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Author Rita Bennett talks about near-death experiences

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An open mind about life after death

AUTHOR VISITS NAPLES TO DISCUSS NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

by Eileen McClelland, Staff Writer

Author Rita Bennett hasn't been to heaven herself, but she's confident her mother has been—twice.

Now deceased, Loretta Jesse Reed had complications in childbirth.

"My mother told me she had nearly died when I was born," Bennett said. "She put it this way, 'I went to heaven to get you.' She also described heaven for me and what a beautiful, peaceful place it was, filled with creations of gold and pearl. God sent her back because her family needed her."

Her mother's reflections hit home when Bennett was writing "To Heaven and Back," a book that includes stories of people who believe they have had near-death experiences.

Bennett will discuss the book at 7 p.m. Thursday, April 23, at Trinity-by-the-Cove Episcopal Church, 553 Galleon Drive. It's open to the public and no books will be sold or signed.

On Friday, April 24, Bennett will sign autographs at 1 p.m. at Barnes & Noble. That evening she begins her workshop on another topic, "Inner Wholeness—Lord's Prayer Seminar," which runs through Sunday. The cost for the workshop is \$50.

"As I was writing the book I realized that when I looked at the characteristics of people who had had near-death experiences, I found my mother had many of them. And I was attached to my mother by umbilical chord, so maybe I had a little taste of heaven before I was born into this world."

Bennett said a near-death experience may be characterized by a sense of being dead; a sense of peace and painlessness; an out-of-

body experience; a tunnel experience; seeing people of light, often relatives or friends; seeing a being of light, thought to be Jesus or an angel; experiencing a life review; a reluctance to return; and experiencing a personality transformation upon return.

But the most remarkable characteristic they share, Bennett believes, is their lack of fear of death.

"It's very encouraging because I think that for all human beings, the one thing we are not wanting to walk through, is death, but there's not anything we can do to change that," Bennett said. "But of people who've had near-death experiences, there's a very large percentage who are not afraid to die again."

Bennett was christened in infancy as a Presbyterian, raised and baptized in the Assemblies of God, became a Southern Baptist in her teens and was confirmed as an Episcopalian as a young adult. She also enjoys fellowship with Messianic Christian churches.

Bennett's husband, Dennis, a retired Episcopal pastor, died in 1991. She longed to know more about where he was, sure that that place was heaven.

"When you lose your loved one and you know you won't see him again until you leave this life, it's a real lost feeling," Bennett said. "The wonderful thing was to talk to all these people who had gone over and come back and wish they could return."

Bennett said she adheres to scriptural prohibitions, though, about trying to establish contact with the dead.

"God speaks to us in dreams, that's a biblical thing," she said. "But there is Scripture

that indicates that we're not supposed to talk to the departed. I don't feel that I need to talk to Dennis. I know he's safe on the other side. When I pray, I ask God to tell him that I love him. I give him a message to give to my husband.

"There are boundaries that the Scripture gives us that if we keep within those boundaries, we will be safe."

Bennett said the seven people interviewed for her story came to her; she didn't seek them out.

The first, Dr. Gerald Landry, is a member of the Christian Medical Foundation, with Bennett's brother. "Dr. Landry asked if he could give his personal story at the meeting and that was tape-recorded. My brother told me they began to weep, these doctors, because they knew his story was real. He truly did die and come back.

"It was very meaningful to hear someone tell a story of how beautiful it was over there," Bennett related. "He was met by a welcome committee of millions, billions, he didn't know how many people in white robes who said, 'we've been waiting for you.' The second thing was he did see Jesus Christ who spoke to him and called him by his name."

She's even interviewed people who believe they're spent some time in hell. Craig Gottschalk passed out from an excess of drugs and found himself the object of a "tug of war" between Jesus and Satan for his soul. Ultimately, he was rescued and returned to his body.

According to a 1997 Gallup study, only 2 percent of believers say their chances of going to hell are "excellent," with another 2 percent saying their chances are "good."