

Q&A with
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author of *To Heaven and Back*

How did you feel when you died? Did you know what was happening?

I was acutely aware of everything that was happening. I knew that my efforts to exit the boat were not working, that I was out of air, and that I was too far from the riverbank for anyone to reach me. I knew that I would probably die. Having grown up with a fear of drowning, I was surprised to find my transition from life to death was seamless, peaceful, and beautiful. I felt quite wonderful.

What was your faith life like before your death?

Before my near-death-experience, I believed in God and took my kids to Sunday school but was not particularly religious. Like many accomplished young adults, I felt like I was in control of my life and my future. Although I tried to be a “good” and “moral” person, my faith was not integrated into my daily life and the demands of work and family left little time to think about spirituality.

With my near-death-experience, the truth of God’s promises and the reality of eternal life became a part of my every breath. I am in constant prayer and regardless of what I am doing, I try to reflect God’s love and live for His glory. I try not to miss opportunities to uplift or encourage the spiritual life of others, and I live with gratitude and joy, knowing that I never face challenges alone.

What can you tell us about your Christian heritage? It sounds like you have a number of family members who have been ordained pastors.

My grandfather, my great-grandfather, and I believe his father before him were all Presbyterian ministers. My father and his twin brother went into the ministry of medicine. I was baptized and confirmed in our local Presbyterian Church. I began to explore other denominations during high school. I have always appreciated that different denominations meet us wherever we are in our spiritual journeys, just as Jesus meets us wherever we are in life. I found the ritual of the Episcopal service to sooth my inner turbulence and chose to undergo a full immersion baptism during high school. I identify that as the moment of becoming a new person.

Why do you think you came back to life?

I certainly didn’t want to return to Earth, but was given information about some of the work I had yet to complete and wasn’t really given a choice. I was expected to share my experiences and my story with others, helping transform their faith into complete trust that God keeps His promises.

Do you have any regrets about this experience?

I have not a hint of regret. In fact, my death and return to life is the greatest gift I have ever received, and I am continually grateful for having had this experience.

How do you explain why this happened to you?

I have always been a private person, am not known to be a writer, and do not relish the attention of speaking. I have been asked this question many times. I do not know the answer, but I am a scientist by training, a skeptic by nature, and a very concrete, rationale thinker. Perhaps, I was given this job because I have a developed a lifetime of credibility.

Do people respond to your story differently because of your background as a medical professional?

I think they do. I am a very pragmatic and straight forward person and my education, training, and profession demonstrates a certain seriousness of purpose. I believe this gives me greater initial credibility and I think people are intrigued by the perceived fallacy that medicine and spirituality cannot coexist.

How is your experience compared to others who've gone to heaven and come back to physical life?

I have not read many accounts of other people's experiences, but I have had many patients over the years tell me about their own near-death experiences. It seems that most stories, mine included, contain some consistent elements – that of an overwhelming sense of God's love and forgiveness, intense peace and beauty and no desire to return to Earth. Everyone recalls the details with precision and each person is profoundly affected by the experience. In these ways, my experience is quite similar.

How did your experience going to heaven and back change you as a mother? How did it change your relationship with your children?

I never really thought of my children as "mine." Although my husband and I were given the privilege and responsibility of raising them, I always believed our children really belonged to God. I loved my children before my near-death-experience, but afterward, I cherished every moment with them because I was better able to see God's beauty within them, even when their behavior was frustrating. I think I was a more loving, tolerant, and patient mother because I knew that God had a plan for each of them and that it was my job to encourage and support them to the best of my ability.

What do you want people to know about heaven?

God's unconditional love for each of us is intense, complete, and is reflected in all of Heaven. Before we return to Heaven, our real home, we have an incredible opportunity on Earth to face challenges that will help us learn, grow and to become more Christ-like in the fruits of our spirit. Our time is so short that we need to be about God's business every day.