

NIGHT OF THE LIVING NEAR-DEAD

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“I’m dead,” I thought, “and no one is here to know it!”

Betty J. Eadie, “Embraced By The Light”

Last year a record 16,238 people had near-“death” experiences in this country – some 200 of them without financial gain and 50 without appearing on afternoon talk shows. If this trend continues, the chances are good that you’ll soon be living next door to someone who was recently “dead.” Chances are even better that they’ll be telling you about it. Just to make sure that they’re “dead,” and not just, well, *dead*, shout at them very loudly. If you get no response, they’re dead. If you can’t get a word in edgewise, they’re “dead.”

I had my own near-“death” experience on February 6, 1973. I had gone into the hospital to have a bunion removed. As the Novocain started to numb my left big toe, I abruptly realized that this operation was going to be fatal and that I was, in fact, “dying.” I heard myself gasp out: “I’m going to sue you bastards.” Then a great darkness came over me.

Many people claim to see a long tunnel of light at such moments, with their grandmother waving to them from the tunnel’s end. This was not my experience. I did indeed find myself in a tunnel, but I was on an Amtrak train bound for Indianapolis and the bathrooms and the air-conditioning did not work. Also, they had run out of peanuts at the bar (which looked oddly like my chiropodist’s office). At the end of the tunnel some lawyers were waving agreements and promising me a fortune in damages from my fatal bunion. Then the train doors opened onto Indianapolis, and I knew that real death could not be very far off. If you’ve ever been in Indianapolis, you’ll know what I mean.

I don't know what higher power called me back to "life." It may have been the nurse saying, "Wake up, stupid." In any case, since that day I have collected stories of people who have crossed to the other "side" and come back. (See my recent book, "How We Died.") Here are four typical accounts:

Wilma Stang, 83, housewife, Teaneck, N.J.: My husband was driving us home one night when the car started off the road toward a ditch. Suddenly a great darkness came over me and I heard Andy Williams singing "Moon River." I found myself walking in the Lincoln Tunnel and my grandmother was waving to me from the other end of it, saying: "*Get out of the road!*" When I came back to "life" we were in a ourdriveway, where I beat my husband about the face and head with my purse. If real death means listening to Andy Williams, I look forward to it.

Adam Gorboduc, 21, student, New York City: I was kneeling on the floor of the Warsaw Diner in St. Marks Place, choking on a piece of kielbasa when I realized I was, like, "dying." Suddenly, a great darkness came over me and I found myself in the Tunnel, the dance club in Chelsea. Lech Walesa was there. He waved to me and said, "Wow, this place is really *dead* tonight." But he said it in Polish, which I don't understand. Then somebody me got in a Heimlich and *pow!* There went the kielbasa. When I came to, I told my girlfriend I had just had a near-"death" experience. She said death would have been easier to watch than that sausage flying out of my mouth.

Diane Ultralite, 40-something sculptor, Chula Vista, Calif.: I've done "death" a couple of times and it is *wonderful*. Very mellow and harmonious. Like drugs without drugs. Like massage without mass. Or the word "without" without "without." No light-filled tunnels, but a very soothing gallery where lots of beautiful customers are waving money and buying my work. (Catalogue and prices available on request.)

Stanley Deckplate, 53, retired, Pittsburgh: I have near-“death” experiences two or three times a week, sometimes for up to eight hours at a time, often while reading the newspaper in my Barcalounger of an evening. When I come back, I usually find my wife’s clothing messed up, whiskey on her breath and my neighbor Walter in the house. Very mysterious. But better on the whole than Hawaii.

Many people know the five steps to death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Thanatologists now recognize the five steps of *near*-“death”: surprise, delight, shlock, mild boredom and a book contract. You can get near-“death” kits (available from the author) containing maps of the underworld, honey-roasted peanuts, magazines, a flashlight for any tunnels, a roll of toilet paper and an ID bracelet telling all the near-“dead” if you have any allergies. My insurance agent will also sell you near-“death” insurance for a moderate premium: if you nearly “die,” they almost “pay” you.

If you find yourself in a near-“death” situation, follow these easy steps: 1) Don’t panic. Breathe deeply. Then scream for help. 2) Check to see if you’re really “dying” or if you’re simply watching television. 3) If your grandmother is waving to you, wave back, but *do not give the old lady any money*. You’ll never see it again. 4) If you find *my* grandmother waving to you, ask her where she parked the car. 5) If you find yourself in the Chunnel, you’re in Europe. Take appropriate measures. 6) If you find yourself in a twisty, dark, mysterious street, take a left at the corner to the Holiday Inn, check in to room 613, and order some fried clams. They’re good but make sure to ask for extra tartar sauce. 7) If you hear people weeping and a religious person saying prayers and your life is passing before you, disregard the above and toss away the near-“death” kit. You won’t be needing it where you’re going.