

BOOK REVIEW

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After the Light: What I Discovered on the Other Side of Life That Can Change Your World, by Kimberly Clark Sharp. New York, NY: William Morrow, 1995, 240 pp + xvi, \$20.00 hb; New York, NY: Avon, 1996, \$6.95 pb.

Kimberly Clark Sharp, former Northwest Regional Coordinator of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) (when IANDS had such things) and long-time coordinator of the Seattle Friends of IANDS chapter, the oldest and largest local affiliate, has produced a remarkable book about her own near-death experience (NDE) and its effects on her life. With so many first-person NDE accounts on the market today, do we need one more? For myself (and, I suspect, for many readers of this Journal), that's a silly question: we can never have too many.

But this is not just another autobiographical NDE story, for Sharp brings to bear on this story her clinical expertise as a critical care social worker and her earthy humor. It contains plenty of "woo-woo" experiences ("woo-woo," Sharp explains, is the sound the spiritual train makes right before it knocks us off the track). But its style, like Sharp's, is so down-to-earth that it's difficult to dismiss these stories. Sharp alludes to her "secret persona" as a stand-up comic: "Put a microphone in my hand and a receptive audience, and you'd have to seal my mouth with duct tape to keep me from spouting one-liners" (p. 143). *After the Light* puts her wit beyond the reach of the duct tape.

While Sharp leaves no doubt as to her traditional Christian orientation, she does not preach or suggest that only Christians are saved. While she takes a Christian approach to her own experiences

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of angelic and divine intervention, she does not impose that interpretation on the NDE as a whole, particularly on her patients' experiences, any more than she imposes on them the medical interpretation ("ICU psychosis") of her professional training. Rather, she takes each experience at its face value, telling her patients first and foremost, "What you experienced is real," and allowing them to formulate their own understanding. Is it true that what every NDER has experienced is real? As a scientist, I am not certain of that. Is it helpful to NDErs to have their sanity validated? As a clinician, I am quite certain of that.

Significantly, Sharp starts her book not with her own NDE, but with that of Maria and her now-famous tennis shoe on the ledge. Maria was a migrant worker admitted to Harborview Medical Center's cardiac care unit (CCU), where Sharp was working as a social worker. While her body was undergoing a cardiac arrest, Maria floated out of the hospital and saw, on a third-story window ledge on the side of the hospital farthest from the CCU, "a man's dark blue tennis shoe, well-worn, scuffed on the left side where the little toe would go. The shoelace was caught under the heel" (p. 11). Despite Sharp's having had an NDE herself, her professional training led her to doubt Maria's story until she finally located the shoe by going from room to room, pressing her face against the windows—although the scuffed toe could only be seen from a perspective outside and above the window. Sharp first published this account in my 1984 NDE anthology (Clark, 1984), and it has been repeated several times, most recently by Susan Blackmore (1995); but the detailed account here is the definitive "Maria's tennis shoe" story.

Sharp flashes back in Chapter 2 to her own NDE at age 22. Since she was ostensibly unconscious for much of the experience, she provides her father's first-person account of watching helplessly as his daughter stopped breathing and received cardiopulmonary resuscitation. She then relates her own account of the NDE, using humor to get around the ineffability of the experience ("*Fade to black. Fade to blacker*"). The juxtaposition of Sharp's own experience with her father's is compelling, and her down-to-earth style lends credibility to her story:

The only words I could formulate in the midst of this incredible Light were from my childhood: "Homey home." It was something I used to say when we had been on an outing and I began to spot the familiar landmarks of our neighborhood. (p. 25)

In the following chapter, aptly named "We're Not in Kansas Anymore, Toto," Sharp describes the bizarre aftereffects that made her fear she'd gone crazy ("Not lunatic crazy. Just a little 'off'"). A spiritual force pulled her away from everything she'd found security in: her family, her friends, her fiance, and, yes, Kansas. She describes the paranormal events that became commonplace in her life as she followed the signs west, and following a ride in which her car seemed to steer itself without a driver, concluded: "The reality test was over. Reality lost" (p. 38).

Events turn from bizarre to ominous in Chapter 4, "Dance With the Demon," in which Sharp describes her new residence in a farmhouse apparently haunted by a malevolent force. Much of the apparent demonic content of this chapter is hard to integrate, as Sharp relates it as she experienced it, rather than from a clinical perspective. She rejects the notion that she was hallucinating (even though she had narcolepsy and was prone to sudden daytime nightmares), and she also rejects the notion that her house was possessed by Satan; yet she could not deny that the evil presence was real. Some of my difficulty integrating this material derives from Sharp's continued use of humor to deal with the inexplicable; these matters are not funny, and one wonders why she continued to live in the house as long as she did. This chapter will disturb many readers who, like myself, would rather not acknowledge evil as a distinct force, rather than just a shortage of goodness. By the end of the chapter Sharp comes to terms with these experiences without fully understanding them, and tries to immerse herself in the here-and-now atmosphere of her work in the Harborview CCU—which brings us back chronologically to her encounter with Maria.

Chapter 5 outlines Sharp's approach to patients with NDEs, not by a dry list of clinical guidelines but by a series of vignettes and quotes from her patients. She suggests gentle but effective ways to open a discussion of patients' NDEs: "What was your last memory before losing consciousness? Do you remember anything after that?"

The next few chapters return to Sharp's personal story, from her "going public" about NDEs when a television talk-show host surprised her on the air by asking about Maria and the tennis shoe; to further encounters with ostensible demonic spirits; to her whirlwind romance with her fiance, his tragic death, and his visitations afterwards; to her Dark Night of the Soul, the inner explosion of wrenching doubt.

With her characteristic self-effacing humor ("'C'mere, Kenny,' I said, pulling him to my side. 'I feel a metaphor coming on'"), Sharp

introduces a graphic analogy for the interface between the two worlds she found herself inhabiting. Passengers on a ferry see the world around them as reality, and when they look down into the water they see only the surface reflection of that "topside" world. But on rare occasions, individuals may catch a glimpse of another world below the surface, as intricate and varied as the one "topside." Experiences like NDEs allow us to part the veil that normally separates the spiritual realm from our familiar "topside" world.

In Chapter 9 Sharp describes the founding of the Seattle IANDS chapter, the oldest continuous near-death support group, and relates the stories of some of the founders and their efforts to overcome "the damnable thing about a near-death experience": its ultimate ineffability. She then takes us through further encounters with spirits, angelic and demonic, and her eventual synchronistic meeting with "Mr. Right." Through this odyssey, Sharp came to understand spiritual visions not as predetermined events but as maps, from which we can chart our own courses.

In Chapter 11, Sharp returns to her role as social worker and near-death clinician. She details with compelling anecdotes her clinical approach to patients who have had NDEs; provides examples of the wide variety of near-death phenomena, including frightening NDEs; and reviews various physiological mechanisms that have been proposed to explain NDEs. Her prescription for working through the pain of spiritual growth is the same as for natural childbirth: "Breathe through it, try to stay focused, and emerge with something truly wonderful when it's over" (p. 159).

Bouncing back to her personal story, Sharp relates more "woo-woos" involving visitations from deceased persons; balancing marriage and motherhood with her increasing professional notoriety; and being forced, after 15 years as an "NDE expert," to reveal in public her own NDE. But the most difficult chapter in Sharp's life was the discovery that she had an unusually deadly form of breast cancer, followed by the discovery that she was also pregnant again. Without treatment, the cancer, fed by the hormones of pregnancy, would quickly kill her; but the poisonous cancer treatment would certainly kill her baby. Unable to sacrifice her baby to save her own life, Sharp struggled with personal death again, finally yielding to her husband's plea not to leave him alone with a 2-year-old and a newborn already damaged by the radiation from her bone scan and mammograms. She dedicates *After the Light* to this never-born baby: "To

David Eugene Sharp and all of the other unborn who never left the Light of God.”

In the weeks of nausea and pain that came with the chemotherapy and radiation, Sharp lost much of her hair, skin texture, energy, and dignity, but not her sense of humor. She was scheduled to have the radiation target tattooed on her breast on April 1. “I had to do something. On my left breast, with a red magic marker, I wrote WRONG BOOB in enormous letters. Underneath, in smaller black letters I wrote, APRIL FOOLS” (p. 228). With her remission from cancer came a re-mission, a rededication to live the lessons she’d learned, to walk in faith and be the Light, as she had seen and felt it, for those not so blessed.

Throughout *After the Light*, Sharp’s life story is intermingled with her death story. This intermingling is sometimes awkward, when the “topside” world clashes with the spiritual. But I think that intermingling is part of Sharp’s message: when you live in both worlds, life *is* awkward. Some readers will find this juxtaposition of seeming opposites uncomfortable. I’m sure Sharp found it uncomfortable as well—but at least we have the option of putting the book down.

People who are looking for integration—of the material world and the spiritual, or of demonic and angelic forces, or of Sharp’s spiritual journey and her professional role—will not find it here. Sharp lays out her story in compelling prose, but does not tie together the loose ends. For those looking for a neat package, those loose ends are annoying; for those seeking the truth, loose ends are how it is. For many readers, any well-written NDE book (and this is surely one) will be welcomed. For those uncounted who have been touched by Sharp over the years, this book is long overdue. For the remainder, this is still a book worth reading. It made me cry; it made me laugh; and it made me rethink some of my fundamental ideas. As Sharp might sing into her microphone, “Who could ask for anything more?”

References

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