

Called into the presence of God

By: Brett Buckner, Staff Writer

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Death offers a second chance to the living. It stirs emotions once thinly veiled, forcing those caught in its wake to confront their own mortality. Through such unwanted introspection, a profound appreciation of life is gained - regrets are mended, failures forgotten and hope for an ever-fragile future is renewed.

Matt Nelson understands the sway death holds over the living. He, too, has been changed by its presence.

Only this death was his own.

As a sales inspector for Terminix, Nelson faces the darkness as a matter of routine. Almost daily, he belly crawls beneath the homes of potential clients, stabbing at the shadows with a flashlight searching for signs of infestation.

But what Nelson experienced beneath a house on Main Street in Glencoe on Monday, April 7 was anything but ordinary. For 30 seconds, while his body was being electrocuted, Nelson stepped out and across the threshold of eternity before being snatched back by an unlikely hero.

Once, Nelson would have rolled his eyes at the mention of a "near-death experience" - with the requisite stories of bright lights and choirs of angels usually told by the same people who believe in alien abduction and Bigfoot.

"I was an absolute skeptic, a cynic," says the 40-year-old Nelson.

That was until it happened to him.

Crawlspace

It was a day like so many before. With owner Jerry Oswalt watching over his shoulder, Nelson descended, crawling on his elbows, into the dank darkness.

"It was so small, so cramped that it was like diving underwater," Nelson remembers. "Putting my hands in first, I had to pull myself along slowly."

With support beams hanging less than two feet overhead, Nelson couldn't rise off his stomach. Slowly, he made his way to the back of the house. Instead of turning around, Nelson cut across the crawlspace. As soon as he passed underneath a second support beam, "everything went crazy."

Waiting like a coiled rattlesnake was an exposed 110-volt electric wire that electrocuted Nelson the moment it touched his back.

Trapped in the painful throes as the current coursed through his body, Nelson was trembling uncontrollably, his teeth rattling against the powerful surge of electricity.

"I knew I was about to die," he says.

While still aware of his surroundings, Nelson's life flashed before his eyes. In an instant he reviews "thousands and thousands" of detailed images from his childhood, ending with a picture of his wife standing alone with their three kids.

"I was overcome with a sense of sadness, because I knew they would be grieving," he says. "All I wanted was for it to all be over. The pain was unimaginable."

As each excruciating moment dragged on, Nelson felt himself drifting out of his body and into a white light.

"I have no doubt that I was about to be called into the presence of God," he says.

Though drawing ever closer to death, Nelson didn't feel sorrow or fear but rather an overwhelming sense of hope, knowing that he was about to enter heaven.

Then it all stopped ... silence consumed everything.

"I thought for a second that I was dead," he says.

Instead, Nelson had been saved. Somehow Jerry Oswalt made his way underneath the house, grabbed a pipe and slapped the electric wire away.

"But the Jerry Oswalt I saw wasn't the same man I'd met earlier," Nelson says, his words drifting in pursuit of the memory. "He was a very powerful, pure and holy image."

'Revival of purpose'

Outside in the cool sunshine, Jerry Oswalt could hear Nelson's muffled screams and moans. Peering into the darkness, he saw that Nelson was being electrocuted. At 67, Oswalt will be the first to admit that he's not the best option in an emergency.

With two bad knees and a pinched nerve in his back, Oswalt moves slowly, but not on this day.

"I wasn't myself," he says in a voice quivering with emotion. "What I did, moving that fast ... Like I am, there's no way I could've gotten there in time. But somehow I got to him quick.

"The Lord was in complete control that day."

Oswalt knocked the electric cord off Nelson's back, shocking himself in the process. During those frozen moments, he was able to make out a few

words as they stumbled out of Nelson's trembling lips. "Jesus," he said over and over again. "Jesus" ...

"I looked into his eyes," Oswald says. "He didn't really see me. I know in my own heart, my own faith, he was actually staring at the Lord."

With Oswald's help, Nelson made it out where he was soon greeted by an ambulance and the wide eyes of gawking neighbors pulled from their own houses by the blaring siren.

Though Nelson's only obvious injury was a few trickles of blood on his lips, he was rushed to Gadsden Regional Medical Center where he remained for observation until the early hours of Tuesday morning.

Roughly equivalent to a household light bulb, 110 volts is easily enough to kill a person. It's not the actual voltage - 50 watts can be lethal - rather it's the voltage and the amperage together. Voltage is how strongly the electricity is being pulled through the line. Amperage is the amount of electricity that's flowing.

Water, as in the damp conditions Nelson was crawling through, can facilitate the shock and is the reason the live wire sunk its teeth into his back and wouldn't let go.

Those who survive being electrocuted are often left paralyzed, suffer brain damage or chronic heart problems. Nelson had a few chipped teeth and that was it.

While no physical scars are visible, the proof of Nelson's near-death experience is something that mere flesh and bone cannot define. In his death, all truths were revealed. What remains an unseen mystery, a leap of faith, to most is a reality for Nelson.

"It all reaffirmed what I knew in my heart was true," he says. "I knew my life was in God's hands and that my life after death would lead to an eternity in heaven.

"But now I know."

To those who haven't stepped across the gateway that separates life from death, the powerful - if all too similar - images of heaven, bright lights and out-of-body sensation are not only cliché but also "inherently unbelievable," says Dr. Raymond Moody, author of *Life After Life* and many other books dealing with this phenomenon.

For more than 30 years, Moody, who is credited with coining the phrase "near-death experience," has studied and chronicled the journeys of thousands of people who have returned from death with stories of an afterlife. From atheists to born-again Christians, all shared one thing in common.

"It changed everyone profoundly," Moody says from his Anniston home. "For some, their faith was crystallized, while others became more welcoming and less judgmental toward people of all faiths."

And all returned with a single message - "learn to love one another," Moody says.

There will always be skeptics who wish to diminish these stories, just as there will always be believers. Neither side is likely to ever find what they both long for - scientific proof of life after death.

"The views of both sides can be dismissed," Moody says, "but what remains is hope. Where reason cannot give a definitive answer, we have every right to make up our own minds."

As for Nelson, no matter what lies ahead, he knows that God has put him here for a reason.

"God's not through with me yet," Nelson says, a wide grin pulling across his face. "My life has had a revival of purpose. Faith is a very easy thing for me now. And for those struggling with their own faith, I say, 'Struggle no more.'"

"This is not just a story. God is real."