



AWAKENINGS FROM THE LIGHT

Sample Chapters

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*12 Life Lessons from a Near Death Experience*

NANCY RYNES

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12 Life Lessons from a Near Death Experience

## ***SAMPLE CHAPTERS***

**Nancy Rynes**



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***This book is dedicated to the Lafayette, Colorado, Police and Fire Departments, and to first responders everywhere. You rock!***

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# Author's Note

One of the difficulties I faced when writing this book was deciding on the terminology. So many of the words we use to describe spirituality or spiritual concepts are loaded with emotion or tied to a particular belief system.

After my near-death experience (NDE), my own beliefs have come to encompass ideas from many faiths even though I align more with what I call an open-hearted Christianity. I understand that a similar core of beauty and truth lies at the heart of many of our religions and philosophies, so in my own life, I embrace the loving wisdom from different faiths. When I began to write this book, it made sense that I wanted to use words that were meaningful *across* faiths, rather than exclusive to one.

That turned out to be a bigger challenge than I expected. I struggled with finding a term to use to describe a Higher Power, one that would be inclusive of many faiths. In the end, I chose to use “Spirit” as much as possible. This word seems to best describe the sense of mystery that I feel about what some might call “God.” In my own mind, I don’t look upon the concept of Spirit or God as a person sitting on a cloud somewhere, passing judgment on everyone. Spirit is a mystery, something that really can’t be described adequately with a word or a phrase. But the word “Spirit” is a start. I also use the words “God,” “Divine,” and “Creator,” interchangeably, as a name for that mysterious Higher Power. I hope the different words aren’t too confusing, but I invite you to substitute the word that feels most comfortable for you.

Similarly, I had many long discussions with friends about how to refer to the being I met during my near-death experience. Some wanted me to use the term “angel,” but I felt that wasn’t quite right, especially since she didn’t refer to herself in that way. In the end, I decided to use the term “Guide,” as suggested by a fellow artist and friend, Ken Elliott. It’s simple, clear, and easy to understand.

The word “Heaven” also proved challenging. As a child in the Roman Catholic faith, the priests taught me that Heaven was a separate place, up in the sky, where the souls of “good” people went after death. While my view of what

happens after life has changed a lot in the last 15 months, I still couldn't come up with a meaningful term to replace "Heaven." I decided to simply go ahead and use it, knowing that, in my mind, it's not exactly the right word. I don't use it in the traditional, Christian sense, though, meaning it's not someplace up on a cloud that we go when we die. For the purposes of my story, "Heaven" simply refers to that very mysterious state or place I found myself in. I don't intend to wrap the meaning in any particular religion or philosophy. Feel free to put your own interpretation on this "place," though. For myself, I am content leaving it to the realm of deep mystery.

At a few places in the book, I felt it necessary to include the actual words given to me by my Guide and they're set apart from the rest of the text. Similarly, in a few places, I wanted to include appropriate thoughts or quotes from other, learned people, that seem to emphasize a particular concept. While I've tried to include thoughts from a variety of cultures, you might notice that I lean heavily on Native American wisdom at times. I have Native American in my background, so some of this wisdom resonates with me.

I'll finish with a note about photos. Many of my friends wanted me to include photos of the accident and my recovery in this book. The realities of publishing made that financially out of reach for this first edition. I have posted photos on this book's website, [AwakeningsFromTheLight.com](http://AwakeningsFromTheLight.com), if you're interested in visuals. The link to photos is in the upper-right corner of the home screen.

# Part I - Changes

# 1) In An Instant...

January along the Colorado Front Range can be a beautiful thing.

After the frigid days of December, Mother Nature usually gifts us with abundant warmth and sunshine in the first month of the New Year. On some days, the temperature reaches 70 degrees Fahrenheit and the first wispy scents of spring meander on the breeze.

January 3, 2014, brought in sunshine and warm breezes. At 10:30 AM the temperature pushed 60 degrees Fahrenheit, the sun shone bright and warm, and the dry roads beckoned me out on my bicycle. The colder weather and some injuries from the car accident around Thanksgiving had kept me cooped up for much of December. I felt strong and more than ready to hit the roads. A longtime road cyclist, I appreciated being able to ride outside all year here in the Rocky Mountain State, so a month off the bike was almost impossible for me to handle.

Road cycling was my passion. I loved its speed and rhythm, often riding 30-40 miles several times a week. I rode for hours on the plains and challenged myself on the hills — and this is Colorado, so I had plenty of hills to choose from.

Since the day was just about perfect I decided to run some errands around town on my mountain bike. I figured that since it was more stable and had wider tires, the mountain bike would perform better if I ran into any sand or dirt on the road. The other reason I chose my mountain bike was that this was my first ride in over a month and I wanted its stability and more upright posture in case I had lost some of my cycling mojo. Balance is key on any bike, but even more of an issue with the skinny, slick tires of my road bike than the fat, rugged treads of my mountain bike. And since I was a little out of shape from the previous month off, I planned a slower, shorter outing than usual. The slower ride would also allow me to bask in the warm, winter sunlight.

The ride started out promising enough. I intended to go out for a quick and easy jaunt south out of town toward the hospital,

then stop at some stores, the library, and the post office before calling it a day. I rolled my mountain bike out of the garage, put air in the tires, cleaned the chain, and donned my cool weather clothes and helmet. In what turned out to be a lucky happenstance, I filled up my backpack with clothing in case it was cooler than I thought. The sun felt warm as I prepared my bike but I knew that I'd probably feel colder once I got out on the road.

When the bike was ready, I rode south from my home for about 1/2 mile. I felt physically strong and glad there was very little traffic. My legs felt good getting back into the cadence of pedaling again. I reveled in the feeling of my leg muscles pushing the pedals while I continued to head south.

At just shy of a mile from my starting point, I cautiously rode into the new roundabout that recently replaced a three-way intersection. Once in the roundabout, I continued riding south in the bike lane. I knew to take this traffic circle slowly. Its very narrow lane and large concrete dividers made biking through it a bit nerve-wracking. A small car followed me into the circle but stayed a couple of car lengths behind me. I kept my eyes on some vehicles approaching on the road to the right, but I didn't worry too much since they appeared to be slowing down to yield to traffic already in the circle.

As I began to cross in front of the incoming traffic, it appeared that the driver of the lead vehicle, a very large SUV, saw me and was stopping. A split second later, though, I realized she was driving straight into the circle without even slowing down.

Panic gripped me and knotted in my gut. I knew without a doubt I was going to be hit and thought I would likely die. The odds of a cyclist coming out alive in a confrontation with an SUV were pretty low.

Thoughts of my daughter, sisters, and niece flashed through my mind. In a split second I realized how devastated they might

be when they found out I had died. I wouldn't witness my daughter grow into the amazing woman I knew she would be. I wouldn't see my niece marry the man of her dreams, or her daughter grow into a beautiful woman. I regretted that my sisters would be grieving over me. Losing another sister in our family would not be easy for them to endure.

I tried to steer my bike to avoid a crash but I couldn't get out of the SUV's way fast enough. The roundabout was narrow and while I started to veer to my left to avoid a crash, I didn't have much room to maneuver. I remembered the car behind me and I didn't want to do anything that would cause it to hit me as well. I felt trapped.

The SUV continued into the circle. The worst thing I could imagine, happened. It hit me broadside, from the right, impacting my right leg and ribcage. As it did, I tried to push off it with my right hand hoping to propel myself out of the way of its tires. It didn't work. I felt my bike slipping away from under me and knew I was going down. In a flash of odd clarity I figured that was it, I would die right there. Thoughts of my family and friends again went through my mind. Oddly, though, I didn't feel any physical pain.

Somehow I ended up on the SUV's hood. I remember looking through the windshield to the driver and passengers before slipping further down the hood. It appeared that the driver was holding a cell phone in front of her on her steering wheel, but I couldn't be sure.<sup>1</sup> Up on the hood, I couldn't find anything to grab on to and began to slip down the front of the SUV. Without understanding how I got there, I soon found myself clinging to the front grille of the truck, hoping against hope that I wouldn't

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<sup>1</sup> Witness accounts verified that the driver of the SUV appeared to be texting for the several hundred yards before she hit me. While she was initially charged for this offense, plus three others, the District Attorney's office dropped the texting charge due to difficulties in obtaining enough proof to convict.

get pulled under the vehicle. Time seemed suspended. I felt as though I clung to the grille for hours. In reality, though, only seconds passed.

I didn't know what had happened to my bike. I assumed by now that it was under the truck's rear wheels. I had no idea why I wasn't there too.

Still the truck continued to drive — it didn't stop when it hit me or when I was up on its hood.

After what seemed like forever but was probably only a few more seconds, I lost my grip on the SUV's grille and have a clear memory of grasping at the license plate, hoping again that I wouldn't be pulled under, terrified that I *would* be pulled under. I was in animal survival mode, doing anything possible to hold on and stay alive.

Exactly what I feared would happen, did. I lost my grip on the license plate.

In another second I was under the SUV, my helmeted head and left shoulder hitting the pavement with a pair of loud cracks. Oddly enough, though, I don't remember feeling any pain through this. I felt no pain at the initial impact with the truck and still felt no pain as I struck the pavement.

But I did feel fear deep in the pit of my stomach.

The terror that I would be run over almost paralyzed me. By a stroke of luck I somehow retained consciousness. Why I didn't black out, I still don't know. Now, several months later and after speaking with my doctors, I am more convinced that the blow to my head should have knocked me out cold even with my helmet on. Most people in this situation would have lost consciousness but if I had, there is no doubt I would have died. The vehicle's rear wheels would have run over me. While remaining conscious turned out to be a terrifying experience that would later cause me some post-traumatic stress, it turned out to have been a blessing. Staying conscious saved my life.

As the SUV pulled me under, my sternum caught on its transfer case at the same time that I reached up and grabbed the axle with my right arm. Again, I was doing anything possible to hang on. I have no memory of *knowing* that I needed to grab something. My instincts simply told me to find something to grab and the axle was mercifully within my reach.

The SUV still moved and dragged me with it, my body pinned between the transfer case and the asphalt. My backpack, hips, legs, and shoes made direct contact with the road's surface for approximately 50 feet. My pack and shoes even left a long skid mark that police would later use to determine the speed of the SUV and the duration of the accident.<sup>2</sup>

But in those moments under the SUV, I whimpered like a hurt animal with only thoughts of survival in my mind, and the need to stay away from the deadly rear tires. Oddly, my memory flashed back 27 years to a raccoon I accidentally struck and killed while driving home from college one night. I now had a small glimpse into the terror that little animal probably felt in its last moments. Empathy, sadness, and remorse overwhelmed me as the SUV continued to drag me under it.

At that moment I realized my consciousness was in two places at once.

I didn't think much about it at the time except "Wow, that's weird." But later, even today, I still find it difficult to wrap my brain and emotions around that experience of dual-consciousness.

It seemed like the animal or survival-focused part of my consciousness stayed under the truck in my body, hanging on to

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<sup>2</sup>A few hours later, I would be grateful that I had stuffed my backpack with clothing. While in the ER later that day, the trauma team would point out to me that the pack had protected the skin on my back from being shredded during the time that I was being dragged under the SUV.

the axle, whimpering, and trying not to get run over. That part was all about fear, raw emotion, and survival. *But another part of my consciousness watched the whole accident unfold from out in front and to the side of the SUV!* How could this be? I noticed this split but had no idea what was happening and I had no time or energy to contemplate it. I allowed it to happen and simply observed.

The displaced and “observer-me” was oddly dispassionate about what unfolded. While it was definitely me, this part of my consciousness did not feel any panic or fear. It maintained an oddly calm state of being, thoughtful yet loving. It felt it was witnessing something sad but also something that was somehow supposed to happen just the way it was unfolding. I distinctly remember that this observer-me felt everything would be OK and just as it should, so why be frightened?

I had this dual sense of consciousness for what seemed like hours but in reality was only a few minutes. Being in two places was an odd state of being and one I had no experience with. A year later, I still have a difficult time understanding it from my scientific background.<sup>3</sup>

My observer consciousness saw the front of the truck, read the license plate, saw the driver inside, the people from other vehicles stopping to help and intervene, and eventually it saw the SUV stop.

It turned out that after the initial impact, the driver dragged me for approximately 50 feet under the vehicle. In those few minutes while I laid under the truck and before the paramedics arrived, the animal instincts in me wanted to get up and run away as fast as possible. I guess that’s not an uncommon survival

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<sup>3</sup> My doctor later reported that this type of phenomenon was not unusual during traumatic events, at least in his experience. He had many patients who had experienced something similar.

instinct, but in my case it would have done me more harm than good.

But my animal-mind didn't know that. When I thought it was safe, I tried to squirm out from under the axle. My fear screamed at me to get up and run as far away as I could. All the while, the observer-me simply watched and waited.

When I began my struggle to move, searing pain ripped through my pelvis and lumbar spine. I screamed, then collapsed back to the pavement, frustrated and afraid. The pain felt more horrendous than any I had ever experienced. I thought for a moment that my hips had been ripped from my body! At the very least, I thought that my back had been shattered.

In that moment I didn't fear death as much as I did the thought of never being able to walk again. I had enough consciousness left in my body to understand that the pain in my back and my inability to move were not good signs, and I had a very real chance coming out of this in a wheelchair.

Even then, with all of that pain and the gut-wrenching fear of paralysis running through my mind, my animal instinct still wanted my body to get up and flee as I continued to squirm in panic and desperation. Eventually, I managed to move enough to get my head and shoulders to a point where they were out from under the front of the SUV.

I glanced over to my left and saw a pickup truck and a man with a cell phone. He seemed to be on the phone even as I whimpered something about calling for an ambulance. I turned my head to the right and saw the driver of the SUV. She screamed something to me in a foreign language. I had no idea what her words meant but my animal-mind didn't care — it wanted me to get up and confront her. I'm not terribly proud of that instinct now, but in hindsight I was in fight-or-flight mode. Since the pain was too intense to allow me to stand, I instead screamed back at her. With me yelling at her, she ran to the side of her vehicle and out of my line of sight. I later learned that she

had jumped back into the driver's seat of the SUV and appeared to bystanders as if she were going to drive off.<sup>4</sup>

As I continued my struggle to get up and run, a blonde woman, a pony-tailed angel, ran up to me from my left. She knelt down next to me and said her name was Anne or Annie — I can't remember which now — and that she was a trauma nurse. She put her hands on my shoulders and gently told me not to move.

It turned out that this simple gesture saved me from becoming a paraplegic, and I am utterly grateful to her from the depths of my soul. Unknown to me at the time, my first lumbar vertebrae (L1) had shattered. Any attempt to stand and that damaged vertebrae would have collapsed around my spinal cord, severing it and leaving me paralyzed.

Anne stayed with me until the first responders arrived, then she moved off to one side, still speaking with me to keep me calm.<sup>5</sup> In a rush, firemen, police, and paramedics converged on the scene. My body remained mostly under the SUV, so two paramedics knelt down next to me to try to figure out if I was pinned and how badly I was hurt. It turned out that my sternum was now free of the transfer case and the paramedics decided they could simply roll the truck backwards to free me. I heard the firemen yelling to the bystanders to clear the area. Several first responders then pushed the vehicle away so the paramedics could stabilize me for the trip to the nearest trauma center.

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<sup>4</sup> I later learned that concerned bystanders intervened and prevented her from driving over the top of me and leaving the scene. I'm very grateful to everyone who helped me at the scene that day — I owe them my life.

<sup>5</sup> Only one other person saw and interacted with Anne, one of the police officers, and the nurse said that she didn't want to give her name. The officer briefly spoke with her after my transfer to the hospital, then Anne disappeared into the crowd. All attempts to locate her since this time have failed. I still don't know who she is, but in that moment she was my guardian angel.

Once the truck was moved, the paramedics surrounded me. It was then that both of my consciousnesses finally came back together. I can't explain how it happened. One moment my mind was in two separate places and in the next, both parts were back together in my broken body.

The paramedics then did a check of my potential injuries. One of them gently cradled my neck in his hands. He gingerly touched my neck vertebrae one at a time, and I screamed in pain. He then asked about other pain and I mumbled something about my lower back and pelvis.

Another of the paramedics managed to gently slide a hard, plastic collar around my neck, and eased my helmet and backpack off. With great care, three of them worked to slide me first onto a backboard, then a gurney. Anne stayed with me during all of this, asking me questions to keep me focused on her while the paramedics worked to stabilize me. She asked if I wanted her to go to the hospital with me. I said yes — I wanted company, someone friendly to hold my hand and help keep my panic at bay. But once the paramedics moved me into the ambulance, Anne disappeared. I never saw her again. She didn't accompany me to the hospital and I was never able to remember her full name. Whoever she was, I am truly grateful that she showed up that day just when I needed her.

The paramedics stabilized me in the ambulance as quickly and gently as possible. They locked the gurney to the floor with a loud click, then made sure the straps securing me to the backboard were snug. A medic asked me questions, I think in an attempt to gauge my lucidity. I have no idea now what he asked. My mind really wasn't focused on him. Pain consumed me. It felt as though everything hurt — my neck, back, shoulders, thighs, and arms all complained. Nothing seemed *normal* anymore.

I felt grateful for the short ride to the emergency room. In a way I was fortunate. The crash happened less than 1/2 mile from

a hospital with a trauma center. The transport was a blur of IVs, vital signs, and men making sure I was stable and not moving.

I don't remember arriving at the hospital or being wheeled out of the ambulance into the emergency room (ER), although what happened there remains clear in my mind.

Frenzied activity greeted me in the ER. The trauma nurses cut my clothes off while I tried to mentally deal with waves of pain ripping through my back and shoulder. I remember whining about this to the nurses — I had just purchased these cold-weather cycling clothes and they were goners on my first ride! Funny what your mind chooses to fixate on during a crisis. The clothes should have been the least of my worries and here I was, angry that they had to be sacrificed.

While the trauma team performed the first round of evaluations — placing yet more IVs, taking vitals, looking for obvious bone breaks and scrapes on my skin — doctors tried to find a pain medicine I could tolerate. Like most members of my family, I'm particularly sensitive to most pain medications. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) were not an option since they can hinder bone healing and cause gastric bleeding. I also had a history of hallucinating or becoming violently ill with many other pain medications so I refused most everything the trauma team tried to give me. I could see frustration on their faces but being ill was the last thing I wanted in my current state.

While the doctors worked on managing my pain, nurses tried to contact my family on my partially-crushed phone. When I'd set out on my ride that morning, I'd placed my smartphone in its usual pocket on the outside of my backpack. During the crash the phone endured its own share of trauma as it was dragged on the ground, pinned in a pocket of my pack between me and the asphalt. Cracks now ran through its touchscreen but miraculously the phone itself still (barely) functioned. One of the doctors took a look at my phone and joked that it was a metaphor

for my body: busted up but still working. I managed a chuckle and appreciated his lightening the mood.

One of the trauma nurses figured out how to use my phone to contact my niece, even with its shattered touchscreen. My niece, Chrissy, worked as a nurse at another hospital and, like me, was also sensitive to pain medications. Chrissy suggested an opioid, hydromorphone, and I agreed to try it. My niece was able to tolerate it and the hope was that I could as well.

Time slipped past in a blur of vitals and medical evaluations. It's odd to me now that I remained relatively calm through this time. I focused on managing my pain and contacting my friends and family. I didn't feel afraid — I simply wanted to know the full extent of my injuries so I focused on being patient.

In the early afternoon, the imaging team came to transport me to another part of the hospital for more X-rays than I thought possible. After the first set of films, the radiologist decided that the X-rays didn't tell a clear enough story; another team then brought me to the CT scanner for a more thorough view of my injuries. After the CT scans, the imaging team rolled me back to the ER through one long corridor after another.

Next came more waiting while the radiologist and trauma team evaluated the CT scans.

By this point I had spent about four terrifying and pain-filled hours in the ER and still no one had been able to give me a full rundown of my injuries. I knew I wasn't in good shape but at the same time I understood how fortunate I was to be conscious and still able to feel my legs. I wasn't allowed to move them, but I felt comforted by the fact that I could still *feel* them. I felt more scared about what injuries might be going unnoticed than I was about the obvious ones.

Everything that afternoon in the ER felt surreal, as if this was happening to someone else and couldn't possibly be me. My brain felt disconnected from the events around me and it almost seemed as if I was simply a supporting cast member in some

overly dramatic TV soap opera. Only it wasn't a TV show. It was my life, my body, my pain, and my future.

During the time I waited for the test and imaging results, I tried my best to have some phone conversations with my family. Unfortunately those attempted conversations were horribly muddled by my pain medication. Now, a year later, I don't remember what we talked about.

My niece lived in a different part of Denver and my sisters were thousands of miles away so I was still alone in the ER. This actually didn't bother me too much. At the time, I thought it would be easier to deal with any bad news if I was alone. It was terrible enough getting bad health news, but for me, receiving it in front of family or friends made coping more difficult. I always felt as though I needed to be strong for them and to make sure they were OK first, forgetting about myself or my own feelings in the process.

No, I was glad I was alone.

My family contacted my workplace and called a few of my local friends who would stop by a bit later that evening.

My first visitors were the local police. Officers came in to speak to me at least twice between 2 and 3 PM. The first visit concerned the details of the accident itself. They took my statement, asked me questions about the crash and took photos of my injuries, my backpack, and my helmet. I remember only bits and pieces of this visit: seeing my shredded backpack, my cracked helmet, and hearing that my bike's frame was bent and twisted beyond repair. The officers left but came back about 45 minutes later to inform me about the driver and the consequences she would face. The officers indicated that since my injuries were quite severe, the driver would be charged for several different violations including driving without a license, driving without her prescription glasses, and failure to yield. The charges might change once the District Attorney's office reviewed

the case but in any event, she would be spending some time in jail.

Quite frankly, I really didn't care one way or another what would happen to her. My mind was completely focused on my own injuries.

By 3 PM, a neurosurgeon arrived from Boulder. His expertise is in surgical intervention for severe back traumas and he came highly recommended by the hospital. As he approached my bed in the ER, the first thing I thought when looking at him was "Wow, he's too young to be a doctor." He looked to be around 25 years old, although I guessed his true age to be at least several years older than that. I didn't really care as long as he could put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

My trauma doctor and one of the nurses arrived to consult with the surgeon. The surgeon studied my scans and proclaimed that it was a miracle I wasn't paralyzed or dead. I wasn't sure whether to be scared or relieved at that! The trauma team had previously told me that most people normally don't survive the type of accident I'd experienced.

I felt very grateful to have been spared.

After talking among themselves, the doctors came to my bedside to tell me about my injuries. Their expressions looked serious and solemn. A knot formed in the pit of my stomach.

The good news: I miraculously suffered very little bruising on my body, which surprised everyone, including me. A small area on the front of my left shoulder held my only bruise. From its direct impact with the asphalt, I expected that the left side of my body would be black and blue for weeks. I felt relieved that wasn't the case. I also suffered very little road rash, just one small spot about the size of a quarter on my left shoulder. This surprised me even more than the lack of bruising! Anyone who's ever fallen from a bicycle can attest to how easy it is to have the road's surface scrape your skin to smithereens. And here I was,

dragged along the pavement for 50 feet and no road rash to speak of. Wow, what a miracle! One of the nurses held up my backpack and showed me why my back wasn't shredded: my pack was. It had taken the brunt of the road's rough surface and saved my skin.

The neurosurgeon chimed in and said all signs pointed to a full recovery in about a year to eighteen months.

Now for the bad news.

I had a major concussion with bleeding apparent in my brain, a broken left collarbone, five broken ribs on my left side, bruised ribs on my right side, internal bleeding in my pelvic region, a minor crack in my pelvis, a cracked sternum, many compression fractures in my spine (neck, middle back, and lower back), my L1 (first lumbar) vertebrae shattered and burst apart in my lower back, and many transverse process<sup>6</sup> fractures up and down my spine.

In total, at least 24 of my bones were visibly broken, the majority of them in my spine. The most immediate problem was my L1 vertebrae which had shattered and sent sharp bits of bone into my spinal canal, coming dangerously close to severing my spinal cord. I was within a millimeter or so of being a paraplegic. That made me sit up and take notice, so to speak.

Another shocking thing was that my neck injuries were so severe that I was close to being paralyzed from any one of them, too. My neck hurt less than my back but the fractures and ligament damage there were so traumatic that any ill-timed movement could cause the damaged vertebrae to shift out of place and sever my spinal cord. I was hovering close to being a quadriplegic. That sobered me more than anything else. The thought of my legs not working was hard enough — I could likely

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<sup>6</sup> Transverse processes are the spurs of bone that jut out from the sides of the spinal column.

deal with that in time — but the possibility of having my entire body paralyzed was more than I could conceive of.

I went into a form of shock at that point. My mind didn't want to deal with any of the bad stuff — the broken bones, the potential for paralysis, or the brain injury. In fact, a part of me wanted to pretend that everything was A-OK. I tried to convince myself that I wasn't very badly injured and would be back to my normal activities in record time.

Unfortunately, things didn't quite turn out the way I thought they would.

The trauma team installed a hard, more permanent, plastic brace around my neck that they said would be my constant companion for the next three months. "Great," I thought. But at least with this on, my neck would heal completely given enough time.

My most damaged vertebrae, the first lumbar in my lower back, would need stabilization as soon as possible. To do that, the surgeon recommended installing titanium rods from the T12 vertebrae (12th thoracic, just below my ribcage) to L2 (2nd lumbar, toward my pelvis) to take the pressure off the burst vertebrae, allowing it to heal. The titanium rods would stabilize my spine and, in time, those three vertebrae would fuse together and effectively become one large bone.

While the surgery might sound traumatic, I was in favor of it and didn't hesitate in giving the surgeon my consent. The only non-surgical alternative was three or more months flat on my back in a body cast, hoping that everything would heal correctly. Having the rods in place would allow me to have my mobility while my body healed.

Give me the titanium, please!

It was now early evening and I still lay flat on my back in the ER. The hospital admissions staff scheduled surgery for the following Monday morning — three days away. Finally, around 6

PM, nurses moved me from the ER to my very own private room in the intensive care unit (ICU).

Friends and coworkers came in to visit me that evening. I don't remember much about their time with me. The opioids and letdown from the trauma made me feel sleepy and unfocused.

I spent that Saturday and Sunday flat on my back in my ICU room, using the opioid to keep the pain under control. So much of my body cried out in pain: my broken ribs, my collarbone, my sternum, my neck, my pelvis, and my back. Even with the medication, my pain wasn't under "control." I still felt the sensations of pain but the medication put my mind in a state where I really didn't care about the pain, or anything else for that matter. I was not allowed to get up, but then again I didn't want to. Even with the medication, the pain was horrendous and I still feared paralysis. I did everything I could to stay calm and in control of my emotions, including meditation and distracting myself with visitors or TV, but sometimes I slipped into panic and worry. Friends and family graciously helped me regain hope and sat with me through those terrifying moments when I feared my life was over.

It seemed as though I was on the phone with my family and friends through most of the weekend. My niece, her fiancé, and her daughter, came to help me stay calm, take care of my home, and keep my mind occupied. Friends and coworkers visited to check up on me and try to lift my spirits with care packages of books, magazines, toiletries, and art supplies. Their visits warmed my heart and soul, even if I couldn't concentrate for long enough to put their gifts to good use.

And while I remember that so many people visited and called, I still have no recollection of what I said to them and have little memory for details during my first two days in ICU. The opioids kept my mind unpleasantly muddled and the concussion left me sleepy.

Having my family and friends visit me helped — their love and support kept my mind on the goal: surgery on Monday, then healing.

## 2) Surgery

### **Most people don't look forward to Mondays.**

I usually counted myself in that group, but today was my first step in getting my mobility back so my impatience could not be held in check.

The hours before the surgery stretched on for what seemed like forever. I am grateful for the presence of two women who stayed with me during this time: Ellen, the aunt of a former partner, and Angela, my friend and manager at my workplace. Their loving presence kept me calmer and focused on something besides my impatience and fear in those hours before surgery.

While I just wanted the surgery over with, at the same time I dreaded it. The thought of being anesthetized and having my back reconstructed frightened me even though I knew it was my best option for achieving a full recovery.

I never have liked going under the knife. Three prior surgeries years before left me a little skittish about the anesthesia. I hated the forced loss of consciousness and always had that nagging fear of not waking up. On top of that, some of the anesthesia drugs made me nauseated and ill upon waking. I have a medical history of bad reactions to both pain medication and anesthesia and I was about to need whopping doses of both. I was not looking forward to the long recovery from this surgery.

I tried to distract myself in conversation with Angela and Ellen but that didn't work very well. My mind kept running off to wallow in fear, not leaving me much mental energy for my visitors. The recurring thought that the surgery would somehow go terribly wrong terrified me. I feared waking up to permanent paralysis, severe pain, or something even worse.

Paradoxically, a part of me also wanted this to just be the end of it all. I'm not proud now of thinking this way, but constant, throbbing pain wracked my body even with the hydromorphone.

The pain was so intense that I didn't want to go on living if it was always going to be like this. In my current mental state, though, I assumed the pain would always be this bad. I just couldn't seem get my mind wrapped around the concept of a pain-free future. I didn't have much hope that the procedure would bring me back to normal even though my surgeon assured me otherwise. My back continued to feel like it was being ripped in half even though I was doped up on hefty painkillers, and horror stories of spinal fusions not working played through my mind in a continuous loop. Sometimes too much knowledge isn't a good thing.

Something even more subtle scared me more though: coming back home to the same life I had before — a life that was unfulfilling. While I hadn't been *unhappy* before my crash, I wasn't all that happy either. It felt as though I was simply going through the motions of life, stuck in a predictable rut, not very excited about any one thing, and not knowing what to do to make a change. My writing job was stable but I was having trouble getting my real passion, my art career, to take off. I enjoyed painting for its own sake but I also wanted to sell my works and teach art and creativity. Painting is very enjoyable for me, but I also wanted it to generate income. The fact that it wasn't doing that yet disheartened me.

Even worse was my daily life before the crash. I felt lonely. It was this feeling of being utterly alone that bothered me the most. I remember thinking that close family members would miss me if for some reason I didn't make it through surgery, and some friends, but I didn't have much more than that, at least in my own mind.

I finally faced my own truth: in the last couple of years I had somehow managed to isolate myself in my own little corner of the world. *I did this to myself*. While isolation felt emotionally safer at some level, in that hospital bed waiting for surgery I came to realize its terrible price on my soul. I wasn't active in getting out and enjoying the community, I didn't attend arts events anymore, and certainly didn't socialize with friends as I used to. My connection to those around me felt tenuous at best and I knew something about this isolated life was not *me*.

I knew then that, no matter what, my life needed to change.

Ellen, Angela, and I waited for the surgery longer than we thought was necessary, until finally it became obvious that something was delayed. Nurses came in to my room periodically to check on me, then around 2 PM the anesthesiologist arrived to brief me on his role. It was to be routine from his perspective. He already knew which set of drugs he'd use — ones that had been used on me in past surgeries plus a couple more to keep nausea at bay. In his view, everything was predictable.

That sounded promising.

Closer to 3 PM, my surgeon and his team arrived to explain the actual procedure in more detail. After I was in the operating room (OR) and anesthetized, they would move me, face-down, on to the operating table. The surgeon would open an incision along my lower back, pull the muscles and other tissues out of the way, and clean out the dangerous bits of vertebrae near my spinal cord. Next, they would attach titanium rods across my three lower-back vertebrae to stabilize the one that had burst. Eventually, all three vertebrae would fuse together into one piece of solid, safe bone.

Piece of cake.

The surgery itself would last about two hours, after which I'd be brought back into recovery and eventually return to ICU. The surgeon reiterated that he expected me to achieve a full recovery after the vertebrae healed together. Good news for me, although a part of me didn't fully believe him. But even with the fear of the procedure failing in some way I still hoped for the best. I didn't want to give up my active lifestyle and while I was OK with making some modifications to my activities, I didn't want to become a couch potato for the rest of my life.

I trusted my doctor, but the surgery sounded horribly complicated and physically brutal. The amount of scarring I might endure worried me a little. While not a beauty queen by any stretch of the imagination, the thought of a long scar running along the length of my back troubled me. And deeper than just cosmetics, I was beginning to feel like the medical staff looked on me more as a mechanical puzzle needing to be reassembled and

less as a physically traumatized person.<sup>7</sup> I wanted to feel human again. I wanted to be whole again.

The surgeon went on to say that the afternoon's prior procedure had run late so the start of mine would be delayed a bit more. I wasn't happy about the delay but was powerless to do anything about it, either. Fear combined with painkillers left me emotionally fragile and very worried, but I did my best to put the fears aside. That worked — mostly.

At 4 PM, an hour later than the originally scheduled start time, one of the nurses came to wheel me to the operating room. Finally! While I still felt fear, I just wanted the surgery over. I said a quiet goodbye to Angela and Ellen, then spent the next few minutes trying to stay calm as the nurse wheeled me through the corridors.

“Deep breaths,” I thought.

I called on years of meditation practice in an attempt to calm myself. It didn't work. My throat tightened with fear, my mouth felt like cotton was stuffed inside it, and swallowing was almost impossible.

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<sup>7</sup> In defense of the medical staff: I've worked in healthcare for many years prior to my accident and I understand why trauma and surgery teams often cultivate a little distance between themselves and their patients. These professionals see horrible injury and illness every day they report to work, and in order to do their jobs effectively, they need to maintain some emotional distance.

### 3) Another World

The doors of the operating room stood in front of me, gleaming white from the bright surgical lights shining through their windows. An odd thought about the doors' resemblance to the Pearly Gates passed through my mind but I tried to put that aside. I didn't want to somehow jinx myself or the surgical team. The pit of my stomach tightened again and I felt yet another wave of panic wash through my body.

More deep breaths.

As the nurse pushed me inside, I noticed the unusual color of the room: bright, sunflower yellow instead of the usual cold, sterile white I'd come to expect in hospitals. Metal equipment that seemed impossibly shiny ranged around the room, and the surgical team stood on the opposite side of the operating table. I spied a tray with what I assumed were surgical instruments laid out around it and a bit of terror grabbed at my stomach again. Some of the instruments looked like they were from a torture chamber rather than a medical facility. I wished I hadn't seen them.

I didn't pay much attention to the nurse as she prepped my IV tubing and anesthesia drugs, and I hardly noticed the anesthesiologist come up on my left side. Instead, I devoted most of my mental energy to stilling my nervousness. The anesthesiologist adjusted the IV drip and joked about it being time for cocktails, then I drifted off.

I've had three previous surgeries that required the same general anesthesia as I was getting today — two abdominal and one minor back procedure. I've also endured a few minor surgeries requiring the same or similar anesthesia. None of those experiences were remarkable in any way. In all of them, the anesthesiologist gave me the drugs, I drifted off into a gray state

of nothingness<sup>8</sup> (I wouldn't call it "sleep"), and what felt like the next second I was waking up in the recovery room. No memories, no dreams, no sense of anything happening, just the experience of slipping into a gray unconsciousness one second and waking up in recovery the next.

Not this time.

I did drift off as the anesthesiologist gave me my "cocktail," but it wasn't to the gray state of nothingness that I expected.<sup>9</sup>

I abruptly found myself standing in a spectacular landscape unlike any I'd ever experienced. Warm breezes drifted across my skin. Beautiful vistas of meadows and distant mountains surrounded me. And a pervasive, loving presence overwhelmed me in its intensity.

My mind tried to wrap itself around what was happening since it felt so real. In the back of my awareness I knew I had just gone into surgery, but I wondered if I had somehow dreamed the bike accident and my injuries. This place felt more real to me than any on Earth.

Surrounding me was a landscape of gently rolling hills, flower-filled grassy meadows, towering deciduous trees in full leaf, trees taller and more grand than any here on Earth, and a sense of a light mist floating through as if it were a humid summer morning. The sky gleamed a very light, pearly blue, similar to what you might see at the ocean's shore, with wispy clouds and a very bright but somewhat diffuse light.

Oddly, though, I didn't see or hear any evidence of other people or animal life. No one else walked the meadows. No fences, roads, or buildings intruded on the landscape. No birds

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<sup>8</sup> If you haven't been in surgery, having anesthesia may seem odd. It's not sleep. It's a state of deep *unconsciousness*. It's characterized by lack of memory, lack of pain, and muscle relaxation (wikipedia.org). You don't dream and most people really do describe it as a "gray state of nothingness."

<sup>9</sup> From here on, things get difficult to explain in human words. Much of what I experienced in Heaven was pure knowing and feeling. While I do my best to describe them to you, know that mere words cannot even begin to adequately explain what I experienced there.

sung from the branches or flew through the air. It was just me, this gorgeous landscape, and that loving presence permeating it all.

I had the sense that I was standing. I could tell I wasn't floating since the ground felt solid under my bare feet as I walked. Lightweight clothes fit for a summer day seemed to drape softly over my skin. They felt silky, but I didn't have the sense to look down to check them out. I guess I'm not much of a fashionista.

My surroundings captured most of my attention. Below the surface forms and colors of everything in the landscape, I somehow also saw or sensed vibrating energy. I'm not sure how to describe it. It seemed I could see the surface of a leaf, for example, yet also see below it to an energy, a vibration of love or compassion or kindness that made the leaf take on a subsurface radiance. Everything had this radiance: trees, grass, sky, flowers, and clouds. Colors seemed intensified by this radiance. The feeling of love flowed through everything and heightened this radiance.

Through it all I sensed and somehow physically felt an incredibly profound feeling of peace, rightness, goodness, and love flowing through my body. I cried, literally wept, at how beautiful it all was and thought to myself that it was definitely an OK place to be during my surgery; much better than that gray nothingness I expected. I didn't know *where* I stood or how I came here, but I felt at home, right, and at peace.

The Beauty I saw and felt in those first moments really does deserve a capital "B." It wasn't just pleasing to the eye, there was something deeper to it, more harmonious, more blessed, and more powerful. Everything felt tied together by an enormous amount of love and peace. Somehow I knew that the beauty of the landscape around me was the product of unconditional love on a cosmic scale.

While this beauty took my breath away, the sense of overwhelming peace and love completely ensnared me and made me want to stay here forever. I continued to feel a deep sense of unconditional love flow through all things around me: the air, the ground below my feet, the trees, the clouds, and me. I didn't

know how it was possible to feel love as if it were a physical presence, but I did. My *being* vibrated with love to its core. Every molecule of me seemed bathed in love. I couldn't block it out, nor would I have wanted to. I continued to feel the energy of love flow around me like a gentle current, washing through me, and eventually capturing me by the heart. I felt supported by some kind of loving presence so powerful, yet so gentle, that I cried again. I had never experienced such unconditional love and acceptance in all of my years on this Earth.

It felt as though this place were built from love on a very grand, cosmic scale.

Soon, a visitor joined me. As she approached, she welcomed me with a warm embrace of pure love.

*This ends the sample chapters for “Awakenings from the Light.” Please visit our website to sign up for news and events, to contact Nancy, or for more information on purchasing this book:*

***<http://NancyRynes.com>***

# *The Power of Two*

Thank you for allowing me to share my experience with you.

My near-death experience, and the messages I received in Heaven, continue to have a huge impact on my life. It's part of my calling to spread Heaven's message of love to all who want to hear it — you can help by telling others about this book.

If you enjoyed reading this book, I graciously ask that you tell at least two friends about it.

Peace,

Nancy Rynes

**<http://NancyRynes.com>**

**[TheSpiritWay.BlogSpot.com](http://TheSpiritWay.BlogSpot.com)**

# ***Nancy's Programs***

## **Awakenings from the Light**

As the author of *Awakenings from the Light*, Nancy speaks about the depth of love and connection to Spirit that is our birthright. In fun, positive, and engaging talks and seminars, she shares her experiences while in Heaven, and how we can use that information to enhance both our personal and professional lives. Available in several formats from one hour to weekend workshop.

## **Your Creative Vision — Finding and Nurturing Your Muse**

“Your Creative Vision” expands on the creativity message found in *Awakenings from the Light* and teaches artists of all kinds a process for developing and nurturing their own signature style.

**For more information or to schedule any of these programs, please see:**

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