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REMEMBERING KEN RING

By P. M. H. Atwater

The last issue of **Vital Signs**, dedicated to Ken Ring, caught me. I almost cried, loving every page, every morsel of word and sentence, pictures, memories. Oh, my God, how do I express myself here, my story mixed with his.

I missed that first go-round in 1977, when special folks like Ken gathered to start something new - the scientific study of near-death experiences - and here in Charlottesville, where, years later, my husband and I would make our home. I couldn't attend (nor would they have invited me) because I was too busy at the time dying, three times in three months, then later in that same year having three relapses. When they were discussing "how to," The Voice Like None Other from my third NDE was telling me to do the very research they were discussing. The timing of this gets me.

And I did as I was told to do, leaving my home state of Idaho, traveling to Washington, D.C., finding a job, staying with cousins until I could find an apartment, and suddenly finding myself meeting other near-death experiencers, giving talks, researching/studying with a keen eye. A strong feeling to move led me to Roanoke, Virginia. The job I found there involved constant travel through all the states east of the Mississippi River. Everywhere I went I encountered other near-death experiencers, all of them wanting to tell me their story - even though they had no idea who I was. We met. They talked. That simple. With me studying every movement, nuance, word said - meeting often with their families, friends, employers, health-care providers. Constantly. For years. Hardly ever were names exchanged. The whole thing was spooky!

One day Ken called me on the phone. How he heard of me or found my phone number, he never said. What he did say is that he had found

my little self-published book, *I Died Three Times in 1977*, at a bookstore in Hartford, Connecticut. Intrigued by the title he bought it. Neither of us could figure out how that little book ever got to Hartford in the first place, as only 50 copies were ever printed, sold mostly in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. After reading it, he made it a priority to somehow find me. He did. On a trip he would soon make to Charlottesville, once again meeting with Raymond and “the group,” he asked if he could come over, stay overnight, and talk. My husband Terry and I said sure.

We talked the night away. Ken had no idea I was doing near-death research. I had no idea anyone else was doing it, either. I had never heard of Raymond Moody, nor his book. The term “near-death experience” and what it was came from Elisabeth Kübler Ross, when I met her at O’Hare Airport near Chicago in 1978. Her plane was late for Europe. I recognized her from news clips, walked up, introduced myself, and asked if I could tell her what had happened to me the year before. We sat on a bench for over an hour, talking like a couple of school girls. She said I was a “near-death survivor” and then she told me about the phenomenon, never once mentioning Raymond. The more I talked the more interested Ken was, marveling at the research I had done and the way I did it, and the numbers of people involved. By morning he said: “You’re ahead of the rest of us. You must come to Storrs, meet your peers, and go through our archives.” I did just that, staying for almost a week, bunking out on Ken’s front room sofa, driving every day to the University of Connecticut and the office of the newly minted International Association of Near-Death Studies. Nancy Bush was the Executive Secretary.

I read everything they had, listened to every recording, and from that devised a questionnaire I would send to all of the IANDS people and all my people to see how the two groups compared. Identical. . . except. . . *none of them acknowledged any kind of problem or difficulty they were having afterward. . . when I already knew the people in my group were having lots of them, verified by their families and friends.* That discovery fueled my fire to do more, much more.

Over the decades since, Ken and I have cross-compared, argued, agreed, fought, praised each other, up and down the scale - me thanking

God I stayed with police investigative techniques as my protocol (I was a cop's kid raised in a police station) and Ken rightfully predicting that until I used standard scientific techniques my work would probably never be fully accepted. Who knows the wrong or right of this. I only know Ken was my mentor, that angel who stepped in out-of-the-blue to make a big, huge difference in my life.

Thank you, Ken, for being who you are and doing what you did. We're about the same age, you retired, me still gung-ho about research. I guess some of us, mainly me, never learn. Chuckle.

With much love, always, PMH