

[During a parachuting jump, the leader below me accidentally pulled his ripcord without confirming the sky was clear above him. It would have been deadly if I hadn't make some quick moves to save both our lives] I passed him going at over 150 miles per hour, or 220 feet per second. Given that speed, I doubt he saw the expression on my face. But if he had, he would have seen a look of sheer astonishment. Somehow I had reacted in microseconds to a situation that, had I actually had time to think about it, would have been much too complex for me to deal with. And yet I had dealt with it, and we both landed safely. It was as if, presented with a situation that required more than its usual ability to respond, my brain had become, for a moment, superpowered.

How had I done it? Over the course of my twenty-plus-year career in academic neurosurgery - of studying the brain, observing how it works, and operating on it - I have had plenty of opportunities to ponder this very question. I finally chalked it up to the fact that the brain is truly an extraordinary device: more extraordinary than we can even guess.

I realize now that the real answer to that question is much more profound. But I had to go through a complete metamorphosis of my life and worldview to glimpse that answer. This book is about the events that changed my mind on the matter. They convinced me that, as marvelous a mechanism as the brain is, it was not my brain that saved my life that day at all. What sprang into action the second Chuck's chute started to open was another, much deeper part of me. A part that could move so fast because it was not stuck in time at all, the way the brain and body are. This was the same part of me, in fact, that had made me so homesick for the skies as a kid. It's not only the smartest part of us, but the deepest part as well, yet for most of my adult life I was unable to believe in it. But I do believe now, and the pages that follow will tell you why. ·

I'm a neurosurgeon. I graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1976 with a major in chemistry and earned my M.D. at Duke University Medical School in 1980. During my eleven years of medical school and residency training at Duke as well as Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard, I focused on neuroendocrinology, the study of the interactions between the nervous system and the endocrine system-the series of glands that release the hormones that direct most of your body's activities. I also spent two of those eleven years investigating

how blood vessels in one area of the brain react pathologically when there is bleeding into it from an aneurysm—a syndrome known as cerebral vasospasm. After completing a fellowship in cerebrovascular neurosurgery in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne in the United Kingdom, I spent fifteen years on the faculty of Harvard Medical School as an associate professor of surgery, with a specialization in neurosurgery. During those years I operated on countless patients, many of them with severe, life-threatening brain conditions.

Most of my research work involved the development of advanced technical procedures like stereotactic radiosurgery, a technique that allows surgeons to precisely guide beams of radiation to specific targets deep in the brain without affecting adjacent areas. I also helped develop magnetic resonance image-guided neurosurgical procedures instrumental in repairing hard-to-treat brain conditions like tumors and vascular disorders.

During those years I also authored or coauthored more than 150 chapters and papers for peer-reviewed medical journals and presented my findings at more than two hundred medical conferences around the world. In short, I devoted myself to science. Using the tools of modern medicine to help and to heal people, and to learn more about the workings of the human body and brain, was my life's calling. I felt immeasurably lucky to have found it. More important, I had a beautiful wife and two lovely children, and while I was in many ways married to my work, I did not neglect my family, which I considered the other great blessing in my life. On many counts I was a very lucky man, and I knew it.

On November 10, 2008, however, at age fifty-four, my luck seemed to run out. I was struck by a rare illness and thrown into a coma for seven days. During that time, my entire neocortex—the outer surface of the brain, the part that makes us human—was shut down. Inoperative. In essence, absent.

When your brain is absent, you are absent, too. As a neurosurgeon, I'd heard many stories over the years of people who had strange experiences, usually after suffering cardiac arrest: stories of traveling to mysterious, wonderful landscapes; of talking to dead relatives—even of meeting God Himself. Wonderful stuff, no question. But all of it, in my opinion, was pure fantasy. What caused the otherworldly types of experiences that such people so often report? I didn't claim to know, but I did know that they were brain-based. All of consciousness is. If you don't have a working brain, you can't be conscious. This is because the brain is the machine that produces consciousness in the first place. When the machine breaks down, consciousness stops. As vastly complicated and mysterious as the actual

mechanics of brain processes are, in essence the matter is as simple as that. Pull the plug and the TV goes dead. The show is over, no matter how much you might have been enjoying it. Or so I would have told you before my own brain crashed.

During my coma my brain wasn't working improperly - it wasn't working at all. I now believe that this might have been what was responsible for the depth and intensity of the near-death experience (NDE) that I myself underwent during it. Many of the NDEs reported happen when a person's heart has shut down for a while. In those cases, the neocortex is temporarily inactivated, but generally not too damaged, provided that the flow of oxygenated blood is restored through cardiopulmonary resuscitation or reactivation of cardiac function within four minutes or so. But in my case, the neocortex was out of the picture. I was encountering the reality of a world of consciousness that existed completely free of the limitations of my physical brain.

Mine was in some ways a perfect storm of near-death experiences. As a practicing neurosurgeon with decades of research and hands-on work in the operating room behind me, I was in a better-than-average position to judge not only the reality but also the implications of what happened to me. Those implications are tremendous beyond description. My experience showed me that the death of the body and the brain are not the end of consciousness, that human experience continues beyond the grave. More important, it continues under the gaze of a God who loves and cares about each one of us and about where the universe itself and all the beings within it are ultimately going.

The place I went was real. Real in a way that makes the life we're living here and now completely dreamlike by comparison. This doesn't mean I don't value the life I'm living now, however. In fact, I value it more than I ever did before. I do so because I now see it in its true context.

This life isn't meaningless. But we can't see that fact from here—at least most of the time. What happened to me while I was in that coma is hands-down the most important story I will ever tell. But it's a tricky story to tell because it is so foreign to ordinary understanding. I can't simply shout it from the roof-tops. At the same time, my conclusions are based on a medical analysis of my experience, and on my familiarity with the most advanced concepts in brain science and consciousness studies. Once I realized the truth behind my journey, I knew I had to tell it. Doing so properly has become the chief task of my life.

That's not to say I've abandoned my medical work and my life as a neurosurgeon. But now that I have been privileged to understand that our life does not end with the death of the body or the brain, I see it as my duty, my calling, to tell people about what I saw beyond the body and beyond this earth. I am especially eager to tell my story to the people who might have heard stories similar to mine before and wanted to believe them, but had not been able to fully do so.

It is to these people, more than any other, that I direct this book, and the message within it. What I have to tell you is as important as anything anyone will ever tell you, and it's true.

[At home, getting ready for work in 2008] Another jolt of pain shot down my back, so intense that I gasped. This was definitely not the flu. But what else could it be? After struggling out of the slippery tub and into my scarlet terry-cloth bathrobe, I slowly made my way back to our bedroom and flopped down on our bed. My body was already damp again from cold sweat.

Holley stirred and turned over. "What's going on? What time is it?"

"I don't know," I said. "My back. I am in serious pain."

Holley began rubbing my back. To my surprise it made me feel a little better. Doctors, by and large, don't take kindly to being sick. I'm no exception. For a moment I was convinced the pain - and whatever was causing it - would finally start to recede. But by 6:30 A.M., the time I usually left for work, I was still in agony and virtually paralyzed.

Bond came into our bedroom at 7:30, curious as to why I was still at home.

"What's going on?"

"Your father doesn't feel well, honey," Holley said.

I was still lying on the bed with my head propped up on a pillow. Bond came over, reached out, and began to massage my temples gently.

His touch sent what felt like a lightning bolt through my head-the worst pain yet. I screamed. Surprised by my reaction, Bond jumped back.

"It's okay," Holley said to Bond, clearly thinking otherwise. "It's nothing you did. Dad has a horrible headache." Then I heard her say, more to herself than to me: "I wonder if I should call an ambulance."

If there's one thing doctors hate even more than being sick, it's being in the emergency room as a patient. I pictured the house filling up with EMTs, the retinue of stock questions, the ride to the hospital, the paperwork ... I thought at some point I would begin to feel better and regret calling an ambulance in the first place.

"No, it's okay," I said. "It's bad now but it's bound to get better soon. You should probably help Bond get ready for school."

"Eben, I really think-"

"I'll be fine," I interrupted, my face still buried in the pillow. I was still paralyzed by the pain. "Seriously, do not call nine-one-one. I'm not that sick. It's just a muscle spasm in my lower back, and a headache."

Reluctantly, Holley took Bond downstairs and fed him some breakfast before sending him up the street to a friend's house to catch a ride to school. As Bond was going out the front door, the thought occurred to me that if this was something serious and I did end up in the hospital, I might not see him after school that afternoon. I mustered all my energy and croaked out, "Have a good day at school, Bond."

By the time Holley came back upstairs to check on me, I was slipping into unconsciousness. Thinking I was napping, she left me to rest and went downstairs to call some of my colleagues, hoping to get their opinions on what might be happening. Two hours later, feeling she'd let me rest long enough, she came back to check on me. Pushing open our bedroom door, she saw me lying in bed just as before. But looking closer, she saw that my body wasn't relaxed as it had been, but rigid as a board. She turned on the light and saw that I was jerking violently. My lower jaw was jutting forward unnaturally, and my eyes were open and rolling back in my head. "Eben, say something!" Holley screamed. When I didn't respond, she called nine-one-one. It took the EMTs less than ten minutes to arrive, and they quickly loaded me into an ambulance bound for the Lynchburg General Hospital emergency room.

Had I been conscious, I could have told Holley exactly what I was undergoing there on the bed during those terrifying moments she spent waiting for the ambulance: a full grand mal seizure, brought on, no doubt, by some kind of extremely severe shock to my brain.

But of course, I was not able to do that.

For the next seven days, I would be present to Holley and the rest of my family in body alone. I remember nothing of this world during that week and have had to glean from others those parts of this story that occurred during the time I was unconscious. My mind, my spirit - whatever you may choose to call the central, human part of me - was gone.