

Sabine Mehne

Light Without Shadows

Living With a Near-Death Experience
With an afterword by Pim van Lommel
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Reading preview, part 1

A dentist appointment is written in my weekly planner. It's not a big deal, really, just a filling replacement. Still, it's difficult for me. I hate to be fiddled around with for medical reasons, even when reason tells me it's nothing to get upset about. I hate shots and pain. Why I need to play the hero, today of all days, I don't understand myself, but I decide to try to do the whole thing without pain medication. The chair is lowered down, my head hangs askew, and a cushion that is supposed to provide relief presses into my neck. I cross my legs and fold my hands across my stomach. I close my eyes and surrender to the situation. I tell myself it won't be so bad, that I've already endured much worse. I talk to myself as if soothing a frightened dog. There, there, easy girl, stay calm, it's just a dentist visit and the guy is surely doing his best. Breathe into your hands, come on! Don't cramp up your shoulders, that's not going to help. You know everything is going to be just fine. The drill whirrs, chugging along in my head, the suction device gurgles and smacks its lips in my open mouth. Disgusting. I sense how in my deepest being, everything that makes up who I am contracts and collects into one point, very familiar.

Suddenly, sharp stabbing pain blindsides me as if I were strapped to an electric chair. I jerk; the dentist again offers me a shot of anesthetic. No way, certainly not now, I can take it! I don't want to run around for hours with my cheek drooping lopsided off my face! He continues to drill, and I exhale deeply. With the exhalation, I feel how I become lighter, how the drill becomes quieter, and suddenly I

am looking at myself from above, from the glaring ceiling lamp. No pain, no unpleasant noises anymore, a short repose, a time-shift.

I follow exactly what the dentist is doing. Interesting – such an open abyss. How precisely and confidently he holds the drill, so as not to slip a millimeter. I feel his concentration and his pleasure that he's almost finished. Fascinated and relieved, I leave him to it and continue on inwardly. A short dip into eternity, simply gone, just like that. It feels light and good. I could spend hours like this.

“Would you please rinse?” I don’t move. The assistant taps me on the shoulder. “We’re almost finished, Ms Mehne, please rinse out thoroughly!” With a twitch I am back in the chair, trying to open my eyes. “Is everything ok?” I don’t feel like answering and spit and rinse slowly and carefully. I lay my head back, open my mouth and give a sign to continue.

I hear the doctor ask, “Is everything really ok?”

“Yes, yes”, I answer sheepishly. “I know a kind of technique,” I hear myself say, “that I use for total, deep relaxation.”

On the way home, I smile to myself. What did I just try to pull over on them? A deep relaxation technique? Seriously? On the other hand, why not, that’s just what I’ll call it, sounds good! All the same, I still feel strange, because everything seemed to happen by itself. I didn’t do it on purpose. Or did I? What’s going on here? Why can’t I just push away the uncertainty and say to myself: there’s one more thing you made it through, great job! A strange feeling gnaws at me, an elusive internal bewilderment, like a roll of faraway thunder during a summer storm. I feel peace, lightness of being, gratitude. And at the same time, I feel like sobbing. Tears simply run down my face; I’m shaking inside, no chance to suppress it. It’s a good thing I don’t meet anyone on this small forest path and have to explain myself. I walk slowly, I cry, let myself be shaken to the core by the tears, stand still, look up to the treetops interspersed with the blue of the sky. And then a smile spreads across my face, a deep, good smile. I feel like I’ve been born again, but also tired and spent.

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Interview

The editor Heike Hermann in conversation with Sabine Mehne

Ms Mehne, how has your life changed since your near-death experience?

Everything was turned upside down. At the beginning I could only notice it inwardly, because on the outside I was desperately trying to keep up with my responsibilities and to function as usual. I couldn’t connect to or understand myself anymore. It was terrible. My ability to believe in myself and meticulously observe myself — and the good fortune to always meet the right people at the right time — helped me. To this day, the most difficult thing is to live with my heightened sensitivity. It’s similar to animals that need a certain kind of habitat and care to survive in captivity. My own species-appropriate environment requires times of quiet, sometimes for days at a time. Appropriate conditions also means that I have to have contact with people who have learned to love and appreciate the light. That nourishes me for weeks on end.

And your view on death?

To have no fear of death, and to think of death as a good friend at my side is simply wonderful. Living becomes so easy, and only from that moment on can truly be called life. Death is movement towards this inexpressible light. For me it is not an end, at most only the end of our earthly aspect. It is a transition to a different dimension, which unfortunately is so difficult for our brains to imagine. Our hearts can feel it, when they are ready. In spite of this, death is and remains for me something immense, something incomprehensible, a mystery that even near-death experience can’t explain. For me personally, it’s a comfort to have been allowed to discover that there’s something that remains, something that is always there, regardless of the many scientists that still claim it’s just a phantasm.

How do you explain the phenomenon of near-death experience?

I believe that it's a kind of program designed into us humans that becomes activated under certain conditions, possibly also when dying. Descriptions of near-death experiences have been around since there have been human beings. And more and more people are going to experience it, quite simply because modern resuscitation and high-tech medicine are leading to increasing survival rates. There must be a reason why this phenomenon keeps occurring. In my opinion, it's to show us humans the way into transcendence. For me, the intangible is actually the basis for life. According to various studies, including those Pim van Lommel cites in his book *Consciousness Beyond Life*, approximately four percent of the German population have had a near-death experience.

Why do you believe it is still taboo to talk about it?

The majority still don't trust themselves to talk about it because they don't want to be called crazy. I also had that concern. People who haven't had the experience have great difficulty understanding this dimension; they simply can't imagine it. And unfortunately, they also try far too little. They may also be afraid that their worldview might be called into question if they allowed themselves to believe in near-death experience.

What was your motivation to co-found the German Near-Death Experience Network / Friends of IANDS (International Association for Near-Death Studies)?

Fascination, my own desire for knowledge, and the recognition that you can achieve a lot more through a network. In the United States, where this kind of an organization has been around for a long time, people talk more openly and empathetically about near-death experiences. Here in Germany, I often come across anxiety with regard to the subject. The connections between science and personal experience that the network makes possible are simply wonderful.

You already had a near-death experience a child, then twice again as an adult during your fight with cancer and another life-threatening condition. Do you believe that some people are more open to this kind of experience than others?

Yes, that's easy for me to imagine. Studies show that a small percentage of people have an NDE in childhood, and then a repeat experience in adulthood. The experience as an adult can therefore be very intense, just as it was in my case. It's as if the entirety of the person has been primed to allow this dimension to occur. Unfortunately, the vast majority don't exactly remember having a near-death experience in childhood. They only sense that they're somehow different from other people. When I look back from the perspective of this experience, many moments take on a deeper meaning, running through my life like a golden thread. Finally understanding this has been an essential building block to my recovery.

Thank you very much for the interview.

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Reading preview, part 2

Against my better judgment, I decide to go to Kirsten's funeral. I manage to divide up the children among friends, even though it costs me an endless amount of energy and a guilty conscience. A two-hour train trip awaits me, the first one I decide to try on my own after my illness. I have a compartment all to myself. The black suit needs getting used to, the skirt is too wide, the blazer feels stiff and tight

and it strangles me on the inside even more; suddenly this black masquerade feels ridiculous. Something brighter would have been much more appropriate! I make myself comfortable at the window seat. My eyes dive into the countryside, darting back and forth with the rocking of the train. Memories flood me. Kirsten was my angel in the night. We shared a room at the Mainz University Medical Center when I was sent there after being diagnosed with cancer. I had my first chemotherapy treatment next to her; she already had countless treatments behind her. She looked after me, gave me courage and was the most important person to me during that time. She showed me her crocheted caps, she told me what it's like when your hair falls out, and she even let me try on her wig. We shared gallows humor and talked all night long, since it wasn't possible to sleep anyway. We cried together, because her prognosis was much worse than mine.

She was ten years younger than me and had married a few years earlier. She wasn't allowed to have children due to the chronic leukemia she had been struggling with since she was nineteen. At that time the doctors only gave her five years to live, but when I met her, she had managed to live the same lifespan again. Kirsten was tired and delicate. Her face had that typical yellow-brown coloring that many people have after chemotherapy. She usually covered her naked head with a light blue cap. She shuffled her way to the toilet bent and slow, pulling the IV stand along like a dachshund at her side. We hit it off immediately. Without question or hesitation, we instantly understood exactly what the other was saying. Healthy people seldom achieve that, even if they try very hard. I owed her a lot. As I sit in the train, I realize just how precious the time with her was.

At the entrance to the cemetery, I buy a large pink rose. The sales lady describes the way to the chapel. Arriving, I hear the music from "Time To Say Goodbye" and am ready to burst into tears any second. Oh man, it goes right through me. The chapel is filled to overflowing, lots of young people; I don't know anyone here. I see her husband sitting in the front row. He came to the hospital as often as he could. From the chair that someone kindly offers me, I look at the large photo of her. I've seen it before. She sent it to me just before her death. I knew as soon as I pulled it out of the envelope: This is her farewell letter, even though she wrote to tell me all about her life.

I stand at her grave, one of the last ones, in front of this trench. I am exhausted. Along with my rose, I throw all positive thoughts into the earth and notice how my legs become weak. All of life's energy drains out of me, into this cavity in the ground. For a short moment, I feel the urge to simply fall into the hole. I feel something like envy. I'm envious that she made it, that she's free now, that she is in peace. Everything before was just torment. If someone tried to tell me that hell comes after death, I'd scream in their face that it was a lie. Hell is here on Earth, before death. To be locked in a body filled with sickness twenty-four hours a day, that is part of hell! What do you moral apostles and remorseless cheerleaders know about suffering? You can all piss off. Death is a good thing! I know it, but I can't say it. I sway and my knees buckle, when a large hand grabs my arm and pulls me up. I'm sweating and shaking and want more than anything else to lie down.

Instead, I find myself looking into the eyes of Kirsten's husband. His joy in seeing me again is written all over his face. He grabs and hugs me. What are the others going to think? Actually, I couldn't care

less. His firm hold helps me immensely. It's as if some of his strength flows into me, like a pump blowing up an air mattress. With great pleasure, he offers me his arm, I put mine through his, and we make our way to the restaurant where everyone has already gathered for the customary meal after a burial. He introduces me to everyone, while I can hardly make sense of what's going on. Everyone is happy that I made it though, that I am one of the few who had the privilege to be close to Kirsten during her ordeal – although she did more of the supporting than I. I am celebrated like a starlet, a survivor, someone who has defeated cancer. I do everyone the favor and plaster on a grin like a Cheshire cat, the smile of the rescued. Apparently, I embody for everyone the hope that death can be

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vanquished. It's unbelievable, as if Kirsten has already been forgotten. Within me, I feel her presence strongly. I feel that vibrant part of her persona, the part that must be indestructible. It's a very beautiful feeling, delicate, fine, clear. It is a sacred feeling.

On the way back in the train, a strange sorrow grows in me. I can't stop thinking how free Kirsten is now and how trapped I still am, even though I was the one to receive the blessing of continued life. Here in the solitude of a train compartment, I don't feel ashamed. I know death, I know what dying means, and I know with the entire consciousness of my being that it isn't a bad thing. I want to be free too, but I don't want to die. Why can't I have one without the other?

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