

# Departed Loved Ones Coming Back To Say Goodbye...

By Jeannie Kever, The Houston Chronicle  
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Susan Fulbright is a math teacher, a believer in logic.

She also believes this:

"It was Christmas 1978, six months after her father's death. She and her mother, sisters and assorted husbands had gathered in the living room of a sister's house when she noticed a smell.

"I recognized that smell immediately. It was pleasant, but it was the smell of a working man. I reached out, and the next thing I knew, we were holding hands and tears were coming from all of us.

"We just kept talking. After a few minutes, it went away, and I looked at Frances (one of her sisters) and said, "Did you feel that?" and she said, "Daddy was here, wasn't he?"

"Daddy came and visited us one more time, and we knew he was OK."

It was wonderful, really, dispensing solace like a soothing salve. But in 22 years, she has told the story to just a handful of people, all too aware of the reputation such mystical revelations have in many circles.

"People will think you're nuts."

Fulbright, who lives near Galveston Bay, had experienced what researchers call an after-death communication, an increasingly acknowledged phenomenon that is expanding ideas about death and the afterlife.

"We live in a seriously death-phobic society," said Carla Wills -Brandon, a therapist and author from Galveston. "We don't want to talk about it. We don't want to think about it."

Wills -Brandon's new book, *"One Last Hug Before I Go: The Mystery and Meaning of Deathbed Visions"* (Health Communications, \$12.95), forces its readers to think about death. Among anecdotal evidence gathered from a number of cultures and historical eras, many of its stories hint at a reunion with a dead loved one or a vision of an angel or religious figure just before death, others are from survivors who, like Fulbright, report a reassuring communication from someone who has died

These experiences, with their suggestion of some sort of afterlife, aren't new, Wills -Brandon said. "One hundred years ago, when somebody died, they died in the home, with the family around the bed. There would be talk, settling disputes, saying goodbye. When the dying had visions, it was accepted," she said.

"Now people die in hospitals and nursing homes, and typically they are alone. This has been pushed aside, but it's still happening."



The topic is so emotionally charged that Wills -Brandon for years resisted writing her book. Even now, she acknowledged, it is on the fringe of mainstream psychological thought.

But stroll down the self-help aisle of any bookstore, and you'll find evidence that people are beginning to talk openly about what happens when we die.

"I think there's this real resurgence (of interest), with the baby boomers getting older and our parents passing and getting sick. People are beginning to ask questions," Wills -Brandon said.

Bert Hayslip, a psychology professor at the University of North Texas in Denton who specializes in death and dying issues, says the questions are an attempt to gain control.

"If you can predict or understand what happens (after death), it gives you more control over what happens before," he said. "If you could be assured of a good life after death, there's not as much to worry about as if you are going to roast in hell or you literally didn't know what was going to happen to you."

A few researchers are applying such strategies as measuring electrical activity surrounding death scenes, and Hayslip's professional opinion is neutral: "I'm not sure we have reliable information on what happens to you after you die, or when you die."

But he has heard enough about deathbed visions and after-death communications not to dismiss them out of hand, even in the absence of scientific proof. "People want and need to believe that they will be reunited with people they love," he said. "My answer is, unless you can prove to me that it didn't happen, I'm going to have to accept on faith that it did."

Strangely common

Wills -Brandon first encountered death almost 30 years ago, when she was 16 and her mother was in the final stages of breast cancer.

"I woke up at 5 a.m., and I just intuitively knew she was gone," she said. Confirmation came from the hospital soon after.

More than a decade later - like many people, she had guarded her secret for years - she discovered that two friends had had the same experience at the same time, waking abruptly with the intuitive knowledge that Wills -Brandon's mother had died.

Wills -Brandon, who is now 44, ultimately viewed the sensation as a visit from her mother, delivering one last hug. She was intrigued, and she began casually collecting information on the subject.

But it remained a sideline while she worked as a family therapist and wrote several books on other topics, until her husband, child psychologist Michael Brandon, and their youngest son, Joshua, had visions connected to the death of Brandon's father in 1996.

"For our family, it was very healing," Wills -Brandon said.

Even so, it was hard to talk about.

Brandon was reluctant to tell people what he had seen - a "swirl of pastel color" rising from his father's chest shortly before his death, a vision of his father sitting in his customary place on the couch the morning after his death - for fear of being labeled flaky and unprofessional.

"Concrete thinkers would rather trust logic than their own experiences," Wills -Brandon said. "They have to go through a process of adjusting and accepting."

He ultimately did talk about it, and Wills -Brandon writes about his experience and that of their then 3 -year-old son. By then, she was speaking openly of her own experience with her mother's death. And Brandon's cousin Yvonne Hess had shared a secret of her own.

An only child, Hess had been terrified when her mother was diagnosed with leukemia more than 10 years ago.

Her fear grew a few months later when her mother suffered a heart attack as paramedics prepared to take her to the hospital for further treatment.

Hess was sitting on a nearby sofa with her father when it happened. "I'd never experienced anything like this, but I physically saw her spirit leave," she said. "It hovered over where Dad and I were sitting, and I just had this incredible feeling of peace.

"I knew everything would be OK."

Hess grieved when her mother was pronounced dead later that day, but she also took strength from what she had seen.

"What it let me know was that I didn't have to let go," said Hess, 47, a middle school art teacher in Clear Lake. "The loss I thought would be there really wasn't. Yeah, I missed the day-to-day conversations, and I still do after 10 years. But it erased so many fears in one fell swoop."

Still, she didn't tell anyone for years. Not even her father.

It was too personal. Too emotional. When she did finally begin to share her story, she discovered that she wasn't alone, but people were hesitant to talk about their own experiences

"They thought they were strange and didn't want to talk about it," she said.

Curtis Holverson fits firmly in the latter category.

"I don't want people to think I'm on the nut side," he said by way of introducing his story.

Holverson, a 44-year-old grain inspector from Grand Forks, N.D., was lying in bed one night in 1994 after returning from the hospital where his mother-in-law was dying of cancer. His wife, Jeanine, was asleep beside him.

"All of a sudden, I noticed this fluffy, misty thing hovering over her side of the bed," he said. It moved into his daughter's bedroom, then returned for a few more seconds before rising to the ceiling. "And then it was gone."

Fifteen minutes later, the telephone call came from the hospital: Jeanine's mother was dead.

Holverson told his wife what he had seen. "I said, "Your mom must have been here and said goodbye."

Otherwise, "I've never told a soul. I don't want to tell nobody about it. They'll think I'm nuts."

But his wife told two people, an uncle who is a Lutheran minister - "He didn't seem surprised, and he thought it was

probably my mom" - and Wills -Brandon , whom she heard last month in a telephone interview with the radio station for which Jeanine Holverson works as a sales representative.

Her husband is reluctant to dwell on what he saw that night, but Jeanine Holverson finds consolation in it.

"I kind of wish I had been the one to have the experience, because it was my mother," she said. "Curt said she hovered over me for a while."

Wills -Brandon is used to hearing these long-held secrets, especially since the publication of her book. She appears on several radio shows each week to promote the book, and TV bookings are growing.

"Every cocktail party I go to, every football game, people tell me things," Wills -Brandon said. "I'm a real magnet."

Lasting impressions

She believes all these stories add up to something, but she doesn't claim to have all the answers.

"There is something to this," she said. "I'm not here to prove there is life after death. I'm saying there is something going on, and we're allowing our scientific culture to pooh-pooh this stuff when there are people out there with tales to tell."

Here is Virginia Dooley's:

"My husband had this experience when I was nursing him. . . . He had terminal cancer, and I was home with him. He was just going into a coma, and what he did was, it was just so amazing, he raised his arms, (and) he was making a patting motion with his hands, patting someone on the back. It just struck me, he was patting someone on the back, he was kissing. . . .

"I was there with his sister, and we were amazed. We just said, "Look at that." His sister said, "I think he sees Mother (who had died eight years earlier)."

"It was nothing you could mistake for something else."

Virginia and George Dooley had been married for 28 years when he died in Galveston two years ago. His death was painful, but she drew comfort from what she had witnessed.

"It gave me hope and encouragement," said the 61-year-old Dooley, who now lives in Crystal River, Fla. "It made you feel like maybe there is someone out there waiting for you, to show you the way. . . . We thought he was truly seeing someone that had gone before, someone he was close to."

As a longtime parish pastor and now a theology professor at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn., Richard Smith has seen death professionally as well as personally.

Part of his job now is to teach young seminarians to deal with death. "We talk about what a mistake, perhaps, our society has made in the way we treat death," he said. "We want bodies to be fixed up, all kinds of cosmetics and so on, so somebody can say, "Doesn't he look natural?"

"As though death is the end of everything."

Smith has witnessed several deathbed experiences and has been told of others.

"It's kind of hard to validate, isn't it?" said Smith, who worked as a physicist before entering the ministry. "But I think anyone who's been in the ministry very long and dealt with persons in their dying process can tell you some experiences . . . involving some action of God that was beyond anything they could imagine."

With the publication of books such as Wills -Brandon's, as well as writings by Raymond Moody and others exploring the related phenomenon of near-death experiences, the taboo against talking about death may be cracking.

"When people lose a parent, that almost forces them to begin looking at this stuff," Wills -Brandon said. "When the generation before them begins to disappear, it forces them to confront their own issues of mortality."

But people tend to do it quietly, skulking into the New Age section of bookstores or checking out Web sites in private.

Skeptics point to a host of possible explanations for deathbed visions, including hallucination-generating medications and the malfunctioning of oxygen-starved brains. But believers note that stories of deathbed visions are similar across cultures and time periods. It's not uncommon for people to report seeing a dead friend or relative of whose death they had not been told, Wills -Brandon said. Young children have described visions, presumably before they were old enough to be constrained by societal expectations.

Still, Wills -Brandon understands the desire for a rational explanation.

"(Deathbed experiences) take everything you know and have believed in and toss it out the window," she said. "I think we have been so indoctrinated with scientific methodology, (and) you can't quantify this sort of thing. You can't weigh it or measure it."

There are people who willingly exchange certainty for a measure of peace.

Bonnie Cottrell of Clear Lake gave birth in 1971 to a daughter who lived for only one day. She grieved hard until, alone in her apartment a few months later, she found relief.

"I was looking at this young woman who was calling me Mother and saying, "I'm OK. Everything is OK. "

She believes it was her child, or perhaps a guardian angel serving as a messenger.

Twenty years later, Cottrell's mother died. Again, she had a vision of the young woman.

"She said, "It's OK. I know that you understand," and she hugged me. There was no letting go. And my mother did this to me."

It had been their tradition, when parting, to indulge in a long, tight embrace. Comforted, Cottrell told her father what she had seen. Half a continent away, he had experienced the same thing.

"The same words. The same embrace that lasted forever."

For more information on the departing visions of the dying and the incredible spiritual experiences of everyday people see Carla's books *"One Last Hug Before I Go"* and *"A Glimpse of Heaven"*.