

When an Atheist Encounters God

Growing up in rural Alabama in the 1960s, Dr. Reggie Anderson's childhood sounds like a script from a Hallmark movie. He was raised in a Christian home, and life on the farm was innocent and honest. God was as real to him as the clay beneath his feet, he says.

But the feel-good story of his life turned into a horror movie one sizzling summer day in 1973.

After a gang of escaped convicts brutally murdered six unsuspecting members of Anderson's extended family, the heart and soul of the entire community was ravaged. Everyone and everything went into lockdown. The once-open doors, trusting hearts and willing faith of the community were latched and dead-bolted shut.

A teenager at the time, Anderson began wrestling deeply with God.

"In my mind and heart, God began to shrink," he writes in his book *Appointments With Heaven*, which chronicles his struggle with gut-level honesty. "It was suddenly so obvious to me. He didn't care because He wasn't there!"

Soon Anderson stopped attending church and headed for college, where he decided to become a doctor.

"It was a point where I consciously decided to become an atheist and started worshipping at the school of science," he says.

But his interest in God was slowly revived when some Christian friends began to study religion with him. He went camping one weekend to enjoy a bit of nature and sort out his thoughts—but

he never made it into his tent that night.

After a day of hiking, he did some reading and fell into a deep sleep, finding himself in a dream like no other. His senses took on the kind of otherworldly qualities you hear about in near-death encounters, like ultrasaturated colors and aromatic scents. Suddenly the family that had been killed appeared to him.

"They didn't speak with words," Anderson says, but they somehow communicated to him they were in a world of paradise and had no regrets.

And then came the ultimate healing. Like a father welcoming his prodigal son into his arms, Jesus appeared as a brilliant presence with an ageless and raceless form. Everything about Him radiated love and warmth. Without speaking, He beckoned Anderson near and told him about his future.

At dawn, Anderson was still laying on the ground next to the campfire.

"I woke up, and I was completely different," he says.

He felt humbled. The mysterious dream not only sealed his faith, but it also cleansed him of his anger and made him desire more of God.

"Dreams don't always change your life," he says. "[But] this was a Damascus Road event. It actually changed the chemistry of my spirit."

Anderson ended up marrying his college sweetheart, Karen, and today they have four children, as foretold in his dream. He is currently a family practice physician at Frist Clinic in Ashland City, Tenn.

Yet over the years, the sensations Anderson experienced in his dream have come back in his medical practice, particularly as patients cross the veil between life and death. Sights,

aromas, temperature changes—"each time is different," he says.

The first time Anderson attended a patient who died, he says he felt a warm sensation move through the cold hospital room as the man took his last breath. Then he noticed a momentary soft glow above and to the right of the man's body, and he felt a "deep sense of peace and an embracing comfort," he says.

Since then, Anderson has felt that warm presence many times with dying patients.

Not everyone passes peacefully, though. Anderson says he has also sensed an evil presence in those moments at times, as he did with a patient with an abusive history. This man was hostile toward God, and he seemed to fight death with every breath. When he passed, Anderson says the temperature in the room dropped, and he could actually smell sulfur and diesel.

A praying man, the "country doctor" gives God credit today for helping him make life-and-death decisions. The glimpses of heaven that restored Anderson's faith have allowed him to share the gift of hope with many others, including the Steven Curtis Chapman family during the high-profile tragic death of their daughter in 2008.

Close friends with the Chapmans for years, Reggie and his wife, Karen, were among the first called when 5-year-old Maria—the youngest of three daughters adopted from China—was accidentally run over by her brother's car at the Chapman's home.

"Even before the phone reached my ear, I could hear the sound of a mother's wail in the background," Anderson says. "It was unmistakable. And it was Mary Beth's."

As believers around the world prayed for the family amid their formidable grief, the Chapmans sheltered at the Anderson home

for two weeks, leaning on one another's faith.

"We'll never really be able to put into words all they did for us through our darkest days, weeks, months and really years," Steven Curtis says. "There's no one in my life who has given me a better glimpse into heaven [than Reggie]. God has let him catch glimpses through the veil in some pretty profound ways throughout his life. And because Reggie's a doctor, a guy where everything's very scientific and medical and fact-based, you know he's not coloring things up to make something fantastic out of something normal; it's the real deal."

"We knew Reggie's story, his relationship with the Lord. They're true stories—it's all real stuff," Chapman adds. "As God showing up in our day-to-day lives, [his story] will hopefully take some of that mystique out and people will say, 'If God's showing up like this in this guy's life—this doctor who's respected—then this is real. God's kingdom really is at hand, and there really is a very thin veil between heaven and where we are.'"

Anahid Schweikert is a frequent contributor to Charisma. She lives in Memphis, Tenn., with her husband and their two daughters, who were adopted from China.

Watch videos of Bruce Van Natta and Dr. Reggie Anderson sharing supernatural encounters of "God with us" at