

Symptoms of Consciousness: Where Science and Story Meet

In this series of short essays, stories, poems, and personal observations, Robert A. Burton, neurologist and writer, uses both fiction and non-fiction to explore the many paradoxes and contradictions inherent in scientific inquiry. A novelist as well as author, Burton brings story to science and science to story.

Death and Disbelief

ROBERT A. BURTON

A middle-aged woman had a massive stroke and would be dead within hours. The husband was in the ER waiting room. I took him aside and explained the grim prognosis. He paused, his expression blank, his lips searching for something to say. Finally, he blurted out, "I think I'll go home and take a shower."

I was telling an old friend—a well-connected advertising executive—that my college chemistry lab partner, a Nobel Laureate in Medicine, had just died of pancreatic cancer. My friend's puzzled response: "How could he have died? He knew everyone."

Some years ago, my wife took my 95-year-old mother to Macy's to buy a new blanket. The saleslady suggested one that was both reasonable and durable. "Does it look like I need durable?" my mother said, summarily dismissing the saleslady. On leaving the store, my

mother told my wife that her old blanket was quite adequate. "Besides, I won't be cold for that long."

I called the telephone company to cancel my mother's phone service. The representative asked why. I explained that my mother had just died. "OK," the rep replied, "I'll cancel the local coverage, but you should keep long distance, just in case."

My wife's ninety-year-old aunt agreed to hospice care for her terminal cancer. The admitting nurse explained that palliative-only care meant that she wouldn't be getting any treatments aimed at prolonging her life. Her aunt thought for a minute, looked out at the garden beyond the admissions office, nodded, then asked, "Would it be okay if I take my vitamins?"
