



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*Breathe on me, breath of God,  
so shall I never die,  
but live with thee the perfect life  
of thine eternity.*

*Edwin Hatch*

Remembering me in Indonesia, Kilito in New York, John and I often play a little game: describing to one another the "perfect life" of heaven as we envisage it. Each person's image, of course, is different. I recall Ruth Graham's children asking, after

a beloved dog died, if their pet was now in heaven. Instead of smiling at the question, Ruth went to the Bible. Heaven, she concluded from her Scripture search, is where each of us will be totally happy. And if someone's happiness depends on finding a particular animal there, then yes, heaven might well house dogs -- horses, cats, canaries.

For someone else, happiness might require dance, or music, or a garden to tend. For Len LeSourd, heaven had to have meaningful work. In the last decade of his life, Len collected everything he could find in print about the next world. "I don't think we'll just float about praising God on our harps," he'd say.

He believed praise would indeed be unending, but also that God would have jobs for us. Among his papers, after his death, I found this paragraph:

Humans go to heaven as elected persons but flawed spirits. Broken relationships that aren't dealt with here have to be healed there. The immature who haven't grown up here, have to do so up there. Many mature spirits are trained to teach the immature. The teaching process is widespread and endless.

How Len looked forward to attending classes taught by St. Paul! "After that I'd love to be trained to teach a class of spiritual beginners. What a way to serve!"



## The Game

## *Personal Paradise*

He believed our work on earth prepared us for work we would continue to do in heaven. An editor in his earthly life, he joked about landing a job on the *Heavenly Gazette*. He admitted that communication in the next world won't require editing. But he was very serious in believing that God will go on using the gifts he's given us -- more fully, more perfectly, than ever before.

For Len, heaven meant service. For John, who sings in St. Mark's choir, it includes chorales led by a brilliant but tolerant conductor. Isabella d'Este, patron of Renaissance artists, was wealthy enough to build an earthly model of *her* celestial vision. In her *paradiso*, she surrounded herself with paintings, carvings, books, tapestries, cameos. Today in her five-hundred-room palace in Mantua, there's not much left of her paradise; her treasures are scattered through the museums of the world. But enough remains to glimpse heaven through the eyes of a lover of beauty.

What's in my own heaven? Lecture halls and libraries! An eternal schoolroom where I can study literature, botany, history, astronomy --all the fascinating subjects a single lifetime can't begin to explore. "Are you *sure*," I quiz John when we play our heaven game, "that I won't wake up in the next world suddenly knowing everything?" For me the process of discovery is part of the joy. And John assures me solemnly that I will arrive with my ignorance intact.

## **The Icon**

Is it only idle daydreaming, this designing of a heaven to suit our own taste? A self-indulgent fantasy; teasing ourselves with false hopes?

Or ... is it possible that heaven is doing the designing?

On the wall in St. Paul's Church on Nantucket is a small wooden panel with a painting of the church's namesake. St. Paul is shown half length, his withdrawn, inward-looking eyes seemingly fixed on eternity. I recognized it as an icon, those archaic, rather rigid devotional images of the Eastern Church, so I was surprised to learn that it was painted in the 1990s by the church's rector at that time, Andrew Foster. "I didn't know you were an artist," I told him.

"Oh, I'm not," he said. Icons, he explained, are not "art" in the Western sense. Self-expression has no more place in an icon than in Egyptian tomb crafts. The iconographer replicates as nearly as possible a hallowed image handed down from master to apprentice over the centuries. "Icons are considered 'windows into heaven.' They're unsigned, dateless."

I looked more closely at the portrait of St. Paul. Bald, dark-skinned, curly black beard falling to his chest, he held in his hand a jewel-studded book.

Around his head, glowing in the dim light of the sanctuary, was a metallic gold halo.

"Icons are different in another way," Andrew went on. Western perspective, developed during the Renaissance, shows space receding away from the viewer, lines converging at a "vanishing point" in the distance. In an icon, lines converge forward, meeting outside the painting, at the place where the spectator stands.

"It's not you looking at the painting," said Andrew. "The painting looks at you."

### *Heaven in Pursuit*

The painting as the active agent, reaching out to include me in its celestial space. What if I've had it wrong, imagining with our heaven game that I am thinking about heaven. What if, instead, heaven is thinking about me?

The "Hound of Heaven" pursuing us, as it pursued fleeing Jacob, planting a ladder at his feet as he slept. What if ours is always the passive role? Not us projecting our desires onto eternity, but eternity striving to imprint each of us with our true identity. Trying to mold each life into the unique pattern for which God created it. Preparing us for a world where all things fit together and each separate piece of the great design is essential to the whole.

Perhaps in the realm where past, present, and future are one, the design is already complete. Perhaps the Native American with his Happy Hunting Ground, the desert dweller with his garden, were not being naively literal, but catching whispers from eternity. Plato taught that everything on earth is merely a copy of its prototype in heaven. Perhaps a divine work assignment, an eternal choir, a heavenly art collection, an endless classroom, is tugging at different individuals here from a realm where these things have their full expression.

"Your soul has a curious shape," wrote C. S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain*, "because it is ... a key to unlock one of the doors in the house with many mansions. For it is not humanity in the abstract that is to be saved, but you -- you the individual reader.... Your place in heaven will seem to be made for you and you alone, because you were made for it."

Made for heaven. Made, through all the struggle, joy, suffering, and seeming chance of this brief earthly life, for an eternity of bliss no fantasizing can equal.

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