



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

Holy Cross is a Benedictine monastery on the Hudson River thirty-five miles north of our home, where I go from time to time for a day of reflection on my journey. Looking back to those days when I traveled in darkness, I wonder why my unhappiness itself didn't show me my need for God. Here both John and I were, writing for a publication whose whole thrust was to show that God had answers to far more serious problems than mine.



The Entrance

But it was not my problems, apparent though they were, that led me to the kingdom. And the monastery building itself reminds me that our journeys seldom unfold so predictably. The three-story brick structure sits on a hillside, its gracious entrance facing the Hudson. From this entryway the architect designed a broad driveway leading down to an imposing riverside dock.

But the driveway and dock were never built.

In 1902 when Holy Cross was erected, it was taken for granted that people would arrive by steamboat. Carriage roads were dusty or muddy according to the season, and passenger trains didn't serve the west side of the river. Steamboats -- fast, modern, dependable -- were the obvious choice.

As for the faddy, funny-looking "auto-mobiles," they were too new, too few, too experimental for the planners at Holy Cross to take into account.

Those daily steamboat runs between New York and Albany must have seemed as changeless as the tides that sweep up the river from the sea. The monastery's builders never questioned positioning the entrance to face the water. Before the pilings for the dock could even be sunk in the riverbed, however, automobile highway construction had begun. And for a century, people have been entering Holy Cross through the back door. It's a small service entrance, originally designed for local farmers arriving with their horse-drawn produce. But this is the humble door monks and seekers have always used to enter the hallowed space. How do we enter heaven? The answer is almost always a surprise.

Outsider

By 1956 I was a full-time Guideposts employee, working from home. For five years I'd interviewed people about their personal faith. Heard about illness healed, financial needs met, relationships restored. Surely this would be the door through which both John and I would step into another

dimension of experience.

In fact, almost the opposite was true. It was not that I disbelieved what people told me. Just that it never occurred to me to apply it to myself. One interview was with an Olympic skier, another with a coal miner... a stunt pilot... a movie star... a rodeo clown. I didn't have these people's talents, so why should my spiritual life be like theirs? Answered prayer, miraculous guidance -- these were exciting things that happened to others. I might have a pang of longing: *Wouldn't it be great to believe like that!* No different from other fleeting wishes. *Gee, wish I could ski like that!*

Actually, when it came to religion, John and I prized our outsiders' status. Interviewing all persuasions of Christians from Roman Catholics to Free-Will Baptists, we could identify with each in turn. "Objectivity" we called it. "Fence sitting," said our Christian friends.

Our very ignorance, we insisted, made our writing clearer. Statements that might go unquestioned by a fellow Christian -- "God told me to make that phone call" -- drew a barrage of *hows* from John or me. How did God tell you? How did you know it was God?

If we were content with our agnosticism, however, others were not. In the course of some interviews we'd be preached at and prayed over, coaxed and condemned, until in self-defense we learned to adopt the religious passwords of the group we were with.

Some passwords, that is. Others grated so I couldn't bring myself to utter them. One formula in particular irked me, till I was willing to lose a story altogether rather than reply when someone accosted me with,

Have you been saved?

This black-and-white division of the human race into "ins" and "outs" contradicted everything I'd observed since coming to *Guideposts*. No two histories I'd heard were alike, no two encounters with God the same. "How can they talk as if 'saved' were a switch—on or off!" I'd splutter to John.

Another question religious people posed, though, I could not dismiss: What about your children? Weren't we going to give Scott and Donn and Liz any exposure to religion? To biblical literature? Why not at least send them to Sunday school so that, later, they could make an informed decision?

That argument struck a chord in my Unitarian conscience. And so in the spring of 1956, John and I began to look for a local church.