



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven by Elizabeth Sherrill

*Thou dost hold my right hand
Psalm 73:23 RSV*

On the wall of my mother-in-law's bedroom in Louisville, Kentucky, hung a framed quotation in hand-lettered Gothic script:



The Hand Holder

*I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year;
"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."
And he replied, "Go out into the darkness and put your hand
into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light
and safer than a known way."*

More than fifty years ago, when I went to Louisville to meet my new in-laws, I would step into that room, read these lines by Minnie Louise Haskins, and puzzle over them. The words in that frame seemed to me the embodiment of everything Unitarians rejected. An anthropomorphic deity (how could anyone hold the "hand" of God!). Blind faith (why should being led around in the dark be better than stepping out in the clear light of reason?). Such outmoded religious notions, Aunt Helen had assured me, were believed only by ignorant people.

My mother-in-law, Helen Sherrill, however, was not ignorant. An author and authority on early childhood development, she must have thought this enigmatic quote important to hang it where her eyes would light on it first thing each morning.

Later, when Mother and Dad Sherrill moved to New York City, the Haskins quotation hung on the wall of her bedroom there. It hangs today in my bedroom. In the years since I first read those words, I've become an adherent of that "outmoded" religion. And I've come to see in Haskins's prose-poem the traveler's guide to heaven.

Virgil

Our hand in his is of course a poet's way of expressing trust. And why should dark be better for our journey than daylight? Because, I've come to feel, holding our hand is God's delight.

Oh, there are practical reasons, too, why he cannot banish the darkness here and now. Light-his Light-

would show us too much. In 1991, an operation was performed on a blind man named Virgil. For forty-five years, neurologist Oliver Sacks reported, Virgil had functioned effectively as a sightless person. Suddenly able to see, he was overwhelmed by a torrent of impressions bombarding a brain that could not process them. He became disoriented, listless, miserable. When an illness destroyed his new-won vision, Virgil welcomed the return of blindness.

"Now, at last," wrote Dr. Sacks, "Virgil is allowed to not see."

Allowed to not see ... If we were suddenly able to see as God sees - the entire past, the entire future, the ultimate consequence of each thing we do, each word we speak-perhaps we too would be unable to cope. Perhaps in his compassion God *must* keep us in the dark.

But I think his hand-holding goes far beyond mere necessity. In the 1960s when our kids were teenagers, a Beatles song throbbed through our house: "*I Want to Hold Your H-a-a-a-nd*," came through the closed door where I'd be trying to work, till I'd end up holding my ears.

But I believe God sings the same refrain. I think he longs to keep us company, to walk at our side like a lover, hand in hand. I think he doesn't reveal the future to us, not only because we couldn't handle it, but because if he did we'd drop his hand and race ahead alone. "Thanks! I see how to get there now!"

Getting there, even to some noble goal, is not as important to God, I suspect, as the journey in companionship with him. It's relationship, not achievement, that he wants. This is the opinion, at least, of one of the greatest achievers I know.

Andrew

Andrew van der Bijl, "Brother Andrew" to millions, is a Dutchman, today in his seventies, who for over forty years has been bringing the good news of God to places where Christians "cannot" go, first behind the Iron and Bamboo Curtains, today in the Muslim world.

When John and I were writing *God's Smuggler*, the story of Andrew's adventures, we began by asking about his accomplishments. How many Communist countries had he worked in? How many people had he reached? There were impressive answers to all this, but Andrew thought they were the wrong questions. These weren't the things he wanted people to remember. "What I hope someone will say about me some day is what the Book of Genesis says about Enoch, 'Enoch walked with God.'"

It's an hour by hour, minute by minute thing, Andrew said. "God doesn't set us a task and come back later to see how we've done. He goes with us every inch of the way." And it's along the way that the important thing happens, the creature falling in step with the Creator.

Enoch walked with God. Andrew spoke it like an invocation, like a *t* four-word prayer. "If that could be said of me, it's all the reputation I'd ever want."