



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

I'm sorry that it took me more than thirty years to meet this God who walks at our side. In the Unitarian church I'd



The Ten-Week Experiment

learned about God's majesty, his moral demands, his truth reflected in many traditions - and I'm forever grateful for these insights. But ... to imagine this infinite God giving individual attention to just one of billions of human creatures on a speck of a planet at the edge of a minor galaxy?

Because I couldn't imagine it doesn't mean of course that he wasn't attending to me, every moment of my life. An infant has no concept of the mother who holds him. But I stayed an infant so long! How much joy I missed by failing to perceive his arms beneath me. How much I still miss when I fail to see him throughout the day.

Heaven lies around each of us, closer than the air we breathe, this very moment. Its the growing awareness of this immanent heaven - like all human awareness, always partial, always capable of more - that I've come to see as the single Christian story, whatever the difference in details.

The details are important too, though. It's in the specifics of our stories that we discover just how personal God's dealing with us is - so tailored to each alone that there are as many ways of taking his outstretched hand as there are individuals.

Car Trip

For me, the awareness began with that cross-country car trip in 1959.

That June, as soon as school was out, we'd piled the kids, ages eight, five, and three, into our gray Ford station wagon and set out to zigzag twelve thousand miles across the country, interviewing interesting people.

President Truman in Missouri. John Paul Stapp in New Mexico, "the fastest man on earth," who rode a rocket sled to simulate bailing out of the new jet fighters. Alfred Hitchcock in Los Angeles. Governor Mark Hatfield in Oregon. Homesteaders in Alaska.

In between these scheduled stops, we did what we'd done ever since our first writing trips in Europe, typewriter strapped to John's bicycle. Go to a local newspaper office and ask to see the "morgue," the storeroom where back issues of a paper were kept in the days before microfilm.

We'd emerge with ink-blackened fingers and the account of a tornado ... a factory fire ... a missing child. In Virginia we went to see a man who'd been lost in Dismal Swamp. In Alaska, a teenage boy blinded by a bear. Though the news stories didn't mention faith, we'd found, in interviewing for *Guideposts*, that every survivor has spiritual discoveries to share.

The homeward leg of the trip was different. No interviews, no combing newspaper files, just long hours in the car as we pushed to get back for the start of school. To the drone of the tires, all three children would often stretch out on the mattress in back and fall asleep. And John and I found ourselves with that rarity in the lives of young parents, time to talk.

We discussed upcoming book projects. How to stretch our budget to include guitar lessons for Scott. What would happen when President Eisenhower met face-to-face with Khrushchev. Montana ... North Dakota ... Minnesota ... Could Liz wear Donn's outgrown snowsuit this winter? Would my brother's job with General Electric in Havana be affected by this new name in the news, Fidel Castro?

We were in Pennsylvania, almost home, and the topic of religion - religion as it affected us personally - had not come up. By this time we'd been writing for a religious magazine for eight years without ever making that personal connection. But since we'd covered the important subjects, we got around even to this one. We hadn't been inside a church, I realized, since the apron episode more than two years earlier.

The Experiment

"What do you believe now," I asked John, "about-well, God and everything?"

"I haven't really thought about it. What about you?"

I hadn't thought about it either. "If only there were a church somewhere," I mused aloud, "where people would leave you alone. Let you have your own experience, if you're going to have one."

An unfriendly church, John agreed, was what we needed. Five miles passed in silence. "How about Episcopalians?" John said. "Aren't they supposed to be 'God's Frozen People'?"

But were there any in our area? There was a handsome stone church in Mt. Kisco, just past the statue of the Indian chief who gave the town its name, that we thought might be Episcopalian. We hadn't ventured into it during our months of church hunting-- the parking lot seemed to be full of Bentleys.

Signs for resorts in the Poconos. We'd be home by nightfall.

"Why don't we try it for a couple of weeks?" I suggested.

"Maybe," said John, "two weeks isn't long enough."

And on the last few miles of the long trip, we established two rules for the new experiment. We'd go to the church by the Indian, starting that coming Sunday, for ten weeks. That would be ... we counted up. Till Thanksgiving.

And, the all-important second rule: We wouldn't talk about it. Like all verbal people, we could wring an experience dry with words. Just as we hoped no one in the stone church would talk to us, we agreed not to discuss our reactions with each other either, until Thanksgiving.