



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

Herb Stevens's word *unique* resolved for me that seeming contradiction: do I "love myself" or "give myself up"? During a recent retreat at St. Cuthbert's in Brewster, New York, I heard an old story from Eastern Europe that put it in four words.



## Entrance Exam

Zuysa was the village rabbi, wise, kind, and beloved, who worried nonetheless that he might have failed to observe some commandment. He went to a mountaintop to ask God what more he needed to do.

"At the gate of heaven, Zuysa," he heard God answer, "I won't ask why you didn't give more to the poor, or fast more often, or memorize more Scripture. I will ask only one question.

*"Why weren't you Zuysa?"*

Why weren't you Herb ... Molly ... Corrie ... Tib? Why didn't you show forth the aspect of God you alone embodied?

Zuysa's story was in my mind that night as I reread Paul's letter to the Ephesians. When he urges them to reach *"the whole measure of the fullness of Christ"* he can't be suggesting that anyone can do this solo! Paul was addressing Christ's Body, that Body with "many members," no two alike. Each member with its special role, its part in the fullness of Christ that no one else can supply.

"Giving up myself," I believe today, means giving up *my* notion of what my role should be and accepting -- with joy -- the one for which I was created.

### *Sin*

To love myself is to accept God's evaluation instead of my own. And what a

staggering value he places on each of us! In December 2000 I heard an Advent sermon in London's Westminster Abbey. The topic was sin. The fact is, said the Reverend Robert Wright, that "I am as loved and worthy of esteem as I ever shall be -- already infinitely loved and respected.

"The condition of not knowing this," he continued, "is sin. The tears that flow following its discovery are called repentance, in which we weep for the sin of ever having thought of ourselves as unloved, for not having loved ourselves as we are."

Infinitely loved ... as I am! Not as I will be, or could be, or might have been, but just the way I am this minute. To think less of myself is not humility but the pride that says I know better than God.

## Bluebells

God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us.  
St. Augustine

How long has God been preparing each of us for that part no one else can play?

When I applied for confirmation at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine back in 1962, the first question on the candidate form was *Date of Baptism*. I couldn't remember what I'd told the registrar of marriage banns in Geneva fifteen years earlier. In any case, it was a made-up date; I doubted such a ceremony had ever taken place. But when I telephoned my mother to ask, she surprised me. "Why ... yes," she said after a moment's thought. "It happens that you were."

I was born, I'd known, in Los Angeles, during an earlier effort of Daddy's to open an office in his beloved California -- as short-lived a venture as the one when I was twelve.

"There was the nicest man in the apartment next to ours in Hollywood," Mother went on. "He was a minister, so helpful, in a new place with a new baby" He kept asking, she said, when they planned to have me baptized.

"He was so kind, and it seemed to mean so much to him. So one morning we went to his church, and he did a lovely little service. It was an Episcopalian church, I remember. Such a pretty garden out front."

I put down the phone, absurdly elated at the denominational mesh. I'd not only been baptized, but in the very church where I now wished to be confirmed! The baptism of course would have been equally valid wherever performed. The coincidence was simply a little gift along the Way, like the bluebells planted

beside Texas highways. I *planned your path from the beginning*.

What is confirmed in confirmation are the promises made on a child's behalf in infant baptism. That night I got out the *Book of Common Prayer* and read the Order for Baptism.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?

I do.

Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?

I do.

Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?

I do. I do. I do. Promises made for me long before I could promise anything.

## The Corridor

Turn to me and be saved.

Isaiah 45:22

It was not, however, the service in the cathedral with its solemn affirmation of baptismal vows that confirmed to me my new life in Christ – that life in heaven begun here on earth. That confirmation came in a casual conversation at *Guideposts'* office a few years later.

A friend from out of town, Jean Stone, had come to New York with a story suggestion. We talked it over, then she looked at her watch. "I have a train to catch."

"I'll walk you to the elevator," I said.

We stood in the corridor, making conversation. "Have you been saved, Tib?" she asked. The same politely interested tone in which she'd just asked how the children were.

And for the very first time in my life, I heard the question.

Jean Stone is a mannerly, soft-spoken person. As she quietly posed the question, I didn't hear a formula. Didn't hear judgment or an agenda being pushed.

I heard *saved* as a dictionary definition gave it when I looked it up later that day: *to guard intact*. As Jean said the phrase that had once made me too angry to listen, it was an inclusive, not a divisive one. My name on a place card at a glorious feast. I heard the word *saved*, and it sounded like *loved*.

"Yes!" I said as the elevator arrived. "Yes, I have!"

Jean left. I walked back to my desk. My feet walked, that is, but my soul was dancing, turning cartwheels in heaven. Cherished, valued, guarded, whatever came, now and forever.

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