



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

2 Corinthians 4: 17 RSV

It was some years later that John and I stayed with our friends Michael and Jeanne Harper at an English retreat house near the site where Dame Julian of Norwich lived her self-imposed incarceration. And there I first encountered the writings of this fourteenth-century mystic.



Prayer Warrior

Like her contemporary, St. Catherine, whose footsteps I'd traced in Siena, Julian lived through the terrible years of the Hundred Years' War. Catherine had confronted the evils of the day with outward action; Julian battled them with prayer, shutting herself away in a sealed cell attached to a church. Church and cell were destroyed by a bomb during World War II, but these were the fields, the hills, from which she'd shut herself off, to fast and intercede for a suffering world.

In *Showings*, that classic of Christian devotion, Julian recorded the revelations received in prayer. All are summed up in a single statement:

All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

Had Julian too, I wondered, seen the visible world break open to reveal the joy at its root? Is what, for me, was a fleeting one-time impression, for the saints a common experience? Even, for them, a constant perception, the insight that makes their lives of extraordinary endurance possible?

"The joy of the Lord is your strength," Nehemiah told the Israelites, in what once seemed to me a poetic outburst. But maybe the man who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem in the face of ridicule and plots against his life was simply reporting a fact. Perhaps when he looked at the "hopelessly" ruined walls, he didn't see heaps of burned rubble. Perhaps he saw the joy vibrating beneath appearance and drew his strength from the

sight.

Or when, as the writer of Hebrews tells us, Jesus endured the cross "for the joy that was set before him" -- perhaps the joy was literally before his eyes.

Superstring

Intimations of heaven! Like the lavender leaves my grandmother sprinkled in her hope chest, remembering keeps them fresh. That momentary sighting of a reality beyond sight, in the driveway at Wain-wright house, remained so vivid over the decades that when I began reading about the superstring theory, it was with a shiver almost of recognition.

The theory, for a nonscientist like me, is bewilderingly complex, involving an unimaginable nine-dimensional universe. AS George Johnson wrote in the *New York Times* in April 2000, "Human brains are not wired to picture a world beyond the familiar three dimensions of space." But picturable or not, physicists believe this may be the longsought "Unified Theory of Everything," from the smallest subatomic particle to the farthest galaxy

What does the theory say this underlying reality is? Unthinkably tiny loops of threadlike material scientists have named, for lack of a better word, "strings." Entities so infinitesimal that, wrote Johnson, "strings are to an atom as an atom is to the solar system."

Yes! I thought, reading these words, *That small!*

The universe might be understood, the article continued, as a kind of mathematical music, a cosmic symphony "played by an orchestra of tiny vibrating strings."

I've witnessed that vibration, I thought.

Not comprehending, not even beginning to inquire into the physics. Simply joining for an enraptured instant in that universal dance. Catching a strain of the ecstatic music of heaven.

Maybe, I thought, there truly is a "music of the spheres." Maybe what I saw as motion, others perceive as sound -- what Christians through the centuries have heard as the singing of angels. Our friend Carrol Maxwell heard them as she grieved for the death of evangelist Roy Hicks. Another friend, Ruth Prince, would hear angel song as she prayed. "We realized," her husband, Derek, wrote, "that we were privileged to experience a tiny part of the total worship of the universe, spanning both heaven and

earth."

Worship. That's what it felt like, that day at Wainwright House. A taste of the eternal worship of heaven..

Becky

*And when this flesh and heart shall fail, and mortal life shall
cease,
I shall possess within the veil, a life of joy and peace.
John Newton "Amazing Grace"*

Once, fleetingly, I may have witnessed someone who was hearing the angels sing -- another jewel for my hope chest. Becky was the six-month-old daughter of our friends Connie and Frank. I had volunteered to stay with her that evening so that Connie could attend Frank's company party given in his honor because he was being transferred that month to Michigan.

About 9:00, thinking the baby might have kicked her blanket off, I tiptoed into her room. To my surprise, Becky was wide awake, lying on her back. As I bent over her, she smiled.

Smiled? There's no word in the language for the expression I saw in the glow of the night-light. Her whole small being pulsed with a kind of ecstasy. The room seemed alight more with what shone from her face than from the pale little bulb in the wall. I'd often reveled in a baby's smile; this was a different phenomenon altogether.

This was joy itself.

In a moment or two, Becky's eyes closed, and a sweet sleeping infant was all I saw. And yet ... for a little while, something not of this earth had been present in that room.

The Letter

Frank and Connie moved shortly afterward, so it was not till nearly a year later than John and I learned of their tragedy. A month after they'd settled into their new home in Ann Arbor, Connie found their little Becky dead in her crib, a victim of sudden infant death syndrome.

It had taken eight months before they could write the letter "To our friends." All I could think, reading it, was, *I was given a glimpse of the joy Becky's sharing with saints and angels right now!*

I wrote back, trying to describe what I'd seen that night in her room. Whether it meant something to those grieving parents, I don't know. But forever after, the joy of heaven has had an infant's face for me.

Preparing for my confirmation a decade earlier, I'd memorized questions and answers from the catechism:

Q. What do we mean by everlasting life?

A. By everlasting life, we mean a new existence, in which we are united with all the people of God, in the joy of fully knowing and loving God and each other.

That was the joy, I believe, that I witnessed in Becky's smile. A split second of the everlasting life she lives today:

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