

Afterlife: reflections following my mother's death

by [Nancy Mairs](#) in the [October 10, 2001](#) issue

So common are visitations in reports of near-death experiences (NDEs) that I, for one, do not expect to die alone. As I say this I dread the eye-rollers and scoffers who will label me as an eccentric if not an outright nut. And I can't altogether blame them, since accounts of these experiences can make for some mighty strange (and not overly literate) reading, filled as they are with buoyancy and tunnels and light and spirit guides that may include telepathic pets.

When NDEs are put forth as evidence of an afterlife, then I side with the skeptics, because the narrators have uniformly returned and dwell in the now, not the sweet hereafter. But when the skeptics (altogether too often characterizing themselves as scientists) go so far as to claim that NDEs don't "really" occur but are "only" caused by brain chemistry, then I grow impatient. What the devil do they think "reality" is if not the product of cerebration? "Reality is merely an illusion," Albert Einstein pointed out, "albeit a very persistent one." I may assume that "reality" exists apart from my own or anybody else's consciousness of it, but that's all I can do: make a rough hypothesis. There's no "out there" out there that "I" can know; and if, after my death, there turns out to be, "I" will no longer care. Meantime, I give myself permission to imagine that my dear dead ones will come for me. Their point of origin—angelic realm or dying brain—matters not at all.

Not long after the death of Rosemary, an elderly friend who was one of the founding members of the Community of Christ of the Desert to which my husband, George, and I belong, the group devoted an evening to remembering her. George, who is one of the quieter participants, had been sitting with his eyes closed, smiling, as we recalled details: Rosemary's passion for both horse racing and opera; the naturalness with which she moved among convicts, the homeless, refugees, homosexual men and what passes for "high society" in Tucson; her deep devotion to the woman she always referred to as Our Blessed Mother. As our reminiscences trailed away, George sat up and said, "I have been looking at Rosemary as God sees

her, and God takes no notice whether she is dead or alive. That distinction has no meaning for God. And it doesn't have to for me, either." He couldn't sustain this cosmic vision for long. Who among us—except a saint or a mystic—could? But his insight has stayed with me.

This is the miraculous message of the resurrection, it seems to me. Not that a body nailed to a cross died, was entombed, disappeared and was later seen and spoken to by grief-stricken friends more than once before rising like a hot-air balloon through the clouds and vanishing into the Garden Spot of the universe with the promise that, if we were good enough, we'd get to go there too. Even though I have elected to believe this story, as most of the world does not, I don't think it details what is going to happen to us when we die. I think it as much analogical as anagogical: a rough suggestion, in terms the human imagination can conceive, of our permanence in the cosmic Working Out we know as God. Because our selves are all (with which) we know, our visions are bounded by their realities: we will fall into a sort of sleep and then wake up, arise, put on garments of light and a pair of wings, pick up our harps, and break into song, behaving, in short, rather as we do now only better. The continuity, in recognizable form, of ourselves and those we love, because it can't be disproved, can hardly be condemned. I'm just not counting on it.

The wonder indicated by the Christian resurrection story—and by other tales, whether religious or secular, which attempt to point toward realities that are humanly unknowable—is that death does not from some perspectives occur at all. The fact that we believe in it as an absolute end says more about our limitations than it does about either the event itself or the universe in which we are embedded. Because it is, without question, the absolute end of the personal consciousness beyond which noesis no longer functions, we require faith (though not necessarily religious faith) to proceed any further; and faith, as the (doubting) Thomas of the resurrection story demonstrates, comes hard to some of us—and to others, not at all. Faith requires a kind of letting go—a relinquishment of any pretense of control and an admission of radical ignorance—which, in the name of intellectual rigor, modern thinkers tend to resist to the (excuse the expression) death.

"Seeing is believing," most of us say along with Thomas, as though human vision were some arbiter of reality, although our eyes perceive only a fraction of the spectrum. Few of us doubt, however, that on either side of the rainbow's red and violet lie the infrared and ultraviolet. What is it but faith that leads us to pop some frigid yummy into a large box and press a few numbers, confident that within

minutes we'll be sitting down to a passable imitation of a hot meal? I've long since learned that when my Labrador retriever's ears prick, George will shortly pull into the yard, even though my own ears can't yet detect the rumble of the van's motor several blocks away. And I don't question the physicists' observation that my dense and sullen body is made up, at the atomic level, almost entirely of space or that the flutter of swallowtails across my yard may trigger a torrential downpour in Madagascar. "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" Jesus asked his followers (John 3:12). A more apposite question nowadays might be: If you are so credulous about earthly matters, some of them really quite farfetched, why should the idea of transcendence so try your faith?

I don't know what has become of my mother. This ignorance I must accept—embrace—as part of what defines me as a human creature. I know that Mother is humanly dead. I sat beside her as she died. I handled her ashes. I saw these put into the ground. Yet she certainly lives on in the memories of many. Her genetic legacy (and her mother's, and her mother's mother's . . .) abides in her scions. And if matter and energy are indeed conserved as scientists assert, then she has not been destroyed but translated into an existence no less authentic for my inability to read it. On the myriad occasions when I long to speak with her, this conviction provides cold comfort. But I'll take comfort at any temperature I can get it.