

Fear of heaven

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [March 14, 2001](#) issue

There's a rumor going around about heaven. It's been bruited about by well-known theologians, sharp-tongued satirists and social critics (Mark Twain among others), but it's not really a very subtle point: The life of eternal blessedness sounds boring. My five-year-old son Andy voiced this concern early one morning while he was bouncing on the bed where I was trying to sleep. "Momma," he said, "you're Mary and I'm the baby Jesus. And up here is heaven, downstairs is earth. And in the basement there's a secret passageway that goes to another world." To which I gave a half-asleep "Uh-huh."

Then Andy, still bouncing, said, "Let's go downstairs. There aren't enough rooms in heaven." To which I replied, hoping to buy more time in bed, "But I thought you said your father's house has many mansions!"

Given eternity, many of us fear that there will not be enough mansions to keep us occupied and fulfilled. Heaven, we fear, will be endless church services, a terrifying prospect to any reasonably vigorous child. That's why the little girl asked (in *The Gates Ajar*, the 1868 novel by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps) whether, if she were very good up in heaven, they'd let her go down to play in hell on Saturday afternoons.

But boredom is in the eye of the beholder. My children think it's boring to go to a museum, to sit still or to do anything contemplative for very long. We all have different boredom thresholds—is it too much to hope that our boredom threshold will be raised when we are raised? Even in this life there are moments when church is truly enthralling. Why should it not be the case that inability to be bored will be one of the gifts with which the Holy Spirit endows the blessed?

By definition, heaven cannot be boring. If our picture of heaven is boring, then the fault lies with the picture and not with heaven. It's a sign that we have not yet taken seriously the promise that we are to be renewed, transformed and remade in the image and likeness of the One who made us. (Eastern Christians call this "deification.") The only boring heaven would be one from which the prospect of personal relationship with God is absent. What could be more dreary than life

everlasting without God? Conversely, conceptions of heaven *with* God as center and source are, or should be, endlessly rich and appealing. As Jonathan Edwards puts it, “They shall see every thing in God that gratifies love. They shall see in him all that love desires.”

Perhaps it is not boredom that this vision evokes in us so much as fear. We may be told that it is wonderful to be taken up into eternity and ushered into the very presence of God, but we are well aware that it will cost us the sacrifice of our present life and most of the things to which we are attached. Along with fear of eternity, there is fear of perfection, fear of having our deepest wishes granted, fear of our own desires.

There was a time when even Andy was afraid of heaven. It lasted only a few days, but he was quite stricken. He had heard that heaven was a perfect place where nothing is lacking for our happiness: families reunited, harmony, delight, popsicles aplenty. But none of this could console him. He wasn't ready to leave our little house on a quiet hillside road with ant colonies in the driveway and moss on the steps. I tried to convey to him, as a rule of thumb, that whatever he found missing from his picture of heaven should be made up by the exercise of his imagination; for if the prospect of heaven fails to inspire longing and delight, the problem is not with heaven but with us—we have not pictured it right.

Some depictions of heaven are strongly theocentric, portraying the blessed as caught up in an endless rapture of adoration; others are sociable and anthropocentric. But a more adequate picture would be theocentric and anthropocentric at once. I've come across such a picture in the tenth-century Irish tale *Adamnan's Vision*, in a curious scene that captures the sociability of the beatific vision. Adamnan discovers that the saints who encircle the divine throne have acquired the power to face in all directions at once: “None turns back nor side to other, but the unspeakable power of God has set and keeps them face to face, in ranks and lofty coronels, all round the throne, circling it in brightness and bliss, their faces all toward God.”

Andy recovered from his fear of heaven after he had a dream of which I give his verbatim account:

I dreamed I was with all the nuns and monks and there were nice animals there too. There were nice pigs and raccoons and giraffes. All the animals

were there and they were nice. And all the nuns were there. And one was named Father Anselm. And my brother was there and Dad and Mom. And my friends were there. And lots of nice animals. And my teachers were there. All the nuns and monks and my family and everybody I love was there. And nice animals.

Here is a perfect image of the Peaceable Kingdom, or Paradise Regained. It has a terrestrial quality to it, but that has never deterred Christian writers from pressing such images into service as previews of heaven. Andy ceased to fear heaven when he learned how to conceive it after the image of his own sociable and pastoral heart, as a realm where nuns and nice pigs dwell in friendship.