

Immortal dreams

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [November 28, 2012](#) issue



The *Fountain of Eternal Life* statue in Cleveland. Photo: [Some rights reserved](#) by [Erik Daniel Drost](#).

"Pragmatism," G. K. Chesterton said, "is a matter of human needs; and one of the first of human needs is to be something more than a pragmatist." So too, faith is a matter of human desires; and one of the first of human desires is to be in contact with genuine reality. People of faith don't want to live—or die—in a fool's paradise. They want the real paradise or nothing. If it should turn out that our belief in the life to come has been an illusion, most of us would rather sink into nonbeing than beguile our final hours with hallucinatory dreams.

We are in a curious and puzzling situation, therefore, in which the hope for immortality is criticized in some circles as unbiblical and sub-Christian, yet affirmed in others as a matter of established empirical fact. A recent, widely publicized case is that of neurosurgeon Eben Alexander, survivor of a harrowing brush with death.

Newsweek picked up Dr. Alexander's story in advance of the publication of his best-selling book, *Proof of Heaven*. The cover story, "Heaven Is Real," coincided with an announcement of the imminent demise of the print edition of *Newsweek*. (Is there a heaven for newsweeklies that have seen better days?) What we learn from the *Newsweek* story and the book is that Dr. Alexander, stricken by a rare form of bacterial meningitis, fell into a deep coma in which his cortex, as he tells us, shut down—and awoke seven days later with memories of a profound visionary experience. Immediately losing his sense of individual selfhood, he found himself immersed in a synesthetic, holographic vision in which millions of butterflies,

heavenly sounds, soaring angels, and a young woman of transcendent beauty all entered into an intricate pattern whose meaning was unconditional love: “You are loved and cherished. You have nothing to fear. There is nothing you can do wrong.”

Needless to say, this story is at best a glimpse, not a proof. Such visions can flood the mind in the moments of returning consciousness, or in dependence upon residual cortical function (as recent studies of patients in a persistent vegetative state would suggest). A healthy skepticism is in order and a turn to the deeper reasons for belief in the promise of eternal life.

But perhaps you’ve heard it said that it is improper for Christians to speak of the soul’s immortality at all. In that case, a *distinguo* is in order. On the one hand, there must be a principle of continuity between the living human person and the person who has passed beyond our sight on the journey toward final resurrection; that principle of continuity we call soul. On the other hand, Christians do not think of the soul as a fifth essence stored in the body and released at death; Christians do not think of the discarnate soul as the complete self; and Christians do not think of the soul’s immortality as natural or intrinsic; it is a sheer gift.

The Christian view of the soul is actually quite different from the Platonic or the Hindu or the Gnostic or the Cartesian or the New Age; it is more creaturely, more implicated in the life of the body, more dependent upon God, more vulnerable to sin. Christians know that the soul’s journey will not be complete until we are raised body and soul as the living unity that God designed us to be.

This is an understanding we share with Jews and Muslims, who in their classical traditions affirm both immortality and resurrection. There are hints in the Hebrew Bible: “If a man die, shall he live again?” asks the book of Job. “All the days of my service I would wait, till my release should come. Thou wouldest call, and I would answer thee; thou wouldest long for the work of thy hand” (RSV). It is this call from our Maker and Redeemer that awakens us from death, not some inherent excellence and indestructibility in our souls. And I am reminded by my son John of a wise saying of al-Ghazali to the effect that the combination of both—immortality of the soul and resurrection of the body—is what makes the promised resurrection “the most perfect of all things.”

Perhaps it is significant that Dr. Alexander sensed his identity dissolving as he touched the fringe of death. Our personal identity is not a solid, metaphysical fact we can measure, but a mystery hidden with God. Until the last veil is lifted, solid

evidence will elude us; only the total pattern of redemption is strong enough to bear the weight of our hope.