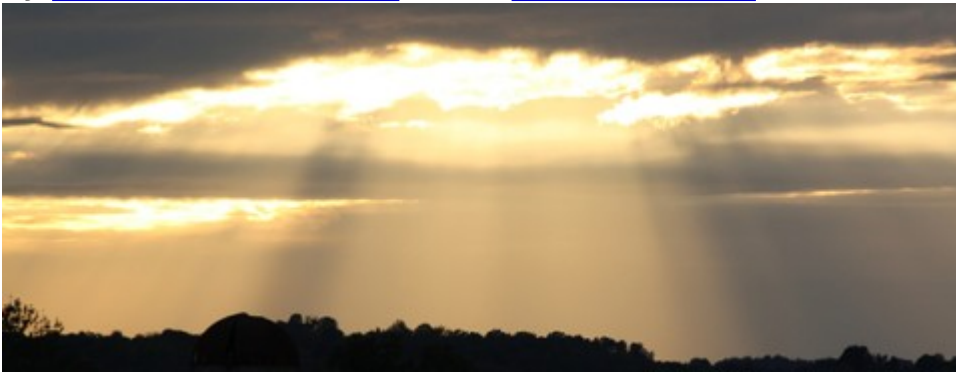


Reports of heaven

With some reluctance, I decided to read *Proof of Heaven*. I was surprised when my first reaction was positive.

by [Sarah Kenyon Lischer](#) in the [August 7, 2013](#) issue



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Although faith is “the conviction of things not seen,” millions of faithful Christians yearn for eyewitness corroboration of the invisible. Eben Alexander’s *Proof of Heaven*, a first-hand account of paradise, has captivated readers and was for months on the best-seller lists. The author, now a popular speaker and commentator, presented his views on the resurrection in the *Huffington Post* online news blog.

With some reluctance, I decided to read *Proof of Heaven* after many friends recommended it. Until then I had avoided life-after-death best sellers. It’s not that I doubt heaven; it’s that I doubt the *reports* of heaven. Why should we presume to request human eyewitness testimony if “no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”?

So I was surprised when my first reaction to the book was positive. I believed it. I accepted the author’s story of a near-death illness during which he traveled to and from heaven, learning the secrets of existence from loving celestial beings. After making a scientifically impossible recovery, Alexander shared his tantalizing peek into God’s mysteries. His descriptions of heaven even refer to one of my favorite

images of God: the “deep but dazzling darkness” articulated by 17th-century poet Henry Vaughan. I spent a week envisioning the author’s experiences during my own prayers.

But as I ruminated on the book its appeal faded. Or more accurately, my enthusiasm dissipated and I realized that little else remained. In the end, Alexander’s heaven does not compel me.

For one thing, I don’t really want the surprise spoiled in advance. For another, I realized that if his heaven is *the* heaven, I’ll be disappointed. One person’s report of paradise, no matter how blissful, seems rather generic to another person. Given assurances of an eternity of peace, for example, some of us worry that heaven might become boring after a while.

Even more unsettling, these static descriptions of heaven bear alarmingly little resemblance to the unique and dynamic nature of a relationship with God in the here and now, when one finds God through many different doorways: sensory experience such as dancing, painting, singing; meditation on scripture; being in nature; loving other people; caring for the poor and downtrodden; corporate prayer; wordless prayer. After death, does that variety cease? What changes? What stays the same?

I imagine a different heaven, one in which our relationship with God becomes perfected—not homogenized, but perfected. Not finished, but completed. For the sensory person, maybe perfection means she finds herself in a dance with God, swept off her feet with delight. For the person who spent life bone-tired, overworked and poor, maybe perfection means falling into the arms of God, finally at ease. The mystics speak of the perfection of the unitive experience, a wordless unity of person and God which does not erase personhood but completes it.

It’s not that I doubt Alexander’s experience of heaven or discount the message of unconditional love. Scripture and our own experiences confirm that a personal encounter with God often ignites a spiritual transformation. For Christians, however, the message of the book is simply not necessary; it doesn’t add anything to the witness of the Gospels. In any case, no human testimony can actually prove the reality of heaven. As Jesus says to Martha, “Only one thing is necessary”: to sit at his feet as Mary did, listening in rapt attention.

Considering that unambiguous advice, I wonder at the enthusiasm with which Christians embrace the genre of afterlife literature. What do we gain that we do not already have?

Consider the extraordinary amount of effort Alexander expends to convince his fellow doctors of the very lowest common denominator of most faith traditions: that human consciousness is more than neural activity and that we exist in an unseen and eternal spiritual realm. While secular medical practitioners and wistful atheists may insist on exhaustive empirical gymnastics as a prerequisite for belief, our faith does not require such proofs. Why search for proof when we have the assurance of the unseen?