

Why Stand Gazing?

BY JULIE PENNINGTON - RUSSELL

To aim our lives chiefly toward avoiding hell or gaining heaven is to have missed the point. Rather than fixate on our brownstone in heaven or the brimstone in hell, why not fix our lives on the Christ who says, "Let me breathe my life into you today so that you don't have to settle for this hellish half-life anymore."

My husband's parents live in the tiny farming town of Vega in the panhandle of Texas. Halfway between Vega and Amarillo, just a few yards from I-40, lies a massive patch of stink called the Classic Cattle Company. The smell emanating from the acres of cattle pens is so powerful it invades your body, becomes part of you. The only thing to do when approaching the cattle yards is to speed up and breathe through your mouth. During a recent visit with my in-laws, I found myself driving past the dreaded pens with our six-year-old daughter, Lucy. As the smell became more and more unbearable, Lucy, her nose buried in the crook of her arm, observed grimly, "Mom, this must be what hell smells like."

I laughed at the time, but later wondered at what point along the way did our six-year-old surmise that there is indeed a hell, and that it's a most unpleasant place? Truth is, hell rarely gets raised (no pun intended) in the daily flow of conversation at our house. Even heaven, a decidedly brighter subject, does not figure prominently in the talk around our dinner table. I rank myself in the company of those who don't dwell all that much on the hereafter. My ambivalence, I suppose, comes from exposure as a child to too many wild-eyed preachers in the vein of Elmer Gantry, and from endless parodies in literature and film of simple-minded, often Southern, religious folk whose preoccupation with the afterlife makes them appear downright bizarre.

But the subjects of heaven and hell are not so easily avoided. In the first place, not just Christianity, but virtually all world religions embrace some view of the afterlife and sketch out consequences for the evil and for the good. Our sense of justice demands it. It seems right that there be separate places after death for Hitler and for Mother Teresa.

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Thoughts about heaven and hell are hard to escape, also, because the subject of death, which we are able to skirt almost completely in our twenties, crops up more frequently in our thirties, and hovers at our elbow as we enter mid-life. The older we get, the more we think about death. Many of us, in private moments, find ourselves imagining what lies on the far side of the grave.

Billy Collins, the nation's Poet Laureate, muses about death in "The Afterlife," which begins with these lines:

While you are preparing for sleep, brushing your teeth,
or rifling through a magazine in bed,
the dead of the day are setting out on their journey.

They are moving off in all imaginable directions,
each according to his own private belief,
and this is the secret that silent Lazarus would not reveal:
that everyone is right, as it turns out.
You go to the place you always thought you would go,
the place you kept lit in an alcove in your head.

Some are being shot up a funnel of flashing colors
into a zone of light, white as a January sun.
Others are standing naked before a forbidding judge who sits
with a golden ladder on one side, a coal chute on the other.¹

This vision of the afterlife would not pass muster as Christian orthodoxy, but the poem does remind me of a biblical point: though we call up in our minds all of our best and worst images of what heaven and hell will be like, our speculations are only that. The afterlife is the one subject about which all the experts are in no condition to elaborate. Here the toddler

knows as much as the Rhodes scholar. The scholar may use more compelling adjectives, but when it comes to the hereafter, we are all pretty much guessing.

Is there life beyond death? Scripture paints a bold and unambiguous *Yes!* But on Scripture's canvas of heaven and hell, the images are veiled and undefined. What we behold is less like the *Mona Lisa* and more like the puzzling brokenness of Picasso's *Guernica*.

Reinhold Niebuhr says that we shouldn't concern ourselves too much with the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell, and he is so right. Enough for us now to be on the road with Christ, and to seek and cherish God, for heaven is only heaven because God is there, and exclusion from God's presence, even if you were reclining on a cloud while cherubs fed you Godiva, would still be hell.

The question might be asked of us that the two angels asked Jesus' followers after his ascension: "Why do you stand gazing up into heaven?" (Acts 1:11) For that matter, why stand gazing down into hell? To aim our lives chiefly toward avoiding hell or gaining heaven is to have missed the point. Christ says, "Let me breathe my life into you *today* so that you do not have to settle for this hellish half-life anymore."

Let's be honest about this: there is so much that you and I don't know about eternity. But eternity has come to our here and now in the person of Jesus Christ. Rather than fixate on our brownstone in heaven or the brimstone in hell, why not fix our lives on the one who is Lord of both? Christ recognized that we all suffer from spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder. Left on our own, we find all kinds of secondary issues to wrap ourselves around. Perhaps that is why Jesus was always giving us such straightforward instructions: *Follow me. Don't be anxious. Love God. Love each other.* Christ apparently did not think it important to fill in all of the missing pieces about life after death. What he gave us was a calling so high and a love so expansive that everything else seems puny by comparison.

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We who live in the 'Not Yet' could do worse than to recall the wisdom of our sixteenth century Christian forebears. The summary of Scripture known as the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) asks the ageless question,

“What is my only comfort in life and in death?” The answer comes back:

My only comfort is that I am not my own,
but belong, body and soul, in life and in death,
to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

That will preach in any century.

NOTES

1 Excerpt from “The Afterlife” from *Questions About Angels*, by Billy Collins, © 1991.
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2 See his “Mystery and Meaning,” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. by Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1986), 237-249.



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