

GLIMPSES *of* HEAVEN



True Stories of Hope and Peace
at the End of Life's Journey

Trudy Harris, RN


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To all those whom God sent to our care
and who taught us life's lessons along the way.

Conversations . . .

Look at Me and no one else,
See none but Me, My child.
Compare not yourself to others now,
Consider Me awhile.

Do not be distracted by anyone, anything,
Look past all else to Me.
I will show you all I have
And all I want you to be.

Spend time with Me, My little one,
The rush should stop for now.
Listen to Me softly speak to you,
I will show you how.

So many things get in the way,
Time speeds by, you see.
Soon it will be over for you, My child,
What will be will be.

So much work yet to be done,
I need your hands, your heart.
Listen carefully while I tell you so,
My wisdom and gentleness I impart.

Trudy Harris

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Foreword



In 1979, my father was dying of cancer. I was an agnostic when I noticed a book on his nightstand, *Life After Life*. The book coined the term “near-death experience” (NDE). I read it that night and realized there’s evidence that God does exist and life continues beyond the grave. That opened me up to studying the Bible and coming to faith. Since that time, I went from a career in engineering to studying at seminary and starting a church. Over the last thirty years, I’ve also studied close to one thousand accounts of people who clinically died, were resuscitated, and have something to say about the reality of life beyond death. I wrote the book *Imagine Heaven* not only to show the evidence for near-death experiences, but more importantly to show why I believe they reveal the Bible’s exhilarating picture of the future that awaits us.

As a Christian, I’m surprised at how quickly some Christ followers dismiss stories of those near death, seemingly without careful study. The sheer scope of those having NDEs or near-death visions deserves careful analysis by

Christian thinkers. Gallup and other international polls estimate that as many as one in twenty-five people have had a near-death experience, and I have found that they have amazingly similar commonalities to report about their glimpses of the life to come.

As a hospice nurse ushering people from this life into the afterlife, Trudy Harris brings even more evidence of the exhilarating life to come, including stories that confirm what I found in my research and in the Bible. Oftentimes, as a person is passing, the veil between this world and the world to come gets transparently thin, allowing patients to color-commentate their passing to those in the room with them. Trudy chronicles the many instances where she has witnessed her patients describing what they saw, how they felt, what they heard, who came to greet them and give them peace as they stood at the doorway of death. What they describe will give you great hope for what's to come.

Through each real-life story Trudy describes, you see the profound power of God's love, the promises of Scripture coming to life, and you learn lessons from the dying that often only come during our final moments. Trudy not only offers us hope from these glimpses of the life to come, she gleans the wisdom from those final moments that can help us all live each moment to the full. I hope you enjoy Trudy's unique glimpse through the doorway to heaven as much as I did.

John Burke
New York Times Bestselling Author of *Imagine Heaven*

Acknowledgments



To my husband, George, whose unselfish love and constant encouragement and support made the writing of this book possible.

And to our sons, George Jr., Jon Hugh, Kenneth David, and Erik, for their patience, good humor, and faith that enabled me to complete this manuscript.

In loving memory of my parents Peggy and John Horan, whose example laid the spiritual and moral foundation for our family and the work we were to do in our lives.

To Sister Naureen Marie, whose beautiful and gentle spirit taught me that the nurse at the bedside is invaluable in the true healing of God's children.

I gratefully acknowledge the earliest pioneers of end-of-life hospice care who recognized the need for a more personal and supportive way to serve the needs of those whose lives were limited in time by a terminal illness. They set about to create an environment of spiritual, emotional, and physical comfort and well-being in a way that had not yet found its place in the medical community.

Acknowledgments

We owe a great debt of gratitude to them for the strides made, against all odds, in creating and teaching a new way for people to live to the fullest each day, until there are no more tomorrows left to them. Their names are too numerous to mention here but include Dame Cicely Saunders, Joy Ufema, and Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. Their determination on a national and international level moved the understanding of end-of-life care to the noble place it holds today.

Paul Brenner, Dottie Dorion, Gene Lewis, Phaon and Kay Derr, Lois Graessle, Dr. Matt Becker, Gretchen Bell, Jack Galliard, Shirley Doyle, Linda Brown, Billye Boselli, Dr. George Wilson, Dr. Fred Schert, Dr. Max Karrer, Dr. Sam Day, Jeanne Christie, Betty Hurtz, and many others played a major role in founding the hospice program with which I was associated for more than twenty-two years.

The nurses, chaplains, social workers, home health aids, and laypeople were the heart and soul of the tiny hospice program and received such little compensation as to be considered a stipend rather than a salary. Without their commitment, perseverance, and compassion, patients would not have received the tender, loving care that enabled them to die with peace and dignity. These hospice workers know well who they are, and they can bask quietly in the knowledge that their noble work has made an enormous contribution to the living and dying time of thousands of patients and families for more than twenty-five years.

Special thanks to Jackie Aquino, RN, who started this journey with me more than twenty-five years ago and to Edry Rowe Surrency for her devotion and dedication, which made this work possible.

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Introduction



Many years ago, I was visiting a terminally ill patient at his home in the middle of the night. As I entered his room, he smiled and, pointing to the window nearest his bed, said to me, “There’s an angel at my window, Trudy. Can you see him?” It was more than evident to me that Pat was actively dying and had very little time left, maybe an hour or so. He was peaceful and unafraid but awestruck by what he was seeing. I explained to him that God was preparing to take him home very soon, and He was letting him have a glimpse of heaven before going in. He smiled knowingly, nodding his head in agreement, and seemed totally at peace with that thought. Since he lived alone, I promised to stay with him until he was taken there safely by the angel who was watching over him now. Sitting on the floor next to his bed, I held his hand for less than an hour until he died.

Over many years, family members, friends, and patients in my care have shared with me their very personal experiences of dying. Their experiences are as varied and unique as the persons themselves, and are shared with

an openness and confidence that can only be explained by their anticipated and imminent meeting with God. He speaks to their spirits in a way no one else ever has as He prepares to call them home. No one has to tell them they are dying; they know and recognize His voice. They have developed what I call “spiritual eyes and ears” and seem to see and understand things in a way we cannot. The experiences are unique to the persons themselves but share a common theme of enlightenment, love, and acceptance at the end of life. They give us glimpses into a world none of us has yet seen but one day will. Each person seems to receive exactly what he or she needs to see and hear in order to die peacefully and well.

As the physical body declines, the spiritual self becomes apparent and seems to yearn in a real and tangible way for someone or something greater than itself. This appears to be a very natural movement on the part of the dying person and is expressed in a myriad of ways. People who are about to die are very generous in sharing their experiences if they feel you will be open to hearing them. They tell you about their experiences as they are living them and seem to want to help you understand the simplicity of it all.

This temporary tent, which is our body, is changing, and no one knows this better than the person who is dying. If you sit quietly and listen to them, both their questions and their insights, they will invite you to share in this next, awesome step in life’s journey. There is nothing left to hide, nothing to gain, and nothing to prove or lose, thus making the sharing totally pure. And when you enter into the wonderment of these blessed experiences with them, you yourself will grow.

Visions of those who have gone before them, angels, beautiful music, and personally comforting experiences

permeate the minds and hearts of those who are dying. The imprints of their shared experiences are left with us to ponder and more importantly to provide a platform for our own lives. This book does not attempt to define or provide meaning to what people see and hear. Rather it offers a portrait of what we might expect when our time inevitably comes and demystifies death as only first-person accounts can do.

When patients and friends who were dying would say to me, “Today is my day” or “I saw my name on the marker” or “I heard them call my name” or “My son is here with me now; he said it’s time to go,” at first I simply did not understand. When many others told me about seeing angels in their rooms, being visited by loved ones who had died before them, or hearing beautiful choirs or smelling fragrant flowers when there were none around, I assumed it was the result of the medications they were taking or possibly dehydration. Surely the visions could not be real. But when others who were dying and not on medication and not dehydrated were saying the same things, I started to listen, really listen.

When they spoke of angels, which many did, the angels were always described as more beautiful than they had ever imagined, eight feet tall, male, and wearing a white for which there is no word. “Luminescent” is what each one said, like nothing they had ever seen before. The music they spoke of was far more exquisite than any symphony they had ever heard, and over and over again they mentioned colors that they said were too beautiful to describe.

I have the feeling that people do not die at the exact minute or hour that we say they do. In some inexplicable way that we do not yet understand, they seem to travel back and forth from this world to the next, developing

the insights God wants them to have on this, their final journey back to the Father who created them.

Friends of mine who are physicians and nurses have often suggested to me that hearing about and understanding the experiences of terminally ill and dying patients would be of great comfort to everyone in the medical profession. Those who have allowed themselves the luxury of being present with patients as they are dying come away realizing in a whole new way that there is only one Divine Physician, and it is He alone who sets the timetables of our lives.

A patient who was afraid to die lying flat on his back asked me to hold him in a sitting position as he was dying. Moments before he died he said to me, “Trudy, there is no such thing as time. Dying is like walking from the living room into the dining room, there are no beginnings or endings.” The words he spoke were in response to my looking at my watch as I foolishly counted his respirations, and he smiled a very patient smile as he said it. Then he closed his eyes and died. There are so many new insights, so many opportunities to think and understand in a whole new way when seeing from the perspective of the patient who is moments away from entering heaven. There are so many important lessons people are trying to teach us moments before they die. We had better listen. We are standing on holy ground during these moments, and we dare not miss one of them.

Trudy Harris

The names, diagnoses, and histories of those portrayed here have been changed to protect the privacy of those in my care. In those instances where families have asked me to use the real names of their loved ones, I have done so.

Daddy

“Martin said it’s time to go”

My dad was a big, loving Irishman of sixty-eight years who had lived and loved well. “Don’t wait too long to come and see me,” he said. “I haven’t much time left.” I had called Dad from the South Carolina beach where I was vacationing with my family. It was Father’s Day, June 1973. Dad had broken a rib while picking up a statue on the outside of their house and moving it for my mother. He was in a great deal of pain and didn’t know why. Tests over the next four weeks showed a diagnosis of multiple myeloma with widespread disease to the bone. CAT scans reflected a large tumor on the left kidney as well. The doctors said Dad had less than one year to live, and without surgery he could have less time than that, with the possibility of hemorrhaging to death. Time was very short, and no one knew it better than Dad.

Dad had been a wonderful father to his four daughters, who now took turns staying with Mom and helping with the day-to-day needs they shared. He had a great zest for

life, endless Irish humor, and a love for my mother that could not be measured. She was his main concern in life, always had been, always would be. Even now as he was dying, she continued to be his primary focus.

One day, as four doctors circled his hospital bed with multiple ideas as to how to handle his care, he turned to me and said, “Can they make me better, honey?”

“No, Dad,” I said. “I don’t think so.”

“Then take me home now,” he said with such authority as to leave no doubt in anyone’s mind as to what he wanted. We did exactly that.

Dad was a great talker all his life, and he loved to share his ideas and thoughts and loved hearing yours. As a labor leader and union negotiator in New York City, he could see and hear both sides of an argument and loved to play the role of bringing people and their ideas together. He often pondered about business friends and acquaintances and those with whom he had worked who had lived less than good lives and had gotten away with it. He wondered with a chuckle about the chance of some of them getting box seats in heaven while he was in the bleachers. He was never judgmental but had great humor and loved thinking out loud about all the possibilities.

He loved retelling Jesus’s story about the landowner who had invited workers into his vineyard at different times of the day and paid them all equally at the end of the day. As a union organizer who was always concerned with a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work, Dad would question Jesus’s thinking and suggest that a good union could have made a difference for them. He said all this in jest, of course, figuring that Jesus, in His infinite mercy, had His own way of handling things, which in turn was a good lesson for us all. His lifelong musings were the foundation

of our very early learning, and he had a unique and wonderful way of telling the stories, which would ultimately play a major role in who each of his children became.

One morning, just days before Dad died, I was giving him a nice shave. He looked into the mirror and said to me, "I don't look like I'm dying, do I, honey?"

"No, Dad, you really don't," I said.

"I really don't mind dying, you know. I'm ready. I just hate leaving Mommy. Don't let anyone ever hurt her, OK? She's just too good for anyone to upset her or make her feel sad." Dad's concern had always been for others: those who might be vulnerable, those who were less fortunate, those who were alone, and those who could not help themselves. Especially now, he wanted to be sure that the great love of his life would be protected and safe and that no harm would come to her. It was so like him.

Although I didn't realize it fully at the time, Dad was really talking with me about his impending death. His time was very close, and like all people who are about to transition into a new life, which we call death, he knew it, he felt it; no one had to tell him. God was preparing him Himself. The Holy Spirit, to whom Dad had turned throughout his life for guidance and direction, was playing a major role in his understanding and insight now. He seemed so at peace with it all, as if with an old friend who understood him well and with whom he was very comfortable. It was awesome to watch.

"I didn't always like you, you know," I said to him one day while we were alone. "But I always loved you. I especially loved you when you bucked me, stood your ground, and told me the truth, whether I wanted to hear it or not."

"You didn't like me because you were just like me," he said with a big smile. We had butted heads often because

we were so alike, often coming to the same understanding of truth but at different times and in different ways. “You always know just what I need before I have to ask,” he said in response to my changing the pillow at his feet.

Dad had a way of letting you know how important you were to him and what he thought of you with just a smile or simple pat. *What a good and truthful man he is*, I thought. *This is the very best it can be. My father is leaving us to go on to the God he has always loved and followed with the same certainty, confidence, and peace he exhibited all his life . . . how natural.*

Then it was Maggie’s turn to be with Dad. She was the “little one” he always felt a need to protect. She had an impish nature, which caused her to test the envelope a lot growing up. Dad was always there to happily bail her out of her young antics. It was now her turn to explain things to him, to make him laugh, and to show him who she had become because of him. The day he died, Dad greeted her in the morning, saying, “Maggie, Martin said it’s time to go now.” Dad was referring to Martin Kyne, his friend of forty years who had died less than a year before. Dad was very peaceful when he told her that he had seen Martin. He said it so calmly as though it was just understood. He was letting her know he was ready to die. He gifted his daughters, even now as he was dying, in the ways he knew would be most comforting for each of them. He knew each of us well, so it came naturally for him.

Maureen, the eldest daughter, lived with Mom and Dad and had a work ethic that he admired greatly. “You work so hard all the time but you never complain,” he would often say to her. They both felt strongly about hard work and principle, and she said many times that, for her, Dad represented the true living gospel of Jesus Christ. “He

didn't just talk about it," she would say. "He lived it every day in all the things he did for others."

Anne, as the youngest, was in constant attendance with both Mom and Dad, meeting their every need. She was always the one who tried to fix things, to make everything right, and she was doing this now in her own special and gentle way, wordlessly. Dad especially loved having his "Annie Fresh Eggs" around him now reflecting the sweet soul she had always been growing up.

Dad thought about others first throughout his life; and even now he continued to do the same, putting others at ease, their well-being uppermost in his mind. The lessons he taught me during this period of time prepared me for a future of serving the needs of the dying through hospice care in a way I could never have known otherwise. The gentleness and naturalness of his passing demystified death for me and allowed me to see God's gentle and constant hand on the souls of His children as He prepares to take them back home to Himself. I will be forever grateful to my dad for his strength of character, constant love, and faith in me and for the great love he exhibited all his life.

Only six weeks after his original diagnosis, Dad was curled up in bed with Mom beside him, quietly resting. Turning to her he said, "I love you, Peggy," and taking one last, gentle breath he traveled from this world's experience into his eternal reward. He was with the love of his life until the end, and his leaving, though very sad, was a gentle and natural experience. It was covered by a faith nurtured through the ups and downs of spiritual growth by a God who was always with him.

Dad walked and talked with God throughout his life, searching for Him in the hard places of personal growth and refinement. He reflected Him in the compassionate

ways he attended to those struggling to make a dignified living for their families; in the ways he cared for his mother and sisters and brother when his own dad died so young; in the way he cherished and respected Mom all her life; and in the many ways he nurtured his four daughters into womanhood.

He depended on God's direction for everything and now could simply turn himself over to the God whom he knew and trusted so completely. He taught us so many things while he was living and even more when he was dying. He was an unforgettable man.