

A visit to a wake or funeral always stirs in me the ultimate question: What lies in store for us beyond the grave? Though I often see mourners who give every indication of ignoring the question, I cannot do so myself. This greatest of mysteries never fails to provoke my wonder.

Sometimes one receives from people in their last days indications of what might be the experience of living after death. Such recently came to my attention when friends revealed what two women said when they were dying.

The first, Daria, described what she was going through by the single word "surreal." I do not have details that might enable me to judge what she meant by this expression. But I suspect that it was for her a premonition of what death would bring.

She would seem to have had some kind of vision of a reality different from that of our everyday world. It was apparently an experience of awe that promised something that she had never known previously.

Amazingly, the second woman, Marj, used the same expression: "this is a surreal experience." As if in confirmation of this awesome sequence of inner events, she then added: "I feel as though this is happening to someone else."

But she found another metaphor in her love of sailing. Nothing pleased her so much as heading out on her boat accompanied by friends, with the wind in her face and herself sitting at the helm. A charming photo on her funeral program shows her sitting cross-legged, on the boat, the ocean in the background, a floppy hat protecting her from the sun, and a broad smile on her face.

Shortly before her death, she said to a priest who was ministering to her: "I hope heaven is another ocean." These words struck me as a beautiful statement of what the next life could be. For Marj, it featured the activity that she had most favored in life.

Presumably, heaven would bring all the beauty of water, wind, sand, stars, the company of fellow seafarers and whatever else made for pleasure on earth. Except now, it would be unimaginably enhanced.

My book group this month is reading *My Antonia*, a classic novel by the 20th century American writer Willa Cather. In it she tells the story of a young boy, Jim, who has been sent from Virginia to live with his grandparents in Nebraska. The farm they run is isolated from human society, but it brings the boy close to nature.

One warm day Jim lies down in the middle of the family garden, to rest and take in the surroundings. "I kept as still as I could," he says. "Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more."

He continues: "I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become part of something entire, whether it is sun or air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is

happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep.”

As a reader, I find myself skeptical that a young boy would have such deep reflections about death. However, I especially identify with becoming part of goodness and knowledge, part of something complete and great. Transposed into more standard religious terms, this description would seem to be expressive of union with God.

A writer friend, Fred Buechner, approaches the mystery from a different perspective. He detects intimations of immortality as he tells of answering a question that his mother, in old age, posed to him out of the blue. “Do you really believe anything happens after you die?”

In one of his responses, her son writes about the way life feels to him: “It feels as though, at the innermost heart of it, there is Holiness, and that we experience all the horrors that go on both around us and within us as horrors rather than as just the way the cookie crumbles because, in our own innermost hearts, we belong to Holiness.”

Amen.

Richard Griffin