

We're Surrounded by Loved Ones Just Beyond Our 4 Dimensions

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My mother, who died in 1984, came to my wife Nancy many years later, while Nancy napping—to advise her on one of our daughters. Great advice, counter-intuitive to Nancy's instinct.

Few years later, I was startled awake by my mother's voice, "Ken!" I looked at digital clock **3:13**. Mom died of breast cancer. Somehow, I knew to pray for Pat Miller's sister, dying of breast cancer. Later that, email from Pat: sister died "around 3am."

My gammy Meyers died in my bed (she had moved in for us to care for her). Gammy Meyer's last words to my father were, "**Look! Glen, the angels!**" She was pointing to my closet.

After ejected from her denomination, Emily trying to understand her responsibility to reform Evangelicalism. She entered a semi-napping state, in which Phyllis Tickle (a leading secular observer of religious landscape who died earlier in year) came to Emily, gently turned her cheek and said, "**Those are not your people.**"

Scripture gives language to what can't be verified: "***Therefore, we also, having so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, having with such ease put off every encumbrance and the sin besetting us [scapegoating] let us run the race set before us, Looking ahead to Jesus the leader and finisher of faithfulness, who preferring the joy that lay before him, endured a cross, disdaining its shame and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God***" (12:1-2)

Scripture signifies **intersection** between this world/realm beyond as a **cloud**. Physics, same metaphor—used to think electron orbited round nucleus like planets around sun. Discovered electrons function like **waves** (spread out) and **particles** (a specific point)—something we can't imagine, so it is described now as a **cloud**. *Cloud represents something between **tangible** and **intangible**.*

In Acts 1:9, Luke says regarding Jesus, appearing to his disciples after his death, "**as they were watching, he was taken up, and a cloud took him from their eyes.**" We would say

Jesus was transitioning from our 4 dimensions of space-time, to a dimension beyond that ... **the intersection is signified by a cloud.**

One of very few events in life of Jesus also mentioned in letters happened on Mount Tabor. Three disciples went up mountain with Jesus, sleep overtook disciple and they awoke to a vision of Jesus with Moses & Elijah (not his contemporaries). Luke describes it thus: ***And as he was saying these things a cloud came and overshadowed them; and as they entered the cloud they were afraid. And a voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, the chosen one, listen to him"*** (Lk. 9: 34-35) Cloud X3

In first several books of Hebrew Bible, dead means dead. The dead entered a hole in ground, thought to remain in an underworld space, "Sheol." One Exception in Genesis, **Enoch**, who walked with God is **"taken"** No further details... Until **2 Kings 2**

Wouldn't you know, it's story of Elijah and his apprentice Elisha. Elijah is planning his departure. Elisha says, wait! Don't go! I want a double portion of your spirit. Elijah says, "We'll see." Chariots of fire separate them and Elijah is **went up in a whirlwind** [funnel cloud] after which **Elisha** is infused with **spirit of Elijah**.

In gospel of Luke we hear that John, born to Elizabeth-Zacharias **"will go forth in God's presence in the spirit and power of Elijah."** As Elisha was infused with the spirit of Elijah, so will John.

What are we to make of all this? That there is possibly way more interaction between this realm and the realm beyond this realm than meets the eye or can be measured by instruments of science.

Like, we are surrounded by loved ones who have gone before us.

Much in modern culture tries to shoosh this. Toxic/inhumane approaches to **mourning**. Pete Buley's death ... talking to someone who knew Pete, an older guy. Julia says, **"I am so going to miss Pete."** To which he says, **"Well, that's done."**

As if the healthy response: get over it, move forward.

But what if Pete Buley is not done? What if the essence of Pete Buley is somehow nearby in what Scripture calls **“cloud of witnesses”** cheering us on in our life here and now?

Julia’s husband Richard died in April 2011, while she was completing her study to become a priest. In June, ordained as a priest, assigned to first parish, **St. Michael’s and All Angels** in Lincoln Park. Seminary classes in Detroit used to driving home, thinking about what she wanted to share with Richard. So in June, after he died in April, she’s driving from Lincoln Park, imagining all things from the day she wants to tell Richard. Then it dawns on her— Oh he’s not waiting at home for me. He died. Then, instinctively, **“No need to wait till I get home.”** And she spends the rest of her drive talking to Richard.”

Some would call that morbid. Shouldn’t be doing that a year later. Not so. It’s good for us. **“Speaking out loud to a loved one who has passed is helpful for many people processing grief,”** Dr. Alison Forti, Professor of Counseling, Wake Forest University. My source? No less an authority than Teen Vogue Magazine. So there.

My wife died at a very inopportune time for me, suddenly, no forewarning. A few years later I’m in therapy realizing I have some unresolved things related to that. It dawns on me, **“Why don’t I talk it over with Nancy? Go to the source!”** Over a couple of weeks, before dinner, praying routine: Headspace, Divine Hours. I added a glass of wine and started talking to Nancy. She didn’t talk back in words so much as in feelings. I felt feelings that I took to be from her. She was sorry to have missed all drama and couldn’t have my back. She was very proud of all of us, and happy with the outcome. That sort of thing...and more private things.

Why did it take me 6 years to think of that? Influence of European Protestant Christianity in reaction to Catholicism—poo-pooed communicating with those who had died as **superstitious** (aka “Catholic”) I absorbed this tacitly. **Faith organized around this European history is uptight about ancestors. Faith organized around African cultures at ease:** Of course we’re surrounded by a cloud of witnesses cheering us on! Some people alive even find themselves animated by other people who died a while ago!

Add some texture to story. A picture later in Heb. 12 helped me process some **difficult emotions** with Nancy in my prayerful conversations with her. A description of what’s happening when we gather to worship: **“You have come to Mount Zion and the City of a**

Living God, a heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, and to a full gathering, an assembly of the first-born, enrolled in the heavens, and to God the judge of all, and to spirits of the righteous who have been perfected.

When we gather to worship, a lot going on **behind the scenes!** We are approaching God, and our loved ones who have died are held in God's heart, so we are approaching them as well! (Why we often feel our mourning more acutely in worship.)

Notice: ***“to spirits of the righteous who have been perfected.”*** Those who die pass into God's direct presence where they are transformed, completed, healed, renewed. So I could talk to Nancy and **bring up difficult things** that might have been too sensitive, made her defensive—but I was free to now, knowing she was past all that, no need to walk on eggshells regarding anything. Extraordinarily liberating communicating with her in that state.

In biology we learned about **semi-permeable membranes**. Out lining of cells: Let some things in, keep other things out. Exchange between inside of the cell and the outside but it's limited.

There's a semipermeable membrane between heaven and earth—this world and the realm just beyond ours, in which we are nestled. More back and forth than we realize. Not a scary thing, a good thing: All bathed, soaked, pickled, immersed in love.

QUIET REFLECTION

Center ourselves around this text, conscious-intentional about remainder of our worship.

First: on 3x5 card, jot down names of a few loved ones who have died. Underline circle one of those names. [Cassie will name them aloud in our closing worship songs]

“You have come to Mount Zion and the City of a Living God, a heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, and to a full gathering, an assembly of the first-born, enrolled in the heavens, and to God the judge of all, and to spirits of the righteous who have been perfected.”