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Arlington Street Church  
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## **Heaven**

In the Yukon, I once met “an elderly Sekani man,” travel writer Wade Davis reports, “... who was completely confounded by a missionary’s notion of heaven. He couldn’t believe anyone could be expected to give up smoking, drinking, swearing, carousing, and all the things that made life worth living, in order to go to a place where they didn’t allow animals.

“‘No caribou?’ he would say, in complete astonishment.”

First on the list of my colleague and friend Jane Rzepka’s recipe for living a “satisfying” life is just this: “Know what your heaven looks like.”<sup>1</sup>

When I heard that, it was a real show-stopper. Unitarian Universalists are very big on getting it right in this life; we don’t spend a lot of time on whatever might come next. In most faith traditions, when the talk turns to heaven, they’re not talking about here and now. But when Jane Rzepka says, “Know what your heaven looks like,” she is naming heaven as that which we love – already love – and suggests that we can sweeten our lives with an insight into what brings us joy, and peace; a meeting place of body and soul, or not necessarily a place, but a state of mind and heart.

What does your heaven look like?  
*Seek, and ye shall find.*  
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In February of 1798, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote *Frost at Midnight*. It’s long; here are just a few beautiful lines from the opening stanza:

The Frost performs its secret ministry,

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Ranney Rzepka, *From Zip Lines to Hosaphones*, p. 144. Thanks to Jane for this, and for walking me to the profound connections among Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Evelyn Frey, and Joama.

Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry  
 Came loud – and hark, again! loud as before.  
 The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,  
 Have left me to that solitude, which suits  
 Abstruser musings: save that at my side  
 My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.  
 'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs  
 And vexes meditation with its strange  
 And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,  
 This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,  
 With all its numberless goings-on of life,  
 Inaudible as dreams!....

To be quiet in the quiet, and at ease, alone with our reflections: Jane Rzepka writes, “For some of [us], this scene is [our] idea of heaven.”

But, she continues, “Just as many of [us] think Coleridge and anyone like him is nuts. Who cares if it's [1798]? We] want the TV on for a little background noise. [We] wonder if any of the neighbors are still awake; maybe they feel like playing cards. Or ... it's never too late to get a start on the laundry....

“[*Frost at Midnight*] sounds lonely and boring. *Silence* means nothing's happening! *Solitude* means nobody's come by to visit. *Stillness* means nothing's getting done.”<sup>2</sup>

Heaven: TV off, or TV on? Caribou, or no Caribou?

What does your heaven look like?

*Seek, and ye shall find.*

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Frijoles Canyon is at the heart of Bandelier National Monument, north of Santa Fe, New Mexico. There's a memorial there to Evelyn and George Frey,<sup>3</sup> who, in 1925, babe in arms, came to manage the Lodge of the Ten Elders in the canyon – “in,” as in over the edge. They walked down; their belongings arrived on a sled, behind a mule.

<sup>2</sup> Rzepka, *op cit*, pp. 121-122

<sup>3</sup> pronounced “Fry”

“[George] Frey took apart a small Dodge truck and sent it down, piece by piece, and reassembled it ... [at] the bottom of the canyon.” Evelyn Frey sent in her crank-operated Gramophone and records, a piano ... and an orchard.

“On the day I came in here,” Evelyn remembered, “I brought seventy-five fruit trees. Mr. Frey said that if we ever were in the notion of getting a divorce, it was right then.... [H]e was not a farmer....

“[I] had to tie those little trees on our horses..., and they bucked them off all the way down the trail. But [I] got our orchard all planted.... [In the years to come,] I had plums and peaches and pears and apricots and nectarines and cherries and apples....”

Improbably, that orchard, as well as cabins, sheds, barns, and a two-and-a-half acre garden grew up next to Frijoles Creek.

The couple did, indeed, divorce. Evelyn got the house ... and the canyon. She raised and schooled their son there, and remained for sixty-three years, until she died in her mid-nineties. This was her recipe for the good life. She was fond of saying, Frijoles “is the best place on earth!”<sup>4</sup> To Evelyn Frey, it was heaven.

Heaven: Over the edge with an infant, a truck, a record player, a piano, and an orchard. TV off, or TV on? Caribou?

What does your heaven look like?

*Seek, and ye shall find.*

\*

In the wasteland that was the wake of World War II, some of the flower children of the '60s headed for Asia in search of the meaning of life. In the Himalayan foothills, many of them encountered Neem Karoli Baba, one of the greatest spiritual masters of our time. His student Krishna Das, an American chant master, says, “We would ask, ‘Maharaji, how can we know G\*d?’ We figured we got the guy here, he knows the answers, we’re going to ask him the questions. ‘How do we find G\*d?’

“‘Serve people.’

<sup>4</sup> Please see [wnpa.org/freepubs/BAND/freystories.pdf](http://wnpa.org/freepubs/BAND/freystories.pdf)

“What? It was totally beyond our understanding. We tried again. ‘How do we raise our kundalini?’

“Feed people.”

“What? But Maharaji, how can we be happy?”

“Stop thinking of yourselves.”<sup>5</sup>

Hmm. Heaven is service. Heaven is over the edge ... or it's not. Heaven is silent, or maybe it's noisy. And what about the caribou?

What does your heaven look like?

*Seek, and ye shall find.*

\*

“The snows had scarcely melted last June when 24-year-old Joama and her three male cousins, yak herders in the remote mountains of northern Tibet, embarked on the most sublime journey of their lives.

“Their departure was not marked by any ceremony. ‘We just started out,’ she recalled. The four began [reciting] mantras and raised their hands to heaven. They dropped to their knees and flung their bodies forward, fully prone against the damp earth. Then they stood up, took three small steps, and repeated the sequence.

“For more than five months now, they have prostrated themselves this way, all day every day, inch-worming their way to Lhasa and its holy sites. They slowly made their way through more than one hundred miles of some of the world’s harshest terrain, starting from above 14,000 feet, then followed a highway 200 more miles into Lhasa....”

Eric Eckholm, reporting for *The New York Times*, writes, “... Buddhist devotion ... remains a resilient source of joy for most Tibetans out on the grasslands and mountains, persisting through the temple-burning of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, ... the Chinese Communists’ condemnation of the exiled Dalai Lama, and the growing incursions of modern culture.... [T]heir quest is for an inner harmony that can be approached by giving up one’s pride – and prostration is an ultimate symbol of submission....

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<sup>5</sup> “Sing!,” *Yoga International*, November, 2001, pp. 76, 79

“I’m not married yet, so I was able to free up the time,’... [says] Joama... [pausing] for tea.... ‘This has been our lifelong dream.’” Adds another pilgrim, ‘We’re doing this so our future can be better.’”<sup>6</sup>

Heaven is the dream of a better future.

Beloved spiritual companions,

Heaven is that which we love – a state of mind and heart.

Heaven sweetens our lives with joy,  
and gives us peace, body and soul.

Heaven in the road as we pray on it.

Devotion.

Feeding people, and finding joy in their joy.

Heaven is a small truck and music and fruit trees.

Heaven is the owl’s cry. The sleeping baby.

Carousing. Caribou.

All, some, or none of the above....

What does your heaven look like?

*Seek, and ye shall find.*

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<sup>6</sup> Erik Eckholm, “A Holy Quest in Tibet: Prostrate, and Miles to Go,” in *The New York Times*, November 15, 2001. Please see nytimes.com/2001/11/15/world/a-holy-quest-in-tibet-prostrate-and-miles-to-go.html