PERSONAL VOICES

Hying to Kolob

EDWARD A. GEARY

OLD BISHOP LEONARD used to insist that the Spirit World was right here on earth and the dead were never far from home. He was not really the bishop anymore, but the title was for life and carried, to my young mind, an immense weight of dignity and authority. I remember the way his beard quivered as he spoke about the Spirit World, in some otherwise long forgotten church meeting. The dead were all around us, he said, some of them right there in the meetinghouse at that very moment, but we couldn't see them because of the Veil. When you were about to die the Veil would open up, and you would see your parents or your wife or whoever you had on the Other Side. Brother Crandall, on the other hand, who was also old and dignified though without title or beard, maintained that when the spirit left the body it traveled in the twinkling of an eye to the distant planet Kolob where it remained either in Paradise or in Spirit Prison until Resurrection Day. Only the righteous, he said, those worthy to inherit the Celestial Kingdom, would return to the earth after it had been cleansed and renewed.

When Bishop Leonard and Brother Crandall differed on a point of doctrine, as they often did, they debated with great vigor, quoting scripture and prophets and resonant phrases such as "paradisiacal glory" and "weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth." Brother Crandall had a more epic vision of life after death, I thought, taking in, as it did, practically the whole cosmos. I knew that Kolob was the planet nearest to the throne of God, and we sometimes sang in church a song that began with the line, "If you could hie to Kolob in the twinkling of an eye. . . ." I wasn't sure what it meant to hie to

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Kolob, but it had a grand ring to it, like Brother Crandall's doctrine. Nevertheless, I favored Bishop Leonard's view with its suggestion of a comfortable continuity between this world and the next. It seemed to me that a spirit would be better off in familiar surroundings than it would in some strange new place, even if it was Paradise. Of Spirit Prison I hardly dared to think. Besides, if the earth was to be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory, why should the spirits have to go hying all over the universe? When the graves were thrown open on Resurrection Day, they could simply take up their bodies and go on about their business.

All I knew of earth then was a wide valley in southern Utah with a string of villages along the arable strip at its edge. Our town, like the New Jerusalem, lay foursquare on the land, its length the same as its breadth, but instead of walls we had tall rows of lombardy poplars. Instead of jeweled buildings there were houses of buff-colored brick set deep in shady yards, and big weathered barns crammed with hay. We lived just outside of town. The canal ran east past our place to the corner of Grandpa's lot where it turned south along the top of town, feeding the little ditches that ran beside each street and brought water to the orchards and gardens. Inside the angle of the canal were the family fields. Outside lay the town in one direction, with the meetinghouse steeple visible above the trees, and in the other direction the tall angular form of the mill, the low eminence of Sandberg's Hill, and the graveyard.

The graveyard, which was more populous than the town, was a place I had known from my earliest time, but its real fascination for me began at the death of my great-grandfather when I was five. His passing brought no sense of loss, for I had known him only as an occasional silent visitor in dark glasses, sitting in the big padded rocking chair in Grandpa's front room. It was not the death that impressed me but the funeral. As we filed past the coffin, where it stood banked with flowers at the front of the meetinghouse, my father lifted me up so I could see inside. Great-grandpa lay there not so much stiller than I remembered him but pale and oddly dressed in a white cap and white robe with a green apron. Mother whispered something about temple clothes, and I nodded as though I understood. The coffin lid was left open throughout the funeral service, perhaps, I thought, so Great-grandpa could hear the talks. If he listened he was apparently not displeased, though unmoved. Nor did he protest when, at the end of the funeral, the lid was closed and the coffin carried out to the hearse. I remember the long parade of cars to the graveyard, and Grandpa's praying over the grave that the mortal remains might rest undisturbed until the morning of the First Resurrection. Then the undertaker pushed a lever, and the coffin sank smoothly into the deep, straight-sided hole. I remember with a special vividness how straight and clean-cut the sides of the grave were, like the walls of a house, or rather, since the grave was so narrow, like a hallway leading from one room to another, perhaps a part of a great subterranean mansion whose dim, cool chambers stretched on and on.

For some time afterwards, I looked for someone else to die so we could have another funeral. I knew that Great-grandpa Geary had died of old age. There were lots of old people around: old Mr. Sandberg who lived by the mill and walked with a cane and was deaf; Bert Westover whose house was across the road from Grandpa's and who was bent with rheumatism; Mrs. Johnson who hobbled up the road every day or two to visit Grandma, arriving red-faced and panting and saying, as she settled into the rocking chair, "Lard, I'm going to drop dead in the road someday." If she did, somebody would have to pick her up and dress her in white clothes before they could have a funeral. Even Grandpa and Grandma were old, though not as old as Great-grandpa since he was Grandpa's father. The skin on the back of Grandpa's hands was like thin brown leather, and Grandma, when she had worked too hard, would press her hand against her side and say that she was about out of breath. You could die, I knew, from running out of breath, and also from car wrecks and from getting very sick.

But nobody did die, that I remember, until the summer the headstone man came. Having turned eight the preceding winter, I was baptized as soon as the high waters subsided in the creek. My grandfather baptized me, the two of us wading into the swimming hole in our white clothes until the water reached my chest. After the immersion, Grandpa and Dad and Bishop Wakefield laid their hands on my head as I stood dripping and shivering on the bank and gave me the Gift of the Holy Ghost, which they said was to be a light and a guide to me throughout my life. Then the bishop shook my hand solemnly and told me that I was now accountable for any sins I might commit and advised me to pray often and vocally. I did pray oftener than before, not only kneeling conscientiously beside my bed each night but also going, sometimes, to a secret place in a clump of willows by the canal and praying aloud there.

The summer weather brought an epidemic of polio that year. Several people from our town and the neighboring villages contracted the disease, and there were three or four deaths, including a girl I knew. She was nothing special to me, but I remembered seeing her in Sunday School just a few days before she died. She had been quite normal then, as much alive as I was. By the next Sunday she was dead. I didn't go to the funeral, but I watched the procession to the graveyard, the black hearse leading the way, the family following in the second car. When the last car had passed out of sight over the ridge, a long cloud of dust still hung in the air.

As the summer wore on, I visited her grave several times. It was a short mound of blue-gray earth without a headstone, just a metal stake with a sort of window in which a card had been placed with her name and dates typed on it. The dry remains of the funeral wreaths lay scattered on the disturbed ground.

I realize now that it was not the little girl I was concerned about as I hovered around her grave, but myself. When Great-grandpa Geary died it had been interesting but not threatening. He had seemed safely remote from

my own life. But this girl was younger than I, and yet she had died. I had heard my parents discuss the symptoms of her lobar form of the disease, and I was aware that they were unusually solicitous of my health. They forbade me to swim in the creek or even wade in the canal as I had done in other summers. So it could happen to me too; there was no special exemption on my account. As that appalling realization came home to me, I started to become morbidly aware of my bodily functions, mentally inventorying the rate of my breathing, the elevation of my temperature, virtually the beating of my heart. When I awoke in the morning I immediately felt my forehead to see if it was hot and swallowed hard to test whether my throat was sore. At intervals throughout the day I would suddenly realize that I had not been thinking about my health, and I would immediately check again. Sometimes I swallowed so hard and so often, making sure that I still could, that my throat did begin to feel sore. Then I became terrified and avoided my parents lest they should discover that I was ill and take me to the doctor, thus confirming the awful fact.

Though my fears began with polio, they did not end there. I worried about getting every disease I had heard of: cancer, diphtheria, scarlet fever. My organism came to seem so vulnerable that I doubted its ability to maintain itself even in the absence of infection. When I had been running and my heart beat rapidly in my chest, I grew alarmed that it might wear out. At night, on the verge of sleep, I would suddenly realize that I couldn't remember my last breath, and I would draw in one deep breath after another until I became light-headed. Then I would lie awake worrying that I might stop breathing in my sleep when I didn't know about it.

It was while I was in the midst of these anxieties that the headstone man came. He arrived late one afternoon driving a large gray van which he parked in the shade of the cottonwood trees just across the canal from Grandpa's place. The van had a bunk and cookstove inside, like a sheepherder's wagon, in addition to the stoneworking tools and some slabs of polished blue-gray granite. The headstone man was gray himself, gray-haired, and his clothes and skin were covered with gray dust. He drove to the graveyard each day, where most of his work was replacing broken stones. Then in the evening he came back and parked under the cottonwoods, getting his drinking water from Grandpa's hydrant. There were many such itinerant craftsmen in those days, piano tuners, photographers, scissors grinders, who stayed for a day or a week in one town then moved on to another through a wide circuit of rural Utah. Most of them passed through and were forgotten, but the headstone man remained for several weeks and I got to know him fairly well. I often went with him over the ridge to the graveyard, watching as he dug out the old stone and prepared a foundation for the new, sometimes helping him by carrying water from the tap in a dented bucket for the concrete that he mixed by hand in a low trough. He seemed like a safe man to me, friendly but still a stranger, not likely to inquire into my health or bundle me off to the doctor. What's more, his profession fit in well with my own fascination with death.

I had a notion at that time (it had originated at Great-grandpa Geary's burial) that the headstones might conceal an entrance to the grave. It seemed reasonable that the larger ones, at least, might open up in some secret way and reveal a flight of steps descending into the ground, rather like Grandpa's cellar stairs. Such an image lessened the finality of death, suggested the possibility of coming and going, made of the grave a sort of home. There was a story in my mother's family that when Great-grandpa Olsen felt himself growing old he went to the carpenter and ordered a double-wide coffin so that he would have room to turn over if he wanted to. He kept it in a shed behind his house until he died and used to show it to visitors when they came to call. I liked that story, but I still preferred the vision of underground rooms connected to one another, where there was no confinement but rather a secret subterranean life. The cellar was my prototype, with its snugness from the weather and its rich compound odor of damp earth and rotting timbers and last year's apples. You could live in a place like a cellar, I thought. Only I was troubled by the dark; I would want a light in there.

It is hard to say why I found this fantasy more compelling than the doctrines of life after death that I had been taught. I was aware of the Church's teachings, certainly, and could have explained, if asked, that only the body was buried in the ground while the spirit went to the Spirit World. But the Spirit World had to be someplace, and since I had no desire to hie to Kolob when I died I preferred to think, with Bishop Leonard, that it was here on earth. And why not at the graveyard where the rows of headstones told of bodies resting below the ground, awaiting resurrection? Yet even the most comfortable image of death that I could conjure up remained disquieting. In all my prayers I asked that I might not get polio or any other disease but might grow up and fulfill my earthly mission. That was a reassuring phrase I had picked up at church. The Lord would protect you, if you were righteous, until you had fulfilled your earthly mission. Of course, when people died young it was said that their earthly mission was finished and they were needed on the Other Side. But I felt sure that there was no pressing need for me on the Other Side and that I had a good long earthly mission to fulfill that would carry me—if I didn't get polio or stop breathing in my sleep—well into the years of manhood and beyond the fear of death. Perhaps, indeed, there was no need for me to die at all. I had heard of the Three Nephites, who had been permitted to remain on earth until the Second Coming. They stayed alive century after century, going about the earth doing good deeds. I would be willing to do good deeds if I could live on like that.

Gradually in my prayers, especially when I went into the willows and offered up my petitions vocally and without restraint, I began asking, not merely to escape the polio epidemic, or even to grow up, but to stay alive forever. For if the spirit and the body were to be reunited on Resurrection Day, why should they have to be separated at all? As my prayer took form through repetition, my confidence grew that my earthly mission was to live forever. It seemed as though my soul had a special harmony with the living

earth that precluded dissolution. I felt, in the midst of mortality, that I was already immortal. Nevertheless, whenever my head felt feverish or my throat felt sore I experienced a sudden sense of panic that I might be dying.

Sometimes, while we waited for the concrete to harden for a footing, the headstone man and I wandered through the graveyard, and he shared his professional observations with me. In the oldest corner, some of the graves were marked with common sandstone from the hills, with names and dates scratched in with a knife, and some were merely wooden planks planted in the ground like a post, so rotten that they would break off at the slightest touch.

"The families done these theirselves," the headstone man said. "In the early days they had to make do with whatever they had."

There was a succession of markers from the crude pioneer stones through the cream-colored Manti limestone to the newer marbles and granites.

"This here don't weather good enough for a monument," he said of the limestone, rubbing the surface and showing me a fine granular powder on his hand. "They used a lot of it, though, before they could get marble or granite from back east. My father done a lot of work in it."

The newer stones were plain, with simple inscriptions, but several of the older limestone slabs bore elaborate decorations or lengthy commentaries. Some of them listed the towns that the dead person had helped to settle; others identified handcart pioneers. Two that I had thought were for soldiers were actually on the graves of missionaries who had died in the field. "Soldiers of the Lord," the headstone man said. The lambs on children's graves, and the doves, he said, were designs brought over from the Old Country, where his father had learned the trade. Other designs were original to Utah, such as the open Book of Mormon, or the cluster of sego lilies on one stone, replicas of the fragile, porcelain-like flowers that I never picked when I found them on the hill, since they had saved the pioneers from starvation and were the state flower. The headstone man pointed out to me the clasped hands carved on several stones and a rather spooky looking eye that stared blankly out from the top of an obelisk. "They're temple signs," he said, and wagged his head significantly. I didn't understand him, but at the mention of the temple and with the image before me of a single, unflickering eye staring down as though from distant Kolob, I began to sense the presence of some intricate network of signs and symbols linking the seen and unseen worlds.

At the top of the graveyard there was a large stone with an elaborate cluster of roofs and towers carved on it, which the headstone man identified as the Celestial City. "It took Father days to do one of those," he said, "but they was his favorites. While he carved he would tell me about the Celestial City where the Saints would dwell all arrayed in spotless white. You see," he continued after a pause, "these things wasn't just for decoration. There's a meaning to them. But there ain't much call for this sort of work anymore. Folks don't want to go the expense."

At the end of the day, after a supper of meat and fried potatos in his van,

the headstone man often brought out an old spindle-legged chair and sat by the canal. Most evenings old Bert Westover came across the road from his place to squat on his heels and jaw for a spell, and I went too, as often as I could manage it, slipping out of the house after supper. When the apricots grew ripe on the tree by the cellar, I picked them on my way, standing on the cellar roof to reach the lower branches and carrying the fruit in my shirt to the men. Then I sprawled on the canal bank, watching the spasmodic motions of the water striders and listening to the men talk.

Bert Westover was one of the most vivid characters of my childhood, a dry, shrunken old man with widely bowed legs. He had a farm up the road toward the canyon, but he raised little on it, only a few acres of hay for his horses. The horses were his only livestock. There were ten or twelve of them, and for all practical purposes they belonged to the whole neighborhood. They grazed freely along the ditchbanks and fencelines, and if we ever failed to close a gate they were sure to get into our fields and gardens. As for the horses, so for their master, no business seemed pressing, though by his own account Bert Westover had led a full life and could talk endlessly of his adventures. Although nominally a Mormon like the rest of us, he didn't go to church or keep the Word of Wisdom, and his true faith, it seems to me now, was in free thought. Whenever he got a chance to talk, he settled slowly onto his heels, legs spread apart and arms draped across his thighs (an easy equilibrium strangely at odds with the stiffness of his usual movements). Then he automatically reached into his left breast pocket to fish out his sack of Bull Durham by the orange tab on the drawstring. With unbroken concentration he spread the mouth of the sack and shook a little of the brown leaf into a white tissue peeled from an orange folder and held just so between his fingers. Then, his hands trembling a little all the time, he leveled it judiciously and folded up the sides, gave a quick motion of the tongue to moisten the joint, twisted the ends, and stuck the cigarette in his mouth. After that came an awkward fumbling in the pocket of his Levi's for a match before he could draw the first deep breath and begin to talk.

"Well," he would say slowly, "you're in a good line as long as folks keep dying, ain't you?"

The headstone man would smile and nod, "Surest thing in the world," while he tilted his chair precariously on its thin legs or perhaps still pottered about, washing his supper dishes in a blue enameled dishpan.

"Course you'll be out of a job come Resurrection Day." Bert Westover paused to draw on his cigarette or spit into the canal, the yellowish bubbles drifting lightly on the water until they hit a rapid stretch and disintegrated. "Hell of a time that'll be, people crawling out of the ground like salamanders in a mud puddle. I figure to move away from here before then. Mine's the first place they'll hit when they come over the ridge, and they'll eat me out of house and home."

Bert Westover's house was a weathered plank cabin. When old Sister Westover was alive, Grandma said, it was a nice little house with floorboards

scrubbed and curtains on the windows. But Bert, being an old batch, had abandoned all but the main room where he had an iron bedstead in one corner and a cookstove in another with a black coffee pot on it. Suckers from a huge yellow rose bush at the rear of the house grew up through the floor of the back room and pressed against the window to reach the light. Years later, when Bert was dead, we used to take girls there on Halloween to scare them.

"The men come first, ain't that right? Then they call up their wives." He spat again and showed his teeth in a yellow grin. "Joe Miller says his old lady will wait a hell of a long time in that old blue clay before he calls her up. Says it'll be the first time he's ever had her where he wants her."

One evening he told of digging up a mummified Indian years before, when he was working on the road across the creek. "He was all folded up till he wasn't no longer than that," he said, holding his hands three feet apart. "Smart way of burying. You don't need such a big hole."

I had seen the tiny, contorted mummies in the museum on Temple Square but had never thought of them as human. Now I saw, in imagination, a body twisted, compressed, shoveled into a shallow pit and covered with suffocating dirt. Caught up by the image of such an end, I missed Bert Westover's next words until, at the end of some longer speech, I heard him say, "Nossir, by damn, when you're dead you're dead."

"Careful," the headstone man said quietly. "The boy."

I remember that exchange of words but do not recall my reaction to it or whether it contributed significantly to my anxieties about death. I don't even remember whether it took place early or late in the headstone man's stay. One day was much like another in the dry heat of midsummer. Every evening there were the same sights and sounds and sensations, the smell of smoke drifting from the headstone man's chimney, the gurgling of the canal, the casual, discontinuous yet continuing talk, the sound of Bert Westover's horses cropping the ditchbank grass somewhere nearby. Only the apricots we ate grew softer with the passing time.

One day I do recall quite clearly, though, near the end of the headstone man's time. Dad and Grandpa and I went to the graveyard to help the headstone man set up a new stone on the family plot to replace the broken limestone monument on Aunt Anna's grave. Dad dug out the old stone and widened the hole for the foundation, and I carried water for the concrete. After the soft gray mud was poured, Grandpa took the shovel over to Great-grandpa's grave, where the settling of the earth had left a depression. He filled in the low place and carefully leveled it off even with the surrounding ground, then leaned on the shovel for a few moments in silence.

"I suppose that's where you'll put Grace and me," he said, indicating a space beside Great-grandpa's grave.

When the job was finished, Grandpa rode home with the headstone man in his truck, but Dad and I, for some reason, walked, taking the long way over Sandberg's Hill. The late afternoon was hot, and an occasional blue-bellied lizard scurried through the dry shadscale under our feet. Dad told me the names he had given to each of the ridges and hollows when he had played on the hill as a boy. It seemed strange to me because I called them by different

names; yet they were the same places. It was strange to think of my father as a boy and of Grandpa as a boy before him. And in all that time the hills hadn't changed. It was only the people who changed, grew up, had children of their own, grew old and died. I began to catch a vision of mortality, of mutability, that went beyond the mere anxiety about my own death, though its outlines remained vague. It had something to do, I felt, with the permanence of the earth and the transience of all who dwelt upon it. Dad and I descended from the hill and walked past the mill where old Mr. Sandberg, sitting on the porch, waved his cane at us and called out a greeting in his strange high-pitched voice. He talked that way because he couldn't hear. The loud machinery of the mill had made him deaf.

After we reached home I slipped away and sought out my secret place of meditation and prayer in the willow patch. I fell to my knees and closed my eyes but for several minutes formulated no words, while the gurgling water and the summer insect sounds seemed to grow louder and louder. When the prayer did come it began as so many others had done that summer, with the petition that I might not die. But now it was not an imminent threat of polio or any early death that impelled my desires, but rather the general weight of mortality. I knew, too, that merely my own exemption from the common fate was not enough. To live on, unchanged, while the others changed and failed and died could bring no comfort. It wouldn't matter whether they were gone to Kolob or just beyond the Veil; either way they were out of reach. I saw a vision of a cold, empty house and the cellar roof caved in, like a grave. For the first time it struck me that the Three Nephites must be lonely, living on and on when all their people were gone. So I prayed that my parents and grandparents and brother and sister might also live forever, unchanged. I thought of Bert Westover and Mr. Sandberg too, but it was unwise, I sensed, to ask too much of the Lord. Probably everyone couldn't stay alive forever, and I surrendered with some reluctance the upper floors of the mill where Mr. Sandberg was my guide. Anyway, maybe on the Other Side he would be able to hear again, so it might be better for him. Other problems presented themselves. What about my mother's father, the grandfather I had never known, who was already dead? And what about my grandparents' parents? Wouldn't they miss them if they stayed alive forever? Emboldened by my need, I asked that they might be made alive again and remain forever too, but even as I named them I was swept by a wave of futility, for where could it end? Great-grandpa had had a mother and father too, and they, and they. I saw a horde of strangers, each linked to those beside them but alien to the rest, marching over the hill and filling the house, the yard.

No, it was impossible. I stopped praying and knelt in silent frustration for a time, then got slowly to my feet. I stepped out of the willows into the slanting light of late afternoon and cut through Grandpa's yard toward the headstone man's camp. The shadows of the cottonwoods covered the gray van and reached clear across the road to Bert Westover's cabin. On this side, the light still shone on the apricot tree beside the cellar, and I could see a few fruits, the last of the season, still hanging on the upper branches, too high to reach from the cellar roof. If I wanted them I would have to climb.