

HEAVEN WILL FIND YOU (EXCERPTS)

Sheldon Lawrence

Fiction Editors' Note: As fiction editors at Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, we're excited to showcase two chapters from Sheldon Lawrence's novel Heaven Will Find You. The novel follows a man who learns that death is no escape from the consequences of a life of broken relationships, self-loathing, and lingering addiction. Though relentlessly pursued and tempted by dark forces in the afterlife, the man also discovers that God is tirelessly in pursuit, too, to remind him of his divine nature. Guided by angels, the man, as he struggles to see himself and others fully through divine eyes, discovers that true righteousness deepens our ability to love and be loved.

Chapter 1

They have let me come and speak to you in your sleep. They said it would help us heal but that I should not go alone because seeing my son again in the flesh could pull me back down—my love could lapse into need or self-pity. So my friend, my guardian, has escorted me here and is watching me, taking care, ready to fill me with light if necessary. He is wise; even now, seeing you here, I long to be part of your life and wonder what might have been if I could have seen into your heart. But regret is heavy and can quickly drop into self-indulgent despair. I have come too far to risk that.

I want to tell you how I came to this point and where I have been since my death. I want to tell you about the hard path of repentance for someone with my stubborn heart and the difficulty of fixing things from where I am, close enough to touch you but separated by a universe. You carry so much of me within you—some good, some bad. I bear part of the burden you inherited from me, and I would labor for

eternity if necessary to lift it from you. My greatest pain is knowing the burdens I passed on to you like a virus, and knowing that you will in some degree pass them to your children. I have learned how deeply our paths and eternal destinies are intertwined.

I used to believe we were all lone wolves dealing with our own problems, making our own way, succeeding or failing based on our own merits. But I was wrong. I have come to know we are not separate. We are parts of the same whole, a living organism. One of us is not saved without the other, and so on through the generations. When one rises, the entire organism flourishes; when one falls, the entire human family suffers.

We can make things right. That is the great truth, the beautiful mystery. You are still in the game, and I am one of legions cheering for you, encouraging you, and praying for you. You carry within you the hopes and burdens of your ancestors. Growth and repentance are so much easier where you are, in the flesh, but even here we are all involved in the work of salvation.

If you retain any of this, it will seem like a strange and disjointed dream. But I hope something I say will ring true to you. That one day while reading or in conversation, when you hear a truth, you will feel a resonance, like you have heard it before, that somehow it makes sense. I did nothing to teach you faith while on Earth, but now I can at least whisper this story into your soul and hope that it somehow finds a place there. More than anything, I hope that, even if only in your dreams, your heart can begin to turn toward me, your father.



The first thing I remember after the accident is the powerful urge to flee the scene. There, in the darkness of a remote mountain highway, lay a steaming mess of two mangled vehicles. I told myself I was going for help, but there was no question that I was running from the mess I had just caused, running from the consequences of my choices. I had

been driving drunk and would be arrested when the police arrived. Moans of agony seeped from the other mangled car, but I did not go to help. To my relief, and some shame, I survived the wreck without even a scratch.

In the distance I thought I saw a house and told myself I would go there and get help, spinning my motives to look more innocent than they were. Yes, I would run and get help. But my real reason for running hung in the air. I ran for the same reasons I had always run away, to escape, to hide from responsibility. I wanted the forest to bury me so its blanket of darkness would cover my sins. In the pale moonlight, bodies, now quiet, lay motionless in the twisted wreck, even a limp human form lay in my own car—one I assumed had been thrown into my vehicle on impact. My chest now sick and hollow, I turned to run.

I heard a distinct voice say, “Don’t run.” I looked to see who said it, but I stood alone in the cool night air. The voice came a second time, more like a warning, and seemed to come from within my being.

Above the highway a piercing light appeared, illuminating the entire scene. The light revealed not only the smashed cars but the truth of the whole chain of events that hung in the air, an undeniable reality. The true cause of the crash, my intentions in running, the injured people in the other car—all displayed before me with perfect clarity.

I told myself the light was from another car, or perhaps a result of hitting my head. But every time I lied to myself in the presence of this light, the absurdity of my thoughts was naked and obvious. If only in this moment I had submitted to the wisdom of this light, allowed it to open me and work its truth upon me, I could have been spared a lot of pain. The light invited me into it, but I resisted.

Now more than ever, I wanted to run. I could not bear the presence of the light and wanted to be as far from its influence as possible. The voice from within again begged me not to go into the forest, but I pushed it away and plunged off the embankment into the thick, dark trees below.

I slid fast at first, almost falling. What I thought was a small embankment leading to the flat bottom of the canyon now plunged deep into the darkness. I did not drop into a canyon but an abyss, a dark pit that would hide me from the all-knowing light at my back. As I pushed downward through the darkness, the voice of warning grew fainter with each step and then finally, to my relief, fell silent.

I finally reached the bottom of the canyon as the ground gave way to a gentler but still downward slope. I could no longer see the steep wall I had stumbled down. Nothing about the landscape looked familiar. I was now impossibly far away from the wreck, worlds away, it seemed.

The moonlight was gone, replaced by a soft gray mist. A bone-chilling emptiness pervaded the atmosphere. I kept walking, not knowing what else to do, still lying to myself by saying I was looking for help. In the dim light I saw a grove of trees ahead, a tangled mass of branches and undergrowth. I hesitated.

A voice, somehow familiar, came from deep within the forest. "Look! It can still see you. The grove will protect you. Hide!"

I looked up in the direction of the wreck and could still see a pinpoint of light like a single star in a black sky. The voice was right. The light still watched me. Though distant, my movements and thoughts were as obvious to it as when I was directly under its gaze. Seized with the fear of being captured (by what or whom I could not tell) I ran into the grove, pushing deep within until the spark of light above was no longer visible.

Beyond the trees—or was it deeper in the forest?—human voices laughed and whispered.

"Hey!" I shouted into the darkness. The power of my own voice—loud and forceful—startled me. Anger and frustration welled up and my voice felt violent. The buzz of alcohol no longer blunted my senses. I felt more alert and alive than ever.

I pushed on toward the direction of the voices, but the forest grew thicker and darker. I was no longer among living trees but only thick, finger-like shadows, sometimes snagging me and holding me back, not

like branches so much as hands. I ripped off the clinging branches. Laughter echoed in the trees, faint at first, but then louder.

“Shhh . . .not yet, not yet. Let him get deeper.”

Was it a real voice or just inside my head? I couldn’t tell.

“Who’s there?” I yelled.

Again, the aggressiveness of my own voice frightened me. My anger did not have a particular cause, did not rise from a specific wrong against me. Rather, the resonance of the atmosphere seeped into my being. Rage clouded the air like smoke, and I breathed it in. A beast grew inside me, nourished by the waves of violence and hate that filled the grove. As my anger surged, so did my physical strength. I clenched my fists and teeth. I could fight, or kill, anything. I dared something to challenge me. The lie of looking for help no longer motivated me. I pushed through the trees because they were in my way, and I wanted something to fight against.

Every thought irritated me. The accident, though now like a distant memory, infuriated me. If it weren’t for the stupidity of the other driver, I wouldn’t be wandering through this forest looking for . . . whatever I was looking for. I didn’t care if those in the other car survived. Their death would be their problem. Something softer inside me listened in horror as I said aloud, “I hope they’re all dead.”

The few voices in the forest—or in my mind—now became the indistinct murmur of a crowd. Sometimes laughter, sometimes a cry of pain, sometimes frustration, and sometimes all of these at once. I went mad with confusion. No way could so many people be here, in the middle of nowhere, at the bottom of a canyon. But they watched me, counted my every step, studied my every thought. The trees watched me, the shadows watched me, and then they followed me. Behind me, the path collapsed and closed in. Ahead, black veins sprouted from the ground to slow my steps.

The branches now grabbed at my face, my feet. Did I wonder how shadows and trees could have intention? No, I only took pleasure in hating them. I snapped them away with strength I had never before

experienced. I was an animal, busting my way through the undergrowth. When a tree wrapped a limb around my neck or my waist, I ripped it away with ease.

A joyless laughter came from deep in the shadows, a mocking, triumphant laughter. I stopped and listened in the darkness.

“Show your face,” I yelled. “Bring it on!”

Only a faint, suppressed laughter, then nothing.

The sudden stillness reminded me that I had no clue where I was or where I was going. The car wreck felt like a thousand miles away. Should I turn and fight my way back up the hill? I couldn’t detect a trace of the path behind me, but only a grayish light illuminating an ocean of tangled shadows. No more canyon walls, no more light in the distance.

One moment, fear coaxed me to turn back, the next moment, rage prodded me deeper into the forest. Voices crowded my mind, mostly my own, complaining about the person who crashed into me (their fault, no doubt), my job that made me take that trip, and this pointless trek into the woods.

I pushed on through the tangled mess of trees, but they no longer felt like trees. Rough bark was now smooth and cold, like—I didn’t want to admit it—the skin of something dead. The shadowy branches now bent and coiled like snakes. One reached down and caressed my cheek and neck, pulling away when I reached for it. Another jabbed me hard in the ribs, and I grabbed it and pulled it apart, its flesh tearing in my hands. It shrieked in pain, but the cry was only a mocking one followed by laughter, like when a child proves it isn’t really hurt.

This should have terrified me, but I converted terror to anger. The oppressive atmosphere overshadowed any sense of good judgment or even self-preservation. As if in a dream, I did not stop to wonder at the moment but simply took the world as it presented itself.

My most overwhelming desire, the most obvious thing to do, was to fight someone. My rage transformed me. Nothing was stronger than me. I now dared them to come for me, these voices, whatever they were.

“He’s almost ripe,” said one of them. Shadows melted into the shape of human forms. Like ravenous dogs waiting for their master to unchain them, they howled and lunged.

“When?” they cried. “When?”

There were now hundreds of them, perhaps thousands. I turned to run, but tendrils wrapped my body, binding my legs and arms, forcing me to the ground. Like a fly caught in a web, the more I struggled, the more I sent waves of excitement through the legion of beings creeping toward me. They planned a long time for this and now came to reap their harvest.

Finally, an authoritative voice from the darkness let them have their reward.

“Now.”



Author's Introduction to Chapter 17: Attacked and tormented by malicious spirits, the man realizes that not only is he dead, but he has ended up in a realm of souls as selfish as he had been in life. Confusion, grievance, and deception bombard his mind for a seeming eternity until he is struck from above with the purest memory of his life, the birth of his son. This memory creates an energetic opening in the darkness through which a guardian spirit rescues him. Feeling unworthy of the rescue, he drifts into other, less dark but equally distracting, spheres of the spirit world where he continues to confront spiritual temptations and competing philosophies of God and the universe. When all paths lead to disappointment and frustration, he finally surrenders and chooses to confront, with the loving guidance of his guardian, the broken relationships and poor choices of his mortal life.

Chapter 17

Rest in this world was nothing like sleep on Earth. It was a deep and dreamless sleep, but also a conscious sleep. My whole body and soul melted into the stillness of night. When morning came, it felt like a

rebirth, as if the whole world was also reborn and awaiting new acts of creation. Nothing here was monotonous, no mass production, no daily grind.

I was ready for whatever awaited, but still apprehensive. My guardian met me and, sensing my nervousness, filled me with love. He told me I was not alone in this and that I would be supported by unseen friends and ancestors.

At the center of this community, like the others throughout the landscape, stood a large temple-like structure that formed the focal point of activity. Large crystal spires lined the exterior, while inside, tall columns supported the ceilings. The architecture was simple and elegant without being too showy or too ornate. This would be the place of my training as well as the point of entry for rescuing my father.

Inside, we entered a large, dark room where the only light was what emanated from my guardian. I felt safe in his presence and knew that as long as he was with me, I could make this journey.

“Your preparation begins with understanding who you are and what you are doing,” he said. “I will teach by analogy. Until you are capable of direct perception, analogies—while they have their limits—will suffice.

“We are all part of a vast and beautiful work of art. Wholeness comes with working in harmony with God’s creative processes. When you resist, the result is confusion and discord, a sense of enmity with creation. To exist in a state of competition and comparison, to assert one’s glory over another, or to see yourself in a game of trying to win God’s approval is to exist in a state of self-delusion. Freedom comes from directly perceiving your divine nature, not just learning about it intellectually. And there is only one divine nature. God is one.

“The universe is not a hierarchy of the righteous and the wicked or the intelligent and the ignorant. There is only one kind of being in the universe, and all creation comes from that Being and is fundamentally good. Beings who know they are part of God are sometimes labeled as righteous; beings who have forgotten are sometimes labeled as evil.

But the difference is one of accurate perception versus ignorance, not essential nature.

“Evil is not an inherent quality of any being’s soul, but a temporary condition of ignorance. God’s work is not to sort out the good from the bad or the righteous from the wicked, but to awaken souls to an understanding of their true selves. Once souls understand this fully, they will return to the God who gave them life.

“This is our work and God’s work—not to sort and judge, but to awaken to eternal life, or more accurately, to *return* to eternal life.”

My guardian pointed to an empty space before us, where a large, ornate vase appeared. He must have pulled it from my own mind, for it was similar to one I had seen in a museum during mortality and had paused to admire longer than the rest. But this version was much taller, at least twice my height.

Unlike the one from my memory, this vase was not a dead piece of ceramic but vibrated with life and intelligence. It was a conscious intelligence, but it did not comprehend itself. It did not understand itself as something beautiful because it had not experienced anything other than itself.

Suddenly a crack formed at the base and traveled up the side, and I felt a keen sense of loss as the fissure split the vase in two pieces, each piece falling to the floor. Now each half of the vase saw the other half, and the vase began to comprehend itself. The halves regarded one another with fascination and fear. Each half coveted the other’s beauty but also hated the other’s brokenness as it hated its own brokenness.

More cracks formed in the halves, which then split into more pieces. Now with more pieces, the competition grew fiercer and the fragmentation continued, fragments breaking into fragments that broke into more fragments. Soon I saw millions of pieces of painted ceramic in combat, cutting and getting cut, breaking and being broken, each one fighting for its own legitimacy, its own worth.

Then a fragment appeared that had a perfect memory of the vase’s wholeness. It contained the master plan, the whole image of the lost vase.

It knew how to mend the brokenness. Though the work seemed impossible, this shard bound itself to one fragment, then another, and then another. The vase began to mend, but the work was slow, as thousands of fragments filled the room in a swirling cloud. Many shards only decided to come together after they had exhausted all other options for finding a sense of completeness. I watched in wonder and delight as hundreds of pieces forgot their self-importance and found their place in the whole.

The work was not random. Two pieces could not come together in just any order. For the art to be perfectly restored, each broken piece had to seek out the others to which it had been bound and mend itself with those pieces, no matter how long it took. Some pieces came together easily and naturally. Other pieces tried to come together but kept jabbing and crashing into one another awkwardly, binding themselves in all the wrong ways. These pieces yearned for wholeness but still insisted on their own brokenness. Only by giving up their identity as broken fragments could they find their fit, their harmony.

Sometimes several other pieces, which had already bound themselves to others, had to wait until two pieces found their fit before they could come into place. Like a complex jigsaw puzzle, when a key piece had found its place, it set off a chain reaction, enabling other pieces of the puzzle to fall into place.

So the binding and mending happened one fragment at a time. At first the work seemed absurdly slow and impossible, but there was momentum in it, for as the vase began to form, other fragments caught the vision and began to search for their place.

Eventually the work was completed, and the vase was different, even more beautiful than before, with tiny fracture lines, like scars, giving it an aged and weathered appearance. It now seemed even more alive than before. Having experienced fragmentation, the vase comprehended its wholeness. Having experienced its own death, it comprehended its life. Having experienced its own destruction, it now comprehended itself as creation and beauty.

“The old life,” my guardian said, “is largely defined by a sense of fragmentation and separation—separation from God and separation from one another. We only experienced *ourselves* as real and found it impossible to truly see into the life of another soul. We experienced ourselves as fragments, and we tried to make ourselves whole by filling ourselves with more of our self, asserting our own greatness, which caused only more fragmentation.

“We thought of ourselves as individuals, and as an individual, the natural thing was to compare yourself with others, to see how you measured up, to see where you fit in the great game of losers and winners. Who was the smartest, the prettiest, the strongest, and the richest? It even infected spiritual life—who was the most righteous, the most enlightened, the wisest, the most loving? The journey to Hell is this striving to win in a supposedly hostile universe, competing against other souls who are also striving to make themselves great.

“Awakening means releasing your individual claim to greatness and glory and finding your place in the fabric of creation. This requires seeing other fragmented beings as essential, not as hostile, to our quest for wholeness.

“You have come a long way. But escaping Hell was not about leaving a certain space. In a sense, you are not returning to Hell to rescue your father. You are still there with him, still bound to him in all the wrong ways.

“Only mending and binding your hearts according to God’s plan will make things right. Generations of ancestors await your reconciliation. It will cause a chain reaction that will work backward through your soul family as they are released from their contribution to your brokenness. Your change of heart will free you, and it will also free them to continue their journeys.”

I still didn’t understand what my extended family had to do with this. In mortal life, I had little connection with them, and I had no real interest in my ancestors.

“Why can’t my soul family just go about their own business, growing at their own pace?” I said. “How could my father and I be holding them back?”

“Think of your soul family as a body. In the old life, if you were to smash your foot, the rest of the body could not indifferently go about its business. The whole body feels the pain, and the whole body must attend to healing. But we must extend this analogy to understand what is really happening in the human family. The broken foot and its consequent pain cannot be blamed on the foot alone. The entire body, all of its systems, played a part in that act, and therefore, all of the systems are responsible for it.

“You cannot imagine the hands or nose congratulating themselves for their own righteousness while the foot suffers. A body divided against itself in that way could not live. A healthy body experiences pain as a whole and joy as a whole. When one part of the body is released from pain, the entire body rejoices.

“Your soul family, extending back to your distant ancestors, is inextricably tied to your life on Earth. They provided the genetic material for your body as well as the cultural environment in which you lived and breathed. So many of the challenges and inclinations, good and bad, that you believed were uniquely yours were actually a shared burden—shared with them.

“Instead of viewing yourself as you truly were, a good soul heroically advancing the spiritual evolution of the human family, you saw yourself as a lone individual losing at a game in which the rules were stacked against you.”

In the space where the vase had been, there appeared the image of a human body. I was unsettled to see that it was a model of my image, my body, on display before me. But I did not perceive it in the normal way. My eyes were opened so that I was able to see every part of it, every tissue, every cell, and every system.

Yet there were no parts. I did not just perceive the physicality of cells and tissues and nerves. I saw their origin, their life cycle, their function,

and the way they formed the whole. These were not parts working together like a machine. They were a single, indivisible unit. The body was perfect and healthy. But, like the vase, it did not perceive itself as such.

I perceived the body at a microscopic level and watched as a virus infected a cell, then another cell, and spread throughout the entire body. The infection was fierce, permeating every tissue. The body grew pale as its various systems shut down until it was on the brink of death. Then a cell infused with light started its own kind of infection, an infection of health and energy that spread from cell to cell. Each cell learned how to overcome the virus and flourish again. The body returned to full health, but now, because it had experienced the opposition of infection, it enjoyed itself as alive and healthy. It was no longer susceptible to the virus, as it was inoculated against its effects. Joy and appreciation only came through overcoming opposition.

As the body returned to life, my guardian said, "Witness the resurrection of Christ."

I was startled at this and worried that he had blasphemed, as this was clearly *my* body we were looking at.

He heard my thoughts and smiled at my concern. "This is Christ's consciousness coming alive in you, as it must come alive in all, giving new life to all humanity."

The body disappeared, and we stood alone in the darkness, as I tried to absorb my teaching. He said, "Analogies help, but their symbolic nature still creates distance between your mind and the thing itself. Awakening is the process of dissolving barriers between yourself and pure reality."

"I still don't understand what all this is about," I said, "all this talk of awakening and growing. I have been saved from Hell and am now in Heaven. If you need my help getting my dad here, I am fine to do that. But isn't that the important thing? Haven't I been, as they used to say on Earth, *saved*?"

I felt a kind of joyful mirth coming from my guardian, almost laughter, not patronizing or mocking, but a kind of delight in my question.

“In the end, the only thing to be saved from is ignorance and our incorrect perception of reality. Salvation is the process of removing the veil of ignorance from our mind. To see something purely and understand it purely is to love it purely. As our consciousness expands beyond the boundaries of the self, as we assimilate each new life into our being, or rather, as our life extends into creation, our joy expands until, eventually, we share in the mind of God.

“Righteousness and sin are not about obeying or disobeying a list of commandments. Righteousness is anything that deepens our powers of accurate perception or, in other words, love. Sin is anything that obscures or distorts our capacity to love. Whenever we resist or deny reality, we thicken the veil of darkness surrounding our minds, which keeps us from seeing and therefore loving. Heaven is not Heaven because of beautiful scenery. It is Heaven simply because it is the dwelling place of beings who are no longer fettered by veils of self-delusion.

“Hell is the exact opposite. In Hell, your mind was so darkened by confusion that we needed to create an opening, just one moment of clarity and love. It had to be a moment in your life—the birth of your son—when your awareness was least polluted by self-concern. You were touched by grace because grace is the gift of sight, of seeing things as they really are, not through the lens distorted by our pride, appetites, opinions, and judgements. True sight leads inevitably to true love.

“Which brings us to the next stage of your growth. It will be among the most painful and joyful experiences you have had yet. You must open the book of your life and review its wisdom and secrets.”

I had feared this moment. I felt the familiar desire to run.

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