

CONTENTS

Does Heaven Exist?

BY JO CAVALLO

A recent ABC News poll found that nearly nine out of 10 people in the United States believe in heaven. For some cancer patients, strong religious beliefs can ease fears surrounding death.

That so many Americans believe in heaven may not be surprising since most traditional religions, including Catholicism, Judaism, Protestantism, Buddhism and Islam all have some concept of an afterlife, although there may be variations in the strict notion of heaven and hell.

“In Buddhism, death is looked at as a completely normal, natural event that is the ultimate moment for enlightenment, and that it’s going to happen to all of us and that the contemplation of our death enhances our own life because it engenders a deep appreciation and gratitude,” says Joan Halifax, PhD, a Buddhist teacher and founder of the Project on Being with Dying. She says the view of an afterlife is dependent upon the culture in which Buddhism is found. But even so, the essential dharma taught in terms of early Buddhism doesn’t particularly deal with the afterlife—it is more a psychology and a philosophy that involves training the mind.

Having a belief in an afterlife, however, is no guarantee that death will be less frightening or peaceful. Feelings of guilt or unworthiness can sabotage even the strongest faith. “For some Christians, one fear of dying is the separation from God,” explains Reverend Patrick McCoy, director of the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center Chaplaincy in Lebanon, New Hampshire. “There’s this notion of heaven and hell, so as many people approach death they wonder if an afterlife will be good for them or not. They ask, ‘Will I be separated from God or will I be forgiven?’” Remembering the religious teaching that God is loving and forgiving, says Rev. McCoy, can help alleviate that fear.

Nonbelievers in an afterlife can also find comfort as death nears. Rev. McCoy says atheists can be quite comfortable in their approach to death if they have an understanding of death as a natural part of life and see themselves as living in harmony with the pattern of the natural order of things. “It’s not necessarily a time of anxiety just because somebody doesn’t believe in God,” says Rev. McCoy.

