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The fact that the best part of tuning in for the Super Bowl each year is watching the commercials. In Britain, it turns out that their TV-watching populace looks forward in much the same way to the Christmas season, for the same reason: the slew of new and clever ads on the telly.

This year, Marks and Spencer — a British department store chain equivalent to Macy's in the U.S. — launched a lovely Christmas advertisement featuring Mrs. Claus. (Watch the video on YouTube; search for "M&S Mrs. Claus.")

The ad features a traditional Santa Claus leaving the North Pole to spread toys around the world in his sleigh. But, a last minute request arrives after he is gone. Mrs. Claus' response to fulfill it in an adventurous way — complete with red helicopter — is delightful and heart-warming. In a turnabout to the traditional way the story is told, both parts of the couple appear to be necessary to complete the Christmas mission.

In the 1990s a Peanuts cartoon featured Linus and Lucy waiting on Halloween for the mysterious Great Pumpkin. In one cartoon strip Lucy refers to the Great Pumpkin as a "she" and Linus looks at her shocked. "Never even occurred to you, did it?" she replies.

It takes imagination to veer away from traditional and often deep-seated stories and images, especially ones which we may have been hearing since childhood.

In a similar way we don't often envision God beyond the way the story or image of God has been traditionally presented in the Western culture. And, often it takes a crisis or major event to initiate a new perception.

A new understanding

On May 2, 1988, our son Nick was born. His labor was induced due to my scarily high blood pressure, and he arrived about a month early, his clenched fists and jaw letting us know in no uncertain terms that he was extremely unhappy about being rushed.

On May 3, 1988, 20 hours after Nick's arrival, I died.

For reasons that will remain unknown, the IV that was delivering medicine to keep my blood pressure down was removed. Some minutes later, I experienced a piercing headache, and heard four massive banging noises, like those street-smashing machines — Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! — not outside my hospital window, but inside my head.

The next thing I knew, I was standing next to a being of light. Somehow I believed or understood that I had died, and this was heaven. That was surprising, because as a kid with 16 years of Catholic school, I had long expected death to deliver me to a place of very specific judgment: heaven, purgatory or hell. This place was nothing like that. And, the "being" with me was not singular or masculine but somehow bigger than that image.

The information that moved organically through my own being showed me that here they knew all about me, all the way back and all the way forward, through all of my "lives" (also a new concept for a Catholic.) They understood each of my choices relative to my evolution through all of them. Somehow I knew I could choose to stay in heaven or go back to earth. It was up to me. Either way, there was no judgment.

From that vantage point, I could see that my newborn son Nick would be disabled (Nick has autism). I could see my 2-year-old daughter Chelsea as well. As soon as I formed the thought "I want to take care of them," I found myself being sucked down a vacuum-like tube — Thwack! and I was back in my body.

I was told later that when I sat up in that darkened hospital room, the nurse attending to my death paperwork soiled her pants. Besides being paralyzed on my left side for about a month, and some other lingering issues, like a floppy left foot over which I tend to trip, I came away from my time "being dead" relatively unscathed physically. But my brief time in this alternate space changed me entirely.

Childhood images

Until that experience, I related to God like most Catholic school kids. I pictured God as a man with three distinct personalities.

God the Father was a white-haired being on the ceiling, pointing haughtily at us. In my childhood outlook, his demeanor seemed to imply distance: "Here, have life.

Now, don't bother me too much. I have a lot on my plate." Certainly, the Hebrew Scriptures did not inspire in me a warm and fuzzy relationship with God. He placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, then kicked their naked selves out over one apple. He sent a flood to wipe the earth of sinners except Noah and family — which, as a kid, and even now, seems awfully selective. He turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt simply for looking back. Even compared to the nuns at St. Euphrasia Elementary, this guy was strict. So, I grew up imagining God as this easily irritated king. Each day, when I recited the Lord's Prayer — "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done" — it was to someone far away, who might not even be listening, and whom I seriously did not want to tick off.

Then in the Scriptures I learned about Jesus, the Prince, the Son of God on earth, who was kind to children and animals, touched lepers and embraced people on the street. Jesus came to heal broken bodies, even waking Lazarus after he had died. He died himself, then rose, to show us not to fear death. Jesus said we were all children of God, brothers and sisters, and that we needed to treat each other as we want to be treated. He was the kinder, gentler version of God. To a child it seemed that Jesus liked us, really liked us.

And the Holy Spirit? Well, to me it seemed that was God's ephemeral flame that floated around and hovered over people's heads, inspiring his followers and igniting journeys of great servitude and saintly suffering.

An intimate God

After my brief time behind the "pearly gates," however, my vision of God entirely changed. God was no longer male, no longer separate from me, no longer someone to be feared or needing to be pleased. The God I met — and whose voice and presence I have felt in and through and around me ever since — is not "out there," but "in here." Doting. Cherishing. Nourishing.

As I settled into parenthood, my husband, Dan, once asked me what my favorite part of being a parent was. I knew my answer at once: it was those times, at three in the morning, holding a kid who had a croupy cough in a steamy bathroom or a barfy tummy on a pile of towels on the bed. At those times it was just my child and me, alone but together in the dark, fighting whatever was hurting. It was just us. And I felt that only I could make it better, just by being there, no matter what, even if it took me forever. That experience became God for me and that was how I

experienced God with me.

As I am a mom and grandmother, the only experience I can find as close to that intense intimacy that I feel for God is the relationship between myself and my babies or grandbabies. God enfolds me, like a mommy or daddy, nuzzling me through the flu, cuddling me close on a snowy day, or tucking me into a warm safe bed. And, just like with our babies, God sometimes has to say "no" to me, when what I think I want is actually not the best for me, or could actually hurt me. Like a parent, God sometimes just knows better, and it is up to me to trust and be patient.

It is not easy. I imagine that I have made God suffer through many of my pointless tantrums, just to prove that I have a choice, a free will, and I won't be told what to do. But after I have cried myself to sleep, wake up spent somehow cleaned out, and refreshed by tears, God is right there. Loving me. The feeling is always: "Shall we start again?"

Overcoming fear

Dying helped me not to be so afraid. If that is the worst that can happen to me, that is not so bad, not at all. Just like the endless chances God seems to allow me to start fresh, start again ... it seems that it is never too late, for any of us.

The gift of learning that each of us is genuinely never-ending because there is life after death — the exact message that Jesus shared when he died and then rose three days later — seems to me to be ultimately empowering. It is my secret against fear: fear of aging, fear of losing the people I love, fear of illness and death, and all the myriad other fears that plague me, all day long.

Beneath those fears, what frightens me and causes hot tears to spring from my eyes, and my chest to tighten, is the fear of being alone. Of being separate, cut off and out there duly punished for my sins. I still find myself thinking about a vengeful and terrifying judge, an image formed long ago, who keeps a list of everything I ever did wrong, every person I hurt, or mistake I made. My internal childhood voice says that judge will never forgive me. When I am tired, sick and scared, that list is waved in my face, and my courage lapses. But then I am once again scooped up and enfolds by God's warm hand. Like the breath of a mommy's kiss near my ear. Like my daddy swinging me up and onto his great shoulders. I am loved. I am protected. I am safe.

Accepting a new image

I suppose the most difficult challenge is accepting that all this is true. God really loves me just the way I am. God understands that I am a being in process, evolving and learning and trying my level best. It seems to me that my imperfections inspire only greater compassion from my Mommy-Daddy God. Like the loving parent God sees beyond a kid unable to pronounce my Rs, or needing thick glasses, or requiring braces or a wheelchair to get around. During my difficult times, God feels that much more protective, tender about my inadequacies, and invested in my progress. I have often been accused of "making lemonade out of lemons," that is, always looking for the bright side. But I suppose when dying turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me, that can't be helped.

Many religions in our world have both male and female gods. They pray to each intentionally and separately, whispering their dearest wishes to that particular icon, hoping they will be understood and assisted accordingly. In my early years of being raised Catholic, I was instructed to disregard other ways of knowing God because our faith was the one true path to heaven. In that scenario only people who accepted Jesus were saved. We know differently today.

My experience in heaven changed that exclusive position. Instead, it helped me understand that any belief structure that helps people feel an intimacy with the divine — provides them a sympathetic male or female ear into which to whisper in the dark — can only be a good thing.

Safe in the shelter of God

To feel united with our Creator is remarkable. To feel beloved by that source, truly, deeply, all the way through you, that's just plain amazing and life-changing. If God can be patient and compassionate and forgiving with me, then in turn, I might be brave, compassionate and forgiving enough to offer those same things to others.

Perhaps it goes back to the same core issue: trust. I either believe that God loves me eternally, and the universe is abundant, with plenty for all of us. Or I am putting my money on a judgmental, list-keeping God.

In the popular culture Santa is an enduring holiday icon. We can climb onto a great warm lap, tell someone in secret what we want, and if all goes well, our wish will come true. In an unfair and uncertain world, that is a very comforting process. Many religious traditions also have an image of Jesus' mother, Mary, a sheltering and protecting mother, who enfolds us into her arms holding our deepest fears and inexpressible joys close to her heart. Like the Abba of Jesus' prayer can she be a Mama to us all?

So, I love the Marks and Spencer envisioning of Mr. and Mrs. Santa, if only that it reminded me that there might not only be a he up there, but an us, encircling and enfolding the world, listening and caring for each one of us down here. Perhaps the answer to our prayers just might occasionally come from the female part of that couple ... however uncredited that response may be.

Editor's note: *This reflection was originally published in the April 2017 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Easter reflections](#).*

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