

Operating Instructions (2013)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner, WLRH Radio Huntsville, AL USA

"Scalpel."

"Forceps."

"Suction."

"Swab."

I'm going under, and (as always) I'm not sure I'm coming out on the other side. That's what the doctors call the "mortality rate" of a procedure, figuring how many people out of a hundred survive what's done to them: a mortality rate of 1% or less means that ninety-nine out of a hundred make it through, and that's pretty good. Even though this transaction ahead of me is remarkably survivable -- 98 out of a hundred outlive trading a tired, leaky, flawed aortic heart valve for a healthy, hearty similar portion of an involuntarily generous pig -- you really don't know, when you start drifting off to narcoland, whether you'll wake up here or there, or maybe never.

I am intrigued by the fact that the only person who multitudes claim came back from death made no report whatsoever about what it was like. I trust him, and like to hear what he said. Jesus of Nazareth, reports assert, was "crucified, dead, and buried;" that's three ways of saying, "Dead, real dead, dead as a doorstop." On his reported return, however, he brought no smidgen of information about what three days dead was like. He made a couple of sketchy and pretty general statements about the experience before the fact -- "There's plenty of room where I'm going," and "Later today you and I are going to be where it's really swell," but nothing with much detail. And afterward, after his return? Zip. Zero, nada. Everything about NOW, not then, chatting with people about whether they want breakfast or whether they really love him or where they ought to go next; instructions about dampening people; nothing about Over There.

So we have to go on what he didn't say, or what we can deduce, or what we can guess, or hope.

Logic tells us it's not like here. It doesn't make sense to think it's like families, with moms and dads and kids and bicycles and grandparents, because the grandparents would like to have their grandparents there, and so on, and that would get overly crowded very quickly. How old would people be, or would they have hair or toupees, and all their teeth? If they'd lost a lot of weight, would they be skinny, or cuddly like we remember them? That guy, Jesus, seemed to point in the same direction when he turned aside questions about the woman who was married to seven brothers in turn (even though he didn't dwell on the incredible gullibility of the final groom), and on another occasion said, "There aren't any wedding chapels there." Figures.

I, for one, don't think it's like here; nice as that is, on certain rare occasions, it's too spotty and up-and-down like, to have it happen all the time. Nor -- for my wager -- is it like 24/7 church, with hallelujahs all the time, rock music pounding (or Handel, either, for that matter), and little winged babies with harps singing backup doo-wop; as pleasant as that might be for awhile, I think it would get tired and (frankly) boring after while.

Some who are smarter than I am picture something with less personality, more resemblance to a media animation of the solar system being born, whirling spheres and flashes and shooting stars and whizzing colored orbits -- "You can be a spark in the sun of the Almighty!" goes the promo.

I don't know. Maybe. "Do your part, brighten the corner where you are, spark where you park" catches the beat, but somehow sounds like it would get old also, after a million million years or so. Maybe not.

Or... getting closer to home...maybe sleep. I like sleep. It's one of my favorite things, just lying there dozing, and having it make the transition from here to there, on to off, awake to unconscious, gradually, bit by bit, before you know it. It's gotten so I really love that, like to think about it during the day, get to yearn for it and to get ready for the day to be over and the night-time to come, then for the evening to end and the time for dreaming to begin. Is that really the best part of the day, maybe, the ending of it?

And would -- could it be possible that leaving life is the best part of living? Slow, easy, soft, gentle... drifting off in it, floating... easy, easy, quiet, safe: there, there, there, it'll be all right.

That would be fine.
