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SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE  
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Embraced by the Light  
by Betty J. Eadie with Curtis Taylor  
(Gold Leaf Press, 147 pp., \$14.95)

A yearning for elsewhere, for a life beyond the life we're leading, is universal, but America is unique in giving the idea a specific geographical location in the West--though the West is a slippery and mobile entity. When Miles Coverdale goes to Blithedale to try the "life of Paradise anew," he has only to ride one day's journey inland from the smoky city (Boston); but Hawthorne crowds that day with topographical and meteorological incident, laying on a snowstorm and a tempest and depopulating the countryside, so that by nightfall Coverdale is able to reflect, "I felt that ... we had transported ourselves a worldwide distance from the system of society that shackled us at breakfast-time." Blithedale, like its model, Brook Farm (in West Roxbury), may have a Massachusetts zip code, but it is located in spirit in that far West of the American imagination where all utopias belong.

Now that California is elsewhere no longer, its problems as insistently here as those of Roxbury itself, the utopian burden has been taken up by the states to the north--Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana--where population density is lighter and the impact of recession has been less. The Pacific Northwest, with its dramatic and metaphysical geography of mountains, forest, desert, ocean coast and inland sea, is still, just, West in the old sense; a worthwhile, if not a worldwide, distance from breakfast-time society.

Recent arrivals, like J.Z. Knight, who channels the spirit of Ramtha, the hedonistic 35,000-year-old sage from Atlantis ("I give you the strength to find joy"), on her New Age ranch at Yelm, near Tacoma, Washington, have fitted easily into the region. Yelm is just another dot on a map already thickly spotted with the names of old utopian communities and with schemes of salvation and revelation. Already Yelm has shown signs of following its predecessors down the dusty Brook Farm road of dissension and breakup. Shirley MacLaine and Company have packed their bags and the Knights are now divorced (after an extensive hearing on the daytime T.V. circuit), but Knight goes on filling the 1,000-seat arena at Yelm for "dialogues" with her old man of the sea.

On the far side of the Puget Sound from Tacoma lies Home, a turn-of-the-century utopia where "the kingdom of heaven," in secular lower case, was

to be established within the liberated self. Home was founded in 1896 on a wooded inlet-within-an-inlet named Joe's Bay on the Key Peninsula. It grew out of Glennis, a bankrupt utopia thirty miles south of Tacoma, and was based on a merry conglomeration of principles, including single-taxism, anti-clericalism, anarchism, socialism, nudism and free love. By the time people reached Home (most came from the East Coast, some from Europe), they were well to the west of conventional radical thought, and the place became a famous shelter for all sorts of very far-Western doctrines. Several members were known as Koreshans, holding that the accepted view of the world was inside-out and that the Earth was not a globe but the interior surface of a sphere.

The community produced a succession of newspapers and magazines. Its first regular publication was Discontent: Mother of Progress, in one of whose early issues the laureate of Home, C.L. Penhallow, set out the somewhat spongy ethos of the place in a poem titled "Joe's Bay":

I there a promise feel,  
That in a future great,  
I'll find a realm that's truly free  
From taint of church or state.

Where each will live for all;  
Where all will live for each;  
And in an atmosphere of love,  
They'll practice what they preach.

Interestingly, the poem itself is profoundly colored by the taint of church that it tries to disavow: the literary tradition of C.L. Penhallow can be found in its entirety in the Methodist hymnal. Home--which was proud of having no church within its precincts--was at heart a congregation of staunch non-conformists bent on turning the Sunday school picnic into a permanent way of life.

Syndicated articles by--and home-grown articles about--Emma Goldman were a staple feature of Discontent, and when Goldman was on a swing of the Western states in 1898, she was talked into making a last-minute appearance at Home. (She came again in 1899.) The colonists were thrilled by her ("a jolly comrade, a good looking, sensible girl, who is even not averse to a little flirtation"), though she found them to be a bunch of happy cranks, too lightweight for her large designs on the world. They showed her their asparagus plots and their poems; then they went skinny-dipping. Goldman said Home was "the anarchist graveyard."

What now remains of Home are the swelling rhododendrons, the colonists' gnarled apple trees and bird-haunted spaces between houses--the square one-acre plots, the perfect balance between communitarian neighborliness

and deep country isolation. The last relic of communal ownership is the broad village beach, on which no houses directly abut. Home slowly evolved from utopia to suburb, with the last of the founding anarchists surviving into the 1950s. Heaven on earth became a dormitory suburb of Tacoma that reminds the passer-by of how utopian was the original suburban urge; it has turned out to be not so much the graveyard of anarchism as the nursery of the upper-middle-class planned community.

The Pacific Northwest continues to be a magnet--the strongest regional magnet in the country, I would guess--for hopefuls and new-lifers of every imaginable cast. It feels like the last surviving corner of the United States to be widely promoted, in Blithedale terms, as "the one green spot in the moral sand-waste of the world." People like to think of themselves as undergoing not mere relocation but full-blown resurrection here in the smoke-and-cholesterol-free city of Seattle, where eternal life is thought to be a viable alternative to two packs a day. In the enlightened Northwest the recycling and saving of things (water, oaks, paper sacks, whales, urban neighborhoods) elides imperceptibly into the salvation of the self. (The Self section in bookstores here is impressively larger than the History section.) In this far-Western stronghold of the second chance, second family and second career, it's easy to find yourself beset by the thought that you have somehow passed over and entered the afterlife.

Embraced by the Light is an unusual travel book by Betty J. Eadie, a Seattle woman, in which she describes her journey to heaven and what she saw there. It has been steadily climbing The New York Times's non-fiction best-seller list for the last several weeks, and its paperback rights were recently sold to Bantam Books for "more than \$1.5 million," according to a Times report. The same report also carried a brief interview with Bantam's president, Irwyn Applebaum, who praised the book for being "remarkably affecting and thorough."

It is a pity that Curtis Taylor, Eadie's co-worker on the book (in this context one hesitates to call him a ghost), has licked her prose into professional shape and has given it a style of machine-turned simplese that fails to do justice to the very personal nature of the experience reported here. For even before her death and brief ascension, Betty Eadie had a story worth telling--a Western story, in the footloose, hardscrabble Raymond Carver mold. Embraced by the Light gives one the facts of it but not the voice it needs to come alive.

She was born in Nebraska in 1942, the seventh of ten children. Her mother was a Sioux Indian, her father a "Scotch-Irishman." She was 4 when her parents separated and she was posted off to a Catholic boarding school, where the nuns were brutal and where she nearly died of whooping cough and double pneumonia ("I found myself in someone's arms. I looked

up and saw a man with a beautiful white beard looking at me."). She met kindlier treatment on the Rosebud Indian reservation in South Dakota, where she was cared for by Wesleyan Methodist missionaries. At 15, she quit school and married. At 21, she was divorced with three children (a fourth died in infancy).

Her second life began in Reno, Nevada, where she met Joe Eadie, an Air Force technician who was himself recently divorced. (These bones are very bare. What was she doing in Reno? Living on welfare? Waiting on tables? Had she gone there to get her divorce? We're not told.) Joe and Betty married ("From the beginning it seemed almost too good to be true" and moved on to San Antonio, Texas, where the Air Force put him in training as a computer operator. Two more children were born in Texas. "We were living a dream come true ... but still, I knew that something was missing." She was 25 when Joe retired from the Air Force in 1967, and they and their five children, soon to be six, embarked on life number three:

[Joe's] training qualified him to begin a new career just about anywhere he wanted. All we had to decide was which side of the country we wanted to live on. We finally chose to move to the Pacific Northwest, where Joe would take a position at a large aerospace corporation. We felt that the climate would be a welcome contrast to the hot, dry weather we had become accustomed to in Texas.

Rosebud to Reno, Reno to San Antonio, San Antonio to Seattle ... these are mighty hops; comparable, where I come from, to flitting from London to Marrakesh, Paris to Moscow or Rome to Damascus. Betty Eadie describes a lightly rooted, quintessentially Western American life, in which the great distances she travels help to underscore the enormous, empty gulfs between scenes of Dickensian deprivation and reports of dreams come true. Journeys themselves turn into a kind of narrative explanation: How do you get from servitude to bliss? You take the road from Rapid City to Reno, via Rock Springs and Salt Lake City. How do you signal a change in your life, perform a rite of passage? You hit I-10 west out of San Antonio. (I wish we knew more about that journey--the make and vintage of the car, if it was done by car; the behavior of the children, all under the age of 10; the motels stopped at; the flat tire in New Mexico--and would be sorry to discover that it was made by plane, tickets courtesy of Boeing.)

It seems inevitable that such a life should have come to rest in Seattle (there is nowhere further west to go) in the hilly, arboreal suburb of White Center, where several thousand Boeing workers live within spitting distance of the aircraft plant. White Center's undulating avenues, lined with shingled houses set on tidy plots, along with the march of Pacific

rain clouds overhead, must have seemed a world and more away from the miseries of Betty Eadie's childhood on the edge of the Badlands. Settled in Seattle, she took home study courses to make up for her lost years of high school--tough going for a mother of six, about to turn 30.

In November 1973, when she was 31, Eadie had a partial hysterectomy in a Seattle hospital. Sometime during the night that followed, she died, and began her longest journey yet, to that undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler ordinarily returns:

I felt a terrible sinking sensation, like the very last drops of blood were being drained from me. I heard a soft buzzing sound in my head and continued to sink until I felt my body become still and lifeless.

Then I felt a surge of energy. It was almost as if I felt a pop or release inside me, and my spirit was suddenly drawn out through my chest and pulled upward, as if by a giant magnet. My first impression was that I was free. There was nothing unnatural about the experience. I was above the bed, hovering near the ceiling...

After a short surveillance of her own dead body, she was off on a rapid power glide ("I was only vaguely aware of trees rushing by below me") to her home suburb, where she saw her husband "sitting in his favorite armchair reading the newspaper" and two of her children engaged in a pillow fight. She flew, or was flown (the pleasurable passivity of post-mortals travel is given repeated emphasis here) back to her hospital room from which she made a non-stop supersonic ascent into heaven.

It was a night flight. The noise on takeoff ("a deep rumbling, rushing sound") was terrific, but quickly diminished as altitude was gained. Eadie was made to feel luxuriously comfortable:

I was in a reclining position, moving feet first, head slightly raised. The speed became so incredible that I felt that light years could not measure it. But the peace and tranquillity also increased, and I felt that I could have stayed in this wonderful state forever.

She entered heaven through a dark tunnel with a brilliant light at its end. At the celestial terminal, Christ was waiting for her. While admiring his magnificent halo (gold paling to incandescent white), Eadie noticed that she had acquired a halo of her own, though hers was of much humbler wattage.

In an understandably breathless sequence, she describes how Christ gave her a crash course in universal cosmology and the meaning of life. ("As

more questions bubbled out of me, I became aware of his sense of humor. Almost laughing, he suggested that I slow down.") Under divine tutelage, the answers to all her questions came whizzing at her, as if by magic: "The word 'omniscient' had never been more meaningful to me. Knowledge permeated me. In a sense it became me, and I was amazed at my ability to comprehend the mysteries of the universe simply by reflecting on them."

She comes into possession of a teleology that owes something to Plato and even more to Emerson (an ever present influence on American religious thought, from Mrs. Eddy to Mrs. Eadie). Christ explains the relation between heaven and earth in a nicely up-to-date simile: "I was told by the Savior that the spirit creation could be compared to one of our photographic prints; the spirit creation would be like a sharp, brilliant print, and the earth would be like its dark negative." Here I do wonder if perhaps Eadie hasn't gotten the analogy the wrong way around: the idea that heaven is a print made from the negative of earth rings with a truth that I cannot believe she quite intends.

In her state of omniscience, the whole of human history is unfolded before her. She watches as the world is created and "our spiritual brothers and sisters" take their turns at incarnation. Every child born is a spiritual being, dispatched to earth on a divine mission. (Roe v. Wade puts all Heaven in a rage.) She witnesses a sort of living-hologram cavalcade of great events; significantly, she is particularly interested in seeing the settlement of the West:

I distinctly remember watching the American pioneers crossing the continent and rejoicing as they endured their difficult tasks and completed their mission. I knew that only those who needed that experience were placed there.

Though Eadie's descriptions of her ascension and her interview with Christ may tax the reader's credulity, what follows is in a more comfortable and familiar genre. On a guided tour of the world above, she proves herself to be a seasoned and unflappable traveler, with an eye for heavenly architecture ("buildings are perfect there"; they have translucent walls of "very thin marble"), fashion ("soft pastel gowns") and the wonders of nature. She is tactfully curious about politics and industry. She visits a factory where a strange fabric ("like a mixture of spun glass and spun sugar") is manufactured on hand looms, and stops at the celestial equivalent of the Pentagon, from where warrior angels ("giant men, very muscularly built, with a wonderful countenance about them") are sent out on covert operations against the legions of Satan.

Her tone here is matter-of-fact to the point of being blase. She has knocked about the enormous and variegated spaces of the West, has lived in Nebraska, South Dakota, Nevada, Texas and Washington; Heaven presents

itself as one more state on her life's itinerary. (A double meaning lurks in her discovery that "when we `die'... we experience nothing more than a transition to another state.") Nor is it surprising that she seems to be so at home there, for Heaven, as it turns out, is much like western Washington. Any Seattle resident would feel at ease in this landscape of "mountains, spectacular valleys and rivers in the distance, " where the grass is "crisp, cool and brilliant green." The river that flows through the garden at Heaven's center is "fed by a large cascading waterfall of the purest water ... a melody of majestic beauty carried from the waterfall and filled the garden." The Seattle resident will be put in mind of Snoqualmie Falls on the western flank of the Cascades, a favorite Sunday brunch destination. (These are the falls that used to figure in the "Twin Peaks" credits.)

Heaven, like Seattle, is in the forefront of advanced information technology. Besides the quaint hand-loom weavers (themselves well represented in western Washington), there are computer hackers; angels who "enjoy creating devices that are helpful to others--both here and there. I saw a large machine, similar to a computer, but much more powerful. The people working on this too were pleased to show me their work." Eadie is given a taste of what the hackers are up to when she is taken to "a large room similar to a library":

It seemed to be a repository of knowledge, but I couldn't see any books. Then I noticed ideas coming into my mind, knowledge filling me on subjects that I had not thought about for some time--or in some cases not at all. Then I realized that this was a library of the mind. By simply reflecting on a topic ... all knowledge came to me.

This sounds much like a system now under development at Bill Gates's Microsoft Corporation, where it goes under the code name Cairo; though Microsoft's sublunary version, running a generation or two behind the heavenly model, will still require the user to be seated at a terminal.

As Eadie travels through Heaven ("I could do whatever I wanted, go wherever I desired, go fast--incredibly fast--or go slow. I loved the freedom"), her book grows to resemble one of the guides for prospective immigrants to the Pacific Northwest that were put out by the railroad companies between about 1880 and 1930. There is the same boosting of landscape and lifestyle, the same chatty and informal peeking at the major industries in which the immigrant is likely to find work. The authors of the railroad guides habitually reached for the language of supernatural revelation to convey the marvels of the region: "Picture your own ideal of a place to live on this earth.... On the horizon of the Pacific Northwest men with vision read, in letters of fire, a single word--Opportunity" (from *The Land of Opportunity Now*, 1924). Or as Eadie

says of Heaven: "Plans, paths and truths await us there." All aboard!

Embraced by the Light is a Western production in every sense. Gold Leaf Press of Placerville, California, was set up by a Sundance, Utah, businessman for the express purpose of publishing Eadie, and the main bulk of the book's sales has been in the far West--in Washington, Oregon Idaho, Utah and California. (590,000 copies are in print; about half that number have been sold so far.) It has been a triumph of regional word-of-mouth, with no reviews to speak of and with powerful Christian bookstores handling the book gingerly or not at all. Eadie has taken to the road, drawing large crowds in small towns, and the book has been promoted on back-country f.m. stations. It has been walking on winged feet from the chain bookstores in the malls.

As I write, Eadie has just shouldered her way past Bill Moyers on the Times list and is now within hailing distance of Rush Limbaugh. Yet the disconcerting rise and rise of Embraced by the Light cannot simply be put down to the novelty of the adventure. Eadie is by no means the Columbus or Marco Polo of the afterlife: accounts of post-mortem flights to Elysium are such standard stock items in New Age bookstores (which themselves lean to distant-travel names such as Quest and Odyssey) that they are known wearily in the trade as "ascension material."

It's the homely and well-trodden aspect of the book that marks it out--the seven-children-at-age-30, the rootless pilgrimaging across the states, the succession of fresh starts. The Taylor-Eadie prose style, tepid and banal, works to the book's advantage here. It is so unparticular that this life might belong to almost anyone who's trailed a string of kids around a supermarket in an unfamiliar town.

On her zigzag trek from Nebraska to Seattle, Betty Eadie covered what still remains of the crumbling Manifest Destiny trail. Now--and for a largely Western audience--she brings back a report on a territory of unlimited travel across vast spaces, romantic scenery, fertile soil and full employment ... that old story of the far West that has always really been a tale of the hereafter. It's in the dictionary: "Go west ... a) to be lost or destroyed irrevocably; b) to die."

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By Jonathan Raban

Jonathan Raban's most recent book is Hunting Mister Heartbreak (Harper Perennial).



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