

To Heaven and Back: A Doctor's Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again: A True Story Study Guide

To Heaven and Back: A Doctor's Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again: A True Story by Mary C. Neal M.D.

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Plot Summary

"To Heaven and Back" by Mary C. Neal, MD, is the autobiographical story of Neal's life, career and most of all her faith. The sub-title of the book is, "A Doctor's Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels and Life Again" gives more than a hint about Neal's her amazing journey and unique experiences in faith which she retells in her book.

Mary Neal was born and raised in a small town in Michigan where she lived with her parents and her siblings. Mary and her family attended regular services at the local Presbyterian church. As a youngster, Mary considered church boring and simply something that had to be endured. Mary enjoyed the outdoor life that her environment provided. Her father was a general surgeon who Mary greatly admired. She would sometimes follow him around in the hospital as he checked on his patients.

When her parents separated and then divorced when Mary was an adolescent, she was devastated. She prayed that her parents would reunite and was upset when her mother met a new man and eventually married him. She thought God had abandoned her. After all, God had another five billion other people to worry about, why would he care about what she wanted? But a close and enduring relationship with her step-father, George, became one of her most cherished and most influential of her life. She realized that God, in His own way, had answered her prayers. God answered her prayers again when she and her friends survived a potentially deadly car accident.

At fifteen, Mary volunteered to join a missionary couple who was devoted to helping the poor people of Matehuala, Mexico. Without any knowledge or experience, Mary was assigned to "obstetrics" and luckily no babies were lost while she was there. Although she initially had not been interested in the spiritual aspect of the mission, by the time she left she had been moved by the impact that God was having on the impoverished people of the region.

In college, Mary at first had no time or interest in church or faith, but that changed with a scuba diving trip to Florida. Mary worked part time at a scuba shop that sponsored a trip to the Florida Springs. She and her instructor made a dive as soon as they arrived. It was ill-advised because it was too dark but they were anxious to get into the open water. They enjoyed observing the fish and terrain and when they were almost out of air, surfaced only to bump into solid rock. They had inadvertently swam into a cave. After more than a few panicked moments, and Mary's prayers, they found their way out. It was a pivotal point in her life, and she began to make faith more central in her life.

Mary went on to become an orthopedic surgeon and marry another physician. They had four children and left the rat-race of Los Angeles for a more calm existence in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Mary and her husband went on a kayaking trip to Chile with friends. Mary, alone in her own boat, got pinned under water and experienced a near-death experience during which she talked to souls and angels and felt the presence of God. But her work on earth wasn't complete and she returned.



Mary's faith grew and prepared her for devastating personal tragedy. In her darkest hours, Mary clung to her faith and her belief in God's promises. She was able to get through her ordeal with the constant presence of God and the knowledge that she had more to do to fulfill God's plans for her.



Chapters 1 through 3

Chapters 1 through 3 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 1: The Early Years

Mary Neal was born and raised in a middle-class town in Michigan. She lived an idyllic childhood with her parents, her two brothers and one sister. Her father, Bob, was a general surgeon; her mother, Betty, a homemaker. Mary loved the great outdoors that surrounded her and took advantage of the many opportunities for fun and sport that were literally in her backyard. Like many generations before them, the Neal family attended the local Presbyterian church. To young Mary and her siblings, church services were long and boring and something to endure. Mary never got much out of them. However, the Christian values of love and support and compassion displayed by their parents did have a lasting impact.

Mary was always intrigued by her father's work. She would sometimes trail along behind him in the hospital as he checked on his patients. By the time Mary was nearing her teen years, she had become independent and opinionated. Mary adored her father but he was emotionally remote. She was stunned when they separated in 1970 and divorced the next year. Mary was confused and angry from this upheaval in her young life. She felt a need for comfort and turned to her faith for support. Her father picked her up and took her to breakfast and church every Sunday morning. Mary held onto the hope that he would return to his family.

Mary's mother was young and attractive and had several male friends. Mary didn't like thinking of her mother with a man other than her father. But Betty became serious with a man named George and a year after they started dating, he proposed. Betty had a meeting with her children to get permission to marry him. Mary didn't like it but George was a decent man and seemed to love her mother. How could she deny her mother's happiness?

Until the very day Betty and George married, Mary prayed to God that her mother and father would reconcile. When her mother remarried, Mary felt that God had abandoned her. From that point on, she discarded the idea of praying. Why would God listen to her with four billion other people on earth to worry about? She would move on and leave her belief in God behind in her childhood where such silly notions belonged.

But perhaps God had answered Mary's pleas in a way that she didn't recognize at fifteen years of age. George became a loving and gentle presence in her life. He was always supportive and respectful and taught her about friendship and responsibility. He became one of the most important influences in her life.

Chapter 2: Spinning Out of Control



Mary's teen years were chaotic. Despite George's steady presence, she still struggled. Her friends were into drinking and drugs. Her life felt as though it was spinning out of control. Mary was out with friends one night. John, who was driving, had just gotten his license. He was speeding when the car went out of control, smashed through several trees, rolled over and wound up in an inverted position. Luckily no one was seriously injured. But the accident was a pivotal point in Mary's life. As they crashed and rolled she distinctly heard the voice of God say, "I am with you." (8) After hearing those words she was not afraid.

All of Mary's anger and confusion didn't vanish but she began to look at life more seriously. She stopped hanging out with her friends and devoted more time to her goals and what her role was in the world. She continued going to the Presbyterian church as well as to an Episcopal church. Occasionally, she would attend the Oakland Road Christian Church with her friend Merry Ann where she was re-baptized. She had been baptized as a baby but this second ceremony made her feel euphoric and ecstatic. Mary became a new person in God.

Chapter 3: Mexico

Mary felt inspired by a fund raising notice at church posted by a missionary couple who were reaching out on behalf of the poor people in the mountains surrounding Matehuala, Mexico. Mary had no money to donate but she thought that working in such a remote relocation would be a great adventure. The couple happily accepted her offer and her mother approved her going. Things fell into place very smoothly and she was soon on her way to Mexico. When one follows God's will, things happen without much effort.

The missionary couple had a home in Matehuala but spent most of their time in the rustic areas surrounding the city. Mary stayed with the couple in a small farmhouse in the region where food and other materials were distributed to the people. They also held Bible classes there and provided basic medical care and treatments. The couple handed the fifteen-year-old Mary a worn medical book and told her she'd be responsible for obstetrics and child birthing. Mary was stunned. They told her to pray to God for guidance. Mary thought they were nuts!

Mary did pray—feverishly in fact. Fortunately, they never lost a baby while she was there. Later when Mary became a surgeon, she looked back on that time and knew that it wasn't her skills and talents that got her through. God was there with her. Mary initially had no interest in the evangelical aspect of the mission. But as time passed, she felt inspired and saw that God was working in the lives of the poverty stricken villagers.



Chapters 4 through 6

Chapters 4 through 6 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4: Spiritual Awakening

Attending church back home had new meaning for Mary. The predictability of the sermons that used to bore her were now comforting to her. She expanded her church attendance to include the Catholic church and Lutheran services. She appreciated the variety of religious denominations that provided the opportunity for people to find their religious identity. While Mary attended the University of Kentucky, however, she rarely attended services. Her plans were to apply for medical school after finishing her undergraduate studies. In addition to her studies, she spent a lot of time as a member of the varsity swim team. She gave little thought to God or prayer.

Mary took a part time job in a scuba shop. She became interested in the sport and gave up a paycheck in exchange for diving lessons. She went on a trip to Florida sponsored by the scuba shop. Her first dive was near disaster. The instructor broke the rule that new divers never dive in open water at night if they'd never dived during the day. After swimming along the coral and admiring the fish and sea life, the air in their tanks was almost depleted. They went to surface but hit rock. They had inadvertently swam into a cave. Mary and her instructor searched for the opening and Mary in her growing panic hit the bottom and raised a cloud of silt making visibility even worse. The tanks were echoing their electronic warnings that the air was almost gone. Mary thought of praying. She knew that He would show them the way out. The silt cleared and they spotted a few fish darting about. They followed the fish who led them to safety. After they surfaced, the instructor was distraught blaming himself for losing control of the situation. But Mary felt the experience was much more profound. Mary was sure they had survived because God had intervened. The experience reawakened Mary's spiritual life. She vowed to always keep God at the forefront of her life.

Chapter 5: God Is Faithful

In 1980, Mary graduated from college and moved to Los Angeles to attend UCLA Medical School. After two years in the classroom, Mary enjoyed her third year which included clinical training. She developed an interest in orthopedic surgery and felt she had found her niche. Mary met Bill, her future husband, in Los Angeles. He was also a doctor who had studied at Stanford. Before completing medical school, Mary was accepted into a prestigious orthopedic surgery training program in New York City. She would be able to complete her first two years of general surgical training at UCLA. Despite her crazy schedule, lack of sleep and the demands of medical school, Mary always listened for God's will and tried to follow His lead. He was always there when she needed him.



The medical field was beginning to recognize the spiritual component of healing. Mary always encouraged her patients to share with her those experiences. She noticed that many patients were embarrassed to tell their stories of God's intervention in their lives and recovery because it was a predisposed assumption that science and spirituality were like oil and water. Mary learned a lot from a fourteen-year-old liver transplant patient. After many trips to the operating room, the girl was on her way for more surgery when she told Mary that she would not be back but she wasn't afraid because God was with her. Even though Mary believed the girl and knew she was in God's hands, she could not hold back her tears when the girl's heart stopped beating.

Chapter Six: An Attitude of Joy

Mary and Bill were destined to be together. She did not want to leave California for the training in New York but she needed the training. There were no openings at the USC program. Mary prayed for a solution and soon afterward, one of the students had to bow out of the USC training program leaving an opening for Mary. The Los Angeles County Hospital is part of the USC system. Through her work there, she cared for many poor and even incarcerated patients. She learned a great deal during her time at USC. One valuable lesson came from an unexpected source. An elderly female elevator operator always had a big smile and the rosiest outlook. One day Mary asked her how she maintained such a happy and positive demeanor. She found her strength in the Lord, she told Mary. Years later an operating room nurse who worked for a real tyrant told Mary she didn't really work for the man, she worked for God.



Chapters 7 through 9

Chapters 7 through 9 Summary and Analysis

Chapter Seven: God Shouts When Necessary

By 1991, Mary was 33, married with one child and one on the way. Mary had completed five years of orthopedic surgery training, and a year and a half of specialty training in trauma and spinal surgery. She accepted the position of director of spinal surgery at the University of Southern California. She enjoyed teaching and the typically challenging cases that landed at a major medical university. The family lived by the ocean, had a reliable nanny who nurtured her sons, Willie and Eliot, and she and Bill were free to pursue their successful and lucrative medical careers.

Mary felt that most of her time was devoted to her career and that she had little time left for God and family. The superwoman who handled everything with ease was an urban legend. Balancing everything was a challenge for Mary and one that she was not necessarily winning. In 1993, after giving birth to a daughter, Betsy, she began to question whether she was following God's will. The family attended the United Methodist Church but, judging from her own reaction to religion as a child, she was sure that her children did not have a personal relationship with God. Mary knew her family needed her more but she couldn't bring herself to quit her job.

When one doesn't listen to God's voice, he has to shout. A new surgeon, an older man near retirement, was put on staff at USC. Mary doubted his abilities and credentials and that she could work with him. The family enjoyed a relaxing vacation in Michigan and Mary was pregnant with their fourth child, Peter. After spending time with an old friend and family members, Mary made a new commitment to God. Back at USC, she attended a faculty meeting. She looked around at the doctors, mainly men, most of whom had drinking problems and were divorced or having affairs and decided that it wasn't an environment where she wanted to spend her time. Within a month, she resigned and joined her husband's orthopedic group. It was the first step toward a deeper commitment.

Chapter 8: Breaking the Bonds

Free from her commitment at USC, Mary and Bill decided to relocate to a smaller city where her children could better experience nature. They weighed all the options and decided that Jackson Hole, Wyoming, would best fit their needs. It would be quite a change from Los Angeles. It was a rural community with a population of only 20,000 full-time residents. Bill learned that the local orthopedic group in Jackson Hole was looking for a spine surgeon to join them. Mary applied for and got the job and four months later, the family was on its way. The family immediately fell in love with their new home. Mary and Bill became close friends with Tom and Debbi Long. The Longs invited Mary and



Bill on a kayaking trip to South America. Mary decided to give Bill the trip as a birthday gift.

Chapter 9: An Adventure in Chile

In January 1991, Mary and Bill left their children in the capable hands of their nanny and flew off to Chile. Pucon is a resort town on the shores of Lake Villarica about an hour out of Temuco. The area has many glacier-topped volcanoes that form the beautiful lakes in the region. They stayed in a rental house with the Longs, three of their grown sons and one daughter-in-law, Anne. They spent a fun week kayaking and playing in the water. On their final day in Chile, they planned to float the Fuy River in the southern Chilean region of Los Rios. The area was known for its exotic beauty and rushing waterfalls.

On the morning of the the float, Bill woke up with a kink in his back and couldn't go. Mary started to have some nagging doubts about the trip which would start from the small village of Choshuenco. No one in the Long family and some other Americans who would be joining them had the same level of experience as she and Bill had. Anne was feeling some apprehension herself. Soon after the kayaks were put in and they began the trip down river, they quickly came to their first drop off. One of the boats got caught in a narrow channel to the right. Mary saw that the channel was blocked so she paddled to the channel on the left. One of the inexperienced boaters had gotten spun around in the rushing water and went down the left channel backwards. Unknown to Mary, that boat got stuck in the rocks below and the woman got out and swam off. Mary took the left channel down and collided with the rushing water and the stuck boat. She became pinned in and the water began to engulf her. She and her boat were suddenly under water. The others who came down the channels didn't immediately see Mary, and weren't aware of the predicament she was in.



Chapters 10 through 12

Chapters 10 through 12 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 10: Death on the River

There are release mechanisms that can free a person from a trapped kayak. Mary immediately tried to activate these escape devices but they didn't release. She prayed to God not for her release particularly but to see her through to the end whatever that might be. She thought of her husband and children and then she thought of an old poem entitled, "Footprints in the Sand," which was about God always being there. She felt comforted even in her dire predicament. She was ready to die.

Chapter 11: My Rescue

Chad, one of the sons, realized Mary and her boat were missing. He frantically searched for her and spotted the top of her red helmet some four feet under the rushing water. But the spot she was in was almost impossible to get to because of a gap in the rocks and the rushing water. Chad and his brothers tried to reach her but failed repeatedly. Tom looked upon the scene and felt the presence of God. Suddenly a dry rock appeared in the gap. Chad was able to step on that rock and grab the kayak but still couldn't loosen it. Suddenly, a loud noise like a sonic boom was heard and Mary's kayak was freed and tilted onto its side. The force of the water sucked her body out of the boat and out into the water. A short while later, Chad and Anne pulled Mary's purple, bloated body to the shore. Her eyes were lifeless.

Tom and his sons immediately began resuscitation. They were praying and pleading with Mary to breathe. By the time eleven minutes had passed, it looked very gloomy. Suddenly, Mary took a huge gasp of air and began labored breathing. This pattern repeated several times after which she began to breathe normally.

Chapter 12: Going Home

Looking back on the incident, Mary had been aware how her legs and back were bent and how she had been trapped. She knew her knees were sustaining serious injury. She felt no fear but felt surprisingly blissful. When she was sucked out of the boat, she sensed that her soul was separating from her body. When her body was released from the boat, she felt her soul was freed and it rose up and broke the surface where she encountered a group of fifteen to twenty other souls, a sort of joyful welcoming committee.

Mary felt as though she knew them and knew they were sent from God. They had form but it was less distinct than a body. Their brilliance was at once blinding and exhilarating. She communicated with them but not through words. She hugged and danced with the souls and had never felt more pure joy. Words did not exist that could adequately describe how she felt and what she experienced. Even writers of the Bible



had trouble describing their encounters with angels. Matthew described an angel as having a face like lightning and wearing clothes as white as snow. The souls were all excited because they were going home to God and taking Mary with them. Mary could see Tom and the others pleading with her to breathe. She didn't want them to be sad so she took a breath but then returned to her journey.

They traveled down a long corridor that radiated brilliance and color. She felt her soul being pulled toward the entry. She felt pure and complete and her surroundings were beautiful and alluring. The hallway was a place where the soul could either go on to be with God or choose to return to life on earth. Just as she was ready to enter, the other souls turned to her. It was not her time to go. She had to return to earth where she had more work to do. She gave the beings one last glance as her soul returned to her body on the river bank.



Chapters 13 through 15

Chapters 13 through 15 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 13: Angels by the River

Mary was hoisted onto one of the kayaks and carried through the forest that hugged the river. Some native men appeared out of no where to help carry her. But they couldn't be located later. Were they angels? As she was being toted away, Mary was going in and out of consciousness. She couldn't move her legs and suspected her back was broken. She mumbled about needing steroids which would lessen the possibility of paralysis. As the group emerged from the forest, an ambulance was sitting on the side of the road almost as if it was waiting for them. Bill had been alerted by one of the women and he arrived just as they were putting Mary in the ambulance. Chad was unable to get the boats out of the water. The stone that had appeared in the gap had disappeared. Later, everyone agreed that it wasn't just one miracle that saved Mary but a series of them.

Chapter 14: Return to Wyoming

The first aid station had no diagnostic equipment but there was plaster so Bill applied splints to Mary's legs. Mary decided she would not stay in Chile for her care or go anywhere but back to Jackson Hole where there was a great hospital and doctors she knew and trusted. They had to stay one night in a hotel and took a flight out the next morning to Santiago where they would connect with a flight home. Mary began to experience more breathing problems on the way back. They flew into Utah where they had left their truck when they departed. Bill loaded Mary into the truck and they began their five-hour drive home. Bill called Mary's internist and asked him to meet them at the hospital. During the high elevations on the way back, Mary's breathing became more labored. Sadness and guilt overcame her. She was failing Bill and her children. He wanted to make it home but it looked like she wasn't going to survive.

Chapter 15: Power of Prayer

Driving over Teton Pass, Mary's breathing so shallow that she could no longer speak. She was fading in and out. Bill drove as fast as he could. At the hospital parking lot, Mary was quickly transferred from the truck to a gurney. In the ER, she did not respond to the administration of oxygen. She had advanced pneumonia and acute respiratory distress syndrome which was a swelling of the lung tissue and had caused her breathing problem. Natalie, a medical assistant who Mary knew began to pray as soon as she saw the faces of the doctors who were treating Mary. Word spread and many prayers were said for Mary throughout the community. Finally, in the middle of the night her vital signs stabilized.



Chapters 16 through 18

Chapters 16 through 18 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 16: Clarity of Vision

The next day, Mary was more alert but noticed that her vision was blurry. She tried to read the Bible but she had trouble reading it. She was able to read "Rejoice always" and "Pray without ceasing" both in Thessalonians. She became inspired and thought about the concept of prayer. She had always prayed for guidance and help from God which was perfectly acceptable. However, what she learned from her experience and recovery was the power of people praying for others. Her vision remained blurry for several more days.

Chapter 17: Conversing with an Angel

Mary spent many hours trying to determine what God's will was - where he was trying to take her. What was the purpose of the accident and ordeal she was going through? While she was trapped in her kayak, she had had a conversation with an angel who was sitting on one of the rocks. The angel told her that everyone came to earth for a purpose in God. Before coming to earth, they knew about their basic life plan and discussed it with the angels. People may either be directed or guided to their destiny or arrive there by their own volition.

Mary believed that angels were all around. They cared for, protected and guided God's people and sometimes intervened. They were responsible for the "coincidences" that everyone encountered. Angels often pushed or nudged people in the right directions. Even the most tragic events - like Mary's accident - happened for a higher purpose. Without personal trials and challenges, no one would develop stronger characters and faithfulness. No one could grow during a period when there was general complacency.

Before her accident, Mary was easily annoyed by some of her colleagues. After the tragedy, she didn't like their behavior any better but acknowledged that they had a purpose and that she didn't have to know what it was. And, most importantly, God loved those people that so irritated Mary just as much as He loved her. She was made better by associating with them because she learned the virtue of being more patient. The angel stressed to Mary that each person is a part of a large tapestry, too large for anyone to see.

Often a tragedy or an accident like Mary suffered seems worse to those looking on. Perhaps that's because the person that it happened to became wiser and achieved a higher level of understanding. Bad things happen to good people. There is no better example of that than the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. There are always angels coming to our rescue. Our part is to learn to rely on the words and promises of the Lord.

Chapter 18: The Patient Care Unit



Mary moved to the PCU. She felt the presence of God as did many of her visitors. Weeks after the accident, Mary spent most of her time in pensive contemplation. She was trying to make sense of what happened and what God had planned for her. Suddenly, she was in a bright field with another angel. She learned that one of the reasons she returned was to protect her husband's health, to be a support after the death of her son and helping others to find God. Even though she was thrilled to see her children, part of her still longed to be with God.

As Mary recovered and got stronger, she had her first surgery. She began to feel further removed from God. After a month of recuperation following the surgery, Mary was happy to pack up and head home.



Chapters 19 through 21

Chapters 19 through 21 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 19: My Physical Recovery

Although she was happy to leave the hospital, she felt depressed and physically miserable. She had toes to groin casts on both legs and was not mobile. She had to be wheeled everywhere. She was on medication and had twice daily shots to remove blood clots that had traveled to her lungs. Scott, a nurse's aide who tended to Mary a few times a week, devised a large sled from so he could take Mary outside on and push her in the snow. Mary's son, Peter, was only one and a half when Mary had her accident. He was initially a little afraid to get close to her in the hospital but at home, he wouldn't leave her side.

Due to her depression, Mary felt emotionally detached from her family. It took her a year to accept that she had been sent back to earth for a purpose. Bill was an amazing support. He took care of the family and tended to his practice as well as her's. The community provided a lot of support, even people she didn't know.

Chapter 20: Bob

Two weeks after coming home from the hospital, Mary was notified that her father, Bob, was being taken off life support. Mary hadn't even known he was in the hospital. After a visit to San Francisco, Bob had come down with pneumonia. He didn't respond to antibiotics and was put on a ventilator. He never recovered and began to deteriorate and Mary's step-mother made the decision to take him off life support. His wife hadn't notified Mary or her siblings that he was ill. The relationship between Bob and Mary and her siblings had been strained over the years. He wanted a closer relationship but ran out of time. Mary pleaded with his doctor to not remove the ventilator until his children could come and visit him. The doctor grudgingly agreed.

When Mary saw him, she was sure that his soul had already departed his body. Modern medicine may keep a person "alive" but in Mary's opinion death occurs when the soul leaves. Mary felt bad that she was not able to express her love and gratitude for him at the end of his life. She would have loved to tell him what was waiting for him. A large traditional funeral was held for him in the Presbyterian church that the family attended when Mary was a child.

Chapter 21: My Beloved George

Mary's mother came to stay and care for her and the children. They got a call that George had been admitted to the hospital with pneumonia - the same condition as her father suffered with. Mary spoke with George's physician who assured her that he was responding well to antibiotics. Betty and Mary discussed whether she should go home. A large gray owl swooped down and looked at them through the window. Over the next



few days, they saw the same owl frequently throughout the day looking in at that them with an intense stare. Ultimately, Mary thought that the bird wanted her to go with her mother to see George.

When Mary and her mother arrived at the hospital, they were relieved to find George in good condition. The next morning sipping coffee at her house, Betty commented on the pear tree that George had planted many years before. They wanted the tree because of its beautiful pink blossoms but in all the years it never bloomed. After breakfast, they visited George again but found a completely different situation. George had taken a turn for the worse and his organs were failing. Mary and Betty decided to let him die with dignity and had the ventilator removed. The next morning, the women looked out the window and were astonished to see that the pear tree was displaying colorful blossoms. Betty commissioned an artist to do a rendering of the tree. Those blossoms stayed on well into the cold weather, past those of the neighbors' trees.

Mary was certain that the owl had been an angel. She had never seen that owl since. It proved to her that angels were everywhere and came in many different forms. Their job is to nudge us to follow the path laid out by God.



Chapters 22 through 24

Chapters 22 through 24 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 22: Inspiration to Others

Interest was growing about Mary's story. After she got stronger, she was asked to speak to groups at several different churches. Mary is a scientist and naturally skeptical. She relies on data and numbers. But there is one area a scientist cannot account for and that is the "alteration of time and space and dimension that is God's." (136) Mary does not know, on a scientific level, how it works but she knows that God loves and knows each person.

Sharing her story had several benefits. It inspired others and it freed them, gave them permission, to tell their own stories. Mary has observed that people who relate stories about encountering angels or about being in the presence of God can tell their stories effortlessly and in great detail. Most of the stories that Mary heard paralleled her own in that they occurred around some tragedy.

Chapter 23: God Rolls the Stone Away

Mary's depression and frustration over her accident continued. One benefit of her experience was that earthly matter no longer held the same urgency and concern. As a result, she became more tolerant of others. Mary wanted to live the faithful life and spend more time with like-minded people. Mary and Bill wanted to leave their orthopedic group but weren't sure if the other doctors would enforce the non-compete clause of their agreement.

For Easter break, the family vacationed in the British Virgin Islands. The charismatic preacher at the service they attended didn't speak about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus but rather about the power of God on the day of resurrection. After the Romans sealed Jesus' tomb, God caused a violent earthquake that rolled back the stone. His point was that nothing could stop the power of God. As soon as the service ended, Mary and Bill both sent in their resignations. They formed their own successful practice without any problems.

Chapter 24: Willie

Mary believes that young children come from God and are young enough that they still have memories of the angels and are still connected to God's world. As children mature and become adults, they must find their way back to God. Each person can choose or reject God but cannot do both at the same time. Until a person embraces God and believes in his promises, there will be a hole in his soul.

Mary had always been very close to Willie, her first born. When he was five years old he told Mary that he would never be eighteen. The words cut Mary like a knife. Mary never



shared the conversation with anyone. As his eighteenth birthday neared, Mary wasn't sure what to expect. Mary had a dream that a boy who died in an accident told her that he had traded places with Willie. One month prior to Willie's birthday, he, Eliot and Betsy left for a ski trip in Sweden. They first drove to Salt Lake City. After Willie dropped his brother and sister off at the airport, he decided to leave the car in the parking lot. He had a minor accident with another driver. He tried twice to get the other driver to talk to him but the driver ignored him. He was on the phone with Mary who urged him to try again to talk to the man. On that third attempt, the man pulled a gun on him. Willie told his mother what was going on and she screamed at him to run to his car and drive away. Would Willie have been shot if she hadn't been there?



Chapters 25 through 27

Chapters 25 through 27 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 25: Bill

Mary had also been sent back to earth to protect her husband's health. Several male friends had recently died. They were the same age as Bill and took good care of their health like he did. Mary began to pester Bill to have a heart evaluation. Bill's heart was fine but a nodule was discovered in his lung. It turned out to be a malignant tumor. The tumor was removed and Bill recovered quickly and completely because they had caught it early. The only reason the tumor was spotted was because the CT scanner was slightly misaligned. Discovering Bill's disease wasn't coincidental or fortunate, it was miraculous.

Chapter 26: Chad

Chad Long was a young man of faith. He was a Christian and had married a Christian woman. Yet, he was one of the reasons Mary returned to earth. What could she do to contribute to Chad's life or faith? In preparation for this book, Mary interviewed all of the Longs. Chad admitted that he was in a dark place before the Chile trip. He was in the throes of the age-old struggle between God and Satan. Returning to Utah, he still suffered from the same conundrum. But he wanted to be a man of faith. He thought about the boating accident and allowed himself to contemplate the miracles that were connected to that event. He came to realize that one has to let go of his earthly life and trust in God. The boating accident was a pivotal point in his life and faith.

Chapter 27: Compulsion to Write

By early 2009, Mary felt she was living up to God's expectations. Her husband was healthy and her three younger children were maturing into wonderful youngsters. Willie was absolutely flourishing. After his eighteenth birthday, he enjoyed Nordic skiing and won the Wyoming State Championship. He also expanded the non-profit environmental organization that he created to include local "no-idling" policies. He wanted people to be conscious of the environment and understand the damage that sitting in idling cars did to it. He was interested in politics and became a state delegate to the Democratic National Convention in Denver in 2008.

Mary knew that God wanted her to write about her experiences but she was procrastinating. She had relentlessly lived in God ever since her accident. But she was not yet inspired to write about it. Finally, in 2009 she was struck with an overwhelming drive to begin writing her story. She finished the first draft of her book in a week. Willie and Eliot were planning on leaving Jackson Hole to drive cross-country to Maine and live there with the Maine Winter Sports Club. Willie asked about writing a will and

whether she had a life insurance policy on him. He was a healthy nineteen-year-old so she didn't give his questions much thought.

When she told the boys good-bye as they embarked on their trip, tears welled up in her eyes. It reminded her of when she left Willie on his first day of pre-school. She told the boys she loved them and hugged them tight. She felt worried the entire time they were on the road even though they called her every day.



Chapters 28 through 30

Chapters 28 through 30 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 28: The Longest Day of the Year

The boys arrived safely, and went on to train hard and enjoy themselves. Good friends of the family, Sophie and Derek, lived near by and invited the boys over. One afternoon when Willie went fishing with Sophie and her two dogs, he asked her about the soul, what she thought about it. She told him that souls were timeless and returned to earth for spiritual growth.

On June 21, 2009, Mary completed the final draft of her book. She and Peter were in the car and called Willie and Eliot on the speaker phone. Someone else answered the phone and told Mary that Willie had been in a roller skiing accident and was dead. The family's world was forever changed.

Chapter 29: A Beautiful Son

Roller skiing is a dry-land version of cross-country skiing, done on roads and concrete. It is used by professional skiers to increase endurance. Willie was working out with another friend, Hilary, on roller skis. He told her about his premonition about his eighteenth birthday and about his thoughts about death. He told her that it would be his preference to be cremated. His environmental mind-set led him to be against using land for burials. As they skied down a hill, a local eighteen-year-old boy drove his car down the hill and was distracted by his cell phone. He lost focus and his car swerved barely missing Hilary but hitting Willie from behind, killing him instantly.

Chapter 30: The Other Side of Time

The family immediately traveled to Maine. They drove to the funeral home to see Willie. They cleaned the blood from his broken body and cried, anointing his body with their tears. They visited the site of the accident. It was a lovely spot with beautiful pink Alpine roses growing all about. Mary felt that it was the spot where his soul left his body. Mary was sure that God sent his most gentle angels to collect Willie's soul.

The next few days seemed to be in a strange slow motion. The family received the support of family and friends and their minister. It was difficult flying home with Willie's ashes. The family wanted to mourn in private when they got home. When they arrived, their porch was filled with flowering potted plants in honor of Willie and his passion for the environment. Walking around their property one day, Mary found a bunch of the same beautiful pink Alpine roses that were growing in the spot where Willie died. Mary had never seen the flowers before. It was a message from Willie, one of love and gratitude and apology for leaving. Willie knew about the pear tree blossoms that meant so much to Mary and her mother. After the pear tree bloomed for five years, it was

struck by lightning and destroyed. It was God's way of telling Betty it was time to move on. Would the bed of Alpine roses have the same fate?



Chapters 31 through 33

Chapters 31 through 33 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 31: Gifts of Compassion

Several weeks after Willie's death, Mary found a notebook full of letters that Willie had written. They were letters to friends and coaches. He thanked them for their friendship and support. Mary had no doubt that they were good-bye letters. He wrote a letter to President-elect Obama and even one to himself about the great life he'd had and his gratitude for his wonderful family. Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts called with his condolences. Singer/songwriter Carole King wrote a song in his honor. The community grieved for the loss of one of their fine young men.

Mary clung to her faith and reminded herself to believe in God's promises. God kept the family from falling apart. Mary came to believe that Psalm 23:45 - "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. . ." wasn't about one's on death but rather for those left behind after a love one's death.

Mary loves her family and her life and knows that her work on earth is not done. In writing this book, Mary allowed herself to embrace her spiritual experiences. Doing so, she felt comfort in remembering God's constant presence in her life. Her faith deepened and she became stronger and prepared to help her family through their grief. Mary and Bill were surprised to learn that a common emotion following the death of a child is fear - fear that they'd never be happy again, fear that they would fail their other children and just a general fear of what the future may hold. Bill really struggled. He was sad and fearful and was in deep despair.

Chapter 32: Perfect Timing

When Mary and Eliot were skiing eight months after Willie's death, Mary tried to catch some air on a small hill but instead broke her ankle. Eliot couldn't carry her so Mary made the painful decision to tighten her ski boot and make the long painful walk back to their car. She had surgery that evening. A friend brought Father Ubald, a Catholic priest whose Tutsi father had been murdered in the 1962 overthrow of the Rwandan government, to pray for her recovery. Sensing Mary's deep pain, Father Ubald reminded Mary that forgiveness comes from within and doesn't have to be two-sided. She discussed Bill's state of despair with Father Ubald who prayed for the family's recovery. He sprinkled holy water all about their house, in every closet and drawer, and commanded the entire time that the evil of despair leave them.

Mary finally was able to admit that she had anger over Willie's death even though she knew he was with God. There was a rage within that she tried to ignore. She was angry at the boy who hit him and bitter that he never contacted them to say he was sorry. He had taken her beautiful son! But she knew that she did indeed have to forgive him. Mary



also had guilt that she didn't go to Maine with her son. Above all, she felt she failed God by not protecting her family which was one of her purposes in life. She asked God for forgiveness and guidance. After his visit, the despair and fear that she and Bill felt began to subside. Was it a coincidence that she broke her ankle just when Father Ubald was visiting the area?

Chapter 33: Logical Conclusions

Mary believes that the experiences in this life has prepared her for the next one. She reached some very logical conclusions about her beliefs. Mary believes in God's promises; that heaven exists; that nothing separates God from her; that God has work he wants her to do; and that God will always be there to carry her through the darkest hours.

During Willie's brief life, he accomplished a great deal. He knew who he was and he cared. Nothing will ever get Mary beyond his death. She does her best as a wife and mother and as a physician and surgeon. She is loved by God and she is His child. Mary's experiences have changed how she interacts with her patients. She, of course, recognizes the importance of one's spirituality in the healing process. Her own life experiences argue against coincidence and luck. She knows that God uses His many angels to lead men where He has planned them to go. It is faith that sets us free to walk in joy with God.



Characters

Mary C. Neal

Mary C. Neal was born and raised in a small community in Michigan. She and her siblings lived with their mother, Betty, who was a homemaker, and father, Bob, who was a general surgeon. Mary greatly admired her father and often tagged along when he made his rounds at the hospital. Mary and her family attended regular services at the local Presbyterian church. Mary was not engaged in her faith, she merely endured the boring weekly sermons.

Mary spent time with a missionary couple in Mexico who was reaching out to the people of an impoverished region. She helped with medical treatment and food distribution but was not initially engaged in the spiritual aspect of the mission. However, by the time she left the mission, she had seen the impact that God was having in the lives of the people. Mary went through several life-threatening ordeals during which she naturally turned to prayer. Each time she would feel comfort in the presence of God.

After becoming a physician and orthopedic and spine surgeon, Mary was headed for a great career as the head of spine surgery at the University of Southern California. She married a fellow physician and eventually had four children. Ostensibly life was great but she felt that something was missing, because she was not making God the focus on her life. That all changed forever after a kayaking trip to Chile when Mary died and was nearing the gates of heaven when it was God's will that she return to earth because her work there was not done. She had talked to angels and had seen that brilliant light that others have claimed seeing in near-death experiences.

Mary's faith grew stronger and stronger over the years. And it prepared her for the most devastating tragedy that anyone could have imagined. Mary knew that God had a plan for her and that He loved her and would always be with her. She knew she would have never survived her darkest days without that belief.

William C. Neal

William C. Neal is the husband of Mary C. Neal, the author of "To Heaven and Back." Bill Neal was educated at Stanford University and became a physician and orthopedic surgeon. He met Mary in Los Angeles when they were both young physicians. Bill Neal had moved to Los Angeles because his girlfriend at the time lived there. But when he met Mary, his plans and life changed drastically. The two young doctors knew they were meant for each other and would eventually share a life together.

Mary and Bill married and had four children. They began to question if being in the huge, fast-moving city of Los Angeles, California, would provide the best environment for their young children. Bill and Mary gave their situation a lot of thought. They would be giving up a lot yet it would be worth it if it meant a better life for their family. They had



several locations in mind and finally decided upon Jackson Hole, Wyoming, as the ideal place for them. They resigned from their positions and moved to Jackson Hole where they were both able to set up a practice.

Mary and Bill were on a kayaking trip in Chile that Mary gave him for his birthday. On the last day of their trip a bad back kept Bill from going on the last float down the river. Mary was badly hurt in an accident on that float. Bill was able to set her legs in plaster casts and get her out of the country. After landing in Utah, they still had a five-hour drive ahead of them before they get to their home hospital. Bill could see that Mary was struggling with pain and with her breathing and drove swiftly through the night and got her to the hospital and to the treatment that saved her life.

Both Mary and Bill were, of course, devastated when they lost their oldest son to an accident. Mary's faith was strong and got her through the darkest hours but Bill remained deeply depressed and in utter despair. After a Catholic priest came to the house and sprinkled holy water all about and demanded that the evil despair leave, Bill began to feel better although there would forever be a hole in his heart.

Willie Neal

Willie Neal was Mary and Bill Neal's oldest child. Tragically he was killed when he was struck by a car when he was in training for winter skiing.

Eliot, Betsy and Peter Neal

Eliot, Betsy and Peter Neal are the other three children of Mary and Bill Neal.

Tom and Debbi Long

Tom and Debbi Long invited Bill and Mary Neal on a kayaking trip with them to Chile. Mary almost died in a boating accident during the trip.

Chad Long

Chad Long was the first to notice that Mary was missing when she was trapped under water in an accident in which she almost died, and was seriously injured.

Hilary

Hilary was a friend of Willie Neal's. They were roller skiing down a hilly street when a car went out of control and almost hit Hilary but killed Willie instantly.



Father Ubald

Father Ubald was brought by a mutual friend to Mary's house when she was in grief over the death of her son. She told Father Ubald that her husband was in deep despair over the loss. The priest sprinkled holy water in every nook and cranny in the house and demanded that evil despair leave the premises!

Betty and Bob

Betty and Bob were Mary Neal's parents. They divorced when Mary was a young girl. Mary followed in the professional footsteps of her father, who was a general surgeon.

George

Mary was upset when her mother began dating George and later married him. She had always hoped her parents would get back together. But George was a great step-father and they developed a close relationship that Mary cherished.



Objects/Places

Michigan

Mary Neal was born and raised in a small community in Michigan. She lived with her family who attended weekly service at a local Presbyterian church.

Matehuala, Mexico

When Mary was fifteen-years old, she volunteered to join a mission in Matehuala, Mexico, that provided food and essentials to the impoverished people of the the region.

Florida Springs

Mary and her scuba-diving instructor went on a dive in Florida Springs where they became trapped in a cave and barely escaped before their air was depleted.

UCLA Medical School

Mary followed in her father's footsteps when she entered UCLA Medical School in Los Angeles, California.

Los Angeles, California

Mary and Bill Neal both had successful and lucrative careers in Los Angeles, California, where the couple and their children lived for a number of years.

USC

Mary did her orthopedic surgery training at the University of Southern California. She ultimately became head of the school's spine surgery department.

Jackson Hole, Wyoming

Mary and Bill Neal chose Jackson Hole, Wyoming, as their new home when they decided to leave the hub-bub and fast pace of Los Angeles.

Chile

Mary was seriously injured and almost died when she was involved in a kayaking accident on a vacation she and her husband took to Chile.

Maine Winter Sports Club

Willie and Eliot Neal, two of Mary's sons, attended the Main Winter Sports Club to condition themselves for skiing. Willie was killed when a car hit him as he was roller skiing down a hilly street.

British Virgin Islands

The Neal family vacationed in the British Virgin Islands during one Easter break. It was after hearing a charismatic preacher speak about the power of God that Mary and Bill decided to resign from their current positions and form their own orthopedic group.



Themes

Faith

Mary Neal's faith in God emerges as the main theme in her memoir, "To Heaven and Back." Mary provides an account of the evolution of her faith. As a kid Mary merely tolerated her weekly visits to church with her family. Many readers will be able to relate to that scenario having gone through a similar experiences themselves. It is not a new concept for one to seek his faith; however, in Mary's case it was almost as if faith was seeking her out. As a teen she survived a potentially deadly car accident that strengthened her faith. As the car careened off the road and into a tree, Mary's natural instinct was to pray. An inexplicable calm came over her and she felt deep down that she was safe and in God's care.

Mary makes the case for a faith that endures ordeals and tragedy. Each time when Mary found herself at a pivotal point when her faith was in the balance, her beliefs only grew stronger and her fear of dying lessened. It all came to a climax when she was trapped under water in a kayaking accident and was badly injured. She had gone to the other side and was in God's presence. But her belief in God's will sent her back to life because God had more work for her to do on earth. She had prayed during her ordeal but later realized that her prayers were not asking God to let her live they were just that she follow and accept God's will.

Mary's story is a testimonial to the impact and strength of faith. As a scientist and doctor whose "beliefs" had strictly been in numbers and data, Mary does an about face when she is not able to explain the healing power of faith. Faith is generally through of as something that one adopts in order to feel safe about the unknown and the future. However, the stronger one's beliefs become and the longer they endure, faith becomes the destination.

Survival

Mary Neal tells her story of her faith in God, which grew and became stronger over the years and as a result of many challenges. She attributes her survival to her faith. Her strong belief in God certainly helped her through the various ordeals that she experienced. A devout person like Mary would attribute her strength of character and her courage to her faith. Others who may not share her beliefs would have to recognize that Mary had an inordinate amount of grit and the intelligence to withstand challenges that many would buckle under.

Whether it was her faith that saw her through or some natural or acquired superior traits, Mary Neal is unquestionably a survivor. Mary had the intelligence to withstand the demands and rigors of medical school and specialized surgical training. Her skills and abilities catapulted her to head the department of spine surgery at the prestigious



University of California medical school. She rose in a field that was dominated by men and wasn't reluctant to laud the benefit of spiritualism in healing in a scientific profession that was typically all about numbers and data.

Mary was nearly out of air when her and she and her scuba-diving instructor were stuck in an underwater cave. Just in the nick of time, Mary and her instructor were able to find their way out. Mary nearly died in another incident involving water. Many people would have given up being trapped underwater for ten minutes with broken legs and other severe injuries. Her background of a physician almost made her situation more dire because she knew just how serious her condition was. But she was rescued and survived the ordeal only to develop pneumonia and a lung condition that literally took her breath away. Mary was a death-defying survivor!

Mary lived through the most devastating tragedy that anyone can imagine, losing one of her children in an accident. She clung to her faith and relied on God's presence and promises to see her through. But raging anger and bitterness was understandably still there. Again her strength - no matter the source - got her through.

Priorities

The word "priorities" pops into mind when recalling the story Dr. Mary Neal tells in her book, "To Heaven and Back." The priorities in one's life changes from the natural process of maturation and from one's unique experiences. Mary's priorities as a youngster was of the most ordinary and expected sort - having fun with her friends and enjoying the great outdoors. But as one grows older and leaves childish notions behind, priorities change and mature as well. For example, at fifteen-years of age, Mary felt compelled to volunteer to join a missionary couple who was reaching out to the people of an impoverished region of Mexico. When she first joined the mission, she thought of it as an adventure. However, by the time she left, she had seen the impact that God was having on the people. The presence of God that Mary had sensed at the mission, stayed with her. She became more serious and began to give thought to what her role in life was, what her purpose was.

When she was trapped in an underwater cave with her air supply nearly depleted, Mary prayed for help and found her way out. She knew at that point that God needed to be a more central focus in her life. She took a mature stand and admitted that He always seemed to be there for her but she had not always been there for Him. By placing God as a priority in her life, other things that seemed impossible seemed to fall in place. For example, she didn't want to leave her husband-to-be in California while she took orthopedic surgery training in New York. But there were no openings at USC. None, that is until suddenly, a student dropped out and the opening was her's for the taking.

After becoming a successful orthopedic and spine surgeon, Mary was elevated to the head of spine surgery at the University of Southern California. Mary enjoyed a successful, prestigious and lucrative career. She had a happy marriage and three children. She had everything yet she felt that something was missing. She didn't have to



think too deeply to recognize that it was God who was missing from her life. She had allowed her busy life to get in between herself and her God. She had failed to keep him as a priority and thus she felt empty and lacking.

Once Mary refocused on God as her most important relationship, things fell into place. She and her husband realized that they didn't belong in the fast-paced city of Los Angeles. It wasn't their style and they didn't think it was particularly healthy for their children. Once again, by placing God as her top priority other things fell into place. She put the welfare of her children as a priority over her big job at USC and her husband gave up his orthopedic practice and they decided to move to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where they could have a calmer life that was closer to nature. Mary only got her priorities right when God was the top one.



Style

Perspective

"To Heaven and Back" by Mary C. Neal, MD, is a memoir and is written in the first person, narrated by the author. Mary's journey toward her faith in God could not have been written in such great detail and with such poignancy by anyone other than Dr. Neal herself. Mary's honesty shines through when she writes of being bored at Sunday morning church services and her fragile faith that at times she would abandon. But Neal makes a compelling case about death, angels, God and heaven and coming back to a life whose purpose had not yet been fulfilled. Neal provides an interesting and inspiring account of a woman who ultimately believed in God's promises and nurtured a faith that saw her through the worst of times.

Mary C. Neal, MD, is a certified orthopedic surgeon. While living in Los Angeles, California, Neal was named head of spine surgery at the University of Southern California. Mary received her medical training at UCLA and at USC's prestigious orthopedic surgery training program. In addition to her medical career, she is an accomplished writer having written professional articles. She is the member of many professional medical associations in the U.S.

Tone

In telling her very personal story in "To Heaven and Back," Mary provides an honest and detailed account of some of the darkest and most challenging events of her life. Mary is forthright about her faith that wasn't always strong and how she at times thought that God had abandoned her. Even though Mary is devout in her faith in God, there is nothing condescending or pious in her tone. It is obvious that Mary wants to share her faith in a positive way and convince her readers that belief in God is essential to a complete life. Mary was saved from a near-death experience, she writes, because her work on earth was not done. It was God's will that Mary help spread the word about her faith and belief in God's promises.

Mary admits in her book that she was a procrastinator in the writing of her book. But perhaps she needed the time to step away from everything that happened to her and see it with a more remote and critical eye. But she was obviously inspired when one morning she got up and felt a urgent drive to write her story. She wrote the first draft in just one week - which is record Stephen King time!

Even when Mary discusses the biggest tragedy of her life, the loss of one of her children, she infuses the narrative with intelligence and poignant introspection. She admits that after the death of her son she clung to God to see her through. However, she finally had to deal with the anger, the sheer rage, that she had repressed deep



inside. Mary Neal provides a guide for the faithful and for all people who face doubts and tragedy that seem insurmountable.

Structure

"To Heaven and Back" by Mary C. Neal, MD, is a memoir that is told in chronological order. The book is separated into thirty-three chapters. It chronicles the life and faith of Mary Neal beginning in her early years when attending church was something she had to endure to an awakening of her faith as a teenage missionary when she saw God's impact on the life of the impoverished and finally to an unshakable faith that got her through the darkest hour imaginable.

Neal devotes a large part of the middle section of the story to her near death experience when she almost drowned in a kayaking accident in Chile. She had been on the "other side" and was ready to leave her earthly bonds but her work was not done on earth and she returned. Neal juxtaposes her experiences of being in the presence of Gods and angels to her profession as a physician. She understood the role of spirituality in healing and encouraged her patients to share those stories. At the conclusion of the story, Neal describes how her strengthened devotion and belief in the promises of God are what got her through devastating personal tragedy.

An "Acknowledgments" section, precedes the beginning of the book along with a "Prologue" and an "Introduction." There is a section of photos of Mary with her husband and four children. Following the book is a section entitled, "Giving Back" which describes the type of charities that will receive proceeds from the book and a section entitled "Q&A with Dr. Neal." The book concludes with a brief bio of the author.

Quotes

"I decided that thoughts about an omnipresent God who cares about individuals had likely been a childish and silly belief so I decided to 'move on,' leaving my beliefs about God behind me." (Chapter 1, page 6)

"The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." ~ Eleanor Roosevelt (Chapter 2, page 7)

"I have always appreciated the variety of religious denominations that are present in our world. Their different styles of worship and ways of communicating offer people in different stages of their life and spiritual journeys an opportunity to find the place where they feel most comfortable and a place where their faith can grow." (Chapter 4, page 18)

"We are constantly bombarded by those who want a piece of us; seeking our time, talents and energy. Sometimes we weary of those demands and, at times, we feel God's call on our lives as just another pull when we already feel pulled apart." (Chapter 6, page 37)

"With man, this is impossible, but not with God. All things are possible with God." ~ Mark 10:27 (Chapter 11, page 59)

"I sat down in my body and gave these heavenly beings, thee people who had come to guide, protect, and cheer for me, one last, longing glance before I lay down and was reunited with my body." (Chapter 12, page 74)

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." (Chapter 16, page 92)

"One reason angels are rendered invisible to human sight may be that if they were seen,, they would be worshiped. Man, who is so prone to idolatry as to worship the works of his own hands, would hardly be able to resist the worship of angels were they before his eyes." (Chapter 17, page 100)

"It is about waiting for the showers to pass. It's about learning to dance in the rain." ~ Vivian Greene (Chapter 20, page 111)

"God's plan and His ways of working out His plans are frequently beyond our ability to fathom and understand. We must learn to trust when we don't understand." (Chapter 24, page 147)

"Be still, and know that I am god." ~ Psalm 46:10 (Chapter 29, page 173)

"God took our son, but there was o 'grim reaper.' I believe He sent his most gentle and loving angels to collect Willie's soul and take him to heaven." (Chapter 30, page 178)



Topics for Discussion

What was Mary's relationship with her father? Why was she against her mother dating after her parents divorced? What relationship did Mary have with her step-father, George?

When Mary was a youngster, what was her opinion of faith? How did working at the missionary in Mexico impact Mary's beliefs?

Describe the miracles that occurred during Mary's boating accident and rescue. Why was that a pivotal point in Mary's life and faith?

What premonition did Willie have about his eighteenth birthday? What occurred on Willie's eighteenth birthday? Why was Willie curious about souls and death?

What roles did pear tree blossoms and Alpine roses play in the story? What did it mean when the pear tree was struck with lightning and destroyed?

What did angels tell Mary about God? When did Mary encounter angels? What made her certain that they were actually angels?

What did Mary experience in her near death experience? Was eleven minutes a long time for Mary not to breathe? What was Mary's purpose on surviving her accident and staying on earth?