



## ***Stephen Hawking Goes to Heaven***

— *Pir Elias Amidon*

The first thing Stephen knew was that his wheelchair was skidding away behind him as he stood up — not stood up as much as leapt up, landing firmly on his feet, his arms flung out in the same motion, and he shouted — with his real voice, not the computer voice — “*What?*” so loud it startled him. He looked around disbelieving.

He was on a footpath in a meadow with summer wildflowers and small yellow butterflies flitting here and there. A stream sparkled in the sunlight in a valley not far below him, and on the far side were hills covered with forests and meadows. Stephen shook his head and closed his eyes tight and opened them again. It was all still there. He swung his arms, still incredulous that he could do it, and began to jump up and down, little jumps to test the ground and his legs.

He called out, “Hello?” several times but there was no answer, just a soft breeze on his face. There was also no sign of his wheelchair. He took a step, and then another. He turned in a circle. He couldn’t believe what was happening. Gathering his courage, he began to walk along the path, slowly at first, step by step across the meadow toward a stand of trees that made their way down to the stream. He was so delighted to be walking, to feel his legs carrying him, to be able to look this way and that. He began to trot, and then broke into a full run, his head thrown back, “*Whee!*”

As he came to the forest he slowed to a walk again. The dappled light from the trees calmed him. A carpet of pine needles spread soft under his feet; the air was fresh and scented. Up ahead on

the path he saw a clearing in the forest with sunlight slanting in. As he came to the edge of the clearing he saw a small cottage with a porch and a path leading to it. He followed the path, stepped up onto the porch and knocked on the door.

“It’s open,” came a voice from within.

Stephen pushed open the door. What he saw astounded him. Instead of the small room he expected, the place was aglow with light, a pale blue light. There didn’t seem to be any walls or ceiling. He saw a woman seated on a bench, facing him. She gestured for him to come closer and to sit on the floor in front of her. He did so, folding his legs beneath him as if he had been doing that all his life.

The woman had an ethereal beauty about her, not only her face but in the way she sat there and in the soft folds of her gown. She looked at him kindly.

“Is this... heaven?” he asked, his voice breaking.

“No, Stephen,” she replied. Her voice was velvety. “No, Stephen, this is not heaven. You’ve been in heaven. This is the place of remembrance.”

“What do you mean?” he asked. “I don’t understand.”

“I know you don’t,” she replied. “There are many things you don’t understand. As brilliant as you are, you are still just a child who doesn’t know where he is. I know you have suffered and overcome great obstacles, but you have made a mistake, a mistake that you will have to correct.”

“What mistake?” he blurted out. “My theory on information retrieval from black holes? Was that wrong?”

“No, Stephen,” she said, “nothing like that.”

The woman stopped speaking. She looked at him then with a steady gaze that felt to him like a fierce wind. He had never felt anything like that gaze — it went right through him. It blew away all of his thoughts, all of his equations, all of his theories of everything. In their place he sensed something more beautiful than he had ever known, although if he were asked he could not have said what it was. But suddenly he knew. He knew what his mistake was, and he knew what he had to do.

The woman smiled gently and said, “Now you are ready. Close your eyes.”

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Even before Stephen opened his eyes he knew where he was. He was back in his wheelchair, crumpled to one side. He remembered the moment clearly: he had been wheeled out to give a speech at the Royal Society for Advanced Physics. He was just sitting there, center stage, being introduced — and then he had died. Quietly, in front of everyone, with television cameras recording the whole drama. He heard the President of the Royal Society speaking to the shocked audience, “Ladies and Gentlemen, please be calm. It is with deep sadness that I must announce the passing of Dr. Stephen Hawking...”

Stephen opened his eyes. The doctors who had gathered around him on the stage gasped. “Wait!” one of them shouted. Stephen straightened his head, and then sat upright in the chair. He said to the doctors, “Please, step back, give me a little room.” They moved back, stunned.

The audience began talking all at once, “*What? What?*” Stephen lifted both hands toward them. “Please, I would like to say something.” He unhooked himself from the paraphernalia of the chair and stood up. First there was the sound of gasps from the audience, and then everyone went silent.

Stephen walked to the front of the stage. He stood tall, taller than he had been in his youth. In future years people would remark, when they watched the video of the event for the hundredth

time, that there was a light around him, a pale blue light. Stephen began to speak, his voice clear and intimate. Though he had no microphone, everyone in the room could hear him perfectly.

“My friends,” he said, “don’t be alarmed. Yes, I did in fact die a little while ago, as you witnessed. But I have been asked to return to this life for a few moments to correct something, to correct an error I made.” There were cries from the audience. Stephen raised his hands again to quiet them.

“Dear friends, last year I announced that we had no more than *a thousand years* to develop the technology to escape planet Earth. I said we have to find other planets to escape to before the Earth becomes uninhabitable through the many dangers that confront us — climate change, overpopulation, nuclear war, epidemics, asteroid strikes. Six months later I amended that message and said we had no longer than *one hundred years* to make our escape. I was wrong. *We have to do it now.*

“The good news, dear friends, is that a habitable planet has indeed been found! And what’s more, we have the means to get there. I am delighted to tell you that the planet I am speaking of is perfect for us. It has vast quantities of liquid water and an atmosphere with just the right percentage of oxygen for us to breathe unaided. Its gravity is also perfect for our body mass – we will not bounce off its surface or struggle under our own weight to keep ourselves upright. Its star is a yellow dwarf, halfway through its life cycle, which means it will provide us with at least



five billion more years of light and warmth. And, miracle of miracles, the planet’s orbit is exactly in the habitable zone, with temperatures on the planet’s surface well within the range to support life. And as for life, because of these ideal conditions the planet has evolved a great diversity of life forms with whom we can share the planet. These life forms are not dangerous to us, at least not if we treat them with respect. And beyond all of this, the planet is beautiful, with mountains, and forests, and great plains of rich soil, and regions of ice and deserts and tropical jungles. And because of its rotation around its axis, it has a lovely rhythm of day and night, not too long, not too short, and

the tilt of its axis as it orbits its star allows a progression of seasons that will keep poets writing for eons.

“I implore you — everyone — to find your way to this planet now, before it is too late. You can do it. It will not take enormous rockets to get you there, or undiscovered technologies. But it will take great resolve, and even greater love. For if you do not love that beautiful planet you will lose the chance to live there. I mean the word “*love*” here in its most sacred sense, as *reverence*, for the planet I am speaking of is a sacred place, created out of the stars, and the only way to deserve it is to honor it as you would honor something sacred to you. Reverence for life, for each other, for the natural ethics of kindness and fairness, and for living simply and humbly, these are not technologies but they will get you to the planet you hope for. Technologies can help you find ways to stop wasting and poisoning good and beautiful things, but only if they are guided by your love.”

Stephen paused. The audience was silent. He looked slowly from one side of the great hall to the other, and into the cameras, and then said simply, “Good luck to you,” and slumped to the floor and passed away.