LIGHT AT THE END
OF THE TUNNEL

For years it was my favorite movie -- Harold and Maude. It wasn’t a very
conventional film: a love story between a twenty-year old kid and an eighty-year old
woman. However, with its wonderful musical score by Cat Stevens and terrific
acting by Ruth Gordon, it became quite a rage. Harold, the twenty-year old introvert
with a gaunt and sinister look, a morbid and depressed spirit, had a fondness for death.
The first half of the movie showed him faking various means of suicide to terrorize
his mother. Of course, if she were your mother, you would have tried to terrorize her
too. Domineering and self-serving, she exhibited not an ounce of love or authentic
interest in her son’s well-being. She was unfazed by Harold’s antics, designed to
shock her.

Harold encounters Maude in the last pew of a church during a funeral. (They
attend funerals frequently: he, to feed his morbid ego; she, to remind herself of her
ultimate destiny.) The years have taken their toll and she’s as wrinkled as a prune. A little
wisp of a woman -- however, her spirit is as sprightly as if she were a child of seven.
“Pffst! Pffst!” Some of the worshipers frown and glare at the two. “I see you at a
lot of funerals,” Maude says to Harold as she pushes her way into his pew. “You like
them too, don’t you? Really make you appreciate the mystery of life -- the great
cycle of birth, life, death and re-birth. I feel so alive when I come to a funeral.” Harold
wincs. After the procession leaves the church [they awkwardly try to look pious and somber as the priest passes their pew], they tag along at the end of the funeral
cortege. The mourners wind their way in the rainy procession to the cemetery. The
camera’s aerial view shows the tops of all the black umbrellas, except for the last one --
Maude’s bright yellow parasol, which she’s twirling gaily over her shoulder. That
unlikely two-some portray a delightful contrast in people’s approach to death... and
life. Some, like Harold, grow old before their time. Trapped by their circumstances
they can’t wait for life to be “over and done with.” For them, each day is a prison
sentence and death is ‘release’ from this torture chamber. Never having found a
reason to live beyond the narrow confines of their own needs and desires, life itself
becomes a coffin with the lid quickly closing upon them. Their fate is nothing
more than waiting for the burial rites.

Others, like Maude, see life as
something bigger than themselves. They
know that they’re here “for a good time, not
a long time” as a song once sang. They can
take a ‘devil-may-care’ attitude toward
themselves and towards life because they
believe that God cares and will always be
there for them. They don’t dread the “end
because, for them, it’s merely one more
adventure -- perhaps the greatest adventure.
Death is the chance to break out of the
limitations of this world. It may lead to
extinction, but it may also be a passageway
into a richer, a more satisfying experience.

In the words of the Apostle’s Creed,
you and I profess faith in “the resurrection
of the body and life everlasting.” We end
most of our liturgical prayers with a sense of
eternity, like “forever and ever. Amen” or
“world without end. Amen.” We pray for the
dead, inscribe their names into a book, and
honor their memory. Yet, for all our
openness about death in prayer and
theology, in media and literature, our society
still attempts to anesthetize us to its reality,
to turn our faces from our own mortality.
And so we daily encounter a world that
avoids the inevitable -- where doctors and
nurses, even in a hospital, either refuse or
are ill-equipped to discuss death with their
patients; where the aged are shelved in the
background instead of being recognized as
the sources of wisdom and stability that they
are; a society which promotes any means --
advertising, sales, recreation, cosmetics -- to
maintain a facade of eternal youth -- not a
youthful spirit, but a cover-up for the fact
that life itself tends toward death.

Even our Catholic religion has ofte
succeeded to a mythology about death with
gruesome images from Dante’s Inferno, or
prayers addressing God as an unrelenting
judge. All these blind us to the divine lover
and compassionate parent which scriptures
reveal God to be. How then can we, as
believers, face death, and how can our
traditional belief in the afterlife and the
resurrection help us to live each day more
fully? The Word of God today has
something to offer to the Harold and
Maude among us and within each of us.

First, the Book of Macabees
challenges us to have courage in the face of
struggle. The seven brothers and their
mother went to their death proclaiming
unwavering faith in the God of Israel. Death
no longer wields the final blow; it can truly
become a passage to a fuller life. G. K.
Chesterton once said of our Catholic faith
that we believe life is too important ever to
be anything but life. That life which is in us
survives the tragic breaking apart that comes
with death. And if God is with us in that
final moment, surely the daily struggles and
trials that we face can be lightened when we
face them against the background of
eternity.

Second, St. Paul in his letter to the
Thessalonians, assures us that we are people
who hear the melody of the future. We can
plan for the future -- a new job or a new
home, our children’s security, a more just
social order, a spirit of greater change and
renewal in the church, a fresh approach to
government and leadership (even in the face
of this week’s election) -- because we know
that God will not fail us. Our hopes will not
be dashed. We work with hope for a better
tomorrow because we are absolutely
convinced that God will fulfill promises and
act on our behalf.

Finally, the gospel of Luke today
exhorts us to be dedicated to living fully ‘in
the present.’ Just as Jesus would not be
trapped by the Sadducees who tried to
distract themselves from the real issues, so
we need not become confused or enmeshed
in the “how” of life after death. Concern
over how things shall be in heaven shouldn’t
detract from our present commitments. The belief in the hereafter begins through the love expressed here and now. The bonds of love that we foster and nourish each day, the causes of justice and peace that we uphold, the community of caring hearts that we build on earth are the surest and clearest testimony of the glory of a kingdom yet to come. Jesus didn’t say: “It” is the resurrection or “There” is the resurrection. He said: “I” am the resurrection. Our faith in the resurrection is confident love in the person of Jesus Christ and committed union with his body, the Church. As Christians we are hopeful people, for this life and for more.

By the way, in the movie Harold finally learned how to live. Maude became his ‘angel of mercy’ who showed him what it meant to let go and soak this life for everything it has to offer. Maude died at the end -- we all must! And Harold cried to see her go -- we all hate to lose a loved one! But his sadness and his broken heart were sure signs that his life was now worth living. Once Maude brought him to life, he was able to put more of himself into each day of living. Maude taught him how to love and he was able to see in her death a passageway to something more. A beautiful movie and a touching story that echoes our story in Jesus: in his death and resurrection is our passage to new life. As Jesus tells us: *Our God is the God, not of the dead but of the living; for to God all are alive.*

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