

Document 27.3 Lucretia Coffin Mott, “To Martha Coffin Pelham Wright” (1862)

During the war, grieving survivors were pushed beyond traditional boundaries of mourning. Survivors were now encouraged to account for the dead by imagining them in heaven, where they would all reunite someday. The new emphasis on an imagined reunion led to the reinvention of heaven. Antebellum notions of heaven focused primarily on the relationship between the deceased and God; in this pre-war heaven, familial ties were considered earthly and for the living. But newer renditions of heaven took on a more tangible, earthly appearance. In this letter, Lucretia Mott describes a sense that a loved one’s spirit might be closer than she has been taught to imagine—demonstrating the new belief that heaven might be near to the living world.

Roadside, 1st mo. 12th, 1862.

My dear Sister,—Alas! no Lue, precious invalid, to write about. How entirely gone from us, she is! At least so far as daily solicitude for her is concerned. I feel at times as if in spirit she may be much nearer to us than we imagine. We have so long been taught to think of Heaven as a far off place, that the nearness of the departed spirits is not realized. And because we fail to dwell on it as a known fact, G. L. exclaims, “How little faith you folks have!” I tell him sectarian theologies and speculations should not be called faith. It is because we have so much faith, and a firm trust that all will be well, that we indulge no vain curiosity as to “what we shall be.” Thou thought it a pity that Lue and her mother could not talk freely of her approaching death. Anna did answer her honestly that she was no better; but she could say no more. Dr. Holmes warned his students against interfering with the ways of Providence, who conceals the end from the patient. It would be a satisfaction now if she had alluded more plainly to it. But when Lue said to me a few weeks ago, “Oh, I want to get well,” I had not the courage, any more than her mother, to say, “It is impossible.”

Anna was far from well—had slight chills, and some fever before Lue’s death. But she bore up until after the funeral, which was quite private, and since then has been confined to her bed, with a nervous fever.

Source: Lucretia Coffin Mott, *James and Lucretia Mott: Life and Letters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884), 402–403.