

Everyone's Dying and the World is Ending

Laura Ochs Wibberding, ASRS annual meetings 2025, Boston

In May of 1853, Nathaniel White, brother of James White and brother-in-law to Ellen, died of tuberculosis--in their home--at the age of 22.¹ Twenty-six months later, three more of the little community which produced *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* in Rochester, New York died of the same disease. Lumen Masten, a printer who had converted while working with them, died in March 1854 at 25.² Eight months later, Anna White, editor of the *Youth's Instructor*, and another sibling to James White, also died at 25.³ Finally, and most famously, Annie Smith, editor and poet, died in July of 1855 at 27.⁴ The closeness of their deaths would have been compounded by the closeness of the *Review* community. Most shared living space as well as working together, surviving on faith and a steady diet of beans.⁵

To have so many friends and coworkers die young so close together cannot but have shaken the other *Review* workers, and through them the entire church-to-be. The early 1850s were a liminal space between the Great Disappointment and becoming a denomination, when the only "church" beyond a Sabbatarian Adventist's local congregation was the church paper. The group had no name, no governing bodies, no paid ministry. To many members in isolated communities, the *Review* was the only tangible evidence they weren't alone. Since the church was essentially gestating within the pages of the *Review*, it is easy to imagine the deaths as a theological epigenetics, skewing the church's DNA.

But it was not simply that four people at the *Review* were dying. Everyone was dying. The world itself was dying. Those who survived the 1844 Great Disappointment with their faith

¹ James White, "Obituary," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Vol IV, no 1 (May 26, 1853), Rochester, NY: 8.

² "Obituary," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol V, no 8 (March 14, 1854), Rochester, NY: 63.

³ James White, "Obituary," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol 6, no 17 (December 12, 1854), Rochester, NY: 135.

⁴ Rebekah Smith, *Poems, With a Sketch of the Life and Experience of Annie R. Smith*, Manchester, New Hampshire: John B. Clarke, Printer, 1871: 106.

⁵ W. C. White, "Sketches and Memories of James and Ellen G. White: XIV. Beginnings in Rochester," *Review and Herald*, June 13, 1935, 10.

in God and prophecy intact still expected the end of the world any day. William Miller's famous recasting of his apocalyptic expectation, "Today, Today, and Today, until he comes,"⁶ is a statement of hope, but may also be seen as a burden. Those who adopt it must live in a world which they are constantly giving up. In such a dying world, attachment is ill-advised, investment is temporary, and anticipatory grief for unsaved loved ones and life experiences which will never happen is ever-present.

Set in this context, then, how the Review editors and their readers process these deaths is important. While the period between disappointment and denomination was a time of doctrinal formation, it was also where unspoken theologies were adopted. It is one thing to agree on a theology of death. It is another to adopt a community ideology and meaning-making about grieving. **The Advent believers adopted a positive form of religious coping with both the immediate-proximity trauma of bereavement and the middle-distance expectation of the apocalypse through the telling of "good death" stories. These stories will offer a positive reframing of their grief, and deepen the believers' connection to God and to one another.**

At first glance, it does not appear that the Adventists-to-be are talking about their grief. *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* from 1852-55 is relentlessly doctrinal, full of long, often serial biblical arguments about prophecies of the second coming, and defense of the seventh-day Sabbath. After all of these, a letters section included reports from traveling ministers, death reports, and readers affirming their faith.⁷ In 1854, a short note near the end of the paper warns readers that there will be no issue the next week, as Anna White is expected to die any day, and James White is critically ill. Also, the note mentions, more funding is needed.⁸

⁶ William Miller, *Midnight Cry*, December 11, 1844, 142. Cited by George Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism*, Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1993, 226-7.

⁷ For example, in the September 2, 1851 issue (Vol II, no 3), Hiram Edson tells of his travels. Readers write about their expectation of the end time, but also their views on interpreting prophecy. In the April 4, 1854 issue (Vol V, no 11), a mother's letter tells of the death of her 1-year old son, and includes a poem..

⁸ *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Vol VI, no 15, pg 117.

Articles discuss death infrequently, mostly to refute spiritualism, and those on the second coming are written for confirmation, not consolation.⁹

The pre-Adventist theology of grieving shows up, instead, in the telling of “good death” stories, both in the growing obituaries section, and in separately-published accounts. Lumen Masten, Anna White, Nathaniel White, and Annie Smith’s stories are the most significant of these. Two deaths--Annie Smith’s, and Nathaniel White’s are published for distribution. Smith’s appears in her mother’s book *Poems: With a Sketch of the Life and Experience of Annie R. Smith*.¹⁰ Nathaniel White’s last days are documented in James White’s *A Brief Account of the Last Sickness and Death of Nathaniel White*. (Ellen White also includes details of Anna White and Nathaniel White’s deaths in *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 2, part of which is taken from her letter to

⁹ There is a detectable softening of the content from 1853 to 1855, with the inclusion of more of the experiential and practical side of Christianity. It begins with the addition of poetry, most often by Annie Smith, on themes of Christian living and longing for heaven. See “Pilgrim’s Song,” “Onward,” “Watch and Pray,” and “Joy Cometh,” from the March 3, 1853 (Vol III, no 21), May 26, 1853 (Vol IV, no 1), October 4, 1853 (Vol IV, no 13), and November 1, 1853 (Vol IV, no 17) issues respectively. The first and fourth are credited to Annie Smith, and the two between have no author, but a similar style and theme. In between the second and third examples, Uriah Smith seems to have tried his hand at poetry as well, although his work, “The Warning Voice of Time and Prophecy,” is very much like the articles as it doesn’t rhyme, is doctrinal, and extends over five issues between March 31 and August 11, 1853.

As the length of the paper grows, more articles are added on Christian living. In January 1854, “Keep Awake” described, not just the nearness of the second coming, but how believers should live in light of it. That February’s “Our Duty to the Poor,” by Lois M. Richmond and May’s “Kindness in Opposition” both emphasize compassion and love for one’s neighbor (in addition to having the correct Sabbath day). Over the next year, articles touching on the believers’ feelings about their faith such as “Christ Knocking at the Door,” “The Love of God,” and “The Morning,” or on the duties and behaviors of Christians, such as “Forgive One Another,” “The Nightwatch” (on watching for Jesus’ coming), “How to be Rich in Heaven,” and “On Dress” appear. See “Keep Awake,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol IV, no 26 (January 10, 1854); Lois M. Richmond, “Our Duty to the Poor,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol V, no 3 (February 7, 1854); “Kindness in Opposition,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol V, no 15 (May 2, 1854); Vol VI, no 8 (October 3, 1854); Vol VI, no 20 (January 9, 1855); Vol VI, no 31 (June 16, 1855); Vol VII, no 10 (July 10, 1855).

At the start of Volume seven of the *Review*, a short article titled “Commencement of the Volume,” notes the shift. Opening with a comment that during the past year they had toiled “amid sickness, sorrow and death,” and covered important themes such as “the Law of God, Man not Immortal, Atonement, the Three Angels of Rev. xiv, & c.” But the new volume hopes to do more. “Besides the lengthy expositions of Scripture, we want many short articles on present truth, and present duty, and stirring epistles on experiences, or exhortations to obedience.” See “Commencement of the Volume,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol VII, no 1 (July 10, 1855), 4.

¹⁰ Rebekah Smith, 97-107.

their parents, and also used in James' pamphlet.)¹¹ In addition, Lumen Masten wrote an account of his near-death bout of cholera which follows a similar style and testimonial purpose.¹²

The fact that all four died of tuberculosis made them excellent candidates for retelling. First, because tuberculosis often provided a slow and public death. The slowness gave time for introspection, confession, and preparing for the next life. Family and friends could gather at the deathbed--it would be a few more decades before the idea that tuberculosis was contagious was widely accepted--to witness their loved one's final words and faith in God.¹³ Second, because death by tuberculosis was often romanticized in life and fiction--the pallor and emaciation making the victim appear ethereal in their final sanctification. Telling deathbed stories for spiritual edification was common for American Protestants during this period. Greg Schneider refers to it in the Methodist tradition as the ritual of "happy dying."¹⁴

While there is not exactly a formula for good death stories, there are enough common elements to see the similarity between the Adventist and Methodist accounts, and to discern the evangelistic flavor of the obituaries. I have, between observation and Schneider's writing, noted frequent, if not universal common elements.

¹¹ Ellen White, *Spiritual Gifts* Volume 2, 113-116; James White, *A Brief Account of the Last Sickness and Death of Nathaniel White*, pamphlet, found on EGW Writings, "A Brief Account of the Last Sickness on Death of Nathaniel White," <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/1436.5#5>; James White, "Obituary" *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol IV, no 1 (May 26, 1853), 8.

¹² Lumen Masten, "Experience of Bro. Masten," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol III, no 14 (November 25, 1852), 108. Masten tells his story of nearly dying while not being spiritually prepared. In it he says "About six o'clock it seemed as though I was drawing my last breath.-- Death seemed to stare in the face, and visions of Hell and the grave rose up before me. Demons danced before my eyes and seemed to grasp my breath. The history of my past life rose like a skeptic to haunt my expiring moments. The scenes of horror, anguish and suffering, no pen is able to portray. I knew I was not prepared to die; I had made no confession whatever, but lay a guilty sinner in the sight of God." This is a "bad death"--or could have been, without God's intercession. It warns the reader to live a life that prepares to die in God's grace.

¹³ Death by tuberculosis, especially among the poor, the young, and women, was common in the US in the 1850s, with one study crediting it with about 50% of deaths in 20-40 year olds. (An unscientific perusal of the Review obituaries seems to confirm this, as the majority of reported deaths were young women and girls, and the most commonly cited cause was consumption.) "Gathering and Interpreting Data about Tuberculosis in the U.S.," *Circulating Now*, National Institute of Health, posted October 7, 2015, <https://circulatingnow.nlm.nih.gov/2015/10/07/gathering-and-interpreting-data-about-tuberculosis-in-the-u-s/>

¹⁴ A. Gregory Schneider, "The Ritual of Happy Dying Among Early American Methodists," *Church History*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Sep., 1987), pp. 348-363.

The first is that the death stories may serve as miniature spiritual biographies. Even in the shorter obituaries in the *Review*, at least half told of the deceased's conversion to Christianity, or how long they had "kept the Sabbath truth." In contrast, only a third mention family members left behind, and several, like the wife of JM McClennen, are listed without their first names.¹⁵ This is not surprising if, as Schneider asserts in his discussion of Methodism, "obituaries were for moral and spiritual edification."¹⁶ The reports not only shared the grief of their deaths with the small community, they affirmed the witness of their lives.

This purpose is only more pronounced in the longer "good death" stories of Nathaniel White, Anna White, and Annie Smith. James White tells both of his siblings' stories starting back at their childhood conversions--age 10 for Nathaniel, and 6 for Anna. Both accepted Millerism, although Nathaniel gave up his faith for a while after "the great declension, about 1844,"¹⁷ and both accepted the Sabbath soon after coming to live in the *Review* household in Rochester. In Rebekah Smith's account of her daughter Annie's life and death, she tells a similar tale--childhood conversion, loss of faith after 1844, and a renewed hope and faith in the seventh-day Sabbath after attending Adventist meetings. Annie, well-educated, and experienced in teaching, then gave up lucrative opportunities in order to work at the *Review* without pay. As her mother explains, "The whole current of her mind was changed, and nobler aspirations took possession of her heart. From a position of exaltation and honor among men, she had now turned her eyes to an inheritance incorruptible."¹⁸

The life story, however, is short compared to the story of death. The believer exhibited their readiness to meet God in two common ways--by their own testimony, and by the visible evidence of grace in their attitude, acts, and demeanor.

¹⁵ JM McCellen, "Obituary," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol VI, no 13 (November 7, 1854), 103.

¹⁶ Schneider, 360.

¹⁷ James White, "Obituary," *RH* Vol VI, no 17 (December 12, 1854), 135; James White, *A Brief Account*, 32.

¹⁸ Rebekah Smith, *Poems*, 99.

Deathbed accounts often contained last words, frequently about confidence in Jesus and expectation of heaven, or exhortations to loved ones to follow their example. Elizabeth Sheldon, age 32, died “[e]xpressing, among her last words, her firm conviction in the truth of the Advent faith, and her expectation of . . . the resurrection.”¹⁹ Samuel T Crimson, dying at 33, spoke of his belief in the Sabbath, the third angel’s message, and the heavenly sanctuary, and criticized Universalism in his last hours.²⁰ Harriet Hastings, “[w]ith her dying breath . . . dictated messages of mingled exhortation and consolation to each member of the absent family. . . [She] joyfully assured us that she should sleep but a little while, and we should be re-united soon.”²¹ And JM McClellan’s nameless wife likewise “exhorted us all to be faithful, for she wanted to meet us again where we should never more part.”²²

Anna White, by James White’s account, spoke of Jesus as “the chief among ten thousand, the one altogether lovely.”²³ Annie Smith, having bouts of decline and recovery, made several attempts at her last words, in which she spoke of her faith and “delivered many messages for different individuals” as well as exhorting her mother and brother John “to prepare for the time of trouble, and to be ready to meet her at that day, which she said she did not think was far distant.”²⁴ Nathaniel White, by Ellen White’s account, made the most extensive confession of his faith before dying. On his last day, he called the household into his room and confessed any unkind words or deeds to them. Later in the day, as she sat with him, he recounted the story of his life, and particularly how God had led him to his current faith. Finally, about supper time, he sent for the group again. Seeing he was close to death, she urged him to trust in Jesus. “Said he, ‘yes, yes.’” His final words, at the close of the group prayer, were,

¹⁹ D.P. Hall, “Obituary,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol VI, no 4 (September 5, 1854), 31.

²⁰ M.E. Cornell, “Obituary,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* VolVI, no 28 (May 1, 1855), 222. Those with longer last words reported appear to have all died of tuberculosis, affirming that the slower process was likely to allow time for a “good death.”

²¹ Obituary,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol VI, no 4 (September 5, 1854), 31.

²² McClellan.

²³ James White, “Obituary,” *RH* Vol VI, no 17 (December 12, 1854), 135.

²⁴ Rebekah Smith, 104.

“Amen! Praise the Lord!”²⁵ By Schneider’s account, not only was a confession of faith common, loved ones might ask for one, seeking a statement of faith as close to the end as possible.²⁶ These testimonies confirmed that the believer held their faith to the end, and the travail of dying could not dislodge it. (In the *Review* obituaries, anecdotally, most of those which included dying words also revealed that the cause of death was “consumption.”)

But the witness of the dying came from their attitude and countenance as well, demonstrating that God was sustaining them through pains of death. A sanctified Christian approached their end with peace, without complaint, and with love for others. They might express gratitude or even joy.²⁷ Sometimes they seemed to receive relief from pain and weakness, or even appear physically changed. Here the gaunt paleness of tuberculosis could reinforce the idea of becoming more spiritual, and the sometimes flushed appearance might be seen as a glow from within.

In the *Review* obituaries, Vesta L. Lothrop, age 15, died “without a struggle or a groan” in spite of her two weeks of painful illness.²⁸ Elizabeth Sheldon, age 32, was “bright in hope.”²⁹ Brother Beeba was often heard to “shout praises to God while his body was sinking under the heavy hand of disease.”³⁰ Even six-year-old Mary Sophronia Perkins, when asked if she wished to get well, replied, ‘No, not now,’ and soon after fell asleep in Jesus without a struggle.”³¹

Of Nathaniel White’s last days, James wrote in his *Review* obituary, “As his bodily strength failed he became more free and happy in mind. . . . He would join with us in praising the Lord, while his countenance, shining with the Spirit. of God resting upon him, was expressive of

²⁵ James White, *A Brief Account*, 95-114.

²⁶ Schneider, 361.

²⁷ *Ibid.* While Schneider’s Methodist examples emphasize the “happiness” of the dying person, in spite of their pain and grief, the Adventist examples include some mentions of joy, but more of peace. Schneider does not emphasize the observers’ impression that the dying person is visibly transformed, but the element is present in his examples, and seen in the Adventist stories as well.

²⁸ “Obituary,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol V, no 20 (June 13, 1854), 158.

²⁹ DP Hall, “Obituary,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol VI, no 4 (September 5, 1854), 31.

³⁰ Alonzo Miles, “Obituary,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol 6, no 20 (January 9, 1855), 159.

³¹ Laura H. Perkins, “Obituary,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol VII, no 9 (October 30, 1855), 17.

the holy joy he felt.” At the moment of his death, “He looked up and smiled, and then sweetly fell asleep in Jesus, sitting in his chair, without a groan or a struggle.”³² Lumen Masten also died “in the most peaceful manner, leaving a pleasant smile upon his countenance.”³³

Annie Smith’s path to the end had ups and downs. Six days before her death she seemed to be transformed. Her mother recounts, “About 2 o’clock she looked very happy. I said to John, “Annie is being blessed.” She soon exclaimed, “Glory to God,” a number of times, louder than she had spoken for a long while. She said, “Heaven is opened. I know Jesus is mine, and that he will save me. I shall come forth at the first resurrection.” However, this was not the end. Two days before her last, “she had a conflict with the enemy, and seemed to lose sight of Jesus” but “[b]efore night she was enabled to triumph over all the powers of darkness, and praised God aloud. She prayed for patience to suffer all her Father’s will, saying, “I . . . can bear anything while Jesus sustains me.” Her mother compared the moment of death to the ease of falling asleep, and reported that after her death “[i]t was remarked that a holy sweetness seemed to rest upon her countenance.”³⁴

These good death stories may not be as dramatic as those reported in the Methodist papers which, according to Schneider, might involve sermons by the dying and converted witnesses, or where “the dying one got happy and perhaps shouted, clapped hands, sang, and praised God in ecstasy.”³⁵ But they follow a similar form, and seem to point to a similar belief—that the deceased has triumphed over the temptations of life and pains of life by remaining faithful until the end. In fact, Schneider claims, “we might characterize evangelical religion fairly as an effort to steal a march on death, a strategy for conquering death by living a dying life.” The good death stories proved that the dying life worked, since believers were ready to joyfully leave this world behind, confident of the world to come.

³² James White, “Obituary,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol IV, no 1 (May 26, 1853), pg 8.

³³ “Obituary,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol 5, no 8 (March 14, 1854) pg 63.

³⁴ Rebekah Smith, 104-106.

³⁵ Schneider, 361.

Observed, not from the lens of theology, but of coping psychology, the “good death” stories represent a form of positive religious coping. Parmegent, et al, in a 2013 study of religion and coping, said that positive religious coping--the kind of religious responses to stressors which improve one’s resilience--does two things. It reframes the stressful event in positive terms rather than negative (such as “this is temporary,” or “I don’t have to go through this alone” rather than “God is punishing me” or “I need to have more faith”). And it involves a sense of acceptance by God and connection to the community.³⁶ The “good death” stories do all of those things.³⁷

For Sabbatarian Adventists, experiencing bereavement, and expecting the apocalypse can be a circle of consolation, one stressor easing the other. On the one hand, the soon end of the world could soften the loss of loved ones--the time without them would be short. And the constant loss of friends meant there was less reason to hold on to this world, or to grieve that it would soon pass.

Furthermore, good death stories may be a consolation for “the great declension.” Although the Advent is delayed, the believers’ faith can be reinforced by these stories. *Review* readers, an unpopular minority, could see others held to the same faith even to the moment of death, and be reassured of its reasonableness. And although God did not show up for them in 1844, they can see God’s spirit tangibly showing up in the moving stories of these witnesses.

In the end, while the four *Review* community deaths may not have altered Adventist theological developments, they gave the community a chance to reinforce their faith. Everyone was still dying, and the world was ending. But taken together, that was the good news.

³⁶ Raymond F. Paloutzian, *Introduction to the Psychology of Religion, third edition*, New York: Guilford Press, 2017, 298.

³⁷ This is, of course, only true if the stories work the way they are supposed to. It is also possible that believers will feel pressure to have, or pretend they have, a faith just as perfect as these martyrs. Pressure to perform their faith could create a sense of isolation rather than connection to the community, if a believer feels they must hide their doubts or their suffering. Since I don’t have the means to explore how since the obituary writers are, I will leave the question aside for someone else.

Bibliography

- "Gathering and Interpreting Data about Tuberculosis in the U.S.," *Circulating Now*, National Institute of Health, posted October 7, 2015,
<https://circulatingnow.nlm.nih.gov/2015/10/07/gathering-and-interpreting-data-about-tuberculosis-in-the-u-s/>
- Miller, William. *Midnight Cry*, December 11, 1844, 142. Cited by George Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism*, Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1993.
- "Obituary." *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol V, no 8 (March 14, 1854), Rochester, NY: 63.
- Paloutzian, Raymond F. *Introduction to the Psychology of Religion*, third edition, New York: Guilford Press, 2017, 298.
- Schneider, A. Gregory. "The Ritual of Happy Dying Among Early American Methodists," *Church History*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Sep., 1987), pp. 348-363.
- Smith, Rebekah. *Poems, With a Sketch of the Life and Experience of Annie R. Smith*. Manchester, New Hampshire: John B. Clarke, Printer, 1871
- White, Ellen. *Spiritual Gifts* Volume 2, 1860. Ellen G. White Estate, Inc, 2017.
- White, James. *A Brief Account of the Last Sickness and Death of Nathaniel White*. pamphlet. found on EGW Writings, "A Brief Account of the Last Sickness on Death of Nathaniel White," <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/1436.5#5>
- _____. "Obituary." *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol IV, no 1 (May 26, 1853), Rochester, NY: 8.
- _____. "Obituary," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* Vol 6, no 17 (December 12, 1854), Rochester, NY: 135.
- White, W.C. "Sketches and Memories of James and Ellen G. White: XIV. Beginnings in Rochester," *Review and Herald*, June 13, 1935, 10.