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*What Dreams May Come*  
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Robin Williams's new film, "What Dreams May Come," is the most recent telling of an old story -- actually several old stories, but we'll get to that. The main character, Christy, a physician killed in a multiple-car accident as he attempts to help its initial victims, discovers that death is not an extinction of the self, but rather its apotheosis.

As he learns, the self is distinct from the body and death places that self in a personal paradise created by one's own imagination. Christy thus lives in a majestic locale derived from the landscapes and paintings he loved in his mortal life. The problem, though, is that his wife commits suicide as a result of the guilt and grief engendered by the death of Christy and the earlier deaths of their two children. She is consigned to hell, not through judgment, but rather through her own despair. As Christy made himself a heaven, she created an inferno of darkness, waste and self-loathing.

As Christy descends into the depths of this hell to rescue his wife from her anguish, the film alludes insistently to mythic and religious tales. Christy's quest recalls the myth of Orpheus, the journey of Dante, and even the story of Christ's saving intervention into a world of sin and despair. The film combines this traditional material with recent visions of the afterlife supplied by accounts of near-death experiences. It even includes the option of reincarnation, probably derived from eastern religious traditions. Its broadly allusive texture thus avoids any specifically sectarian commitments. Indeed, God is mentioned only once, when we learn that He is probably "up there" somewhere, attempting unsuccessfully to communicate.

Despite its allusions to these powerful and moving spiritual narratives, though, the film's metaphysics derive primarily from the degraded, if popular, contemporary discourse of therapeutic self-fascination that has become the stock in trade for New Age self-help authors and "spiritual" advisors. Salvation, from the film's perspective, is the state of eternally feeling good about oneself. Christy and his family lived in professional-class comfort, with an expensive house, children in private schools and an au pair. If death has the power suddenly to disrupt this well deserved happiness, its effects are short-lived -- like a temporary dip in the stock market, it is distressing merely in the short run.

In the end, the film assures us, we will succeed more dramatically than we dreamt. But the film's concept of our dreams is rather limited, for it can do no better than recommend that gratified greed is less lonely when someone is there to share the booty. There is no need to fear death, "What Dreams May Come" proclaims, because it offers no less (or more) than the deed to an eternal upscale retirement property.