

How often do you think about heaven and hell? Or do you ever? I do. Not too often but enough I guess. Enough to put me into self butt-kicking mode whenever I catch myself doing something or other not quite heaven-worthy. Although usually the thought is prompted by some circumstance. Like for instance, a couple of nights ago at a funeral viewing. Went to pay my respects after the passing of the aunt of a close friend of mine. I was standing there in front of the casket, saying my petitions for this woman's soul, asking God to receive her in His glory, when the thought came to me: What's it like up there? What about down there? Boggles the mind, doesn't it? Okay, so it boggles mine. But let's be clear, it's purely wonderment and curiosity, not anticipation. : )

We all know that sometimes life can seem like heaven or hell here on Earth, depending on what's going on in our lives I suppose. I think I've experienced a glimpse of hell a couple of times, and I believe I've experienced what could be a taste of heaven — if sitting on a beach watching an amazing sunset, eating dark chocolate, while surrounded by family and good friends could be considered heaven, then yeah, I've had a taste of it. And if watching a loved one suffer unimaginable pain day after day until almost their next to last breath can be considered hell, then yeah, been there and back, twice.

These moments of heaven or hell on Earth are found sometimes in our experiences, like mine above, or we find them sometimes in our attitude. Yes our attitude, the sweet and sour components of our intricate being. Constructive and destructive stuff that can make us or break us. However, it's hard to imagine any such moments coming close to the real heaven and hell. For me, the horribleness of eternal life within the confines of hell with satan by my side tormenting me is…well, spine-chilling; the hairs in the back of my neck stand. In contrast, the peacefulness of eternal life in the expansiveness of heaven with the Lord by my side showering me with all the angelic-like sights, sounds and smells I could muster is…well, sublime; tears well up.

So I'm curious about the hereafter. Except that if curiosity really killed the cat, then I don't need to know right now, I can certainly wait to find out, know what I'm saying? I'm fine with it

remaining a mystery for now. But I think it's a good thing to have the heaven and hell question floating about in some corner of our minds. It's helped me put things in perspective at times I can tell you that. Another upside is that it can keep us in check. Obviously, this works best if you're a person of faith. No kidding.

So the circumstance arose and I stood there in front of the casket with my heaven and hell thoughts. And sure enough the question popped up: "How am I living out this mortal stage of mine? Heaven-bound?" The jury's still out on that one. How 'bout you? You heaven-bound? What's your take on it?

The Secrets of Heaven and Hell

The old mon sat by the side of the road. With his eyes closed, his legs crossed and his hands folded in his lap, he sat. In deep mediation he sat.

Suddenly his zazen was interrupted by the harsh and demanding voice of a samurai warrior. "Old man! Teach me about heaven and hell!"

At first, as though he had not heard, there was no perceptible response from the monk. But gradually he began to open his eyes, the faintest hint of a smile playing around the corners of his mouth as the samurai stood there, waiting impatiently, growing more and more agitated with each passing second. "You wish to know the secrets of heaven and hell?" replied the monk at last. "You who are so unkempt. You whose hands and feet are covered with dirt. You whose hair is uncombed, whose breath is foul, whose sword is all rusty and neglected. You who are ugly and whose mother dresses you funny. You would ask me of heaven and hell?" The samurai uttered a vile curse. He drew his sword and raised it high over his head. His face turned to crimson, and the veins on his neck stood out in bold relief as he prepared to sever the monk's head from its shoulders.

"That is hell," said the old monk gently, just as the sword behan its descent.

In that fraction of a second, the samurai was overcome with amazement, awe, compassion and love for this gentle being who had dared to risk his very life to give him such a teaching.

He stopped his sword in mid-flight and his eyes filled with grateful tears.

“And that,” said the monk, “is heaven.”

~ From *A Third Serving of Chicken Soup for the Soul*, by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen.

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