

## Purgatory?

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Sunday, December 11, 2022

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*My troubles are many, they're as deep as a well  
I can swear there ain't no heaven but I pray there ain't no hell  
Swear there ain't no heaven and pray there ain't no hell,  
But I'll never know by living, only my dying will tell,  
Only my dying will tell, yeah, only my dying will tell  
And when I die and when I'm gone,  
There'll be one child born and a world to carry on, to carry on*

The above snippet of lyrics is from the [Blood, Sweat & Tears](#) song, [And When I Die](#), a song that reached number 2 on the charts in 1968.



For many reasons the line, “*I can swear there ain't no heaven but I pray there ain't no hell*” has stuck with me these many long years. It is not too far from how I approach the whole concept of the afterlife. I generally believe that dying is like the proverbial candle flame going out... *poof*... that is it. The problem is getting from A to B, from living to the candle flame going... *poof*. We are hard wired to survive, dying can be painful, drawn out, and I am sure very scary. Although the one or two times I thought I was about to die, a great peace just came over me, although in all likelihood that feeling was just the endorphins kicking in. Afterwards was a different story, but at the moment I thought death was a certainty, it was peaceful and without fear. Undoubtedly, those acute situations are very different than the slow decline of old age or suffering a chronic illness that are the more common of nature's exit strategies for us in 21st century western culture.

I am vaguely tempted to call the next a school of thought, but I think perhaps that is giving it too much credit. A few times in my life I have encountered writers or real flesh and blood people that contended that we make our own heaven or hell, that we create our own afterlife, when we pass away. Well perhaps...



If there is a heaven and hell then possibly the Catholics are right, and there is

a purgatory. However, growing up Southern Baptist I have a bit of a hard time understanding the whole concept. My understanding is that it is a condition intermediate between hell and heaven. Your sins were not so bad that you did not pass Go and went straight to hell, but that your soul needed cleansing and purification. Folks still in the realm of the living can assist you by prayers and indulgences. As a concept in the Catholic Church purgatory did not come to being until around the 12<sup>th</sup> century. My cynical take on this is that it was a way for the Church to extract more money from believers as they worked to ensure their loved ones were not stuck in limbo. (See Wikipedia article on [Purgatory](#)) I would have to talk to a Catholic to see if this is still the deal now days.

Just as an aside the concept of hell was a Johnny-come-lately in Judaism and Christianity. Judaism in general does not have a strong concept of hell. The Jews following Jesus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century took their concept of hell from the Book of Daniels. It became a general belief in Christianity around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. The Muslim concept of hell is more aligned with the Catholic Church's purgatory, albeit with much suffering, you eventually get out of hell. Of the major religions, it is only the Christian religion that will damn a soul to an eternity of suffering without the possibility of redemption.

Bear with me a minute. DeeJay David is about to do the proverbial mashup. If there really is heaven, hell and purgatory, AND we create our own afterlife, perhaps purgatory, at least in this country, is nursing homes, and other warehouses where we park our old and dying. It is certainly a place of limbo. For most folks the only way out of it is to pass on to the next state of being, or the candle flame going... *poof*. It certainly feels that way when I visit my mother, although I have a hard time picturing my mother committing any sin, let alone one bad enough to keep her out of heaven, unless it was the overuse of the leather strop on her five sons. Spare the rod, spoil the child, was Sarge's guiding principal of child rearing, Sarge being my mother's nickname. Trying to run a household of five boys with a husband often gone on business, she channeled her inner Drill Sergeant.

Whenever I think about my being in a nursing home, I start thinking about combining a bottle of Jameson with a bottle of oxycodone. It seems like a lot saner solution, but definitely a personal choice. However, sometimes that option of that choice is taken away from us. Plus I am sure it takes a lot of courage or desperation to take that step. Maybe more than I have.

Yeah, I know this is a bit gloomy, but so it goes sometimes. And don't forget the indulgences and to light a candle for me...

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The song *And When I Die* was written by [Laura Nyro](#). Given the following verse she must have had more than a passing acquaintance with [Dante's Divine Comedy](#). At the center of Dante's hell it is cold beyond comprehension.

*If it's peace you find in dying  
And if dying time is near  
Just bundle up my coffin cause  
It's cold way down there  
I hear that's it's cold way down there  
Yeah, crazy cold way down there*