

## War of the worlds

*Sunday, July 5, 2009*

For longer than I care to admit, I accepted without examination what I was taught as a child – that we exist to serve a grumpy, grudge-holding God, first under the pall of original sin and thereafter in conflict with temptation. If I imagined any mechanism for this, I suppose it was a vast warehouse of switched-off spirits, all tainted by Adam’s transgression, all awaiting delivery, activation and rigorous testing to determine their suitability for readmission to paradise.



This “reconditioning” scenario assumes that the body and the spirit are in opposition, the spirit striving for heaven, the body raging against what Dylan Thomas called “the dying of the light.” If our bodies were in league with our spirits, wouldn’t they welcome death as a natural, desirable conclusion? We’d shed our bodies as casually as a snake sheds its skin ... no pain or despair, no anger, jealousy or rage ... none of the body’s panoply of responses to deprivation.

Orthodox holy men like Milton Green play up this conflict to great effect. Self-denial, they say, is purifying. Poverty, celibacy, removal of the offending hand ... Christ, pierced and scourged and bleeding on the cross ... wars and rumors of war between the two planes of existence. And extreme suffering does induce what many describe as religious ecstasy, doesn’t it? It loosens the body’s grip on our senses just long enough for us to glimpse the great beyond ... our “reward,” as we call it. Our eternal reward.

Ironically, I’ve found that the best way for me to distance myself from my body is to give it exactly what it wants, be that food, rest, sex or anything else it sets its sights on. This is how I get my body to shut up and leave me alone. Was it Reverend Ike who preached against “pie in the sky, by and by?” Carlton Pearson preaches that we make our own Hell right here on Earth, that all of us are glory-bound despite ourselves.

Disclaimer here: I’ve never had an out-of-body or near-death experience, never entered a trance state, never even been hypnotized. I have no first-hand evidence whatsoever that it’s possible to peek beyond the veil of this existence, but I have a tremendously powerful intuition that there is a veil and that there is an infinite and that we’re connected in some positive, affirming way to that infinite and to each other.

And I have no idea what I’m talking about.

Which is sort of the point. The brain’s ability to detect, let alone comprehend matters of the spirit is as doubtful in my opinion as the eye’s ability to see flavor. We can predict flavor based on appearances, but we can’t know it until our mouths get involved. What our spiritual mouths might be, by the way, I haven’t a clue.

Maybe, as Reverend Ike teaches, the spirit likes the body in the same way that people like houses and, for that matter, the snake likes its skin. Maybe the spirit wants its body to be happy and healthy and

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long-living and, by extension, might want the whole planet to be happy and healthy and long-living because this is where the spirit has chosen to be for a while. Maybe being here isn't a trial or a punishment, but a choice, made for reasons we won't fathom until the deed we're here to do is done.

Of course the body mourns its own passing, just as the snake's skin might mourn the end of its usefulness, but these transitions aren't tragedies. We shuttle from one realm to another. How many houses does the average person occupy in a lifetime? How many times does a snake shed its skin? And what does it matter? Houses come and houses go. The snake moves on. We move on. All glory is fleeting.

Maybe the spirit is honing itself on the body somehow and suffering, as we define it, is the abrasive. Maybe our sojourn here is a process of spiritual exfoliation. Maybe we are to our spirits what loofah sponges are to us. And we emerge from our bodies cleaner and smoother for the brief association.

At the same time, however, we're still us inside these bodies. We are here ... for now. If being here were a loss or a danger, surely we'd have adjusted course by now. The alternative is neck-deep in original sin, venial sin, mortal sin, temptation, penance, purgatory, damnation ... the big, angry, whack-a-mole god of the Old Testament ... all of which I reject reflexively.

I reject also my poor brain's determination to master this topic. Thinking is, I believe, a bodily function. Even what we describe as "sixth sense" is, I believe, only the liminal edge of the prosaic, a tiny sliver of the spiritual spectrum. While we may be able, with great effort, to detect spiritual matters for long enough to point ourselves toward them and bask in them ever so briefly, I believe we're better off disengaging our brains as we approach the target that we'll acquire only in death. The mind, duty-bound as the body's proxy, wants to comprehend, consume and manipulate everything it touches. This, I think, is why we're so driven to understand everything. But we can't. None of us. The best that we can do inside these bodies is be good bodies and, when we detect a glimmer of something spiritual, move toward it. And if we see somebody else doing this, we should tip-toe out of the room and close the door behind us as quietly as possible.

If this were a sermon, I'd refer now to the Bible passage that settles the issue once and for all and the one that comes immediately to mind is Psalm 46:10 – "Be still and know that I am God." Good advice, I think ... being still. Stop striving and acquiring and know that I am God. Stop worrying about what it all means, how it began, where it's going. Stop digging, stop deducing. Just stop. And know that I am God.

And God is Love, right? According to the newer of the two testaments, anyway. God is love and we are love and our very existence here inside these loathsome, brilliant bodies of ours is an expression of love.

Might the temporal realm and the spirit realm be two views of the same thing? They might, I suppose. But who am I to say? Who am I in any respect?

Maybe my uncertainty about the answer to this most fundamental question is itself the answer I'm looking for. And maybe this is where I should put down my pick and my shovel, look up at the mountain I'm trying to excavate, and be still.

**Length:** 12:00

**Music:** "Dance of the Knights" from Sergei Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, excerpts from Milton Green's sermon, "The Flesh and the Powers of Darkness," "Agnus Dei" from Morten Lauridsen's *Lux Aeterna*

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