

Talking of Michelangelo
Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell in the Burgundy Region

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PART ONE



Among Some Talk of You and Me

There is a visible world and an invisible world. What can we know for sure about either of them? Aren't they both equally mysterious? Sure, we cannot verify the existence of angels, but neither can we verify what a dinosaur really looked like because no one has ever seen a dinosaur with their own eyes, whereas, people have seen angels, or so they tell us.

I frankly don't understand why people have such a hard time believing in the invisible world, as if it were easier to be sure of what we can see than what we cannot see. How often do we decide to trust our feelings in complete contradiction to what is plainly present before us?

But the visible world is hard to ignore. It knocks on the doors of our senses, and demands entrance. Not only does the world of *things* barge in through our eyes, but it enters into our nose and through our mouth and makes tiny depressions on our skin as we touch it, so that when we let go there is a red mark there on our palm in the shape of it.

It is different with the invisible world, what most people call the spirit world. What I call the spirit world. Within this world, theologians think that we have identified the chief spirit, the source of all spirit (and matter), so we spell it with a capital letter, like this: Spirit.

They have also found this Spirit to be very different, higher up, stronger, kinder, wiser, and more intelligent -- like the aliens on Star Trek, only a million times more so. For that reason, we call it the Holy Spirit. Or just Spirit for short.

In this invisible, odorless, untouchable world, the Spirit doesn't knock on the door and demand to be let in, like light does to our eyes when we are sitting in a dark room and someone walks in and flips the switch. The Spirit is not rough, like pebbles on a gravel road that we can feel through the soles of our shoes.

The Spirit is more like a signal, an invisible airwave sent out at random, looking for a receiver. And inside each one of us there is a receiver, and if yours is turned on, and if your volume is up, and if you're listening, then you hear something. That first random signal comes to you and it makes a *ping* on the inside when it finally reaches this thing you call "me."

Unlike the physical world, it didn't have to knock, because it has a key. No, it doesn't need a key because it passes right through the doors, whether or not they are locked.

Whoever made the transmission is apparently the same person that outfitted me with a receiver. It must be, because the sender knows my frequency, and no matter how hard I try to tell other people my frequency, no one has ever managed to send such a perfectly clear and intimately personal signal as this one.

And although the signal seemed random at first, as the *pings* begin to happen more often and closer together, I soon realize that this signal is carrying a very personal message. Other people claim to be getting the signals too, but there is no way they are getting the same message that I am, because what the Spirit has to say to me could not be understood by anyone else. I can believe it is the same Spirit speaking to you, but even if it does say the same things to you, it must be using different words, because these words are for me.

That's another thing I like better about the Spirit than the physical world. At least the spiritual world has something to say. You can strike up a conversation with it. When the physical world assaults my senses at a baseball stadium, or even when it caresses my senses with a down comforter on a cold night, it isn't speaking to me. It's just incontrovertibly *there*. The Spirit, on the other hand, is always transmitting something. The Spirit has something to say. It doesn't just do things or simply exist, the Spirit always *means* something when it comes in contact with you.

All of this is why the Spirit feels as real to me as the chair I am sitting in. And I like the Spirit better than this chair, which is rather hard and uncomfortable.

The whole point about these two worlds is that I want to tell a story about what happened there, in both worlds, during about fourteen very intense days of my life. I guess any story takes place within these two worlds, but this story is primarily about the spiritual world. The material world is just there to set the stage. Scenery, as it were. More than scenery, the material world plays a supporting role. Well, actually, it is the stage. Perhaps it is all of those things. But anyhow, this is a story primarily about the reality of the spiritual world, which is usually harder to verify than the physical world which is why I began with this little reflection on the two worlds.

2

Every Good and Perfect Gift

I have a September birthday. September 9th, to be exact. In fact, my birthday is 9/9/66, which is interesting because you can turn it upside down and it is still the same date. Like this, 9/9/66. And, on that day when you wrote on your checks, 9/9/99, I turned 33. A very important age for hobbits.

There's something about nines: castings out nines, dressed to the nines, a cat has nine lives, Revolution Number 9, Number 9 Dream, My Baby's Traveling on the One After 909. Numbers are fascinating things. More spirit than matter I think. Not to belabor the point.

In January of 2006, Carole asked me, "So what do you want for your 40th birthday?" I could tell by the sound of her voice she had something in mind. She didn't want to tell me what she was thinking, but I got it out of her eventually; she was thinking of a portable GPS for my car. That's not a bad idea, I thought, but I didn't want to speak too soon. Forty is considered such a milestone; I wanted to get this right.

Have you noticed it is getting harder and harder to buy presents for your friends? We live in a country with such affluence, that if you want something, you generally go out and buy it. And despite this fact, despite the fact that between the time you decide you want something and the time you go out and buy it for yourself, your friends don't even have time to sneak a present in edgewise; despite this amazing fact, most people you talk to will say that they are not rich. I've read of studies where they went right up the socio-economic chain, asking everyone, "Are you rich?" and they had to get to the billionaires before anyone would come out and admit it.

But not me. I will admit it. I am rich. And I am hard to buy presents for.

I bet you now picture me as someone who has more money than you. Stop that. That's just my point. I probably don't have more money than you, but whatever the case, I am rich, and you are too. So stop imagining everyone else has more than you do, because they don't. Three billion people in the world (that's half the population) lives on less than \$1 a day. You've got all them beat, if nothing else.

You see, being "rich" shouldn't be thought of as some Holy Grail-type unattainable goal that happens to other people but never to me. Being rich is really as simple as saying, "I live in the United States," or any other developed country. It is as simple as saying, "I buy things on impulse when I am shopping," or "I throw away perfectly good food/clothes/etc. simply because I decided I didn't really want it anymore." Being rich is saying, "I have so much useless junk in my basement/garage/attic that it would take me a whole year of weekends just to dig it out and throw it in the garbage."

Yeah, being rich is not such an amazing thing. It's a lot more common than you think. I don't know why people aren't more proud and appreciative of it. My friend put it this way. Imagine a telephone book that contained the names of every person living today. Six billion names. Everyone alive. It's possible. In fact, I am sure that the venture capital guys are on it. Soon, it will fit on your phone. All that information will dance on the head of a pin.

But for now, say you have this telephone book in paper format, six feet high and four feet wide, and you push it over so that it falls open. Climb onto it and put your finger anywhere on the page. You can bet that if you were born in the United States 999 times out of a thousand, that person you pick randomly out of the world's phone book would trade places with you.

It has to be true. Try it. You flip it open and the first person whose name you choose is a Sandinista freedom fighter in the hills of South America. You think he'd change with you? You bet. Try it again, this time your finger lands upon a woman in Africa, or India, or in *any* third world country. Again, if you want to change places with that person, get your plane fare. You're on.

So anyway, I am one of those rich Americans who, when he wants something, he goes out and buys it. I am wondering what to ask for my 40th Birthday. But then I realize, if it's something I really want, asking Carole for it just means that I will have to wait nine months between this date in January when I am thinking about it and my September birthday to get it. So I actually – this is getting silly, but I actually start thinking of things that I *sort of* want, but that I don't want *too* much, because I will just have to wait nine months to get it. Whatever. I am rich.

Okay, maybe a GPS for my car. I can wait for that. Then I think, maybe an iPod. I could wait for that too. But are we the only family that doesn't have at least one iPod in their home? Do I want to go nine months in this condition?

But thinking about getting some *thing*, some gadget for the big 4-0 just makes me depressed. So after some thought and talking with the Spirit on this, it hits me like a ton of bricks. I go to my wife and I say, "For my 40th Birthday, I want to spend a week in a monastery in France."

Carole wasn't expecting that. At the time she was pregnant with our fifth child. She stays at home, home schools, and I have a home-office, so it is one big happy family. It's like living in our own cable channel: all family, all the time. Except when I am traveling. But that's only about five days a month, and always right in a row.

So the idea of me leaving them all alone for a week to travel to France, by myself, to skulk around in a monastery sounds rather bizarre, but I have my reasons. More on that later. First I had to get Carole to buy this. I felt good about the ask. I have primed the prospect, I waited for the right moment.

“No way!” she says, laughing in my face.

I’ve done sales. I am undaunted. I just smile, and give her that look. You know that look. She stops laughing and cocks her head and scrunches up her nose and says, “Are you for real?”

Aha! That’s what she said when I asked her to marry me. Book the tickets! A few days later she says, “Let me see the brochure.”

I didn’t pull this idea completely out of thin air. I had been corresponding with this monastery near Dijon ever since I was a French teacher at a Catholic high school over ten years ago. Okay, so here’s where the Spirit comes in for the first time.

This monastery in France sends out this impressive little newsletter in French once a month. About 20 years (more like 14) ago when I was teaching French at a Catholic High School, the religion teacher – who was also a monk – no relation – comes up to me and hands me this newsletter, which he can’t read because he doesn’t read French.

Now, if you want to appreciate this story, you have to begin to tune up your spiritual senses to see that nothing happens for a reason. I mean, everything happens by accident. No wait, actually, I mean that everything that happens by accident happens for a reason. Is that right? I heard this on Oprah.

The point is, that there are all of these little coincidences scattered throughout this story, and that’s where the Spirit is pinging me. In fact there are so many of these little coincidences that I hope you will begin to see this invisible hand guiding the economy of my life. That’s part of the whole point of the story.

Okay, so I have them forward the newsletter to my home, and lo these past 16 years I have been reading it religiously, so to speak, every month. One of the benefits of reading this newsletter is to keep current on my French. Despite living in Paris for six months after college, and studying in the South of France and leading student tours, my French is getting rusty. All of that francophilia was a long time ago. I haven’t been to France in exactly ten years. I have my own consulting firm now for small businesses and nonprofits, which affords me very little opportunity to speak French.

So I came up with this idea of spending a week in a monastery in France for the 40th birthday because 18 years ago someone randomly gave me this newsletter and started me corresponding with this French abbey in a little town near Dijon in the Burgundy region. Every once in a while I would open the envelope and a brochure would fall out for these weeklong Ignatian retreats. *I have never done an Ignatian retreat in a little medieval town in France where there has been an Abbey since 720 A.D. Someday I would like to.* That’s me thinking.

By the time Mary Clare was born in April, Carole was starting to soften to the idea. In fact, as they wheeled her out of surgery after the C-section, she looked at me lovingly and said, "You're such a wonderful husband, go ahead and book that trip to France."

Imagine my dilemma. (Thinking again.) *Does she really mean it? That was some heavy sedation they gave her before they cut her open. Maybe I should wait until the drugs wear off. She just told the nurse 'I love you.'* She is a nice nurse. *Maybe I can get an internet connection on that computer in the waiting room and check out the prices on Expedia?*

The internet was down in the waiting room. I gave her two weeks. She was still firm on letting me go, so I booked it. I even worked in a weekend in Paris on the front end, since I had to fly in and out of Paris anyway, right?

Now here's something I want you to notice. As I told people what I was doing for my 40th Birthday, no one said, "Are you nuts?" Most people thought it was kind of cool. I think most people, when they hear about the medieval town, the Burgundy region, Benedictine monks roaming the halls in those hooded robes, chanting in Latin all the time, most people could appreciate five days of that. Especially if they have five kids, home school and work from a home office.

Then one day, I mentioned this universal appreciation for my idea to a good friend of mine, and he said, "No way man! Of course they won't say that to your face, but behind your back, they're all saying, 'Is he nuts to leave his family to go skulk around a monastery in France for a week?'"

At first I was really shaken by his comment. Is that what they really thought? I couldn't understand people holding back their opinion. They never do otherwise. Why should this be any different? They all said we were crazy when we told them we were home schooling. In fact, complete strangers tell me at least once a week that I am crazy as soon as they realize that "all of those kids" are mine. I will sometimes say, "These four are mine, the other one followed me out of the post office and I buckled him in the van before I had a chance to look at him."

3

Some Overwhelming Question

Everyone wants to be part of a larger story. Don't you think? Who would be content to think that their whole life and everything that happens to them is an isolated incident, a one-off, with absolutely no relationship to anything that went before, came after or happened contemporaneously?

I happened to be alive during the bicentennial celebration in 1976. I was just ten years old then, and it made a powerful impression on me, because that year, on the 4th of July everyone was part of what happened two hundred years ago. All those great statesmen who did all those brave and noble things, that all belonged to us. And even though the economy in the US was weak, and our foreign policy was a mess and would blow up in our face just a few years later, despite all that, everyone was celebrating in the present how great it was to be an American. And I even remember seeing a little child on a tricycle in the parade with a sign that said, "Tricentennial or bust." The future was ours as well.

Being part of a larger story allows you to live in the past, present and the future. It allows you to live more broadly – far beyond the limits imposed on your life by time, death, distance and culture.

For me, this is one of the most attractive things about Christianity. I get to be part of something that stretches over 2000 years in the past, and clear into eternity. As for geography, I am so glad that Christianity did not start in Milwaukee, or even in the US. It would feel so parochial. I would be sure my embrace of it would just be a cultural accident due to where I was born, like the fact that I call a water fountain a "bubbler" like everyone else in Milwaukee (but no one outside of Milwaukee) does.

But Christianity did not start in Milwaukee; it started in the middle east, in a totally different culture, in a totally different time, and in a totally different religion even – so it's not just some tribal or herd thing that makes me Christian. I am part of this huge story that spreads across time and space which I can share and call my own. Moses, Solomon, Peter, Paul, Augustine, Charlemagne, Thomas Aquinas, Joan of Arc, Bing Crosby in "Going My Way," all of that, is now part of my story, too.

Here's just one little way in which I live in this bigger story every day. There is a certain type of prayer called the Breviary. It is also called the Liturgy of the Hours. During the Reformation it was pared down considerably in England and became the Book of Common Prayer. The Breviary is what monks are usually chanting whenever you do hear monks chanting.

The Breviary is mainly a way to structure your prayer life, and since one can hardly know how to pray who does not know the Psalms – the great Hebrew hymnal – the Breviary is

composed mainly of psalms, with some readings from the Epistles, Church Fathers, and Old Testament thrown in.

All those people that go by the technical term, “religious,” that is Priests, monks, brothers, sisters, nuns – they all make a vow to pray The Office – as the Breviary is called, every day. Many lay people choose to pray The Office as well. Christopher Columbus was famous for his dedication to praying The Office for example. Though that would never show up in the history books. In fact, I don’t think Columbus even shows up anymore. Or if he does he’s a terrorist or something.

I was turned on to the Breviary by a seminarian friend of mine. I have been praying it for about 15 years now, morning and evening. I was aware that Catholics all over the world pray the office, but I was really stoked when I found out that they are all praying the same psalms and prayers every day. I test this by buying Breviaries in the different countries I visit, then compare them with mine. It works. Same prayers, different language.

So when I wake up and pray the Wednesday morning prayer on August 12th, for example, other Christians who are one hour east of me have just finished those very same prayers, and in the next time zone to the West they will wake up and pray these same prayers an hour later. And you can think about it going all around the world like that – like the wave at a baseball stadium.

The same prayers go up to God from around the world all day and all night. This is one way the Church carries out the Biblical command to “pray always.” And when you consider that people have been praying the Breviary for nearly 2000 (more like 1700) years, it really does plug you into something far beyond yourself, and it helps you to make connections, like when I found out Columbus prayed the Breviary every day, and I thought, *Woah!, I can totally picture him getting up early in the morning and opening that book to the right day and praying those psalms.* That happened again when I was listening to Robinson Caruso on tape and he had just gotten to the Island and he said, “I was reading my Bible one night . . .” and again, I thought, *Oh yeah, I do that. I read the Bible at night. I’m not marooned on a desert Island, but I get it.*

That universality, that connection, that solidarity with others through space and time is extremely comforting. And, it goes a long way toward placating the feelings of total insignificance I get from watching Nova.

So, yeah, everyone wants to be part of a larger story, but which story should I choose? There are so many stories. First there are all the religions to choose from, then there are all the philosophies. Then, of course, there’s television. You know, how those shows like Survivor, and Real World, and American Idol – you can become part of those stories because they are interactive. You can vote people off the show and all that. I think people get into that genre because they want to be part of a larger world. For me, if it’s between these TV shows and some 2000 year old religion, I guess the religion wins, hands down.

But again, which one? Here's how I handle that question.

When I was an English major in college, we would study poetry or plays and we would read what the critics had to say about the meaning of the Ezra Pound's in "In a Station of the Metro," and we would discuss whether King Lear's struggle really with his girls or with himself, and whether or not Gatsby was a Christ figure the way he carried that air mattress on his shoulder to the pool, etc. Then of course, we would give our own ideas of what these things meant.

As we did that, it seemed to me that the person who could come up with an interpretation that reconciled the most elements with the most consistency and unity – that person was the winner.

Then every once in a while someone would say, "But I read an interview with the author and he said it was something different." And the good teachers would always step in at that point and say, "No matter. Once the author publishes his work, his or her interpretation is just another one to be considered." Because after all, authors don't ever fully realize what they're saying. Like those poets who go and sit in the back at discussions of their work just to find out the deeper meaning of what they wrote.

That's got to be what religion is. People searching for an interpretation of life that reconciles all these disparate elements. Religion is an effort to make sense of the world. Because everything about life is so dog gone *engaging*. Even when you get desensitized to the little miracles, like flowers coming up out of the ground without any help or hair growing back no matter how many times you cut it – even if you get used to the little things, something big and shocking comes along and shakes you out of your complacency, something like 9/11 or one of your parents dying, and then you're engaged again.

And when you are engaged, you try to figure out how to put all of these elements of your story together. You try to come up with an interpretation that works. And for me, and for most people -- one out of three, if the polls are correct -- Christianity does the best job of reconciling all of these weird elements of life. Especially love and suffering. Christianity does an especially good job on love and suffering.

Theologians – like all academics – have a fancy term for finding the right interpretation. More precisely, though, they have a term for finding that one filter or way of looking at things that makes everything else fall into place. They call it the *hermeneutic key*. That's what we all need to do, is to find the hermeneutic key for our life. Until we do, we can get all goofed up by seeing things the wrong way.

I often think of this in relation to that great poem by T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." I was an English major in college and later taught English at a high school. I have taught and been taught this poem many times and I have never heard an interpretation that worked for me. In fact, IMHO, I think all the critics have it wrong because they are using the wrong key. They all seem to think that Prufrock's problem is

with women and romance. They see him as a sort of shrinking violet that can't quite seem to get up the nerve to proclaim his love to women. This is the interpretation I heard over and over in college, and it's also the interpretation that appeared in the teachers' manual when I was teaching high school. And you can point to lines like, "If one, settling a pillow by her head, should say, 'That is not what I meant at all.'" And the women with "arms that are braceleted and white and bare, (But in the lamplight downed with light brown hair!)" and "perfume from a dress that makes me so digress," and all that. But this interpretation explains less than half of the poem and leaves so much of the poem untouched.

I think that Prufrock's problem is that he comes face to face with his mortality. Somehow, maybe when he's wandering "at dusk through narrow streets" he realizes that he is living an empty life, and if he doesn't do something to change it, he is doomed, or damned, as it were.

(NOTE: If it's possible, I considered running the poem in a sidebar, or an appendix. Not sure with copyright and all... but it is essential to the story)

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

*S'io credessi che mia risposta fosse
a persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
questa fiamma staria senza più scosse.
Ma per chi che giammai di questo fondo
non torna vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question...
Oh, do not ask, «What is it?»
Let us go and make our visit.
In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.
The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.
And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

authoritative looking tome – gloss this line by saying, “See John 11:1-44.” This is the story where Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

But that’s the wrong Lazarus! Wrong Lazarus, wrong key, wrong interpretation. If you want to see this poem in the right light, check out Luke 16: 19-31 where Jesus tells the story of the beggar named Lazarus who sat at the rich man’s gate. Every day the rich man passed poor Lazarus, but he never paid attention to him. The dogs would come and lick Lazarus’ soars, but the rich man never gave him a thing. So they both die and Lazarus ends up in heaven and the rich man in hell. No surprise there. But the rich man begs Father Abraham to relieve his suffering. He even asks if the beggar Lazarus can come and give him a sip of water because he is burning up in hell. But Abraham can’t allow that because of “the great gulf that is fixed” between heaven and hell. No one can cross over. So, the rich man says, “Okay, then, send Lazarus back to earth to warn my brothers.”

At first, Abraham demures, saying, “No, they can just read the Bible and get the truth.” But then the rich man says, “No, that won’t work. But if someone would rise from the dead and go to them, that would do the trick.” But Abraham says, “Look, if they won’t believe the Bible, then it’s hopeless. Even if a man were to return from the dead, they would not listen.”

Got it? Even if a man named Lazarus should come back from the dead . . . and here’s Prufrock saying, “I am Lazarus come from the dead to tell you all, I shall tell you all!” Well just what do you think Prufrock wants to tell these women who come and go talking of Michelangelo? Why, about The Last Judgment of course! Do you think Prufrock fancies himself Lazarus come all the way back from the dead just to find a wife?

When I was an English teacher, all of the American Lit textbooks glossed John 11. As I said, that’s the wrong Lazarus. That’s just Jesus raising his buddy because he loved him. That’s not a hermeneutic key to the Prufrock poem.

Now, I abhor writing in books, and I am not quick to question authority. Graffiti is a definite no for me. But despite all of that, I used to have the students take out a pen, and in their books, next to the John 11 gloss, I would have them add, “c.f. Luke 16:19-31.” I knew those books would go on to another class, and I wanted those other kids to read about the right Lazarus, the poor beggar at the gate. That’s Prufrock’s Lazarus, coming back from the dead to warn those taking their toast and tea to give some serious thought to their immortal souls.

But, alas, Prufrock just can’t do it. He can’t tell his peers the truth about the most important concepts in all the world, what theologians call the four last things: death, judgment, heaven and hell.