

One Dark and Stormy Night in the Afterlife

4200 words

It was a dark and stormy night and Mr. Robert Ingersoll, a writer, philosopher, and retired lawyer from Dobbs Ferry, New York, was lost in the woods. He was unsure how he came to be in the woods or even which woods he found himself in. He supposed that he must still be in New York, but where in New York, he was uncertain.

An hour previously, Robert had awakened at the base of an impressive conifer, which led him to believe that he must have been beaten and robbed. However, the fact that he felt no pain and appeared not to have a single bruise or scrape countered the theory that he had been the victim of a thrashing.

“They must have chloroformed me,” Robert surmised. “Surely that is the case, for I feel quite undamaged. They were gentlemen, these robbers, inasmuch as a robber can be a gentleman. This will work in their favor if they are ever brought to justice.”

Robert forged ahead through the blizzard, marveling at the fact that he was unaffected by the cold despite wearing only his usual winter-weight suit and an overcoat. He moved easily through the fallen snow, almost as if he was walking on air.

Robert saw a light ahead. A lantern hung in front of a small tavern. He could see a roaring fire burning in a fireplace and was well pleased.

“This rustic place is a welcome sight!” Robert declared. “Although I am neither particularly hungry or thirsty, it will warm my soul to enjoy some hearty food and a good drink. Perhaps they can make me a hot toddy, or maybe a glass of wine would be the thing.”

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Robert pushed the door open and stepped into the tavern. He noticed an elderly gentleman in priest’s robes sipping wine at a table near the fire. After ordering a glass of wine from the innkeeper, a roughly dressed, swarthy, bearded fellow with long curly dark hair, Robert asked the priest if he could join him.

“Certainly, good sir,” the cleric replied, his accent identifying him as Eastern European. “I am pleased for your company.”

Robert sat down and extended his hand.

“The name is Robert Ingersoll, and I am a lawyer by trade. I note that you are a priest. Although I am staunchly agnostic, I trust that we will be able to find common ground.”

“I agree that finding common ground will make for pleasant conversation,” the priest surmised.

“My name is Karol Józef Wojtyła, although for the past twenty-seven years, I have also been known as Pope John Paul the Second.”

“I beg your pardon, good sir, but the current pope is Pope Leo XIII,” the puzzled Mr. Ingersoll replied, then laughed, patting his companion’s hand.

“A fine jest, Father,” he chuckled. “Good humor always makes for common ground.”

“But I do not jest,” the puzzled pope responded.

“Then it must be a miscommunication between us. Your mellifluously accented English informs me that you are European. May I ask which country you hail from?”

“I come from Poland, dear fellow.”

“Poland—excellent, excellent! I know several fine Poles. Polish cuisine is a favorite of mine. I do not speak a word of Polish, however. Perhaps in translating from Polish to English, pope means the same thing as, say, cardinal.”

The innkeeper brought the men two steaming bowls of vegetable stew and refilled their wine. The pair toasted to one another’s health. John Paul drank half of his wine in one gulp.

“I must say, Sir, something odd is going on here,” he postulated.

“Indeed. It has been a night for odd things. Is there anything that you find particularly peculiar?”

“You stated that the current pope was Pope Leo XIII. However, Pope Leo XIII reigned from February 1878 until his death in 1903.”

“Did you say his death in 1903, Sir?”

“I did, Sir.”

“Father, you are pulling my leg again,” Robert chuckled. “You are the most sprightly priest I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. Why, if all priests were as entertaining as you, I might well have converted to Catholicism.”

“I am pleased that you find my company amusing, but I fail to see what is especially entertaining about my observations regarding His Holiness Pope Leo XIII,” the nonplussed John Paul countered. “It is merely fact, my good fellow. Perhaps the wine has gone to your head.”

“Perhaps I was unconscious for longer than I thought,” Robert replied, quaffing his wine, and signaling the innkeeper for a refill. “I daresay, I must have pulled a Rip Van Winkle.”

“Now I believe you are pulling my leg,” the Pope chuckled. “Very well, let us have some fun. What year is it for you, Sir?”

“The same year it is for you and everyone who walks upon the Earth, Sir. It is 1899. Unless perhaps it is 1903 for you.”

“It is 2005, Sir,” John Paul replied.

Robert smirked.

“Do you enjoy H.G. Wells, Father?” he inquired. “I enjoyed his fantastical story of the time machine myself. Surely you must have read it.”

“I have read many things,” John Paul replied. “But I assure you, Mr. Ingersoll, that I am not pulling your leg. It was the first of April 2005 when I walked through that door. I had just gotten up to make my way to the lavatory, a painful journey considering my advancing Parkinson’s disease. Therefore, I submit that you, Sir, are an actor sent to play an April Fool’s joke on the old gentleman to bring a smile to his face. Well, you have succeeded, my friend. I have quite forgotten my pain and my declining abilities. I am sitting here enjoying a fine wine and a robust stew with my talented companion, and I thank you for it.”

“I am not an actor, Sir,” Robert swore solemnly as he signaled the innkeeper for another refill.

“As I told you, I am a lawyer by trade. I was feeling quite poorly up until the moment when I woke in the wood. My heart, you see, no longer sufficiently pumps my blood, and this makes breathing difficult. But here I am feeling spry as a schoolboy, and I daresay, you look to be the picture of health yourself. I submit to you, Sir, that we are dead.”

“I am inclined to agree with you, my friend,” the Pope concurred. “I must say that Heaven is not what I believed it would be, although it is certainly a pleasant place.”

“Perhaps this place isn’t Heaven, but somewhere in between,” Robert surmised. “That would make sense for me, being both a law-abiding citizen and an agnostic. I never believed that bit about people being sent to hell for not believing a certain way. I said the following words in my lecture entitled The Great Infidels. I pray they will not offend you, but I stand by them.”

“I am interested in hearing your thoughts, Sir. Please divulge them.”

“My thoughts, my friend, are as follows. All the meanness, all the revenge, all the selfishness, all the cruelty, all the hatred, all the infamy of which the heart of man is capable, grew blossomed, and bore fruit in this one word – Hell.”

John Paul was silent for a moment as he contemplated Robert Ingersoll’s words. Then he smiled.

“Mr. Ingersoll, I believe we were sent here to learn from one another,” he said. “I think you are correct that the threat of hell, or at least the belief that a given group of people do not deserve Heaven, has been the cause of much distress. I am grateful for this knowledge and hope that I will have the chance to apply it in some fashion.”

“How do you suppose that you might apply it, Sir?”

“I am currently unsure of the specifics. Perhaps I will teach it to those whose calling it is to serve our Lord in the living world. Perhaps I shall return to Earth as a spirit or an angel and impart the knowledge through dreams.”

“Do you think there is a chance that you might be born again to spread this new knowledge?”

“If God wills it, I would like that. I hope to have communion with the people, that is the most important thing. I always enjoyed meeting different people, learning about them, and serving them however I could.”

“As did I,” Robert agreed.

“There, you see. We are more alike than we are different, are we not?”

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A band entered the room and began to play a lively polka. The Pope's eyes sparkled. He grinned, tapping his foot on the floor and his hand on the table.

"I see this music brings you joy," Robert noted. "Your happiness is infectious."

"I have a sweet tooth for song and music," John Paul admitted. "This is my Polish sin."

"There is no sin in enjoying a merry tune. Can you dance the Polka?"

"Is the Pope Catholic?" John Paul laughed. "Come, my friend, we will dance together!"

The men danced merrily to the music, forgetting their differences and the struggles of the lives they had just left behind. The innkeeper came out from behind the bar and joined them. The happy music and joyful energy attracted an angel and a devil who were strolling through the forest, and they joined in the dance.

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Suddenly the door burst open and a lanky, white-haired, pale-complexioned man with wild blue eyes bellowed at the assembly:

"REPENT, YOU SINNERS! DON'T YOU KNOW THAT GOD HATES FAGS?"

"Oh dear, not him," John Paul sighed. "I was sure he would be going the other way."

"A contemporary of yours?" Robert inquired.

"I knew of him," the Pope corrected. "We did not move in the same circles."

"He seems a bit overzealous in his belief that a little music and dancing are sinful."

"Stupidity is also a gift of God, but one mustn't misuse it. Give him a moment and you will see what I mean."

“See here, Sir, there is no reason for you to come into this place bellowing and disrupting our celebration,” Robert chided the man. “Perhaps you had an unsettling journey. Why don’t you sit down, have a glass of wine, and tell us your troubles?”

“Fred Phelps does not tell his troubles to a bunch of Nancy boys in a fag bar,” the man barked.

“Just look at the state of this place! Men dancing with men! Angels dancing with demons! The lot of you are nothing but a bunch of lowdown, degenerate homosexuals, and God hates fags!”

“His phonograph is certainly stuck in an unpleasant groove,” Robert lamented to John Paul.

“Here we were having such a fine time despite our philosophical differences and this deranged lout had to come in and spoil things.”

“So long as our understanding of one another continues and our peaceful philosophies reach the hearts and minds of those willing to listen, men like him need be nothing more than a momentary foul odor in an otherwise pleasant meadow. Let us try to make him feel welcome. Perhaps he will cease his bluster and open his mind to better possibilities.”

“Very well, I suppose it is the righteous course of action. Sir, perhaps we got off on the wrong foot. I am willing to try again. My name is Robert Ingersoll, and this is my new friend, His Holiness Pope John Paul II. I take it that your name is Fred Phelps.”

“My name is Fred Phelps and I surely do not see what I am supposed to repent.”

“I do not ask you to repent, Sir. I only suggest that we got off to a bad start. We are willing to try again if you are willing to do the same.”

“It is not I who needs to repent, Sunny Jim. Repentance means to have a hearty, thorough change of mind, and it includes rejecting the sinful, filthy lifestyle you have been living. And, for the most part, fags cannot repent because they are proud of their sin.”

“Nobody here is sinning, Sir. We are merely dancing and enjoying one another’s company. I do not know where you get the idea that either of us lived sinful, filthy lifestyles. I was a family man, a lawyer and something of a philosopher. Surely you cannot imagine that this good man lived a sinful, filthy lifestyle. He was the pope!”

“And I say that men dancing with men can only lead to men fornicating with men and that the pope wears a dress. I also say, thank God for 9/11. Thank God that the wrath of God was poured out upon this evil nation. America, land of the sodomite damned. We thank thee, Lord God Almighty, for answering the prayers of those that are under the altar.”

“John Paul, I know that you are a man of peace, as am I, but please, let us throw him out!”

Robert begged. “He is beyond odious! I was having such a delightful time discussing philosophy and enjoying freedom from my suffering body. If I had a choice between spending eternity in my body as it was in the year preceding my death or spending eternity with this character, I would choose to be back in my body.”

“As would I,” John Paul agreed. “But perhaps it is my cross to bear to try and convince this lost soul to see the error of his ways that he may enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

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At that moment, a group of Valkyries entered the tavern.

“Behold, Sisters, this little place is bigger on the inside!” one of them remarked.

“You filthy Swedes!” Phelps bellowed. “Thank God for the tsunami and thank God that two thousand dead Swedes are fertilizing the ground over there in Asia. How many of these two thousand, do you suppose, were fags and dykes? This is how the Lord deals with His enemies. And the Lord has got some enemies. And Sweden heads the list. You filthy Swedes. You filthy Swedes!”

The Valkyries ignored Phelps' bluster. The innkeeper brought them lager and they embraced him. They joined the other guests in the joyful dance. One of the Valkyries approached Robert, John Paul, and Phelps. She shook hands with Robert and embraced John Paul.

"Would you like me to remove this nuisance for you, Father?" she inquired, indicating Phelps. John Paul smiled warmly.

"No, dear Sister, it will be fine. I will do my best to see if I can convince him to alter his wicked points of view. As it stands, I am not even sure that Hell would take him."

"You're an American, aren't you?" Phelps asked Robert. "Or are you perhaps Canadian?"

"Canada is a filthy country run by fags, which has Draconian laws making it a crime to preach the Gospel there. All of these cowardly kissy-poo preachers who telecast their milquetoast sermons into Canada have to edit out every single word critical of fags -- snip, snip, snip -- or the fag officials of Canada will arrest and criminally prosecute the Canadian affiliates, and shut down their stations! There's no freedom of speech in Canada. There's no freedom of religion in Canada. It is against the law to read the Bible in Canada."

"I am an American," the rattled Ingersoll replied. "But I believe that you are quite mistaken that it is against the law to read the Bible in Canada."

"God hates America, and God demonstrated that hatred to some modest degree only last Tuesday -- sent in those bombers, those hellacious 767 Boeing bombers, and it was a glorious sight. What you need to do is see in those flames -- those sickening, twisting, burning, life-destroying flames, brightly shining from every television set around the world! You need to see in those flames a little preview of the flames of Hell that are going to soon engulf you, my friend. Burn your soul forever!"

“I think this one is a madman,” Robert expounded, gripping the Valkyrie’s hand. “Pray, Madam, is there some asylum to which you could take him? I fear there is no way for us to talk sense to him. I believe the situation calls for compassion, however I cannot bear another moment in his presence.”

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A pair of angels walked up to Phelps, taking him by the arms.

“Now you faggots and dykes see it!” the pastor gloated. “The Lord has sent his angels to rescue me from this den of vice! I will watch with glee as He rains His wrath down on the sinners!”

“What will happen to him?” Ingersoll wondered as the angels led Phelps away. “Surely he isn’t to be rewarded for his hatefulness. Please tell me that can’t be so.”

“He is being taken to a place of healing as you suggested,” the innkeeper explained. “He began to have an epiphany in the final years of his life, leading to his excommunication from the hateful institution that he founded. The behavior he exhibited here is backlash as his psyche makes a last desperate attempt to hold onto the beliefs that sustained him for most of his life.

You gentlemen are welcome to stay here and continue enjoying the revelry, or you can accompany us to the Seraphic Sanitarium. The choice is yours.”

“Robert, I have dearly enjoyed your company and this time of celebration,” John Paul said. “But at heart, I am a healer. I would like to learn more of this Seraphic Sanitarium and the ways in which it may aid unfortunate souls such as Mr. Phelps.”

“I believe I will join you,” Robert decided. “There is a time and place for revelry, but there is also a time and place for increasing knowledge. Besides, my friend, I have numerous philosophical questions that I would like to hear your opinions on. You may be a religious man,

but you are also a rational man. Few things are quite as exhilarating as a brisk discussion of philosophy with intelligent fellows.”

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The innkeeper led Robert and John Paul into the forest and through a dark tunnel in the side of a mountain. When they emerged on the other side, they found themselves in an idyllic glen with a pristine lake and a steaming hot spring. Spirits bathed themselves in the lake, soaked in the spring, and engaged in various activities including painting landscapes, playing croquet and badminton, or sipping tea.

The angels led Phelps to the spring. Discreetly hidden behind a cloud of mist, he slipped off his clothing and stepped into the spring where he sat, gazing reverently at the passing clouds above.

“You gentlemen are welcome to stay here as long as you wish,” the innkeeper invited. “My father’s house has many rooms. Feel free to visit one or all.”

John Paul knelt at the innkeeper’s feet and kissed his hand.

“Thank you, my Lord,” he said. “And thank you for granting me a fine friend to explore Heaven with.”

“He came of his own accord,” Christ said. “Rise now, my disciple. Thank you for the good works you accomplished on my behalf during your time walking the Earth. Your benevolent spirit and willingness to correct your own course are commendable qualities.”

Robert Ingersoll extended his hand and bowed low.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir,” he said. “Although I did not adhere to the teachings of the church during the latter years of my lifetime, now that I have had occasion to meet you in person, may I say that I have the utmost regard for you. You are benevolent and patient and desire healing and happiness above all things.”

“The church does not always teach the spirit of my word, Sir,” Christ explained. “Churches tend to have their own agendas. Like the individuals who attend them, churches may be judged on their own merit.”

“As you say, Friend Jesus. I wonder, do you have a moment to explain a few things to me over tea? Specifically, those visions that our unfortunate companion was railing about. Flames I understand, of course, but what are bombers and bow wings, and what is tell-a-vision? Are they the ravings of a madman or are they contraptions that I would not be aware of because they did not exist in my era?”

“The latter, Sir,” Christ replied. “John Paul would be better able to explain these things. Like so many others, he witnessed via television the attacks that Mr. Phelps described. Gentlemen, I am pleased to have you among us. Explore or relax to your heart’s content, and if you need anything, please don’t hesitate to call on me.”

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“I believe that it will be easiest to explain the event that Mr. Phelps was describing with pictures,” John Paul said, taking a sketch book and a set of pencils from an attending angel.

“Please, my friend. I am curious as a child to learn of events and technologies of the future.”

As John Paul reiterated the events of September 11, 2001, Robert watched and listened attentively, expressing wonder and horror. When the Pope’s story was done, the pair sat silent for a time, watching the sky, and sipping tea. Finally, Robert spoke again.

“John Paul, I mean no disrespect to either you or to Christ,” he said. “He is the finest of people, clearly an evolved soul, so I hope you will not take offense at my next line of questioning.”

“I have not taken offense yet,” the Pope responded. “Please continue.”

“Why should we place Christ at the top and summit of the human race? Was he kinder, more forgiving, more self-sacrificing than Buddha? Was he wiser, did he meet death with more perfect calmness, than Socrates? Was he more patient, more charitable, than Epictetus? Was he a greater philosopher, a deeper thinker, than Epicurus? In what respect was he the superior of Zoroaster? Was he gentler than Lao-tsze, more universal than Confucius? Were his ideas of human rights and duties superior to those of Zeno? Did he express grander truths than Cicero? Was his mind subtler than Spinoza’s? Was his brain equal to Kepler’s or Newton’s? Was he grander in death – a sublimer martyr than Bruno? Was he in intelligence, in the force and beauty of expression, in breadth and scope of thought, in wealth of illustration, in aptness of comparison, in knowledge of the human brain and heart, of all passions, hopes and fears, the equal of Shakespeare, the greatest of the human race?”¹

John Paul sat silently studying his companion for a moment. He laughed and clapped his hand atop Robert’s.

“My introspective friend, it is a good thing that we have all of eternity to discuss your many iterations of a core query,” he said. “To boil everything you have asked down to a simplified concept, I believe that the thing that separates our host from all those that you mentioned aside from the Buddha is his embodiment of divinity. Both Christ and the Buddha channeled pure benevolence. I may have chosen one as my master, but both are worthy of reverence.”

“As I said before, my friend, if more of the religious people I knew had been as considerate as you, I may have remained religious myself. My father was, after all, a preacher. He often came under fire from the church for his open-minded views. It was the inflexibility of the church that swayed me to agnosticism. There were too many fire-and-brimstone adherents such as our Mr.

Phelps and too few thoughtful men like you and my father. Although I must admit that Mr. Phelps brings a special flavor of insanity to his brand of Calvinism.”

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Phelps emerged from the spring and donned a white robe. He approached John Paul and Robert with a congenial smile and grasped their hands.

“You’re good people!” he declared.

“I thank you, Sir,” John Paul returned. “I am pleased to see that you have had an epiphany.”

“Come, Mr. Phelps, let us stroll around the grounds until you feel at home,” an angel invited.

“I am home,” Phelps returned, a placid smile on his face. “I am angry no longer. I have found peace. Allow me to tell you about it!”

“Am I wicked for saying better that angel than us?” Robert wondered as Phelps and the angel strolled away.

“Perhaps a little,” John Paul laughed, taking another sip of tea. “But I believe you can be forgiven for it. Mr. Phelps as we experienced him at the tavern was quite overwhelming. Now that he has seen the error of his ways and softened his heart, we may experience him as a different person. Robert, may I say again how blessed I feel to have made your acquaintance today. I look forward to the experiences and conversations we will share in Paradise.”

Notes and Acknowledgments

Most of the words spoken by Fred Phelps in this piece are his own. Pope John Paul II and Robert Ingersoll are quoted as well, but far more of their exchange was based on artistic license.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_G._Ingersoll

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1 Quote from *About the Holy Bible* by Robert G. Ingersoll

