

Happy Hunting Grounds... but are they happy?

A Fictional Account by Jim Chapman

I ran into an old friend after a long absence; he seemed relieved to see me, surprising me with a hug. He didn't speak for a few seconds. Finally, he cleared his throat.

"I was afraid you'd gone on ... to the Happy Hunting Grounds," he said solemnly. "I hadn't seen you around in a long time. I wasn't sure if..."

"No, no ... I'm not dead yet," I said, laughing. We chatted and vowed to get together again.

Happy Hunting Grounds ... I chuckled.

It was a nice way for him to picture me, I suppose. Better he pictured me in the Happy Hunting Grounds than eternally pushing a rock up a hill or swimming in a lake of salted fire, anyway. At least he thought of me as *someplace* – not just disintegrated into the elements.

I tried to picture myself in those Happy Hunting Grounds. I picture the brookies tearing up spinners on a majestic trout stream as I fill my creel with so many fish I can't even count them all.

But if my Heavenly luck is anything like my earthly luck, I will hear jostling through the bushes and suddenly see a smiling game warden pop out.

"How many fish you got there, fella? Looks like you might be a smidge over the limit," he said. And oh yeah, I'm a *smidge* over the limit. Like, six years in a federal penitentiary and two year's salary in fines over the limit.

So he impounds my vehicle (a late model celestial chariot with mud grip tires) and takes me downtown to book me with a million-page law book. I don't get a phone call to an attorney, because no lawyers made it to Heaven. (with apologies to my attorney friends.)

So I quickly skip out on this vision of a better place, cause, frankly, *it ain't*.

Everyone has a name for the “better place” the world over: Happy Hunting Grounds, Valhalla, Elysian Fields, Heaven, Beulah Land, Paradise, Nirvana, the ether, the Shire, Asgard and dozens more.

The central idea is we’re hoping it’s *better* than right here, right now, because frankly, right here and now blows. Usually we cast about for a vision of the better place when things fall apart, such as at funerals.

I have a talented cousin who’s often asked to sing at funerals, and when she croons “Beulah Land” with such ache and longing, I always choke up a bit.

"I'm kind of homesick for a country

To which I've never been before.

No sad goodbyes will there be spoken

*For time won't matter anymore."*¹

Yeah, well, I know that feeling. I bet you’ve run into it, as well. Nothing soothes the insane ache that grips us when someone is taken from us, does it? It seems we can handle the sudden shock of loss, but we cannot handle the endless raw absence itself, month after month, year after year.

So we carry our memories in a desperate and white-knuckled way, as if we don’t want those we’ve lost thinking we’ve forgotten them. (As if we even could). And we don’t envision them as no longer being here, but rather, we picture them as being *someplace else*.

“Well, John’s in a better place now,” we say about the fellow lying in the casket. And everyone nods. Yes, he certainly *is* in a better place. And a top shelf mortician will even make the expression on the face of the guy lying there look like he’s agreeing with everyone about being in a better place now. That’s what you call a Southern coup de grâce.

But then just ask anyone to describe this “better place.” Every single person offers a different idea on it – some being so far apart as to seem like hell for another person.

¹ Written by Edgar Page Stites, 1876

And by the way, what do we really mean by “better”?

One common thread of the better concept is this: It’s everything we consider good *here* – jacked up on steroids. It’s the land of endless free Reese’s cups. We get superman bodies with 24-inch biceps and can bench press a loaded school bus. Streets of gold. Pearls hanging everywhere. The keyword is swanky. And bling. Lots of bling. There, even a cat wears four gold Rolexes. Country boys get horseshoes and posts made of gold. Everyone gets credit out the wazoo. Buy the Lamborghini; get the mink stole and the bass boat.

Shucks! Buy two of each! This is the hereafter! The sky’s the limit!

So we arrive at an idea of “better” by interpolating outward from an inward hotspot of unsatisfied yearning, thinking the better place will settle all accounts along the yearning curve.

Yet, there is a small problem with this equation. Actually, not a small problem at all. A barn door.

May I give an illustration of this dilemma?

Let’s picture a well-heeled, old money, wealthy couple who have an auto accident one day and suddenly arrive in Heaven. A few days later, this couple’s next door neighbors also arrive.

The four bluebloods pause to compare notes.

“Well, how does this place rate, Merrill?”

“Terrible,” Merrill said. “No VIP rooms. I can’t even find the country club! Decorations are gaudy, looks like all gold and pearls. Very showy. Very new money, strictly. No class. No parking at all. And I can’t even locate my Bentley.”

“Well, how’s the food here?”

“They don’t even *serve* food here, Ship. They said we didn’t need food here.”

“The *hell* you say!” exclaimed Shipard. “They’ll need to know I enjoy a filet mignon each Thursday for dinner. Medium rare!! And then a decent Cuban cigar and shot of Bushmills afterward. And Dom likes a Belgian mint after dinner. Somebody get me my lawyer! The manager! The cruise director! We’ll get this crap straightened out right now!”

For Merrill and friends, this better place would be a *huge* disappointment, literally a hell. That’s because we are crafting the vision using the human scale – the only scale we have. Based on insatiable desire and fear, this is what impels us to keep up with the Joneses, to get in a better

neighborhood, a better job, a better reputation or a better spouse. And so we figure a “better place” must surely be a five-star joint, or else we missed the boat totally.

We also carry over individual preferences into the “better place,” as far as what goes on there on a daily basis. For example, I grew up hearing from others that the better place was all about an eternal choir belting out hymns into eternity.

This was not music to my ears, as I could barely endure the final stanza of hymns each Sunday without squirming. I always prayed they’d “skip the third stanza’ – and this was one of my earliest prayers. At least one of the more sincere ones.

I kept hoping someone might discover other activities available at the last minute, other options beyond the eternal choir. I was hoping they’d pop into the room and announce, “Hey! They just discovered a rec room with, like, 600 pinball machines, free corn dogs, coinless jukebox and looks like a bowling alley, skeet shooting range, race track, ball fields and tournament fishing beyond all that!”

This announcement never came.

If it were up to me, I’d arrange my better place with cool stuff – like open-wheel racing, watermelon catapults, hunting with falcons, lunger fishing, baseball games and giant Chinese buffets. Not to mention big-screen movie night, free rocket rides, racing go-karts with Elvis and jamming with Les Paul and Jimi Hendrix, and so on.

But no, I was told. None of that will be happening. It’s *strictly* about the eternal choir, where everyone is droning hymns and jacked to the rafters on holy vigor. And you’d better get with this astigmatic vision of the place, son, or you’ll be a real bump on a log.

That’s when I protest that I am no good at singing; there’s no hope for me to be in a choir.

But wait! They tell me, even if you can’t sing here on earth, you can belt out songs like a pro up there. See, you get a super-turbo voice as part of the “better place” package.

Well, OK, yeah. I can get excited about it if I can blast away, singing stuff such as “She’s a Lady” like Tom Jones. Maybe I need to practice some of his sly dance moves, I say.

Oh no, no, no, they tell me. Only certain pre-approved songs are getting sung, and “She’s a Lady” definitely isn’t one of them, bub.

How about “Jungle Boogie?” I ask. Surely I can sing that? Or “Burning Love?”

Nope.

I'm told that none of the songs I like will be allowed. Further, none of *anything* I like will be allowed, because my tastes and preferences are ... let's just say it ... sheer tripe, unlike *their* preferences, which are in holy alignment with the better place's management.

Smirky smile.

It's then I have a revelation: I have crossed over into a vision of someone else's better place. when I should be in my own vision. Because once you leave your own vision and enter another's vision, you are subject to their after-life Gestapo that will make you conform to the rules of their vision – or else kindly take you to the basement to help clear your mind using sharp objects.

But then I stop in my tracks. Wait just a minute ... what if we're on the wrong track in casting a vision of a better place? I mean, the better place is all about a *big* gain...I'm talking the "mutha" of all upgrades, right?

So what's the biggest gain I can think of?

I pause to ponder on the scriptures...they do not say that God endorses love, is full of love or is all about the love ... but that God *is* love. And further, to *dwell* in that big love is to dwell in God, and God in us. (1 John 4:16)

The words "is" and "dwell" floor me, because they don't speak of the past or future – but of the present. So if I dwell in this "big love" now, then I don't care how anyone pictures their "better place." So I'm gonna just dwell. In fact, dwelling in joy and not worrying is the ultimate upgrade for me, because I typically gnaw at mind's psychological cage doors like a homesick beaver. It is my nature.

Now, about this kind of God love: I suspect it's bigger than, say, Montana, and bigger than the galaxies. It can't be bottled, mediated or parceled out. *It is untamable*. And what's untamable lies beyond the human's ability to cut it down and make it less than we are – which is all we know how to do when confronted with anything seriously beyond our range. (with apologies to my humanist friends).

Ah ... we so desperately long to be in control, don't we?

Even in a better place, we want to be in charge, or at least on a sort of trustee system where we get free sodas and get to boss others around because we rank higher than the next person

because we are ... good...and are more in alignment with the better place values and management.

Smirky smile.

And then, along comes this oddball fellow, this Jesus, and his words and deeds are so strange, yet compelling, then and now. (“Love one another.” Forgive 70 times seven.” “Anyone who is without sin go ahead and take a shot.”)

We take note that he is earthy, sweet, wry, strong, forgiving; a blue-collar dude, a fisherman, one of us.

No pretensions whatsoever.

And we like this guy.

Then we are pained to learn the point isn't to *like* Jesus, but to *be like* him. It's not about putting those fish symbols on the back of our cars, being 'good', wearing 24-carat cross cufflinks or donning our lavender jackets, white belts and pretty frocks on Easter Sunday. In fact, those things seem very much contrary to what Jesus was talking about, if you think about it. (with apologies to my holy roller Easter Sunday dress-to-the-nines friends).

We forget that Christianity began blood soaked and hacked to the bone, with forgiveness and love and redemption yanked out of the jaws of hatred and all things foul and ghastly. We forget this is the strangest, most unexpected and sweetest gesture in our whole godforsaken lives – and this translates so poorly into our tidy world of opulence and stained glass sanctuaries with felted seats, high-tone floral arrangements and designer coffee shop lattes.

Is there any overlap between these two worlds? It seems like there *should* be...but that's just me, and clearly, I know nothing of such things.

But wait! I hear some of my friends say: I haven't studied all of this as much as they have, and, if I had, I would realize that they do know better, and their vision is so, so much closer than mine and in truer alignment with the better place's code of conduct.

Smirky smile.

Yet, I have studied it *some*, too, I announce.

And this I recall: Nobody has ever seen one speck or heard one peep of this better place, and neither can we even imagine it, either, according to scripture. (1 Corinthians 2)

But wait! I hear my atheist friends say, blast all this “pie-in-the-sky” business, we are merely blown back into smithereens, into nothingness, a pure state, and we then become stardust that plays a part in forming new worlds and new beings – hopefully ones that recycle and deny the binary.

Well, all-righty, then!

Further, some of my younger friends eschew all of the above and endorse the new ‘cheerful nihilism’ – pushing the idea there’s no meaning to life and, yes, it ends badly, but let’s still cheerfully fly around like springtime robins just the same. ‘just b-cuz’. This impulse to flit around seems isolated in the youth, as old nihilists tend to fly off bridges and ledges more so than frolicking on lawns.

Still, no matter what, where, when we think the better place is, we need to picture it on occasion.

Like when we stand in front of a rouged-up fellow who’s lying there in a casket. There is something in us that wants to envision him in a better place, because the poor boy is in a pickle, as things are now. In him, we see that we, too, will actually run out of time one day. That everyone does, no matter how much we ignore or whistle past the reality.

Yet our earthly visions of something truly grand fall short; we picture the better place much like a snow globe tableau of Las Vegas in the 1970s – shorn of its prostitution, gambling and traffic lights, of course.

So yes, for now, I am announcing some changes in my working vision of a better place: I hereby declare that I am going to allow open-wheel racing, water cannons, world-class pipeline surfing, Chinese buffets, Sunday dinner on the grounds, bait casting reels, endless smiles and sunsets, dogs and cats, caterwauling rock and roll, motorcycles, electric guitars amped up and hanging on every tree, big screen TV’s and full size trucks with mud-grip tires and a gas tank always sitting on full.

This is my vision until I get where I am going and see for myself. Until then, my vision’s as good as anyone’s.

And if I find a game warden prowling around in my vision, I will arrest them and impound their vehicle (with apologies to my warden friends). Or, more likely, I will ask them to toss away the badge and join me fishing. We don’t need no stinkin’ badges anymore.

And if the eternal choir gets too loud, I’ll shut them down because their music is interfering with me listening to Elvis singing ‘hunika-hunika burnin’ love.” (with apologies to my choir friends)

And if too much of that atheistic stardust starts settling on me and I have to come out with a holy feather duster, then I am going to clean house (with apologies to my atheist friends).

And lastly, if those nihilist robins come swarming in my airspace, be advised that I will swat them down just like King Kong swatted those planes from the top of the Empire State Building.

You see, my idea of the Happy Hunting Grounds is a big place with room for all; don't crowd me in my vision and we'll be just fine.

Besides, the real stuff in life is always richer than what we'd pictured.

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