

Some Missives from God to Otis

By Jerry Robbins

*Be careful what you wish for . . . especially publication--me*

Altar Ego

When John Barrymore arrived in Heaven, I called him over one day for a chat

"John," I said, "If you hadn't been such a good actor, I would have sent a plague of locusts to you when you said, 'One of my chief regrets during my years in the theater is that I couldn't sit in the audience and watch me'."

I told Barrymore that he reminded ME of how badly misunderstood I am. Some people think I am the champion of those with big egos, especially those in the religious industry. True, I do like my servants to exude confidence. But my arms are also open to those who do not put themselves forward when they are doing my work. Who are more "behind the scenes." as it were. And I simply cannot abide the extreme braggers or the proud. They shall be cast out of my kingdom.

This is a complicated issue. Ghost thinks I should not be this way with my friends. If people are a little full of themselves because they work for ME, I should not deny them that. He wants ME to excuse all clergy and church workers and other religious people who may have an overdeveloped "sense of audience" because they are doing it for a good cause, namely ME.

I have to remind Ghost that good intentions do not a good act make. He is so committed to a "good show" on earth that will make him look good, that he has no idea what I am talking about. What I am talking about is the shameful behavior of some of my spokespersons. These folks are so flamboyant, so theatrical, so outrageous when they preach about ME that they take the focus of all those good worshipers in the "audience" away from ME and draw it to themselves. They strut, they shout, they mop their brow, they pound on things, lower their voice, raise their voice, gyrate their body, wave their arms, run and jump around the stage.

They say they do it for ME, but I think they do it for themselves.

Maybe they are justified in such dramatics. Since I choose not to reveal myself, they offer their own inflated selves in my place. The people need something to hold on to, they figure, so they give them a good performance. They steal my thunder, as it were, to make it seem that I am there, and to get the attention of the people. Still, I think Jesus had a more excellent way, when he turned down miracles, or rescue by angels, or the trappings of royalty in his day. He tried not to draw attention to himself. When he preached he pointed attention to ME, and, get this, he did that even when he talked about his own Sonship.

Here is a test. If, after listening to a preacher, you forget what he said, but not how he acted, then you are likely dealing with a case of "Altar Ego."

Jesus says we should go easy on these misguided folks, because we can't expect earthlings to somehow get out of their skin. In his typically oblique manner, Ghost says stained glass works because it lets the light shine through. I leave it up to you to make up your own mind on this issue.

--God

Promises

Sometimes Ghost and Jesus forget their lineage in ME. Jesus gets on a rant about how unfair the game is, while Ghost complains that Jesus gets all the easy assignments. At a Staff Meeting recently, Ghost brought up the problem of the Beatitudes,

Ghost: Jesus, you made promises, then left it up to me to deliver.

Jesus: What are you talking about?

Ghost: Oh, don't act like you don't know. Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall be filled. Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the persecuted for they shall see the kingdom of God. Blessed are those who get no dates for they shall go steady with the most beautiful angels.

Jesus: I didn't say anything about going steady.

Ghost: But you left all those other dreams for me to bring true. You just said your comfort piece and left it to me to work it out.

Jesus: You are such a whiner. If you think you got the bad end of this Trinitarian Deal, consider the fact that I had to deliver on the most difficult promise of all.

My Properties began to tumble around uncomfortably. I knew what was coming next. Jesus looked at ME with his penetrating eyes.

Jesus: Dad said he liked the arrangement with people on earth and he didn't want it to end even though they couldn't live on earth forever. So he promised them Heaven. Then he left it for me to figure out a way to accomplish this.

Ghost: You didn't have to go through what I did,

Jesus: YOU didn't either, including dying on a cross, to make good on the word of someone else.

Ghost: No matter how many times you bring it up, I still can't understand that Gethsemane / Golgotha gig.

Jesus: You are such an airhead.

I figured I better step in at that point. "Boys let's remember, we are F-A-M-I-L-Y. We all share the same burdens, we all support each other. I got the promise thing started with Israel, Abraham to be more specific. I promised that if he would just do as I asked, I would make a great nation of his family. I guess you could say that was the Primal Promise, although just creating the world was a kind of promise, too. But Abraham was the first human being I covenanted with. What a job."

Jesus: And that was the beginning of hope, if I remember correctly, although I was still only a soul with not much cognitive stuff.

Ghost: Well, that's the truth.

Jesus: Ghost, why don't you get a job with Gold Street Maintenance? Those workers just stand around a lot with occasional brief periods of work. It would be just your style.

I could see a long Staff Meeting developing. I need to tell you, I finally got things calmed down. But the business of responsibility for what is yet to come has been a prominent problem in our Threeness. I can assure you all of our trifocal resources are at work on this. Be patient. Trust us. The best is yet to be. And, think of it, no one can prove we are wrong.

-- God

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Triune Trials

You have never thought about it, I know, but there are certain difficulties to being Triune that I think I should mention to you. People sometimes criticize ME for not doing more in the world. I want you to know it is not a matter of will but of management. There are times when even I can't get all my Persons together. Our "unity unshaken" sometimes cracks and wobbles right off the Richter Scale.

For instance, it takes an enormous amount of energy for my Persons to agree on the slightest thing, like local elections. We discuss and discuss and discuss, and half the time we don't do anything. And all that discussion keeps us from getting involved with a lot of other things we should be doing. That's why people grumble at ME. Like Woody Allen prayed the other day, "God, what have you done...lately?" He is a tortured man who refuses to grow up. But, he has a point, my level of involvement dropped off dramatically after the trouble with Galileo. Partly, it is a matter of style. Ghost likes the dramatic, Jesus prefers one-on-one interaction, while I like to micro-manage from the sidelines. This became painfully apparent when we were receiving a lot of prayers about the spotted owl. Almost all the prayers wanted ME to do something to protect the endangered bird. I gathered myself together one day and had a good talk.

The Father: We've been getting a lot of requests to help the spotted owl.

Ghost: We should go after the lumber industry. A few good fires, destroy their equipment with a huge earthquake. That'll show 'em.

Jesus: I think we should sit the lumberjacks down with the environmentalists and talk this thing through.

The Father: Can we try Jesus's way, and if it doesn't work go to more radical steps?

Ghost: Don't waste our time. They will never agree on a plan.

Jesus: Well, your plan will leave a lot of people without jobs, destitute.

Father: I did intend that nature serve man not vice versa.

Jesus: Just keep Ralph Nader out of the picture.

Ghost: How do we do that? Am I supposed to make the man fall and break an arm? Talk about violence.

Jesus: Whose talking about violence? Did I say violence?

Ghost: There you go again, with your semantics. You want me to level the guy, but the lumber industry, Oh no ...

Jesus: You are such a buffoon. Your hypostasis needs help.

Ghost: I'm not half the fool you are. And don't shake your penumbra at me!

Father: Now boys, let's try to get along, can we?

But just then Mary walked by with a better idea. "Jesus, you behave, now. I didn't raise you to become a ruffian," she said. "And Ghost, stop pushing your power around. I'm going to have to talk to The Father about this." she said, throwing a stern glance my way.

And that's how we Three came to be in a Conflict Management class led by Eric Fromm, once a month for as long as it takes, which will probably be eternity. Talk about a lot of time that could be better spent.

-- God

Heaven's 4-H Club

When Jesus taught you to pray to ME, "Thy will be done of earth as it is in heaven," he had not yet ascended to my right hand where he would see how hard it is for ME to get my will done up here. You earthlings just assume that I am in perfect control in Heaven, and can have it my way without even trying. Well, I am in control, but it takes a lot of divine effort for my will to prevail.

I'll let you in on a little secret. Among others, there are four things my will aims for in Heaven that take an awful lot of divine labor; Harmony, Happiness, Helpfulness, and Humility. Let me tell you why these take so much work:

**Harmony.** Insofar as they have personalities, the angels are a problem. They want to run Heaven according to their wishes. Impose their agenda on the others. For instance, Arnold Schoenberg tried to introduce the new harpists to atonality. When word reached Ludwig von Beethoven, all hell broke loose. It took me weeks before I could get things under control and almost a year before we agreed to a policy for the music makers.

**Happiness.** You would think this is easy, but it isn't. Some people confuse happiness with a feeling of delight. Others define it as a sense of well-being. The happiness that is my will for Heaven is more like joy, a deep abiding tranquility and contentment. I want the angels to glow within, to resonate with a warm spiritual energy. Of course, Americans and their "pursuit of happiness" give me the most difficulty on this.

**Helpfulness.** Jesus made it clear that the best preparation for Heaven is a life lived in service to others on earth. But few people understand the implications of that, namely, Heaven is the perfection of

genuine benevolence. Some angels keep to themselves. Others sign up for only one job in Heaven. Most refuse to serve as Friends to earthlings. I have to appeal to their self-interest and offer free cruises to the Elysian Fields

**Humility.** This is the hardest to accomplish. Most angels have a big head, and I'm not talking about their aura. They are so pleased to be in Heaven that they get carried away with themselves. I had to remove the mirrors in the assembly dressing rooms because so many angels would spend all their time in front of them if I let them. If they would just remember it was not their works but Jesus' grace that got them in, they might get off their pedestals. But Jesus won't confront these pretentious angels because they upset him too much.

Well, there you have it. Earth is not the only place I have to work hard. I would like more help from Ghost, but he writes all this off as "4-H Club" antics. He says I want to make Heaven into a Kiwanis or Lions Club. I tell him he needs to do a better job with people before they get up here. Jesus, like I said, washes his hands of the whole matter.

-- God

### Heavenly Advice

I hate to gossip, but St. Paul has a fragile ego. He is very jealous of St. Peter and his job at the Pearly Gates. To mollify him, I put him in charge of answering mail, especially requests for help. I suggested he set up an Advice Column in my Name. I may have made a mistake. The other day I found copies of his letters, and far too many had replies like the following:

DEAR GOD: I usually don't like to complain, but we can't seem to get rid of our minister. What can we do?

WILLIE FROM ALBANY, GEORGIA

DEAR WILLIE: Enroll in a minister-swapping plan. Enterprising lay people have these services all over the country. Look in your local library. There is a risk, however, that you might get your old minister back.

DEAR GOD: My husband has nightmares in which a man in a red suit with a pitchfork chases him through a crowded supermarket. He always gets trapped in the cheese department, and just as his assailant is about to close in, he wakes up. Is this a religious-based neurosis?

NERVOUS WRECK

DEAR NERVOUS WRECK: Don't go see your clergy person about this. Reports show that 45% of all living ministers are plagued with this dream. A good Swiss cheese sandwich before bed will cure the problem.

DEAR GOD: Two members of my church came to visit me the other night. Before I could tell them it wasn't a good time, they began telling me how much money the church needs. They forced me to sign a pledge to give the church \$55/month for a year. Is this normal?

UNCOMFORTABLE IN FLORIDA

DEAR UNCOMFORTABLE: What is normal? No one seems to know. What is normal in one culture is not in another. We just can't say. I would, however, advise that you figure out a way to hide from solicitors. You can also report them to the Better Business Bureau.

DEAR GOD: Our minister has been leaving the pulpit and wandering among the congregation while he preaches. Sometimes it gets out of hand. Like the other day, the minister sat on the lap of one of our sopranos. And one time he picked up a cord and started whipping people. Is this acceptable practice? If not what can we do?

SALLY IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

DEAR SALLY: Many clergy are disturbed people who want to be actors. Try to humor him. Ask your deacons to speak to him. If all else fails install a high chancel rail that will hold him in. Holy Security Designs has some nice models.

DEAR GOD; Our preacher says he doesn't want any glitzy, high-stepping congregation around him. He says if the church is prospering, it's the work of the Devil. This has upset a lot of people who would like to see our Sunday School grow, and the grass cut around the parsonage. Now the theological question: If a church succeeds to fail is it a success?

PUZZLED IN PORTLAND

DEAR PUZZLED: Where do you people come up with these riddles? I suggest you enroll in seminary. No, better, take some philosophy courses at a nearby community college. Don't bother me again.

DEAR GOD: Our son-in-law is a very religious man. He insists on grace at mealtime, tearing our family apart.

TOM FROM CONNECTICUT

DEAR TOM: Speak to him. He has overlooked efforts to evangelize in the neighborhood, and he neglects music in your devotions. Also, suggest that the family become vegetarian for religious reasons. He is too lukewarm.

DEAR GOD: Many of our members have left our church for another church. Now some people are suggesting we become more like the churches that are luring our members away. But I don't think we should compromise our principles. What do you think?

PRINCIPILED IN BALTIMORE, MD.

DEAR PRINCIPILED: What principles are you talking about? Since I can't tell from your letter, I can only guess you mean, should you modernize? Of course, you should. It may seem your church will look more and more like everything else in the world around it, but that's a small price for survival.

DEAR GOD: This may sound like a trivial question, but our choir director looks like a man who I often see running red lights. One day he killed a dog.

FLORENCE IN LUBBOCK, TEXAS

DEAR FLORENCE: You're right, this is a trivial problem.

DEAR GOD: Do you ever get mail about whether or not it is OK to clap in church? Our church has a different problem. Sometimes the people will boo during the sermon. The preacher and the regular members are used to it, but I feel bad for the visitors. What can we do?

NOT BOOING IN DALLAS

DEAR NOT BOOING: This problem is more common than you might think. The solution is to rethink what is happening. Booing is a perfectly acceptable practice. The Bible talks about people who "hiss and wag their heads" (Lamentations 2:15). You might encourage more hissing and head wagging mixed in with the booing. Perhaps a guide that indicates when to be ready to boo, hiss, and wag (opening story, middle illustration, closing story), would help.

Maybe I should give Paul another job, put him in charge of "The cloud," our weekly newspaper, or even our monthly Reception for New Arrivals. It might help him get a life up here.

-- God

Christmas

I'm going to let you in on another secret. No matter how hard we try, we who make up the Godhead have difficulty when Christmas rolls around. This is especially embarrassing since there are soooo many people calling on us for happiness at this time of year. I think the problem is Jesus wants it to be a special day for him, but Ghost persists in spoiling it. I don't understand it.

Ghost likes just about anything that will give us some publicity. Sometimes he even shares my glee over religious kitsch. But Christmas brings out the worst in him. Maybe it's jealousy because so much attention focuses on Jesus. Anyway, Ghost began his sad litany at our Staff Meeting in Advent:

"Well, the earthlings are at it again," he reported, "·putting a spin on Christmas so it is hardly recognizable. I was hanging around F.A.O. Schwarz's Toy Store in New York City last week. You want to know what they are selling now? A Nintendo game called, 'The Roman Strike Force,' a 'Jesus in the Temple Action Video,' and a 'Baby Jesus Wets his Swaddling Clothes Doll'."

"Don't look at me," Jesus said. "I didn't put the people up to it. Certainly not, 'Frankincense for the Discriminating,' the 'Three Wise Men's Explorer Compass,' and 'Excelsior Wrapping Paper.' This stuff is way over the edge."

"It's worse than that," Ghost said. "I was in a Waldenbooks at a shopping mall in Philadelphia, and I found a book, ·'What I Saw in the Shed,' by James Michener, a 'Complete Pop-Up Manger Scene,' including Santa, Rudolph, and Frosty, a 'Herod Kills the First-Born-' who-done-it game, and the National Inquirer in the rack boasted, 'First Ever Interview With Joseph,' and a book about a new Washington lobby, 'Protect the Reindeer, Inc.'"

"Frankly, I'm embarrassed," Jesus said, "and I sometimes wonder if you, Ghost, aren't doing all this just for that reason."

"You think I could dream up this stuff even if I wanted to?" Ghost said, and went on to describe the contents of a 'Cornhusk Barrel Catalog,' items like:

'Secular Carols Around the Office Piano,'  
'Naughty-Or-Nice Name List for Sale,'  
'Fruitcake Through the Mail,'  
'Angel Dolls Sing Bing Crosby,'  
Gift coupons for 'Plenty of Rooms at the Holiday Inn Christmas Specials'."

Although I wanted to stay out of this, because, as I have told you, I like religious kitsch, I felt I had to intervene or Jesus would have fainted dead away.

"Don't worry," my Son, "I'll see to it that you have an especially good Christmas this year."

Pulling himself together, Jesus looked at ME in his trusting way, "I know I can count on you, DAD."

I was already foreordaining what would happen. On the next December 24, I would send Jesus, incognito, of course, to First Swedish Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, where a great Christmas Eve Pageant would occur.\* This is a big church, and I will fill it that night. The people will gather in the darkened sanctuary while the organ plays a muted version of "Silent Night," one of Jesus' favorites.

The congregation will kneel reverently while humming along with the organ, all eyes fixed on the creche at front. This will be the greatest creche ever assembled. It will have cows, sheep, and dogs from some of the church families. I'll arrange for the loan of some llamas, camels, and donkeys from the Minneapolis Zoo. Maybe even an elephant. All will be decked out in shining miracle medals.

A cadre of church people will dress up like peasants. The men will grow long beards. This whole majestic panorama will be emblazoned with bright strobe lights that sweep over the scene, giving it an otherworldly aura. The manger will be at the center of all this, filled with soft, fluffy excelsior. The cast and animals obediently will stand around the manger. All the people will kneel quietly until the stroke of midnight.

Suddenly, a distinct squeaking noise will fill the church behind the people. The sound, as of a wheel rolling on a cable, will warn the people that something is coming. Years of training will have taught them not to look back at the miracle about to happen. The noise will become louder as it descends upon their heads. Then, with wheels screeching, a tiny statue of Baby Jesus will slide down the wire from the choir loft behind, and head straight for the bed of excelsior. When the flying Jesus lands, the whole church will light up, the organ will reach its full volume, and the crowd will rise to its feet to sing loudly, "Joy to the World, the Lord is Come."

"I know it will thrill Jesus. I just have to keep Ghost out of it long enough to surprise him.

-- God

Alterations

The most difficult angels in Heaven fall into two categories, those who complain that Heaven is too much unlike earth, and those who complain that Heaven is too much like earth. The first want to make Heaven over so it is just like earth, but improved, and the second want it to be as unlike earth as possible, at least the dark side with all its pain and suffering.



The one group of people, who led a more fortunate life on earth than most, complain that they were promised an afterlife, but what they got was hardly a life at all, at least not one they could recognize. These folks probably looked at too many religious paintings, or saw too many movies about angels, where the angels looked like people. Artists often pictured angels as babies or human beings with wings. The dead Patrick Swayze, in the movie Ghost, looks just like the living Swayze with some limitations.

Maybe these folks heard too many jokes about Heaven, jokes where people talk like New Yorkers, try to "take it with them," play baseball, and complain about the facilities. All this, and a pretty good life on earth, leads these folks to expect Heaven to be like earth, their afterlife just more of their earthly life. They are not content that it is a little like their earthly life. They want to taste the pizza, and feel the thrill of the ski slope. They don't want a spiritual body, they want their own bodies, just come from the spa.

The others, those who had a hard life on earth, complain that Heaven is too much like earth., at least so far as their lives are concerned. For instance, they have heard that they will recognize loved ones in Heaven. That is just part of who they are. But they don't want to run into Aunt Joyce who presumably, as an angel, would be perfect in her unpleasantness. Then again there are things about themselves they would like to forget, the aches and pains, the fears, anxieties, bad memories, and nightmares they had on earth. What good is Heaven if we still have to carry those burdens around?

And we would have to if our identity is preserved. Of course, the spiritual body could be less defined, so the pains and worries are diluted. But, still, the torments are there, and they will be the tormented angels they are forever, which is the down side, if you have ever had to put up with a toothache over the weekend.

You see the dilemma they put ME in. You have to be enough like your earthly selves to say it is you who has survived. So Heaven has to be somewhat familiar ground. But you don't want to have to carry all the negative baggage from your earthly life into Heaven. It has to be different enough to be Heaven, and not just more of what you had to deal with on earth. How can I satisfy the needs of both groups of angels?

Ghost says, I am God, and can do anything. He says what I need is a Department of Alterations, a place where the new arrival goes for, well, alterations, that is, changes that make a person different without changing him or her into something else. I don't know about this. It might work for dresses and pants, but angels? Even I can't make someone something else, but still be the same. I think the whole matter needs further study.

Send me some ideas on this when you get them.

-- God

An Act of ME

I must tell you about something that has ME omni-upset. It is a problem that, so far as I can see, and even on a not clear day, I can see forever, is your fault. More specifically, it is a misunderstanding that has cost ME a lot of worshipers and followers. I refer to the phrase, "Act of God," used to describe a horrendous earth event, like an earthquake, or drought, or hurricane, or flood that wrecks unbearable

destruction. People in the insurance business and legal profession have used the phrase so often it is common parlance.

I really resent the implication that I caused these terrible things to happen. It makes ME look very bad. It connects my considerable powers with fearsome horrific events. It ruins my image as a loving God. And thoughtless preachers use it as an example of my wrath, and scare the bejesus out of people.

OK, I admit I don't show you who I am. That my ways are hidden. That is for your own good. You couldn't stand it if I lived next door. But that is no reason to blame ME for things I never did or do. Your ignorance about the world is no excuse for dragging ME into the mess. Just because something happens that is out of your control, or you can't explain, is no reason to point the finger at ME.

And while I am at it here are some other things that are not my fault:

nose hair  
road kill  
blisters  
runny scrambled eggs  
toothaches  
bee stings  
pimples  
puns  
traffic  
peanut bags that won't open  
squashed worms  
spoiled cheese  
termites  
throwing up  
fanaticism  
boogers  
pollution  
war  
insomnia  
theology

The world is just the way it is. I try not to interfere. Once in a while Ghost will do something, but he never messes with the laws of nature. His job is to help people live good and holy lives. Don't blame him, either.

The sooner you get all this straight the better your chances of getting to Heaven. Speaking of getting to Heaven, here comes Jesus. He looks mad. Oh, ME, I bet it was something I said.

-- God

THE END

*OK, about this one. It arrived formatted as if it were done by someone who didn't realize that a computer is NOT a typewriter. Every line had a carriage return. Spacing was handled by using the space bar. Other, less understandable formatting issues proliferated (such as using "don ' t" for "don't." Ordinarily I toss these directly into my slush pile. But the title intrigued me because of my*

*interest in comparative religious studies. So I started reading it. And I got hooked. I laughed aloud several times, smiled a lot, and even pondered the cleverness of the prose. Anyway, I bit the bullet and spent about 2 hours formatting the blasted (blessed?) thing and posted it here. Jerry, if I messed up a paragraph break or two, please excuse me. Your story-telling skill and imagination won the day. This time. Comments on our BBS.*