

Fred Greenberg: Hell's Therapist

Peter
Rostovsky

I'd been in Hell for close to 300 years when I finally took the bold step of seeking professional help. I don't know, things just didn't seem the same anymore. And even though the tortures remained the same—the eye gouging, perpetual castration, slow fingernail removal and lots of frustrating installation art—they were accompanied by a new sense of ennui. That's when I started asking some of the other sinners around if there was someone I could talk to.

It turns out lots of people were seeing the same guy: Fred Greenberg, who I later found out was Hell's only therapist. Not sure how Fred turned up down here. Did he sleep with his patients or misdirect them in some sinful way? I suppose it doesn't matter much in the end. But, what attracted me immediately was that he treated both sinners and staff; you know, I think it's good that you get both perspectives. For my part, I was in a rut: the same old tortures day in and day out, but was I getting any writing done? Plus my relationship was hitting a wall—literally. The demons would smash us against the wall repeatedly. But were Mary and I talking? Most of the time we would just eat our insects in silence. Mary would just look at her rock, pretending it was a smart phone. Occasionally we'd make love—but since this is Hell my penis would fall off immediately and she'd get a terrible UTI. Little to help you here in Hell so she'd just bear it, and I'd just sew it on again. Hell.

Don't even get me started on my mother who was in a neighboring chasm. Sure, we still saw each other from across the way while our organs were being devoured (we both ended up on the Tuesday schedule, ironically) but I felt like every time we got a break and met for brunch, we'd just be at each other's throats again. I'd start in on dad and the stuff with the old apartment and before we knew it, there we were circling the same pit with demons just looking on and shaking their heads. Plus she's getting older. I want some closure before she goes to another chasm or is promoted to staff and things get really awkward.

So, there I was, standing in front of the office door. The waiting room wasn't much to look at but I immediately recognized some people. There was Bobby. He was holding his severed head in his lap. He seemed really nervous somehow. Poor guy, terrible divorce and now he has to work with his ex in the mines. His old mistress is the manager so it's just painfully awkward. Then I saw a couple of the guards. They were chatting and looking at old magazines—mostly bodybuilding and car stuff circa 1983. Occasionally one of them would shoot a burning ember at someone waiting and they'd pretend it wasn't them. How juvenile. Still, I was excited. I was just ready to work through some things. I wasn't sure what to expect when the receptionist called my name but then, before I could blink, I was in the office sitting on a soft if somewhat worn armchair.

Fred was an unassuming man: short with glasses; definitely Jewish and wearing some kind of clothes from the 70's. The office also resembled an old sitcom. It's like he came here during the **Newhart** days. Whatever, I was ready to get to work. Before he could even utter a word I unleashed a litany of complaints: the girlfriend, career, penis-sewing, the mother whom I could never trust. Fred didn't flinch. He just sat there motionless looking at me through thick wire-framed glasses. Finally he spoke. "Look," he said in a thick New York accent, "this is clearly a complex time—especially

since you're down here. But is it also possible that these so-called problems of yours are keeping you from facing something even deeper—something that's the real cause of your unhappiness? That's what we're here to work on."

I was sold. He was totally right. His words pierced me like a bullet, sharper even than the ones the demons use for Monday breakfast firing squad. Fred and I continued talking for the next 45 minutes. It was mostly introductory, but I was rapt, barely noticing the time passing. Before long, Fred looked at his watch and told me we had to stop. I was escorted to the receptionist to book my next appointment and deal with the insurance. Since this is Hell, we have only a limited number of carriers: Aetna, Blue Cross, Oxford Freedom. (These are local and actually started here.) They also come with the tortures and there's an open enrollment period once every five hundred years. If you miss it, you're kind of screwed. I wasn't sure if all of my sessions would be covered, but there was an option to pay with increased tortures. So, I figured if Fred and I hit it off, I'd just take on some extra time in the trampling stadium, or do a little bit of adjuncting at the local art school. Don't ask me why, but they love contemporary art down here. They think it's the kind of thing that really spreads the seeds of evil and deceit in the world. They even have a fantastic visiting lecturer program where they bring people in from the living dimension. Last month, we saw some fancy European curator talk with a conceptual artist about Marxism, insect love, and lies as a subtler form of truth. I mean it was really kind of perfect for this place.

Anyway, this is a roundabout way of saying that, fortunately, Fred took Oxford. I settled up. Only a 10-year co-pay—time or torture are the common currencies here—and I was back out in the main chasm. It's hard to go back after you had a great conversation with someone you think really understands you and is willing to listen. As I looked out at the towering, writhing mountains of sinners and demons, the infernal exhausts spiraling into the scorching air, I was filled with that familiar feeling of just really being tired of this place. Sure, it was exciting at first—we were young; it was cheap. But now it all looks so boring and gentrified. Just look at some of these new, incoming sinners: mostly finance guys, designers, rich 20-somethings. They don't know who built this place; they don't know who *really* made it Hell.

But then again, maybe it's not the place; maybe it's me. This is what Fred was insinuating. Hell is a state of mind—even when you're in Hell. Maybe I need to learn to appreciate what I have, rather than always chasing some fictional beyond and comparing my situation to a phantom—whether this phantom is Heaven, some golden career or relationship, or just a Wednesday morning with no skin grafts. I have to face it, I'm here for eternity and only taking on more time with my spending habits. I just have to deal with it. I was caught up in this reverie when a group of demons found me. They immediately raped me and gave me a terrible haircut. I was escorted to a chasm where I had to watch reruns of **Full House** while sitting on a rusty spike. The Olsens, Bob Saget, Stamos, all blurred with the pain and blood but I could only think of next Wednesday and my next session with Fred. Clearly something within me had already changed.



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Fragment of Fred Greenburg's Notes

Date: 12,395-6. Time: 70:96

First session with patient PKRx354. Duration of Hell-stay: 300+ years. Current medication need: none. Most recent earthly occupation: artist, writer. Relationship status: here with longtime girlfriend, mother, father.

The first introductory session established a good foundation. The patient was cooperative and ready to engage in the therapeutic process. On a preliminary level, the manifest issues that he was conscious of and able to vocalize were in accordance with general situational factors. In this respect, most of PKRx354's responses to the current environment are within normal parameters. However, I suspect that due to early problems in his most recent earthly existence—and with his mother in particular—he has developed unhealthy expectations that have resulted in subsequently problematic attachments. This hypothesis will no doubt be borne out in future meetings, but the real question already evolving is whether PKRx354's paranoid and thus negatively demanding relationship to the (Hell)world—which he expects to be a substitute parent held up to an impossible standard—is actually a hindrance or a benefit in his current environment. Moreover, can the cycle of perpetual disappointment that this nexus of early experience engenders be of possible advantage, in fact bolstering him against his actual, eternally unpleasant circumstances? That is, can a general disappointment with Hell be the best defense against it?

My second session with Fred was difficult. I started talking about a sandwich and before I knew it, I was talking about Dad and crying. Maybe it's because Dad is down here too and he's frequently turned into a sandwich and served to the Unspeakables. I would look at his anguished face, the grill-marks and the leaf of lettuce covering his forehead and even though his tongue was turned into Swiss cheese, I could see that he was saying sorry. I can't say I really knew him among the living, just as a sandwich. But I like to think there may still be a time when we can get to know each other if we just align our Hell schedules. I tell you, whoever makes an app for this place that can coordinate all the lost souls and figure out the times when we're available to meet would make a killing. He can call it MyHell or iHell or HellCal, or just something zippy like Hello! I'd do it but I'm more of a concept guy.

Anyway, back to Fred. The session started out with just banal stuff: How am I? How's it going with the tortures? What's new on the torture horizon? I've been having trouble with this one demon and it's something that I've really been carrying with me from chasm to chasm. I keep replaying the same conversation with it, where I beg for mercy, but then he plugs my mouth with scorching gravel. Fred very patiently led me to the metaphor here. He suggested that the gravel represented my "ought-to side" and not my

"want-to side." "Don't you think you've spent enough time in the ought-to world?" he asked. I mean that really hit home. Even when I was alive, most of my sins were of the "ought-to" variety. I'd just sin along with the gang. I'd ought and ought and would then explode! Would I have attacked that homeless man if I just switched jobs? Would I have participated in what I will refer to as "the scheme" if I just had enough balls to pursue my own creative leanings?

Fred also had some other zingers. When I told him that I like to lament my damnation and that it's really a turn off for some people, he suggested that every time I feel the urge to complain I just "put a cap on it." There, that simple. I'm not sure what school of psychology that comes from, but it makes me realize that complaining is just not productive down here. I mean sure, everyone is moaning and lamenting. There's *a lot* of repenting going on. But if everyone decided to jump off a precipice into a lake of fire, do I have to do it too? Ok, truth be told, we are frequently chased off a precipice into a lake of fire, but I can also run with confidence. That's the way to deal. I *want* to jump off the precipice. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to jump off the precipice Mr. or Mrs. Demon. "Every problem is born with a solution," Fred says. "It's just a matter of finding the right perspective." And look! A precipice and many people I know are running *with* me. See, there's Sandra with her never-healing sores and Alex carrying his viscera. Good old Alex.

But then we got to the sandwich. I just don't know where all that emotion came from. I was simply talking about the brunch menu and the paninis (very dry since the new chef) and I saw Dad's eyes. They looked like mine; there was a connection. But then—just so much misunderstanding... I left the office in a state of total vulnerability. Had I come to any answers? No. But I did feel like some secret door had been opened. Perhaps I will be more honest now with Mary, with our demons, and after that, who knows? Could I possibly ask for a transfer, a staff position? Once again, I took a step out towards the main chasm. The same demons from the last appointment descended on me. But this time they just flayed and salted me; there was no awkward haircut. Maybe they sensed some newfound confidence. Maybe they noticed that I did not utter a single scream. I put a cap on it.