

GET ON THE BUS

The Great Divorce, by C.S. Lewis

A man waits for a bus. He is not sure why, but for the reason that the queue seems more interesting than wandering the grey, dismal streets of the unnamed city. After some time, a bus does indeed appear; becoming the vehicle for a potentially redemptive journey. The damned are given the opportunity to take a holiday to heaven...

This slim and yet extraordinary book 'baptizes the imagination' (to use a Charles Williams' phrase), to aid the reader in considering the differences between Heaven and Hell - what Lewis calls the 'great divorce.' The story is laid out as an imaginative consideration as Lewis paints a series of interesting portraits of his characters and their responses to their strange surroundings

I was in my 20's when I first read Lewis's fantastic treatment of eternal realities. It seemed, then, like Lewis presented me with an old ViewMaster Finder; offering these startling pictures, one after another, that imbedded themselves into my consciousness. Scenes of Anger, Resentment, Lust and Pride were paraded before me; represented by various characters who were being confronted by their true life on earth and the grand possibilities of what their truer lives could be like in heaven (if they were to agree to those truths).

Sartre famously opined, 'Hell is other people.' Lewis presents the idea that the state of Hell is to be alone with one's opinion - in that our thoughts, ideas, grievances and cynical convictions are the construct of the how the universe should work. So for some, Hell is getting what they want - an existence unto themselves where they have all of eternity to nurse old hurts and their indignant broodings. The narrator of the story finds himself in a conversation with another traveler about the grey town as the bus journey's upward.

'It seems the deuce of a town,' I volunteered, 'and that's what I can't understand. The parts of it that I saw were so empty. Was there once a much larger population?'

'Not at all,' said my neighbor. 'The trouble is that they're so quarrelsome. As soon as anyone arrives he settles in some street. Before he's been there twenty-four hours he quarrels with his neighbor. Before the week is over he's quarreled so badly that he decides to move. Very likely because all the people quarreled with their neighbors - and moved. So he settles in. If by chance the street is full, he goes further. But even if he stays, it makes no odds. He's sure to have another quarrel pretty soon and then he'll move again.'

Self-imposed alienation is Lewis's presentation of Hell. In forming his great contrast between Hell and Heaven, Lewis brings a collection of travelers from the Grey Town of Hell into the light of Heaven. Each of these characters, including the narrator, faces the question - what does it mean to be made whole and to live large?

For once in Heaven's bright light, the travelers are seen to be existing in a half-life. The narrator of these events describes his observations,

At first, of course, my attention was caught by my fellow-passengers, who were still grouped about in the neighborhood of the omnibus, though beginning, some of them, to walk forward into the landscape with

hesitating steps. I gasped when I saw them. Now that they were in the light, they were transparent - fully transparent when they stood between me and it, smudgy and imperfectly opaque when they stood in the shadow of some tree. They were in fact ghosts: man-shaped stains on the brightness of that air...

Then some re-adjustment of the mind or some focusing of my eyes took place, and I saw the whole phenomenon the other way round. The men were as they always have been; as all the men I had known had been perhaps. It was the light, the grass, the trees that were different; made of some different substance so much solidier than the things in our country that that men were ghosts by comparison.

The difference between my first and latest reading of Lewis' book, is that I may have missed the forest for the individual trees. Each of these conversations with the individuals from Hell (those last three words were quite intentional, by the way), almost stand on their own. Yet, it has come to me in this rereading (and by way of further reflection of *The Great Divorce*), that the larger story is about the choice of either being made whole, or living in a fragmented, isolated and unsubstantial existence. The choice of either living in the solitary confinement of the wounded self, or to find one's being being made free and whole by the author of all peace. I am reminded of a previous episode of *REREADS* - and a quote from Sister Joan Chittister, *To the wise, it seems, life is not a series of events to be controlled. Life is a way of walking through the universe whole and holy.* Being made whole. Not living a half-life, or a partial life, but allowing the reality of Christ to make us whole. For the travelers in *The Great Divorce*, there must be an acceptance of their condition - their need for restoration. The story, then, is really a series of confessional moments. Confession, as I once heard as being defined, as simply 'agreeing with God' - agreeing with God concerning who we are in light of who He is, and then agreeing with who we can be in the light of Christ. Our great need next to God's great provision in Christ.

The travelers of Lewis's bus ride must learn to live in the conditions of heaven to travel 'further up and further in' (to reference another Lewis story) - a reality they must submit to, and cease in their efforts to control or impose their own conditions upon. One of the 'ghosts' who is invited to travel further into heaven's country (by a previous acquaintance whom the ghost weighs as being less moral and less admirable than he), declares the following,

I thought there'd would be some damned nonsense. It's all a clique, all a bloody clique. Tell them I'm not coming, see? I'd rather be damned than go along with you. I came here to get my rights, see,?... I'll go home. That's what I'll do. Damn and blast the whole pack of you...'

'Home' according to the ghost is where he alone is right, and all others are wrong. The irony is that he mistakes Hell for home, and Heaven as the place of the damned.

In this season of rereading, I am also trying to keep up on new books. A recent 'new read' that has accompanied my 'reread' of *The Great Divorce*, has been Richard Rohr's *The Universal Christ*. As I have been considering the state of woundedness and brokenness of those characters Lewis represents (contrasted with the spaciousness and solid beauty of heaven), I was struck by my reading of this particular selection from Rohr's book. Consider these words of Richard Rohr in light of Lewis's characters,

Un-forgiveness lives in a repetitive past, which it cannot let go of. But forgiveness is a largeness of soul, without which there is no future of creative action - only repetition of old story lines, remembered hurts, and ever-increasing claims of victimhood for all concerned.

An eagerness and readiness to love is the ultimate freedom and future. When you've been included in the spaciousness of divine love, there is no room for human punishment, vengeance, rash judgement, or calls for retribution.

I cannot think of a better description of Lewis's characters - people who are caught and trapped by their own self-exile, resigned to live in the confines of wounded indignation, and who have rejected the spaciousness of grace, peace and love.

Part of living in the more solid reality of Heaven is to leave behind the vulnerabilities of a human defined existence - this ghostly half-life - and be made whole (or 'thicken up' as Lewis puts it). The acceptance and extension of forgiveness is the key thickening agent for one to be able to learn how to exist in the reality of Heaven. *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespassed against us* is how Jesus taught us to pray and to live - words that are easier said than lived.

As I stated earlier, the difference between my first and recent reread of *The Great Divorce* is about this idea of being made whole (more solid). The other choice is a life of increasing diminishment. Lewis illustrates this idea of diminishment by two startling characters. The first is a woman who has forever felt under-appreciated for her work in 'improving' her husband. In an unceasing complaint (a speech that goes on for five pages of text in the story) the woman spirals into a frantic diatribe, scarcely taking a breath. The fevered pitch of this litany of tribulations finally causes the ghostly woman to snap like a lightbulb filament; disappearing with a brief burning odor.

The second story of diminishment - as opposed to choosing wholeness and growth - comes when a saintly wife meets her husband and begs him to let go of his victimhood of 'putting up with her' during their earthly life together. What is so startling (and sheer genius by Lewis) is that the husband has created a persona, a man-size puppet, to speak and act out the woeful tragedies of his life - called the Tragedian. The wife begs with her husband to 'let go' of his victimhood. The husband is represented by an ever-shrinking dwarf. The wife's pleading goes unheeded, and the persona swallows the real man, before it also disappears. The narrator observes,

I do not know if I ever saw anything more terrible than the struggle of that Dwarf Ghost against joy.

There is a choice before human beings - to either become who they were purposed to be through the love and grace of God (in other words, to know Joy), or to settle for a life that is not life. In one of the better known quotes of the book, the bus driver (Lewis's literary mentor, George MacDonald), says,

There are only two kinds of people in the end; those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. This who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.'

What I noticed in this last engagement with the book, is that the choices of Heaven and Hell are actually choices we make in our current earthly existence. I began to consider that Lewis's descriptions might have less to do with the imagining of future eternal realities, and more to do with current realities. This choice of wholeness or fragmentation is a daily choice. In a lengthy conversation that the book's narrator has with George MacDonald, the character of MacDonald tries to explain,

...both good and evil, when they are fully grown, become retrospective. Not only this valley but all this earthly past will have been Heaven to those who are saved. Not only the twilight in that town, but all their life on earth too, will be seen by the damned to have been Hell... Both processes begin before death. The good man's past begins to change so that his forgiven sins and remembered sorrows take on the quality of Heaven: the bad man's past already conforms to his badness and is filled with dreariness. And that is why, at the end of all things, when the sun rises here and the twilight turns to blackness down there, the Blessed will say, 'We have never lived anywhere except Heaven,' and the Lost, 'We were always in Hell.' And both will speak truly.

This got me thinking. I need to be mindful of my thoughts, words and deeds - not because by them I may get *sent* to Heaven or to Hell. I am mindful of thoughts, words and deeds because in these real moments I am participating in Heaven (the God-Filled reality) or I am participating in Hell (the wounded, broken and isolated self-driven desire for independence from the God-filled reality).

Being made 'whole and holy' (again, to quote Sister Joan) is a dynamic state of being; interacting with the Holy Spirit to shed that which inhibits our wholeness and embracing God's good purpose to lead us 'further up and further in.' It reminds me of the closing words of Revelation. Where once John observed Christ on the cross uttering, *it is finished*, John in his Revelation hears Christ from the throne, *See, I am making all things new*. What if choosing heaven is to live in the unfolding reality of God's work in Christ both in myself and in the world - that which is full of Grace, Peace and Love? What if choosing heaven is to live in correspondence with things as they really are - that which is really real?

Lastly... The most impactful story of *The Great Divorce* (to my 20-Something self) was the encounter of one of the ghosts with an angel. This story stood out for me for a couple of reasons: it is a story about Lust (relate-able to many young people), but it also gave language to the struggle of Lust and its insidious whisperings. Lewis describes the encounter in the following (the selection is long, but it must be shared in its fullness to capture Lewis's beautifully descriptive prose),

I saw coming towards us a Ghost who carried something on his shoulder. Like all the Ghosts, he was unsubstantial, but they differed from one another as smokes differ. Some had been whitish; this one was dark and oily. What sat on his shoulder was a little red lizard, and it was twitching its tail like a whip and whispering things in his ear. As we caught sight of him he turned his head to the reptile with a snarl of impatience. 'Shut up, I tell you!' he said. It wagged its tail and continued to whisper to him. He ceased snarling, and presently began to smile. The he turned and started to limp westward, away from the mountains.

'Off so soon?' said a voice.

The speaker was more or less a human in shape but larger than a man, and so bright that I could hardly look at him. His presence smote on my eyes and on my body too (for there was heat coming from him as well as light) like the morning sun at the beginning of a tyrannous summer day.

'Yes. I'm off,' said the Ghost. 'Thanks for all your hospitality. But its no good, you see. I told this little chap (here he indicated the lizard), 'that he'd have to be quiet if he came - which he insisted on doing. Of course his stuff won't do here: I realize that. But he won't stop. I shall just have to go home.'

'Would you like me to make him quiet?' said the flaming Spirit - an angel, as I now understood.

'Of course I would.' said the Ghost.

'Then I will kill him.' said the Angel, taking a step forward.

What ensues is a dramatic confrontation and struggle. In my first read, this vignette was merely a story of Lust. Thirty years of reflection has grown my consideration that this is also a story of Identity and Redemption. Shame, need not define us. What we fail to be need not limit us from becoming what we *can* be.

Consider...

What if Sin, as the word connotes, is less about an inherent wickedness than it is about those conditions and choices that limit us from fully realizing the life of wholeness in Christ? What is so powerful in this particular story of Lewis is that the man with the red lizard is not beyond redemption. The lies and suggestions of the lizard did not define his identity. An unrealized life awaited this man. The angel knew it - all of heaven knew it - he merely needed to step towards the true life that was his. He could become 'whole and holy.'

Weighing in at a mere 128 pages (my old Collier Books edition), Lewis's *The Great Divorce* is a worthy Reread. Thoughtfully dense and rich in its imagery; provoking the imagination to consider what is often unimaginable.

The Great Divorce, by C.S.Lewis
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