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C.S. Lewis: Past Watchful Dragons

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The First

FRANCES WHITE EWBANK COLLOQUIUM

ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 1997

Upland, Indiana

C.S. Lewis: Past Watchful Dragons

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Past Watchful Dragons

by Stephanie Jones

We walk with C.S. Lewis through the wardrobes of every day life into lands hidden within the closets of our imaginations. Fictitious worlds of personified animal kingdoms, silent planets, and even heaven itself become a parallel to some greater truth in our lives. The impact of Lewis' writings is so profound because he first involves our intellect with some idea—childhood fantasy, science fiction, or heavenly portrayal, and then, after our intellect is occupied, Lewis' writings sneak past all of our “watchful dragons” so that he can enter the most private recesses of our minds. In Lewis' own words, “An obligation to feel can freeze.” Lewis thaws our feelings by stealing past intellectual obligations. Like Aslan tearing away the outer dragon skins of Eustace with his claws to reveal a small boy, Lewis tears away guards and masks and exposes our naked humanity. The intellectual styles and scenes of Lewis' writings have been and will continue to be discussed on end, yet the messages of Lewis' writings are a private encounter with each

reader's individual soul.

I stand before you as one who has felt the claws of Aslan tear away my facade and reveal my weakness. For several years of my life, I was buried beneath the layers of an eating disorder. Numerous attempts were made to peel away the layers; and after much counseling and planning I truly believed I would be able to control it, yet it was not until I was able to allow God to rip it completely away that I was able to be set free. When reading C.S. Lewis' novel, *The Great Divorce*, I was allowed to see for the first time the real “me” that existed behind my watchful dragons.

It begins with a bus trip from hell to heaven, as the ghost travelers from hell linger among the solid, flaming spirits of heaven. While led by a fictitious Lewis to observe the interactions between individual ghosts and spirits, the watchful dragons begin to relax as one's intellect becomes enthralled with the style and enchantment of Lewis' writings. Perhaps one's mind revels over the idea of penetrating dimensions of time and space,

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transporting ghost-like beings from a fantastical hell. Personally, I have never taken much to science fiction, yet I found my intellect held with a fantastic vision of heaven. Slowly, Lewis is able to creep around the now sleeping dragons and grasp our inner soul.

While my intellect was putting together the pieces to the heavenly puzzle that I was sure Lewis was portraying, I found *myself* among the pieces. Not a “heavenly” self, nor an imagined self, but my REAL, naked, weak human self, a self controlled by the weaknesses of a vice, unable to participate in the beauty and freedom of the spiritual world. My “self” was personified as one of the dark, oily ghosts visiting this “spiritual heaven”, yet bound to hell because of the inability to “kill” his vice. On the surface, the ghosts’ vices seem quite silly to the reader. For example, the vice of “my” ghost was a bossy little red lizard he carried on his shoulder. Though the lizard was nothing but a nuisance, the lizard had become so much a part of the ghost that he was painstakingly reluctant to give it up. In this sense, it seemed it was the little red lizard that carried the ghost by his shoulder. Though the ghost thought it was he who controlled the lizard, the reality can be seen that the lizard actually controlled the “destiny” of the ghost.

Is not this same principle true with vices today—alcoholism, depression, and eating disorders? An individual becomes so consumed by alcohol, depression, or an eating disorder that it is hard to distinguish the individual apart from the “disorder.” It even appears as though the disorder has taken control of the individual. For several years, professionals encouraged me to “get control” of my eating disorder. This meant gaining enough weight to survive and function normally. And so, I did. I successfully “controlled” my physical vice and gained just

enough weight so that I was able to fit back into society. I was not ready, however, to completely “kill” my eating disorder. I had gained control of my eating, yet it was this “control” that now became my vice. Instead of disappearing, my vice sat upon my shoulder and screamed failure so loudly in my ear that I was not always sure that gaining the weight was worth the agony. I was at times ready to retreat to my former patterns of malnourishment just to quiet the thoughts of guilt and regret.

The oily ghost with the red lizard on his shoulder suffered the same guise. The lizard screeched so loudly in his ear that he decided he might just have to go back to the hell from which he came. One of the solid spirits, a person with whom he had a relationship in his past life, offered to assist him in taking care of the lizard.

“Would you like me to make him quiet?” said the flaming spirit—an angel as I now understand.

“Of course I would,” said the ghost. “Then I will kill him,” said the angel, taking a step forward.

“Oh-ah-look out! You’re burning me. Keep away,” said the ghost, retreating.

“Don’t you *want* him killed?”

“You didn’t say anything about *killing* him at first. I hardly meant to bother you with anything so drastic as that.”

“It’s the only way,” said the Angel, whose burning hands were now very close to the lizard. “Shall I kill it?”

“Well, that’s a further question. I’m quite open to consider it, but it’s a new point, isn’t it? I mean for the moment I’m only thinking about

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silencing it because up here—well, it's so damned embarrassing."

"May I kill it?"

"Well, there's time to discuss that later."

"There is no time. May I kill it?"

With an eating disorder, as with other afflictions, the desire is to simply silence the negative, not to lose a handle on things all together. I was fed up with my eating disorder. I was fed up with the day in, day out rituals of eating and exercise that patterned my every day life. I was fed up with the numbers of calories that shrieked in my ear with each bite of food. I was fed up with the guilt and self-loathing that plagued my thoughts each time I stepped on the scale or looked in the mirror. Yet I was not willing to lose my control. I controlled what I ate, and thus, I controlled my appearance. No, I was not satisfied with my appearance, but would not the alternative be ten times worse? I could see myself gaining weight uncontrollably. If I gave up control, I would lose all of the beauty that I had, even if it wasn't enough. Besides, there was always tomorrow. Someday I would gain more weight. Some other day would be better, not now. I could always find good reasons to continue on my restricted diet. A diet trend in a magazine, a new health report, or even a medical doctor would back up my claim that it was good to "eat healthy". I convinced myself that was all I was doing—controlling myself to eat healthy.

The ghost responded similarly. He could control it.

"Look! It's gone to sleep of its own accord. I'm sure it'll be all right now. Thanks ever so much."

"May I kill it?"

"Honestly, I don't think there's the

slightest necessity for that. I'm sure I shall be able to keep it in order now. I think the gradual process would be far better than killing it."

"The gradual process is of no use at all."

"Don't you think so? Well, I'll think over what you've said very carefully. I honestly will. In fact, I'd let you kill it now, but I'm not feeling frightfully well today. It would be silly to do it *now*. I'd need to be in good health for the operation. Some other day perhaps."

"There is no other day. All days are present now."

"Get back! You're burning me. How can I tell you to kill it. You'd kill *me* if you did."

"It is not so."

"Why, you're hurting me now!"

"I never said it wouldn't hurt. I said it wouldn't kill you."

"Oh, I know, you think I'm a coward. But let me run back to my family doctor. I'll come again the first moment I can."

"This moment contains all moments."

"Why are you torturing me? You are jeering at me. How can I let you tear me to pieces? If you wanted to help me why didn't you kill the damned thing without asking me—before I knew? It would be all over now if you had."

"I can not kill it against your will. It is impossible. Have I your permission?"

Though the idea of being freed from my eating disorder was tempting, the alternative in

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my mind was much worse. I could no longer see myself apart from the “habits” associated with the eating disorder—the rigorous exercise and strict diet. I would lose myself if I gave in and let go of my control. Throughout the process of gaining enough weight to be acceptable, I felt like I was losing all that I was. How could God ask me to let go completely? Because he was asking me to live: to live the life that he designed for me, apart from the vices that attempt to control. Through reading scripture on the life God had promised me, I could taste what life would be like if I let go completely. It would be a life free of the worldly entanglements. A life with a purpose beyond mere existence. God continually offered to kill the eating disorder for me. It was just a matter of me letting go, once and for all. It became a battle between my fleshly self, and the self that God created within me. It was as if my eating disorder began to take sides against God. This was a spiritual battle.

As the red lizard states his battle position to the ghost in effort to win the ghost’s favor, it is as if my eating disorder has personified and states its refute against God:

“He can do what he says. He can kill me. One fatal word from you and he *will!* Then you’ll be without me forever and ever. It’s not natural. How could you live? You’d be only a sort of ghost, not a real man as you are now. He doesn’t understand. He’s only a cold, bloodless abstract thing. It may be natural for him, but it isn’t for us. Yes, yes. I know there are no real pleasures now, only dreams. But aren’t they better than nothing? And I’ll be so good. I admit I’ve sometimes gone too far in the past, but I promise

I won’t do it again. I’ll give you nothing but really nice dreams—all sweet and fresh and almost innocent.

Lewis successfully snuck past my watchful dragons and exposed my actual self. There were no real pleasures, the little red dragon was right. Life became mindless rituals, frustration, and resentment. I clung dearly to dreams of what life could be, yet I experienced no joy in living. I convinced myself that the way my life was while under the vice of my eating disorder was the best life could get for me. Somewhere, within the recesses of my mind, I clung to the promises God had given me in the Bible that life could be freeing. During January of my freshman year at college, I decided to close my eyes, reach out my hand, and allow God to take control of that to which I had clung so dearly.

And so the oily ghost allowed the spirit to kill the lizard. Intense pain, momentary confusion, then a new life emerges. The lizard turns into a stallion which the ghost, now stronger and brighter, mounts with joy and rides off to claim his place in heaven. It was not through control that release was possible, but through complete submission.

C.S. Lewis portrayed on a few short pages in one of his many works that which years of counseling and knowledge could not touch. The release from my eating disorder was not achieved through my own efforts, nor through the efforts of others, nor even through the revelations brought about by this book. My release was through an individual and personal encounter with God, in which I decided on my own to give God my every aspect of my life. Why, then, is this scenario set up by Lewis so important to my life? I will not be able to ride away on my stallion into heaven until the Lord calls me home. Until that time, I am in the continual process of

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letting go of control. It is not unlike the portrayal previously mentioned of a small boy named Eustace in Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Eustace repeatedly ripped off his dragon skins (his weakness of pride) on his own accord, but found that there was always another layer underneath. It took Aslan's claws to completely tear the dragon skins from Eustace to give him the freedom life.

I am reminded of Paul writing to the Romans about his spiritual battle. Though he was no longer a slave to the law of the flesh, it still waged war within him. He was a fleshly man seeking to follow the Spirit living in him. The watchful dragons of our fleshly self, namely pride, keep much from penetrating our spiritual self. Lewis' writings are a tool that can be used to grasp the inner spiritual soul past the watchful dragons. Though I am being set free from my eating disorder, the watchful dragons in my life are always building up new areas of resistance and seeking to preserve control over different aspects of my life. Lewis' writings, such as *The Great Divorce*, serve as a constant pathway to my soul, to remind me of the joy and freedom available in complete submission.

Because I am human, I will always have my watchful dragons. Because I have my watchful dragons, I will always have the ability to become callused and resistant to complete freedom. As long as I am human, I will at times struggle with the vices of the fleshly world. As long as I have vices, I will continually have to crucify them for the Lord. Thank God for the writings of C. S. Lewis, that are able to penetrate watchful dragons, expose vices, and reveal the true joy of freedom in Christ.