

Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016

Volume 4 *A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fourth Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis & Friends*

Article 3

3-2004

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James M. Spencer

Covenant Christian High School

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Recommended Citation

Spencer, James M. (2004) "C.S. Lewis and the Ordinary Man," *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016*: Vol. 4 , Article 3.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol4/iss1/3

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume IV

A Collection of Essays Presented at

The Fourth

FRANCES WHITE EWBank COLLOQUIUM

ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2004

Upland, Indiana

C.S. Lewis and the Ordinary Man

James M. Spencer
Covenant Christian High School

C.S. Lewis and the Ordinary Man

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I make no claim to being a Lewis expert of any sort; however, I do feel qualified to write on this topic as I have a long and distinguished career of being a very ordinary man. Perhaps that is part of the reason I have been fascinated for a number of years about the Lewis's amazing ability to connect with people's lives in so many ways. C.S. Lewis connects with the ordinary man for reasons both personal and professional. In this brief paper, I propose to offer three reasons why his life connects so personally with some, and five reasons why his writing is so approachable to so many.

Although I am convinced that Lewis would be both embarrassed and a bit offended at examinations of his personal life, I must begin there. It is part of the magic of literature that occasionally readers identify with an author because they share common experiences, both real and imagined. Perhaps many of his readers will not share these connections, but I could relate very specifically to the man behind the books through three specific things.

First is a sense of shared loneliness. Although that seems to be an oxymoron, it is only so when viewed in retrospect. Lewis described his early years by saying, "I am the product of long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs indoor silences, and attics explored in solitude."¹ When combined, those three ordinary words (upstairs indoor silences) seem to paint a revealing autobiographical picture, which can be viewed only by those that have the same memory. There is a thin line between being alone and being lonely, and it is not always easy to tell the difference. Although my childhood was more shaped by Gene Autry cowboy movies and imaginary sand-pile cities, somehow I imagine Jack would understand the similarities. I contend that there are a lot of ordinary men and women who have seen that picture and to whom the "indoor upstairs silence" is still a profound memory. Let me be quick to add in this day of environmental determinism, that loneliness is not necessarily a negative thing and that it doesn't inevitably produce "disadvantaged" students. Lewis was never asking for pity as he described his loneliness, as it was his being alone which opened the door of his imagination so incredibly wide—wide enough to take him to whole other worlds. If myth is the perfect bridge between concrete experience and abstract ideas (between heaven and earth), then it requires some imagination to cross that bridge. Developing that sort of imagination is not a

social activity.

The second shared experience was finding an academic refuge. Losing his mother, set apart from his father and brother, Lewis's childhood was redeemed by books and school. I mention those as two separate things, as one can obviously explore the world of books apart from school, but it is success in school which allows many insecure children to develop some sense of purpose and value. Pouring himself into his studies, when they appealed to him, Lewis achieved that kind of success which often lures young men and women into lifetime careers in the world of academia. Although never as bright as Lewis, I too had enough fond memories of my school experiences, especially high school, that I have just finished my 42nd year in the twelfth grade. Lest you think I am a particularly slow learner, most of those years were spent as a teacher.

The third thing I share with Lewis is having an adult conversion experience. Although many ordinary people share some sort of childhood religious experiences, there are three general reactions to those. There are those who put them away as "childish things" and move on with their "adult" lives. There are those who tenaciously cling to them, refusing to think much about why they believe what they believe. Then there are those who, like Lewis and me, wander into adulthood fluctuating somewhere between skeptic and agnostic, convinced that they can "see through all things." Lewis wrote that his conversion came largely in three steps. First, his realization that joy was really desire and that our "wantings" are our best "havings." It took me some thirty years to figure out what that meant, although I was always anxiously aware of "something" that was missing from my life. Second, Lewis pointed out that our desire is for heaven itself, which is our true home. "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."² This helped me to understand why no place on this earth, or no accomplishments in this life, could fill that empty spot. Finally, Lewis found that his search for the object of his desire led him to the truth. He wrote that his last step into mere Christianity was his realization that some myths (explanations) might actually be true. It was that line, coupled with Francis Schaeffer's classic summary, "Christianity is not just a series of truths but Truth—truth about all of reality,"³ which allowed me to embrace Christianity with my mind as well as my heart

and soul. Both helped me to understand that Christianity is the only explanation of things, as they really are, that makes any sense.

Now, given the fact that Lewis died some forty years ago and yet still sells over a million and a half books a year, permit me to suggest five reasons his writing appeals to the ordinary reader. Of course, I am writing from a personal perspective, as that is the only one an ordinary man has. The magic of Lewis's writing begins with the fact that he often seemed to be able to write exactly what I was thinking, only better. For example, is there an honest man or woman on the planet who, on any given day, doesn't know what it is like to look into the mirror and feel phonier than a three-dollar bill? Lewis made these two points concerning that dilemma: "First, that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave in that way. They know the Law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in."⁴ I always wondered why Saint Paul didn't include that in the Seventh Chapter of Romans.

On the other hand, if we live long enough, we will also discover that the great freeing truth of Christianity lies in its impossibility. For those struggling with all their might to be "good Christians," Lewis offers little sympathy. "The main thing we learn from a serious attempt to practice Christian virtues is that we fail."⁵ It is impossible, of course, apart from Christ. Like Lewis, I am convinced that no genuine conversion is possible short of that discovery. We will never move from eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil to eating of the Tree of Life until we come to the end of our own efforts to please God. I will be eternally grateful to Dr. Lewis for putting that into words for me.

Being an educator, I felt that it was my responsibility to be able to answer every question and to explain away those I couldn't. This, of course, is the curse of academia. It was a marvelous day, indeed, when Lewis pointed out the fruitlessness of that pursuit. "You can't go on 'explaining away' forever: you will find that you have explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on 'seeing through' things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it . . . to 'see through' all things is the same as not to see."⁶ It is often the great irony of men's lives that they become the very opposite of what they think they are pursuing. Seeking to become a real man, I found myself becoming, instead, what Lewis described as a man without a chest.

Although our need to win the argument is one of the surest signs that we are still eating of the wrong tree, I was always painfully aware that even though Christianity seemed to be disappearing from the public

square, the case for Christ still needed to be clearly presented. Not as one among several "religious choices" we might make, but one of eternal importance. For those who weary of the debate, Lewis wrote, "One must keep on pointing out that Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important."⁷ I wish I had said that.

The second thing about C.S. Lewis's writings that attracts many ordinary readers is his marvelous sense of humor. It is a genuine gift indeed, to be able to express an extraordinary wit in the most ordinary moments of life. For example, I am sure that none of you ever have days when you would just as soon not go to church, but I have those occasionally. And even though I don't quote Lewis to justify my own recalcitrance, I have been encouraged several times in imaginary conversations with the author in which he pointed out, "But though I liked clergymen as I liked bears, I had as little wish to be in the Church as in the zoo."⁸

Now that I have mostly passed through middle-age and am experiencing the senior moments of life, I can't help but chuckle at Lewis's observation that "The middle-aged man has great powers of passive resistance."⁹ It is amazing that those things youthful willpower could never conquer are somehow simply eliminated by weariness and forgetfulness. At the same time, I couldn't agree more with one of his final observations about the times of our lives. He wrote, "Yes, autumn is really the best of the seasons; and I'm not sure that old age isn't the best part of life. But of course, like autumn, it doesn't last."¹⁰ I am writing this in mid-October during the week of my sixty-third birthday. The Indiana leaves are gorgeous and I am having the best time of my life. I thank professor Lewis for helping me see both of those more clearly.

Perhaps it is because I taught American History for years next door to a Welshman who always wondered what we did the second six weeks, but I couldn't help but smile as Lewis clarified the European perspective of America as he reminded his colleagues, "Though we all know, we often forget, that the existence of America was one of the greatest disappointments in the history of Europe."¹¹

For those who have ever experienced an uncontrollable urge to laugh at the funeral home, or suffered an attack of the snickers while reciting the Lord's Prayer on the Sabbath day, Lewis has some compassion as he revealed, "In my own experience the funniest things have occurred in the gravest and most sincere conversations."¹²

As morbid as it might sound, I found Lewis's humor to be particularly biblical as he encouraged his readers to "Die before you die. There is no chance after."¹³ Although few would choose to preach it, this line inspired what I think was one of my best sermons,

entitled, Cheer up, God wants to kill you. Much good humor seems to speak to a deeper matter, and it is catching a glimpse of that universality which both relieves some of the tension of our lives, and helps us not to take ourselves so seriously. I totally agree with Chesterton; that is the reason angels can fly.

The third reason C.S. Lewis's writings appeal to the ordinary reader is that he was such a good story teller. Even those who can't define the word "allegory," will find themselves drawn into a story if it is well-told. The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, being among his best known "stories," has intrigued three generations of children who were lucky enough to be either readers or read to. Many adults have collected a piece or two of the story that still seems to appear in their adult conversations. My own favorite, often occurs in conversations in which people are trying to evaluate God. Seems like a strange activity, but one that man has been preoccupied with since leaving the garden. In those situations, my mind often flashes back to Lucy asking Mrs. Beaver if this "Aslan" they are about to meet is safe. If you remember the scene, Mr. Beaver, without hesitation, blurts out, "Course he isn't safe. But he's good."¹⁴ I know of no better description of Christ outside of the Scriptures.

Many ordinary men and women's lives seem to revolve around one simple question, "Why is this happening to me?" Lewis brings unique understanding to each of those personal stories as he eloquently states the question—and the problem at the same time. "If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But His creatures are not happy. Therefore, God lacks either goodness, or power, or both."¹⁵ Knowing that this is one of the questions that we must live with, Lewis resists the temptation to answer it, but does offer a bit of encouragement to those in the midst of difficult times. "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain."¹⁶ In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Lewis described the impact of the "problem of pain" on individual's lives with a description of a map. The explanation went something like this; "And what is this valley called? We call it now simply Wisdom's Valley: but the oldest maps mark it as the Valley of Humiliation."¹⁷

C.S. Lewis brings great balance to the search for God by paraphrasing the first chapter of Romans, "Indeed, in so far as the things unseen are manifested by the things seen, one might from one point of view call the whole material universe an allegory."¹⁸ At the same time, he rejects the dominant twentieth century mindset which still seeks to find—or eliminate, God scientifically. "Looking for God—or heaven—by exploring space is like reading or seeing all Shakespeare's plays in the hope that you will find Shakespeare."¹⁹

The fourth way in which Lewis appeals to the ordinary reader is in exposing them to something many didn't know they had, a spiritual imagination. As much as we don't want to say it, the heart of Christianity is still a mystery. In the west, we prefer to leave mystery to eastern religions, thinking that Christianity is historical and demonstrable. Lewis begins the conversation by pointing out that, "Reality, in fact, is usually something you could not have guessed. That is one of the reasons I believe Christianity."²⁰ Rather than reject the subjectivity of Christianity, it is embracing it that actually brings us to faith. In spite of the best efforts of Josh McDowell and Lee Strobel, the case for Christ is not going to be proven in a court of law. On the other hand, Lewis doesn't reject the realm of logic and reason as he pointed out the irrationality of existentialism when he wrote, "If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning."²¹

Trying to explain how the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent God of the universe could reduce himself to a single cell in the womb of a teen-age Jewish girl requires some spiritual imagination. But, it is an inescapable step as Lewis explains, "Here and here only, in all time, the myth must have become fact; the Word, flesh; God, Man. This is not a religion, or a philosophy. It is the summing up and actuality of them all."²² Lewis finishes the *Problem of Pain* with a most sobering thought about the eternal seriousness of applying our spiritual imagination correctly. "The day is coming when you will wake to find, beyond all hope, that you have attained it (Joy), or else, that it was within your reach and you have lost it forever."²³

Finally, then, I believe that the ordinary man or woman who discovers C.S. Lewis will be encouraged by the fact that he didn't believe there was any such thing as an "ordinary" man. "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors."²⁴ It is for these "extraordinary" people then, that Lewis makes sense out of Christianity. Few who have ever put pen to paper in that quest, have succeeded as C.S. Lewis has. He begins by pointing out that our search for truth must start with our wanting to find what is there, as opposed to what we want to be there. "If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end. If you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth . . . only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with and, in the end, despair."²⁵

Once the reader has discovered Truth as revealed in Christ, Lewis explains what it means to be a Christian. "Putting on Christ . . . is not one among many jobs a Christian has to do; and it is not a sort of special

exercise for the top class (of believers). It is the whole of Christianity. Christianity offers nothing else at all.”²⁶ He also describes the alternative with equal clarity. “To walk out of God’s will is to walk into nowhere.”²⁷

In summary then, what we are suggesting in this brief and humble effort is that some of Lewis’s readers connect with him personally as they also know the feelings of childhood loneliness, finding an academic refuge, and experiencing an adult conversion. If it were possible, many pleasant hours could be spent with Jack at the local pub reminiscing over those shared experiences.

Since that isn’t possible, we still have the great privilege of wandering through his writings looking for things that we wish we had said, sharing a good laugh, getting lost in the story, chasing our imaginations down previously unexplored paths, and making sense out of that which we have bet our lives upon. My concluding prayer is simply, that like the good professor, we might all come to the place where we can say, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else.”²⁸

Notes

- ¹ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), p. 10.
- ² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 120.
- ³ Francis Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982), p. 19.
- ⁴ *Mere Christianity*, p. 21.
- ⁵ *Mere Christianity*, p. 125.
- ⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 91.
- ⁷ *God in the Dock*, Walter Hooper, editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 101.
- ⁸ *Surprised by Joy*, p. 128.
- ⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), p. 32.
- ¹⁰ *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, W. H. Lewis, editor (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), p. 308.
- ¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Oxford, 1973), p. 15.
- ¹² C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1958), p. 90.
- ¹³ C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), p. 279.
- ¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1970), p. 75.
- ¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 26.
- ¹⁶ *The Problem of Pain*, p. 93.
- ¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), p. 125.
- ¹⁸ *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, W. H. Lewis, editor (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), p. 273.
- ¹⁹ *Christian Reflections*, edited by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 10.
- ²⁰ *Mere Christianity*, p. 47.
- ²¹ *Mere Christianity*, p. 46.
- ²² *Surprised by Joy*, p. 124.
- ²³ *The Problem of Pain*, p. 148.
- ²⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 15.
- ²⁵ *Mere Christianity*, p. 39.
- ²⁶ *Mere Christianity*, p. 166.
- ²⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 116.
- ²⁸ *The Weight of Glory*, p. 92.