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C.S. Lewis and Frederick Buechner: Literary Expression of Faith

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Keynote Address

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A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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C.S. Lewis and Frederick Buechner: Literary Expression of Faith

Victoria S. Allen

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

C.S. Lewis and Frederick Buechner: Literary Expression of Faith

Victoria S. Allen

C.S. Lewis and Frederick Buechner never met, yet they are “friends” because they share so many similarities as authors writing from a Christian perspective. In terms of Buechner’s themes and range of his writings, this award winning American author and ordained Presbyterian minister may have as much in common with C.S. Lewis as his own British Inklings. So let me introduce Frederick Buechner and his writings.

Frederick Buechner (b. 1926) has published over 30 fiction and non-fiction works and is regarded, like C.S. Lewis, as a Christian apologist as well as a literary figure. Like Lewis, Buechner’s non-fiction involves the interaction of faith and literature as well as memoirs of his journey to faith and beyond. Also like Lewis, he has a large following of persons who enjoy his writings, which are both literarily and spiritually challenging. Perhaps most in common with Lewis is Buechner’s imagination, humor and phenomenal ability to put into words the truth of spiritual experience in insightful and memorable ways. Like Lewis he is therefore often quoted from the pulpit and by other writers.

Frederick Buechner’s published works span a period of 56 years and include 16 novels, personal memoirs, collections of sermons, humorous lexicons, daily meditations, literary criticism, Christian apologetics and, as one reviewer put it, “a half-century’s worth of thinking aloud about the Christian way” (JAD). Although he has long been recognized as an articulate Christian voice in mainline churches and seminaries, he is relatively unknown in some evangelical circles, yet his papers are archived in the Wheaton College special collections, close to those of his “friends” C.S. Lewis, George MacDonald, Dorothy Sayers, J.R.R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield and Charles Williams in Wheaton’s Ward Collection of British

authors. As the book buyer for the Logos Bookstore in Nassau, Bahamas, I first read Frederick Buechner in 1982, when I ordered his newly published memoir *The Sacred Journey* at the suggestion of the Logos Association. As I explain in the introduction to my book *Listening to Life: Psychology and Spirituality in the Writings of Frederick Buechner* (2002):

Intrigued by the title, I began to read the slim volume and was immediately captured by the poetic insight Buechner brought to this memoir of his early life. He described his life “before time” as an age of innocence, when like Adam, he learned to name the animals and experienced a child’s sensory immediacy and wonder, not unlike that described by James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I was struck by Buechner’s rude awakening “once upon a time” when as a ten-year-old he looked down from the upstairs window to view the motionless body of his father who had just committed suicide. And I was moved by his spiritual awakening to a dimension “beyond time” which changed the course of his life forever.

As I read and reread *The Sacred Journey*, Buechner’s style reminded me of C.S. Lewis, whose *Chronicles of Narnia* I was reading to my children at the time. Like Lewis, Buechner’s seemingly simple narrative revealed an unfolding spirituality of biblical proportions. At the same time, his deep psychological insight into his own motivation and experience echoed that of author/psychiatrist Dr. Paul Tournier.

The Sacred Journey provided my introduction to Frederick Buechner, but it was not until 1997, when as a doctoral candidate at the Catholic University of America I was searching for a topic for my dissertation, that I came to know his work on a deeper level. As a graduate student in English at Georgetown University, I had written my master's thesis on Flannery O'Connor. Now I was searching for an American author less analyzed by scholars, who also infused skilled literary expression with spiritual insight and a Christian world view. When two fellow graduate students [who, by the way, had done their undergraduate work at Calvin College], recommended Frederick Buechner, I learned that in addition to his memoirs he had written sixteen novels and numerous works of non-fiction. As I read the Buechner corpus, I began to see that Buechner's psychological/spiritual perspective in *The Sacred Journey* characterized his fiction. Not strange, for Buechner's creativity, psychological insights, and faith flow from a 'deep inner place' (Brown 44), the *imago dei* where he sees with the eyes of the heart. (xiii-xiv)

"At its heart most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography" (3) begins *The Alphabet of Grace* Buechner's first autobiographical journal which marked a significant development in his understanding of faith. Buechner had received an invitation to give The William Belden Noble Lectures at Harvard in 1969. Before agreeing he asked for clarification on the topic of the lectures. In a later memoir, Buechner relates the answer he received:

Perhaps something in the area of "religion and letters," he wrote back, and it was the word *letters* that did it.

What he meant by the word was clear enough, but suddenly I found myself thinking of letters literally instead—of letters as the alphabet itself, the A's, B's, C's and D's out of which all literature, all words, are ultimately composed. And from there I wandered somehow to the notion of the events of our lives—even, and perhaps especially, the most everyday events—as the alphabet through which God, of his grace, spells out his words, his meaning to us. So *The Alphabet of Grace* was the title I hit upon, and what I set out to do was to try to describe a single representative day of my life in a way to suggest what there was of God to hear in it. . . . In writing those lectures and the book they

later turned into, it came to seem to me that if I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace. What I started trying to do as a writer and as a preacher was more and more to draw on my own experience not just as a source of plot, character, illustration, but as a source of truth. (NT 86-87)

In his memoir *The Sacred Journey*, Buechner explains how to "listen to your life":

What each of them [events of our lives] might be thought to mean separately is less important than what they all mean together. At the very least they mean this: mean *listen*. Listen. Your life is happening. . . . A journey, years long, has brought each of you through thick and thin to this moment in time as mine has also brought me. Think back on that journey. Listen back to the sounds and sweet airs of your journey that give delight and hurt not and to those too that give no delight at all and hurt like Hell. *Be not affeard*. The music of your life is subtle and elusive and like no other—not a song with words but a song without words, a singing, clattering music to gladden the heart or turn the heart to stone, to haunt you perhaps with echoes of a vaster, farther music of which it is part.

The question is not whether the things that happen to you are chance things or God's things because, of course, they are both at once. There is no chance thing through which God cannot speak—even the walk from the house to the garage that you have walked ten thousand times before, even the moments when you cannot believe there is a God who speaks at all anywhere. He speaks, I believe, and the words he speaks are incarnate in the flesh and blood of our selves and of our own footsore and sacred journeys. We cannot live our lives constantly looking back, listening back, lest we be turned to pillars of longing and regret, but to live without listening at all is to live deaf to the fullness of the music. Sometimes we avoid listening for fear of what we may hear; sometimes for fear that we may hear nothing at all but the empty rattle of our

own feet on the pavement. But be not affeard says Caliban, nor is he the only one to say it. “Be not afraid,” says another, “for lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” He says he is with us on our journeys. He says he has been with us since each of our journeys began. Listen for him. Listen to the sweet and bitter airs of your present and your past for the sound of him. (SJ 77-78)

Interwoven into the Buechnerian style is the natural integration of Scripture and quotes from Shakespeare. Words of Caliban from *The Tempest* exemplify Buechner’s technique of showing literature as a way to get at essentials. This appreciation of literature as a vehicle for listening to life parallels his view of psychotherapy and spirituality—all increase our perception of God’s grace being played out in our experience.

In his writing, Buechner draws deeply from his own life experience which in many ways parallels the early life of C.S. Lewis. Like Lewis’s autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, in his memoir *The Sacred Journey* Buechner reflects on the mysterious ways God was speaking to him culminating in his conversion at age 27. To understand why Buechner and Lewis share so much in common, it is helpful to review some highlights from Buechner’s memoirs of his childhood and experiences leading up to his conversion.

Like Lewis, reading imaginary fiction was a major preoccupation of Buechner’s childhood. He recalls that as a boy during a year of sickness, “I lived a year in Oz (1932) and have been homesick for it ever since” (*The Clown in the Belfry* 28). As he became immersed in the Oz books by L. Frank Baum, the world of Oz became more real than the world outside his bedroom. In *Sacred Journey* Buechner describes his fascination with the Land of Oz where animals talk and no one dies which in some mysterious way became a key road mark on his sacred journey. Buechner was particularly drawn to a character named King Rinkitink, who eventually evolved into the hero of many of Buechner’s novels. This king was plumb and ebullient, foolish and vulnerable, but even in his weakness he demonstrated tremendous wisdom and strength. Buechner describes him as later turning up in unexpected places, such as in G.K. Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday*, where according to Buechner “he appears as the character of Sunday . . . that billowing, zany powerhouse of a man, [who] reveals his true identity finally by saying, “I am the Sabbath. I am the Peace of God” (SJ 18).

As a child Lewis too was a devout reader of myths and legends and even created his own fictional kingdom, Animal-Land, filled with talking animals, although Lewis states it was devoid of the wonder which characterized Narnia. He recalls “at the age of six, seven, and eight—I was living almost entirely in my imagination; or at least that the imaginative experience

of those years now seems to me more important than anything else” (*Surprised by Joy* 15). At this time Lewis also experienced what he called moments of Joy—intense awareness of beauty in nature or in reading Beatrix Potter’s *Squirrel Nutkin* or in poetry—that left him with a sense of longing for this Joy which he had glimpsed in a moment. Lewis comments that his reading Norse legends may have prepared him “to acquire some capacity for worship against the day when the true God should recall me to Himself” (*Surprised by Joy* 77).

Reflecting on his experience forty years later, Buechner explains why his boyhood reading was so significant:

Nothing was more remote from my thought as this period than theological speculation . . . but certain patterns were set, certain rooms were made ready, so that when, years later, I came upon Saint Paul for the first time and heard him say, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,” I had the feeling that I knew something of what he was talking about. Something of the divine comedy that we are all of us involved in. Something of grace (SJ 18).

Another major similarity in the childhood of the two writers was the loss of a parent. When he was 10, Lewis’s mother died of cancer. In 1936 when Buechner was 10, his father committed suicide. For both boys, this loss proved to be a turning point—when childhood innocence ended, and the reality of time began. Lewis recalls “With my mother’s death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life” (*Surprised by Joy* 21). But whereas Lewis deeply grieved the loss of his parent, at the time Buechner did not. In Buechner’s home, his father’s suicide became a family secret, something one did not talk about. There was no funeral for his father, and the memorial held for his father the following fall his family did not attend. Buechner describes this experience of losing his father as something he did not consciously feel at the time, but which he came to realize shook the very ground of his existence. For twenty years Buechner unconsciously wove his father’s suicide into his novels. After being in therapy, he wrote his three memoirs partly to discover how God was nevertheless with him through his father’s loss, but also to illustrate how important it is to talk about a painful experience. As a way to listen to life, in therapy Buechner discovered the importance of remembering. In a short novel *The Wizard’s Tide* (republished under the title *The Christmas Tide*), Buechner refashions his family’s reaction to his father’s death, rewriting it as it should have been—a time for

the family to openly share their grief to bring acceptance and healing. In many of his writings Buechner stresses the importance of memory:

We cannot undo our old mistakes or their consequences any more than we can erase old wounds that we have both suffered and inflicted, but through the power that memory gives us of thinking, feeling, imagining our way back through time we can at long last finally finish with the past in the sense of removing the power to hurt us and other people and to stunt our growth as human beings It is through memory that we are able to reclaim much of our lives that we have long since written off by finding that in everything that has happened to us over the years God was offering us possibilities of new life and healing which, though we may have missed them at the time, we can still choose and be brought to life by and healed by all these years later.

Another way of saying it, perhaps, is that memory makes it possible for us both to bless the past, even those parts of it that we have always felt cursed by, and also to be blessed by it. If this kind of remembering sounds like what psychotherapy is all about, it is because of course it is, but I think it is also what the forgiveness of sins is all about—the interplay of God’s forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of God and each other (TS 32-33).

As writers, both Lewis and Buechner reveal the pain of familial loss in their books. For Lewis the ripples extend to Digory in *The Magician’s Nephew* who wishes more than anything to help his mother live and through obedience succeeds. Later using a pseudonym, Lewis writes *A Grief Observed* after the death of his wife. For Buechner, a more unconscious mechanism is at work—in each of his early novels, a suicide occurs before or during the narrative, which the characters seek to work through. In some of his later novels such as *Godric*, the longing for a father is a major theme. As Buechner was later to learn, although death had ended his father’s life, it had not ended his relationship with his father which would need prayer, therapy, and his novel about a medieval saint to heal.

Godric, the story of a twelfth-century English saint, was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1981. By many it is considered his best novel. In his most self-revealing, psychologically-oriented memoir *Telling Secrets*, Buechner describes how writing the novel *Godric* brought him “a sharper glimpse than I had ever had before of the crucial role my father has always played in my life and continues to play in my life” (TS 21). Describing the novel as written during one of the

darkest periods of his life, he relates his identification with Godric’s grief “for having lost a father I never knew.”

I did not realize until after I wrote it how much of this [the crucial role my father has always played in my life] there is in the book. When Godric is about to leave home to make his way in the world and his father Aedward raises his hand to him in farewell, Godric says, “I believe my way went from that hand as a path goes from a door, and though many a mile that way has led me since, with many a turn and crossroad in between, if ever I should trace it back, it’s to my father’s hand that it would lead.” And later, when he learns of his father’s death, he says, “The sadness was I’d lost a father I had never fully found. It’s like a tune that ends before you’ve heard it out. Your whole life through you search to catch the strain, and seek the face you’ve lost in strangers’ faces.” In writing passages like that, I was writing more than I had known I knew with the result that the book was not only a word *from* me—my words painstakingly chosen and arranged into sentences by me alone—but also a word out of such a deep and secret part of who I am that it seemed also a word *to* me.

A book you write out of the depths of who you are, like a dream you dream out of those same depths, is entirely your own creation. All the words your characters speak are words that you alone have put into their mouths, just as every situation they become involved in is one that you alone have concocted for them. But it seems to me nonetheless that a book you write, like a dream you dream, can have more healing and truth and wisdom in it at least for yourself than you feel in any way responsible for.

A large part of the truth that *Godric* had for me was the truth that although death ended my father, it has never ended my relationship with my father—a secret that I had never so clearly understood before. So forty-four years after the last time I saw him, it was to my father that I dedicated the book—*In memoriam patris mei*. I wrote the dedication in Latin solely because at the time it seemed appropriate to the medieval nature of the tale, but I have come to suspect since that Latin was also my unconscious way of remaining obedient to the ancient family law that the secret of my father must be at all costs kept secret (TS 21-22).

The central theme of the novel is the ambivalence of love and friendship which effects every relationship. This is not only true of Godric's father who by always working to provide for his family, neglects them emotionally. Early in the novel, Godric leaves his sister behind because he loves her and he fears his love would corrupt her if she accompanied him. After becoming a confidant of the Lady Hedwic, Godric abandons her fearing her husband's jealousy would endanger her. Every time his ailing friend the Abbot Ailred coughs, Godric feels the pain as if it were his own. And in the end, Godric and his sister must part because their love only increases the wounds they feel. In the first chapter, Godric poignantly asks, "What's friendship, when all's done, but the giving and taking of wounds?" (7). This painful recognition leads the aged Godric to pray, "Gentle Jesu, Mary's son, be thine the wounds that heal our wounding. Press thy bloody scars to ours that thy dear blood may flow in us and cleanse our sin" (7-8). Responding to the emotional pain of his hurt trail, Godric seeks transference to the wounds of Christ for healing of memories and forgiveness of sin. Christ is the wounded healer, a picture of what Godric is also becoming.

Buechner states that writing the novel *Godric* "saved his sanity" during one of the darkest periods of his life. During that period his daughter almost succumbed to anorexia and had to be hospitalized. Looking at the novel, one can see the outworking of Buechner's personal experience. Far more central to the novel than Godric's father is his sister Burcwen. For Burcwen, Godric is a father figure as well as a brother (she is much younger and looks up to Godric). The central wounding of the narrative that causes Godric the most pain is his excessive love for his young sister, a love that in the novel culminates in incest. Her codependency and fusion with Godric and the severe anorexia that she develops in response to this relationship parallels Buechner's own obsession with his daughter at the time he wrote the book. This is not to suggest that the novel "reveals" that Buechner committed incest with his daughter. Far more probable is the author's subconscious metaphorical instinct which translated an emotional fusion into its most dramatic expression. Throughout the novel the imagery of starvation is prevalent, and the descriptions of Burcwen's anorexia are almost verbatim the words he uses to describe his daughter in the memoir *Telling Secrets*.

What ultimately is striking about Buechner's best work is the depth of characters that assume a life of their own. For Buechner, "Godric was my saint," an historical person with whom he identified. Buechner has defamiliarized his protagonist, locating him in a different time, setting, and even language from his own. Sometimes an author can be too involved, creating a thinly disguised autobiography rather than fiction, but in *Godric* Buechner has created a kind of "objective

correlative" for his own experience. That which is most personal is most universal.

Concluding his second memoir *Now and Then*, Buechner describes the creative process as he wrote *Godric* which cannot be separated from the word *mystery*:

Godric came as mysteriously alive for me as Bebb had and, with him, all the people he knew and the whole medieval world he lived in. I had Godric narrate his own life, and despite the problem of developing a language that sounded authentic on his lips without becoming impenetrably archaic, and despite the difficulties of trying to recapture a time and place so unlike my own, the book, like *Lion Country* before it, came so quickly and with such comparative ease that there were times when I suspected that maybe the old saint himself was not entirely uninvolved in the process, as, were I a saint and were somebody writing a book about me, I would not be entirely uninvolved in the process either.

All sorts of adventures are described in the book because Godric's life was full of adventures, and I followed his life as accurately as I could; but Godric is a very old man as he tells his tale, and old age and the approach of death are very much in the back of his mind throughout. In this sense I think it was a book as prophetic, for me, as the Bebb books had been. It was prophetic in the sense that in its pages, more than half without knowing it, I was trying on various ways of growing old and facing death myself. As the years go by, Godric outlives, or is left behind by, virtually everybody he has ever loved—his sister, Burcwen; his shipmate, Roger Mouse; the two snakes, Tune and Fairweather, who for years were his constant companions; and the beautiful maid, Gillian, who appeared to him on the way back from his pilgrimage to Rome. But, although not without anguish, he is able to let them all go finally and to survive their going. His humanity and wit survive. His faith survives. He prays. He sins. He dreams. And one day not long before his death—bathing in the icy waters of the river Wear as for years he has bathed there, summer and winter, to chasten his flesh—he feels his arms and legs go numb, his pulse all but stop, and speaks these words both for himself and also for me:

"Praise, praise!" I croak. Praise God for all that's holy, cold, and dark. Praise him for all we lose, for all the river of the

years bears off. Praise him for stillness in the wake of pain. Praise him for emptiness. And as your race to spill into the sea, praise him yourself, old Wear. Praise him for dying and the peace of death (Godric 96) (NT 107).

What's lost is nothing to what's found," as Godric says, "and all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup" (Godric 96) (NT 109).

In the final scene in the River Wear, Godric releases his burdens, finding peace and joy. In accepting and letting go of his many losses, he makes space for the love of God. *Godric* is a novel that deals with overcoming loss and finding life's meaning in spite of pain. Buechner's unconscious psychological and spiritual struggles, when compressed and molded in the forge of the creative process, have produced a literary gem.

Both Lewis and Buechner benefited from a classical education where they were exposed to the best writers of English literature. Like C.S. Lewis, Buechner was sent to boarding school, but for him it was a positive experience. Although he was dreadfully homesick the first year, he adapted to the academic challenges of Lawrenceville, an all boys preparatory school. There Buechner found life long friends, such as James Merrill, and inspiring English teachers. By the age of 15 he knew he wanted to become a writer.

In the final section of *Sacred Journey* called "Beyond Time," Buechner relates his experience at Princeton, his father's alma mater, where he was an English major, studying British and American literature. In the Wheaton archives I came across Buechner's Princeton notebooks. Although Buechner was an excellent student, on occasion his mind wandered, and the artist in Buechner emerged. Doodles from his Princeton class notes paint a vivid picture of the atmosphere of the classroom, where Professor R.P. Blackmur shared the New Criticism and Buechner expressed his literary skills to the acclaim of his professors. As a student at Oxford, Lewis was a confirmed atheist, but remarks he was drawn to the writings of Christians in spite of their faith. For Buechner though not religious, glimmerings of spirituality are revealed in his doodles. Pictures of stairways, a cross, a serpent, a die of chance, are randomly juxtaposed with the class notes about the Cerebral Cortex (spelled Kortex). And in the midst is a large pointillist face, with eyes raised—icon like. Perhaps a saint? Perhaps a self-portrait? When seen next to photographs of Buechner in his twenties, there is a striking similarity.

Like Lewis's affinity for medieval and renaissance literature, Buechner recalls he "had a love affair with the 17th century" and he too discovered the riches of

Milton's *Paradise Lost* from which he chose the title of his first novel *A Long Day's Dying* which he started writing during his senior year. Writing thirty years later in his memoir *Sacred Journey*, Buechner explains why he chose this title in terms of the psychological interaction of his novel's alienated characters:

I took the title from a passage in *Paradise Lost* where Adam says to Eve that their expulsion from Paradise "will prove no sudden but a slow pac'd evil,/ A long day's dying to augment our pain," and with the exception of the old lady Maroo, what all the characters seem to be dying of is loneliness, emptiness, sterility, and such preoccupation with themselves and their own problems that they are unable to communicate with each other about anything that really matters to them very much. I am sure that I chose such a melancholy theme partly because it seemed effective and fashionable, but I have no doubt that, like dreams generally, it also reflected the way I felt about at least some dimension of my own life and the lives of those around me (SJ 98).

Published in 1950 when Buechner was 23, this modernist novel dealing with alienation in an Ivy league setting met critical acclaim and its author was heralded as a young Henry James. It was reviewed in *Life*, *Time* and *Newsweek* and was on *The New York Times*'s best sellers list. In the novel a third-person omniscient narrator reveals how the characters seek to listen to their past and present experiences. Through self-examination and introspection they listen to themselves in a haphazard way, without the psychological or spiritual understanding of the protagonists in the later novels, but their impulse to listen to their lives to discern meaning is the same.

Looking back at his Princeton days, Buechner recalls being drawn to the great writers of the seventeenth century for their wonderful use of language "but I could not entirely overlook the fact that what they were using their extraordinary language to describe was again and again their experience of the Extraordinary itself, and that this was the source as well as the subject of their unparalleled eloquence" (SJ 92). Lewis similarly describes literary readings in English literature which "baptized his imagination," preparing him for the spiritual revelation which was to come.

Even more than the similarities in their early life, conversion to Christianity links C.S. Lewis and Frederick Buechner as "friends." For Lewis, the process of conversion involved lengthily discussions with believing friends, coming to theistic belief and then a final surrender to Christ which he recounts in *Surprised by Joy*. For 27-year-old Buechner, conversion came as he listened to a sermon preached by George Buttrick in

Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York. As Buechner recounts:

“What drew me . . . was whatever it was that his sermons came from and whatever it was in me that they touched so deeply. And then there came one particular sermon . . . Jesus Christ refused the crown that Satan offered him in the wilderness, Buttrick said, but he is king nonetheless because again and again he is crowned in the heart of the people who believe in him. And that inward coronation takes place, Buttrick said, “among confession, and tears, and great laughter.”

It was the phrase *great laughter* that did it, did whatever it was that I believe must have been hiddenly in the doing all the years of my journey up till then. It was not so much that a door opened as that I suddenly found that a door had been open all along which I had only just then stumbled upon. . . . that what I found finally was Christ. Or was found. It hardly seem to matter which. There are other words for describing what happened to me—psychological words, historical words, poetic words—but in honesty as well as in faith I am reduced to the word that is his name because no other seems to account for the experience so fully (*Sacred Journey* 109-111).

“Surprised by joy” could well be a phrase used to describe Buechner’s conversion that Sunday. The following week, Buechner made an appointment with Buttrick to learn more about what had apparently happened, and by the following year Buechner was enrolled in Union Seminary where his formal theological education began in earnest. Buechner’s second memoir *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation* recounts his seminary years, ordination as a Presbyterian “evangelist/apologist,” where he sought to “defend the faith against its ‘cultured despisers’ as Chaplain at Phillips Exeter Academy. While at Exeter he delivered sermons, still in print and recently reissued by Harper and Row as *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (2006). He also published his first overtly Christian novel, *The Final Beast*.

After nine years at Exeter, during which time he developed the Religion Department, Buechner decided to become a full time writer. Much like the first time he tried to do this, he had a very difficult time, but then came *Alphabet of Grace* which embodied his theme listening to life.

While both Lewis and Buechner have written in multiple genres including autobiography, apologetics, sermons, fiction of all types, what is most remarkable is their ways with words. From *Mere Christianity* to his fantasies for children and adults, Lewis is often quoted

as is Frederick Buechner. Ever popular are the lexicons in which Buechner gives common words a surprising twist. For example:

ANGER:

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you (*Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, 2).

BUECHNER:

It is my name. It is pronounced Beekner. If somebody mispronounces it in some foolish way, I have the feeling that what's foolish is me. If somebody forgets it, I feel that it's I who am forgotten. There's something about it that embarrasses me in just the same way that there's something about me that embarrasses me. I can't imagine myself with any other name—Held, say, or Merrill, or Hlavacek. If my name were different, I would be different. When I tell somebody my name, I have given him a hold over me that he didn't have before. If he calls it out, I stop, look, and listen whether I want to or not.

In the Book of Exodus, God tells Moses that his name is Yahweh, and God hasn't had a peaceful moment since (*Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* 12).

PSYCHOTHERAPY:

After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, God came strolling through the cool of the day and asked them two questions: "Where are you?" and "What is this that you have done?" Psychotherapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and the like have been asking the same ones ever since.

"Where are you?" lays bare the present. They are in hiding, that's where they are. What is it they want to hide? From whom do they want to hide it? What does it cost them to hide it? Why are they so unhappy with things as they are that they are trying to conceal it from the world by hiding, and from themselves by covering, their nakedness with aprons?

"What is this that you have done?" lays bare the past. What did they do to get this way? What did they hope would happen by doing it? What did they fear would happen? What did the serpent do? What was it that made them so ashamed?

God is described as cursing them then, but in view of his actions at the end of the story and right on through the end of the New Testament, it seems less a matter of vindictively inflicting them with the consequences than of honestly confronting them with the consequences. Because of who they are and what they have done, this is the result. There is no undoing it. There is no going back to the garden.

But then comes the end of the story where God with his own hands makes them garments of skins and clothes them. It is the most moving part of the story. They can't go back, but they can go forward clothed in a new way—clothed, that is, not in the sense of having their old defenses again behind which to hide who they are and what they have done but in the sense of having a new understanding of who they are and a new strength to draw on for what lies before them to do now.

Many therapists wouldn't touch biblical teachings with a ten-foot pole, but in their own way, and at their best, they are often following them (*Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary* 105-106).

From his later fiction such as *Godric*, nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1981, to his psychological account of Jacob in *The Son of Laughter*, which received the fiction prize for 1993 from *Christianity Today* and the conference on Christianity and Literature, psychological and spiritual insights are organically fused in his writings. Not that the central characters find a good therapist and solve their issues, but that they experience healing in their lives which involves listening to their lives, responding to God's questions and finding his presence as the answer.

C.S. Lewis and Frederick Buechner share similar life experience, scholarly training, Christian apologetics, a Christian world view articulated through sermons and lectures, philosophical writings and imaginative, often humorous fiction. What are their differences? For Buechner psychotherapy is an effective and even essential aid to his spiritual life. Lewis tends to see psychoanalysis (which was the main form of therapy in his day) as a specialized medical procedure needed to heal abnormal conditions. Lewis states:

What psychoanalysis undertake to do is to remove the abnormal feelings, that is, to give the man better raw material for his acts of choice: morality is concerned with the acts of choice themselves But psychoanalysis itself, apart from all the philosophical additions that Freud and other have made to it, is not in the least contradictory to Christianity. Its technique overlaps with Christian morality at some points and it would not be a bad thing if every parson knew something about it (*Mere Christianity* 84).

Another difference is their approach to issues of faith and doctrine. Whereas Lewis provides answers, Buechner suggests possibilities. Lewis is straight forward, Buechner throws a curve ball. And yet, they usually come to the same conclusion, trusting the love

that will not let them go. C.S. Lewis's famous quote from *Till We Have Faces* beautifully expresses Frederick Buechner's perspective on the mystery: "I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away." (*Faces* 308).

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Fiction by Frederick Buechner (chronological order)

Abbreviations

<i>A Long Day's Dying</i> . New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950.	LDD
<i>The Seasons' Difference</i> . New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952.	SD
<i>The Return of Ansel Gibbs</i> . New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958.	RAG
<i>The Final Beast</i> . New York: Atheneum, 1965; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982.	FB
<i>The Entrance to Porlock</i> . New York: Atheneum, 1970.	ETP
<i>Lion Country</i> . New York: Atheneum, 1971; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984.	LC
<i>Open Heart</i> . New York: Atheneum, 1972; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984.	OH
<i>Love Feast</i> . New York: Atheneum, 1974; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984.	LF
<i>Treasure Hunt</i> . New York: Atheneum, 1977; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984.	TH
<i>The Book of Bebb</i> . New York: Atheneum, 1979; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990.	BB
<i>Godric</i> . New York: Atheneum, 1980; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983.	
<i>Brendan</i> . New York: Atheneum, 1987; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988.	
<i>The Wizard's Tide</i> . San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990.	WT
<i>The Son of Laughter</i> . San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993.	SON
<i>On the Road with the Archangel</i> . San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997.	
<i>The Storm</i> . San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998.	

Non-Fiction by Frederick Buechner (chronological order)

Abbreviations

<i>The Magnificent Defeat</i> . New York: Seabury Press, 1966; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985.	MD
<i>The Hungering Dark</i> . New York: Seabury Press, 1969; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985.	HD
<i>The Alphabet of Grace</i> . New York: Seabury Press, 1970; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985.	AG
<i>Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC</i> . New York: Harper and Row, 1973.	WT
<i>The Faces of Jesus</i> . New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.	
<i>Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale</i> . San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977.	TT
<i>Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who</i> . San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979.	PT
<i>The Sacred Journey</i> . San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982.	SJ
<i>Now and Then</i> . San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983.	NT
<i>A Room Called Remember</i> . San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984.	RCR
<i>Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized</i> . San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988.	WD
<i>Telling Secrets: A Memoir</i> . San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991.	TS
<i>The Clown in the Belfry: Writings on Faith and Fiction</i> . San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992.	
<i>Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner</i> . Compiled by George Connor. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992.	
<i>The Longing for Home</i> . San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996.	
<i>The Eyes of the Heart: A Memoir of the Lost and Found</i> . San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999.	
<i>Speak What We Feel (Not What We Ought to Say): Reflections on Literature and Faith</i> . San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001.	
<i>Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith</i> . San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004.	
<i>Secrets in the Dark: A Life of Sermons</i> . San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006.	