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Cover Page Footnote

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) and Frederick Buechner (b.1926) never actually met, but they can be considered kindred spirits because as 20th-century authors writing from a Christian perspective, their writings and spiritual journeys have much in common. Both writers are known for their literary expressions of faith, whether through creative fiction, non-fiction, apologetics, literary criticism, or sermons. Both writers are known for their vivid imaginations, humor and phenomenal ability to put into words the truths of spiritual experience. And both have experienced grief and brokenness which they have expressed in their writings. How they tell their stories reflects their views of themselves and God. As a scholar, Lewis writes a philosophical treatise, *The Problem of Pain*, then twenty years later reveals his personal experience in his private journal published under a pseudonym as *A Grief Observed*. Beuchner reveals the depth of his struggles through the trials of a 12th century saint by writing *Godric* and his third memoir *Telling Secrets*. Their expressions of pain and brokenness powerfully portray the paradox of Christian suffering.

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Grief Observed: Pain and Suffering in the Writings of C.S. Lewis and Frederick Buechner

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Although Frederick Buechner (b. 1926) was an American a generation younger than C.S. Lewis (1891-1963) and had never personally met him, these two writers have much in common. In previous papers presented at the Frances W. Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis & Friends I have shared why Buechner can be considered a “friend” of Lewis. Both expressed their unique Christian voices through multiple literary genres: fiction and non-fiction, apologetics and sermons, and conversion narratives which have become Christian classics. In this paper I would like to explore another area which they share: the grief and brokenness which they have poignantly expressed through their writings.

Both have written about grief and loss. How they tell their stories reflects their views of themselves and God. As a scholar, Lewis writes a philosophical treatise, *The Problem of Pain* (1940), then twenty years later pours out his personal experience of grief in his private journal, *A Grief Observed* (1961) published under a pseudonym. Buechner reveals the depth of his struggles through the trials of a 12th century saint by writing the novel *Godric* and his three memoirs, especially *Telling Secrets*. Their writings reflecting pain and brokenness powerfully express the paradox of Christian suffering.

Childhood Loss

As children, both Lewis and Buechner experienced the tragic loss of a parent. For both boys, the death of a parent proved to be a turning point—when childhood innocence ended and the uncertainty of life began. When he was 9, Lewis’s mother died of cancer. Lewis recalls “With my mother’s death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life” (*Surprised by Joy* 21). Although Lewis felt her loss deeply, the family did not discuss their grief. In fact, Lewis states he was embarrassed whenever his father tried to approach the subject. Soon afterward, his father shipped him off to boarding school. Lewis hated boarding school, and the loss of his mother only intensified the experience. However, besides a few references in his autobiography, the loss of his mother is not something Lewis dwells on. Later the loss of his wife, however, will compound the sense of maternal loss which had been buried.

In 1936 when Buechner was 10, his father committed suicide. In Buechner’s home, his father’s suicide was an embarrassment, a family secret, something one did not mention. As soon as possible, Buechner’s mother moved with her two sons to Bermuda. There was no funeral for his father, and his immediate family did not attend the memorial held for his father the following fall. Buechner describes this experience of losing his father as something he did not consciously grieve at the time and when the next year he came upon his younger brother crying, Buechner did not understand why he was upset.

Yet, in retrospect, writing his first memoir *The Sacred Journey* (1982) in his mid-fifties, Buechner realizes his father's death was so significant that he divides his life story into before and after the event. Before is "once below a time" –childhood's timeless present, Eden before the fall; and after it is "once upon a time" when measurable time began. Although he was not aware of it at the time, and he rarely spoke of it to friends, his father's suicide shook the very ground of his existence.

Remembering and Retelling

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.

Both writers draw on their childhood loss in their fiction. Lewis revisits the pain of losing his mother in *The Magician's Nephew* (*Chronicles of Narnia*) and changes the outcome. The protagonist young Digory feels helpless as he watches his mother slowly dying and he prays to make her well. In Narnia he is tempted by the white witch to steal a magic apple to heal his mother, which he refuses to do. Later Aslan gives him a magic apple and when his mother eats it, she is healed. The ending Lewis as a boy had prayed for, and been denied, is now received.

For twenty years Buechner wove his father's suicide into his novels. In each of Buechner's early novels, before or during the narrative, a suicide occurs which devastates the characters left behind. For example, in his first novel, *A Long Day's Dying* (1950), the protagonist's pet monkey slits his throat in imitation of his owner's suicidal gesture. When Buechner's mother read his third novel, *The Return of Ansel Gibbs*, the thinly disguised details of her husband's suicide enacted by the protagonist's father, left her feeling betrayed, and she was so angry she never read anything else her son wrote. In some of his other novels, 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 writing a novel about Godric, a medieval saint, to heal. It is the novel *Godric* which most deeply reveals Buechner's pain.

In his memoir *Telling Secrets*, Buechner describes the experience of writing *Godric* during one of the darkest periods of his life, when he was distraught over the illness of his daughter. He writes,

And all the time those things [his daughter's near fatal eating disorder and his subsequent feelings of fear and helplessness] were happening, the very fact that I was able to save my sanity by continuing to write among other things a novel called *Godric* made my work blessed and a means of grace at least for me. Nothing I've ever written came out of a darker time or brought me more light and comfort. It also—far more than I realized at the time I wrote it—brought me 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 even though in so many ways I have long since lost all but a handful of conscious memories of him. (*Telling Secrets* 20-21).

Themes of loss and the ambivalence of friendship and kinship are central to *Godric*, the first person narrative of a 12th century Anglo-Saxon saint who recounts his life to the monk assigned to write his hagiography. The novel begins as Godric the aged hermit remembers five special friends he has lost over the years. Now as an old man he concludes, “That’s five friends, one for each of Jesu’s wounds, and Godric bears their mark still on what’s left of him as in their time they all bore his on them. What’s friendship, when all’s done, but the giving and taking of wounds? (Godric 7)

This is Godric’s definition of friendship-- “the giving and taking of wounds.” After a long life, the saint knows that deepest love produces deepest pain. 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). Only the blood of Jesus and his forgiveness can heal the pain of friendship and family relationships. As Bruinooge and Engbers note, “This rather bitter definition of friendship informs nearly every human relationship in the novel: character after character hurts the ones whom he or she loves in an attempt to love them” (44, 45).

Buechner’s understanding of the psychodynamics of family relationships stems from his own experience. Throughout the novel, the relationship of Godric and his family, especially with his father and sister Burcwen, is a continual bearing of burdens and giving of wounds because of love. In the earlier chapters of *Godric*, the protagonist’s personal losses and past failures threaten to overwhelm him as he looks back over his long life. Remembering his youth, Godric only remembers his father’s back and his sense of abandonment:

It seems that he [my father] was ever striding off in every way but ours so I scarcely had the time to mark the smile or scowl of him. Even the look of his eyes is gone. They were grey as the sea like mine, it’s said, only full of kindness, but what matter how kind a man’s eye be if he never fixes you with it long enough to learn? (9).

Godric describes his father as faceless, like the wind, and their relationship in terms of hunger and starvation:

It was fear kept Aedlward from us, and next to God what he feared of all things most was an empty bellySo it was his fear we’d starve that made him starve us for that one of all things that we hungered for the most, which was the man himself” (10).

But when Godric undergoes a spiritual transformation in Jerusalem, he prays for forgiveness:

Dear Christ, have mercy on my soul. And Aedlward, have mercy too. I’ve chided you for failing as a father, too spent from grubbing to have any love to spend on me. Maybe it was the other way around, and it was I that failed you as a son. (103)

In his third and most self-revealing, psychologically-oriented memoir *Telling Secrets*, Buechner states that *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” (21). Describing the novel as written during one of the darkest periods of his life, he links his dedication of the book to the memory of his father and his identification with Godric’s grief “for having lost a father I never knew.” In *Telling Secrets*, he shares for the first time the anguish he was experiencing while writing *Godric*:

I did not realize until after I wrote it how much of this [the crucial role my father has always played in my life and continues to play 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. (21-22)

An even greater pain is unconsciously expressed in this novel, however. While in real life Buechner is fearing his anorexic daughter’s death, in the novel, this fear is transferred to Godric’s relationship with his sister. In contrast to the male ascetics in the novel, Godric’s sister’s self-starvation is an illness caused by her pinning for her brother. Fearing his own attraction, Godric withdraws from her, and Burcwen begins to stop eating. William, their brother, describes her to Godric in words later echoed by Buechner in reference to his daughter’s anorexia:

I fear our sister ails. Some lettuce or a parsnip’s all she takes for days on end. Water is her only drink Women’s ways are ever strange. A radish now and then. She won’t have meat or breadHer legs and arms become like sticks(154).

Godric describes his feeling when he saw his sister: “Her eyes were fever-bright and she herself so lean she could have been a sailor shipwrecked on a raft for weeks. My bowels within me stirred for pity and remorse . . . She grew so thin her checks went hollow. The flesh around her mouth and eyes shrank back till you could see the skull beneath the skin” (154,159).

Buechner can write so convincingly about the psychological and physical dynamics of anorexia and its connection to consuming familial love between Godric and his sister because it reflects Buechner’s own relationship with his daughter, his intense codependent love and his fear of losing her. In *Telling Secrets*, Buechner reveals the reason he went into therapy: his desperate need to find a way to save her. He felt completely helpless. Identifying with Frank Baum's Cowardly Lion, bound with ropes and plagued by the tormenting monkeys, Buechner recalls facing the painful experience of watching his daughter waste away, “a victim of Buchenwald”:

. . . the Cowardly Lion got more and more afraid and sad, felt more and more helpless. No rational argument, no dire medical warning, no pleading or cajolery or bribery would make this young woman he loved eat normally again but only seemed to strengthen her determination not to, this young woman on whose life his own in so many ways depended. He could not solve her problem because he was of course himself part of her problem. . . . Then finally, when she had to be hospitalized, a doctor called one morning to say that unless they started feeding her against her will, she would die. It was as clear-cut as that. Tears ran down the Cowardly Lion's face as he stood with the telephone at his ear. His paws were tied. The bat-winged monkeys hovered. (*Telling Secrets* 24)

My anorectic daughter was in danger of starving to death, and without knowing it, so was I. I wasn't living my own life any more because I was so caught up in hers. If in refusing to eat she was mad as a hatter, I was if anything madder still because whereas in some sense she knew what she was doing to herself, I knew nothing at all about what I was doing to myself. She had given up food. I had virtually given up doing anything in the way of feeding myself humanly. (25)

What could be more devastating than for a father to watch helplessly as his daughter slowly committed suicide, an agonizing reenactment of the most traumatic loss of his childhood? Desperate to help her, Buechner went to a psychotherapist to understand his daughter, only to learn that he was a major part of her problem. In therapy Buechner came to face his codependency, the secret bondage inherited from his dysfunctional family. Psychologically, this difficult experience tore down the last remnants of his false self, to expose his hurt wounded self. He came to realize that he needed to find healing for himself which involved reconciling the loss of his father and learning to let go. Commenting on how this relates to writing *Godric*, Buechner explains,

This book 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 . . . 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. . . . And one day not long before his death . . . [he] 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. . . . Praise him for dying and the peace of death . . .”

“What’s lost is nothing to what’s found and all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup.” (*Godric* 96, *Now and Then* 107, 109)

Subjective vs. Objective

Despite similar experiences, Lewis and Buechner’s approaches to sharing them are quite different. Introducing his conversion narrative *Surprised By Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* published in 1955, Lewis’s preface reveals that he is not comfortable sharing personal emotions. From the first sentence, the focus is on a change in philosophy—a move from one logical position to another. And yet, Lewis soon mentions that the relevance of the story will depend on how well a reader can identify with his experience of “Joy”—“have *you* felt that too?” In other words, it is also based on personal emotional or intuitive experience.

Another significant difference between the two occurs in Lewis’s last paragraph of his preface:

The story is, I fear, suffocatingly subjective; the kind of thing I have never written before and shall probably never write again. I have tried so to write the first chapter that those who can’t bear such a story will see at once what they are in for and close the book with the least waste of time. (viii)

Lewis’s disclaimer implies that something “suffocatingly subjective” is somehow less valuable than something that is “objectively true.” He seems almost embarrassed at the introspection involved, and he adds it is the kind of thing “I have never written before and shall probably never write again.” Thus when Lewis is asked by his publisher to write a theological explanation of suffering, he seeks to provide an objective apologetic. In the book *The Problem of Pain* (1940) Lewis logically explores human suffering from a theological and philosophical perspective. As in *Surprised by Joy*, he makes this disclaimer in the preface:

I must add, too, that the only purpose of the book is to solve the intellectual problem raised by suffering; for the far higher task of teaching fortitude and patience I was never fool enough to suppose myself qualified, nor have I anything to offer my readers except my conviction that when pain is to be borne, a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all” (9-10).

The Problem of Pain focuses primarily on physical and mental pain (rather than emotional pain). In it Lewis seeks to justify the ways of God to man—to show how tribulation (suffering) produces patience by causing the Christian to rely not on himself

but on God. Lewis researches the subject and puts together a treatise on suffering based on classical, literary, and Biblical sources, but he is not speaking from personal experience.

How different when Lewis lost his wife Joy to cancer. So powerful was the experience of loss that he had to release his feelings in his private journal which he published under a pseudonym. This record, *A Grief Observed*, begins:

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraidAnd no one ever told me about the laziness of grief. Except at my job—where the machine seems to run on much as usual—I loathe the slightest effort. Not only writing but even reading a letter is too much. Even shaving. What does it matter now whether my cheek is rough or smooth (7-8)

Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence

I tried to put some of these thoughts to C. this afternoon. He reminded me that the same thing seems to have happened to Christ: ‘Why hast thou forsaken me?’ I know. Does that make it easier to understand?

Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion is not ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.’ (9-10).

A Grief Observed is an intense, moment by moment account of Lewis’ thoughts and feelings, his intense bewilderment and suffering. Lewis rails at God, then questions himself, his motives and his faith. As we read, we experience the pain Lewis is going through when he cries, “Oh God, God, why did you take such trouble to force this creature out of its shell if it is now doomed to crawl back—to be sucked back—into it?” (18). We feel his anger when he writes: “Talk to me about the truth of religion and I’ll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I’ll listen submissively. But don’t come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don’t understand” (23). The honesty and clarity of Lewis’ logic only reinforces his pain when he writes:

They tell me H. is happy now, they tell me she is at peace What makes them so sure of this? . . . ‘Because she is in God’s hands.’ But if so, she was in God’s hands all the time, and I have seen what they did to her here. Do they suddenly become gentler to us the moment we are out of the body? And if so, why? If God’s goodness is inconsistent with hurting us, then either God is not good or there is no God: for in the only life we know He hurts us beyond our worst fears and beyond all we can imagine. If it is consistent with hurting us, then He may hurt us after death as unendurably as before it (24-25).

Over time Lewis comes to experience his grief as a process. As his anger fades, he grows into acceptance. One of his insights about God, whom he has previously referred to as the Cosmic Sadist, is that his own idea of God (prior to his suffering) “is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence?” (52) Lewis ultimately accepts that some questions are not answerable. His last words are acceptance:

How wicked it would be, if we could, to call the dead back! She said not to me but to the chaplain, ‘I am at peace with God.’ She smiled, but not at me. *Poi si torno all’ eternal fontana. (Then she turned herself back toward the eternal fountain. Dante Paradiso XXXI, 30).* Lewis thus accepts that Joy, like Dante’s Beatrice, must return to God (King, 9). The Lewis with the answers has been replaced by one who surrenders and accepts the will of God. Out of this death comes life. Now he has indeed experienced and can share 2 Corinthians 4:16-7:

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.

For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Unlike Lewis’ original disdain for the “suffocatingly subjective,” Buechner always prioritizes his own subjective experience as a way to express truth. He begins *The Alphabet of Grace* (1970), his first autobiographical journal, with the statement, “At its heart most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography” (3). This is certainly true in *A Grief Observed* in which Lewis reveals his experience as he lives it daily. In Buechner’s more psychologically oriented autobiographies, Buechner is looking back, shaping his retelling of the past from memory.

As I have explored in depth in *Listening to Life: Psychology and Spirituality in the Writings of Frederick Buechner*, Buechner’s aborted grief reaction, experienced after his father’s death, was accentuated by the repetition of psychological dynamics and fear of loss associated with the illness of his daughter. In addition to the healing he experienced in professional psychotherapy which taught him the value of memory, through several spiritual experiences Buechner learned to trust God, to have faith when all seemed darkest. Secondly he learned that unlike his love, or lovesickness, the “realistic, tough, conscientious” love the doctors and nurses exhibited in treating his daughter was closer to what Jesus meant by love than was his own.

Thus Buechner’s view of psychotherapy based on his own experience has a spiritual source: it is one way God heals memory and the past:

The sad things that happened long ago will always remain part of who we are just as the glad and gracious things will too, but instead of being a burden of guilt, recrimination, and regret that make us constantly stumble as we go, even the saddest things can become, once we have made peace with them, a source of wisdom and strength for the journey that still lies ahead. 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. To see how God's mercy was for me buried deep even in my father's death was not just to be able to forgive my father for dying and God for letting him die so young and without hope and all the people like my mother who were involved in his death but also to be able to forgive myself for all the years I had failed to air my crippling secret so that then, however slowly and uncertainly, I could start to find healing. It is in the experience of such healing that I believe we experience also God's loving forgiveness of us, and insofar as memory is the doorway to both experiences, it becomes not just therapeutic but sacred. (*Telling Secrets* 33-34)

Memory is used to expose the real hurt self to feel the suffering of the past, for in therapy one must work one's hurt trail before one can discover one's love story (the healing of memories and forgiveness through the love of God).

Given a choice, Lewis prefers the rhetoric of debate and philosophy-- the logical apologetics of *Mere Christianity* to the personal narrative of spiritual experience expressed in *Surprised by Joy*. Lewis, the "reluctant convert," is wary of the "suffocatingly subjective" and apologizes to his readers for becoming far too personal. He expounds intellectually on the question of suffering in *The Problem of Pain*, but when it comes to exposing his own pain, he remains incognito, keeping the personal private, struggling to objectively "observe" grief and try to make some sort of sense of what he is experiencing. On the other hand, Frederick Buechner approaches faith from inner revelation and intuition, feeling his way as he goes, dealing with the struggles of emotional pain by sharing them—first with a therapist and then with readers. For both writers, the greatest tests of faith come when they face the loss of a loved one. Lewis's pain is uncovered through the pages of the journal he wrote to record his experience of grief and it is through writing this intimate memoir that he (and his readers) find healing. Buechner shares his own experience so his readers will find their own sacred journeys. For both, it is the honesty and personal nature of their grief journeys that make them so powerful. In the suffering of these two Christian authors, we see enacted the central paradox of Christianity: unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit--the paradox of death and resurrection, the paradox of suffering producing life.

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