

From Misery to Freedom: Psychotheology Goes to the Movies

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The Mission of the Workshop:

We are going to perform a psychospiritual examination—a kind of autopsy of the soul—on several characters found in film and literature, these include Dickens' Scrooge, DeNiro's Mendoza in *The Mission* and McDormand's work in *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*. The first question is how did they become crippled? From there we will examine their journey toward freedom. Spiritually, we will discover the psychospiritual integrity found in grief, guilt, forgiveness and true joy.

The Goals of the Workshop

- To increase our capacity to do psychospiritual diagnosis
- To deepen our appreciation of human resilience and how spiritual care can facilitate in this journey
- To develop an increased capacity to do theological analysis on the fly

A guiding principle . . . healing is never a matter of closure, separation or distancing, it is a matter of integration.

Two Terms that are themselves integrative

The world of **psychotheology** comes into view when the disciplines of psychology and theology engage each other in a way that enhances their capacity to understand the human condition. Words such as forgiveness, redemption, love, epiphany and hope speak to deeper themes and refuse to be trivialized.

Psychospiritual tends to reflect the weaving together of new realities as people intentionally move into the world. It is a matter of will, or “any intentionally motivated action”—Nietzsche. Here the will serves to deepen our appreciation of freedom, connection, meaning and relationship.

Pastoral Diagnosis

Pastoral diagnosis is an often misunderstood concept sitting uneasily amidst an array of skills utilized by the pastoral practitioner. At first glance the words *pastoral* and *diagnosis* appear contradictory in nature. *Pastoral* often denotes a gentle, non-agenda driven appraisal, whereas *diagnosis* often denotes a more definitive, clinical assessment. The term, itself, illustrates an ambivalence residing within the character of pastoral care and counselling. Is it a supple, more subjective process or is it a stringent, more objective discipline? My own understanding, and the thesis for this article, is that pastoral diagnosis must be both supple and stringent, but never ambivalent. To “diagnose” is to enter into the lived reality of the other in a way that is discerning but, at the same time, non-judgmental. As a result, a pastoral diagnosis possesses a transitive quality and can never be fixed. The dual character of diagnostic work, the supple and the stringent remains open to the new emerging landscape of the other while providing appropriate focus and direction.

Pastoral Diagnosis

- Open emotive pathways
- Capacity to enter into relationship

- Capacity to self soothe
- Consistence of self over time
- Ability to access freedom
- Ability to access meaning

Four Primary Emotions

- Grief
- Guilt
- Love
- Joy

Four Signaling Defense Mechanism

Anger with its weaker cousins frustrated, annoyed and irritated.

Anxiety—which always reveals the presence of deeper more disturbing emotions such as grief and guilt—is evident in sighing and tension in the striated muscles, beginning in the thumb. It has a weaker cousin, “butterflies in my stomach,” and a more volatile cousin, fear. Anxiety can be crippling.

Avoidance, painfully self evident. When an avoidance strategy is challenged, anxiety or anger will generally move into to fortify the defenses.

Projection Freud understood projection as a defense mechanism whereby a person projects his or her own undesirable thoughts, motivations, desires, and feelings onto another person or group of people. Peter Gay, an American historian sharpens Freud’s concept by describing projection as “the operation of expelling feelings or wishes the individual finds wholly unacceptable—too shameful, too obscene, too dangerous—by attributing them to another.”

Background on “The Mission”

The Mission is set during the Jesuit Reduccion or settlements among the nomadic cultures of South America. The film tells the story of a one such reduction. The two central characters are Fr. Gabriel, a missionary and Rodrigo Mendoza, a Spanish mercenary.

The story is based on events surrounding the 1750 Treaty of Madrid, in which Spain ceded part of Paraguay to Portugal. The movie is narrated by “Altamirano,” (based on an actual historical figure, Luis Altamirano). Fr. Altamirano was sent by the Jesuit Superior General Ignacio Visconti to oversee the transfer of Paraguay and its seven reductions from Spain to Portugal in 1751. The indigenous society was known as the Guarani.

At the time, Spain unlike Portugal, had outlawed slavery. The Treaty, designed to stabilize the Jesuit Order in Spain, meant that Portugal could sweep into a region that had been Christianized and settled for well over one hundred years. The climax of the film occurs during the final stages of the Guarani War (1754-1756), during which time Guarani defended their land and homes against Spanish-Portuguese forces that sought to implement the Treaty. The movie is set in one of the missions, Sao Miguel das Missoes.

Father Gabriel's character is loosely based on the life of Fr. Roque González de Santa Cruz S.J., who was born in Paraguay in 1576. His parents were Filipino. He spoke fluent Guarnai and became the first “European” to enter the southern most part of what known as the Rio Grande do Sul, or the southern most region of Brazil. For historical note, Fr. Gonzalez was made a saint by John Paul II on May 16, 1988, thus becoming the first Paraguayan saint.

The waterfall setting and the connection between the characters of Gonzalez and Gabriel suggests the combination of these events with the story of older missions, founded between 1610-1630 on the Panapanema River, or the region above the Guaira Falls. The Guarani and the Jesuits fled there in order to escape the slave raids. The final scene of the movie was likely fought in 1641.

About the Screen Writer

Robert Bolt was a teacher turned writer. Growing up in England he developed an interest in Thomas More, and is best known for his play *A Man for All Seasons*, (1960)—the Vatican considers it “of religious significance”—one of the which depicts the clash between Henry VIII and More. He also developed the script for *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). It was also during that time that Bolt began to protest nuclear proliferation. For his opposition he was arrested and sent to prison, serving all of two weeks.

He also wrote the screenplay for *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) and *The Bounty* (1984). *The Mission* (1986) was Bolt’s final film project, although he did write the TV movie *Without Warning: The James Brady Story* (1991), about the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan’s press secretary James Brady, who experienced a shot-gun injury to the head. Bolt, who had a stroke earlier in his life, felt he could relate to Brady’s struggles with a cerebral injury. As a result, a lot of his own experiences went into the script.

Rodrigo Mendoza is a fictional character. He was a slave trader and mercenary who killed his brother in a duel. Because the death occurred during a duel he was untouchable by law of his time—although as a mercenary he grossly out matched his brother. *The Mission* is a multi-layered tale, but ultimately it is about Mendoza’s journey of redemption—and possibly forgiveness—for the murder of his brother and the brutalization of a people.

According to Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* is driven by the intense dialogue whereas *The Mission* is driven by the wordlessness of the characters.

In an interview featured in *The Christian Century* (1962):

“I am not a Catholic, not even a Christian. I would like to be a Christian. I would like to be a Catholic. But I can’t . . . A Christian is a person who believes Christ rose from the dead, and I just can’t believe it.”

“It is not a play about Catholicism or Christianity. It is a play about the self. We are losing the idea of what a self is. We lack courage—mental courage. It seemed to me More had it, and that’s why I wrote about him.”

“We cannot recover the old beliefs by trying to. All we can do is find our own kind of courage and go forward. Maybe by going forward we will come back.”

“People are expecting that something will happen to bail them out. It won’t. They will have to act for themselves. They will have to take the risk for themselves.”

Of the Film:

Roger Ebert’s notes that “*The Mission* feels exactly like one of those movies where you’d rather see the documentary about how the movie was made. You’d like to know why so many talented people went to such incredible lengths to make a difficult and beautiful movie — without any of them, on the basis of the available evidence, having the slightest notion of what the movie was

about.” To under score Ebert’s point, the film opened with a limited release, and picked up momentum by word of mouth. It won the top honours as the Cannes Film Festival, but was not well received by Hollywood. It was also considered theopolitically problematic is espousing liberation theology and Marx’s principles. The reducciones, which looked much like plantations, were owned by the Guarani.

Culture critic Michael Medved suggested that the film is anti-religious because it depicts ecclesiastical figures as cowardly and greedy. However, the Vatican list is as one of the most noteworthy films, of deep religious significance. Under the category of “Art,” the Vatican also lists *The Wizard of Oz* as one of the fifteen most influential films of the Twentieth Century.

The Film

Lets watch the first thirty-five minutes of *The Mission*.

(Enno Marricone’s musical score, though nominated for an Academy award lost out to Herb Hancock.)

Scene 1. Letter to the Pope

Scene 2. Over Iguazu Falls

Scene 3. Credits

Scene 4. Father Gabriel’s climb

Scene 5. The Guarani

Scene 6. Hunting above the falls

Scene 7. Illicit love

Scene 8. The brother’s death

Pause for a diagnostic exploration

Prepare for the next scene.

Scene 9. Double Dare

Pause for an examination of the pastoral dimensions of this encounter.

Mendoza’s **Head-on Collision** with himself orchestrated by Gabriel

The Head-on Collision is an intervention aimed at addressing a myriad of defense mechanisms being deployed by the patient. It is a direct appeal to the patient’s will to overcome the resistances that cripple the patient’s entire life. It is shot, sharp and focused, allowing the patient to animate change. The focus is on the will, the reality of the circumstance and the consequence of maintaining the resistance, or self defeating pattern.

- Let’s take hard look at what is happening here.
- You have a problem and you either want to deal with it or not, but in order to deal with it you will have to bring your will to the project.
- You have pain in your life, misery is also in your life.
- So let’s address the root that cause such crippling.

The Head-on Collision simultaneously animates the patient’s will, activates the pastoral alliance and gives the unconscious a direct wake-up call. (I want to acknowledge the work of Dr. Habib Davanloo who developed the Head-on Collision.)

Scene 10. Perilous penance and Scene 11. Epiphany

Pause for an examination of the pastoral dimensions of this encounter and a look at the emotional weight.

Penance, acts of contrition/sorrow, massive grief, guilt, joy.

A Christmas Carol

Originally titled *A Christmas Carol in Prose, Being a Ghost Story of Christmas*, by Charles Dickens was first published on December 19, 1843. The tale was an instant success. *A Christmas Carol*, a novella written in six weeks, became one of Dickens' "most popular and best-loved books" (Rowell, 1993). The novella quickly captured the imagination of Dickens' mid-nineteenth century audience, selling out in a few days after its release. *A Christmas Carol* reflected a shift in the cultural sensibilities of Victorian England. Christine Lalumia (2001) suggests that Dickens, primarily through the vehicle of the novella, infused the stagnant festival of Christmas with new life. Lalumia states that the novel "vividly reflected a prevailing mood and marked a change in perception from Christmas as a celebration of general festivities and conviviality toward one more specially preoccupied with family and goodwill toward others."

Scrooge is the literary embodiment of this social change. Geoffrey Rowell in exploring the effect that Dickens had on the development of Christmas, notes that the tale is "a story of conversion, of release from the imprisoning chains of grasping covetousness . . . into the freedom of compassion and generosity."

Of Dickens

Charles John Huffman Dickens was born on February 7th, 1812 in Portsmouth, Hampshire, England, the son of Elizabeth née Barrow (1789-1863) and John Dickens (c.1785-1851) a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. While the Dickens family were not essentially poor, Charles father ended up twice imprisoned for debt.

The first occasion was the most devastating for Charles. In 1824, John was sent to Marshalsea Prison. The entire family went with him except for Charles who, at the age of twelve, was sent off to work at Warren's Shoe Blacking Factory to help support the family. The pre-teen lived in a boarding house in Camden Town—the location of the Cratchet family. This first imprisonment brought to an end Charles' idyllic childhood and harshly introduced to the world of the working poor. A world in which child labour was widespread and many children found themselves abandoned or orphaned. Many of Dickens' future characters such as Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, Philip Pirrip and even Tiny Tim would be based on his late childhood experiences.

Even after his father's debt had been paid, Charles' mother would insist that he continue to in the factory. Herein Charles felt abandoned by his mother.

At age fifteen he began to work as a clerk in a law office. Despite the family hardship, Dickens continued to study at day school.

George Orwell on Dickens: *Nearly everyone, whatever his actual conduct may be, responds emotionally to the idea of human brotherhood. Dickens voiced a code which was and on the whole still is believed in, even by people who violate it. It is difficult otherwise to explain why he could be both read by working people (a thing that has happened to no other novelist of his stature) and buried in Westminster Abbey.*

The inscription on his tomb reads: *He was a sympathiser to the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed; and by his death, one of England's greatest writers is lost to the world.*"

Ebenezer Scrooge

Scrooge's transformation is deeply spiritual, predicated upon themes of meaning, relationship, and forgiveness. It is a journey that delivers him from a state of isolation to one characterized by empathy and emotional integrity. Moreover, it takes only eight hours to accomplish.

Section 1

Count the number of times Scrooge dismisses others, contributing to the creation of a wall against intimacy and closeness.

Perfect Emotional Storm, one that he defends against.

- Christmas, seasonal association
- Mention of Mr. Marley, his only friend and the anniversary of his death
- The visit of Fred, *projective identification*—feelings, likely grief and guilt, projected onto the son of his beloved sister.

Rather than allowing his feelings to become conscious he continues to fight against them, angrily dismissing Fred, "If I could work my will," said Scrooge, indignantly, "every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas,' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!"

Section 2

Anxiety, a warning sign that other emotions are moving at the level of the unconscious. Heightened sensory awareness, auditory and visual hallucinations, he double locks the front door and he will double lock his bed chambers. This serves as a metaphor for his own sense of emotional imprisonment.

Marley's Ghost

Twinship
Head-on Collision
Consequence of life, if he continues to forge links to the chain that binds him emotionally.
"Yet a hope"

Section 3

Ghost of Christmas Past

Here we encounter at least four traumas

- Possible death of mother
- Banishment by father, perhaps as early as 4 or 5 years of age
- Possible collusion of mother with the banishment idea, a sense of the character of Ebenezer's mother.
- The person of Fan, who would later die.

Fezziweg

Belle/Alice

Death of Fan, exclusive to the 1951 film version.

This scene was added by Noel Langley—the same man who did the screenplay for *The Wizard of Oz*. (Just for the record, Langley was happy with the final version of *Oz*.)

What do the Ghosts Accomplish?

- The Ghost of Christmas Past look graphic at the losses.

- The Ghost of Christmas Present explores the crippling effects of Ebenezer's defenses against emotional closeness. To come close to another human being is a source of pain for Ebenezer.
- The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come, **does not say a word**. At this point Ebenezer's unconscious is highly mobilized. He must now wrestle with the consequences of his life.

Final Scene

Joy, humour, affection, touching, generosity, kindness, warmth, grief and forgiveness.

Diagnosing Tiny Tim

A Christmas Carol has two iconic characters, Scrooge—the mean spirited miser—and Tim Cratchit—the sick little boy who walks around on crutches yet still possess the capacity to cheerfully pray “God bless us every one!” His character stands as a wonderful counterpoint to Scrooge’s “Bah, humbug!” Prior to his healing Scrooge has no interest in Bob Cratchit’s children. There is no evidence in the novella that he even knew them. Yet the Ghost of Christ Yet to Come, shows Ebenezer a world without Tiny Tim. This deeply disturbs Scrooge. Dickens did not reveal in the book what Tiny Tim's illness was, but general consensus suggests that it was renal tubular acidosis, a type of kidney failure that causes the blood to become acidic. What Dickens’ audience knew is that for a few pennies the fatal condition could be successfully treated with Vitamin D and a few natural tonics.

Ebenezer’s is conversion and new found generosity not only ushered in his salvation but saved the life of Tiny Tim.

Crippling factors:

Abandonment, repression of murderous rage—which give rise to guilt (the most crippling of all emotions) and grief, development of pathology.

Viktor Frankl and Diagnosis

Choosing Attitude

"Everything can be taken from a man but ...the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

"There is also purpose in life which is almost barren of both creation and enjoyment and which admits of but one possibility of high moral behavior: namely, in man's attitude to his existence, an existence restricted by external forces."

Discovering the Meaning of Life

"The meaning of our existence is not invented by ourselves, but rather detected."

"What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general, but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment."

"We can discover this meaning in life in three different ways: (1) by doing a deed; (2) by experiencing a value; and (3) by suffering."

Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day is a romantic comedy. It is also British and American film collaboration. The project was directed by Bharat Nalluri. Who is considered on Britain “hot” young television directors with three critically acclaimed series already on his portfolio. The screenplay by David Magee and Simon Beaufoy is based on the 1938 novel of the same name by Winifred Watson.

The story is set in London just prior to World War II. The primary character is Guinevere Pettigrew—a middle-aged, strait-laced, and somewhat dower daughter of a vicar. Her calling in life is that of being a governess, a task for which she has little if any capacity. As the film begins, Guinevere is about to be fired from her fourth assignment. When employment agency head Miss Holt informs Miss Pettigrew that she is no longer willing to represent her, Guinevere does something radically uncharacteristic, she steals an assignment intended for one of her colleagues. This highly questionable action must be placed against the fact that Miss Pettigrew is both the homeless and destitute. This action introduces the first comedic twist; the assignment that Miss Pettigrew stole was not one for a nanny but rather for a post of social secretary for a flamboyant American singer/actress Delysia Lafosse (née Sarah Grubb).

Arriving at the luxurious penthouse apartment where Delysia is ensconced, Miss Pettigrew discovers the younger woman is involved with three men; the romantic and penniless pianist Michael Pardew; the wealthy and controlling Nick Calderelli, who is attempting to control Delysia’s career, he is also owns the nightclub where she currently employed as a singer; and there is theatre impresario Phil Goldman, who has the power to cast her in major West End theatre production.

As other worldly as theatre, money and high society is Miss Pettigrew must mentor Delysia while coming to terms with her own inner reality. In the course of a single day attachments are made, internal and external transformations begin to occur and destinies are alerted. Guinevere helps Delysia sort through her various affairs and in the midst of the journey Miss Pettigrew finds herself attracted to successful lingerie designer Joe Blomfield. Who is a in a tempestuous but shallow relationship with the social maven Edythe Dubarry. By chance, Edythe knows that Miss Pettigrew is little more than a vagrant.

About the Author

Winifred Watson lived her life in Newcastle upon Tyne (the same place the Director grew up.) She had intended to enter university, but due to the depression, and its effects on her father’s business, she found a job as a typist. Her meagre salary was used to help support the family. She wrote her first novel at work.

Miss Pettigrew Lives For a Day, was Watson’s third novel and was initially rejected. It was published as a part of a deal that saw Watson write a fourth novel, set in the countryside, a particular favourite setting for her publisher. Miss Pettigrew was an instant success and became a best seller in England, Australia and the United States.

About the Screenwriters

David Magee (born 1962) is an American screenwriter who was nominated for a 2004 Academy Award and a Golden Globe for Finding *Neverland*—the story of J.M. Barrie, the author of *Peter Pan*.

Simon Beaufoy (born 1966) has twice won a Golden Globe, most recently in January 2009 for *Slumdog Millionaire*. He received his first Golden Globe in 1997 for a low budget film—that would go on to becoming one of the largest grossing British films of all time, *The Full Monty*.

Loss of job, loss of possessions, presence of anxiety, difficult personality, judgmental

Psychosocial and Psychospiritual Dimensions of Life—Seven places within which we come to know ourselves:

Ambition (I'm okay look at me) healthy grandiosity

The lived nightmare: I'm not okay, I don't like what I see in your eyes. It is effecting how I see myself.

The lived blessing: I'm okay, I like what I see in your eye. It is effecting how I see myself.

Belonging (I'm a part of you I must be okay)

The lived nightmare: I don't feel like I am a part and if I am not a part I am not okay.

The lived blessing: I like being a part of this team, we do good things and I am one of the team members.

Kinship (I'm okay because you are okay.) Never underestimate the importance of this need.

The lived nightmare: There is no one like me in the universe, I must be a freak.

The lived blessing: Gosh someone else is like me.

Efficacy (I'm okay because I make a difference.)

The lived nightmare: I don't make a difference, actually the world would be better off without me.

Merger (I'm okay because we connect.)

The lived nightmare: Even the touch is painful. What is there in me that is worth touching.

Adversarial (I'm okay because I can survive having a different opinion.)

The lived nightmare: We can't have a difference of opinion, because I will be dismissed or ignored.

Spiritual (I'm okay because I have a sense of the transcendent.)