

Unexpected Places

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I met Aslan first, long before I met Jesus. Aslan, that majestic lion in the Chronicles of Narnia,¹ was a safe haven of goodness and power with his magnificent roar that unnerved the enemy and released captives from prisons of stone. His grandeur evoked awe while his warmth invited closeness, making space for fear and love, joy and regret. His principles were firm, his standards were high, and his mercy exceeded them both. He was such a comfort to me. It was clear, from my limited time in Narnia, that even the mere anticipation of his arrival brought light and levity to dark and heavy days. And so I loved him with that unabashed love of childhood. I still love him. Making his acquaintance set a seed of hope in my heart, and for that I will be forever grateful.

Literature still leads me to Jesus. When Charlotte spins her webs for Wilbur, I catch a glimpse of the joy of a saviour.² When Aunt Beast helps Meg after she “tessers” through darkness, my heart opens to the comfort of God.³ And when Harry leaves the last battle, walking through the halls of Hogwarts, alone and with unwavering willingness, I watch with solemn love and quiet gratitude.⁴ These literary moments are gifts, given to us by authors who have grasped spiritual truths that set the heart free.

Literary wisdom is not restricted to light and joy, gladness and honor. Authors who successfully depict evil – in all its many forms – offer us a useful vantage point and a brief respite from our own troubles. When Calvin and Meg are shown the heavy force of encroaching darkness that threatens to encompass their world, I somehow feel more prepared to understand

¹ Lewis, C.S. (1950). *The lion, the witch, and the wardrobe*

² White, E.B. (1952). *Charlotte's web*.

³ L'Engle, M. (1962). *A wrinkle in time*.

⁴ Rowling, J.K. (2007). *Harry Potter and the deathly hallows*.

and withstand the turmoil of our present days.⁵ Professor Umbridge's strategic misuse of power brings me to greater awareness and increased wariness.⁶ And, when I witness the stifling, pristine community found in *The Giver*, I realize that the desire to eliminate all suffering is a deceptive goal, one that is neither worthwhile nor achievable.⁷ And so I am changed by these encounters, even though the depictions are entirely fictional.

Literature, then, is clearly useful. A heart that has wept for Aslan weeps for Jesus. Encountering evil in a story equips us to detect it elsewhere. What else does literature offer? It provides solace, reassuring us that we are not alone. It reveals our innate narrowness of mind, inviting us to widen our perspective, offering us possibilities beyond the ones in our immediate circles. It reprimands us, albeit indirectly and seemingly inadvertently. It warns us, teaching us vicariously through others' mistakes. It guides us, leading us in well-worn paths of courage and virtue. And, for those who are willing, it is a training ground for empathy, continually introducing us to the proverbial "other". *What would it be like, we can ask ourselves, to not be me?*

And so, after establishing that literature informs the mind and influences the heart, we are now going to take a step back and consider a much broader question: *How is it that external information is able to alter our internal state?*

We know what it feels like to be suddenly altered by something outside of ourselves. One moment we are standing inside our familiar perspective and then, somehow, something moves our hearts. It's not that *we* move, it is that we are *moved*. Robert Frost put it well,⁸

Dust of Snow
The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree
Has given my heart
A change of mood

⁵ L'Engle, M. (1962). *A wrinkle in time*.

⁶ Rowling, J.K. (2003). *Harry Potter and the order of the phoenix*.

⁷ Lowry, L. (1993). *The Giver*.

⁸ Bober, N.S. (1991). *A restless spirit: The story of Robert Frost*.

*And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.*

We are the recipients of the dust of snow, shaken loose by this crow that has randomly landed on the hemlock tree above us. This experience of being altered by our environment is so commonplace and familiar that we might forget to stop and marvel at the process.

When hearts are moved, there are at least three elements involved. There is an external component, like literature or snow. There is a mechanism by which the external information intrudes, unexpected, upon our interior space. And, finally, there is a malleable heart, one that is willing to be moved.

The Dust of Snow

Let's start by looking at the external components involved in this process. They can take many forms: literature, poetry, scripture, art, music, nature. The list goes on: a task, an activity, a person. The common defining feature is that the source of information originates from outside the self.

We have numerous everyday encounters with different types of information. If we are able to see value in these sources, we will find that spiritual ideas are everywhere, hiding in plain sight. We will be able to learn from the New England poet, the Dutch painter, and the Tennessee songwriter. How is it, though, that secular sources can hold enough spiritual value to move a heart?

If we start from the premise that God exists and that He created all things, then we would expect His wisdom to permeate all aspects of life and to persist through all time. Truth is pervasive, evident, and discernible. It precedes us, surrounds us, outlives us, and reveals us. It should not be surprising, then, to find that poets and authors from our culture and others have observed and documented things about life that are, very simply, *true*.

We are given a gift from Paul when he stands on Mars Hill quoting Epimenedes and Aratus,⁹ two thinkers of the ancient world:

*'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said,
'We are his offspring.'* (Acts 17:28, NIV)

⁹ https://www.blueletterbible.org/niv/act/17/1/s_1035001

In this speech, we watch Paul leading the people of Athens to Jesus. He simultaneously leads *us* to these poets and, in a way, to poetry itself. Granted, he only quotes these two lines, but apparently they were two lines worth quoting, worth knowing. And so Paul's gift to us is not one of content as much as it is one of process. He is permitting us to value ideas that originate from outside our own religious text. He is acknowledging that people who pay attention can discern that we live and move and have our being in God.

I am not suggesting that these particular poets were divinely inspired or that all secular works impart truth. I am, however, suggesting that wisdom is so deeply woven into the fabric of life that people are able to stumble upon it and to convey it. Wisdom can be found. Sometimes it is found in expected places. Sometimes it is found in unexpected places.

For some people, secular works are a reminder of the spiritual principles that they first encountered in scripture. This was not my experience. I did not grow up reading the Bible. In my experience, the secular sources actually *preceded* the scriptural knowledge. For me, these sources were not mere reminders of spiritual ideas. These sources were actually able to teach the lesson itself. The secular, then, can act as a portal into the spiritual. A source may be secular, yet its effect can be entirely spiritual.

A few years ago, I stood in front of *The Starry Night*¹⁰ at the Museum of Modern Art. People came and went, but I remained, for minutes on end, transfixed by the brushstrokes, some which taunted gravity in gloopy piles and others which didn't even cover the canvas. Van Gogh completed this painting during a period of great suffering. As I stood in the New York City museum, I saw beyond the stars and spires. The painting taught me that mental anguish and beauty and decisiveness coexist. They overlap, overlaid in time, occupying the exact same space. The painting taught me about Gethsemane.

Clouds teach me that emotions come and go. Languages teach me that we are not all the same, and yet we are all very much the same. Yoda teaches me that much to learn, I still have.¹¹ The Canadian Rockies teach me that I am small and God is not small. Shavasana teaches me to lay aside my old self and begin again.¹² Heart opener poses teach me that Jesus died with full

¹⁰ <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79802>

¹¹ <https://www.starwars.com/databank/yoda>

¹² <https://www.yogabasics.com/asana/corpse/>

acceptance, without turning aside or self-protection – open to those around him, to the pain of living, to God, to whatever was coming next. And, finally, the song *Light of a Clear Blue Morning* teaches me to hope more deeply, leading my heart into untrodden territory.¹³

Caught Off Guard

In Frost’s poem, the dust of snow alters the heart because it is so unexpected. When we are moved, the information intrudes upon our hearts, without warning and uninvited. There is an element of surprise.

We usually expect to find spiritual ideas in spiritual places – in the Psalms, the Proverbs, Genesis, the gospels. Often we can revisit familiar verses and feel a change of heart. This is to be expected: the inspired word is alive and active. And yet sometimes our hearts are not moved by these familiar texts. Why is that?

When the mind encounters information that is familiar, it begins to disengage. In psychology, this is called habituation. I have worked in a child development lab at the National Institutes of Health. Infants as young as three months old will stare intently at different pictures of cats. After a while, their long gaze turns into a short glance. They habituate. If we introduce something new – a picture of a dog – suddenly the babies are riveted again. They have created a category for cat. We can tell because of their intense reaction to not-cat.

What is the lesson for us? Familiarity breeds habituation, not contempt. When we know or understand a concept, our innate impulse is to disengage. In terms of the gospel, familiarity can create a sort of “what’s-for-lunch” response. The exhortation does not seem engaging or the thirty-fifth chapter of Isaiah falls flat, not because it is in any way flat, but because it is no longer new. If we introduce something new, the mind re-engages. Even adding one simple adverb shakes us out of our dull reverie. We can try it here: A rose *really* shall bloom in a lonely place.

This is where a secular source sometimes has a slight advantage. The mind is caught off guard when it encounters a lesson about Gethsemane in Manhattan. We are pulled into the spiritual realm without warning, much as the Pevensie children were pulled into Narnia from a British railway station.¹⁴

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-UK7iNJgNo>

¹⁴ Lewis, C.S. (1951) *Prince Caspian*.

Jesus used this element of surprise whenever he answered subversive questions with higher-order questions or whenever he purposefully broke with religious conventions. He also used this strategy whenever he told a story.

There are so many things Jesus could have taught directly. Instead, he spoke in parables. The word parable has its origins in two Greek words: *para*, meaning *beside*, and *bola*, meaning *to throw*. He was placing two pieces of information side by side, trusting that listeners could draw the connections.

He was also doing something else. He was tossing stories beside people, knowing that sometimes the most direct route into our hearts is to steal in through a side door. The story acts as a Trojan Horse, its message is a band of Greeks ready to conquer our city of Troy. The modest guise entertains, captivates, and distracts. Our minds are programmed to follow plots, so we naturally stay with the storyteller. When the deeper message dawns on us, we respond with either awe – “Oh, wow” – or indignation – “Hey, wait a minute.”

And so Jesus overflowed with stories about regular, everyday objects and experiences. He spoke of nets and lamps, coins and pearls, yeast and seeds, fish and sheep, rock and sand. His messages manage to surprise their way into our unguarded hearts.

Emily Dickinson prescribes this mechanism, instructing her readers in the ways of circuitous thought. She reasoned that we can't actually handle full direct truth. It is preferable, she argues, for truth to dawn on us gradually.¹⁵

Tell all the truth but tell it slant –

Success in Circuit lies

Too bright for our infirm Delight

The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased

With explanation kind

The Truth must dazzle gradually

Or every man be blind –

Nathan knew this when he confronted David. He presented his accusation in the form of a story, slipping past the king's fortified defenses. Nathan knew that sometimes truth is more easily

¹⁵ Olsen, V. (1990). Emily Dickinson: Poet.

received through gentle, indirect routes, through story or poem. After all, he knew he was speaking to a master poet. Perhaps this principle of gentleness is why Robert Frost's crow knocks a slight dust of snow on us rather than a solid, staggering clump.

A Change of Mood

When the dust of snow shakes us out of our solitary preoccupation, we have a choice. We can carry on undeterred, or we can allow our hearts to experience a change of mood. Part of our response will be determined by whether or not we believe that secular encounters provide spiritual insight. Another part will be based on whether or not we are looking outwards, with a propensity to learn. A third part will depend on the agility of the heart.

Physical bodies differ in flexibility and agility. As we age, our muscles tighten, limiting our range of motion unless we purposefully practice moving. The physical heart weakens and stiffens. There seem to be parallels between the physical and the spiritual in this regard. Our range of spiritual motion is at risk of decreasing as we age unless we purposefully practice moving and stretching. This is where we get the stereotypes of the old curmudgeon. Agility is a choice.

We can maintain a moveable heart *by moving* and by remaining open. When we are open and ready to learn, our minds are more alert and more receptive. A receptive heart is ready to receive whatever is given, whenever it is given, and in the form in which it is given. We can become more ready to receive by breaking up the fallow ground of our hearts and minds (Hos 10:12).

Much of movability rests on whether or not we *let* ourselves be moved. *Let* is such a short little word. Let's pause for a moment to give it our full attention: *let*. We can *let* our hearts be moved – or not. The option is ours. This is really about willingness.

We can let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts (Col 3:15), or not. We can let the word of Christ dwell richly within us (Col 3:16), or not. We can let our heart take courage (Ps 27:14), or not. We can let our heart revive (Ps 69:32), or not. We can even let there be light (Gen 1:3), or not. And we can let a multitude of unexpected encounters move our heart throughout the day – or not.

The Mover

We have covered three elements that are involved in moving the heart. There is a fourth. In Frost's poem, we have the tree and the snow, the surprise of the falling snow, and a willing recipient. But with only these elements, the heart is still not moved, because the snow is still on the branch. There is no mover of the snow, no mover of the heart. We will end this discussion, then, by considering that perhaps God is the one who presents the snow, the painting, the book, the clouds, the poem.

Perhaps it is presumptuous to attribute these encounters to God. Perhaps it is not. When Paul was in Macedonia, he was feeling particularly crummy, "afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within" (2Cor 7:5). Titus shows up, and Paul feels comforted. He attributes the encounter to God,

But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus (2Cor 7:6)

With his eyes, Paul sees Titus, but through the eyes of faith he sees beyond Titus – to God. God can reach us through the natural world, the secular, the regular, the mundane.

This idea is not new. We know that God works in our lives. He is the potter, working on our hearts. We are His workmanship, the clay. Nehemiah makes one of the boldest claims in scripture in this regard. He says that God actually placed an idea directly into his heart,

I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem (Neh 2:12; 7:5)

Similarly, David, that poetry-writing shepherd king, attributes his change of heart to God: "You have put gladness in my heart..." (Ps 4:7). Elsewhere, he asks for his heart to be changed: "Make me to hear joy and gladness... Renew a steadfast spirit within me." (Ps 51:8,10)

How far can we take this idea? How far *should* we take this idea? Do we interpret *every* helpful encounter as God sending us Titus? Does God put ideas into our hearts? Taken too far, we might fall into presumption or superstition, compulsively attaching meaning to any and every event in our lives. Taken not quite far enough, we run the risk of denying God's ever-present help in time of need. Perhaps we can sidestep exactitude by admitting that we just don't know. We can find rest in this place of intellectual humility.

Now we will look at one final idea about God moving our hearts. We will turn to a familiar passage,

In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths. (Pr 3:6, KJV)

In this translation, it might sound as if we are supposed to tilt our heads towards God in acknowledgement, as if we are strangers passing on the street. Or maybe this sounds like an acknowledgment page in a book, where the author recognizes those who assisted with the project.

There is a different meaning hiding inside the verse. The word *acknowledge* is actually the Hebrew verb *to know*: yada, as in “yada-yada” or “I know, I know”. In all your ways *know Him*, and He will direct your paths. Let's take this a step further. In *all your ways* know Him, in your going out and your coming in, in an art gallery and a good book, and on a winter walk in the woods. When we know Him, in the rhythm of our everyday lives, He directs our paths.

And so, there is a constant interplay between the self, the environment, and God – between the heart, the dust of snow, and the crow. We go on, from strength to strength, from encounter to encounter, expecting to be moved in unexpected ways. If we miss a lesson, that's okay. We can learn it another day, through other means. We don't have to worry about deciding between two roads – the less travelled or the more travelled – because the path is one of the heart, not the feet. We can rest assured that God can use whatever He wants or whomever He wants, whenever He wants and however He wants, to move our hearts, even a Lion named Aslan from the fictional land of Narnia.

I will leave you with these words of Paul,

May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

(2Thess 3:5)