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Flight Instructor for the Soul

C. S. Lewis's Vision of Human Freedom through an Imaginative Obedience

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Abstract:

“Morality is a mountain which we cannot climb by our own efforts; and if we could we should only perish in the ice and unbreathable air of the summit, lacking those wings with which the rest of the journey has to be accomplished. For it is from there that the real ascent begins. The ropes and axes are “done away” and the rest is a matter of flying.”
(*Man or Rabbit? – God in the Dock*)

Within the Lewisian canon there is the idea that there is another type of obedience, an imaginative obedience to God best expressed as the freedom of flight. All who want it eventually grow the necessary wings, some sooner than later. Lewis's imaginative obedience brings encouragement to all who are willing to listen.

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Flight Instructor for the Soul: C. S. Lewis's Vision of Human Freedom through an Imaginative Obedience

In *Reflections on the Psalms* Lewis states "In this book...I write as one amateur to another, talking about difficulties I have met, or lights I have gained, when reading the Psalms, with the hope that this might at any rate interest, and sometimes even help, other inexpert readers. I am 'comparing notes', not presuming to instruct" (2). "Comparing notes" is the task of this author as well, "not presuming to instruct." The bulk of this paper will be Lewis speaking, commentary will be minimal.

Flannery O'Connor's character Hazel Motes in her novel *Wise Blood* had "a deep black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin." And we are told "He had a strong confidence in his power to resist evil..." (11). O'Connor also tells us that "He knew by the time he was twelve years old that he was going to be a preacher. Later he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown. Where he wanted to stay was in Eastrod with his two eyes open, and his hands always handling the familiar thing, his feet on the known track, and his tongue not too loose" (11). The ideas I am about to present began when I happened to read Lewis's essay "Man or Rabbit?". In the essay Lewis is addressing the issue Hazel Motes attempts to deal with, that is avoiding Jesus. The essay opens with: "'Can't you lead a good life without believing in Christianity?' This is the question on which I have been asked to write..." and concludes with:

"When that which is perfect is come, then that which is past shall be done away.' – The idea of reaching "a good life" without Christ is based on a double error. Firstly, we cannot do it; and secondly, in setting up "a good life" as our final goal, we have missed the very point of our existence. Morality is a mountain which we cannot climb by our own efforts; and if we could we should only perish in the ice and unbreathable air of the summit, lacking those wings with which the rest of the journey has to be accomplished. For it is from there that the real ascent begins. The ropes and axes are "done away" and the rest is a matter of flying."

(God in the Dock, 108)

"The ropes and axes are "done away" and the rest is a matter of flying." When I read that line my heart jumped. Flying, that is ultimately what I want to do in this life; I do not just want to get by. I want to fly. Living a good life is not the final goal, if we think it is Lewis says "we have missed the very point of our existence." In *Mere Christianity* Lewis writes:

I think all Christians would agree with me if I said that though Christianity seems at first to be all about morality, all about duties and rules and guilt and virtue, yet it leads you on, out of all that, into something beyond. One has a glimpse of a country where they do not talk of those things, except perhaps as a joke. Every one there is filled full with what we should call

goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they do not call it goodness. They do not call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes. But this is near the stage where the road passes over the rim of our world. No one's eyes can see very far beyond that: lots of people's eyes can see further than mine.

(149-150)

Lewis says that "lots of people's eyes can see further than mine" and while this is true I do believe Lewis was ultimately selling himself short.

The paragraphs from *Mere Christianity* and "Man or Rabbit?" which Lewis began by quoting 1 Corinthians 10:10 – "when that which is perfect come", does seem to imply that this flying, this time and place where we move "into something beyond" is a future event. This takes place in a country that we only now catch a glimpse of. And theologically I would agree that this ultimately happens when our entire being is transformed, resurrected, and enjoy the Triune God in the New Heavens and New Earth for eternity. Yet I do believe we are meant to experience it, to some degree, now.

In Letter 13 of *The Screwtape Letters* Screwtape admonishes Wormwood over the patient's "repentance and renewal" which "amounts to a second conversion" by telling him that he ought to have known that the asphyxiating cloud which prevented his attack on the patient as a well-known phenomenon and one of God's most barbarous weapon that appears when God is most directly present to the patient. Lewis also states that some humans are permanently surrounded by it and therefore inaccessible to the likes of Screwtape and Wormwood (63). Who does not desire this, to be one who is inaccessible to Screwtape and Wormwood by being permanently surrounded by the asphyxiating cloud of God's presence?

How is this to come about for us? Our flight instructor, C. S. Lewis, states in *Mere Christianity*:

For mere improvement is not redemption, though redemption always improves people even here and now and will, in the end, improve them to a degree we cannot yet imagine. God became man to turn creatures into sons: not simply to produce better men of the old kind but to produce a new kind of man. It is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better but like turning a horse into a winged creature. Of course, once it has got its wings, it will soar over fences which could never have been jumped and thus beat the natural horse at its own game. But there may be a period, while the wings are just beginning to grow, when it cannot do so: and at that stage the lumps on the shoulders – no one could tell by looking at them that they are going to be wings – may even give it an awkward appearance.

(216)

This picture of a horse growing wings should bring to mind a scene from *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In *The Magician's Nephew* we find Strawberry, the hansom cab horse who finds his way into the nascent Narnia by accident as Digory and Polly attempt

to remove Jadis the witch from London and spare the city and ultimately earth from her destructive tyranny. Aslan asks Strawberry, who would be renamed Fledge after this transformation, if he would like to be a winged horse, in fact the Father of all Winged Horses, he consents and this is what happened:

The horse shied, just as it might have shied in the old, miserable days when it pulled a hansom. Then it roared. It strained its neck back as if there were a fly biting its shoulders and it wanted to scratch them. And then, just as the beasts had burst out of the earth, there burst out from the shoulders of Fledge wings that spread and grew, larger than eagles', larger than swans', larger than angels' wings in church windows.

(156)

Transformation is needed. Another example from the essay "Man or Rabbit?":

We are to be re-made. All the rabbit in us is to disappear – the worried, conscientious, ethical rabbit as well as the cowardly and sensual rabbit. We shall bleed and squeal as the handfuls of fur come out; and then, surprisingly, we shall find underneath it all a thing we have never imagined: a real man, an ageless god, a son of God, strong, radiant, wise, beautiful, and drenched in joy.

(*God in the Dock*, 112)

In *Mere Christianity* Lewis says that he uses these "extreme example[s] in order to emphasise the point that it is not mere improvement but Transformation" (218).

Lewis believes that all of us are called to this. Like Strawberry we too must say yes if we are asked to become a winged horse – and we will be asked.

From *Mere Christianity*:

The command *Be ye perfect* is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command. He said (in the Bible) that we were 'gods' and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him—for we can prevent Him, if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said.

(205-206)

But how does this happen? This idea of flying, this asphyxiating cloud of God's presence, this country where every one is filled full with what we should call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they do not call it goodness. They do not call it

anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes. These are not prosaic pictures; they are alive, pulsating with that which is hard even to put into words. Words are wonderful, but how do you get there while still on this part of the journey, still within the Shadowlands?

Lewis gives a few hints in his book of fictional correspondence concerning prayer *Letters to Malcolm*:

You first taught me the great principle “Begin where you are.” I had thought one had to start by summoning up what we believe about the goodness and greatness of God, by thinking about creation and redemption and “all the blessings of this life.” You turned to the brook and once more splashed your burning face and hands in the little waterfall and said, “Why not begin with this?”

And it worked. Apparently you never guessed how much. That cushiony moss, that coldness and sound and dancing light were no doubt very minor blessings, compared with “the means of grace and the hope of glory.” They were not the hope of glory, they were an exposition of the glory itself...

I have tried, since that moment, to make every pleasure into a channel of adoration. I don’t mean simply by giving thanks for it. One must of course give thanks, but I mean something different... This heavenly fruit is instantly redolent of the orchard where it grew. This sweet air whispers of the country from whence it blows. It is a message. We know we are being touched by a finger of that right hand at which there are pleasures for evermore. There need be no question of thanks or praise as a separate event... To experience the tiny theophany is itself to adore.

If I could always be what I aim at being, no pleasure would be too ordinary or too usual for such reception: from the first taste of the air when I look out of the window... down to one’s soft slippers at bed-time.

If this is Hedonism, it is also a somewhat arduous discipline...

One must learn to walk before one can run... We... shall not be able to adore God on the highest occasions if we have learned no habit of doing so on the lowest. At best, our faith and reason will tell us that He is adorable, but we shall not have *found* Him so, not have “tasted and seen.” Any patch of sunlight in a wood will show you something about the sun which you could never get from reading books on astronomy. These pure and spontaneous pleasures are “patches of Godlight” in the woods of our experience.

(88-91)

This desire in Lewis is the chief reason he wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In an essay titled “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s To Be Said” Lewis briefly explores how stories in general, and the Narnia tales in particular came to be:

I thought I saw how stories of this kind [fairy tales] could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in

childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.

(Walmsley 527-528)

Watchful dragons are extremely hard to steal past. Lewis said, "If this is Hedonism, it is also a somewhat arduous discipline." Going to the place where the ropes and axes are done away with, entering into the asphyxiating cloud of God's presence requires much of us. Narnia is meant to be a "patch of Godlight".

In *The Voyage of the DAWN TREADER* we see this beautifully when Edmund, Lucy, and Eustace are at the very end of the world. Reepicheep has headed off on his own towards Aslan's country and we read this:

But between them and the foot of the sky there was something so white on the green grass that even with their eagles' eyes they could hardly look at it. They came on and saw that it was a Lamb.

"Come and have breakfast," said the Lamb in its sweet milky voice.

Then they noticed for the first time that there was a fire lit on the grass and fish roasting on it. They sat down and ate the fish, hungry now for the first time for many days. And it was the most delicious food they had ever tasted.

"Please, Lamb," said Lucy, "is this the way to Aslan's country?"

"Not for you," said the Lamb. "For you the door into Aslan's country is from your own world."

"What!" said Edmund. "Is there a way into Aslan's country from our world too?"

"There is a way into my country from all the worlds," said the Lamb; but as he spoke, his snowy white flushed into tawny gold and his size changed and he was Aslan himself, towering above them and scattering light from his mane.

"Oh, Aslan," said Lucy. "Will you tell us how to get into your country from our world?"

"I shall be telling you all the time," said Aslan. "But I will not tell you how long or short the way will be; only that it lies across a river. But do not fear that, for I am the great Bridge Builder. And now come; I will open the door in the sky and send you to your own land."

"Please, Aslan," said Lucy. "Before we go, will you tell us when we can come back to Narnia again? Please. And oh, do, do, do make it soon."

"Dearest," said Aslan very gently, "you and your brother will never come back to Narnia."

“Oh, Aslan!!” said Edmund and Lucy both together in despairing voices. “You are too old, children,” said Aslan, “and you must begin to come close to your own world now.” “It isn’t Narnia, you know,” sobbed Lucy. “It’s you. We shan’t meet you there. And how can we live, never meeting you?” “But you shall meet me, dear one,” said Aslan. “Are – are you there too, Sir?” said Edmund. “I am,” said Aslan. “But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there.”

(245-247)

Narnia helps us, by knowing Aslan for a little in that magical world, we in turn may know Him better here, where, for us, it really counts. This is a high calling, a calling all of us fail at each and every day of our lives if we even take a cursory glance at ourselves. But, Lewis does not leave us in despair. In his the sermon “A Slip of the Tongue” he says:

What God does for us, He does in us. The process of doing it will appear to me (and not falsely) to be the daily or hourly repeated exercises of my own will in renouncing this attitude; especially each morning, for it grows all over me like a new shell each night. Failures will be forgiven; it is acquiescence that is fatal, the permitted, regularised presence of an area in ourselves which we still claim for our own. We may never, this side of death, drive the invader out of our territory; but we must be in the Resistance, not in the Vichy government. And this, so far as I can yet see, must be begun again every day. Our morning prayer should be ...grant me to make an unflawed beginning today, for I have done nothing yet.

(From *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses*, 191-192)

So far this paper has been about our individual selves, specifically in relation to our true calling in light of the Ultimate Reality that is God, our Creator and Father. We have covered half of the Great Commandment. I would like to close with the other half – the part about loving our neighbor. Lewis finishes his great sermon “The Weight of Glory” with these words:

Meanwhile the cross comes before the crown and tomorrow is a Monday morning. A cleft has opened in the pitiless walls of the world, and we are invited to follow our great Captain inside. The following Him is, of course, the essential point. That being so, it may be asked what practical use there is in the speculations which I have been indulging. I can think of at least one such use. It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbor. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor’s glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so

heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously – no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. And our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner – no mere tolerance, or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment. Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbour he is holy in almost the same way, for in him Christ – the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself – is truly hidden.

(From *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses*, 45-46)

I end with that long quote from “The Weight of Glory” because many of the quotes I cited may lead one to view this flight as a solitary adventure. It is not, it is a communal affair. God knows us as individuals and all of us have or are invited into a private relationship with God, yet this relationship will never come to completion outside of community. How many “ordinary” people are in our lives? Do we daily put the weight of your neighbor’s glory upon our backs and pray for the grace to carry it? For Lewis and for us this is a matter of desire. The offer is for all.

To quote one more time from “The Weight of Glory”:

“...if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

(26)

Let us go from here longing for the wings, the vision, and the asphyxiating cloud of God's presence in our lives needed to put Lewis's flight instructions into practice and cease to be so easily pleased and ultimately face the One Hazel Motes so desired to avoid, Jesus.

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