

# The Deeper Magic and Our Response

Growing up, my father often read to my brothers and me. It was a consistent and time-consuming responsibility he took upon himself. I remember listening to such greats as *Watership Down*, *And Then There Were None*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. Though he read many great stories, no books stand out more than C.S. Lewis's masterpiece, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Some of my earliest memories are connected to hearing those books being read aloud. And while this might seem a bit odd to many, he read those books to us even when I was in high school. I savored every moment.

There is one memory of my father reading to us that stands out the most distinctly. It was the reading of the concluding story in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I was young, probably third or fourth grade, yet I vividly recall my father choking back tears as he read the final few chapters of *The Last Battle*. For those unfamiliar with the series, it consists of seven books set in the fantastical world of Narnia. In *The Magician's Nephew*, the penultimate book in the series, C.S. Lewis tells the creation story of Narnia. In *The Last Battle*, he tells of its end. All the other books take place somewhere in between. The moment is seared into my memory because I finally caught a glimpse of just what it was that brought my father to tears.

Even at that young age, I understood this was more than my father's sensitive and gentle nature. To his credit, I have seen my dad cry many times. He has never been afraid to show his emotions, something that has always stuck with me. No, it was not that simple.

Similarly, it was not simply a matter of my father being overwhelmed by the beauty of the prose that Lewis employs in

this grand culmination of his series. Don't get me wrong; it is beautiful and heartbreaking stuff. We are witnesses to the final death throes of a world we have come to love and cherish and Lewis gives the moment a grandeur and gravity it deserves. No, for all his skill, Lewis's mastery of the English language is not what brought my father to tears.

It wasn't even the finality of it all. Narnia dies in the end, and all the characters we have loved move on to the next life, journeying further up and further in to Aslan's country. It is evocative and powerful imagery. There is a feeling of completeness to it all that even at my young age, I understood. No, there was an even deeper magic at work in my father's tears.

My dad wept because of the truth hidden in plain sight in those final chapters. Lewis wrote these words when talking about his friend J.R.R. Tolkien's novel *The Lord of the Rings*, "Here are beauties which pierce like swords or burn like cold iron. Here is a book which will break your heart." The same could be said for his words, his stories. My father glimpsed that. He felt it deep in his soul. The end of Narnia and the introduction to Aslan's country pierced him like a sword. His heart broke and yearned for the far off country we have been promised.

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As I said earlier, I understood this, though in a manner and on a level commensurate with my age. The deepest mysteries of this deeper magic remain tantalizingly out of my reach, but they come into more focus every year that goes by. I am still journeying further up and further in to Aslan's country.

This was all brought into stark relief the other night as I read *The Magician's Nephew* to my youngest son. He is seven and still struggling to fully grasp the language and the plot elements of this nearly 65-year-old story. In our recent

reading, we read the first chapter describing the creation of Narnia. It is Lewis at his very best. Lewis was not concerned with realistic world building like Tolkien. He didn't devote page after page describing the history, the culture, and the traditions of various kingdoms and nations. Lewis was more concerned with the image: the precise picture he saw in his mind. In this case, it is a creation myth where singing and music set all things into motion. Lewis captures a breathtaking sense of wonder and joy in the creation act. First, the silence of the dark new world is broken by the voice of a singer. There are no words in this song, just sounds; deep, beautiful, haunting sounds. Sounds that call other voices—the very stars in the sky—to join the hymn of beginnings. The stars come to life in a blaze of awesome power. The rest of the world follows soon after, hearing the voice of their creator calling them to life.

It is in the midst of this singing, this joyous act of imaginative genesis, one humble character utters this simple line, "Glory be! I'd ha' been a better man all my life if I'd known there were things like this." As I read those words to my son, I actually had to stop reading for a few seconds. It hit me with a force I did not expect. (Don't you love it when that happens?) "I'd ha' been a better man all my life if I'd known there were things like this." This unassuming London cabby is awestruck by the beauty and wonder he sees and hears. Lewis takes great pains to make sure we the reader understand that this cabby is a kind and honest man. A faithful and righteous man. In fact, the cabby's first response to the darkness and silence of a pre-creation Narnia is to sing a hymn of thanksgiving. The cabby is a true believer, yet when he is faced with a power beyond anything he has ever encountered, his response is one of humility, joy, and commitment.

When the cabby says, "I'd ha' been a better man all my life," I sense no Pharisaical bent to his words. Lewis is not calling

for a return to works-based religion. But to the one who has glimpsed beauty and truth so profound, what other response is more appropriate? What other response is more fitting? We see evidence in Scripture of just this thing on more than one occasion. Saul is confronted with the glory of the risen Savior on the road to Damascus. He repents and becomes the Apostle to the Gentiles. Introverted and inarticulate Moses meets Jehovah God in a burning bush and becomes God's voice of truth to the most powerful man on earth. A frightened Thomas goes from asking for physical signs to crying out "My LORD and my God!" when he comes face to face with Jesus.

The cabby's humble response shows a clear recognition of our standing with God. Our best is not good enough. Our good works and our righteousness amount to so very little in the end. "I'd ha' been a better man" demonstrates an awareness of this contrast. When we are faced with the God of Scripture, do we respond in kind? Do we perceive our need and our lack? Do we cry out like the man with the afflicted son, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" [1. Mark 9:24]

The cabby's response is also one of life-changing joy. He recognizes that up to this point, his life has been half-lived. One foot in the light, only glimpsing the deeper magic through a glass darkly. [2. I Corinthians 13:12] He has now seen beyond the glass, to the very foundation of the world and has come face to face with the source of that deeper magic. He responds with joyful and earnest praise.

The cabby also responds with an unspoken commitment. In so many words, now that he has seen the truth and has glimpsed the deeper magic, he can do nothing else but respond with obedience. His promise is one of righteous living. "I'd ha' been a better man." The cabby was given much and now much will be expected of him. [3. Luke 12:48] He understands this and responds just as he should.

Reading those words to my son, the deeper truth pierced me

like a sword. I have been given so much. I have glimpsed the deeper magic in ways that many others in this world have not. I am fully aware that there are "things like this" that should quicken my soul. Am I responding with humility, joy and obedience? Do I cry out "Glory be!" when the Lord moves in my life, showing me deeper magic still? Or do I turn away and pretend that everything around me is dark and silent like another character[5. In the story, Uncle Andrew is a shallow and cowardly man. When he is faced with the creation of Narnia and with Aslan himself, he refuses to accept that any of it is real. He pretends he is still living in darkness and that the light has not been given to him. Aslan calls him an old sinner and says about him, "I cannot comfort him either; he has made himself unable to hear my voice. If I spoke to him, he would hear only growlings and roarings. Oh, Adam's son, how cleverly you defend yourself against all that might do you good!"] in the story. Do I pretend that God is not playing "in ten thousand places"[4. *As Kingfishers Catch Fire* by Gerard Manley Hopkins] and rejoicing over me with joyful songs?[6. Zephaniah 3:17] My prayer is that when I catch those glimpses of the deeper magic, I will respond like the cabby, "Glory be! I'd ha' been a better man all my life if I'd known there were things like this."

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