

Narnia, C.S. Lewis and Introducing Spirituality in the Social Work Classroom

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ABSTRACT

C.S. Lewis through his adult and children's books continues to find new audiences. How can his work help us introduce students to spirituality? His work connects past, present, and future, and helps students think critically about major themes that will occur throughout their social work careers: grief and loss; friendship and social support, honour and self-sacrifice. Yet his work has been generally overlooked in the social work curriculum, and social work literature. In this paper, we would like to explore how C.S. Lewis can be introduced into the social work curriculum both to foster critical thinking, self-other awareness and an introduction of spiritual values. We will identify some of the multimedia available to promote class discussion. The paper offers a chance to "return to the Narnia of your youth" or to discover the magic of Narnia for the first time.

This paper, given at the CSSSW (May 2006), is designed to introduce C.S. Lewis and in particular *The Chronicles of Narnia* to augment the introduction of spirituality in social work courses. The author would like the reader to be aware of this disclaimer “I am not a C.S. Lewis scholar, and I came to Narnia not as a child but as an adult.” I discovered the writings of C. S. Lewis in seeking answers about faith and spirituality both personally and professionally, after the death of my parents, then, in the classroom. I was seeking ways to introduce spirituality and spiritual values in the social work courses in a nonthreatening, but interesting way, in a way that connected creativity and imagination with spirituality. This paper suggests that C.S. Lewis and Narnia can be an effective way to introduce spirituality and values in social work classes. It is designed to provide an introduction to C.S. Lewis who is considered one of the foremost Christian apologists of the last century. However for those educators not located in Christian faith-based colleges, this designation should not detract from the use of the Narnian Chronicles. The Chronicles provide a good story, in which the Christian parallel can be acknowledged, but is often missed by children and adults alike in the enjoyment of the story, as C.S. Lewis intended. The Christian parallel, does not affect the relevance of the story for non-Christian students, as a way to encourage the debate about universal values. C. S. Lewis himself states that his goal was to write a fairy tale, and that Aslan is what Lewis preferred to consider a “supposedly” meaning suppose a Christ-like figure appeared on earth—what would this figure be like and that if anything Narnia might introduce children to the stories they will later find in the Gospels (Hooper, 1996, Wagner, 2005).

According to Wagner (2005),

Lewis's integration of Christian themes into the Narnian Chronicles

is, therefore, simply an extension of himself. His Christian world view wasn't something he could just turn on or off, in the end he couldn't have created Narnia in any other way.

Having said that, Lewis believed that your faith shouldn't impact your enjoyment of the stories themselves. With that in mind, he wanted to write great stories for Christians and non-Christians alike. In fact, he didn't really want kids to recognize the Christian symbolism in Narnia.. Just as George MacDonald's *Phantasies* "baptized his imagination" when Lewis was young, he wanted the Narnian Chronicles to do the same for his young readers. (P.75).

The works of C.S. Lewis have sold more than 100 million copies (Beyond Narnia, 2005). The current Disney release of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Disney, 2006) will introduce new generations of children and their parents to the world of Narnia. *The Chronicles of Narnia*, consist of seven books, in order of publication, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), *Prince Caspian* (1951), *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* (1952), *The Silver Chair* (1953), *The Horse and His Boy* (1954), *The Magician's Nephew* (1955)* (which some argue should be read first as it is the story of the beginnings of Narnia), and *The Last Battle* (1956).

CRITICS OF NARNIA

Before considering the *Chronicles of Narnia* for use in social work, several issues should be considered. The stories were not popular with the critics at their release as they were considered too full of darkness and frightening happenings and characters. Lord of the Rings proponents should

know that while Lewis liked the Tolkien Ring series, J.R.R Tolkien strongly disliked by the Narnia stories, considering them hastily written and too much of mixture of too many mythological characters (Hooper, 1996, p. 402). Although Marcos (2003) argues that this mixture of many mythological characters is very much of the medieval style. Regardless, of format and mixture, the Narnia books were immensely popular with children and continue to be voted (C.S. Lewis, Google, 2005) amongst the top choices of much beloved children's stories of all times.

Critics of Lewis consider his Narnian Chronicles to illustrate racism, classism, and sexism and Christian doctrine bullying because of his emphasis on the promise of eternal life (Jacob, 2005, p. 307). The issue of sexism is often raised in terms of C.S. Lewis's life. It is argued that he gave women subservient roles in his stories. It is often also noted that his literary friendship group, the Inklings had no members who were women. However, Lewis's history and background do not seem to support the accusation. His mother, whom he adored was a university graduate in mathematics. He cared for, and had a deep respect for, his best-friend Paddy Moore's mother and sister after Paddy was killed, and even placed the house they bought together in Mrs. Moore's name. He loved his wife Joy deeply and admired her. Even in his writings, girls and women hold prominent roles—Lucy is the first person to go to Narnia, the four children rule together (two boys and two girls), although the White Witch is evil, Lewis is not the first or the last to use witches as evil in myths and stories, but that does not make the argument for sexism. Jacob says of both Tolkien and Lewis that

they had a ready-made source of "Oriental" imagery on which to draw to enrich their fictional worlds, and in a time less sensitive to cultural differences than our own, they saw no reason not to draw upon it. Perhaps this should count against them, but it rarely

does. I think that it is because readers (and in the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, viewers) can tell the difference between, on the one hand, an intentionally hostile depiction of some alien culture and, on the other, the use of cultural difference as a mere plot device (Jacob, 2005, p. 308).

The class of classism is perhaps best countered by Lewis's own words:

There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals that we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. (Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, cited in Wagner, 2005, p. 318),

When this paper was presented at the *Canadian Society of Spirituality and Social Work* (Renison College, Waterloo, Ont., May 2006), the question was asked if in the research for this paper, I had found any issues of child abuse in connection with C.S. Lewis. At that time and at this point in writing, I have found no references connecting C.S. Lewis to child abuse (Google search, July 18 2006). There is evidence to suggest that when Lewis and Mrs. Moore housed evacuee children during the war, she was not very kind to them, wouldn't let them eat with the family, and fed them meagre meals, C. S. Lewis use to bring food to them and sneak them into the kitchen and, was considered most kind to the girls placed with them, and is remembered as a wonderful storyteller who taught them about astronomy (Wagner, 2005, p. 69). The question might have been raised amongst critics of C.S. Lewis because he was an unlikely writer of children' stories. He was a confirmed bachelor and had little to do with children. His experience seems primarily limited to the

war evacuee children he and Mrs. Moore housed during World War II. He did raise his stepsons after his wife's death in 1960 but this was long after the initial publication of the Narnia books. His correspondence with children shows a deep respect for children and interest in the issues that Narnia created for children and their parents

(Wagner, 2005). He wrote Narnia because he said that by 1950 he felt he had said all he had to say as a Christian apologist and just felt compelled to write a fairy tale having been a great reader of in particular Norse myths and legends all his life. He describes the images as just coming to him and he built his story around such images as a faun carrying an umbrella (Wagner, 2005). He as a great believer in fairy tales and said

When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty I read them openly." This idea is reflected in his dedication to Lucy Barfield (daughter of Lewis's good friend Owen Barfield) in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: "You are already too old for fairy tales...But some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again." (Wagner, 2005, p. 75).

Fans and supporters of C.S.Lewis argue strongly against the charges of racism and sexism, and overt Christianity, those who oppose Lewis are equally determined to provide evidence. This debate might be an interested one in which to engage social work students—perhaps divided into those who read Narnia as children, and those who were introduced to Narnia for the first time with the Disney movie or in class. The question for critical debate and analysis might be: As *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* continue to be selected amongst the most popular of children's books—are they sexist, or racist, do they present spiritual values or are they trying to convert readers?

It should be noted that most children (including J.K. Rowling of Harry Potter fame (Wagner, 2005) who read Narnia Chronicles as children all say that the Christian message was not evident to them, but rather it was the story and the imagination that were important.

WHO IS C.S. LEWIS: CREATOR OF NARNIA

There is a considerable literature on C.S.Lewis, his writings, and in particular his Narnia chronicles. The reader has a choice of many biographies including the recently published *The Narnian* (Jacobs, 2005); and *C.S. Lewis & Narnia for Dummies* (Wagner, 2005) which as stated “ a friendly introduction to the master storyteller and Christian apologist” (Wagner, 2005). The reader might also choose to view the DVD *Beyond Narnia* (2005) which in addition to the biographical details of Lewis's life, also show the places so important to Lewis. For many years, Dr. Armand Nicholi (2002) has taught a very popular course at Harvard in which he compares the arguments of Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis on the question of God and is also available on DVD (2004).

The biographies of C.S. Lewis impress because of the outstanding record of scholarship and publication, but also because they capture the rich creativity and imagination of the man. To summarize briefly, Clives Staples Lewis was born in 1898 in Ireland, had an older brother Warren or Warnie with whom he lived for the greater part of his life, and as a child renamed himself Jacksie or Jack, a name used by friends and family all his life. He had an idyllic childhood in which imagination was encouraged. At age ten , he lost the love and security of his childhood when his mother died of cancer. His prayers to save her were not answered, and his belief in God ended. His father took refuge in his grief abandoning the two boys, who were sent away to boarding schools in England and Ireland. Lewis was unhappy at school and endured considerable bullying. He finally

was sent to a tutor, have begged to be allowed to leave boarding school. His tutor, William T. Kirkpatrick, taught Jack the skills of critical thinking and logic, that are so evident in his writing. He thrived in this type of educational environment. He won one of three entrance scholarships to Oxford, but delayed this to serve in the British Army, was commissioned as a second Lieutenant and served in France in World War I.

Lewis was seriously injured at the Battle of Arras in 1918 and returned to Britain. His best friend "Paddy Moore" was killed and true to his promise, he then looked after his friend's mother and sister. Mrs. Moore, and her daughter, Jack and his brother eventually bought a house "The Kilns" where much of Lewis's writing occurred and where he would live for the rest of his life.

At the end of the WWI, he returned to Oxford where he graduated with honours in 1922. He was hired as a "don" or teacher and lecturer in 1925 and he became an outstanding lecturer. He started writing and publishing poetry from the 1910's to 1920's; in the 1930's and 1940's he wrote fiction, and in the late 1930's to 1940's he wrote Apologetics, in the 1950's he wrote children's fiction, and in the 1950's to the 1960's he wrote devotional books, while his writing in the area of literary criticism spanned the decades from the 1930's to the 1960's.

At Oxford he developed group of friends including J.R.R Tolkien known as the Inklings who critiqued each other's work. Although he was an avowed atheist, Lewis noticed that all his friends and all the writers he really liked reading were Christians. Between 1926 to 1931, Jack became a believer in Christianity influenced by Tolkien amongst others who convinced him that Christianity was a true myth. Lewis initially considered myths to be a form of "lie" but Tolkien argued that there was usually some truth in myths and of the Christian myth he argued that the difference is that the Christian myth is based on the truth that God came to Earth. To understand Lewis's conversion, it is

necessary to remember that he was a literary critic, and could discern the difference between myths and the Gospels did not have a mythical sense for him but if a myth were true it would be like the Gospels (Wagner, 2005).

Lewis was first and foremost a scholar of Medieval and Renaissance English and was at Oxford (1925-1954) where he was never popular with the administration, and then Cambridge (1954-1963). He lectured to packed lecture halls and was a much valued tutor. His writings in Christianity and literary criticism launched his writing career. In World War II, from 1941-1944 he began doing radio segments on Christianity that brought him fame on both sides of the Atlantic. His writings as a Christian include, *The Problem of Pain* (1940), the very popular *Screwtape Letters* (1942), *The Abolition of Man* (1943), *Miracles* (1947), *Mere Christianity* (1952), *Surprised by Joy* (1955), *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958), *The Four Loves*, (1960), *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (1960), *A Grief Observed* (1961), *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*(1964) to list just a few of his publications. C. S. Lewis also wrote a space trilogy: *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *Perlandra* (1943) and *That Hideous Strength* (1945).

In 1956 he married an American divorcee with two sons, Joy Davidman Gresham, initially to help her stay in England. She developed bone cancer, then went into remission and in this time the marriage became a true love match. The movie *Shadowlands* (1993) was made about this relationship, but is not considered an accurate interpretation of either Lewis's character or his life(Wagner, 2005). Her death in 1960 challenged his Christian faith and he wrote about this in his book *A Grief Observed* (1961).

C.S. Lewis died Nov. 22, 1963, the same day J.F.. Kennedy died. His brother Warren outlived him by 10 years and although he struggled with alcoholism, he edited the Letters of C.S.

Lewis. Lewis's stepson Douglas Gresham is active in his estate and is a co-producer for the Narnia series, his brother David adopted his mother's Jewish heritage. (Beyond Narnia, 2005, Jacobs, 2005; Wagner, 2005). At the time of his death he is considered by many the leading Christian apologist of his time.

THE USE OF NARNIA AND C.S. LEWIS IN SOCIAL WORK

As many social work educators particularly in non-faith-based Canadian schools of social work have found, introducing spirituality as a part of social work core courses, rather than as elective materials presents many challenges. Some students automatically “tune out” for several reasons: (1) the inability to separate spirituality from their experience or lack of experience with religion; (2) the life-stage for many students is one of putting aside child-hood religious practices (or lack thereof); (3) negative personal experiences with family and friends or with churches and/or clergy; and (4) historical traumatic events involving church and clergy such as the residential schools; death, torture and fanaticism in the name of religion. C.S. Lewis himself became an atheist at age 10 after his mother died, he came to believe in Christianity in his 30's, therefore he is appealing to students struggling with their own beliefs in religion, spirituality, and a Higher Being.

The Narnia Chronicles offer students a chance to consider their beliefs around universal truths. It also offers an opportunity for adults to re-examine the values and morals in fairy tales, myths and stories of their childhood.

It is however important to be clear that Lewis did not intend Aslan to represent Christ for as he explained in one of his letters to a school girl(24 December, 1959).

When I started *The Lion, Witch and Wardrobe* I don't think I foresaw what Aslan was going to do and suffer. I think He just insisted on behaving in His own way. This of course I did understand and the whole series became Christian.

But it is not, as some people think, an *allegory*. That is, I don't say 'Let us represent Christ as Aslan.' I say, 'Supposing there is a world like Narnian, and supposing, like ours, it needed redemption, let us imagine what sort of Incarnation and Passion and Resurrection Christ would have there.' See? (L) (Hooper, 1996, p. 425).

Hooper (1996) offers an excellent discussion on the Christian meanings in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (pp.398-456). Rogers (2005) offers an excellent analysis of the Christian meanings and universal values in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and Wagner (2005) also offers examples of values found throughout the Narnia stories.

The *Chronicles of Narnia* may be used to examine a number of concepts found in spirituality. To help students understand the concept of transformation, Edmund's change from a mean and traitorous person to King Edmund the Just (Wagner, 2005, p. 157) might be used as an example. This offers opportunity to discuss whether students had observed/experienced transformation.

Derezotes (2006) outlines a possible spiritual-values practice hierarchy made of nine values: service, consciousness, love, imagination, integrity, connectedness, ecstatic awareness, meaning making and sacred mystery (p. 30). Looking for these values in Narnia presents one

possible way for helping students to remember and understand spiritual values. The link to spiritual values here will be made primarily with reference to *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (hereafter *LWW*) as this is the most well-known of the Narnia Chronicles, and is available in DVD format for class viewing. The value of Service “taking responsibility to foster the Highest Good of people, life and ecosystems” (Derezotes, 2006, p. 30) in *LWW* is found in the service that the children provide as rulers of Narnia and in Aslan’s role in Narnia. Consciousness “developing each person’s prepersonal, personal and transpersonal development” (Derezotes, 2006, p. 30) might best be illustrated by Edmund’s initial fascination with evil and subsequent change to loyalty to Narnia.. Love or “holding intent for the Highest Good in self, others and ecosystems” (Derezotes, 20006, p. 30) again can be attributed to Aslan, but also to Lucy in particular in her belief in Aslan and Mr. Tumnus and to Mr. Tumnus in his fair treatment of Lucy. Imagination “Imagining the Highest Good for one’s self and the divine self” (Derezotes, 2006, p. 30) might be illustrated by the battle against the evil of the White Witch. Integrity “approaching every moment with all parts of oneself and the divine self” Derezotes, 2006, p. 30) might be illustrated by Lucy’s ability to believe in Narnia and Aslan. Connectedness “living in interrelationship with self, divine self, and Cosmos” (Derezotes, 2006, p. 30) might be illustrated the Beaver’s understanding of Aslan, Narnia and their willingness to help the children. Ecstatic Aliveness “developing capacity to experience joy and suffering from observing self” (Derezotes, 2006, p. 30) might be captured in the joy of the visit of Father Christmas, and in observing their grief while watching Aslan’s suffering. Meaning Making “developing capacity to find spiritual significance in all life experience” (Derezotes, 2006, p. 30) might be demonstrated by the acceptance that Lucy, Susan, Peter, and later Edmund had for the world of Narnia. The last value Sacred Mystery “approaching

life and its mysteries with awe, gratitude, and respect (Derezotes, 2006, p. 30) could be demonstrated by the attitude the children developed toward Aslan and Narnia. These are only suggestions for starting the dialogue about spiritual values in Narnia, and in fact could be used as a class assignment for analysis of evidence of spiritual or universal values in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

There are many other values that can be identified in Narnia: for example “the use of the “little guy” to do great things” for God (Wagner, 2005, p. 166). The LWW also show the different feelings that goodness can evoke:

For Edmund who has already sided with Aslan’s enemies, the name evokes “mysterious horror.” Edmund doesn’t know it yet, but Aslan means the death of everything he has come to value. Neither does he know, however, that the death of his old self means freedom of a new life.

For the other three Pevensies, the name of Aslan sounds like life in its fullness, not death. “Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous. Susan felt as if some delicious smell or delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy to the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realize that it is the beginning of holidays or the beginning of summer”. Strength, beauty, gladness—the approaching Aslan brings abundant life to those who rejoice to see him coming. (Rogers, 2005, pp. 11-12).

Edmund and his need for Turkish Delight might also be used in work in addition to understand the powerful hold and impact on life that an addictive substance can exercise. The

LWW and indeed all the Narnia Chronicles can be used to discuss how the concept of “evil” and how social work values and practice approach “evil” and the concept of “sin”.

For social work students who will be working with children, the debate about the role of fairy tales and stories such as the *Chronicles of Narnia* might be discussed. Lewis argued that fairy tales were “an important way to express truth” (Wagner, 2005, p.75). As Wagner says:

Some critics scoff at fairy tales as giving kids an unrealistic picture of the world, but Lewis strongly disagrees with that sentiment. He explains, “I think no literature that children could read gives them less of a false impression. I think what profess to be realistic stories for children are far more likely to deceive them”. According to Lewis, so-called “realistic” stories—such as becoming popular in school or getting even with the neighborhood bully—have a much greater danger of producing unrealistic expectations because the stories make it sound as if such things are really achievable within the reader's life. (2005, p.75).

CONCLUSION

The Chronicles of Narnia and the works of C.S.Lewis have much to offer social work students for the discussion they can evoke around values, and the use of fairy-tales in social work practice. His writings are still in print and available on audio-format as well. There are numerous C.S. Lewis sites on the internet for those who wish to explore Lewis and his works further. This paper has been presented to encourage social work educators and practitioners to consider the use of *The Chronicles of Narnia* as a spring-board for discussions around values and spirituality. Rogers uses God but the use of the term Higher Being might be used in the following explanation

about the impact of the *Chronicles of Narnia* on their readers:

They give us a taste of the joy that is sometimes painful, and they ask, “What do I remind you of?” They are a gleam of divinity on the human imagination, pointing us toward our true country, our truest selves, always calling us to go further up and further in to the life God offers. (2005, p.176).

Whether you are returning to the *Chronicles of Narnia* as an adult, or discovering the works of C.S. Lewis for the first time. There is much to provoke thoughtful debate. The richness of imagination and of ideas challenge students and practitioners to think about spiritual values and may bring an a greater understanding of spirituality in social work education and practice.

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