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About The Trinity Forum

Thinkers from Socrates’ time to the present day have believed that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” With the pace and pressures of modern life, however, the challenge today is to lead an examined life in an unexamining age.

The Trinity Forum was founded in 1991 as a direct response to this challenge. Described as “a leadership academy without walls,” it helps people in positions of leadership and influence to engage with key issues of their public and personal lives in a context of faith. A core belief of The Trinity Forum is that individuals with commitment and vision can and do make a real difference.

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Introduction

Transformation, a dramatic change from one state of being to another, has been one of the most desired goals of human beings throughout history. In the Middle Ages alchemists spent their waking hours looking for ways to transform “ordinary” metals into gold. At a deeper level human beings have long searched for ways to transform their life experience into gold by making fundamental changes in habits of heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Popular culture reflects this deep-seated desire for transformation in the current popularity of “Reality TV” programs. Such programs are among the most-watched entertainment choices in the first decade of the twenty-first century—and “make-over” programs are among the most popular within the genre. They reflect a global fascination with dramatic changes in one’s physical body, one’s home, one’s work, and one’s life.

Through the ages, the way cultures respond to the desire to foster personal change to alter present and future circumstance has taken many forms. The Greek academy and later the universities sprang up to help transform young minds by increasing their critical thinking capabilities and by exposing students to rich ideas that would forever enhance their world view. In a similar way we more recently have developed therapy and fitness programs to facilitate emotional and physical transformation. But where can people turn for spiritual transformation of character, to help identify reasons for being and for connectedness with a greater sense of value and purpose?

The two readings presented here invite us to reflect on the nature of spiritual transformation. The first is a powerful story by Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Pine Gate.” It provides insight into the transformation process of a young man. The second, a selection from *The Great Divorce*, is a classic by C. S. Lewis in which an observer considers the various ways that people deal with transformational choices. As we consider the lessons of these readings, we have the possibility to better understand the nature of spiritual transformation and to make more informed choices.

It may be helpful for discussion if you keep the following questions in mind as you read the selections.

Questions

1. What are some of the elements involved in transformation?
 2. In what areas of your inner life do you desire to see transformation occur?
 3. What impedes your transformation? What would be required to remove the impediments?
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Thich Nhat Hanh

MINDFULNESS

The Most Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh (born 1926, pronounced *Tick-Naught-Han*) is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Zen master, peace activist, and prolific writer. Born in Vietnam, he left home as a teenager to become a monk and at the age of twenty-four founded what is now the Van Hanh Buddhist University in Vietnam. Nhat came to the United States in 1961 to study and teach comparative religion at Columbia and Princeton Universities, but he returned in 1963 at the request of his monk-colleagues in Vietnam to join in their work to stop the U.S.–Vietnam War. He helped lead one of the great nonviolent resistance movements of the century, based entirely on Gandhian principles and was banned from Vietnam in 1966 by both the Communist and non-Communist governments. His efforts moved Martin Luther King, Jr. to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967 (but no prize was awarded that year).

In 1982 Nhat founded Plum Village Buddhist Center, a meditation community near Bordeaux in the south of France. As of 2005 he heads the Community of Mindful Living, a monastic community, and the Order of Inter-Being, a lay group, and has founded two monasteries in the United States. He travels and teaches regularly across the world and has published over eighty-five titles of poems, prose, and prayers, more than forty of which are in English. His best-known books include *Peace Is Every Step*, *Being Peace*, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, *Anger*, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, and *Living Buddha, Living Christ*.

Thich Nhat Hanh is a leading proponent of “engaged Buddhism,” a way of life and a spiritual practice that differs somewhat from traditional Buddhism in that it intertwines traditional meditative practices with active nonviolent civil disobedience and works actively in the world to relieve suffering. A key component of engaged Buddhism is “mindful living.” Its practitioners seek, according to one publication of the Community of Mindful Living, “to dwell deeply in the present moment, to be aware of what is going on within and around us. Practicing mindfulness cultivates understanding, love, compassion, and joy. This practice helps us to take care of and transform suffering in our lives and in our society.”

This short story was written in 1960. The *me ngo* glass represents mindfulness and the sword is that of Manjushri Bodhisattva, the Guardian of Wisdom, the sword that cuts through illusions. The translator comments of the story that “Even if you are a highly accomplished monk, without mindfulness and self-reflection, you can turn into a monster.”

Differing Sources

If in our daily life we can smile, if we can be peaceful and happy, not only we, but everyone will profit from it. This is the most basic kind of peace work.

Thich Nhat Hanh

People deal too much with the negative, with what is wrong. Why not try and see positive things, to just touch those things and make them bloom?

Thich Nhat Hanh

Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy.

Thich Nhat Hanh

The practice of peace and reconciliation is one of the most vital and artistic of human actions.

Thich Nhat Hanh

When we come into contact with the other person, our thoughts and actions should express our mind of compassion, even if that person says and does things that are not easy to accept. We practice in this way until we see clearly that our love is not contingent upon the other person being lovable.

Thich Nhat Hanh

It seemed that nothing had changed during the seven years he was away, and yet it was surprising that no one was there to greet him.

Never, in as long as he could remember, had his master locked that gate. This narrow path was the only way up the mountain.

It seemed that his master had endowed it with the strength of his own spirit. It was impassable.

The Pine Gate

IT WAS A chilly autumn evening, and the full moon had just risen, when the young swordsman arrived at the foot of the mountain. The wilderness was bathed in the light of the moon glimmering playfully on branches and leaves. It seemed that nothing had changed during the seven years he was away, and yet it was surprising that no one was there to greet him. The swordsman paused at the foot of the mountain and looked up. He saw that the narrow path up the mountain was barred by a tightly shut pine gate. He walked forward slowly and pushed at the gate, but it was immovable, even under his powerful hands.

Never, in as long as he could remember, had his master locked that gate. This narrow path was the only way up the mountain. So, holding onto the handle of his sword, he jumped as high as he could, but he was unable to jump over the low gate. A strange force had gripped his whole body and pushed it back down. Next he unsheathed his long sword to cut the gate's bar open but the sword's sharp blade bounced back from the soft pinewood with so powerful an impact that it sent a shock through his hand and wrist. He raised his sword toward the sky and examined its edge under the moonlight. Somehow, the gate was too hard for his sword. It seemed that his master had endowed it with the strength of his own spirit. It was impassable. The swordsman sighed deeply, returned his sword to its sheath, and sat down on a rock outside the gate.

Seven years earlier, on the day he was to leave the mountain, his master looked into his eyes for a long moment without saying anything. There was a kind expression on his master's face, and yet there was something else, too—a kind of pity. The young swordsman could only bow his head in reverence. After a while, the old man said to him, "I cannot keep you here forever. I know you have to go down the mountain and into the world to carry out the Way and help people. I thought I could keep you here with me a little longer, but if it is your will to leave now, you have all my blessings. Remember what I have taught you. In the world below, you will need it."

Then his master told him what to seek, what to avoid, and what to change. Finally, he put his gentle hand on his disciple's shoulder. "These are the main guidelines for your actions: Never do anything that might cause suffering to yourself or others, in the present or in the future. Go without

fear in the direction that will lead yourself and others to complete awakening. And remember the standards by which happiness and suffering, liberation and illusion are measured. Without them, you betray the Way, and will not help anyone.

“Here is my most precious sword. It is a sharp blade that comes from your own heart. Use it to subdue all evil and also to conquer all ambition and desire.

“Here is the *me ngo* glass,” he said, handing his disciple a small viewing glass. “It will help you distinguish the wholesome from the unwholesome, the virtuous from the immoral. Sometimes it is called the ‘Demon Viewer,’ for looking through it, you will be able to see the true forms of demons and evil spirits.”

The following day, at the break of dawn, the young swordsman went up to the central hall to take leave of his master. The old man walked with him down the mountain, all the way to Tiger Brook, and there, amidst the murmuring of the mountain stream, master and disciple bade one another farewell. The master put his hand on the young man’s shoulder, looked into his eyes, and said, “Remember, my child, poverty cannot weaken you, wealth cannot seduce you, power cannot vanquish you. I will be here the day you come back, your vows fulfilled!” Then he watched his disciple’s every step very carefully, as the young man walked away to begin his journey.

The swordsman recalled the first days of the journey vividly. Then, months and years swirled through his mind. Humanity had revealed itself under so many different guises! How helpful the sword and the *me ngo* glass had been! Once, he met a monk, an old sage, whose appearance instantly inspired reverence. The old man invited him back to his hermitage to discuss how they might “join their efforts to help humankind.” The young man listened with rapture, but then something struck him as odd about the old monk. He took out the *me ngo* glass and when he looked through it, he saw in front of him a giant demon with eyes sending forth crackling sparks, a horn on its forehead, and fangs as long as his own arms! The young man jumped back, drew his sword, and furiously attacked it. The demon fought back but, of course, it had no chance. It prostrated itself at the young man’s feet, begging for mercy. The swordsman then demanded that it swear, under oath, to return to the place it had come from, study the Way, pray to be reborn as a human being, and refrain from ever disguising itself again as a monk to bewitch and devour the innocent.

Another time, he met a mandarin, an old man with a long white beard. It was a happy encounter between a young hero out to save the world and a high official, a “father and mother to the people” bent on finding better ways to govern and benefit the masses. Again, the young man’s instinct was aroused, and under the glass, the handsome, awe-inspiring official turned out to be an enormous hog whose eyes literally dripped with greed. In an instant, the sword flew out of its sheath. The hog tried to flee, but the swordsman overtook it in one leap. Standing in front of the gate to the mandarin’s

And remember the standards by which happiness and suffering, liberation and illusion are measured. Without them, you betray the Way, and will not help anyone.

Humanity had revealed itself under so many different guises!

Again, the young man did not leave without extracting from the monster the solemn oath that it would follow the Way and that it would never again take the form of a mandarin to gnaw the flesh and suck the blood of the people.

mansion, he barred the only escape route. The beast took on its true form and cried out loudly for mercy. Again, the young man did not leave without extracting from the monster the solemn oath that it would follow the Way and that it would never again take the form of a mandarin to gnaw the flesh and suck the blood of the people.

Another time, walking by a marketplace, the young man saw a crowd surrounding a picture and book stall. The vendor was a beautiful young lady with a smile as radiant as a lotus opening to the sun. Seated nearby was another beautiful young lady singing softly while plucking the strings of a lute. The young ladies' beauty and the grace of the songs so captivated everyone present that no one left the stall once they had stopped. They could only stand and listen, enraptured, and buy pictures and books. Also drawn to the scene, the young man managed to make his way to the front and he held up one of the pictures. The elegance of the design and strength of the colors overwhelmed him. Yet an uneasiness arose within him, and when he reached for his *me ngo* glass, he saw that the two beautiful girls were actually enormous snakes whose tongues darted back and forth like knife blades. The swordsman swept everyone aside in one movement of his arms, and with his sword pointing at the monsters, he shouted thunderously, "Demons! Back to your evil nature!"

The crowd scattered in fright as the big snakes lashed at the young man. But as soon as his fabulous sword drew a few flashing circles around their bodies, the reptiles coiled at his feet in submission. He forced their jaws open, carved out their venomous fangs, and extracted the solemn promise that they would never come back to bewitch the village people. Then he burned down the bookstall and sent the monsters back to their lairs.

The young swordsman went from village to village and from town to town on his mission, using his sword and his viewing glass to vanquish demons and offer them priceless counsel. He began to see himself as the "Indispensable Swordsman." He had come down from the mountain into a world where treachery and cunning reigned, and the world was surely better for his presence. He experienced great exhilaration in his actions for the good. At times, he even forgot to eat and sleep, the joy and satisfaction from helping people was so great.

Years passed quickly. One day, as he was resting alongside a river watching the water flow quietly by, he realized that he had not used the *me ngo* glass for some time. It was not that he had forgotten it. He just had not felt like using it. He remembered that at first he had used the glass reluctantly, and then had fought to the death every time he saw, through the *me ngo*, the true natures of the many evils that faced him. He recalled the great happiness he felt each time he saw, through the glass, the image of a virtuous man or a true sage. But, obviously, something had happened to him, and he didn't know what it was. He no longer felt much joy or fury whether he saw a sage or a monster. In fact, the monsters began to have a certain familiarity to him, even their horrifying features. The *me ngo* glass just remained

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safely in his pocket. The young swordsman thought about returning to the mountain some day to ask his master's advice. Why was he reluctant to use the *me ngo* glass, that had obviously been of great help to him in the past?

On the twelfth day of the eighth month, seven years after he had left the mountain, he was walking through a forest of white plum trees, when suddenly, he yearned for the days when he studied under his old master, whose cottage also stood in an old plum forest. Covered with snow-white plum blossoms under the autumn moon, he decided to return to the mountain.

He climbed many hills and crossed dozens of streams and, after seven days and seven nights, he reached the foot of the mountain. As he arrived, darkness was descending, and the rising moon revealed that the pine gate to the path up the mountain to his Master's abode was tightly shut. There was nothing he could do but wait. He could not go any further until one of his brothers came down to open the gate. At dawn, he thought, one of them will surely come down to fetch water from the stream, and they will open the gate for me. Now, the moon had risen and the entire mountain and forest were bathed in its cool light.

As the night wore on, the air became chillier. He pulled his sword out of the sheath and watched the moon's reflection on the sword's cold, sharp edge. Then he sheathed it again and stood up. The moon was extraordinarily bright. Mountain and forest were still, as if unaware of the swordsman's presence. He dropped onto another rock, dejected, and the past seven years passed before him again. Slowly, the moon edged toward the summit of a distant mountain, and the stars shone brightly. Then they, too, began to recede, and there was a hint of glow in the east, as dawn was about to break.

The swordsman heard the rustling of dry leaves. He looked up and saw the vague form of someone walking down the mountains. It must be one of his younger brothers, he thought, though it was not light enough to be sure. The person was carrying something like a large water jug. As the figure came closer and closer, the swordsman heard it exclaim, happily, "Elder Brother!

"Younger Brother!"

"When did you arrive?"

"As the moon was just rising! I've been here all night. Why is the gate locked like this? Was it the master's order?"

The younger disciple raised his hand and pulled, ever so lightly, at the heavy gate. It swung open with ease. He stepped through it, and, grasping the swordsman's hands, looked at him and said, "You must be chilled to the bone. Look, you're covered with dew!

"My job used to be to come down here all day to pick herbs and watch the gate. If someone came who deserved an audience with the master, I'd bring him up. If I thought someone was not ready to see him, I'd just stay behind the bushes, and eventually they'd just give up! As you know, our master doesn't want to see anyone who does not have a true determination to learn.

The younger disciple raised his hand and pulled, ever so lightly, at the heavy gate. It swung open with ease.

“He said it would open itself for anyone who is virtuous, but that it would bar the way for those too heavy with the dust of the world!”

In the water, which was tinted a pale rose by the dawn, they could see their reflections next to one another. The swordsman was bold and strong in his knight’s suit, the long sword slung diagonally over his back. The younger disciple’s figure was gentler in his flowing monk’s robe, a jug in his hands.

The swordsman reached in his pocket to get it, and he realized that for all the years he was away, he had used the glass to look at others, but never once had he looked at himself through it.

Suffering had been etched upon his brother, who, for seven years, had ceaselessly braved the rough and cruel world down below their mountain retreat.

His true image had appeared in the *me ngo* glass so unexpectedly, bringing him self-knowledge in such a swift, brutal fashion that he could do nothing but collapse under the blow.

“Lately, the master has allowed me to move on to more advanced studies, and as I stay up at the retreat most of the time, he told me to close the gate. He said it would open itself for anyone who is virtuous, but that it would bar the way for those too heavy with the dust of the world!”

The swordsman asked, “Would you say I am such a person? Why did the gate stay shut for me?”

The younger man laughed heartily. “Of course not! Anyway, we can go up now. But wait a moment, Elder Brother! I must first fetch some water. Will you come with me? Smile, Brother! Why are you so angry?”

Both men laughed. They made their way down to the stream. The sun was not yet up, but the east was already glowing brightly. The two disciples could now see each other’s faces clearly. In the water, which was tinted a pale rose by the dawn, they could see their reflections next to one another. The swordsman was bold and strong in his knight’s suit, the long sword slung diagonally over his back. The younger disciple’s figure was gentler in his flowing monk’s robe, a jug in his hands. Without speaking, they looked at both reflections, and smiled to one another. A water spider sprung up suddenly and caused the rose-tinted surface to ripple, sending their images into thousands of undulating patterns.

“How beautiful! I would certainly destroy our reflections for good if I dipped the jug in now. By the way, do you still have the *me ngo* viewing glass with you? I remember that our master gave it to you when you came down the mountain years ago!”

The swordsman reached in his pocket to get it, and he realized that for all the years he was away, he had used the glass to look at others, but never once had he looked at himself through it. He took the glass out, wiped it on his sleeve, and aimed it at the water’s surface. The two men’s heads came close to look through the small glass together.

A loud scream escaped from the throats of both of them. It reverberated through the forest. The swordsman fell forward and collapsed. A deer, drinking water farther upstream, looked up in fright. The younger disciple could not believe what he had seen. There he was in his flowing robe, jug in hand, standing next to a towering demon whose eyes were deep and dark like waterwells and whose long fangs curved down around its square jaw. The demon’s face was bluish gray, the shade of ashes and death. The young man shuddered, and, rubbing his eyes, looked again at his senior, who was now lying unconscious on the blue stones of the riverbank, the older man’s face still expressing shock and horror. Suffering had been etched upon his brother, who, for seven years, had ceaselessly braved the rough and cruel world down below their mountain retreat.

The young disciple reached down to the stream to fetch water to douse his elder’s face, and a moment later the swordsman came to, his face ravaged with despair. His true image had appeared in the *me ngo* glass so unexpectedly, bringing him self-knowledge in such a swift, brutal fashion that he could do nothing but collapse under the blow. His energy had vanished.

He tried to stand up, but he had no strength in his legs or arms.

“It’s all right. It’s all right, my elder brother! We’ll go up now.”

To the swordsman’s ears, his brother’s voice was like a faint breeze murmuring from afar. He shook his head. His world had collapsed, and he wanted to live no longer. He felt as if he had just stood in the path of a hurricane. How could he bring himself into his beloved master’s presence?

The younger man brushed the dirt off his brother’s shoulder. “You need not worry about it. Our master has nothing but compassion for you. Let’s go up now. We’ll live and work and study together again.”

The two figures made their way slowly up the steep, rock-strewn path that wound its way up the mountain. It was not yet day, and the silhouettes imprinted themselves on the thin veil of dew stretching over trees and rocks. The first rays of sun finally reached the two men and heightened the contrast—the swordsman seemed only more broken in body and spirit walking next to the younger disciple whose steps were firm and whose mien was gentle.

Over the mountaintop, far away, the sun rose.

“The Pine Gate” (1960) is translated from the Vietnamese by Vo-Dinh Mai. It originally appeared in *The Pine Gate* (White Pine Press 1988) and is reprinted in *The Stone Boy and Other Stories* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996, ISBN 0938077864) © 1996 Unified Buddhist Church, Inc. Permission requested.

Questions

1. Before the swordsman began his seven years’ journey, the master spent time preparing him for the trials ahead. The author writes that the master looked on him with “a kind of pity.” What is the meaning of this look and where does it come from?
 2. When did the young swordsman’s transformation begin?
 3. Why did he become reluctant to use the *me ngo* glass?
 4. Why does the younger monk deny that the swordsman is “too heavy with the dust of the world”?
 5. To what is the swordsman returning as he goes up the steep, rock-strewn path with the young monk?
-

C. S. Lewis

RENUNCIATION

One essential for cultivating character is renunciation—the ability to say a decisive No to bad habits that threaten to enslave us. The following reading focuses on the principle and psychology of renunciation—a key theme of the gospel of Jesus and a key requirement of modern life because of modern lifestyles and addictions. Recovery programs from Alcoholics Anonymous to Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous are based on the idea. As a “giving up” for a “better good,” renunciation is a critical antidote to the crisis of character.

Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963) was a scholar, writer, and a celebrated and much-loved Christian apologist. Born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, he was educated at University College, Oxford. After brief service in World War I, he resumed his studies at Oxford where he became a fellow in English Language and Literature at Magdalen College. For the last seven years of his life he was a professor at Cambridge University, but insisted on still living at Oxford.

Lewis was an excellent scholar in his field, but his enormous reputation rests on his writings. Three dozen of his titles are still available with over 40 million in print—making Lewis the best-selling Christian author of all time. His scholarly study *The Allegory of Love* was awarded the Hawthornden Prize in 1936, but he became known popularly through such books as *The Screwtape Letters* and *Mere Christianity*, and later through his children’s stories *The Chronicles of Narnia* and his science fiction trilogy.

Lewis, known to friends as Jack, was by any standards a courageous and independent thinker. But he derived enormous stimulation and encouragement from the Inklings, a discussion group that met in his college rooms and in an Oxford pub—the Eagle and Child. The group included such other writers as J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Dorothy L. Sayers. Although they did not pursue any outside agenda—as did the conscious reformers of William Wilberforce’s Clapham circle—the influence of the Inklings through their writings has been incalculable.

An almost endless number of people have come to faith or have been aided in faith by Lewis’s writings, and all have their favorite passages. The one that follows comes from *The Great Divorce* (1945), Lewis’s counterpoint to William Blake’s “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.” He pictures a bus trip from hell to heaven and describes the different responses of the ghostly figures of the underworld to the painfully real, brighter, and more solid world of heaven—and their sometimes odd reasons for deciding to return to hell. The essay hammers home the essentially Christian understanding that “All that are in hell choose it” and includes the famous line “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’” The book is dedicated to the novelist George MacDonald, an important influence on Lewis’s thought, who appears in this selection as the Teacher.

Your Choice

Renunciation—is the Choosing / Against itself—

Emily Dickinson

No, there is no escape. There is no heaven with a little of hell in it—no plan to retain this or that of the devil in our hearts or our pockets. Out Satan must go, every hair and feather.

George MacDonald

The Great Divorce

I SAW COMING towards us a Ghost who carried something on his shoulder. Like all the Ghosts, he was unsubstantial, but they differed from one another as smokes differ. Some had been whitish; this one was dark and oily. What sat on his shoulder was a little red lizard, and it was twitching its tail like a whip and whispering things in his ear. As we caught sight of him he turned his head to the reptile with a snarl of impatience. “Shut up, I tell you!” he said. It wagged its tail and continued to whisper to him. He ceased snarling, and presently began to smile. Then he turned and started to limp westward, away from the mountains.

“Off so soon?” said a voice.

The speaker was more or less human in shape but larger than a man, and so bright that I could hardly look at him. His presence smote on my eyes and on my body too (for there was heat coming from him as well as light) like the morning sun at the beginning of a tyrannous summer day.

“Yes. I’m off,” said the Ghost. “Thanks for all your hospitality. But it’s no good, you see. I told this little chap” (here he indicated the lizard) “that he’d have to be quiet if he came—which he insisted on doing. Of course his stuff won’t do here: I realize that. But he won’t stop. I shall just have to go home.”

“Would you like me to make him quiet?” said the flaming Spirit—an angel, as I now understood.

“Of course I would,” said the Ghost.

“Then I will kill him,” said the Angel, taking a step forward.

“Oh—ah—look out! You’re burning me. Keep away,” said the Ghost, retreating.

“Don’t you want him killed?”

“You didn’t say anything about *killing* him at first. I hardly meant to bother you with anything so drastic as that.”

“It’s the only way,” said the Angel, whose burning hands were now very close to the lizard. “Shall I kill it?”

“Well, that’s a further question. I’m quite open to consider it, but it’s a new point, isn’t it? I mean, for the moment I was only thinking about silencing it because up here—well, it’s so damned embarrassing.”

“May I kill it?”

“Well, there’s time to discuss that later.”

“There is no time. May I kill it?”

“Please, I never meant to be such a nuisance. Please really—don’t bother.

“Yes. I’m off,” said the Ghost. “Thanks for all your hospitality. But it’s no good, you see. I told this little chap” (here he indicated the lizard) “that he’d have to be quiet if he came—which he insisted on doing. Of course his stuff won’t do here: I realize that. But he won’t stop. I shall just have to go home.”

“May I kill it?”

“Honestly, I don’t think there’s the slightest necessity for that. I’m sure I shall be able to keep it in order now. I think the gradual process would be far better than killing it.”

“The gradual process is of no use at all.”

“I cannot kill it against your will. It is impossible. Have I your permission?”

“I know it will kill me.”

“It won’t. But supposing it did?”

“You’re right. It would be better to be dead than to live with this creature.”

Look! It’s gone to sleep of its own accord. I’m sure it’ll be all right now. Thanks ever so much.”

“May I kill it?”

“Honestly, I don’t think there’s the slightest necessity for that. I’m sure I shall be able to keep it in order now. I think the gradual process would be far better than killing it.”

“The gradual process is of no use at all.”

“Don’t you think so? Well, I’ll think over what you’ve said very carefully. I honestly will. In fact I’d let you kill it now, but as a matter of fact I’m not feeling frightfully well to-day. It would be silly to do it *now*. I’d need to be in good health for the operation. Some other day, perhaps.”

“There is no other day. All days are present now.”

“Get back! You’re burning me. How can I tell you to kill it? You’d kill *me* if you did.”

“It is not so.”

“Why, you’re hurting me now.”

“I never said it wouldn’t hurt you. I said it wouldn’t kill you.”

“Oh, I know. You think I’m a coward. But it isn’t that. Really it isn’t. I say! Let me run back by to-night’s bus and get an opinion from my own doctor. I’ll come again the first moment I can.”

“This moment contains all moments.”

“Why are you torturing me? You are jeering at me. How *can* I let you tear me in pieces? If you wanted to help me, why didn’t you kill the damned thing without asking me before I knew? It would be all over by now if you had.”

“I cannot kill it against your will. It is impossible. Have I your permission?”

The Angel’s hands were almost closed on the Lizard, but not quite. Then the Lizard began chattering to the Ghost so loud that even I could hear what it was saying.

“Be careful,” it said. “He can do what he says. He can kill me. One fatal word from you and he will! Then you’ll be without me for ever and ever. It’s not natural. How could you live? You’d be only a sort of ghost, not a real man as you are now. He doesn’t understand. He’s only a cold, bloodless abstract thing. It may be natural for him, but it isn’t for us. Yes, yes. I know there are no real pleasures now, only dreams. But aren’t they better than nothing? And I’ll be so good. I admit I’ve sometimes gone too far in the past, but I promise I won’t do it again. I’ll give you nothing but really nice dreams—all sweet and fresh and almost innocent. You might say, quite innocent. . . .”

“Have I your permission?” said the Angel to the Ghost.

“I know it will kill me.”

“It won’t. But supposing it did?”

“You’re right. It would be better to be dead than to live with this creature.”

“Then I may?”

“Damn and blast you! Go on can’t you? Get it over. Do what you like,” bellowed the Ghost: but ended, whimpering, “God help me. God help me.”

Next moment the Ghost gave a scream of agony such as I never heard on Earth. The Burning One closed his crimson grip on the reptile: twisted it, while it bit and writhed, and then flung it, broken backed, on the turf.

“Ow! That’s done for me,” gasped the Ghost, reeling backwards.

For a moment I could make out nothing distinctly. Then I saw, between me and the nearest bush, unmistakably solid but growing every moment solider, the upper arm and the shoulder of a man. Then, brighter still and stronger, the legs and hands. The neck and golden head materialized while I watched, and if my attention had not wavered I should have seen the actual completing of a man—an immense man, naked, not much smaller than the Angel. What distracted me was the fact that at the same moment something seemed to be happening to the Lizard. At first I thought the operation had failed. So far from dying, the creature was still struggling and even growing bigger as it struggled. And as it grew it changed. Its hinder parts grew rounder. The tail, still flickering, became a tail of hair that flickered between huge and glossy buttocks. Suddenly I started back, rubbing my eyes. What stood before me was the greatest stallion I have ever seen, silvery white but with mane and whinneying and stamping with its hoofs. At each stamp the land shook and the trees dindled.

The new-made man turned and clapped the new horse’s neck. It nosed his bright body. Horse and master breathed each into the other’s nostrils. The man turned from it, flung himself at the feet of the Burning One, and embraced them.

When he rose I thought his face shone with tears, but it may have been only the liquid love and brightness (one cannot distinguish them in that country) which flowed from him. I had not long to think about it. In joyous haste the young man leaped upon the horse’s back. Turning in his seat he waved a farewell, then nudged the stallion with his heels. They were off before I well knew what was happening. There was riding if you like! I came out as quickly as I could from among the bushes to follow them with my eyes; but already they were only like a shooting star far off on the green plain, and soon among the foothills of the mountains. Then, still like a star I saw them winding up, scaling what seemed impossible steeps, and quicker every moment, till near the dim brow of the landscape, so high that I must strain my neck to see them, they vanished, bright themselves, into the rose brightness of that everlasting morning.

While I still watched, I noticed that the whole plain and forest were shaking with a sound which in our world would be too large to hear, but there I could take it with joy. I knew it was not the Solid People who were singing. It was the voice of that earth, those woods and those waters. A strange archaic, inorganic noise, that came from all directions at once. The

At first I thought the operation had failed. So far from dying, the creature was still struggling and even growing bigger as it struggled.

Nature or Arch-nature of that land rejoiced to have been once more ridden, and therefore consummated, in the person of the horse. It sang,

“The Master says to our master, Come up. Share my rest and splendour till all natures that were your enemies become slaves to dance before you and backs for you to ride, and firmness for your feet to rest on.

“From beyond all place and time, out of the very Place, authority will be given you: the strengths that once opposed your will shall be obedient fire in your blood and heavenly thunder in your voice.

“Overcome us that, so overcome, we may be ourselves: we desire the beginning of your reign as we desire dawn and dew, wetness at the birth of light.

“Master, your Master has appointed you for ever: to be our King of Justice and our high Priest.”

“Do ye understand all this, my Son?” said the Teacher.

“I don’t know about *all*, Sir,” said I. “Am I right in thinking the Lizard really turned into the Horse?”

“Aye. But it was killed first. Ye’ll not forget that part of the story?”

“I’ll try not to, Sir. But does it mean that everything—everything—that is in us can go on to the Mountains?”

“Nothing, not even the best and noblest, can go on as it now is. Nothing, not even what is lowest and most bestial, will not be raised again if it submits to death. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. Flesh and blood cannot come to the Mountains. Not because they are too rank, but because they are too weak. What is a Lizard compared with a stallion? Lust is a poor, weak, whimpering, whispering thing compared with that richness and energy of desire which will arise when lust has been killed.”

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Loss or Gain?

I tell you that you will gain even in this life, and that at every step you take along this road you will see that your gain is so certain and your risk so negligible that in the end you will realize you have wagered on something certain and infinite for which you have paid nothing.

Blaise Pascal on the wager of faith

He is no fool who gives away what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.
Jim Eliot, martyr and missionary to the Auca Indians, Ecuador, 1956

Questions

1. In the opening paragraph, Lewis describes the “Ghost” as “unsubstantial” and smoke-like. What is he saying about the nature of these creatures from the underworld? Are they real? How do they differ from the creatures of heaven?
2. What does the “little red lizard” represent? What do you make of the Ghost’s contradictory reactions to the lizard—snarling one moment and smiling the next? What are the sorts of things in our lives that can assume the same controlling influence as the lizard?

“Am I right in thinking the Lizard really turned into the Horse?”

“Nothing, not even the best and noblest, can go on as it now is. Nothing, not even what is lowest and most bestial, will not be raised again if it submits to death.”

3. In the dialogue between the Ghost and the Angel, what are the legitimate fears the Ghost has about the killing of the lizard? What makes those fears sufficient or insufficient to refuse the process? What are the greatest fears you have about renouncing something?
 4. The Ghost says he simply wants to silence the lizard, “keep it in order,” try a “gradual process” of elimination, or wait until another day. What is the Angel’s response to these protests? What is the problem with trying to “handle” addictive habits? hoping to let go of them gradually? waiting for another day? Can you think of any other common protests against decisively renouncing something?
 5. The Ghost tries two final defenses: first, the Angel should have killed the lizard without asking him, and second, the process will surely kill him. How does the Angel respond to each? How do these responses lead to the turning point of the story?
 6. What is the practical difference between confession (getting something “off your chest”) and renunciation (getting it “off your shoulders”)?
 7. What happens to the Ghost after the lizard is killed? What happens to the lizard? What is Lewis saying about the fruit of renunciation? What types of transformation are socially acceptable today? What types are not? Have you or has someone close to you experienced transformation on the other side of renunciation?
 8. Is it only individuals who have “lizards,” or can these also inhabit institutions and organisations?
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