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Informed by Joy: A Christian Librarian's Reflection on C. S. Lewis

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ABSTRACT

In *Surprised by Joy* C. S. Lewis offers us his account of his conversion to Christianity. Using his experiences of joy as "signposts," he leads us through his early life up to his conversion at age thirty-one. I reflect on Lewis's account as a librarian, researcher, and fellow Christian, considering his information world and the people who aided and hindered him on his faith journey. I conclude with some thoughts on his and my own conversion, as both unique yet shared experiences within the Christian tradition.

Real joy seems to me almost as unlike security or prosperity as it is unlike agony. It jumps under one's ribs and tickles down one's back and makes one forget meals and keeps one (delightedly) sleepless o' nights. It shocks one awake where the other puts one to sleep. My private table is one second of Joy is worth twelve hours of Pleasure.

—C. S. Lewis (1945, quoted in Flood 2014)

INTRODUCTION

It might not be surprising that Wikipedia (2020) cites C. S. Lewis when explaining this emotion "joy." In 1955, the Oxford don, Christian apologist, and author published a semiautobiographical book on the subject, titled *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Lewis 1955). I suggest "semiautobiographical" because this is how Lewis himself describes it: "The book aims at telling

the story of my conversion and is not a general autobiography, still less ‘Confessions’ like those of St. Augustine or Rousseau. This means in practice that it gets less like a general autobiography as it goes on.” The title is drawn from William Wordsworth’s poem “Desideria,” written after the death of Catherine, his three-year-old daughter. Wordsworth wrote, “I turned to share the transport—Oh! with whom [b]ut Thee, long buried in the silent Tomb, [t]hat spot which no vicissitude can find?” (Wordsworth 1939). He describes how in an unexpected moment of joy he turns to share it with his daughter but realizes she is gone. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis is sharing the moments of joy that motivated him in his spiritual journey from atheism to Christian faith. It might be surprising to some to speak of Lewis’s conversion. He was born into an Ulster Protestant household and was appropriately church-ed. Yet, by his own admission, God and religion generally played no role in his early life (15). His introduction to Anglo-Catholicism in boarding school in England was regrettably formal and burdensome, and by his teen years he had given up religion for atheism (61). It would be at the age of thirty-one that Lewis became a Christian and over the next thirty-four years would be one of Christianity’s leading apologists.

Lewis has been a favorite author of mine since reading the *Chronicles of Narnia* (Lewis 1994) series as a child, and then later in college when I was introduced to his nonfiction works like *Mere Christianity* (Lewis 2015a) and *The Screwtape Letters* (Lewis 2015b). Although I had read most of his writings, I had not read *Surprised by Joy*. When the call for papers was extended, I saw an opportunity to discover what Lewis might share with me about joy and faith. What follows is, in part, a case study in information seeking as faith seeking. It is a case study in the limited sense that it is focused on Lewis’s own constructed account of his spiritual journey.

There is a small but growing body of library and information science literature that is exploring information and religion and spirituality. The oldest and most persistent thread of that research, not surprisingly, has focused on the information behaviors of religious professionals (e.g., Allen 1987; Wicks 1999; Tanner 1994; Michels 2010a; Curran and Burns 2011). The turn to everyday life information behavior opened the field up to consider new contexts, and in the early 2000s Kari was exploring the spiritual in information seeking (Kari 2001, 2007, 2010). His thesis explored concepts in information seeking such as “providence” that would be invaluable for research in religion and spirituality (Kari 2001, 101). In 2007 Kari and Hartel would consider the Higher Things in Life, the “usually positive human phenomena, experiences, or activities that transcend the daily grind with its rationality and necessities” (Kari and Hartel 2007, 1133). They helped set an agenda for the next wave of research, and information scholars are now investigating topics such as prayer and conversion (Michels 2013; Vamanu and Guzik 2015; Guzik 2018). For an academic treatment, I would direct you to these excellent works.

This is a personal reflection on Lewis’s journey toward joy. I reflect on Lewis’s story as a librarian who is daily an information intermediary, as a researcher who has tried to make sense of information seeking in religious contexts, and as a Christian who is also on a faith journey. Ironically, for someone who has published autoethnographic pieces, I find this kind of reflection challenging, or perhaps more accurately, I find sharing my reflections challenging. I do think deeply about things, perhaps too much so, but to verbalize those thoughts and feelings is unsettling. The search for joy is worth the risk.

I explore three themes that emerged for me. First, Lewis frequently writes about his love of reading. In fact, it is no small part of his conversion story: “A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading” (1955, 181). I begin by describing Lewis’s information world. Second, Lewis is continually introducing us to the people around him who would impact his own journey. They would introduce him to new ideas and ways of thinking that would both help and hinder him on his journey. Finally, Lewis says that the story he tells will matter to those who have shared his experience of joy and might in the reading respond, “What! Have you felt that too? I always thought I was the only one” (7). I share Lewis’s Christian faith, and I was curious whether I would recognize his journey toward joy in my own experience.

THE BOOKS

You can find this Lewis quote on teacups and Instagram posts, and it does seem to accurately portray the man: “You can never get a cup of tea large enough or a book long enough to suit me” (Hooper and Lewis 1982, 9). To say Lewis was a reader is to seriously understate the matter. His writings are filled with quotations from ancient and modern authors. I once thought it seemed pretentious, but I now believe he was simply overflowing from his reading. Many of Lewis’s earliest recollections seem to involve books. He notes, “Both my parents, by the standards of that time and place, were bookish or ‘clever’ people” (1955, 12). His mother had a university degree in mathematics and would be his first tutor in French and Latin. His home seems to have been a library unto itself and reading a strongly encouraged and modeled pursuit: “My father bought all the books he read and never got rid of any of them. There were books in the study, books in the drawing-room, books in the cloakroom, books (two deep) in the great bookcase on the landing, books in a bedroom, books piled as high as my shoulder in the cistern attic, books of all kinds

reflecting every transient stage of my parents' interests, books readable and unreadable, books suitable for a child and books most emphatically not. Nothing was forbidden me" (17). During his boarding school years, the school library became the sanctuary from bullying and hardship. When he was older, bookshops seemed to become his regular haunts and one of his closest childhood friendships began over a shared love of a book.

Surprised by Joy traces Lewis's engagement with books, ideas, and imagination, at each stage of his life beginning with his childhood. He describes stories of knights and adventures and the imaginary worlds he and his brother would create. It might seem odd that a scholar of his level speaks so fondly of Beatrix Potter's *Squirrel Nutkin*, but herein Lewis first imagined another beautiful world (1955, 22). Lewis draws on several memories of gardens and books to describe an experience that would set him on his journey: it is here in his worlds of imagination that he first encountered joy. "For those who are still disposed to proceed I will only underline the quality common to the three experiences; it is that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again" (24).

If I reflect back on my own childhood, there were, I suppose, books that made an impression on me. Home from school and bedridden with the flu, I remember reading *Tahara: Boy King of the Desert* (Sherman 1933). I remember nothing of the book, except that it was the first book I, of my own accord, read from cover to cover and that it was a thrilling adventure (I was not much of

a reader as a child). I still fondly, though vaguely, remember that. I began to reflect on other childhood memories that left a similar longing: a time at the family cottage or a summertime trip to the Annapolis Valley. Moments of time that I wish I could go back to but can never be re-created except maybe in a dream. Are these the glimpses of Joy that Lewis describes?

Lewis then describes his later schooling experiences as a time with neither imagination nor joy: “My reading was now mainly rubbish” (1955, 40), adventure stories that he calls wish fulfillment but without wonder: gladiators, adventurers, and science fiction, offering excitement but not wonder or joy.” I was interested to see how Lewis correlates his taste of literature and the arts to the twists and turns toward and away from faith through his school years. The discovery of opera, for example, would lead to Wagner; the Norse gods rekindled imagination, and imagination created the possibility of another world.

Lewis later would dabble in occultism, rationalism, and sensualism and would leave any pretense of Christianity behind by the time he reached Oxford. Yet, he would not find in intellectualism or pleasure the joy he longed for. It would be a copy of George MacDonald’s *Phantastes, a Faerie Romance* (2005), picked up at random for the train ride home that would begin the journey back to faith: “That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptised; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer. I had not the faintest notion what I had let myself in for by buying *Phantastes*” (1955, 171). The reading list would continue, through the war years and the return to Oxford. First converting to the idea of the supernatural, then to theism, Lewis would finally surrender to Christianity’s Jesus.

His prodigious reading is in itself remarkable. He resisted shallow reading, and even felt young people should not be encouraged to read newspapers as they encouraged a taste for “vulgarity and sensationalism” (1955, 152). I can imagine what Lewis might say about reality TV and Reddit. What I found notable is that much of the reading list was not religious literature. Certainly, Christian authors such as George MacDonald and G. K. Chesterton did play an important role in Lewis’s spiritual journey. Yet he also includes a host of philosophers, poets, and musicians among his guideposts both to lead and warn away.

LIS researcher Dr. Louise Spiteri once correctly challenged my conception of religious information. Information is neither sacred nor secular. It is an important distinction: there is not “religious information” but rather information that can be used for a religious purpose. A gold cross on a chain can be a powerful statement of Christian faith or a cheap piece of fashion jewelry. Context will determine its spiritual meaning. I think Lewis would say something similar; Yeats’s writing, though certainly not religious information in the Christian sense, opened Lewis to the idea of the supernatural and challenged his rationalism (1955, 165–66). It was one more step on his road to Jesus.

My parents enjoyed reading but were working-class, not “bookish,” people. There were a few select books on our shelves, but in my conservative evangelical Christian upbringing “separation from the world” was an important principle. Secular books and media were tightly controlled and Bible study strongly encouraged. By contrast my current home, in some respects, is closer to Lewis’s. Books in the living room, books in the bedrooms, and books in the basement. There is a wealth of popular and classic Christian literature but also history, poetry, and philosophy. Homer

and Gilgamesh, Darwin and Machiavelli, Yeats and Shakespeare, Longfellow and Wodehouse appear alongside Chesterton and Milton, and of course Lewis. There were restrictions on my children's choices of books and media when they were younger, but bedtime stories included *Beatrix Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and even *Animal Farm*. Every librarian (and parent) must wrestle with the appropriateness of their collection for their audience. We make judgments about what might help or hinder, and in my case I chose to err on the side of openness. I reasoned that my children needed to be able to engage with the world of ideas, as they grappled with their own faith. Yet I am reminded that critical skills are needed to safely mine that treasure of knowledge.

As I reflected on my research, I was struck by the boundaries I often placed between secular and sacred information. I asked professional and lay church leaders, "What resources did you seek out beyond your personal or group resources that you hoped would help you seek God's will?" (Michels 2014, 321). Predictably, the sources described were largely Bibles, religious texts, and other theological writings. Some leaders included religious fiction, poetry, and music. Younger leaders were open to religious blogs and videos but largely for personal devotional purposes (Michels 2014, 225). Religious sources largely stayed within acceptable theological boundaries appropriate to the denomination (Michels 2014, 252). Secular or nonreligious sources were used by leaders but were restricted to leadership, statistical, or management materials (Michels 2014, 256). In other words, they largely stayed with safe materials.

I wonder what Lewis might say if I asked him that question. Undoubtedly, he would quote the likes of Chesterton or Augustine. But he might also quote Tolkien or Shakespeare, not as sources of Christian doctrine but as sources of inspiration in his pursuit of the will of God for him. In

fact, in *Surprised by Joy* Lewis illustrates his “awakening” by God with an analogy to Shakespeare. He was challenging his earlier mistaken belief that he could no more encounter God than the character Hamlet could the playwright Shakespeare. He would later accept that if such a meeting could take place it would be only at the initiative of Shakespeare to enter Hamlet’s story, and God into Lewis’s story (1955, 214). Lewis’s answer might be bigger than my sources matrix allows, and his story challenges me not only to rethink my categories but perhaps to reflect on the unrecognized information sources God has used in my own spiritual development. What would my complete spiritual bibliography look like? If I am honest, it is likely not Hegel and Kant that have shaped my spiritual journey, as much as Bradbury and Asimov. Not because they are theologians or philosophers but because they inspire the imagination. Lewis found joy in reading, not for reading’s sake alone but because reading led him to faith.

THE PEOPLE

I have long been interested in the roles of people in information seeking, as sources, guides, and intermediaries. In two research studies I became the subject as I interacted with the information systems around me. In one I explored how the person may be represented in our information systems: a statistic, a user, and an outsider and, in each case, how that made me feel (Michels 2010b). In another study, I explored my experience as an information seeker outside the comfort of my library resources, and I wrestled with how new technologies were transforming my librarian intermediary role (Michels 2017). Within religious contexts, I have explored the role of people as information sources by biblical studies researchers (Michels 2005) and the role of people in church leaders’ information seeking (Michels 2014). In the first, I was interested in the

people who would appear perhaps in acknowledgments but never in a bibliography, even though they played an instrumental *informational* role in the research. I found that researchers often turn to others not so much for new information but for confirmation and validation, and that researchers turned more often to others as they grew in confidence as scholars (Michels 2005, 104). In the latter study, church leaders regularly sought advice from experienced people including consultants, trusted friends and family, and members of the community (Michels 2014, 146). It is likely my public services librarian orientation, but I cannot think of information systems and sources without considering the people who create them, use them, and are part of them. I could not consider Lewis's information seeking without considering the people who played a role along the way.

Interactions with people were, in fact, important in Lewis's writing and theology. In a sermon Lewis once challenged his listeners to take seriously the impact they make on the lives of those around them in light of heaven or hell, a topic he explored in his other writings.

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, civilization—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. (Lewis 2001, 45–46)

I find that quotation both inspiring and terrifying; it places both an incredible opportunity and a burden on my shoulders, and that, I expect, was Lewis's intent. The exhortation above seems very much borne in part out of Lewis's own experiences. In *Surprised by Joy* Lewis describes many people who played a role in his spiritual journey moving it either forward or backward. I was able to locate two biographies heavy with photographs (Wilson 1990; Coren 1994) of his family, friends, tutors, and colleagues. This helped me see them as more than characters in a story but as people, not unlike the people who shaped my own journey. Like my own parents who did their best to teach me as they navigated their own faith. Like the church lady called simply "Ma" (or "Grandma") who suffered so much hardship but brought comfort and joy to all around her. Like my high school teacher who mocked my faith, even while his grandmother prayed for him. Like the wise older parishioners who were patient with me as a young, eager pastor who had yet to weather the storms of life. Like my wife and children who continue to journey with me.

Of the many people whom Lewis described who impacted his journey I offer three who served as guides in significant ways, though not always positively: Miss C, the Great Knock, and Tolkien.

Miss C

Lewis was fifteen when he encountered Miss C, the matron at his boarding school. Lewis speaks fondly of her, and she became a spiritual guide of sorts to him.

It was fascinating that in my own research into church leaders' information seeking, leaders were often concerned about the information church members were accessing. Modern media offered a wealth of new information that previously they believed was inaccessible: "They would have

never even been exposed to that ten years ago because of the internet” (Michels 2014, 238). They felt that new media would undermine the leaders’ traditional authority, and, as I noted above, the leaders self-restricted themselves to information sources that they felt were doctrinally sound and trustworthy. Over a century ago, and fifty years before the internet, Lewis would encounter a wealth of new ideas from the school Matron that would destroy the remnants of his Christian faith. The Matron, Miss C, was, as Lewis describes her in retrospect, “floundering in the mazes of Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, Spiritualism.” Lewis graciously does not blame her for his loss of faith, describing her as spiritually immature herself and unaware that the ideas, books, and feelings she was sharing would have such a devastating impact of him.

They ignited something in him that he describes as spiritual lust overwhelming his pursuit of joy: “For the first time, there burst upon me the idea that there might be real marvels all about us, that the visible world might be only a curtain to conceal huge realms uncharted by my very simple theology” (1955, 62). The lure of the occult would be what Lewis would call a disease that he would struggle with throughout much of his life. Lewis would describe this as a demonic attack against him: “The Enemy did this in me, taking occasion from things she innocently said” (63). Lewis was a firm believer in supernatural beings both benevolent and malevolent. This was a central theme of another of his works, *The Screwtape Letters: Letters from a Senior to a Junior Devil* (Lewis 2015b). This was a fictional account of a demon’s attempts to first prevent and then destroy the faith of a Christian. I wonder how much of that work reflects Lewis’s own faith struggles.

As I reflected on this encounter, two ideas unsettled me. The first is the role of the information intermediary that Miss C played, in this case with devastating effect. I had a library director who once said to me, “It’s a library, no one is going to die.” This is true certainly, yet we know words and ideas are powerful, and both heal and harm those who are vulnerable. How does one balance the obligation to provide open and unfettered access to information with that of challenging harmful and hateful ideas? Who should and could be such a judge? My library recently debated those questions, and they remain only awkwardly settled. I must navigate between my professional ethics regarding censorship (Canadian Federation of Library Associations 2018) and my personal responsibility as a teacher (James 3:1). Even with his own negative experiences, Lewis felt the greater risk was not the wrong teaching but rather not enough teaching: “The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles, but to irrigate deserts” (Lewis 1978, 13), or in words from the Bible, “Let my teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew, like showers on new grass, like abundant rain on tender plants” (Deuteronomy 32:2).

The other concern is the challenge of addressing the supernatural in information behavior research. In “Beyond Belief” (Michels 2013) I first tried to address the role of prayer in church leaders’ decision making. In that study, leaders frequently spoke of God leading, calling, placing, wanting, and connecting. God was communicative and involved in their decision making (Michels 2013, 2). I am usually careful about discussing my faith in public and in research contexts. I want to appear unbiased and scientific, the etic (outsider) researcher: “The subject believes God speaks to him.” But I am not the etic, I am the emic (insider): “God speaks to him and me.” Lewis believes in supernatural beings: God, angels, and demons. He believes they played a role, though he does not downplay his personal responsibility for the decisions he made.

I can appreciate Lewis's challenge with *Surprised*; it is terribly exposing to move beyond the rational to share one's beliefs, especially those that defy explanation.

The Great Knock

The "Great Knock," William Kirkpatrick, or simply Kirk, was Lewis's private tutor in the year prior to World War I in anticipation of Lewis's Oxford entrance examinations. The photograph of Kirk fit Lewis's description of the tall lean man with thick white mutton chops (Coren 1994, 19). He was an intimidating sight. Had Lewis lived long enough, he might have drawn parallels with Star Trek's Mr. Spock! Kirk had tutored Lewis's father and brother and made a permanent impact on Lewis. He would tutor Lewis in the Greek and Latin classics, French language, English literature, and some German and Italian literature. So effective was his instruction that soon Lewis was fluently reading and thinking in Greek (Wilson 1990, 40). However, it would not be the information he conveyed but the way of thinking that so transformed Lewis. Kirk's goal was to teach critical thinking. There was no room for opinion or "making conversation," every assumption was challenged, and every idea dissected: "The most casual remark was taken as a summons to disputation" (1955, 170). Raised as an Ulster Scot Presbyterian, he was now thoroughly an atheist, a rationalist, and devoted to logic (though, as Lewis noted, he gardened in a suit on Sundays). Lewis, also an atheist, expected to find ammunition for his position with Kirk, but found him uninterested in attacking Christianity specifically or religion generally. Beyond his study and debate, Lewis continued to read widely, and books arrived by post regularly: "No days, even at Bookham, were happier than those on which the afternoon post brought me a neat little parcel in dark grey paper" (141).

Despite Kirk's unbending atheism, Lewis would call Kirk one of his greatest teachers, "My debt to him is very great, my reverence to this day undiminished" (1955, 143). Lewis saw in his training the critical skills that would lead him to faith and beyond: "Notice here how the true training for anything whatever that is good always prefigures and, if submitted to, will always help us in, the true training for the Christian life" (140). Lewis made me think about those debts I owe. The high school teacher, a true iconoclast who mocked my faith, but forced me to think more deeply about my Sunday school beliefs. He could be profane and intimidating, but he always stood up for the outsider and the powerless. He shaped who I am as a teacher and strengthened my faith (even if that was not his intention!). I was also struck that the very texts and ideas that led Kirk, the teacher, away from faith would provide the tools and knowledge that Lewis, the student, would use to come to faith. This seems paradoxical, yet there it is. It is not the ideas themselves but what the reader does with them or, I expect Lewis would say, what God does with them.

Tolkien

For a long time, Lewis gave up his search for joy: "As for Joy, I labelled it 'aesthetic experience' and talked much about it under that name and said it was very 'valuable.' But it came very seldom and when it came it didn't amount to much" (1955, 194). The worlds of imagination that called to him were frauds, he decided, and he embraced the rational. Following his wartime service, Lewis returned to Oxford and after graduation became a lecturer at Magdalen College. Much to his dismay, he found that several of his closest friends had become Christians. First was his childhood friend Arthur, with whom he first shared his fascination with the Norse gods and who had helped Lewis discover beauty in nature around him and glimpses of joy in the mundane

of life. Next his college friend Barfield, himself once a rationalist, had also become a Christian, to Lewis's horror. Lewis felt even his "safest friends" had deserted him (195–96). He would unexpectedly encounter more Christians at Oxford: "When I began teaching for the English Faculty, I made two other friends, both Christians (these queer people seemed now to pop up on every side) who were later to give me much help in getting over the last stile. They were H. V. V. Dyson (then of Reading) and J. R. R. Tolkien" (204). Tolkien would seek out Lewis to join his reading group of Norse and Celtic legends, and the old connections with his imaginary worlds were rekindled (Coren 1994, 33–34; Wilson 1990, 119). Barfield and Tolkien would become indispensable guides for Lewis as he wrestled with faith (or lack of faith). Though initially hostile to their Christian faith, Lewis would find it strangely compelling. These, among others who crossed his path, were neither gullible nor unlearned. Even Lewis's reading seemed to turn against him: "George MacDonald had done more to me than any other writer; of course, it was a pity he had that bee in his bonnet about Christianity. He was good in spite of it. Chesterton had more sense than all the other modern put together; bating, of course, his Christianity. Johnson was one of the few authors whom I felt I could trust utterly; curiously enough, he had the same kink. Spenser and Milton by a strange coincidence had it too" (Lewis 1955, 202).

Like Lewis, I believe in the providential hand of God, so the presence of these influences is hardly coincidental. As the poet and mystic Francis Thompson writes about his own experience of God's pursuit in his poem "The Hound of Heaven,"

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;

I fled Him, down the arches of the years;

I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears . . . (1917, 239)

Lewis would resist these intrusions into his life, but there was something about these people that attracted him. They would serve an instrumental role as guides on Lewis's faith journey, indispensable because they were trusted friends. We all understand the importance of the trusted intermediaries and the value of people in everyday life information seeking: "People talk to people when they face a problem or issue in their daily lives" (Julien and Michels 2000, 13), often because they need a value judgment based on personal experience. I have seen it again and again in my own research: the biblical studies scholar who would seek out his wife, the trusted nonexpert, to validate his research (Michels 2005, 102), or the church leaders who had trusted friends inside and outside the church whom they could go to when they wrestled with a decision (Michels 2014, 146). Lewis was a voracious reader, and his imaginative quests often offered him his glimpses of joy. But it was not a solitary pursuit as there were many knowledgeable and trusted companions on his journey. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our world, and not least the church. Community is an essential component of Christian faith: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another" (Hebrews 10:24–25a). We are relational by nature, and our spiritual journey cannot be walked alone. It has been twelve months at this writing since our church has met in person. Services are livestreamed, and I meet with my Bible study class via Zoom. I am thankful for the technologies that allow us to connect, and I am concerned that many digital have-nots are feeling cut off. I have needed my community to find faith myself and then to grow in it.

THE EXPERIENCE OF CONVERSION

I have described above some of the books and ideas that Lewis encountered on his journey that first broke down and then rebuilt his faith. I have also considered three of the many people who guided him along the way. Lewis traces for us the moments of joy that discontented him and sent him in search of first joy and then its source: “It was valuable only,” Lewis writes, “as a pointer to something other and outer” (1955, 224) to God in the person of Jesus. His many conversations and his own thinking would bring him to a personal crisis point. Lewis describes his conversion experience: “You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England” (217).

I spent some time reflecting on Lewis’s journey to his Christian conversion and my own conversion. I was born into a “Christian” family, and, like with Lewis, our religion was more cultural than personal. As a child my parents began attending a conservative Protestant church on the invitation of my father’s coworkers. My father would describe how these two coworkers were often assigned the dirtiest jobs in the plant, and they would sing hymns as they worked. The joy they seemed to possess attracted him, and he wanted to learn more. In Sunday school as a child, I was told a simple version of the Christian gospel story by church lady “Ma,” which was, “Ask Jesus to forgive you and accept him into your heart, and he will be a friend forever, and when you die, you will go to heaven to be with him forever.” I teach theology classes now on Christian salvation and the subject has filled many books. For a child this was simple enough; I

said a prayer in the stairwell of the church, then ran off to meet my parents. For me, there would be no crisis point until later in life. I was a Christian.

“What!,” wrote Lewis, “Have you felt that too? I always thought I was the only one” (1955, 7). I recognize Lewis’s experience, though in many ways mine was different. Lewis wrote, “Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about ‘man’s search for God’” (215). Lewis would say God found him. Conversion, in the Christian tradition, begins with an act of surrender to God, a humbling, terrifying, and joyful act. What follows is confession, forgiveness, and commitment to follow Jesus, but it all begins with surrender. For a dejected Lewis in his dorm, this was the culmination of a long wrestling match with God. For me, who, as a child, had little control to give up, it was a simple decision. Years later, as a college student, I would be challenged to reconsecrate myself to God, to surrender “all I am and have, all I ever will be and all I ever will have” to Jesus Christ. I was terrified that if I said yes, God would ship me off as a missionary on the next plane! Oh Lewis, I think I know that reluctant convert feeling. As it would happen, one year later I arrived in East Africa as a student missionary, a transforming, painful, and joyous time that I would not have traded for anything. “The proper good of a creature,” argues Lewis, “is to surrender itself to its Creator, to enact intellectually, volitionally, and emotionally, that relationship which is given in the mere fact of its being a creature. When it does so, it is good and happy” (Lewis 2002, 88). I do not regret for a moment my own conversion, yet I confess that surrender still scares me. For Lewis the role of joy in his life had changed. He called joy a “signpost” (1955, 224) to a destination he now knows. He still experiences “the old stab, the old bittersweet,” but he does not pursue it as he did before. He is most grateful to the One who erected the signposts.

CONCLUSION

Prior to this study I had not taken much time to consider Lewis the person. He was Lewis the profound and entertaining writer. Now I have met Lewis the reader. He was Lewis the apologist and theologian who had impacted so many people's faith. Now I have met Lewis the seeker, himself shaped, for good or for ill, by the ideas and the people in his life. He was the Oxford don, brilliant in his ivory tower. *Surprised by Joy* introduced me to a much more complex person. His pain of childhood tragedy left a permanent mark on him. The boarding school abuses he describes were shocking. The challenges of adolescence and young adulthood were familiar. The horrors of trench warfare thankfully were not. Covered not in this book but in his *Grief Observed* (Lewis 1961), he would wrestle with the loss of his wife Joy Davidson. This more complex person is a Lewis I can better identify with. It requires me to read his other works differently, to think "ah yes, I understand now." Meeting the author does that somehow.

I continued to be intrigued by the sparks of joy that led Lewis to faith and how his ability to imagine a better world would lead him to seek one. We have all encountered those sparks of joy; at least I know I have. The joy when my girlfriend said "yes" and accepted my ring. The joy when the doctor said "you have a little girl" and then years later "a girl" and "a boy." How many less significant but pure sparks of joy have I encountered? I wish like Lewis I could remember and catalogue more of them. I have been challenged to read more, more widely, and more deeply. I am encouraged to be the guide along the way and to nurture the kinds of close relationships Lewis had that help him build his faith. Finally, I am reminded each day to recognize in those moments of joy He who is their source.

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