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Something Enchanted

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Something Enchanted

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Spoiler alert: If you have not yet seen the movie "Enchanted April," I'm going to tell you how it ends. Rent and watch it anyway. Lushly filmed with the compelling and capable actors Jim Broadbent and Joan Plowright, among others, it is one of those rare movies that stay with you long after the final credits roll."



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Something Enchanted

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The story centers on four women in 1920’s London who are weary of their restrictive and dismal lives. London is sopping wet, noisy, bustling, and interminably grey. The women’s relationships are empty and repressive. Thanks to the sheer determination of one of the women, the small group is gathered and heads to the Italian countryside, sans husbands, for a vacation. In stark contrast to London, Italy is full of bright sunshine, riotous blossoming flowers, and bird song. Having traded traffic for tranquility, the women rent an old castle and set out to rejuvenate themselves in peace and quiet.

As the story unfolds, however, we see the women receiving much more than they anticipated. They expected to enjoy the sunshine and the flowers, but the location triggers a profound metamorphosis in each woman as she finds the thing she needs the most. Friendships blossom, love grows, marriages are rekindled, and one by one relationship and spirits are unkinked and set to rights. Ultimately, each woman’s soul is healed. At the end of the movie, Joan Plowright’s character, Mrs. Fisher, pushes her walking stick into the dirt and continues down the path without it. The gesture is symbolic of her new independence and happiness. The camera focuses on the stick: time passes; seasons wax and wane; and at the very last, the lifeless, inert stick sends out little shoots and then, gloriously, bursts into flower. Planted in the rich and fertile soil of the Italian countryside, that which had been a dead crutch became a living thing, destined to shade generations of walkers and embrace generations

of nests. As with all the other transformations in the movie, this one contained a whisper of the miraculous but was mostly symbolic of the healing and restorative power of the natural world.

I thought about this movie the other day as I was reading in Numbers chapter 17. In this section of the Old Testament, the Israelites are camped in the wilderness, incurring God's displeasure with their complaints. They gripe that the way is long and arduous. Things were more comfortable in Egypt, they insist, where, though enslaved, they had "fish, melons, cucumbers, leeks, onions, and garlic" to eat instead of manna – and who gave Moses and Aaron the right to lord it over them as high priests, anyway? In response to this last complaint, which is a thinly disguised rebellion against God-appointed leadership and thus, against God himself, God tells Moses to take a staff (a walking stick) from each of the chiefs of the twelve tribes. The sticks, written with the names of the tribes, are placed in the meeting tent in front of the box (the ark) containing the covenant between God and the Israelites. "The staff of the person I choose will sprout," says God, and that is how it happens: Aaron's staff "grew shoots, produced blossoms, and bore almonds." With this gesture, God confirms that Aaron, from the priestly tribe of Levi, has the right to represent the people before God as High Priest.

This story may seem like just another crazy miracle, but it symbolizes an important theme. I'm always asking my students to find themes in what we read. We look at motifs such as humanity's quest for adventure, "there's no place like home" (to quote Dorothy), the superior power of nature, the futility of fighting against one's fate, and many others. Each piece of literature supports several themes, some more prominently than others. The story of Aaron's almond-staff highlights one of the Bible's primary themes; indeed, this motif is fundamental to the Bible and to Christianity itself. It is the theme of new life out of death.

One of my family's favorite children's stories expresses this theme more succinctly in its title, *Something From Nothing*. It is the retelling of a Jewish folktale in which a small boy's grandfather, a tailor, makes him a wonderful little blue blanket adorned with stars. As the boy, Joseph grows, the blanket becomes worn out, and the grandfather makes it into a jacket. The jacket becomes too small, so the grandfather makes it into a vest, a tie, and finally, a cloth-covered button. When Joseph loses the button (which is reclaimed by a family of mice), even Grandfather cannot make "something from nothing." But Joseph can: he writes a story about the experience. He literally creates something - a story - from nothing - an absence, the lost blanket/jacket/vest/tie/button.

This is what God does. God took the “nothingness,” the uselessness, lifelessness, the absence of fruitfulness of Aaron’s walking stick and not only made it produce shoots but also blossoms, and not only blossoms but also almonds. Perhaps Mike Newell, the director of “Enchanted April,” was familiar with this Bible story, but whether or not he was hardly matters; the theme is the same: it is possible for something to come from nothing, for new life to come from what seems to be dead, lifeless, and inert. For the authors of the Bible, the source of that life was God.

This is God’s stock-in-trade – God’s wheelhouse, if you will. Over and over and over again, throughout the Bible and throughout the history of YHWH’s interaction with humanity, God kindles life from darkness, fire from ice, breath from the inanimate, something from nothing.

There it is on the very first page, in the very first verse: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Even science, which believes it can ultimately answer all questions about the natural world, hits a brick wall when asked, “What before the Big Bang?” How can something come from nothing? Scientists don’t know.

This theme is expressed when God creates the swirling planets, vast galaxies, and limitless universe from a tiny, incredibly dense point of gravitational force. When God stirs life out of primordial soup. When God takes a group of downtrodden, beleaguered slaves and makes them his great and chosen nation. When God has Moses strike a rock in the desert and water gushes out for the thirsty. When manna falls from heaven. When Job’s misery and lament are transformed into some of the most transcendent poetry in the Bible. When Christ marches out of the tomb. When Saint Paul turns from persecuting Christians to become one of the most important theologians in all of Christian history. When person after person whose heart had been dead and lifeless and inert, whose actions and thoughts and feelings had been death-producing and life-killing, puts forth shoots...and blossoms... and fruit.

Aaron’s staff and Mrs. Fisher’s walking stick and even little Joseph’s button all represent redemption. Christians are a people reclaimed by God in myriad ways, whether that reclamation is through the soothing, healing power of the natural world that God created, through the ameliorative love of others, or through creating and producing art for its own aesthetic sake. Human “inspiration” comes from the God-breath in each individual; “inspire” literally means to breathe in (as “expire” means to breathe out, or die), and is related to the word for

“spirit.” The Spirit of God in-spires with wholeness and healing. Humanity may be stick-dry and sapless, but God never is.

People can, and probably have, written long analyses and learned criticisms of “Enchanted April.” Maybe they’ve pointed out that “civilization bad/nature good” is a trite and tired theme, or that the movie is a little on the slow side, or perhaps that the plot is a bit predictable. They may even be right, but it doesn’t matter. The movie and the story are lovely, right down to the final, highly symbolic, moment. Mrs. Fisher leaves her walking stick behind on the side of the path and all of the movie’s characters walk away from it. None of them stay around to see it blossom. They don’t need to. It doesn’t matter. All of the other transformations have happened to them, inside and between them, and this one, this final transformation, is for God’s eyes alone, simply because that is what he does. Because this is the God who says, “I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” Because generative and regenerative work are intrinsic to God’s character. God brings order out of chaos, stars and planets out of murk, sunshine out of tombs. The “something from nothing” that God produces bursts from the nothingness of desiccation and death into something bright and blossomy, sweet and fruitful and exquisitely enchanting.

