

## Meeting God at the movies: Film as a source of revelation

by [Robert K. Johnston](#) in the [August 20, 2014](#) issue



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When I think about an encounter with the Creator, I remember a time when I rounded a corner while driving and found myself confronted by a huge full moon, barely above the horizon, which filled my whole environment with light. Someone else may remember viewing a sunset from a beach or seeing a rainbow. My childhood conscience was divinely pricked by witnessing a friend dealing with total paralysis. Others have experienced God's presence while in a crowd singing "We Shall Overcome" or in a group crying out for justice for one wrongly accused.

Whether through creation, conscience, or human culture, such events are more than deductions based on the footprint of God's act of creation. They are more than mere echoes or traces of his handiwork, though that is sometimes how they are described by theologians. Those who experience the Numinous in these ways speak instead of a transformative moment, something illumining, even if precritical and hard to name adequately. While not having to do with one's salvation in any direct way, and occurring outside the church and without direct reference to scripture or to Jesus Christ, such encounters are foundational to life.

One place such encounters happen is at the movies. When I ask students to speak or write about movies that have been significant to them spiritually, perhaps a third of my students speak in terms of meeting God in the movies and many others speak of movies as being spiritual experiences for them.

In an effort to better understand something of this divine encounter which takes place outside church and outside scripture, I solicited testimonials from several hundred of my students, asking them to write about a movie that was particularly significant to them spiritually. The students were asked to describe the movie briefly, give an account of their experience spiritually with it, and report what resulted from having watched the movie. The question was purposely open-ended, with no definition of “spiritual experience” provided.

As might be expected, viewers had many different terms for what they experienced. Not all would say they encountered God, though many did. I grouped the responses in three categories.

**A spiritual understanding deepened:** One group of students was quite sure that they had not had an encounter with the divine, but nonetheless claimed that in the movie-watching experience a spiritual truth had been garnered or a spiritual understanding deepened. Often such experiences related to movies with religious or quasi-religious themes—movies such as *The Shawshank Redemption*, *The Ultimate Gift*, *The Passion of the Christ*, *A Walk to Remember*, *Lars and the Real Girl*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Simon Birch*, *Signs*—or movies that had clear Christ figures, like *The Green Mile* or *The Dark Knight*. These students found such movies to function for them as theological parables.

The terms and phrases they used indicated the intellectual nature of the spiritual connection that was made: “whispered truth,” “I learned from,” “was representative of,” “was deeply informative,” “was symbolic of,” “led to deep reflection,” “reminded me of,” “is telling me,” “allowed me to picture,” “provided space for theological reflection,” “helped me to understand,” “taught me.”

**A spirit affected:** Others wrote how the moviegoing experience put them in touch with something greater or other than everyday life. They were unsure whether they had had a divine encounter or simply an experience that enhanced their spirit. In any case, the watching of a particular movie proved life-transforming.

The language students used suggested that the movie had offered a spiritual insight rather than that an Other had revealed something to them. But sometimes the language was ambiguous. The students spoke of a “profoundly human moment,” of “tears of identification,” of a “personal fulfillment” or change. They described their experiences as extraordinary and illumining, but not necessarily divine.

**God's presence encountered:** A third group said that they had had a divine encounter, an experience of the holy, which proved transformative. They were quite clear about this claim—they had discovered themselves to be in the presence of God as they immersed themselves in the film (or better, as the film washed over them). In each case, the movie's story had merged with their own stories, resulting in a divine encounter that changed their lives.

One dramatic account of a movie effecting a spiritual transformation came from Carol, a woman in her thirties. In her twenties she had been the victim of a home invasion robbery. Raped, robbed, kidnapped, pistol-whipped, and shot, she was left for dead in an empty lot.

Over the next five years, her life spiraled downward. She was out of control and in the clutch of posttraumatic stress disorder. Depressed and self-medicating with drugs and alcohol, she entertained thoughts of suicide. At Christmas, on the anniversary of her assault, she watched Frank Capra's movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, which she had never seen before.

She identified with the figure of George Bailey (played by Jimmy Stewart), whose dreams had been dashed at every turn, though he had tried to help others all of his life. She too had always tried to be good, though she had grown up in a borderline abusive household and could never live up to her parents' expectations. Her dreams and theirs, given the assault, had been crushed, just as George's had. Like George, she had thought, "It would have been better if I had never been born."

As she watched the gentle angel named Clarence show George that his simple acts of kindness had been important to the community, her perspective on her own life began to shift, she wrote. "The gift this movie provided me with was small hope." She explained: "Following this period I no longer entertained thoughts of quitting life, but [had] a desire to find meaning in what had occurred to me. If the daily decisions that George Bailey made had such a profound influence on those around him, [maybe] the decisions that I was making, even the smallest, most insignificant, [might] have a profound influence on those around me."

The student concluded her reflection by saying that though she was unsure whether the movie experience was "a divine encounter" or simply something that was "spiritually enhancing," she had no doubt that it was "life transforming." While the trauma and its effects continue to ripple through her life, she realized that "the good

news is that those righteous decisions we make ripple just as profoundly as the negative ones.”

Other students had no doubt that in their moviegoing experience they had encountered God—that God had revealed his presence to them through the truth, beauty, and goodness (or lack of it) portrayed on the screen.

A student named John recalled seeing *Easy Rider* with his friends three times one Saturday afternoon in 1969, soon after the movie came out. He spoke of the movie in detail some 40 years afterward: “I walked into the film as one person and exited virtually as another, awakened to new ideas and options.”

This iconic film is about two counterculture bikers who travel from Los Angeles to attend Mardi Gras in New Orleans in search both of America and of meaning in their own lives. It’s a classic road movie, without much plot. The meaning arises through the interaction of the two bikers with each other and with those they meet along the way.

Captain America (Peter Fonda) and Billy the Kid (Dennis Hopper) encounter hitchhikers, bigotry (given their countercultural lifestyle), jail, and even the death of a friend. They pick up a drunken lawyer played by Jack Nicholson (in his breakout role). They visit a gentle hippie religious commune in New Mexico, whose members have rejected materialism and consumerism (the American dream) and seek to live close to the earth. The travelers watch as the community puts on a play and plants crops in dusty soil. They observe as the community clasps hands and prays for “simple food for our simple tastes.” Watching the scenes of the commune, John felt “a remarkable sense of calm and well-being, as if a cool hand were put upon my brow.”

When two bikers leave the commune “on a quest towards Mardi Gras nothingness,” John wrote, he felt a “visceral sense of dread, what I would now describe as a panic attack, a tightening in my chest as if a hand squeezed my heart.” Moreover, “a voice in my head compelled me to say to a comrade, ‘Man, they just blew it.’” Both John and his friend were startled later when, near the end of the film’s uneasy ride, Captain America also speaks of “blowing it,” of not finding that meaning the two had set out to find.

Though the movie leaves it ambiguous as to precisely how they “blew it,” it was crystal clear for this viewer. Though John had never lived in community, the next day

he boarded a bus for Washington, D.C., in search of a similar community. Here surely was where Jesus would live. He found in the movie “a depiction of faith that my spirit craved.” The idealistic Jesus hippies in the film made such an impression on him that his journey toward Jesus began that day. He still lives communally. *Easy Rider* had proven revelatory.

A student named Jessica, who said she did not typically experience film “in a deeply personal and spiritual way,” reported that she had encountered God watching a children’s film, Disney Pixar’s *Toy Story 3*. What connected with Jessica in the film was the theme of growing up and moving on from childhood. She had been a fan of Woody, Buzz, and the rest of Andy’s toys since she had seen the original *Toy Story* (1995) at age eight. Expecting only a fun, simple little movie, she instead experienced through Andy’s character “a reflection of my own childhood and transition to adulthood.” As Andy handed down his toys to little Bonnie, she said she “experienced a sudden and unexpected rush of emotions, which ultimately resulted in crying.” Jessica too was about to embark on a major life transition of her own—she had just gotten engaged.

“Seeing *Toy Story 3* allowed [me] to express and confront those bittersweet emotions associated with making a major life transition.” Here, she said, was God’s way of helping her process her feelings and telling her it is OK. “I learned from this experience,” she wrote, “that God can speak to you and meet you in the most unexpected places, for who would have ever thought that a 23-year-old woman would have seen herself in a fictional, animated, 18-year-old boy who was giving his toys away?”

Though we can for purposes of theological discussion disconnect the Spirit’s revealing presence in the church and through scripture from that which occurs outside the church and without direct reference to the Christian faith, we also know that there is but one Spirit. Church and world, special and general revelation, the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit in creation intersect daily as they merge in our lives—as they did in these students’ experiences with movies.

But few in the church have been encouraged to think theologically about encounters with God that take place outside the church and its scripture. The result is a disconnect between how the church speaks formally of God’s self-revelation and how those who are not Christians speak of that same reality. Theologians continue to downplay the importance of God’s self-revelation through creation, conscience,

and culture, finding in such knowledge (and for them it is knowledge, not divine encounter) at best a mere echo of the divine presence, a trace of divine reality, which is unable to provide sufficient insight or compel obedience and devotion.

Those outside the church, on the other hand, have responded to such numinous encounters by describing them as foundational and transformative. While the church has feared idolatry and self-deception, those outside the church have often described their responses with humility and awe. Such disparity has only increased as the culture has entered what many have labeled “postmodernity,” where spirituality is once again considered a public virtue.

Rather than affirming God’s presence throughout God’s world, Christians have too often poured cold water on that notion. The unfortunate result is that those in the church have lost an opportunity for dialogue and witness. If Christians are uninterested in their neighbors’ spirituality, why should our neighbors be interested in ours? Furthermore, if God has indeed revealed himself to others through creation, conscience, and culture, then the church is impoverishing itself by being insensitive to that divine presence in others.

An interest in God’s wider presence is being triggered by larger changes that are going on in Western culture, particularly in the ordering of what are often labeled life’s transcendentals—truth, beauty, and goodness. We are being invited to flex our theological muscles in new ways. In the 1960s, Christianity’s theological orientation centered on truth. The culture would have ordered the transcendentals this way: truth, then goodness, and finally beauty. By the ’70s and ’80s, Western culture, having lived through the Vietnam War and having seen the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King Jr., had reordered these verities: goodness came first, then truth, and then beauty. If one’s “walk” did not match one’s “talk,” we had less interest. As both the millennium and modernity came to an end and rationalism imploded, the ordering of the transcendentals again changed. Today, an increasing number of people in the West think we must begin with beauty, and then move to goodness, before considering truth.

Such a seismic shift in the cultural plates has deep implications for theology and points to the relevance of reconsidering God’s wider presence. Christians will need to extend their biblical reflection beyond Romans 1 and 2 to also include those biblical narratives in which God encounters humankind outside the “religious” community. Abimelech and Melchizedek, Balaam and King Neco, King Lemuel’s

mother and Amenemope, Canaanite hymnody and Assyrian belligerence—the presence in scripture of these texts has too often been ignored when theological reflection on God’s wider presence has taken place. We will need to mine our biblical resources more broadly.

Similarly, we will need to develop our pneumatology as we rethink our theology of revelation. To focus too exclusively on Christology as many do threatens to reduce the discussion of revelation to Christology. Limiting the Spirit’s role to that of the Spirit of Christ makes the Spirit’s wider presence in creation, conscience, and culture simply a means toward another end. With the church fathers, we must affirm the “two hands” of God.

A constructive theology of general revelation is needed, along with the skills necessary to reflect on God’s revelation outside the walls of the church. And that theology begins with a careful listening both to what others say about their experience and to our own.

*This article is adapted from Robert K. Johnston's book God's Wider Presence: Reconsidering General Revelation, Baker Academic, a division of [Baker Publishing Group](#), (c) 2014. Used by permission.*