Children of a Lesser God: Truth as Bodiliness and Forgiveness

Glenn Morrison

Abstract: *The article aims* in two parts to develop a sense of truth as bodiliness and forgiveness. In bodiliness, we suffer by the suffering of the other and in forgiveness there arises an existential journey of sensibility and feelings. Together, bodiliness and forgiveness provide a relational horizon to journey towards truth. Part I of the article sets out to establish a theoretical background for Part II to engage theology with the study of the film, *Children of a Lesser God* (1986). Given that films today are popular mediums for encountering revelation and the sacred, the application of film to theology provides an opportunity to contextualise theology and make the language of faith, hope and love more accessible to a wider audience.

Key Words: truth; bodiliness; forgiveness; preconscious; Emmanuel Levinas; film; theology

It can be a long and painful journey to uncover the truth. Whilst the discovery of raw truths of reality will provide some epiphany of one's inner state and repressed existence, the end of one journey marks the beginning of new possibilities and attempts to draw meaning again out of truth. On the road to self-discovery, there will be a myriad of temptations to reduce truth to cognition and self-interest. We bear a tendency to represent truth as a personal experience, a group of facts or as objective representations of reality. But truth suffers where it is held captive in thought, consciousness or even objectivity. We want to suggest that truth is more a relational discovery rather than a cognitive one. In other words, in relation to the other, we have a better chance to uncover a truth about our identity, existence, suffering and our need for healing. Specifically in this article, the "truth" in question that is being sought for is at once both existential and phenomenological. The existential relation to truth, namely one's responsibility and freedom in regard to the existence of truth unveils a number of phenomenological modes of truth such as humiliation, persecution and in the case of the focus of this essay, forgiveness and bodiliness. In this sense, truth is concerned with existential relevance and personal transformation.

Part I of the article appeals to the writings of Iván Böszörményi-Nagy, Emmanuel Levinas and Stanley Hauerwas to underline how the human encounters of bodiliness and forgiveness are so deep that they reveal a preconscious sensibility. We can learn that our knowledge is different from facts and objective representations of reality. For example, the journey towards forgiveness unveils a revelation of our bodiliness: a grave responsibility to be like Christ, a body—a gift and sacrifice—for the other. Drawing from both Hauerwas' appreciation of forgiveness in the Mennonite tradition and Levinas' Jewish

(Talmudic) perspective of forgiveness, Part I ends with a Eucharistic and eschatological perspective on the two modes of truth.

In Part II of the paper, the encounter of truth as bodiliness and forgiveness is brought to light through the film, *Children of a Lesser God (1986)*. The film provides a moving and dramatic medium to discover the preconscious and interhuman nature of truth through the path of goodness, reconciliation and love. Guided by five Levinasian elements of the interhuman—agape, otherness, death, sacrifice and transcendence—we will examine the final scene of the film to uncover the truth of bodiliness and forgiveness, the dramatic encounter to "find a place to meet not in silence and not in sound." This is the "place" where the beautiful and good truth of being a gift for another teaches that at the very moment where all is lost everything is possible.

PART I

The Hungarian "psychiatrist, humanist … founder of family therapy and developer of contextual therapy,"[1] Iván Böszörményi-Nagy (1920-2007) has found that interhuman relations are more valuable practically than advancing "cognitive solutions to what moral positions should be … about what a family should be."[2] This is because the cognitive solutions "don't as such lead to clinical relevance."[3] Therefore, for Böszörményi-Nagy, "Cognitive efforts at defining ethical values are only tangentially relevant to the requirements of contextual therapy and relational ethics." The major principle of "relational ethics" is he concludes, "the balance of giving and receiving ['direct and indirect returns'] and the dialectic of receiving through giving ['an offering of genuine concern for the other']."[4] For our concern on uncovering truth, Böszörményi-Nagy's insight into family therapy and relational ethics can be leashed, as it were, into service. This leads to a preconscious relation to truth, namely that relating with others in an ambience of solicitude, empathy, compassion and sensitivity does much more in relation to truth than coming to a "cognitive consensus."[5]

The idea of the "preconscious" state can be difficult to relate. The Talmudic and French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), provides a revealing account of consciousness between the self and the other. Like Böszörményi-Nagy, he underlines the importance of the interhuman over cognition and self-interest. Levinas' phenomenology can help to deepen and define the drama behind Böszörményi-Nagy's insight into relationality. He reflects:

> Consciousness in all its forms—representational, axiological, practical—has already lost this close presence [that is, the very proximity of beings]. The fact that the neighbour does not enter into a theme, that in a certain sense he precedes cognition and commitment, is neither a blinding nor an indifference; it is a rectitude of relationship more tense than intentionality: the neighbour summons me.[6]

---

[1] PT (Psychology Today) Staff, "From Here to Eternity," (an Interview with Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy) *Psychology Today* 26:2 (March/April, 1993), 12.

[2] Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, "Response to 'Are Trustworthiness and Fairness Enough? Contextual Family Therapy and the Good Family,'" *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 23:2 (1997): 172.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 171.

[6] Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 120.

Levinas realises that we are not good at interpreting one another through our personal experience, objectivity and everyday life. He finds a real problem with the "presence" of consciousness because we tend to be so late helping the other in need. The other's condition is literally a past that fails to be "present" in consciousness. Why? Because we tend to be so self-interested in our own possibilities, caring more for the way we do our own things. We can easily fall prey to treating ourselves as the most important child, so to speak. The other becomes more a blur in consciousness or a fact of knowledge, or even a totality of value judgments. We can feel this when we do not like to be interpreted or branded by objective representations. We do not realise how violent our interpretations can be. Truth, however, is something otherwise, in another realm of consciousness—the interhuman relation.

Drawing from Kierkegaard, Levinas posits truth in terms of otherness and particularly in two almost paschal modes, namely persecution and humiliation (or humility). In the essay entitled, "A Man-God?", Levinas writes:

> The idea of a truth whose manifestation is not glorious or bursting with light, the idea of a truth that manifests itself in its humility, like the small voice in the biblical expression [a reference to 2 Kings 19:12]—the idea of a persecuted truth—is that not henceforth the only possible modality of transcendence? … It is doubtless Kierkegaard who best understood the philosophical notion of transcendence contributed by the biblical theme of God's humility. For him, persecuted truth is not simply truth approached in a bad way. The persecution and humiliation par excellence to which it is exposed are modalities of the true.[7]

As a means to stretch Levinas' and Kierkegaard's insight into truth as persecution and humiliation, we want to suggest two further related modes of truth: bodiliness and forgiveness. Both bodiliness and forgiveness are connected to the drama of being persecuted and humiliated by the perpetrator. The sensibility of truth as humility or meekness evokes a way towards imagining truth through the lens of bodiliness and forgiveness. Through humility, the interhuman encounter of forgiveness can evoke an epiphany of bodiliness. However, the bodiliness of moving towards forgiveness—of being hurt by the hurt of the perpetrator—initiates "an entire existential, relational, social and ethical context."[8] Although "forgiveness is neither easy nor impossible … [i]t does require patience and humility in order to accept that forgiveness comprises a number of steps, and that these steps cannot always be made in an equally fast and progressive manner."[9] These steps (such as the experience of negative feelings; the realisation of pain, harm and wounds; naming the injustice; sharing the experience with others and giving meaning to it; approaching the aggressor with a reproach or accusation; and the many steps towards truth, justice, rectification, healing and reconciliation)[10] reveal that forgiveness is something we allow to happen to and through ourselves.

---

[7] Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 55-56, 238.

[8] Roger Burggraeve, "The Difficult But Possible Path Towards Forgiveness and Reconciliation Between People," 1, Unpublished English translation by the author from his article (in Dutch), "Stapstenen naar verzoening en vergeving tussen mensen," *Collationes. Vlaams Tijdschrijft voor Theologie en Pastoraal* 30:3 (2000), 269-300.

[9] Ibid., 3.

[10] Ibid., 1-15.

In other words the interhuman journey towards forgiveness gives rise to a transformation of ourselves so deep that it is preconscious. Through the power of love and the work of the Spirit, the self becomes an "other." The path towards forgiveness can bring us to the truth and vulnerability of our bodiliness. So the gift of forgiveness unveils an epiphany of bodiliness where we are able to glimpse perhaps for a moment the way in which the spirit transforms our deeper selves. By pointing to the interhuman and preconscious nature of truth, the two modes of bodiliness and forgiveness teach us that life is a transformation beyond necessity and need; a revelation beyond objectivity and cognition. We are called towards a life of passivity, humility and of being moved by the Spirit of God in us. A look now into first a Mennonite and then a Jewish (Talmudic) perspective of forgiveness will help to further illustrate the interhuman and preconscious nature of truth.

Forgiveness: A Mennonite Perspective

Stanley Hauerwas relates a grave Mennonite conception of forgiveness as a mode of truth. It is grave because it highlights the cost of discipleship—the pursuit of truth—that radically realises the Gospel's call to be counter-cultural. The individual must seek to rupture the Western embodiment of the priority of the individual over the community so that "forgiveness becomes a community process."[11] In the 1992 "Commencement Address for Graduates of a Mennonite college in Indiana" on the topic of "Why truthfulness requires forgiveness,"[12] Hauerwas explains:

> For Mennonites, after all, refuse to buy the idea that forgiveness is simply a matter of being told that God has forgiven us. Mennonites have been about reminding other Christians that forgiveness is a community process that makes discipleship possible. Indeed, the nature of discipleship as the hallmark of Mennonite life was determined by people who had learned that forgiveness was a practice of a community committed to the truthful worship of God.[13]

The Mennonite position on forgiveness engages truth in a way that shapes existence and reality in a realm other than the interests of the self; it is an exacting humility and an act of obedience to a Crucified and demanding God. Hauerwas describes the Mennonite path to peace as "painful" because the process of "forgiveness, reconciliation, discipleship and truth"[14] requires a radical turnabout towards the face of Christ in the community. This seems to imply that not only forgiveness, but also bodiliness is present because people "are ready to confront one another with the truth so that we will be better able to name and confront those powers that feed on our inability to makes our wrongs right."[15] In confrontation, people are facing the ways in which they are hurt by the hurt of the other or wounded by the woundedness of the other. This journey towards humility before the other speaks also of a time and place for forgiveness to reveal bodiliness. In other words, confrontation must invoke the promise of peace and healing (Isa: 57:17) of the body (and soul) as much as it demonstrates the practice of gentleness and mildness—the

---

[11] Stanley Hauerwas, "Why Truthfulness Requires Forgiveness: A Commencement Address for Graduates of a College of the Church of the Second Chance (1992)," in John Berkman and Michael Cartwright, eds., *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 311.

[12] Ibid., 307.

[13] Ibid., 311.

[14] Ibid., 312.

[15] Ibid., 312.

eschatological gift of inheriting the earth (Matt 5:5). This is because the truth of forgiveness is ultimately a path to encountering peace as a Eucharistic gift ("This is my body, which is given for you", Lk 22:19). But yet forgiveness is never easy; it means a whole existential reality of bodiliness—journeying through feelings and the language of faith and reconcilation. The equally demanding Jewish (Levinasian) approach will help us to discern further the connection between bodiliness and forgiveness.

Forgiveness: A Jewish (Levinasian) Perspective

Levinas' Jewish position on forgiveness is that God cannot forgive our "sins" if first the victim of our evil deed has not forgiven us. In one sense, this seems to be a hard interpretation of the verse in the Our Father, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Levinas' *Gemara* [Talmudic] translation from *Tractate Yoma*, pp. 85a-85b, illustrates the Jewish stance on forgiveness: "If a man commits a fault toward another man and appeases him, God will be able to forgive; but if the fault concerns God, who will be able to intercede for him? Only repentance and good deeds."[16] This Jewish reading on forgiveness is no doubt a hard position, but it can help to reveal some important ramifications of the ethical and interhuman relation of forgiveness.

For Levinas, on the one hand, there are crimes or levels of behaviour that are unforgiveable. This suggests that the victim has a duty to protect the good and show "the greatest circumspection."[17] On the other hand, just as the perpetrator has done something senseless to commit evil, so the victim too could do something equally senseless and forgive the perpetrator.[18] The promise and gift of forgiveness is not easy; it is a deep existential process of journeying through feelings, realisations and discoveries. We can appreciate Levinas' own existential encounter with the raw reality of being hurt by the other (bodiliness) when he reflects on the philosopher, Martin Heidegger, and "the Germans" in the context of a Talmudic reading of *Tractate Yoma*, pp. 85a-85b, on Hanina's refusal to forgive Rab:

> One can, if pressed to the limit, forgive the one who has spoken unconsciously. But it is very difficult to forgive Rab, who was fully aware and destined for a great fate, which was prophetically revealed to his master. One can forgive many Germans, but there are some Germans it is difficult to forgive. It is difficult to forgive Heidegger. If Hanina could not forgive the just and humane Rab because he was also the brilliant Rab, it is even less possible to forgive Heidegger. Here I am brought back to the present, to the new attempts to clear Heidegger, to take away his responsibility—unceasing attempts which, it must be admitted, are at the origin of this colloquium.[19]

In this reflection, we begin to uncover the important connection between forgiveness and bodiliness. Levinas lives with—"is dominated by"—the truth of the "presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror,"[20] and the memory of his former teacher, Martin Heidegger, who collaborated with the National Socialists from 1933. The relationship between Heidegger and the National Socialists indicates the temptation and

---

[16] Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. and with an Introduction by Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 12.

[17] Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 23.

[18] See Michael Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 35-38.

[19] Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 25.

[20] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 291.

the perils of allowing philosophy to be contaminated by nationalism and ideology. Levinas is hurt and shocked by Heidegger's pagan turn. He must now set out to protect the good and develop an ethical metaphysics (ethics as first philosophy) against Heidegger's ontological phenomenology (the authentic self's search for the meaning of being, existence, reality and truth). Now taking on "the greatest circumspection," he can forgive "some Germans," but not Heidegger. For Levinas, even though Heidegger was banned from University teaching for five years after World War Two due to his collaboration with the Third Reich, there has not been enough justice in the public field to prevent Heidegger extricating himself from culpability. In spite of Heidegger's turn towards totality, his writings have had an enduring legacy, even upon Christian theology as one can see in the writings of Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Rahner, among others.

Learning from Hauerwas and Levinas: Towards a Eucharistic and Eschatological Perspective

In response to Heidegger's bodiliness of being inspired and drawn in by the Nazi propaganda manipulating emotions, Levinas demonstrates a bodiliness (sensitivity) of being inspired and drawn to counter Heidegger. Levinas initiates a stance towards forgiveness by not forgiving. The important lesson here is that forgiveness should not be "cheap"—just like grace as Bonhoeffer described: "Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjack's wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sins, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices."[21] For Levinas, justice has not taken its full course due to the "unceasing attempts" to take away Heidegger's responsibility. What Christians can especially learn from Levinas' Jewish and Talmudic stance towards forgiveness is the necessity for crimes against the other to have an ethical dimension (ethics as first theology). For Hauerwas, the Mennonite position almost suggests that the place of ethics in community is first theology. These two perspectives together suggest that the ethical relationship (of justice and judgment) with the other/and or community is the condition for the authenticity of our religious relationship (with God), as we confess in the Our Father: "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us ." If the ethical dimension of justice and judgment is ignored, the sinner or perpetrator risks isolating himself/herself from following through the necessary interhuman path towards forgiveness and reconciliation.

What then does the ethical dimension of justice and judgment signify about religious confession and the divine grace of mercy? It shows that confession itself helps one to savour the love and mercy of God—that forgiveness and reconciliation are a taste of the Reign of God. Through the bodiliness of allowing the self to love through the love of God, new hope can emerge for the sinner to take on the courage and confidence to allow justice and judgment to take its course. This "bodily-relational" event seems to invite the ego-self into another world of gift and to the other who bears the face of Christ. The ego-self could well feel quite lost and lonely in its own world, and when it encounters another face in community, it will need some "costly" grace or word to help it focus for a moment and rise out of its hurt (sense of sin) and loneliness (sense of being isolated from others). But when something of the Eucharistic self and/or the other comes to mind, the self can begin to discover a new way of life and bodiliness, partaking of the gift that Christ has prepared for us—"This is my body, which is given for you" (Lk 22:19).

[21] See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 35.

Inside our own world, we can fall into an abyss of worry, anxiety, delusions and loneliness. When another sacrifices for us in a way that saves us from the horror and anxiety of our ego-self, loneliness does not have to suffocate our soul and being. Solitude (prayer, meditation, contemplation) and solicitude (contrition, love for the other) come together in an evoking bodiliness and sensibility, that is to say, an embodied, Eucharistic gift of love. And when the body wakes up to its sense of gift and being-for-the-other-in-community, we may begin to sculpture an eschatological form of forgiveness and bodiliness through a gestation of responsibility.

The gestation of responsibility points to a "preconscious" state of kenosis or an incarnational sensibility. We can see this in the light of forgiveness and bodiliness. Often we are wounded by the woundedness of another. In an enigmatic and perhaps "costly" way, the preconscious and vulnerable state of our bodiliness is related to the response of expiation (or substitution and forgiveness) for the other. There is much that seems concealed about our human identity and inner state. The deep pain we feel could at once conceal and reveal our inner states. The states of bodiliness (passivity) and forgiveness (expiation) for the other seem to point to some preconscious openness of having a heart for the other. In this way, the primary ethical condition and uncondition of being for the other reveals not just a "persecuted" truth of uncertainty,[22] but a response of humility, that is, of forgiveness and bodiliness.

Humility does not protect or insulate the self from being wounded and hurt by the other, but it allows the self to suffer for the other and journey through the heartfelt existential process of feelings and emotions. Even though we resemble God, there is much about our sensibility that remains unknown. And this unknowing is very important, giving us the possibility to learn the language of faith and community—to allow the Spirit in hidden ways to work in our soul's depths. Too often we want to rationalise problems—this can be a helpful response and part of the existential process of suffering—but eventually we come to a realisation that facts and objectivity are not everything. The interhuman relation with others, God and the world can help to initiate a voice of the conscience and of the soul groaning to be embodied by another. Through the humility of bodiliness and forgiveness, there remains the language of faith and community to share a word and a smile and to become a gift of self for another.

PART II

Children of a Lesser God

We now want to take a turn towards illustrating the interhuman relation and the sense of truth as bodiliness and forgiveness through the study of one film. The first part has attempted to create an existential, phenomenological and theological framework to perceive truth in the interhuman and preconscious modes of bodiliness and forgiveness, and hopefully to give some light to the hidden dynamics of face-to-face relations. The 1986 film, *Children of a Lesser God*, provides a dramatic example of the relationship of bodiliness to forgiveness. Films can provide people with opportunities to encounter the sacred and the revelation of God's word. The American theologian, Craig Detweiler, has written a fascinating book on film and theology, entitled, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top*

[22] Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 55.

Films of the 21st Century.[23] In the following personal account, he reflects on the inspiring experience of relating film to theology and revelation:

> This book begins as a personal effort to reintegrate my head and my heart, to unite my feelings about life, art, and God with the facts of faith. It is a study in film as an occasion for general revelation; a meditation on the Spirit of God, which blows where it wills, inspire(it)ing artists and audiences alike. It is also a work of theological aesthetics—an effort to reunite what the Enlightenment separated: beauty, goodness, and truth (in that order!). I want to practice what Jürgen Moltmann has preached: "It is possible to experience God *in, with and beneath* each everyday experience of the world, if God is in all things, and if all things are in God, so that God himself 'experiences' all things in his own way ."[24]

Whilst Detweiller had dedicated his life to the study of film and theology, one of his major aims is to encounter the transcendental value of the beautiful in film, particular in the genre of "film noir ." For Detweiller, films express something beautiful, namely God's dramatic revelation. And even where films are "ugly," they can nonetheless point to ethics (the good) and truth. Guided by Hans Urs von Balthasar's evocation of the philosophical transcendentals, Detweiller—through a study of 21st century films like *Donnie Darko* (2001), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and *Spirited Away* (2001)—places a priority on the beautiful (discovering God's revelation in the world) as the starting point for exploring the connection between film and theology.[25] Like Detweiller, we too want to bring film and theology together, but in a way that will have a different phenomenological and existential basis.

So keeping Balthasar's (and Detweiller's) perspective on the transcendentals in mind, we want to look at the "good truth" and "true beauty" of God's glory in the interhuman relation. Like the Mennonite (Hauerwasian) position, our Levinasian reading will give a grave view of responsibility and of love for others. But, following Balthasar's theological aesthetics, we will also attempt to show how the interhuman relation bears the theological aesthetic truth that, "if the world wholly belongs to the Incarnation, then it must wholly die with the Son of God in the night of God-forsakenness in order to rise with him wholly in the definitive form which God confers on it."[26] For Balthasar, to participate in the mysteries of the faith is a relation of conformity to the "divine kabod" (glory).[27] In contrast to glory, Levinas speaks of holiness. In the essay, "The Other, Utopia, and Justice," he reflects:

> … what emerges is the valorization of holiness as the most profound upheaval of being and thought, through the advent of man. As opposed to the interestedness of being, to its primordial essence which is *conatus essendi*, a perseverance in the face of everything and everyone, a persistence of being-there—the human (love of the other, responsibility for one's fellowman, an eventual dying-for-the-other, sacrifice even as far as the mad thought in which dying for the other can concern me well before, and more

---

[23] Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008).

[24] Ibid., 17.

[25] Ibid., 38-41, 160-161.

[26] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics.* Vol. I. *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1982), 674.

[27] Ibid., 674.

> than, my own death)—the human signifies the beginning of a new rationality beyond being. A rationality of the Good higher than all essence. An intelligibility of kindness.[28]

Levinas' reflection here could well be fittingly applied to much of the engaging drama in the film, *Children of a Lesser God*. Based on the play by Mark Medoff,[29] the film, directed by Randa Haines starring William Hurt (as James Leeds) and Marlee Matlin (as Sarah Norman),[30] is one of my favourite films that I watch several times a year. I have also used the film in discussion with my class in pastoral theology, and the film is readily available on Google Video (youtube.com). The film has also recently (May, 2010) been used in discussion by the *University of Oxford Division of Medical Sciences* to give both a faculty and medical student perspective on disability. So we see a movement that not only faculty and students in theology are drawing from "literature, film, and the visual arts," but also from Medicine.[31] These mediums themselves could be one way, among others, to bring the "science of medicine" together with "science of theology ." But our focus is on looking at bodiliness and forgiveness as two modes of truth in the hope of unveiling some of the drama of human existence.

Children of a Lesser God is a love story between James (Jim) and Sarah. James is the new teacher at a deaf school on an isolated island. Sarah is a beautiful, intelligent, mysterious and angry twenty-five years old deaf woman. She is a previous student of the school who is currently working there as a cleaner. Jim notices Sarah and wants to help. The principle of the school, Dr. Curtis Franklin, is quite content for Sarah to do demeaning work at the school and not to fulfil her potential. Through Jim's openness, determination and care, Sarah begins to respond, breaking through her anger and allowing her feelings to pour out a little from the protective shell, so to speak, that she has created over the years. The two soon fall in love. Yet, Jim, the teacher, feels there is a barrier in the relationship as the girl he loves refuses to ever speak. He needs her embodiment of voice, sound, growth and emotion. He wants to be joyful by her joys, to experience life through her experience, but he cannot get in—she refuses to let people in—so the teacher is hurt by the hurt of the one he loves. The film boils over with emotion and bodiliness. Naturally there is a confrontation, and Sarah voices a scream of words evidencing her woundedness, humiliation and shame. The teacher responds with a melancholic jubilation at the outburst of words ["Ahh … Hear my voice! … I am such a freak!"] that stuns him for a long moment. She runs away to her mother whom she has not seen in eight years. Eventually Jim discovers where Sarah is now working by meeting face-to-face with the mother. He watches Sarah working from a distance as a nail artist, but does not approach her. Later, the girl—becoming a woman—feels her loneliness and love for the teacher. At the end of the film, she approaches him at a school concert. After the concert, they come together privately to share moments of deep bodiliness and forgiveness where they confess to one another with heartfelt tears and embraces. Bodiliness and forgiveness become one, almost indistinguishable in the love between Sarah and Jim. Movies like *Children of a Lesser God* help to exemplify dramatic moments of life and give an indication of the sacredness of inter-personal relations.

---

[28] Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 228.

[29] Mark Medoff, *Children of a Lesser God* (New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1980).

[30] See http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090830/. Accessed 13/10/2010.

[31] See http://medhum.med.nyu.edu/blog/?p=119. Accessed 13/10/2006.

To Find a Place to Meet Not in Silence and Not in Sound

Let us now look in more detail at the last scene of the film that evokes the culmination of bodiliness and forgiveness, namely the truth that love is being a gift for another.

> *Sarah (Jim interpreting):* You have been angry since you were a little girl. You didn't want to hurt so you used your anger to push me away. You were sorry.
> *Jim:* I am sorry for hurting you.
> *Sarah:* But you learnt from me. You learnt that you can hurt, that you won't shrivel up and blow away. I don't want to be without you.
> *Jim:* I don't want to be without you either. You think that we can find a place to meet not in silence and not in sound?
> *Sarah (in sign language without Jim's interpretation):* I love you.
> *Jim (in sign language)*: I love you.

In Levinas' quote above, he states that, "the human signifies the beginning of a new rationality beyond being ." He exemplifies such rationality of ethical transcendence in five ways: "[1] love of the other, [2] responsibility for one's fellowman, [3] an eventual dying-for-the-other, [iv] sacrifice even as far as the mad thought in which dying for the other can concern me well before, and [5] more than, my own death ." So the path to holiness or the "intelligibility of kindness" evokes a sense of agape, otherness, death, sacrifice and transcendence. Levinas' five descriptions point to a way of life "beyond being," that is to say, an existence otherwise than competing self-interest and forgetting the face of the poor one in our midst. These five descriptions of the path to ethical transcendence, truth and even to the beautiful can help to guide us into interpreting the drama of bodiliness and forgiveness in *Children of a Lesser God*.

In the film, Jim discovers his own "disability" in relationship. He cannot control Sarah's bodiliness; moreover he must follow her pull of emotions. In the growing love for Sarah, Jim is wounded by her woundedness. Sarah will share memories of pain and hurt, of her hunger just to be like "hearing girls" or even to prove that she can be better than them. But all her efforts have seemed to remind Sarah that she is a child of a lesser God, so to speak. Sarah must withdraw to the silence where anger and depression tragically consume her self-worth. But Jim's love refuses to allow her to wallow in a long night of horror. Through love, he moves her to a sense of melancholy, culminating in the last scene. In the film, Jim is constantly a voice for Sarah, sharing with the audience her thoughts and feelings. He is Sarah's interpreter and lover, but must learn more and more how to interpret and to love. The dialogue of the last scene begins: "You have been angry since you were a little girl. You didn't want to hurt so you used your anger to push me away. You were sorry." Now, Jim is beginning to allow his heart to be touched by Sarah's heart.

Throughout much of the movie, Jim seems to listen more to his own needs and thoughts in his attempt to "teach" Sarah how to talk. Conflict can give vent to profound openings of vulnerability, sensibility and openness. Out of despair and frustration, Jim in a previous scene shouts and commands to Sarah, "Now come on! Speak to me! Speak! Speak to me!" Sarah responds with "passion and shrillness"[32] to finally give pain a voice. With shrills and screams she voices several inaudible sentences, but the ones the audience can discern evoke pathos and an overwhelming sense of heartache at the fracture of Sarah's

[32] James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Shadows of the Heart: A Spirituality of the Painful Emotions* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 168.

silence: "Ahh … Hear my voice! … I am such a freak!" These words are no doubt present in Jim's broken heart and crushed spirit (Ps. 34:18) when he encounters Sarah in the moving and last scene of bodiliness, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Sarah's audible and inaudible shrilling words where silence comes crashing into sound speak of the hope of giving pain a voice. Lam 1:12 could very well speak for Sarah what has been deeply repressed: "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger."[33] So when Jim encounters Sarah face-to-face at night just after a school concert, he can now see and hear Sarah's sorrow with a new inner voice within reverberating, "I am sorry for hurting you." From the otherness of agape, truth unveils in the form of bodiliness and forgiveness: Jim is hurt by the hurt of Sarah, and Sarah is hurt by the hurt of Jim. The mutuality of shared pain allows both to feel the surprise of being touched by the other and to allow this encounter to melt into love.

Sarah now says to (and through) Jim, "But you learnt from me. You learnt that you can hurt, that you won't shrivel up and blow away." Through love and responsibility, we can learn from one another how to hold our hurt and permit the other to journey into the pain of the heart, mind, body and soul. The Whiteheads point out, "Holding our hurt in a certain embrace—neither keeping it out of view nor clutching it in futile complaint—initiates a process of healing. This saving dynamic does not magically absolve the pain or restore our loss. But depression's hold is broken."[34] Sarah and Jim now begin in unity to voice their pain and to hold their hurt.[35] She learns the valuable lesson from Jim that she can take the risk to let out her pain and feelings from the hidden inner prison of silence. She knows now that by giving pain a voice and holding her hurt, she will not "shrivel up and blow away." And both Sarah and Jim begin to discover something remarkable together, namely that they are vulnerable and that they can be hurt. Theologically, we can perceive that they are not perfect or ever can be; they are humans, "lesser than God," yet resembling God's love and goodness (Gen 1:26).

Sarah and Jim learn to die a little for one another. Through a heartfelt devotion and mutual affection, they learn that they do not want to live without each other. Each must learn to die to the negative force of anger, control and pain. In the final scene, both lovers intone their grief, "singing the blues," as it were, to salve their pain and depression. We witness a "transformation of pain into shared grief."[36] Both are willing to almost die for one another. Levinas describes, "Responsibility for the other to the point of dying for the other!" is a "revelation" or "the fall of God into meaning" as "St. Augustine himself" experienced.[37] So the love between the self and God or between lovers involves a mutual dying for the other. St. Augustine teaches us that one way of dying for the other is through intimacy—"Let me know you, for you are the God who knows me; *let me recognize you as*

---

[33] The Whiteheads reflect in regards to Lamentations 1:12, "Three thousand years ago our religious ancestors modelled a different method for dealing with depression. In a time of disaster or confusion they would lift up their voices in complaint. Refusing to collapse into private sadness, they gave public expression to their pain. The Book of Lamentations records their distress." See Ibid., 167.

[34] Ibid., 170-171.

[35] Ibid., 171.

[36] Ibid., 168.

[37] Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 173.

you have recognized me"[38]—and confession—allowing "one's conscience to lie bare before your [God's] eyes."[39] And perhaps like St. Augustine's confession to God, both Sarah's and Jim's intimate confession to one another is a way to transform their forgiveness into the bodiliness of being a gift for the other.

Sarah and Jim are now ready to begin to sacrifice their lives and heart for one another. We can appreciate this movement where Jim voices, "You think that we can find a place to meet not in silence and not in sound?" This is the place of learning to hold the hurt, giving pain a voice and to journey into one another's heart, taking responsibility to the point of "dying for the other." This is a time where Sarah and Jim learn the fragility of their existence, suggesting that when they have reached the point of being able to die for one another, everything becomes possible—for they now have each other. The simplicity of existence and of bodiliness comes to mind through the mystery of the relation of love to suffering. There is no drug or solution to take away their pain and hurt; they have one another and this is their embodied and loving reality. Suffering for one another can now take on meaning. In the epilogue of his novel, *A Song For Nagasaki*,[40] Fr. Paul Glynn SM, gives the following insight into the "problem of suffering today":

> Our society has sought to solve the problem of suffering by removing pain. That is a negative solution, which can never be the whole solution. Our great-grandparents lived without pain-killers, air-conditioners, aeroplanes, paid holidays, etc. and yet, compared with our generation, they don't appear all that unhappy! Their society does not appear to me anywhere near as fractured and alienated, as unpeaceful and complaining as ours. I wonder if the physical pain in their lives did not help them be realists and face up to the deeper human issues—the ones Nagai called metaphysical or "beyond the physical ."[41]

Glynn's book was first published in 1988, just one year after the film, *Children of a Lesser God* appeared in Australia ("release date 26 February 1987").[42] Today, over twenty years later, things have not changed; perhaps they are worse with more and more options available to remove pain or to choose a life-style.[43] But there is always one option that remains universal because it is preconscious. This is the option to love. Only love can be bold enough to "find a place to meet not in silence and not in sound." The love for the other will stretch the self's bodiliness to reach "the possibility of dying for the other—a chance for holiness … opening the order of the human, of grace, and of sacrifice."[44] The joy of forgiveness taking place between Jim and Sarah allows them together to discover a new paradise or Garden of Eden. This is a time where everything is possible after experiencing great loss and suffering. In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas writes in relation to "*Time and the 'I'*":

> To understand the mystery of the work of time, we should start with the hope for the present, taken as a primary fact. Hope hopes for the present itself. Its martyrdom does

[38] St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 10, #1 (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books, 1974), 207.

[39] Ibid., Book 10, #2, 207.

[40] Paul Glynn SM, *A Song For Nagasaki* (Hunters Hill, NSW: The Catholic Book Club, 1989), 165.

[41] Ibid., 165.

[42] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090830/. Accessed 14/10/2010.

[43] Philip Hughes, *Putting Life Together: Findings from Australia Youth Spirituality Research* (Nunawading, Victoria: Fairfield Press, 2007), 61.

[44] Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 202.

> not slip into the past, leaving us with a right to wages. At the very moment where all is lost, everything is possible.[45]

The hope of Jim and Sarah has begun to transform the past of heartache into the presence of love and forgiveness. In their bodiliness, they remain hopeful through the hope of each other that they can "find a place to meet not in silence and not in sound." Where is this place, this Eden? Is it the reality of the love for one another on the hither side of perhaps "a beatific vision"? Paul Glynn, describing the experience of Takashi Nagai—the famous Japanese, Catholic medical doctor who experienced firsthand the atom bomb on his city of Nagasaki—provides an opening to appreciate how at the moment of losing everything can lead to "a beatific vision" of possessing everything:

> It was precisely when Nagai thought he had lost everything in the nuclear wilderness that he discovered he possessed everything! In that modern desert he experienced a kind of return to the Garden of Eden because he "was able to walk there with God ." Like his ancestors who composed the Nenbutso ["a kind of simple contemplative prayer … 'Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Jesus, Mary, Joseph'"][46] he discovered that the only reality is "the now", the here and now. He discovered that when one looks and accepts that reality as the one thing "really real," one can walk and converse with God in real prayer. The return to Eden is the beginning of paradise without end, the Beatific Vision.[47]

Glynn's reflection helps to give body to Levinas' pure philosophical thought. Where "hope hopes for the present itself," it can begin to accept the "only reality … the now," and discover a new epiphany of God, the other and the world. And where Sarah and Jim both sign language to one another, "I love you," they have touched upon transcendence, a little "beatific vision" of one another in all their weakness, bodiliness and need for forgiveness. They have now become each other's truth in their one reality of love. It is no longer a raw truth of anger, control and abandonment, but a good truth of the beautiful love they now hold for one another. In Christian theological terms, Sarah and Jim recognise each other as grace; they have broken through "the obstinacy of being"[48] to discover the delight of the interhuman and the humility of being-for-the-other.

Children of a Lesser God is no doubt a moving movie, bringing together bodiliness, being hurt, language and forgiveness. The film inspires reconciliation between body and soul through forgiveness. It teaches us that in the mystery of existence, our "embodied" knowledge is different to objectivity, facts and representations. We can come to existential and phenomenological truth through forgiveness and bodiliness. And the pathway to truth is such a deep sensibility that it must come from the preconscious. *Children of a Lesser God* unveils that in the preconscious order of the interhuman, we are capable of suffering through the suffering of the other, of enjoying through the enjoyment of the other and of laughing through the laughter of the other. The journey towards truth (and forgiveness) is

---

[45] Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. A. Lingis (London: Kluwer, 1988), 92.

[46] Describing the meaning and context of the Nagai's Christian ancestors' 'Nenbutso,' Glynn writes: "Buddhist Japan, as has been said, is proud of a long history of the Nenbutso, the quiet repetition, often on juzu prayer beads, of the prayer Namu Amda Butso, I depend on you utterly, Amida Buddha. The accounts of the Japanese Christians in the 17th century relate the widespread use of a kind of Christian Nenbutso when torture was used in order to break the spirit of Christians condemned to death. Some were bound to faggot stakes at Edo (now Tokyo), others were lashed to poles in freezing water in Sendai, others slowly scalded to death in the Unzen hot springs. They murmured over and over again, like a nenbutso, 'Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Jesus, Mary, Joseph,' in a kind of simple contemplative prayer." Glynn, *A Song For Nagasaki*, 152.

[47] Ibid., 164-165.

[48] Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 202.

difficult, even terrible as it is overwhelming for the emotions. But it reveals that we are living in the mystery of our bodiliness. So with the courage and confidence to face each day, and through the humility of forgiveness, a beautiful and good truth may come to mind: that love remains in the gift of oneself (one body) for another. And in terms of theological aesthetics, von Balthasar reminds us to discover a "Christological form":

> We can, therefore, say that theological aesthetics culminates in the Christological form (taking the word seriously) of salvation-history, in so far as here, upon the medium of man's historical existence, God inscribes his authentic sign with his own hand.[49]

In a final word, "we can, therefore, say," films like *Children of a Lesser God* help us to engage our "historical existence" to become a person in Christ. Films can do much to help us to understand the connection between salvation history, historical existence and our Christian personhood. Furthermore, films can hopefully teach us that our lives are meant to take on passionately the Christological form of responsibility for the Other even to the point of expiation. So through our interhuman existence of bodiliness and forgiveness, as Jim and Sarah show in *Children of a Lesser God*, we can one day hope to awake to God's signature formed upon our hearts.

Author: A regular contributor to AEJT, Glenn Morrison is philosopher, theologian, researcher, writer and senior lecturer at the University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle. He has a PhD from Australian Catholic University.

Email: glenn.morrison@nd.edu.au

© 2011 Glen Morrison

---

[49] Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord,* Vol. I, 646.