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**Night Light:
Beauty and Truth in the Films
of
M. Night Shyamalan**

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The phrase, “I see dead people,” has entered into the lexicon of popular culture. It was made famous, of course, by the film *The Sixth Sense*, the surprise hit thriller from 1999. For the writer-director, M. Night Shyamalan, the success of that film must have been a reassuring relief after the very limited success of his previous two films. Shyamalan’s first film, *Praying With Anger* (1992), was shot in India. It received only limited release on the festival circuit in North America. (It is the only one of his films that isn’t available on VHS or DVD in the United States.) It would be another six years before he had a film commercially released—*Wide Awake* (1998). Although *Wide Awake* was seen outside the festival circuit, it still had very minimal success. Thus, the commercial success of *The Sixth Sense*, just a year later, would have been especially and pleasantly surprising.

Shyamalan has gone on, of course, to write and direct three more films—*Unbreakable* (2000), *Signs* (2002), and *The Village* (2004). Only *Signs* has come close to the commercial and critical success of *The Sixth Sense*. It seems to me that Shyamalan has been somewhat shackled by the success of *The Sixth Sense*: people now expect his films to be thrillers and expect them to have a “twist” at or near

the end. A better guide to Shyamalan's films may be *Wide Awake*. If one begins with *Wide Awake* and views the films in sequence, then at least one consistent theme emerges—a concern with pain, suffering and evil. I want to focus on this sequence and to offer a reading of the films that draws attention to an aspect of their spiritual and philosophical significance. In particular I want to draw attention to what I take to be five strategies for dealing with and thinking about pain, suffering and evil. These strategies emerge from the sequence of the films. Finally, I will provide one moderately detailed case study; I will pay particular attention to the *Signs*.

Before looking at the films, however, few words may be in order about how I view films and about some of the rules of thumb that guide me. First, I make a rough and ready distinction between a movie that is an entertainment and one that is something more; I'll call the movie that is more than entertainment a "film." (An example of an entertainment might be last summer's *Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle*.) This is a rough and ready distinction to be sure, but it is useful nonetheless. Second, with a film, as with any work of art, it is important first to *receive* it and not to *use* it. This is a distinction that C.S. Lewis makes in *An Experiment in Criticism*. (I am indebted to my colleague, Richard McClelland, for reminding me of this work and thereby taking me back to it.) The idea is to take in the film for what it is, not for what you expected it to be or for what it's been packaged to be. Instead, really try to see the film; be a *sovereign knower* in Walker Percy's terms. Third, a film typically requires more than one viewing. I have heard that Robert Altman, the innovative American director, asks people who say they have seen one of his films (e.g., *Gosford Park*), "How many times?" If they say they've seen it only once, Altman retorts, "Then you haven't seen it." In general, I think

that Altman is right. If one thinks of watching a film as something like reading a book, especially a work of literature, then one can see why multiple viewings might be necessary. With a book, one can always flip back a few pages to remind oneself of what has gone before; with a film, the only way to “flip back” (*sans* VCR or DVD player) is to see the film again. Moreover, just as particularly good books stand up to or even demand multiple readings, a particularly good film will require, bear and reward multiple viewings. Obedient to this rule, I have watched each of Shyamalan’s films at least five times and some, e.g., *Signs*, I have watched ten or more times.

As I have viewed Shyamalan’s films, I have been struck, as mentioned before, by a recurring theme: at the heart of each film lies some significant pain, suffering or moral evil. And, in each film the story develops out of the characters’ response to this pain, suffering or moral evil. Moreover, as a handy heuristic, I think we can identify five different “response strategies” that Shyamalan explores in his art. So, to the films we turn.

For present purposes, I will refer to *Wide Awake* as Shyamalan’s first film even though *Praying With Anger* had preceded it by a half-dozen years. In this first film, the problem at the heart of the story involves Joshua Beal, a ten-year-old boy living in the suburbs of Philadelphia, and his attempt to deal with the death of his beloved grandfather. Throughout the film, Shyamalan effectively uses flashbacks to give us important details about the relationship between Joshua and his grandfather. One crucial flashback focuses on Joshua and his grandfather at Mass. It is here that Joshua first learns that his grandfather is ill. When the priest calls for parishioners who are ill to come forward for prayer and unction, Joshua’s grandfather quietly slips out of the pew

and goes forward. It is clear from Joshua's expression that prior to this he had had no idea that his grandfather was ill. In fact, as he later tells us, he had really had no idea that the people he loved would die. In another flashback, Joshua asks his grandfather if he is afraid about the illness and what is to come. The grandfather initially responds with confidence, but he goes on to admit to some fear. The grandfather's response to this fear is to back to his faith ("Faith will get you through") and to offer a version of the design argument for God's existence. As the film opens, which is after the grandfather's death, Joshua is beginning another school year at his parochial school—where "God is homework," as his best friend tells him. It is while at school that Joshua devises his plan: he wants to know what has happened to his grandfather, whether his grandfather is okay, so he will go on a search for God. This is the first part of the film and Shyamalan entitles it "The Questions." The second part of the film provides the sometimes humorous details of the quest and is entitled "The Signs." And the third part of the film is called, as you might surmise, "The Answers." By the end of the film, his best friend, David—of the "God is homework" remark—has moved from the unbelief of "Either there is no God or He doesn't really care that are looking for Him" to belief in a God who cares. And it is David who encourages Joshua to continue his quest at the very moment he is tempted to abandon it. The third part of the film concludes with the end of the school year. In an essay for his religion class, Joshua notes the changes that have gone on in him over the past year:

Before...Bullies were bullies for no reason. Weirdoes were just weird, and daredevils weren't afraid of anything. Before this year, people I loved live

forever. I was asleep. I spent this year looking for something and ended up seeing everything around me. You know what? I'm wide awake now.

He has found God in the everyday and he is ready to move forward into the new life that is opening up for him. But, Shyamalan doesn't quite leave it there. Throughout the film, there has been a young boy, seen on the fringes of the story, appearing in hallways at school. Joshua recognizes him, but doesn't know who he is. At the end of the film, Joshua comes face to face with the boy in a school hallway. As they stand in a sunbeam spotlight streaming through a high window, the young boy delivers a message to Joshua: Your grandfather is okay. Joshua concludes, "I believe that not all angels have wings."

It seems to me that Shyamalan is here exploring what we might call The Quest Strategy for dealing with pain, suffering and evil. When confronted with suffering and loss, one possibility is to go on a search for God, to see if there are signs that He has given us. It also seems clear to me that Shyamalan gives a very sympathetic treatment of this strategy and notes the ways in which it positively transforms Joshua and those around him. It is interesting to note the extent to which Shyamalan, both in this film and in his later films, uses explicitly Christian imagery to communicate the ideas with which he is working as an artist. In fact, the film's favorable treatment of Christianity, in particular Catholicism, drew the ire of the film critic for the *New York Times*, who seemed to think that it was a bit of Roman Catholic propaganda. Of course, Shyamalan is Hindu.

I've spent more time on this film than I'll spend on *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable* because I suspect that of all Shyamalan's films, it is the one that the fewest number of people have seen. So, I'll move quickly through *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable*, before devoting more attention to *Signs* and giving a quick overview of *The Village*.

The Sixth Sense is the story of Malcolm Crowe, a Philadelphia child psychologist. The story is set in motion when Malcolm is confronted at night in his home by Vincent Grey, one of his patients, who blames Malcolm for not helping him. Vincent shoots Malcolm and then commits suicide. Some time later, Malcolm begins to work with another child, Cole Sear, who is also experiencing problems; Cole says that he sees dead people and he is (quite naturally, I think) frightened. Malcolm eventually realizes that the source of Cole's problems is the same as Vincent's. Malcolm then devises a way to help Cole confront his problems and to restore his relationship with his mother. The solution is to enable Cole to move beyond his fear so that Cole is in turn able to help the dead, who have often suffered some terrible injustice, to rest. The film ends, of course, with the famous twist. Everyone probably knows the twist, but for those who don't, I won't spoil it. The twist forces Malcolm to face his own self-deception and to accept the truth. I'll call the strategy in this film, The Redemption Strategy.

In *Unbreakable*, the least commercially successful of the five films, Shyamalan tells the story of two men, Elijah Price and David Dunn. Elijah was born with a terrible medical condition: his bones are so brittle that they break when even a little force is applied to them. In fact, Elijah was born with most of his bones broken, apparently as the result of the coming through the birth canal. We meet David Dunn some years later

as he rides a commuter train from New York to Philadelphia. The train wrecks and kills everyone on board—everyone but David, who emerges unscathed. Elijah believes that there is great significance to David's survival and contacts him. He explains to David his theory that since he (Elijah) is so breakable, there must be someone else at the other end of the spectrum who is unbreakable. During the course of the film, David comes to accept that he is unbreakable and becomes a kind of everyman superhero. He also finds new energy to devote to restoring his family, which had been on the verge of falling apart at the beginning of the film. **Spoiler warning:** At the end of the film we discover that not only did Elijah have this theory about the breakable and the unbreakable, but that he has been actively involved in testing the theory. In order to test and validate his theory, Elijah has killed hundreds of people in at least three major "accidents"—a hotel fire, a plane crash and, now, a train wreck. Elijah attempts to handle his pain and suffering, to find meaning. But he does so in a way that abstracts from the pain and suffering of others and allows him to use them in his experiment. I'll call this The Technical Strategy.

Now we come to the final two films of the five—*Signs* and *The Village*. We really need to watch these films discuss them as we go along, but of course we don't have the time to do this. So, I will focus most extensively on *Signs* and there will quite definitely be spoilers as well as the multimedia show that advertising promised you. The film was marketed as an "alien invasion" film, which in a sense it was. And, of course, everyone was expecting there to be a "Shyamalan twist" at the end of the film, which in a sense there was. But the film seemed not to be exactly what many had expected and they were disappointed. Let me suggest a reading of the film that sees it as connected with

the three previous films and that emerges, I think, from the story itself. I'll give the bare bones of the story and then we can look at some key moments in the film.

Here are the bare bones: Rev. Graham Hess has lost his wife and is left with two young children, Morgan and Bo. Colleen Hess was killed in an accident when veterinarian Ray Reddy fell asleep at the wheel at (as he says) just the right moment and ran into her. The car severed her body and pinned her against a tree in such a way that (according to Officer Paski) "she is alive even though she shouldn't be." The daughter, Bo Hess, suffers from a phobia involving drinking water, and her older brother, Morgan, suffers from asthma. Merrill Hess, Graham's brother, is a failed minor league baseball player who has moved in with Graham and the children in an effort to help out. Graham has responded to his wife's death by leaving the church; he claims to have lost his faith. He has retreated with his family into the cozy confines of the family farm. Into this mix, throw some crop circles, animals behaving strangely, prowlers on rooftops in the night, and an alien invasion. The aliens attack the farmhouse and the family hides in the basement. They emerge thinking that all is clear, only to find a wounded alien in the house. The alien grabs Morgan, who has suffered an asthma attack. And then everything comes together and all is well. I'll term Graham's response to pain, suffering and loss, The Denial Strategy version 1.0. (Version 2.0 shows up in *The Village*.) The spiritual movement of the film is from The Denial Strategy (1.0) to new strategy.

So, let's look at some scenes. The first scene actually occurs late in the film. Shyamalan deliberately and quite rightly chooses to show us, via flashback, something about Colleen Hess's death only about halfway through the film. There are three such

flashbacks and the last one comes about 1 hour and 34 minutes into the 1 hour and 46 minute film. [ch 19 or 20]

SHOW CLIP

At this point in the film, we will have heard Colleen's final words before, in a crucial exchange between Graham and Merrill that leads into the first flashback. Now let's go back to the very beginning of the film. Notice the distortion as the camera looks out the window and down onto the back yard and the corn field. Notice also the shadow of the missing cross on the wall. [ch 2, about 2:10]

SHOW CLIP

So, we have a clear sign of Graham's loss of faith, the appearance of the crop circle signs, and the interesting words from Morgan that "God did it"—i.e., that God made the crop circle. We next get introduced to Bo's water phobia and the strange behavior of animals. We'll skip forward to the first sighting. [ch 4, about 12:00]

SHOW CLIP

Notice the way in which Shyamalan gives the viewer more information about Colleen's death and Graham's loss of faith. And note that this is immediately followed by Graham seeing the monster on the roof. His first explanation is that it is just some kids who seem to have been giving him trouble—no monsters, just kids prowling around. Merrill asks Graham if he is going to do something about the prowler/monster (which we know to be an alien) and then we get a humorous chase scene.

Officer Paski visits the farm to investigate the prowling, and it's while she is there that the news breaks that multiple crop circles have appeared in many places on the planet. Officer Paski suggests as she's leaving that the family come into town for a bit

of normalcy. Graham takes her advice and there is an interesting scene in the family car when someone on the radio talks about the crop circles as signs to be seen from above; the camera moves from the car interior to an overhead shot of the car as it drives through town. It strikes me as no accident that as the car and camera move, a church comes into view.

The next clip occurs after Graham has heard odd noises and seen something unusual moving in his cornfield. What is going on? The family turns on the TV to find that strange lights have appeared and are hovering over Mexico City. A crucial exchange occurs between Graham and Merrill as they sit in the dark watching TV.

[ch.10, approx. 41:15]

SHOW CLIP

This is the key to the film, of course. There are two groups of people. There are those who respond to “luck” with the idea that it is more than luck. It is a sign, it is evidence, and we are not alone. This produces hope. On the other hand, there are those who respond to “luck” with the idea that it is *nothing* more than luck. We are alone and this leads to fear. Merrill says he is the former; Graham says he is the latter.

There are scenes that I’d like to watch but that we’ll have to skip—e.g., Ray’s confessional. Even though he says he is no longer a priest, people keep making their confessions to Graham. This had already happened in the drugstore in town and it happens again when Ray Reddy, the driver in the accident that killed Colleen, sits inside his car and apologizes to Graham as he talks with him through the open window. We’ll also have to skip the scene with the alien trapped in the pantry, when Graham

cuts off a finger on one of its claws. We'll move ahead to the family meal, which Shyamalan calls the last supper. [ch. 16, approx. 1:10:55]

SHOW CLIP

Morgan declares his hatred for his father—a scene that is mirrored only a short time later when the family, under attack by the aliens, goes down into the cellar and locks itself in. An alien grabs at Morgan and Morgan has an asthma attack...and there is no medicine. [ch 18, approx. 1:23:20]

SHOW CLIP

I term this Graham's first confession. He finally acknowledges that he does believe that God exists; his problem is that he is angry with God, that he doesn't trust God. After all, his wife has been killed in a terrible accident, aliens are attacking the planet, he has a daughter who keeps leaving partially filled glasses of water all over the house, and his son may be dying from a severe asthma attack.

The family sleeps in the dark in the cellar and awakes to hear reports that the aliens are leaving, that three small villages in the Middle East have figured out a way to defeat them using very primitive means. The family comes up out of the cellar, but soon discovers that there is a lone, wounded and very hostile alien still in the house. This time, the alien succeeds in grabbing Morgan and it is at this point that Graham has the flashback with which we began these clips. Let's pick it up with what follows. [ch 20 and 21 up to closing credits]

SHOW CLIP

It is an interesting use of Christian symbolism that the "primitive means" for killing the aliens turns out to be pouring water over them—one has only to think of baptism

and the use of holy water to see this. And it is interesting that the final shot of the film is of a cross, not on the wall where one once hung but in the “architecture of the door,” as one critic put it.

But two things seem to have bothered people about this last bit of the film. First, the aliens aren’t all that frightening (especially given other alien movies that have been made and given that they are so easily killed!) and they aren’t on the screen all that long in what was thought to be an alien invasion movie. Second, the coincidences just seem to pile up too fast and too deep at the end; it just isn’t believable.

Let me suggest that the film, in the end, isn’t really about aliens in the usual sense. It is about monsters of a different sort; we might call them demons. (BTW: Did you notice the alien’s feet?) The real conflict in the film is in Graham’s soul. To which group does he belong? Does he belong to the group that thinks that when something happens it is luck and nothing more? Or does he believe that it is more than luck? According to Graham when he talks with Merrill about this, he believes that it is just luck and nothing more. He believes that we are alone, that there is no one looking out for us. His first confession has put an end to part of this: he believes that we are not alone. Can he still believe that there is someone looking out for us? The second confession, that someone did save Morgan, is the answer to that question. So, in effect the conflict with the aliens is an externalized expression of Graham’s interior struggle with his demons. Remember, for example, that Graham’s first glimpse of the aliens came in the context of his conversation with Bo about the fact that he still talked to Colleen even though she didn’t answer him. Colleen’s accidental and apparently pointless death is connected with the appearance of Bo’s “monster,” the alien.

Second, as for the ending being unbelievable, it occurs to me that Shyamalan is provoking the viewer to ask, Into which group do I fall? Why does it strike me as wildly implausible that such a thing could occur...even in a film about an alien invasion, which is already wildly implausible?! What do I think when accidents occur? Do I believe that I'm alone? Do I respond with fear (or maybe with relief)? Or do I believe that I am not alone, no matter what happens? Do I respond with hope? In effect, the climactic scene poses to the viewer one of the central concerns of the film: Is one a person of faith or not?

As for the theme that we've been tracing throughout all of Shyamalan's films—i.e., the concern with pain, suffering and evil—I've already stated that Graham's initial response is The Denial Strategy (ver. 1.0). By the end of the film, though, Shyamalan has introduced a new strategy: Graham puts on his collar and goes out to serve in the Church. In the Christian tradition, we might call this The Repentance Strategy.

That leaves only one film—*The Village*. This one has received even more negative comment, it seems, than did *Signs*. If we had time and a copy of the film, I'd have us talk through it. But we don't, so I won't. Here, though, is a quick summary of the film and a reading of it.

A gravestone marker in a funeral scene at the beginning of the film tells us that the year is 1897. Those in the village are surrounded by woods that they do not enter because they are inhabited by creatures known as "those of whom we do not speak." The elders of the village have come to this place from the towns, which they regard as evil places in which wicked people live. We eventually find out that each of the elders

has lost a loved one in the towns to some brutally violent act. The elders have retreated from the violent world in an attempt to protect innocence, especially that of their children. They have vowed never to go to the towns in the belief that this will protect them from pain, suffering, loss and evil. This is The Denial Strategy, version 2.0. **Now here come the spoilers:** In the end, the elders do not succeed in preserving innocence as they wanted to do. In fact, they are self-deceived in thinking that they have preserved it. Their chief means of attempting to preserve innocence is to use a lie, the effect of which can be seen in the faces of the terrified children of the village who hide beneath the flower when the forest creatures enter the village. The lie doesn't protect innocence; it is an assault on innocence. They do not escape pain, suffering, loss and evil. People die, animals are mutilated and killed, and murderous assault occurs.

A couple of final remarks and then we can open it up for discussion. On the reading I have given of Shyamalan's films, it seems to me that he is suggesting the general outline of a preferred response to pain, suffering and evil. He is critical of the Technical Strategy of *Unbreakable*—Elijah's technique of testing his theory is horrifying. He is also critical of the Denial Strategies of *Signs* and *The Village*. Rather his artistic vision seems to support the Search, Redemption and Repentance strategies. The films are exploring a spiritual landscape and in that landscape there are some places in which it is better to dwell than others.

Finally, we should remind ourselves that even if one good reading of these films is that they revolve around the themes of pain, suffering and evil, strategies for responding to these phenomena, and spiritual struggle, we should not go to the next

Shyamalan film expecting to encounter these themes again. Rather, we must be ready to receive the art—especially from an artist as talented as Shyamalan.