

**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 two previous 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), which 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 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 than *The Sixth Sense* 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—strategies that emerge from the sequence of the films. Finally, I will provide one moderately detailed case study; I will pay particular attention to *Signs*.

Before looking at the films, however, a 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*.¹ The idea is to take in the film for what it is, not for what you expected it to be or even for what it's been packaged to be. Instead, one must try truly to *see* the film, to 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,

¹ I am indebted to my Gonzaga University colleague and fellow-film enthusiast for reminding me of Lewis's work and for thereby taking me back to it.

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.

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 them 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 the child’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 both about the illness and what is to come. The grandfather initially responds with confidence, goes on to admit to some fear, and then returns to his faith. He says, “Faith will get you through,” and offers 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 you 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.²

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 seems to recognize him, but doesn't know who he is. At the end of the film, he 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."

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. 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, unabashedly 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—even though Shyamalan is Hindu.

² As quoted by Tim Drake in "Fear of Evil: The 'Catholic' imagination of M. Night Shyamalan," *The Catholic World Report* (October 2002), pp. 46-50. Drake offers an excellent analysis of Shyamalan's films.

I have devoted more space to *Wide Awake* than I will devote to either *The Sixth Sense* or *Unbreakable* because I suspect that of all Shyamalan's films, it is the one that the fewest number of people have seen.

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 former patients, who blames Malcolm for not helping him. Vincent shoots and wounds Malcolm, and then kills himself. The story resumes as, some time later, Malcolm begins to work with another child, Cole Sear, who is also experiencing problems at school and home. 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, and he devises a way to help Cole confront his fears and to restore his relationship with his mother. The solution is to enable Cole to move beyond his fear so that he is in turn able to give rest to the dead, who often have suffered some terrible injustice. The film ends with the famous twist, which I will not spoil. The twist forces Malcolm to face his own self-deception, and to see and accept the truth about himself and the role he has played in helping to save Cole. I will 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, he was born with most of his bones broken, apparently as the result of the coming through the birth canal. The story picks up some years later, when we meet David Dunn 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, so he contacts him and explains to David his theory that since 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. At the end of the film we discover that not only did Elijah have a theory about the breakable and the unbreakable, but that he has been actively and horribly involved in testing the theory. He has attempted to handle his pain and suffering, to find meaning, but he has done so in a way that abstracts from the pain and suffering of others and allows him to use them in his experiment. I will call this The Technique Strategy.

Now we come to the final two films of the five—*Signs* and *The Village*. We really need to watch and discuss these films as we go along, but we do not have the time to do this today. So, I will focus most extensively on *Signs* and there will quite definitely be spoilers. 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, a way of reading the film that emerges, I think, from the story itself. I will give the bare bones of the story and then focus on some key moments in the film.

Rev. Graham Hess has lost his wife and been 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.

After the opening credits, the first camera shot is one in which we are looking out of an upstairs window and looking down on a back yard and a corn field. As we look through the glass (darkly?) we notice how the scene is distorted by the glass. The glass hides as well as reveals the reality outside the house. As the camera continues to pan, we notice on a wall the faint outline of a cross; a cross or crucifix had once hung on the wall, but hangs there no more. Graham awakes suddenly to find that his children are not in their bedroom. Their cries take him to the cornfield outside. When he finds the children amid the rows of corn, Morgan tells him that "God did it" and then directs Graham's attention to the crop circles in the cornfield. Is Morgan right? Has God done it? Is God saying something to Graham and his family? At this point in the film, we dismiss such thoughts as outlandish.

Another key scene occurs when Bo wakes Graham in the middle of the night with the words, “There’s a monster outside my room. May I please have a drink of water?” As Graham tucks Bo back into bed, they speak of Graham’s habit of talking with his dead wife, Colleen, even though she does not answer him. Almost immediately after he says this to Bo, he sees the monster/prowler/alien on the roof the barn. Colleen’s death and the monster’s appearance are thus connected.

It turns out that crop circles have appeared not only in the Hess family cornfield but in fields all around the world. As they watch television reports about crop circles and mysterious lights hovering in the night sky over Mexico City, Graham and Merrill have the key dialogue in the film. Graham says that there are two kinds of people in the world. 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 identifies with the former group, while Graham says that he falls into the latter group.

The aliens attack all across the planet, but we see only the attack on the Hess farmhouse. The family retreats into the cave- and grave-like cellar. It is in the cellar that an alien tries to grab Morgan and thereby sets off an asthma attack for which the family has no medicines readily available. Graham tries to talk Morgan through the asthma attack—and in the midst of this, he tells God that he hates Him.

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.

When the family awakes in the cellar the next morning, they hear on the radio reports that the aliens are leaving, that *three* (!) small villages in the *Middle East* (!) have figured out a way to defeat the aliens by using some unnamed but very primitive means. The family emerges from the cellar, but a lone, wounded and very hostile alien is still in the house. This time the alien succeeds in grabbing Morgan and then attempts to spray Morgan with a poison gas.

Graham has a flashback to Colleen's death, where her final words were "Tell Merrill to swing away" and "Tell Graham to see." Graham does see—his brother's trophy baseball bat hanging on the wall—and he tells Merrill to swing away at the alien. In the process of hitting the alien, one of Bo's half-filled water glasses tips over and spills its contents onto the alien, whose skin is burned by the water. 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 the symbolism. The imagery is reinforced when there are three glasses of water whose contents spill onto the alien in the home and finally kill it.

In the meantime, Morgan's asthma has prevented him from breathing in the poison gas the alien sprayed on him. Morgan awakes to ask, "Did someone save me?" Graham tearfully responds, "Yes, someone did."

The film concludes with an undistorted view through new glass in the windows through which we had seen the opening images of the film. Graham enters the bedroom as he finishes dressing and puts on his priest's collar. Off-camera one hears

the sound of children laughing. 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 Tim Drake put it.

Two things seem to have bothered people about this last bit of the film. First, the aliens are not all that frightening (especially given other alien movies that have been made and given that they are so easily killed!) and they are not 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 is not believable.

Let me suggest that the film, in the end, is not really about aliens in the usual sense, but about monsters of a different sort; we might call them demons. (If/when you watch the film, be sure to 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: Does one believe that there are accidents, perhaps only accidents? Or does one believe that there are no accidents? The beauty of Shyamalan's images can bring us to face a truth about ourselves.

As for the theme that we have been tracing throughout all of Shyamalan's films—i.e., the concern with pain, suffering and evil—Graham's initial response is what we can term The Denial Strategy. 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, which in the Christian tradition we might call 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 would 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 another version of The Denial Strategy. 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, one effect of which can be seen in the faces of the terrified children of the village who hide beneath the floor when the forest creatures enter the village. The lie does not protect innocence; it is an assault on innocence. The villagers do not escape pain, suffering, loss and evil. People die, animals are mutilated and killed, and murderous assault occurs.

So, on the reading I have given of Shyamalan's films, he is suggesting the general outline of a preferred response to pain, suffering and evil. He is critical of the Technique Strategy of *Unbreakable*—Elijah's technique of testing his theory is horrifying. He is also critical of the Denial Strategy as it appears in *Signs* and *The Village*. Rather his artistic vision seems to support the Search, Repentance and Redemption 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. There is Beauty in these places and when we embrace this Beauty, we will also embrace the Truth.

(Revised, 27 December 2004)