

Don't Leave Your Brains at the Box Office

– On Nurturing Prudence, Not Prudishness

by Steven Garber, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow, C.S. Lewis Institute

I am often in the position of arguing for the truthfulness of the Christian view of life and the world. My teaching and my writing seem to focus on the questions: Is it really true? What difference does it make?

Recently I gave a lecture where I tried to weave together the meaning of several films, always making the matter of truthfulness the central issue. In the question time that followed, a thoughtful adult said, "I have watched a lot of films over the years, but I have never thought of asking the question: 'Is it true?'"

As I work with that question and its relevance for Christian discipleship in our generation, I come back again and again to an essay by Harry Stein which first appeared in *Esquire* in 1980. Teasingly titled, "The Big A: Like to sneak around, tell lies, feel guilty? Try adultery," it is now one of many such delights in *Ethics (and other liabilities)*. Stein is one of the best writers doing "street-level" ethics, in large part because he is characteristically honest about what he sees and hears. "The Big A" acknowledges that the image is not the reality. The films, the music, and the advertisements simply do not portray the meaning of adultery and assorted other unfaithful relationships.

I thought about this again this last spring when I spent an evening with my twelve year-old daughter looking for a swimming suit. My wife had taken her to the local mall, and they had come back empty-handed and frustrated. There just didn't seem to be many good choices for girls who wanted something pretty but not promiscuous. So I offered an evening at the regional "mega mall."

After walking through the five huge anchor department stores, we concluded that French-cut and phosphorescent was all there was. At the last store I protested to the manager, asking "Do you expect us to be happy with these choices?" With a shrug of the shoulders, she said a thousand words about her lack of responsibility.

We eventually found a sporting-goods store with a splendid supply of Speedos, the classic racing suit. My daughter was very happy with the styles and colors, and she made a choice which pleased both of us.

As we walked out of the mall, she and I talked about "the search for the swimming suit" and what it meant about growing up in America. We ranged over the music, the billboards, the magazine, and TV advertisements...all of which have one message on this subject: there is a direct link between promiscuity and happiness. As the bumper sticker baldly puts it, "Sworn to fun! Loyal to none!"

In a hundred ways our culture teaches our young a big lie about the meaning of marriage. Nowhere on the billboards driving home did we see the reality of the "The Big A" and the sneaking and lying and guilt which are always and everywhere a part of unfaithful relationships. In fact, where in our consumer culture do we ever see the presupposition of promiscuity followed to its own logic? Instead it is one subtle lie after another. When all is said and done, the message is clear: being sexually faithful is no fun!

Films are a fascinating expression of this, as they both reflect and promote a society's understanding of life and the world, i.e., its assumptions and postulates. Every film does both, though not because the directors are propagandists, usually. Rather it is inherent in the very meaning of art: painting, sculpture, music, and film. So, an important question for us is, "What vision of human sexuality and marital responsibility is reflected and promoted in the films of our day?"

Sometimes it is not so much what is said, but what is not said. Take *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* for example.

Based on the 13th-century *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, this final Indiana Jones film takes us back to his childhood in the early decades of this century, and explains the origins of his archaeological interests, e.g., his archaeologist father (Sean Connery) has spent his life in pursuit of the Holy Grail. Very loosely, the film is an adventure-filled account of Indiana and his father finding the ancient cup.

At a certain point in the story, father and son end up in an Austrian castle which is overrun with Nazis. One in particular, a beautiful, blonde double agent, causes their downfall. The audience knows something that the Joneses don't: she has slept with both father

and son. At a critical moment, the unsuspecting son is suckered; but surprisingly, the father knows better.

When they have time to reflect on what happened, Indiana asks his father how he knew that she was a Nazi? Without a blink, he acknowledges, "She talks in her sleep." The next few seconds communicate volumes about the meaning of sexual faithfulness, in and out of marriage. There is no dialogue. What passes between father and son is a simple smile. Period. No comment. No judgment. Only a smile.

Spielberg and company want us to smile too. Do we? If we do, we give up too much, as we betray our deepest commitments about reality, and the meaning of marriage. And why is that? Because we really do live in God's world, after all. Even Harry Stein knows that. Like to sneak around, tell lies, feel guilty? Try adultery. In other words, break God's laws... and they will break you.

The Last Crusade is a poor imitation of the original, and a universe away from its moral vision. For seven centuries, its unknown author has inspired countless others who have tried to retell the incredible adventure of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table, and their pursuit of the Holy Grail. Originally written as a guide to discipleship (see the Penguin Classics version), it told the tale of Lancelot, Galahad, and others, who in the name of Christ free maidens in distress, fight vicious knights, and keep themselves from sexual sin.

Did you get that?

Once again, slowly. They keep themselves from sexual sin. Simply, plainly, on the basis of the cross of Christ, they remember to remember the power of the resurrection to deliver them from temptation. This happens on a number of occasions. And there are no punches pulled; the sexual pressure is on! Perceval provides an incredible example of this, when he finds himself lured into the arms of a seductress who has planned long and hard for his fall. At the critical moment, he sees the hilt of his sword—which resembles a cross—and "he came to his senses.... Gracious Lord Jesus Christ, let me not perish here but succor me by Thy grace or I am lost!"

Lancelot's adultery with Queen Guinevere adds another and deeper dimension to this study in the moral meaning of marriage. The most virtuous of all the knights—brave and kind in every way—he has compromised himself with Arthur's queen, and no one knows. But then, along the quest, he falls flat on his face for the first time in his life. As he tries to recover, he meets a holy man who asks question after question, and finally uncovers Lancelot's sin.

His final question is this: what are you going to do about it, Lancelot? Penitence won't take you very far; a

true repentance is required. Will you be faithful to Christ, or not? It is a critical question for people in every generation, young and old alike.

I would guess that our children, like most American children, are more familiar with Indiana Jones than they are with Lancelot. And yet if they are to grow into people whose characters are marked by real courage—not the hollowed-out version of Indiana Jones—then we will need to nurture in them a moral imagination which can distinguish between prudence and prudishness.

The one is a virtue shaped by a biblical way of life, the wisdom and discipline of Proverbs 1, and therefore is integrally bound up with truth. The proverbs are given "for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair" (1:3). Throughout we are taught that there is a profound relation between prudence and doing good: "A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it" (22:3). Because his moral imagination is so shaped by the Scriptures, he is not taken in—he sees the world as it really is—in contrast, the fool walks right on in to a moral mess, probably taking others with him in his suffering.

The portrait of a life rooted in the truth is told in a way that none can miss, in the story of the young man out for an evening walk (chapter 7). He was not planning on adultery that night, but of course that is in the very nature of seduction. His lack of prudence and discipline, though, made him an easy mark for the adulteress, whose invitation—"Come, let's drink deep of love till morning; let's enjoy ourselves with love!"—he takes all too seriously, as if love was what was really being offered. He is compared to an ox going to the slaughter, a deer stepping into a noose, and a bird darting into a snare.

Perhaps the most respected scholar of "the ethic of virtue" is Josef Pieper. In his monograph, *Prudence*, he maintains that "Prudence means that realization of the good presupposes knowledge of reality. He alone can do good who knows what things are like and what their situation is." So, again, prudence—seeing the world truthfully, as it really is—gives us the possibility of doing good. The morally naive young man of Proverbs 7 was more like Indiana Jones than Perceval.

But prudence is not prudishness. It is not easy, but we must teach our children the difference and the difference it makes. We are not shamed by God's good gifts of sexuality. Of all people on the face of the earth, we should be the first to celebrate them. Nakedness is a wonderful gift of a good God, but like all of God's gifts, it has a time and place.

Prudence is seeing the world in a truthful way. It is seeing the world the way it really is, understanding the

meaning of sexual faithfulness and unfaithfulness. We know that “The Big A” always includes sneaking around, telling lies, and feeling guilty – and so we are not taken in.

A few summers ago, I was teaching in a residential study program, and mentioned that the film *Dangerous Liaisons* was a more truthful film than most I had seen. Some eyebrows raised. What could he possibly mean? Weren't there bottoms bared? I make no defense of the rawness, and as a film I commend it to no one for precisely that reason. And yet...the marrow of its message is that people live in God's world after all. Sexual unfaithfulness finally breaks the heroine (Glenn Close), and she comes to see a little bit of her humanness as a woman made in the image of God.

The very same point is made in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* which is based on the novel by Milan Kundera. Can sex be divorced from love? Can love be nourished without fidelity? Never in God's world, the film maintains. All is bared, once again, which is sad, for many reasons. And yet...the movie tells the truth about the meaning of marriage. That is not a small thing in a world like ours.

There are few with so keen an understanding of life and love and lies as the British (and Christian) poet Steve Turner, who put it like this in “The Lying Blues:”

*Looking at the adverts
They were lies all dressed to kill
Looked at the adverts
They were lies all dressed to kill
I dropped my guard to give
a laugh out loud
And they came in and took my will*

Sometimes the lies are so subtle, that we don't see them until it's too late. Remember Indiana Jones. But we lose too much – our very selves, actually – when we leave our brains at the box office.

What kind of questions do we ask, as we listen and read and watch? The next time you see a film, carry a note pad in with your popcorn. On it, write the words, “Is it true?” And then take notes as you watch. I have taken three groups of friends recently to see *Howard's End*, the E.M. Forster novel-made-film. Its large themes of responsibility and grace are shaped by a moral universe where human beings make real choices which have real consequences. Each time we have gone for ice cream, and “a good discussion was had by all...” Central to the conversations was the question, “Is it True?”

What questions are our children learning to ask? A few months ago I invited about fifteen 5th-7th grade friends of my children to go to the recently released

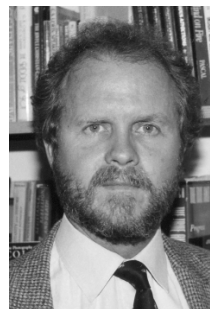
French film *My Father's Glory*. It is a wonderful reminiscence of childhood, by Marcel Pagnol, who became France's best-known film director. Afterwards we all came back to our house for pizza and a conversation. I asked two questions: what in the film was true to how God made the world? What in the film was not true to how God made the world? We had a rousing discussion for a half hour. The questions, in themselves, are shaped by beliefs about the meaning of life and the world, and that is very intentional. The children are being trained to think Christianly...about music and books and films.

In a profound way, good questions are rooted in good character. They are habits of heart and mind... characteristic questions flowing out of characteristic belief and behavior. As people and parents, we need to care about both. Sometime, someday, our children will be on their own, trying to live in but not of the world. Will they have the tools they need? Are we helping them to discern between wisdom and foolishness, between truth and lies?

Good questions and good character. Together they give our children the skills to negotiate a world where the lies are all dressed to kill.

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Dr. Steven Garber

Steven Garber is a Senior Fellow for the C.S. Lewis Institute. The author of The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years, he speaks widely on the relation of learning to life. He is also a Senior Fellow with The Clapham Institute in Annapolis, Maryland, as well as Fellow and Lilly Faculty Scholar at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. A native of the great valleys of Colorado and California, he is married to Meg and with their children (and several chickens) lives in Virginia, where they are members of The Falls Church (Episcopal).

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8001 Braddock Road, Suite 300 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

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