

Columbine, a documentary many believe will be the most watched and significant documentary ever made. Readers for whom this movie resonates can witness for what they believe by taking friends to see this movie. Although they might disagree with Moore's perspective, they must still recognize the movie as a persuasive and artistic presentation. If a credible opposing side exists, let a worthy documentarist come forward and make the movie.

Erik Erikson, the late great developmental psychologist, constructed what became known as the eight stages of life. Each stage involves a conflict that, if satisfactorily resolved, builds toward a successful resolution of the next stage's conflict. The last stage, which is where, to my astonishment, I find myself, involves the conflict of integrity vs. despair.

Two films that help us to look squarely but sympathetically at what it means to grow old with integrity and what it means to be still alive are the popular *On Golden Pond* and *Wasn't That a Time*, a documentary of a folk singing group called the Weavers and their last concert.

I will never forget the surprising and intensely moving communion service at the end of *Places in the Heart*. That scene made the idea of Christ's Kingdom, so misunderstood by his disciples, become real in a small town in Texas suffering through the Great Depression.

I have saved the two best movies for last. A most moving portrayal of simple love, which results in redemption, is found in the film *Tender Mercies*. If you haven't seen this movie get the DVD and watch it. If you think it too slow and somewhat boring, go see the latest James Bond film and enjoy the contrast, but when you tire of the nonstop action return to *Tender Mercies*.

Watch and listen as Mac Sledge, a recovering alcoholic country singer played by Robert Duvall in an Oscar-winning performance makes one of the most poignant movie speeches ever made. While distractedly hoeing in his garden, he speaks of his daughter's death in an automobile accident caused by her drunken husband. "I don't trust happiness," Mac concludes, "I never have and I never will." However, redemption, followed by happiness he has never known, does come to Sledge.

A number of Christian songs depict Jesus as a good friend. Some even suggest that he is our only true friend. I don't know exactly what it means to describe our relationship with the Divine as friendship. But I do know that the only way I can understand, worship, feel the presence of, or experience the Divine in any way is through another human being.

Of all films ever made, *Dead Man Walking* most effectively portrays God's love and unconditional

Looking for a Good Movie?

Christian Movie Reviews on the Web

By Lemuel Bach

Many Christians enjoy watching movies, but they worry about which ones are "good" in several senses of the word. The following Web sites may be one way for readers to find the best movies.

ChristianityToday.com

I found ChristianityToday.com's movie reviews fiendishly difficult to locate. Usually, if I want to read about a movie online I go to MSN.com, click on "entertainment," and then go to "movies" to be quickly linked to pictures and short reviews. But on *Christianity Today's* homepage, the category "entertainment" conspicuously lacks the subcategory "movies."

Using ChristianityToday.com's search engine, the visitor can type in either a movie title or "film forum" and find reviews. Then they can read the most current ones, all of which are written by Jeffrey Overstreet.

Overstreet's reviews are surprisingly well-balanced, probably because he quotes a wide variety of sources, both secular and religious, in favor of and against whatever film he reviews. These sources vary from *Rolling Stone* to *Focus on the Family*.

Overstreet adds his own opinion, which is connected both to his Christian beliefs and to his knowledge of good films. He even recommends age groups appropriate for films under review.

HollywoodJesus.com

I disliked this page at first, and loudly expressed that opinion to others.

This site tries to cater to a wide audience. The home page says, "Everyone welcome! Hindus, Jews, Christians, Wiccans, Muslims, New Agers, Atheists, Agnostics, Gay, Straight. Come in. Enjoy. Post your views!"

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mercy. In the movie, Susan Sarandon, who plays the true story of Sister Prejean, a courageous nun, whispers in the ear of a convicted murderer played by Sean Penn on his way to the death chamber, "Matthew, the last face you see will be the face of love."

The Big Question

I have described a lifelong love affair with movies. This is an important part of my life, but not the part I once considered most important. My greatest concern was how to answer the big question. The big question can be asked in many different ways but always seeks to answer that which is most basic and helps us gain insight into the one best way of living, the one key that gives meaning to our apparently random and chaotic existence.

Where did we come from and when? What is the meaning of and reason for evil? Why does a blood sacrifice get rid of evil? What exactly happens when we die? Am I certain that my church's complex and literal scenario of the Second Coming, the New Jerusalem, the final attack by the wicked, the affirmation of God's plan by the righteous, and the live-happily-ever-after conclusion will happen just as my church has predicted?

If these elements are all or in part not literally true, then what *are* the meanings of our lives? How do we explain the tragedies around us? How do we relate to the miracle of birth and the apparent finality of death? What is salvation and how do we obtain it?

When I attended one of the Church's boarding academies, one of our week of prayer speakers asked the big question. Each meeting, he sang in a nice tenor voice, "Are You Ready for Jesus to Come?" I had no doubts as to what that meant. It meant quitting sinning and knowing what sin was. But I had tried in the past, and two weeks was probably my record for sinlessness. So I approached each week of prayer with an attitude of "not this time." Then the pressure would become too much and I would move from grudging reluctance to tearful surrender and start the cycle once more. This time, I would succeed; I could not bear to fail again.

Later, someone described this as legalism and told me that I could let God answer the big question. All I needed to do was spend time each day with my devotions—early morning was recommended—and I would lose the desire to sin because God would abide in me. For

years I tried to develop a devotional life so that I could experience what others testified to.

I concluded that salvation depended on an introspective approach and that I would surely know it if Christ truly abided in me. I experienced some of the angst and terror that Calvin's followers in Geneva must

have felt as they frantically searched their souls to see if they were among the elect or damned. I actually longed for the days of simple legalism when I knew what was expected of me.

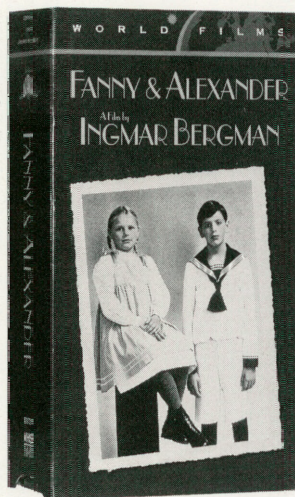
During this period, the pastor of a college church I attended told me that the answer to the big question was easily found. The explanatory principle that answered everything was the great controversy between Christ and Satan. I had become more contentious through the years, and this explanation, which I thought simplistic and pious, was more than I could take. I told the pastor that in the

many statistics and research design courses I had taken I had learned that a plus/minus theory could explain everything after the fact, but predict nothing in advance.

I then tried another approach. I knew that the two basic building blocks of our church were crumbling under constant attack. The first was the authority of Ellen White, the nineteenth-century founder of our church, who was thought to have a prophetic gift. She herself never claimed to be equal to the Bible prophets, but she had great influence in our church, even long after her death. Her counsel convinced me that I would be lost unless I developed a consistent and satisfactory devotional life.

Many others in our church were living lives of guilt and/or rebellion because of the way Ellen White's writings had been interpreted. The fact that she was dead and could neither defend nor explain herself made it easy for those in authority to use her as an instrument of control. Finally, it was shown incontrovertibly that her writings were not all original. For me, her writings then lost much of their former authority, which had been greater than Scripture because they were more explicit and, unlike cultures reflected in the Bible, originated from one more like ours.

The second building block was the apocalyptic expectation of the soon-coming Savior. Our church came out of the nineteenth century Millerite movement, which, using a complicated series of dates derived from Daniel and Revelation, predicted that the Second



Coming of Christ would occur in 1844. Events of the time—including the terrible Lisbon earthquake in 1755; the Dark Day of 1780, a frightening event in New England probably triggered by forest fires to the north; and a spectacular meteor shower in 1833—were all thought to be signs of the end.

However, Christ did not return in 1844, and the Adventist Church grew out of the disappointment and went on to remarkable growth and success. But the Millerite dates have lost their prophetic cachet as they receded into the past. A state of extreme readiness could not be maintained as the generations sped by.

So I turned to the living church, the community of believers of which my paternal and maternal families had been part for four generations. When I looked at our hospitals, schools, mission program, program for disaster relief, and media savvy, I was proud to be an Adventist. I felt that the answer to the big question could be found in the “community of faith,” to use a term beloved by theologians. I resolved to work within my community, to help make it worthy of the exalted status I had given it.

But, to my disappointment, I found that community riven by mistrust and accusations of heresy. I wanted the community to be the standard for justice, honesty, mercy, tolerance, and support for one another, and, finally, for humility as opposed to self-importance. But I found the opposite.

Examples are many, but I will limit myself to only a few. For example, one top-level church leader called religion teachers in Adventist colleges “a cancer that must be excised.” In addition, my church, which had long prided itself on not having or conforming to a constricting creed, but of following instead the Bible as a living document, held a heresy trial. A jury of “peers,” that is, religion teachers, found him guilty, even though the members of the jury were not honest about their own far less orthodox views. Perhaps most disappointing was the loss of perspective and balance in the community and its reaction with fury to mild and healthy efforts to satirize these developments. Here were shades of Erasmus.

If the church community did not hold the answer to the big question, where could I find it? I attempted to integrate philosophy, particularly epistemology, with my basic Christian orientation. How do we know that anything is true? I reviewed once more the notes from a seminar I took from Karl Popper, perhaps the twentieth century’s preeminent philosopher of science. He taught us that we could never know for certain what was true but we could be quite certain of

Flashing lights and rainbow-colored letters accompany this welcome. Still, the site is easy to use. Pictures from movies, each a link, are spread out on the home page. A single click on a picture takes the visitor to an enormous page for each movie, which includes other pictures, written reviews, and theatrical previews.

These reviews don’t seem as spiritual as those on *Christianity Today’s* Web site because, I think, the intended audience is so broad. Of course, that broadness might be good at times. For example, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* doesn’t have an especially spiritual message, and one shouldn’t try to force one out of it. On the other hand, the reviewers use *Solaris* to bring up questions about life after death, for example, because *Solaris* itself raises such questions.

CinemaInFocus.com

This is a user-friendly site. Just click on “movie reviews” to see an extensive list of movies, each reviewed in this site’s consistent style. In addition to being user friendly, CinemaInFocus.com is also visually simple, unlike the garish and sometimes distracting HollywoodJesus.com.

The reviews on this site discuss the basic idea and story of each movie. Then, near the end, they relate their reviews to spiritual questions or ideas. The reviews often raise questions about human nature, the nature of the universe or of God, or how to live a good life. The reviewers even add numbered discussion questions, giving their essays the feel of Bible studies. This is one site that *did* raise tough questions about *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*.

That’s a quick look at places on the Web for Christian movie reviews. In *Titanic*, I wept when Rose said that Jack had saved her in “every way a woman can be saved.” Not only do I believe movies can evoke emotion, I also believe they can express Christian beliefs.

Lemuel Bach is a senior education major at Pacific Union College.

those things that are false.

I drew some comfort from these ruminations, but this was an intellectual odyssey without color, imagery, or spirituality, and thus lacked the power to motivate and satisfy. I turned once more to the movies and, surprisingly, found a satisfactory answer to the big question.

Ingmar Bergman as Theological Mentor

I had seen *Fanny and Alexander*, a beautifully filmed epic in Swedish with English subtitles, twice. But not until I viewed it the third time did I recognize the way it explicitly sought to answer the big question. The movie is autobiographical, as are many of Bergman's films.

Alexander is a young boy and Fanny his younger sister. They are raised in an extended family with lots of color, noise, food, celebrations, and love. There is also a considerable amount of dysfunctional behavior. Alexander's father runs a theater, which includes action on a life-sized stage and a small puppet stage. The little world of the puppets fascinates Alexander.

This idyllic existence ends when Alexander's father dies and his mother marries the handsome but stern bishop. The colors in the film turn stark, and the life and music disappear. As in the film, Bergman's experience with Christianity left him bitter. For Bergman, Christianity was the last place to seek answers to the big question. But Bergman's film, although rejecting the Christianity he grew up with for lacking the ultimate answers, looks to other worldviews. Judaism, non-Judeo-Christian religions, and paganism all get their turn with their own color and imagery. But they all fall short.

Near the end of the film, Gustav Adolf, an uncle to Fanny and Alexander and the oldest surviving son in his family, gives a speech at the close of the extended family's beautiful and sumptuous Christmas dinner. Gustav has previously been described as a man who is especially "kind to young women," but despite his well-known flaws the family is prepared to listen.

"My dear, dear friends," he begins.

"I am more moved than I can say. My wisdom is simple and there are people who despise it. But I don't give a damn. (Forgive me Mama. You think I am talking too much. I will be brief.) We Ekdahls have not come into the world to see through it. We are not equipped for that. We might just as well ignore the big things. We must live in the little world. We shall be content with that. . . .

"Let us be kind, generous, affectionate, and good. It is necessary and not at all shameful to

take pleasure in the little world. Good food, gentle smiles, fruit trees in bloom, waltzes. . . . My dearest friends. I am finished. And you can take it for what you like, sentimental pleasures or the pitiful babbling of an old man."

However, for me, this "pitiful babbling" contains a profound truth that I only discovered after years of searching, and then with the help of a movie. I now know that the big question can never be answered by philosophers and theologians with their comprehensive worldviews. It cannot be answered by scientists probing the edges of alternate realities.

The big question is answered best by things we take for granted. By the "face of love" in *Dead Man Walking*; by Tess Harper's prayer, thanking God for his *Tender Mercies*, as Robert Duvall drives up and down the highway fighting his urge to drink away the sorrow caused by his daughter's death and finally comes home saying, "I'm not drunk. I stopped at the liquor store but I poured it out. I drove by and saw you and Sonny watching the TeeVee. Did you see me drive by?"

The big question is answered best by living in the small world described by Gustav Ekvahl. For me, that world is defined by the daily companionship of a partner I have had for almost fifty years. The small world includes the e-mail correspondence with grandchildren who are emerging into the adult world, completing their education, and finding life partners.

The small world is blessed by the comfort of old friends visiting, reminiscing, and, yes, watching movies. The small world even includes the natural process of growing old, rejoicing each day one's health is good enough to be outside walking together, the willingness to face death without fear because, like Paul, we can claim to have "fought a good fight." Citing Erikson, we can maintain integrity and reject despair.

I close with one more movie reference. Meryl Streep was interviewed on "Actor's Studio," a regularly shown television program. One standard question asked of all interviewees is, "What will be God's first words when you see him on that great Judgment Day?"

Her quick response was, "Everybody in."

In the small world, that may be enough. Movies can help us to keep living in that world.

After serving as an educational superintendent in three conferences, teaching at two colleges, and working with Adventist Health for sixteen years, Adrian Zytoskee retired as a senior vice president in 2000. He currently lives in Placerville, California.