



A DARE BOOKLET

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The Gospel According to Robin Williams

Jesus' Answers to
Robin's Questions

The God I believe in is not particularly religious.

When people are not interested in religion, God is not fazed. God is not boxed in by religious books and people and places. God can still communicate loud and clear in a hundred different ways. Indeed, God can communicate through anything in our world, from circumstances to relationships, from novels to cartoons, from school textbooks to dreams to songs on the radio.

If, as Jesus taught, God feels passionately towards us and longs for relationship with us, then we might expect that that is just what God will do. Every day, at every turn, a loving God will be trying to catch our attention – in the events we experience, the people we meet, the feelings we have. If we are not aware of it, maybe it's because we don't know how to tune in to hear God's message, or maybe we've never learned to interpret the signals.

I have come to the conviction that one of the ways God communicates with us today is through movies. Often, movies touch on the deepest issues of our lives in a way that draws us in, making us laugh, making us cry, making us think. Frequently, movies are on the cutting edge of the things in our world that pain us, stretch us, and excite us. And it is my conviction that wherever people are involved with issues that touch their lives deeply, God is involved right there, reaching out to them. In fact, for that reason, those issues are really spiritual issues.

The movies of Robin Williams are a case in point. Time after time, his movies raise questions I would consider spiritual. I recall speaking at a high school camp in the summer of 1989. During the first talk, in order to make a point, I asked how many had seen *Batman*, which came out that summer: there was a ragged cheer. How about *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (another summer blockbuster that year)? Another half-hearted cheer. Then I asked about *Dead Poets Society*, and, to my amazement, the place erupted with cheering and stamping of feet. Something had touched those high schoolers through *Dead Poets Society* in a way the other two movies had not.

I was startled, and went back to *Dead Poets Society* to discover why this movie had resonated so strongly. After all, each of the three words of the title – dead, poets, society –

could be a real turn-off. I realised then that the themes the movie is working with (I will talk more later about what I think they are) are among the most pressing that people today have to face. But to my surprise I realised too that Robin Williams' themes are also themes that Jesus addressed loud and clear in his day. It also occurred to me that Jesus goes further than Robin Williams in explaining the spiritual dimensions of our questions. It is as though Robin explores the questions, and Jesus enlarges them and points us towards answers.

I want to show you what I mean by exploring two groups of movies. Those in the first group were made between 1984 and 1991, and open up major issues of freedom and personhood. Those in the second group deal with the theme of the search for home, and were made between 1991 and 1999, although I noticed that some of the earlier movies also touch on this theme. With both groups, I will tell you how I read these movies, and then what I believe Jesus would say to Robin.

PART ONE

Robin Williams, Jesus and the Search for Freedom

In the movies Robin Williams made between about 1984 and 1991, he returns time and time again to the related themes of freedom and personhood. What does it mean to be a real person in this world? And how can I be free to become that kind of person? What can I do about the things that threaten my personhood by taking away my freedom? The answers differ from movie to movie. In fact, as I will try to show, there is actually a development from one movie to the next.

***Moscow on the Hudson* (1984): Freedom and Geography**

In *Moscow on the Hudson*, Robin Williams plays Vladimir, who plays saxophone in the band of a Moscow circus during the time of the Soviet Union. The circus is due to visit New York, and while they are there – during a visit to Bloomingdale's store to be exact – Vladimir impulsively decides to defect because he wants to be free. When the FBI interview him, they ask, "Why do you want to defect?" "Freedom!" he replies. "Political or artistic freedom?" they ask. Again he answers, "Freedom!" In other words, he doesn't care what kind of freedom as long as it's freedom.¹ When the KGB agents with the tour protest, a policeman replies, "This is New York City. The man can do whatever he likes!"

Vladimir does whatever he likes. He settles in New York, gets a job, an apartment and a girlfriend – all the essentials of life – and the universe seems to be unfolding as it should. But then, returning to his apartment building one evening, he is mugged. He is not badly hurt but he is furious. He complains to his lawyer friend that this should not happen in America, which is, after all, the home of freedom. "This is false liberty," he spits.

In the restaurant, as they talk, an elderly Russian overhears the conversation. "You want law and order?" he demands. "Go back to Moscow." In the days when Russia was the centre of the Soviet Union, there was no mugging there. After all, it was a carefully controlled police state. You take your pick, he implies: perfect law and order, but no freedom; or freedom – with the chance that some people will abuse their freedom.

At the beginning of the movie, Vladimir seems to think that freedom is simply a matter of geography, of moving from one

political system to another. Freedom is finding a space to do whatever you want to do. But by the end, the question has become a bit more complicated – even (or specially) in a "free" country.

Freedom is not simply "doing what you like," because what some will like (mugging, for instance), will impinge on the freedom of others. Vladimir would understand Erich Fromm's suggestion that the USA needed to balance the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast with a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.

***Dead Poets Society* (1989): Freedom and Society**

Dead Poets Society takes the question of freedom a stage further. The film is set in a private boys' school in the Eastern USA, Welton (known to the inmates as Hellton) in 1959. As the scene unfolds, we realize increasingly that the school is actually more like a prison or an army training school than an educational institution. The rules are strict, the teaching is thorough but boring, and there is a strong expectation that boys will go to the universities and follow the careers of their parents' choosing.

Into this setting comes a new English teacher, John Keating (Robin Williams). He was once a student at Welton himself, but now brings some unorthodox teaching methods to the school. He encourages the boys above all to "seize the day," to become all they are capable of becoming, and to "live extraordinary lives."

Increasingly, the boys take him seriously. They revive the Dead Poets Society, which Keating had founded when he was a student. They begin to "seize the day," to write their verse in the play of life, in their own ways. Knox Overstreet (Josh

Charles) pursues a relationship with Chris, a girl he would otherwise have considered unattainable. Neil Perry (Robert Sean Leonard) applies for a part in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, knowing that his parents will not approve. Todd Anderson (Ethan Hawke) learns to have self-confidence in his poetic talent. And Charlie Dalton (Gale Hansen) writes to the school paper, demanding the admittance of girls to the school.

This provokes the first sign of trouble. The outraged principal calls a school meeting to discover who wrote the letter. During the meeting the phone rings. Charlie answers the phone, which happens to be sitting on his knee, and tells the principal it's a call from God, backing up the demand for girls at the school. Charlie receives a formal beating for his trouble and Keating tells him not to be foolish: "Learn to suck the marrow out of life without choking on the bone." But that's easier said than done. Things get worse.

After the performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Neil's father announces that Neil will be leaving Welton immediately, going to military school and then straight on to his medical training. Neil is devastated, and, in despair, commits suicide. Keating is held responsible by the school administration and parents, and is fired.

It looks as though Keating is defeated, but as he leaves his classroom for the last time, leaving the English lesson in the hands of the principal, one by one the boys stand on their desks in salute – while the principal threatens and pleads with them, to no effect.

Freedom is now a little more clearly in focus. Freedom is no longer just doing whatever you like. Charlie Dalton does what he likes, and Keating warns him that it's stupid. Todd and Neil shoot for a different definition: seeking to be free in order to become the best they are capable of being.

As the definition of freedom takes on a new look, so does the appreciation for the forces which oppose this kind of freedom. It's no longer simply a matter of changing countries, of moving from a dictatorship to a democracy, as Vladimir naively thought. Even in a democracy, the boys find, there are powerful forces – a whole social system, in fact – which can work against you, crush your individuality, and try to make you part of an inhuman machine. It is so powerful that Neil is killed by it, and Keating loses his job because of it.

Is the ending optimistic? Did the school squash the boys again after their final rebellious gesture? Did they live up to the ideals they learned from Keating?² It may be significant that the movie is set in 1959, the threshold of the 60's.³ Maybe the movie is telling us these students became the student radicals of the 60's. That would imply an optimistic future. On the other hand, the radicals of the 60's became the yuppies of the 80's and 90's, concerned mainly for material things and for themselves, their idealism extinguished by the very system they had tried to overthrow when they were students.

So the question now is not, Where can I find freedom? but rather, How can I find freedom? Not, Where can I do what I want? but, How can I become the best I am capable of being? How can I find power and direction to be myself without being self-destructive (like Neil) or foolish (like Charlie)? And, if the setting in 1959 is significant, how can I be my best self without simply running out of steam somewhere down the road?

***Awakenings* (1990) and *Hook* (1991): Freedom as an Internal Problem**

Two movies, *Awakenings* and *Hook*, take us deeper into these questions. Though they are very different from one another,

each adds a new twist to the problem of freedom. In each, the central character is not free, but his problem is no longer one of politics or of social structures: the problem now is an internal one.

In *Awakenings*, Dr. Malcolm Sayer (Williams) is a man trapped in academic life. When he is being interviewed for the patient-related job that will change his life, his first question is, "When you say [I will be working with] people, you mean *living* people?" The people he has worked on in his medical research have obviously been different! He has also worked for five years on a project to extract a certain chemical from four tons of earthworms. William Hurt, playing the interviewer, protests, "But it can't be done," and Sayer proudly replies, "I know that now: I proved it."

In *Hook*, Peter Pan, as much an extrovert as Sayer is an introvert, having come to live in our world at the end of J.M. Barrie's play, *Peter Pan*, has grown up into a successful but workaholic businessman, Peter Panning. Even during his daughter's school performance of (what else?) *Peter Pan*, his cellular phone rings, and it quickly becomes clear that his addiction is destroying his marriage, his relationship with his children, and himself.

Both these films are about a man being set free, not now from a totalitarian political system, nor from social pressures within America, but from himself.

Malcolm Sayer begins to work with a group of patients who have been a sort of "living dead" for as long as twenty-five years. He tries a new drug on them, and, beginning with Leonard (Robert De Niro), they respond dramatically. Here is the first meaning of the movie's title: they awaken to a new appreciation of life and the world around them. Everything is fresh and exciting, and their response is delightfully childlike. Sayer is deeply moved.

This leads to a second awakening. Early on in the film, a nurse Sayer works with invites him for coffee after they have been working late. He declines, saying he has "other plans." We see him going home and playing the piano: so much for his plans. At the end of the movie, however, he invites her for coffee, and she agrees, saying she has no other plans! Now it is Sayer who is awakening, not this time from a zombie-like trance but from a mere half-life, into the real world of love and relationships and endless new possibilities. He is becoming free.

For Peter Pan, too, there is trauma: his children are kidnapped by his old enemy, Captain Hook (Dustin Hoffman). Pan returns to Neverland⁴ where, in order to get his children back, he has to learn some basic lessons about life.

First there is a negative lesson. He threatens Hook with lawyers and tries to bribe him with his cheque book. Neither stratagem works: the North American answers to every problem have both failed. Instead he has to learn – or relearn – the power of imagination: he has to remember how to fly, how to play and how to fight. He has to believe in fairies. He has to become childlike again.

Through all this, he learns what is really important in life, so that, when he finally returns, having rescued his children, he comes back with a new appreciation for his wife and his children and a new zest for life. When he flings his cell phone out of the second floor window in the final scene, we know too that his work is under control.

For Sayer and Peter Pan, the reason they were not free was within themselves. Both needed a violent shock to make them start over. Both are in one sense (not the religious one) "born again" as they begin life over.

***The Fisher King* (1991): Freedom, Forgiveness and Pain**

In some ways, *The Fisher King* is my favourite Robin Williams movie, though it is darker and more disturbing than any of the others. It may be significant that it was directed by Terry Gilliam, of Monty Python fame. Here, the heroes' problems are still internal, but now they are more specific: one needs forgiveness in order to be free, and the other needs deep healing.

Jack Lucas (Jeff Bridges) is a talk show host whose specialty is insulting those who call in. One day he goes too far. He tells Edwin, a regular caller, that yuppies are "the enemy" and that "they need to be stopped." It is only a flippant comment, but Edwin silently hangs up.

At this time, Jack is hoping for a starring role in a new sitcom where his theme line will be "Forgive me." He practises it over and over, to find the funniest intonation. And, as the words "Forgive me" are still ringing in our ears, he puts on the TV, only to hear the news that Edwin went into a yuppie bar that evening and shot dead seven customers and then himself.

Jack is destroyed. He loses his job, his apartment and his girlfriend. One night, feeling desperate, he goes out in a drunken stupor. He is mugged, soaked in gasoline, and is about to be set on fire when he is rescued by a bizarre kind of Robin Hood, a character simply called Parry (Williams).

He discovers later that Parry's wife was one of Edwin's victims, and that since the shooting Parry has been psychotic. Early on in the friendship, he tells Jack that "the little people" have told him to rescue the Holy Grail from a New York millionaire's mansion, and that Jack is "the one" to help him.

Guilt drives Jack to try to help Parry. He asks his new girlfriend, Ann (Mercedes Ruehl, in an Oscar-winning role), "Do

you ever get the feeling you're being punished for your sins?" And later, "Isn't there some way I could just pay the fine and go home?" He gives Parry money, but Parry has no use for it. Forgiveness can only be given, not bought. And Parry is willing to give it, freely, in the form of his nonjudgmental friendship for Jack.

Jack decides to arrange an introduction between Parry and the girl he loves, Lydia (wonderfully played by Amanda Plummer). With Ann's help, the meeting is arranged and they make up a foursome for a Chinese meal – a delightfully long, funny, and touching scene. On the way home, Parry declares his love for Lydia, and she is touched.

The reason Parry is crazy, however, is to shut off the pain of his wife's murder. Every time the memory comes back or he becomes real and vulnerable, he sees a vision of a red knight on horseback about to attack him. Inevitably, the reality of his love for Lydia makes the red knight attack with new ferocity, and the memory of the murder floods in with awful freshness. Parry runs, is attacked by muggers, becomes catatonic and is hospitalized.

Jack realizes the only way to help is to fulfil Parry's prophecy, and to get the Grail – which he does, though it turns out to be only a boy's sports trophy. That doesn't matter, however. When Parry touches the cup, he recovers and is reunited with Lydia. Jack has learned to love someone other than himself, and his self-sacrifice brings Parry healing. Jack and Ann find their love is renewed, and everyone lives happily ever after.

The key to this movie is in the legend of the Fisher King, which Parry tells to Jack one night as they lie on their backs in Central Park:

The fisher king as a young man had to undergo testing before he could become king and heal the hearts of men,

but he failed the test. He wanted God-like power for himself, and reached into the fire to grasp the Holy Grail, but the Grail disappeared, and the boy was dreadfully burned. Over the years that followed, he became weaker and weaker. He couldn't love or feel love. One day a fool wandered into the palace. The king asked him for a drink of water, but when the king took it from him, he discovered that the cup from which he was drinking was the Grail, which he had lost so many years before, and he was healed.⁵

Strangely, the legend is never explained, even though it gives the movie its title. We are left to work out for ourselves: who in the movie represents the Fisher King and who the Fool? In an obvious way, Jack is like the Fool in that he gives to Parry a "Grail" that brings him healing. But other than that, it doesn't fit. Unlike the Fool in the story, Jack is hardly innocent, and at the story's climax he *does* know it is the "Grail" he is giving. Parry does not really fit the part of the Fisher King, either: one could hardly argue that he is suffering because of his pride, in the way the King does.

Could Jack be the Fisher King, then, and Parry the Fool? If Jack is the King, the main problem is that Parry does not give him a literal cup to heal him. Yet Parry is certainly a fool – in the Shakespearean sense of a wise fool: people laugh at him, yet he often knows the truth. Also like the Fool in the legend, Parry does not realize the healing power of what he gives to Jack – not a literal cup, it is true, but rather the gift of his forgiveness and his honest affection. Is Jack then the Fisher King? Certainly like the King, Jack has been hurt as a result of his arrogance as host of the talk show – and, the clearest clue, his arm is literally burned when his gasoline-soaked jacket catches on fire early in his relationship with Parry. Ultimately, it seems, the role of the Fisher King sits better on Jack.

Jesus' response to Robin's questions

The themes of these movies – freedom, experiencing life to the full, understanding why freedom is difficult, finding healing and forgiveness – are all close to Jesus' heart. But in the teaching of Jesus, there is one major additional factor which the movies do not address directly: Jesus teaches that the key to freedom and personhood, to forgiveness and healing, is in our spirituality, and specifically in how we relate to the God who made us. Here are some of Jesus' comments:

On Freedom:

It was Jesus who first said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Peter Panning discovered this principle: it was only when he acknowledged the hard truth that he had failed as a father and a husband that he could return to his family as a free man. Parry too had to face the painful truth of his wife's death before he was free to love another woman. Robin Williams' characters, like most of us, have experienced in one way or another the truth of Jesus' words.

Yet Jesus is saying more than that. He implies that knowing the truth has to do with learning and following his teaching. One modern translation of his words, *The Message*, puts it this way:

If you stick with this, living out what I tell you, you are my disciples for sure. Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you.⁶

Why would freedom come from following Jesus and being his disciple? The clue is Jesus' words, "living out what I tell

you.” Jesus is a teacher, and, like any good teacher, he is concerned that his students become all they are capable of becoming.

If I am an art student, for example, my teacher is likely to encourage those approaches and techniques which will develop my own unique artistry. The discipline of learning from the teacher will in all likelihood involve frustration and self-denial as well as excitement and humour as we struggle to bring my gift to birth. But the result will be freedom: the freedom to express myself to the world in a way that is uniquely mine.

The same thing happens in relation to Jesus the teacher, except that Jesus’ teaching is not about one specific aspect of life (such as art) but about life itself. He is, I suppose, a teacher of life. And, just like the art teacher, he yearns for us to become all we are capable of becoming, not just as artists, but as human beings. So if we work with his teaching, sometimes it is hard (“You want me to forgive *who?*”), even frustrating (“I hate it when I react that way”) but in the long run it leads to the freedom of being the person I was created to be.⁷

On Living Life to the Full

Jesus promised to teach his followers what it meant to live life to the full, using a powerful image to warn of things that might prevent that experience:

*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that people may have life and have it in all its fullness.*⁸

By the end of almost every movie, Robin Williams’ characters experience more of life. They have got rid of the “thieves” from their lives, those things that have crippled and limited their expression of who they are.

Malcolm Sayer has banished the thieves of fear and seclusion which kept him from intimate relationships. Jack Lucas has dealt with the thieves of arrogance and flippant cruelty. Even the students in *Dead Poets Society*, though we do not know what will happen next, have tasted the possibility that they can repel the thieves of authoritarian legalism.

In different ways, all of these characters have tasted something of the depth, the variety, the richness and the texture of life. By the end of the movies, they are all simply more full of life.

This is the principle Jesus is talking about, yet what he is offering is also different. The difference, as Jesus understands it, is in the area of our relationship with God. Perhaps quality of life is always to do with relationships.

Certainly all of the Robin Williams characters who experience fuller life do so because of new or renewed relationships: Sayer with his nurse colleague, Panning with his wife and children, the Welton students with Keating, Jack Lucas with Ann, and so on.

So it would make sense that the quality of “life...in all its fullness” has to do with the most significant relationship of all – our relationship with God. This, after all, is the way Jesus lived: close to God and full of life. In fact, Dorothy Sayers suggests that what Jesus’ first followers saw in him was “the Life – the blazing light of living intensely.”⁹ And the burden of Jesus’ work, in a sense, was teaching by word and action how people could live in deep harmony with the Creator of all Life.

On Forgiveness and Healing

Though Jesus, like every spiritual person of his day, believed that human beings were made good and god-like, he was also aware (to his cost) that people were also capable of great evil.

When asked about the origin of this capacity, he refused to blame society or the lack of religious sanctions, but said bluntly:

It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder...envy, slander, pride, folly.¹⁰

There is an evolution in the movies of Robin Williams: they gradually move from saying that human problems are just caused by outside factors (in the political or social system, for instance), to saying that evil comes from within. The progression looks like this:

Moscow on the Hudson (1984):

Problem: the Communist system in the Soviet Union
Answer: defect to a democracy like the USA

Dead Poets Society (1989):

Problem: society's structures and systems
Answer: seize the day, fight the system

Awakenings (1990) and *Hook* (1991)

Problem: internal bondage
Answer: traumatic liberation

Fisher King (1991)

Problem: the need for forgiveness (Jack) and healing (Parry)
Answer: I need someone else to help me

Jesus would agree with this trend: for him the heart of the human problem was not primarily a problem of society, but a problem of the human heart. Thus, for instance, he shocked his more religious contemporaries by not adhering strictly to the requirements of their religion: for him that was not the

answer. Neither did he gather a guerrilla army to overthrow the occupying forces of imperial Rome: that was not the answer either.

He saw that people hurt themselves and others when they ignored the two greatest principles of life – love God with all you've got, and love your neighbour as yourself. So what he did was to invite people to be reconciled to their Creator and to join a new community with a distinctive lifestyle, a lifestyle marked by passionate love for God and for others. He offered forgiveness to people who wanted a new life with God, and healing to those who had been hurt by the world's evil.

For example, when a paralyzed man is brought to Jesus for healing, Jesus says two simple yet amazing things to him:

Son, your sins are forgiven... I say to you, Stand up, take up your mat and go to your home.¹¹

Immediately, the man stands up and walks, and the onlookers are left scratching their heads, realising that Jesus' pronouncement of forgiveness must have happened just as truly as did his healing. In *The Fisher King*, Jack and Parry struggle to help one another: Jack helps Parry find healing, Parry offers Jack forgiveness. It is a long and uncertain process. Yet Jesus, it seems, can give both healing and forgiveness with a single word of compassion and power. It is a sign that God is with him as he establishes his new community.

Jesus and *The Fisher King*

There is a bigger connection yet between Jesus and the story of the Fisher King. This legend is known originally from medieval times, and is associated with the stories of King Arthur. It is almost an allegory of the Christian story of Jesus

and the human race. In this reading, the Fisher King is not one person but the whole human race, including us.

At the beginning, the King is on trial, preparing for his kingly responsibilities. He grasps at power which is not his to have, and as a result he receives a deadly wound. The Christian understanding of the human situation is that God planned for us to be rulers of the world, to be responsible and wise and compassionate. But, like the King in the story, we have grasped more power than we can handle by ignoring God's norms for human life and care of the environment. We have tried to become, as Robin Williams says, "no longer like a man, but God." But humankind is not made for this kind of independence and power, and so we too have become wounded, inside ourselves, in our relationships, in the structures of society, in our relationship with nature.

Nobody can help the King until the Fool comes. The Fool is wise and has compassion, but as he meets the King's immediate need, so he restores to the Fisher King what he had lost in the first place. Who is the Wise Fool in Christian understanding? The person of mystery, who knows all and yet is not understood, the one who has deep wisdom yet is laughed at by the undiscerning, is Jesus.

Like the Fool, Jesus is able to meet people's immediate needs – for forgiveness, for healing, for fullness of life. But as he does so, he also restores to us the Grail, that which we lost at the beginning – our relationship of intimacy with God, our membership in a community of the friends of God, our role as rulers and stewards of creation. We receive back the freedom we lost through our own foolish pride: the freedom to become the people God always meant for us to be, the best we are capable of being.

The difference between the Fool and Jesus is that the Fool thinks he is only giving a drink of water; he has no idea that

he is also giving the Grail. Jesus gives both water and Grail, but he knows exactly what he is doing. No wonder Parry says, as he tells the story, that the Grail is "the symbol of God's divine grace."

PART TWO

Robin Williams, Jesus and the Search for Home

I grew up in the house where my father was born. We lived in that same house until I was twenty-one. I went to the same three schools my father went to, and in some cases was taught by the same teachers. ("Bowen, you're just like your father" was not generally a compliment to either of us.) I knew where my home was, emotionally as well as physically.

My son (now in university), on the other hand, was living in his sixth home by the time he was eleven, and went to four schools in four years. He has never seen the town where I was born. We were both students at McMaster University during one year in the late 1990s, but that was cause for surprise rather than the norm. "Home" for him, as for many of his age, is a rather more intangible concept than it was for my generation. Sound Asylum speak for many when they sing, "I'm homesick for the home I've never had."

Home Ain't What it Used to Be

Homesickness seems to be a theme of our society. Not just because people tend to move around more than they did thirty years ago. Not even because of the proportion of marriage breakups, which leaves children with two homes,

neither of which feels complete. It is also because the world no longer feels like home.

There was a time when the world felt like a comfortable place to be. There was a benevolent Creator overseeing everything, and a safe resting-place in heaven when we died. Nineteenth-century poet Robert Browning summed up the feeling when he wrote: "God's in his heaven,/ All's right with the world." Now that is all gone. Nobody would think of saying anything so stupid or insensitive as "All's right with the world." The world may still be our home because we have no other, but, like so many of our parents' homes, it is in danger of self-destructing because of human selfishness and destructiveness.

We have lost something, on the personal level, the social level, and even the cosmic level: everything the word "home" represents (or ought to represent) – acceptance, nurture, permanence, safety, being known, respect. We yearn for all those things which are summed up in the magic words "home" and "family."

Movies tell us a lot about our culture. Like other arts, they both reflect and they create the world around them. For some time now, in the movies of Robin Williams, alongside themes of personhood and freedom, has been a second theme, that of home and family. These movies speak of our longing and our frustration, our hopes and occasional joys, with home and family – and they point us in some surprising directions.

Trying to Find a Way Home

Perhaps the most poignant statement of this theme occurs in *Patch Adams* (1999). Adams has been suicidal, and as he travels to check himself in to a psychiatric hospital, he reflects, in the opening statement of the movie:

All of life is a coming home. Salesmen, secretaries, coal-miners, sword-swallowers, all of us. All the restless hearts of the world, all trying to find a way home.

The most extended treatment of the idea of home comes, however, in *Being Human* (1994). Here Robin Williams plays five different characters, each located in a different century and culture, spread out over thousands of years. In the earliest scene, he is a Stone Age man whose mate and children are stolen from him by raiders from across the ocean. Then he is a Roman slave who manages to escape and sets off to find home. In the third sequence, he is a soldier returning from (perhaps) the crusades, tempted to make his home in Italy with a beautiful widow, but finally leaving to return home to Scotland. In the fourth scenario he is a Portuguese aristocrat shipwrecked in Africa on his way home. And the last scene links up with the first: he is a contemporary American, divorced for several years, and finally showing up to take his children away for a weekend.

The message seems to be simply that people in every age and every culture basically want the same things: home, family, belonging, to love and to be loved. But to find those things is a struggle, a never-ending search.

As the estranged father and his two children begin to find a new relationship at the end of the film, they speculate playfully on the nature of the universe. It is as though they are saying, We can't know ultimate truth, we can't know the meaning of the universe. We can't know that much about life in any big way. All we can know is the present, and one another, and, though it's fragile, it's precious. It is reminiscent of the Blue Rodeo line: "We may be lost, but we are lost together."

Another dysfunctional family provides the frame for the movie, *Jumanji* (1995). Early on, the little boy who will (as it

were) grow up to be Robin Williams, on learning that his parents want to send him to boarding school, says plaintively, "You don't want me living here any more?" As an adult returning home after many years, the first thing he wants is to find his long-lost parents. Reconciliation between him and his parents does not finally happen till the end of the movie.

People More than Places

In *Father's Day* (1997), Robin Williams and Billy Crystal are both searching for a teenager who has run away, whom both have reason to believe is their son. Yet the search has a different significance for the two, symbolized by their different reactions on hearing that they have a son. Dale (Williams), a single man, says immediately, "My son needs me." Jack (Billy Crystal), recently married to Colette (Julia Louis-Dreyfus), is much more detached, and merely comments, "How richly bizarre!" Not surprisingly, then, when the search proves more frustrating than they expect, it is Jack who gives up the chase and returns to his wife, while Dale goes on searching. He explains to Jack:

You're very successful... What I'm trying to say is... I need this kid. If he doesn't want me around, let him turn me down.

For Dale, this is not just a search for a lost kid: it's a search for family, for someone to belong to, for home.

The Birdcage (1996) makes this point, that home is people more than places, even more explicitly than *Father's Day*. At one point, Robin Williams and his partner of twenty years have had a fight, and in seeking reconciliation, Robin Williams says with feeling:

You own half of my life and I own half of your life... There's only one place that I call home and it's because you're there.

What matters most is the people who give us a sense of home. It is no coincidence that the movie begins and ends with the cabaret of Robin Williams' nightclub singing over and over the chorus, "We are family." It is an appropriate frame for the theme of the movie.

People finding home with one another takes a different turn in *Good Will Hunting* (1997). Will (Matt Damon) is a young genius who cleans the floors at MIT. One day, a math professor puts a horrendous problem on the blackboard and leaves it there, challenging any of his students to solve it by the end of semester and win a prize. Will comes across the problem as he is cleaning that evening, and solves it in five minutes.

Will, however, is a disturbed kid from an abusive background who is afraid of intimacy, afraid of letting down his guard, afraid of being known. He has never known the safety of "home." Robin Williams is the psychiatrist who finally agrees to take Will on. It turns out, however, that he too is fearful of getting too close to anyone since his wife died two years previously. Little by little these two learn to trust one another. By the time their business is done, they have in a sense become home for one another. Significantly, as they hug goodbye, the last thing Robin Williams says is "Good luck, son." Father and son is indeed what they have become.

This is not the end of the story, however. At the end, each starts out on a new life, moving out from the safety of the emotional home they have made through their relationship into the unknowns of the world. Home, however we experience it, is not a place of permanent retreat from life, a lifelong womb, but rather a solid place from which we can move out to explore the world, and to which we can return.

“Run home, Jack!”

The trouble is, of course, that people are fallible, and the more they become home for us, the more painful their failure will be. In *Hook* (1991), for example, Peter Panning’s old enemy, Captain Hook from Neverland, kidnaps Peter’s children, and Peter has to return to the world of fantasy to retrieve them. Meanwhile, Captain Hook (Dustin Hoffman) tries to convince Peter’s son, Jack, that he will make Jack a far better father than Peter ever was. Peter’s growing workaholism, of course, has meant he has had little time for his family, and Hook’s arguments come to seem quite persuasive.

There is a poignant scene when Jack is teaching the pirates to play baseball. They are encouraging him to hit a home run, but have not quite got the hang of the terminology, so that their chant comes out not as “Home run, Jack!” but rather “Run home, Jack! Run home, Jack!” But for Jack, where is home? He no longer knows. Jack is torn between his biological but absent father, and the smiling but malevolent Hook. The point is underscored when Jack (inevitably) hits the ball out of the ballpark, and Hook exclaims in delight, “My Jack!” Peter, who is secretly watching the game, is taken aback, and mutters, “My Jack!”

Hook has a happy ending. Captain Hook is finally defeated, Peter gets his priorities figured out, and the reality of his home is restored. That is not true of *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993). This movie is about the pain caused when those who have tried to be home for one another and for their children get divorced. The humour of the story comes from the efforts of the father in the case (Robin Williams) to see his children. He is an actor, and dresses as a housekeeper – Mrs. Doubtfire – in order to get daily access to his family. Although the movie is hilariously funny, this one does not have a picture book ending. Apparently the original plan was that the parents would finally

get back together. Robin Williams and his wife Marsha Garces, the film’s directors, however, wanted to respond to the fact that for most children whose parents divorce, their parents do not get back together in the end. The movie therefore ends with the estranged parents modeling how it is possible for parents to live apart peaceably and to share the children.

There is a strange postscript to the theme in the final words of Mrs. Doubtfire, now a TV star, when she suggests that even though a family may be fragmented and living apart, you can still have “a family in your heart.” That sounds unconvincing, in the light of everything else that happens in the movie. I have never heard anyone say, “Well, it’s true that my parents have split up, but I feel I still have a family in my heart.”

The failure of home is seen most dramatically, however, in *Dead Poets Society* (1989). The students at Welton experience increasing tension between the values of their parental homes and the new ideas brought by English teacher John Keating. The parents have very clear ideas about what their sons should become, are paying for a very expensive education, and do not appreciate the school staff encouraging such heresies as independence of thought. The conflict focuses on Neil Perry, the gifted actor whose parents are determined that he should become a doctor. When they announce that they are taking him away from the school and Keating’s influence, Neil kills himself.

For him, home has proved to be no home, in spite of great wealth and respectability – perhaps partly because of those things. Though there is a glimpse of hope at the end of the movie, it is not hope that comes from home. On the home front, there is no reconciliation, no safety, no hope.

God as Home

In a deep sense, the question of home and belonging is a spiritual issue. A relatively early and little-known Robin Williams movie, *Seize the Day* (1986), based on a short story by Saul Bellow, points us in this direction. The central character is Tommy Wilhelm (“Wilky”), a middle aged man who seems to fail at everything he attempts: marriage and fatherhood, jobs, financial investments, and even friendships.

At the end of the movie, he is finally rejected by his legalistic, unemotional father, who loses patience with his son:

“You want to make yourself into my cross. But I’m not going to pick up a cross. I’ll see you dead, Wilky, by Christ, before I let you do that to me... Go away from me. It’s torture for me to look at you, you slob!”¹²

This is immediately followed by an agonizing phone call with his ex-wife. Wilky then runs at top speed through the streets in sheer desperation, until he runs by chance into a synagogue during a funeral service. He sits at the back, and begins to weep, more and more noisily, to the embarrassment of the other mourners. And in mid-cry, the movie ends.

Why this strange, heart-rending conclusion? I suspect it is partly the fact that the funeral objectifies for Wilky all the deaths he has gone through in recent years, and the outpouring of grief is all the pent-up sadness and rage which has been unexpressed. Bellow writes:

The great knot of ill and grief in his throat swelled upward and he gave in utterly and held his face and wept.

But it may be also that he realizes that the God whose house is the synagogue holds the answer to all his longings. Bellow seems to hint at this with the last words of the book:

He heard [the music] and sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries, toward the consummation of his heart’s ultimate need.¹³

“The consummation of his heart’s ultimate need” is a powerful phrase. Bellow seems to be pointing us in the direction of God: what else would fit that description, and in that setting too?

Apart from this strong hint, God is not a major player in Robin Williams’ movies. One of the few explicit statements about God comes in *What Dreams May Come*, the 1998 movie about a man who has died and gone to heaven, Chris Nielsen (Williams), who then tries to rescue his wife Ann (Annabella Sciorra) from hell. When Christy first arrives in heaven, he asks his guide Albert (Cuba Gooding) where God is, and Albert replies:

Up there somewhere, shouting down that he loves us, wondering why we can’t hear him.

Even in heaven, it seems, God is not really present. God may feel love for people, but he doesn’t do anything except “shout down” and feel frustration that people don’t listen. It does not seem to occur to anyone, even in heaven, to respond to God’s message. God, in other words, is a pleasant irrelevance. This is a far cry from the anguished longing of *Seize the Day*. It is *Seize the Day*, however, which resonates more closely with the teaching of Jesus.

Turning for Home

For Jesus, God, far from being irrelevant, is the key to understanding our need for a sense of home. In fact, the theme of home, family and God, was close to the heart of Jesus’ teaching. His most famous story is about a kid who ran away

from home, and a father who waited patiently and sadly for him to return:

There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, "Father, I want right now what's coming to me." So the father divided the property between them. It wasn't long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had.

After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that whole country, and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one gave him any. That brought him to his senses. He said, "All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I'm going back to my father. I'll say to him, 'Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you. I don't deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.'"

He got right up and went home to his father. When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him and kissed him. The son started his speech: "Father, I've sinned against God. I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again." But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to his servants, "Quick! bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here – given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!" And they began to have a wonderful time.¹⁴

The son in Jesus' story is a metaphor for humankind – away from home, running out of resources, lost. The father is a

metaphor for God – waiting and longing for us to come home. Wilky's father in *Seize the Day* was not willing to carry the cross of his son's shame and folly. Jesus' God, however, is not like that. Jesus' God is willing to take the pain that comes from kids running away from home, even though it becomes literally the pain of crucifixion.

Jesus' understanding of God is closer to the picture of Christy in *What Dreams May Come*, who jokes that he is a wonderful guy because he "would choose hell over heaven just to hang around" his wife. A minute later, when it seems that Ann will never recover sufficiently to come with him back to heaven, he tells his guide he would prefer to stay in hell forever with Ann rather than return to heaven without her. This resonates closely with the Christian understanding of what God was doing through Jesus: coming to our world, however hellish we may have made it, out of his immense love for us. It may not be without significance that Chris Nielson is nicknamed Christy.

A "Welcome Home" Party

And the party in Jesus' story? That is a metaphor for, well, just that – a party. According to Jesus, God and all the angels of heaven party when any child returns home. The religious people of Jesus' day accused him of going to too many parties. But the parties Jesus went to were simply earthly extensions of God's heavenly party, wild celebrations of lost children coming home.

Perhaps the best party in any Robin Williams movie is not the return of a lost child, but the return of a lost father – at the end of *Hook*. There are tears, there is laughter, there is hugging, there are words of endearment, there is wild hilarity. But Wendy (Maggie Smith)'s final question to Peter Pan is

significant: "I suppose this will be the end of all your adventures?" And Peter replies "Oh no, to live will be an awfully big adventure." The same is true for those who return home to God: this is not the end of the adventures, but the beginning of the biggest adventure of all: living as God's person in God's world in God's way, with the personal friendship of the Creator of the Universe.

Notes

1. The genie in *Aladdin* (1992), whose voice is Robin Williams', seems to have a similar view of freedom to Vladimir. He wants to be his own master, not constantly at the beck and call of another, and at the end, when Aladdin sets him free, he sets off for a new geographical location, the West Indies, to do whatever he wants to do.
2. *Good Morning, Viet Nam* (1987) has a similar structure to *Dead Poets Society*. There, too, a maverick moves into a situation that is stifling and moribund, and brings new life to everyone he meets. But by the end the bureaucracy has squeezed the maverick out again, and, in spite of a final protest (the equivalent of the boys standing on their desks), we do not know who has won in the long run.
3. This is the suggestion of Doug Caldwell, IVCF staff member at Queen's University in Ontario.
4. In the original play, J.M. Barrie called it "Neverneverland."
5. Leonore Fleischer, *The Fisher King* (New York: Signet Books, 1991), pp. 121-123.
6. The Gospel according to John, chapter 8, verse 32, *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993).
7. I develop this theme of Jesus the Teacher more fully in another booklet in this series: *The School of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Living as a Christian*.
8. The Gospel according to John, chapter 10, verse 10.
9. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to be King* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1943), p. 183.
10. The Gospel according to Mark, chapter 7, verses 21-23.

11. The Gospel according to Mark, chapter 2, verses 1-12. C.S. Lewis points out how strange it is that the man has never wronged Jesus, and so how can Jesus forgive him? "He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was...the person chiefly offended in all offences. This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin." C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Fontana Books, 1955), p. 52.
12. Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day* (The Viking Press, 1956; Toronto: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 110.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
14. The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 15, verses 11-24.