



(Have you ever read or seen The Fox and the Hound? Have you ever felt inconsolably, or inexplicably, sad? Have you ever been 12 years old? If you answered "yes" to any of these, read on. You may find it relatable.)

The prison recently showed a really wonderful movie — A Monster Calls, starring Lewis MacDougall and Liam Neeson. It moved me deeply, at times even to tears, though I have to admit that seems to be less of a feat than I once thought it was. Not that I've ever been very slow to emotional reaction. I've probably just begun to notice it more these past few years while nothing much has really changed at all: I distinctly recall giving in to tremendous heaving sobs one night when I was... gosh, nine? Maybe a year or two older? Anyway, somewhere between 8 and 13 I was in my bedroom late one night, the whole house asleep, and I decided for some reason to read my illustrated copy of The Fox and the Hound. I already knew the story, having seen the movie and read my book at least once before (or had it read to me, not sure), but something just drew me to it on that quiet, lonely night, and that time, the story just got to me. Big time. I remember how utterly shattered I felt as I read about that famously doomed friendship that... well, I'm not sure how to describe or explain what I saw in it. Such great friends, pulled apart by the ~~real~~ expectations of their social positions as they aged, then set apart as "enemies", even "natural enemies", by the adults of their worlds, set at each others' throats, or rather, the stronger, more privileged friend, the hound, made to go at his true friend as if they ~~really~~ really were enemies, as if they'd never known and loved each other... to this day it puts a lump in my throat. I was so ANGRY when I read that, as a kid... I wasn't mad at the hound so much — I was upset by his acquiescence, yes, but I also saw, or I felt, deeply and intuitively, at an age when I was beginning to really appreciate how such things were possible, that the hound was as much a victim of the elders in his culture as was the fox, and maybe more so. I cycled through phases of disconsolate sadness and disbelieving outrage as I read the book that night, becoming more and more distraught, my little pink cheeks streaked with ceaseless tears as I tried to process the rotten injustice of the story. I cried aloud (2 doors and some hallway separating me from my parents, along with their unconsciousness), and also screamed silently, I recall, repeating something like "No! Stop! They're supposed to be FRIENDS!!" I was a rather dramatic little boy at times, and my stomach hurt from heaving by the time I was done. I suppose nothing much has really changed in the years since — surely I've become no more sentimental or easily disturbed by callous cruelty over time. I've simply experienced so much more of it myself, firsthand, and seen so much more of it inflicted on others, often on people close to me, that the stories invoking it now seem infinitely more personal and urgent. Thinking about these things now I just find it sort of incomprehensible that stories like that can continue to be told, over and over, so long after I learned what I'd thought was the obvious lesson, with no perceivable effect whatsoever on day to day realities, on quotidian cruelty. How can we so clearly KNOW what's wrong with how we treat one another (and ourselves),

yet continue on just perpetuating the same heinous shit in our societies, generation after generation?

Ok, the point of this was to talk about the movie, A Monster Calls. It's the deeply sad story of a kid, Conor O'Malley, 12 years old, whose mother is dying of cancer and whose father has been absent since he was a toddler. Right off the top I relate to this story and Lewis' character, Conor, because of his depth of emotion, his standoffishness with a world that too often doesn't play fair, and his love for his family. Also his sense of alienation from classmates at school, though I never felt half as alone as he seems to. I related to his rage as well, that sort of ... "inchoate," is that the word? "undifferentiated?" ... anyway, that kind of rage, a perfectly natural and understandable response to so much injustice, injustice so unexpected and so guaranteed when we're young to not be, yet evidenced all around for so long until the disingenuous denials are one day just abandoned with a shrug. That's where Conor's Monster came in. But for me, mine wasn't just a personal appreciation for Conor or the story ... rather, I see the pain and struggles of so many others, of all the 12-year-old boys I've ever known, including myself... all the lives are very different, yet there's some critical commonality there, too.

I wish I'd written down the quotes that made this movie important enough for me to talk about now. The core of it is, the Monster tells Conor three main stories, each with a special lesson for him. The first two especially resonated with me.

Story #1 was about a prince who got his throne after the king died. His stepmother first became queen, but the prince killed his peasant girlfriend and blamed it on the new queen, which got her run out of town and put him on the throne. It would seem that the prince is the clear rotten apple in this story, but no ... the Monster shows Conor that things aren't always so simple. The queen was not a good person, while the prince was beloved by all in the kingdom for his many virtues. And yet, the queen did not murder anyone, while the prince ultimately did. The peasant girl murder victim was plainly innocent and blameless, and the queen was... well, at least not quite the murderer everyone believed she was (though she remained widely suspected of offing the king soon after she married him in order to take power before the prince came of age. But then we learn she did not kill him, after all.) Conor called the entire shifting story awful and "a cheat," and one of the wonderful quotes I wish I'd written verbatim was the Monster's reply that, "It is a true story. Many things that are true also feel like a cheat." I think I've botched the wording a bit but it's close. The lesson for Conor, for all unhappy young people and stupid old people, must be just what the Monster said: Life is complicated. People are complicated. Things are not black & white, right & wrong, and easy judgements are often also poor ones. There was another quote there... ah, yes. Right. Conor asks who the "good guy" is, then. The Monster tells him, in a way that I found deeply moving, "There isn't always a good guy. Nor is there always a bad one. Kingdoms get the princes they deserve; innocent maidens are killed for no reason. And sometimes, witches merit saving. More often than you'd think, actually — you'd be surprised."

The second story, I felt, was more complicated. It still takes place in olden times, but it's a story

of society progressing and the old ways becoming obsolete. Quite timely, really. So, an old-fashioned apothecary with a bitter disposition found himself being marginalized by the "new economy" as well as the "new morality." A local preacher was hastening the apothecary's descent, even denying him his livelihood in some ways, but one day this preacher came to tragedy as both his daughters fell ill and could not be helped by modern medicine. He went to the apothecary and begged him for help, promising to praise him in all his orations (where he'd previously only mocked and condemned him), and even to provide him all the raw materials for his potions (which he'd previously prevented him from obtaining). The apothecary asked the desperate priest if all this meant that the man would essentially abandon all he believed if only it might save his daughters. The preacher said yes, that was precisely what it meant, and so the apothecary told him, "Then I cannot help you." The priest's daughters died, and then the Monster moved to punish, which Conor applauded, until the Monster said he moved to destroy the priest, not the apothecary. Conor was again baffled and angry, as when the Monster had moved to save the wicked queen, whom Conor had thought a murderer. He insisted that the apothecary deserved punishment for failing to help the poor preacher's poor daughters. The Monster replied that although the apothecary was rude and greedy, he was nothing worse than that, and still a healer. The preacher, however, was nothing but a man of faith with no faith, and evidently that merited visiting still more destruction upon him... I confess I don't quite see why. Perhaps I am not so in tune with monster-logic as some would suppose. At any rate, a very good quote followed, and it deserves accuracy but I'm sure I won't get it right now: "Belief is half of all healing, Conor D'Malley. Belief in the cure, and belief in the future after it." Belief is very powerful, so be careful where you put it, and in whom." Something like that, though I know I botched it, which is unfortunate. It was one of my favorites.

As for the preacher's "sin", I suppose the message there might be that he put his belief in certain things, wholeheartedly, and those things weren't worthy... a commentary on capitalism and government, maybe? Nah, there's more there (or less), but I don't feel like digging further into it. The monster's comment about belief in the cure and belief in the future beyond, that struck home with me. I've been pursuing my "cure" for roughly 7 years now, and... I've lost faith. I don't believe in the legal system at all anymore - I've seen how it "works". Justice is not a factor; compassion clearly not; knowledge is held in contempt; being right, legally, means nothing to courts so long as some casuistry can be conjured to circumvent the facts, etc. etc.... I am totally disillusioned and disheartened with no belief left in what I thought was the cure, and no belief in any future.

Conor acts on his rage, his monster, a number of times. He does a lot of damage. The worst, in my opinion, is what he does to his grandmother's house. What's beautiful is how the movie treats the aftermath. It's clear he feels terrible for what he's done, but no words or deeds from him can ever convey the intensity of his pain and regret, nor can anything undo what he's done, or make it right. It simply is. He has destroyed, and that is that. But he isn't at peace with his destruction, and he doesn't even necessarily want others to be, either. To an extent, he wants to be punished, or more accurately, he wants to atone. He has no idea how. I know exactly how he feels. I've done many things, and said many things, to people I've loved very

much, and who loved me, things I wished and wished and wished I could undo. But they were done. It wasn't always, or usually, or maybe even ever, a one-sided thing... whoever I hurt, too often Mom, was invariably doing damage to me as well. With Mom in particular, we certainly instigated each other. But still... to this day I feel that twisting in the pit of my stomach for the consequences of my indulged rage. Nothing can undo them, they simply are. Broken things, angry words... it's done. What I found brilliant in this movie, just so beautiful, was the way Conor was treated by "authority" after his wrongs. His father in one scene, a headmistress in another, both deeply unhappy with what he'd done, both injured, even, and both seemingly "justified" in hurting Conor in retaliation, as the norm goes... but in both cases they saw much more than just Conor's "badness". They saw and acknowledged his humanity, his feelings, and they rejected the lazy, stupid, typical reactionary attack by Power. Conor expected awfulness to befall him both times — he'd well learned the lesson that that's what happens when one is "bad"; one is punished — but both times it began to become clear to him that that wasn't what was going to happen to him. Both times, with disbelief in his voice, he asked, "So you're not going to punish me?", and both times, in moments that drew tears from me, the "authorities" replied — "What could possibly be the point in that?" What, indeed.

I only hope that the repetition of the lesson and theme wasn't completely lost on audiences, though I'm sure that even what got through will soon be forgotten. Even if it was lost, primarily on the old people, the groan-ups, the people who may simply not be capable of catching the message through the thick muck of their own lifelong indoctrination in the anti-philosophy of revenge... even still, I'm sure some young people will have noticed it. They have to have. They'll feel a bit like I did with my Fox and the Hound storybook so long ago. They must. They just must... it's the only cure I still believe in, and a future I cannot abandon my faith in. I can't. Nothing at all would be left.

(* Please note — I wrote this back in 2017. But it still applies.)