

THE EXORCIST'S TIMELESS EXAMINATION OF FAITH AND DOUBT

By Lyla Miklos

The Hamilton Spectator

October 13, 2021

Amy Nicholson and Paul Scheer kicked off “Scare-Tober” on their podcast Unspooled with a thoughtful examination of William Friedkin’s 1973 film *The Exorcist*, which then inspired me to reflect on my relationship with the film.

I first saw *The Exorcist* when I was a teen still living at home with my parents. My Father thought it would be a really good idea to split the cable throughout the house so all four of his children could individually watch television from each of their bedrooms. One night CityTV had a midnight screening of *The Exorcist*. I had heard of this film, but had never seen it before. Watched it to the end and couldn’t sleep for the rest of the night. Every shadow going across my bedroom ceiling suddenly became an evil demon that was going to possess me. I removed the television set and the split cable cord from my bedroom the next day with the excuse that I simply couldn’t focus on doing my school work with 24/7 cable television in my room.

I would revisit *The Exorcist* many years later as an adult. With more life experience under my belt I appreciated the deeper messages on the themes of faith and doubt this horror film was exploring.

The Exorcist is a pop cultural touchstone that makes a pair of Catholic Priests into Superheroes. One Priest - Father Merrin - is older, secure in his faith and believes in the reality of evil because he has tangibly confronted it head on in his past. The other Priest – Father Karras - is younger, having a crisis of faith, mired in guilt and grief over the death of his Mother, a man of science and doesn’t believe that evil manifests itself in the form of demons that take over innocent little girls.

There is a conversation between the two Priests that was cut from the original theatrical cut, but was restored in later DVD releases of the film. It is the central theme that author William Peter Blatty was confronting in his novel that the film is based on.

Karras asks, "Why this girl? It makes no sense."

Merrin replies, "The point is to make us despair; to reject our own humanity, to see ourselves as ultimately bestial; as ultimately vile and putrescent; without dignity; ugly; unworthy. And there lies the heart of it, perhaps: in unworthiness. For I think belief in God is not a matter of reason at all; I think it finally is a matter of love; of accepting the possibility that God could love us."

Author William Peter Blatty wrote a guest column for America: The Jesuit Review in 1974 in response to the controversy the film stirred up in religious circles.

"The question that my novel and film implicitly ask: namely, if the universe is clockwork and man is no more than molecular structures, how is it there is love as a God would love and that a man like Jesuit Damien Karras would deliberately give up his life for a stranger, the alien corpus of Regan MacNeil? This is surely an enigma far more puzzling and far more worth pondering than the scandalous problem of evil; this is the mystery of goodness. It is the point all critics miss."

In the ultimate act of love both Karras and Merrin sacrifice their lives in order to save a young girl's soul. They look past the ugliness of pea soup vomit being spewed at them to find the goodness inside her and respond with love. How can anyone love this repulsive creature? Karras and Merrin demonstrate through their actions that God could.

Our world has become even more cynical since 1973, but there is something very radical about The Exorcist's ultimate message. A message originally conceived by the book's Catholic author and then reinterpreted by the film's agnostic director. Love is a powerful force. One that evil can't really understand.

In Hamilton, Ontario in 2021 our culture has shifted to a far more secular one. Can those who don't identify as members of a faith community find inspiration in the actions of The Exorcist's two Priests? Good and evil are tangible concepts beyond their religious connotations. The Exorcist's Superhero Priests believe in the goodness of humanity and that all of humanity deserves love.

In these troubling times holding on to that kind of hopefulness requires its own kind of faith, because it is so easy to doubt that we deserve love and that love is our gift to give each other. To love is to take a risk, but if humanity takes that risk collectively and believes that everyone is worthy of love, imagine what a transformative world that would be.

Lyla Miklos is a multiple award-winning queer feminist labour activist, broadcast journalist, chief negotiator, education worker, lay chaplain, publicist and vocalist.