

MOVIES, THERAPY, BUDDHISM, CATHOLICISM

Conversations between Bernie Wooder and Peter Malone

NEED

Increasingly, popular movies are being used as a resource for training people in the healing professions. Trainers and students want to use the movies but often lack the skills to use the resource. On a more general level, with the increased interest in spirituality (for both churchgoers and non-church goers alike), the spiritual elements, often implicit in movies, raise personal issues which people want to explore. There is a need for guidance from counsellors, therapists and religious leaders, so that readers can help themselves to interpret the values in the movies.

PURPOSE

This book introduces readers to ways of using movies. Because of its structure and conversational style between the authors, the book is demonstrating for its readers some of the ways in which movies can be therapeutic, raise issues and awareness about facing and tackling the issues. Since the authors come from different spirituality traditions, one Buddhist, the other Christian, the conversations can help readers discover diverse spiritual insights from the movies. Since the conversations are also dialogues, they enable readers to enter the discussion and critique the points of view.

CONTRIBUTION

At present publication in this area is limited, especially in the United Kingdom. In recent years some psychologists and psychotherapists in the United States have written books on the use of films. One of the present authors has published in Australia and the United States two books on films and applications of Jungian type.

While religious writers in the United States have published books in recent years on spirituality and film, there is practically nothing on this topic by way of books, solely a few articles in periodicals. This book offers a British perspective on spirituality and cinema, cinema and therapy as well as ways in which a local readership could use movies.

AUTHORS

Bernie Wooder is a London Psychotherapist. He has his own website for "The Movie Therapist" and has contributed to a number of magazines, newspaper interviews and has appeared in radio and television programs responding to questions about particular films and therapy.

Peter Malone was the President of the International Catholic Organisation for Cinema (OCIC), then of SIGNIS, The World Catholic Association for Communication. He is an Australian, with a base in London. He has been a film reviewer and lecturer since 1968. He has used movies in counselling, especially using the Myers Briggs Type Indicator. Other books are on spirituality and cinema. Author and writer.

INTENTION AND USES

This is a book
for moviegoers,
for students of cinema
for those who work in caring professions,
for those who are educators and trainers in human resource skills,
for those who enter therapy as clients,
for those interested in dialogue between cinema and religion,
for those interested in dialogue between Buddhism and Catholicism,
for those interested in spirituality in cinema, the implicit values present
in cinema storytelling,
for those who would like to help themselves to an awareness of
how movies can open up areas of spirituality and personal experience.

The format and style of the book is a two-way conversation amongst the authors. The value of this style, in preference to a straight text, is that the authors can use their more personal voices, that readers can more easily and quickly identify with the authors and their positions and that it provides a more comfortable way for readers to dip into the book and read it, for example, while travelling.

CONTENTS

An introduction explains the meetings and discussions that led to the writing of this book.

The first section is principally a series of conversations on general principles of the use of movies in therapy with particular examples, eg images of men in today's movies, *Gladiator*, *It's a Wonderful Life*... Readers can check their movie experiences in terms of relationship to their own lives. The chapters illustrate how they can work in counselling, training and therapy with clients being able to explore the meaning of their movie experiences. This section ends with a conversation about the impact of myths in movies, especially *Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings*.

The second section focuses on the authors' religious beliefs in relation to movies and the way that they use movies to explore facets of Buddhism and Catholicism, especially for clients who are experiencing crises of faith. Popular movies are used to illustrate points, eg *Awakenings*, *Dead Man Walking*, *Liam*, *Defending Your Life*, *City of Angels*. There is also a discussion on Martin Scorsese who has made both *Kundun* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

- moviegoers will find new insights into the movies they see,
- students of cinema will have deeper meanings of movies opened up,
- professional educators, trainers, counsellors and therapists will find information, methods and some techniques for introducing the seeing and discussing of movies into their work,
- clients will be encouraged to use movies as ways of expressing their experiences to their counsellor or therapist and participate more imaginatively in their therapy.

The book will be of interest in the English-speaking world, not only the United Kingdom but also the United States (where there is great interest in the theme), Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and various countries of Asia like India, the Philippines, Malaysia where interest in movies is on the increase as well as opportunities for therapy.

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**THERAPY,
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CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN BERNIE WOODEY AND PETER MALONE

CONTENTS

A. MOVIES AND THERAPY

1. Box-office and therapy.
2. Images of Men in the Movies.
3. Gladiator: Modern Icon and Role Model.
4. The Millennium, Planets of Apes, and Kubrick
5. Enemies at the Gate and in the Heart of Darkness
6. The Archetypal American Movie
7. To Make Her Fantasy a Reality
8. Harry Potter, Myths and Lord of the Rings

B. MOVIES, RELIGION AND THERAPY

9. Metta, Jesus and MGM.
10. Buddhism and Catholicism at the Movies.
11. Resentment, Anger, Guilt.
12. Judgment and Defending Your Life
13. Jimmy McGovern and Liam.
14. Angels.
15. Devils.
16. The opposing balance of suffering and guilt
17. Martin Scorsese.

BOX-OFFICE AND THERAPY

Peter:

Bernie, as a movie therapist, you use a wide range of movies with your clients, but sometimes the movie may not be so well-known. Field of Dreams, for instance, is very helpful for men exploring relationships with their fathers. But I know that you've used some box office winners very successfully, like Titanic and The Sound of Music.

What about The Sound of Music? It's over forty years old now. I would see Julie Andrews' Maria Von Trapp as the almost perfect embodiment of an outgoing, very warm woman, someone who lives in the present with great delight, a great role model in many ways.

Christopher Plummer, on the other hand, embodies a very stereotyped male image, the introspective, rather stern, decisive and unbending autocratic type. So how have you been able to use The Sound of Music with your clients?

Bernie:

Actually, a client brought this movie to me. I was quite surprised. He was a very powerful businessman and this was not the sort of movie that I expected from him. But I learnt a long time ago never to presume. This client spoke about a loss of romanticism in his life, in his marriage. He singled out a dance floor scene where there is a look between Christopher Plummer and Julie Andrews.

That moment, that look, was, for him, amazing in terms of its power. When we looked more and more at that moment, he saw it was a reflection of all that wasn't in his life and all that he wanted back in his life, the whole experience of how jaded his life had become within his marriage. His important discovery was that he was the romantic. This gruff businessman was the romantic in his marriage and his wife was not. So it was very helpful in terms of revealing, helping to exorcise from him, feelings that that scene brought up in him that he thought were missing.

He identified with that moment of connection and romance at soul level through the eyes. That's what was missing. He saw how important it was in terms of nourishment in his life, in who he was. It was no accident that he was a workaholic and was depressed.

Peter:

So you don't have to have an exact parallel. Everybody would say that Julie Andrews in The Sound of Music is very romantic, but you mentioned your client's wife wasn't the romantic. So it's those sparking moments that you've been describing that enable clients to be very much aware of themselves or of an absence in themselves.

Bernie:

It can be the whole issue of a movie. Or it can be one scene or a couple of scenes. It can be one person as a role model in the movie. There's a multiplicity of ways that people are affected. It could be the music at a given moment. But the point is that if you take that look, that small scene, that small moment, there is an experience of insight. You see the emotional power that can come out of such an apparently small element because it touches something deep within their own psychological makeup.

Because my client lacked that experience in his life, had work become his new mistress? That was quite sobering for him. Work was his escape. On the face of it, he was a very good provider. From his wife's point of view, he was absent, she was abandoned. What they were both abandoning was talking about the painful stuff of their relationship.

Peter:

Did his wife see The Sound of Music?

Bernie:

I don't think so. But sometimes I'll ask people to see a movie. I do prefer them to bring the movie to me. But at this time, Titanic had just come out. I asked my client to take his wife to see Titanic whether she were interested or not. He said, 'I don't think she'd want to go because of the subject matter, the drama and seeing all those people get killed'. I said, 'See if you can do it as an experiment. The only thing to say to her is, 'Concentrate on the eyes!'.

Peter:

Of Leonardo di Caprio and Kate Winslett?

Bernie:

Exactly.

Peter:

At any particular point of the movie?

Bernie: I didn't want to specify or prescribe. If it was going to work at all, she would find her moment. And that's what happened. She cried and she didn't see Titanic simply as a terrible tragedy with 1500 people dying. She saw very quickly how clever James Cameron had been in getting us involved. In personalising the Titanic and its fate to get us involved, the movie became a vehicle for the two characters. She was very moved by that and so was he. After the movie they had a meal together.

The romantic in him was stirred and she saw something different in him because he'd asked her to go and see it with him. And somehow they'd cut through the jadedness. What I'm saying is that it was an improvement in terms of the emotional quality of their relationship. It wasn't perfect, but it was a marked improvement. They really learned from that movie how they had been using work and study to escape.

Peter:

And to avoid eye contact. The thing is, he brought The Sound of Music to you and you worked on it. But you brought Titanic to him. What was it in Titanic that actually touched you, so that you were able to recommend it to him? It must have been important for you as well.

Bernie:

I think it was the marrying of a movie, a brilliant singer and the song which was played at all the crucial moments. The theme was facing life or death. It was about saying, yes, I know this is a movie, but what are the real priorities in my life? If I was faced with death and all those choices: what would I do if I saw someone trying to save the children, someone trying to jump ahead of the women and children? You can get everyone's reaction to that moment of truth.

Peter:

But what about the eyes? You remembered Titanic as an example of two people whose eyes met, so it must have stirred something in you the first time you saw it, irrespective of any client. What was it that appealed to you with those two characters and their eyes, so that it stayed with you?

Bernie:

I think it was the clear connection. I think it was the depth of that connection, the nourishment in that connection. In those moments you are completely whole and free. In those moments of eye-to-eye contact and connection, you are completely who you are and reinforced in who you are, and so is the other person.

Peter:

Have you been able to use Titanic with other clients?

Bernie:

I used Titanic for choices. People watch Titanic for entertainment. By all means do that. But you can also watch this disaster movie and think, 'What would I do? What would I really do in that situation? What would be important

to me? What would I save first? Would it be, people, personal items?

It's a probe, really. I'm often working with people about the choices they make. In the beginning there's quite a lot of resistance to saying that they have made choices. They prefer to say something's just happened to them. Now, some things do happen to us, obviously, that are outside our control. But many, many things happen to us because of the choices that we make, even though we may not be aware that we are making choices? So it's saying, 'Look at this movie and what choices would I make?'. It's a tool to make an impact at depth about choices.

Peter:

People do find it liberating when they find a movie that they've enjoyed but see it as dramatising their feelings.

Bernie:

It's enhancing their feeling because, after all, it is actually their feeling that they're experiencing. The film is just celluloid. It's all projection.

Peter:

Yes, literal projection. So it's a meeting of projections, one might say.

Bernie:

It is. If it doesn't touch the person's history and emotional makeup, that it won't touch them. If it does, it means something to them, but it means something to them from their personal history.

Peter:

That's why a family all sitting in the same row can have such diverse responses to a movie.

Bernie:

And you can take ten people to see a movie and they will come out and they've all seen a different movie, because of their history, because of their family and upbringing, because of the emotional shaping of their lives.

Peter:

So that's why movie therapy is capitalising on some of our basic and ordinary experiences.

Bernie:

I wouldn't want to use the word 'capitalising'. I would use the word 'enhancing' to the degree that we can start to witness another insight about ourselves. Insights are not necessarily nice things. We may have to exorcise a lot of our negative stuff until we find the good feelings underneath. I don't want people to get the idea that this is a pop psychology or a flavour of the month therapy. Often people have to feel bad prior to feeling better and feeling good.

Peter:

But it is interesting in these examples that you use very, very popular films that critics can dismiss. But they can offer key experiences for our lives.

Bernie:

It just seems to me that there are good movies that can do that.

Peter:

When you were talking about The Sound of Music and the look, I thought of another look from Rodgers and

Hammerstein in South Pacific, 'Across a Crowded Room'. What you provided for you client was some enchanted evening.

IMAGES OF MEN IN THE MOVIES

Peter:

Bernie, I've noticed in the last ten years, especially from the point of view of psychological type, that there's been something of a transition in the image of men on screen. There are still plenty of action shows and heroes. But, the transition I am thinking of is from businesslike achievers to an assumption that this image is inadequate and that men need to reshape their lives in a more 'personalised' way.

This was particularly the case in 1991-2 like *The Doctor*, with William Hurt, who, when he finds that he's ill and has to undergo an operation discovers the realities of harsh hospital treatment and decides to send all his students to spend three days as patients in hospital, so they can experience what patients experience. Regarding Henry has Harrison Ford as the relentless hot-shot lawyer who is shot during a hold-up and has to rediscover his past which he does not

like. In Fisher King Jeff Bridges is the loudly provocative DJ where a listener goes on a killing spree having been taunted by Bridges. He then goes on a quest for his salvation.

More recently with films like The Insider, where Russell Crowe as Jeffrey Wigand has to make a decision about being a whistleblower. It seems that the image of maleness of the past, now seen as something of a caricature in John Wayne or Arnold Schwarzenegger, is inadequate. How would you read images of men in movies in the last ten years or so?

Bernie:

I think the movies are showing us a greater authenticity in their portrayals of characters as rounded men as opposed to one-sided, one-dimensional. Our language reflects this. When people say, 'He was very macho', they're echoing what was thought to be the norm for many, many years in what was projected in the movies. So I think what's happening now is quite a healthy trend. In a lot of movies we are seeing much more rounded men. I think that Russell Crowe as Maximus in comes across as a completely rounded man.

Peter:

You quoted a remark about how women responded to this image.

Bernie:

It was by a woman reviewer who said, 'At last a real man'. I'm sure many people responded to that, thinking, "Well, do I want New Man who does the cooking and stays at home with the baby, or do I want a Russell Crowe who's a gladiator?" I think there would be greater confusion with men about what it really is that women want. The answer is in the balance. Not just the macho. It's a balance of both. It's not either/or.

Peter:

The title, 'Men Are From Mars, Women From Venus' seems to set up that either/or dichotomy. Or do you think that it is a useful slogan?

Bernie:

I think it helps. Like all of these things, it's important to get to the essence but not go too far. I think it helps to say, yes, to say that the way men and women function can be as if we're from different planets.

Peter:

So, what is the healthy side of 'Men Are From Mars'?

Bernie:

I think a good meaning of Men Are From Mars would be: but they've been to Venus. They have visited Venus and they have learned. In the past in many of those movies, men were from Mars, they stayed on Mars and they went underground on Mars. So, that is what I mean by saying that what we have now is Men Are From Mars; they've had explorations to Venus, and they're learning. By the same token, I think that many women have also been to Mars and are learning.

At the same time they have been making mistakes as well as the men in this transitional period of balancing. Some women worked for power, acting and dressing like Mrs Thatcher, but a caricature of the men they were taking on, rather than developing women's power. I think the recent films show women with much more with real power. Which raises the question: how can men acquire and develop their sensitive side and be honest to that in a world that so often trains them not to do that.

Peter:

Interestingly, in the mid-90s we had the movie of Disclosure, from Michael Crichton's novel. It was a movie from a very popular novelist, and starring Michael Douglas and Demi Moore. But it was dramatising for our imaginations

and emotions, a kind of role reversal of what society was used to, where the woman went too far and seemingly macho male actor was the victim. Did you think Disclosure was a helpful movie in alerting audiences to prejudices based on assumed stances?

Bernie:

I think it was an excellent movie for shifting those prejudices. It was an excellent movie for men to feel powerless by watching a desperate situation where a job was at stake, where the woman was the huntress and very powerful within her own field. But a lot of the confusion in men which interests me is to do with the influence of the mother. In psychology we hear about the predominant effect and power of the mother over the development of the child. Why do so many men still remain with this macho image? Why is that so many are not changing?

Peter:

Your average action movie at the local Multiplex is macho action. I recently reviewed Fortress II, a sequel to Fortress with Christopher Lambert. He has spent a lot of the 90s making interchangeable action films. There is an acknowledgment of the tender side in the movie. He is a devoted father to his threatened wife and child. But when the chips are down, it's practically all slam-bang, macho fights and action. And while there have been these changes that we have been referring to, it's also true that when people are making quickie time-fillers movies for the box office or straight-to-video material, it is still the macho stuff.

Bernie:

Exactly. My dilemma is that there's a mixed message in how mothers actually bring up their sons. To survive in a world that they know is tough, it's important for their sons to be tough. So the very thing they don't want gets perpetuated.

Peter:

On the other hand I know a lot of mothers who are absolutely mystified by their son's interests, the violent computer game or the action show. It's the kind of film that the mother would never sit and watch. The movie or the game is not necessarily bad. She might feel that it is but he feels that he's got to watch it. So there these tensions within her choices.

It would be interesting to get a box office breakdown for a movie like Fortress II. What is the age demographic of the audience? Who actually pays the money to see it? We presume that it's males 25 and under. Maybe that's always been the case.

Bernie:

I was reading an American professor who was saying some very interesting things in a book called Real Boys. He says that if we don't teach boys to deal with their emotions, if we don't bring them up honestly, to be able, without shame, to deal with the more tender emotions, then they cry bullets. That's a very sobering message that movie-makers have to take on board. We all have sons and daughters that live in this society. I'm not talking about censorship, but I'm talking about awareness.

Peter:

Yes. There's a great deal of discussion about hooliganism connected with sport - and I'm sure there always has been - but it's a form of crying bullets. In the past your potential audience for these macho action adventures would have been National Service or involvement in a war, where, once again, they could legitimately cry bullets. So that didn't give the opportunity for developing the man's more tender side.

Bernie:

This hardness is fostered in some of the brutalisation of the making a soldier a soldier. You see with the vets when they come back, they can no longer live with people, they need to go and live out in the middle of the wilds, because their conditioned reflex to kill is such a powerful one. And this is how they've been left.

Do you remember seeing Full Metal Jacket? The first 45 minutes of Kubrick's movie, with the boot camp training, brings home so forcefully the brutality. And, while taking the point that a soldier needs to obey commands in the field, and that any mistake can be the death of many, the humiliation that led to the suicide of one of the characters brought that home. It amazed me that people enjoyed An Officer and a Gentleman so much. Maybe they enjoyed the romance, but the scenes where Richard Gere was in training, where Louis Gossett was exercising that inhumane and inhuman authority in training was macho toughness.

Perhaps we could focus on a recent movie that dramatises all of this in a complex way, Fight Club. A columnist told me that he had been unwell and had rented some videos to while away the time. He remembered that when Fight Club first came out many of the reviewers were very strong in their denunciation of its violence, its brutality its alleged misogyny, and some were calling for it to be banned. So he watched it after all the hullabaloo had died down, and found it very powerful in terms of what it was saying about men and men's images. The very title seems to emphasise it with the focus on the bare-knuckle fighting of the fight club. But that was symbolic, I thought, of something far deeper. Are you a fan of Fight Club?

Bernie:

I haven't quite got my mind around Fight Club, but I think its basic message for me was: what is it to be a man? What is a man? I thought they were the deeper questions all through the movie. I think that the central message for me is much more philosophical. It could do with a lot of discussion by men in men's groups. I would very much like that to happen.

Peter:

Americans have become keen again on rediscovering the wild man inside, which seems to indicate that for some the discovering the feminine had gone too far. But I think we would both be of the opinion that the discovery of the feminine side has still not got going in many areas.

Bernie:

In some areas it hasn't got going. In some areas it's gone too far. It's all a question of overall balance. I always come back to the integration of balance.

Peter:

What I liked about Fight Club - and this is less a philosophical than a psychological reading - is that the whole narrative all took place in the mind of the central character played by Edward Norton. The opening credits' sequence had the camera come right from the centre of his brain into the outer world. It is all his subjective experience. Then we find that he is one of those business achievers. But it's getting to him. He wants sleeping pills because of insomnia. The doctor won't give them to him. So it's a kind of 90s dilemma for the young man.

His solution is to attend an ever-growing number of support groups and becomes addicted. It dramatised the danger, that for a man finding his true self, the danger is becoming addicted to the support of the feminine side.

When he meets the woman, played by Helena Bonham-Carter, who seems similarly addicted, it struck me that all the characters are really aspects of himself. When he meets the Brad Pitt character, who is his alter ego, they get on well. But this shadow alter ego, this wild man, taunts the hero and draws him into the physical exhilaration as well as the pain of the fight clubs. But then the movie raises the question: who is he? Is he Edward Norton or is he Brad Pitt? And the more movie goes on, the audience sees Edward Norton but it's the Brad Pitt side of him that the characters see - in the sex scenes, Helena Bonham-Carter is seeing Brad Pitt.

Fight Club also shows how easily fascist groups could rise from this wild man philosophy - the new soldiers see Brad Pitt and not Edward Norton. Ultimately the movie finishes with the hero literally fighting. The hope is that he tries to rescue the woman, his feminine side.

So it seemed to me that in that way the movie was, in 1999, trying to imagine and say a lot about men at the beginning

of the new millennium.

Bernie:

Yes, I could very easily look at it that way. One of the things that seems to happen within your reading is that society draws from the Edward Norton character the facets of him that it likes. It's a collective unconscious appeal to the aggressive, to the fascist in us all. And in that sense I think the film has a great deal to say.

Peter:

So the woman saw in the central character what she wanted to see, which was the Brad Pitt shadow side rather than the Edward Norton, more normal, side.

Bernie:

Yes, she found that part of him more exciting. And the group found this side was inspiring in leadership. This draws our attention to the distortion of who the hero originally was when the movie opens. So you could say that the kind of aggressive drive that he had in business had now been sublimated and gone into another area in socialising, with the girl and with the friends and enemies in the club. This is a male psyche at war with itself, the different sub-personalities. So it becomes a very interesting movie.

Peter:

What would happen to men who don't normally go to the movies when confronted by a movie like this? They could stop watching, of course. But do you feel, in your work as a therapist, that it could challenge some of their identity questions or the dilemmas they experience?

Bernie:

Very much so. I think it's just the film to be talked about in any men's group. I think it would bring up a lot of frustrations, having to accept that there is a lot of aggression within and that this has to come out somewhere, somehow. It's how to balance, how to integrate the masculine and the feminine, not the one to the exclusion of the other.

Peter:

The frightening consequences of lack of integration can be seen in the movie of American Psycho. Patrick Bateman is the 80s business yuppy who lives perfectly every expectation and every stereotype of the well-dressed, well-coiffeured, well-exercised, well-aftershaved man. Yet inside he is absolutely intolerant. Actually says he has no personality at all, but whether in reality or in his psyche - and it's a bit like Fight Club, hard to know what is happening in the mind and what in the outside world. Bateman is absolutely aggressive, destructive to street beggars, his exact opposite in males, and is cruelly destructive of women. So it's a kind of cautionary tale of what could happen when a man loses his personality in the veneer of success.

Bernie:

The beggar is his shadow, which he evidently can't stand, can't embrace at all. And the women are his feminine side which he cannot accept. He's depersonalised himself into an almost Orwellian figure, and finding it wanting, what does he do to feel?

Peter:

He kills. It's the under-30s that Fight Club and American Psycho are dealing with, men at the beginning of their adult life and adult careers and this kind of frightening challenge.

GLADIATOR: MODERN ICON AND ROLE-MODEL

Peter:

Bernie, were you pleased to see a Roman epic after all these decades?

Bernie:

Marvellous. I was thinking of Spartacus, but predominantly Ben Hur.

Peter:

Did you see The Fall of the Roman Empire with Alec Guinness?

Bernie:

Yes, Alec Guinness as Marcus Aurelius. I don't like Richard Harris a great deal, but he carried off the role of Marcus Aurelius quite well, a tired, world-weary Caesar, a 20-years war with only a four-years break.

Peter:

Yes, but I'm not sure that I was persuaded that he could have fathered such an evil son as Commodus, but in fact he did.

Bernie:

It moved me to think about men with problems with their fathers. Marcus Aurelius said, 'Your imperfections are my mistakes'. I'm paraphrasing, but that was what he said to Commodus when he asked his father to be honest about why he hadn't chosen him as his successor, why he saw only what was wrong with him. He replied, 'That was my imperfection as well'.

Peter:

What went wrong with Commodus? How did you read him? He deliberately came late for the battle which defeated the Germans.

Bernie:

I think Commodus suffered from the very well-known experience of trying to live up to a mighty legend. He grew up in the shadow of his father. There was enormous bitterness in him through growing up in that shadow. The movie didn't fully explain why he couldn't win his father's love, but it seemed the emperor's love was conditional on qualities which Maximus had but Commodus did not. He said to Maximus, 'You're the son I never had'.

Peter:

Joaquin Phoenix, in his appearance, size, height, manner, was able to play Commodus as unlovable. While Marcus Aurelius blamed his own imperfections, Commodus seemed to be an extraordinary character who was unlovable but who demanded that people love him. It could be seen in the bizarre attitude he had towards his sister, suggestions of an incestuous infatuation. Even more alarming were the paedophilic insinuations with his nephew. He was portrayed as a completely unlovable person.

Bernie:

A monster.

Marcus Aurelius asked, 'What will I be remembered for?'. He is still remembered for his sharp-end meditations on the battlefield, truth coming out of harsh reality. He wasn't in some ivory tower. And yet he still produced Commodus.

Peter:

So what you are saying, in terms of problem fathers and sons, is that there is an extraordinary mirror of the individuation of the emperor, yet a mirror of the destructive shadow.

Bernie:

Obviously it's an extreme picture that's been painted. But it's variations on a theme of emotional disturbance between fathers and sons.

Telling the truth to Commodus was the best loving thing his father could have done, but it was too little too late. And it was a bitter pill. It was as if he was saying, 'Take this bitter pill, which is probably the most bitter one you ever had in your life but after it I will give you the warmest hug and embrace you have ever had in your life'.

Peter:

But he kills his father.

Bernie:

He felt rejected. The killing of his father and the manner of the killing is important because he hugged him to death. He could have strangled him by the throat. My impression was that he just held him and held him so that he couldn't breathe. When the guards come, there's no mark on Marcus Aurelius. Commodus has been like a pillow for him.

He wanted so much love from his father that it moved from love to hate, something like some men who have sex with a woman and then become violent. Commodus goes over the line, all the energy of aggression and sexuality come together. They were extremely powerful, those scenes.

Peter:

It's interesting that in a commercial movie which, as some critics said (wrongly), was there just for the violence that the writers and the director should have given so much thought to that manner of death, the psychological meaning of hugging violence.

But that gave a context, of course, to the other father-son relationship in the movie: Marcus Aurelius and Maximus. The contrast in personality with Commodus was extreme. Maximus was both likeable and lovable - from family, wife and child, emperor, troops, his fellow gladiators, Lucilla. Everybody liked him.

Bernie:

He lived out the healthy pattern to the degree that, as you say, everyone liked him and everyone disliked Commodus.

Peter:

He was a man of integrity, which offers an interesting role model for audiences these days. Even his name literally means 'the greatest'. (Some reviewers, because of Russell Crowe's Australian background, referred to him as Mad Maximus getting his revenge.) Did you see Maximus as a character of integrity? What he was embodying?

Bernie:

To answer that question, I would like to go to the religion of the time in Rome and everything that it stood for. Marcus Aurelius was really the High Priest. For Maximus it was the highest and the religious honour to be chosen as the emperor's successor. And he did have integrity. But it was Marcus Aurelius's daughter who helped him later with the Senate - which was interesting because Marcus Aurelius had said to her, 'You should have been Caesar'.

Peter:

Yes, they had been close in earlier years, but we never really found out why they had not continued together. He had gone home and married. To the Romans he was the outsider, the Spaniard, the Spanish General.

Bernie:

There must be something in that because of his crucial answer when he was asked by the slave master, 'What is your name? I must know your name, Spaniard', he said, 'I am Gladiator'. So that put him back into the Roman world, didn't it? It's the only line he speaks at this stage. He doesn't say who he is. He just says, 'I am Gladiator'. That was a personification of Rome? If he was an outcast, being Spaniard, he gave them this Roman symbol.

Peter:

He'd been expelled from Rome by Commodus's treachery and made a slave. So by name as well as symbolically and in action, this was his entree back to Rome.

And in Rome, the feminine, the anima-figure of Lucilla saved him in his integrity, and together might have saved Rome.

Bernie:

What was also interesting were his visions, his thinking about his wife and son, which was again tied in with his integrity, the kind of Rome he wanted for them. His wife as an anima-figure appeared at different times.

Peter:

She appeared in a contemplative context (as well as in the horror of her and her son's death). I suppose this was appropriate since Marcus Aurelius was a meditator. The movie itself started with that Maximus contemplation of the field of grain rather than moving immediately into battle action. Maximus was presented at once as a man both of action and contemplation.

Bernie:

Exactly. He was a mirror of the man who had been his mentor.

Peter:

I wanted to ask you about Stoicism in the movie because it was the philosophy of Marcus Aurelius and the Roman Empire of the time. Does Stoic spirituality appeal to a Buddhist mentality? It's a very humanistic spirituality, nothing beyond human existence. The Stoic wants their personal integrity to be perfect in this world. It's a suffering world so it's a 'putting up with whatever comes' spirituality.

Bernie:

I have mixed feelings. It's an unhealthy philosophy if it's a British stiff-upper-lip attitude being brought to bear. But for some people it's a spiritual way. For a therapist or a priest you have to say that their attitude has to be stoical, finding a way to contain the terrible stories that they hear.

Peter:

It can also be fatalistic. There's no way out. You can contain it so well. So, there is a limiting factor in this kind of spirituality.

Bernie:

The kind of spirituality that I imagine that Marcus Aurelius was talking about - which came from that sharp end of war that he had experienced for twenty years - was something that he turned into personal meaning, in a Jungian sense. I think he somehow individuated. But this is not what every stoic person can do.

Peter:

When you mention individuation, I think of some of the existentialists who do not believe in a life after death, like Camus. When people read 'The Outsider' in the 50s and Visconti's movie with Marcello Mastroianni came out in the 60s, the hero facing death and his fate was seen as a man of high personal integrity. So, that would be the best aspect

of stoicism.

Bernie:

As well, there is something very impressive about the stoicism of Gandhi in going on his fasts to bring about social change.

Peter:

So, there is a kind of self-sacrificing spirituality which Gandhi so well exemplifies. But, for the Christian, Stoicism and Christianity ought to be a contradiction, that Christianity should be able to offer a vision beyond simply containing or individuating. But, I would guess, that in practice, a lot of Christians for whatever reason, especially in the areas of penance and asceticism, are stoic.

Bernie:

I think that's true. The stoic in practice represents the Ego and the spirituality represents transcending.

Peter:

So, Buddhists and Christians have that self-transcending in common. If there were a Stoic here with us, you and I would have far more in common than we would have with the stoic. Both of us would acknowledge the human reality but would be eager to find those self-transcending ways, which is quite a different spirituality.

Bernie:

The gateway from stoicism into spirituality regardless of creed is something like Victor Frankel's experience in Auschwitz. He gives the example of two men who are starving and one has a piece of bread and has it in his nature to give that bread to the other man, he found in the actual life of the camp that the man who gave the bread, lived and the man who took it could be one of those who died, not because it was wrong to take it but because the sense of meaning that the man who gave the bread was stronger than the meaning for the man who received the bread.

Peter:

It's interesting that the only direct saying of Jesus outside the Gospels is from the Acts of the Apostles where he is quoted as saying it is more blessed to give than to receive. Which is what you were saying about Auschwitz.

Bernie:

And that is how Frankel survived Auschwitz.

Peter:

If there was any spirituality in Maximus in Gladiator, it was a practical stoicism. On the other hand, he was often shown contemplating his wife and child and, especially after their deaths, there was some self-transcending: that there can be some afterlife where I can be reunited in happiness with those I love.

Bernie:

What I think happened to him was that he went into an altered state of consciousness where he was able to have spiritual insight and draw from it.

Peter:

So, while the spirit of the Roman Empire was stoicism, the movie is indicating that you need to go beyond it.

Bernie:

That really shows the historical path. Here was an empire ready for Christianity because it needed to go beyond the barbarism of stoicism.

Peter:

That's an interesting phrase, 'the barbarism of stoicism'. That would mean that the arena is really a barbarous extension of the stoic attitude.

Bernie:

The arena is a microcosm of Stoicism. But I would like to say something as well about the war scenes in Gladiator, especially about the Roman war machine as opposed to the barbarians and their attitude towards fighting. The barbarians really had warriors, some really strong, tall men up front, as the movie showed, but didn't have much strategic organisation. The Romans did have a machine, catapults, discipline, going in with arrows flying overhead, the formation, the tortoise technique, listening to orders and the timing of when they were given. I think that is very important. More needs to be said about it. So there is that Yeats' aspect of 'a terrible beauty' about the war.

There's an edge: the horror, then the terrible beauty, the horror and, finally, the sublime and a transcendence into a type of spirituality. I find it a process in me. But I'm still trying to unpack it.

Peter:

My response to the Romans in the movie was to how aggressive they were towards the barbarians, allegedly defending the empire - making it secure, of course - but they were really aggrandising themselves and their empire. That whole machine was aggressive-destructive. You would feel sorry for the barbarians. They had nothing to withstand that machine.

There is something rational, emotional, even majestic about the Roman machine but it is superior, it is destructive, defeating people who cannot stand up to it.

Bernie:

I agree with that but what I wanted to point out is that the Romans systematically used intelligence in warfare and learned from previous battles. For the barbarians, you had a battle and that was all. The Romans made a science of it, used their intellect. That has its modern counterparts. But it is interesting that we use our intellects like this when we could be using them spiritually.

Peter:

Different uses of intelligence?

Bernie:

Yes, I think that's the point. This use of the intelligence is fascinating, even seductive. You think of World War II and the Nazis, the leadership, the parades, the marching, all based on the Romans, the carrying of the SPQR. Hitler doing all this and Goebbels using it for propaganda; Hitler arriving at a rally, arriving last and coming in by plane, spotlights as if he was coming from another world. And by this time the crowds were going crazy. It was theatrical. That's the point I was wanting to make.

Peter:

However, when we look at history, we find that 200 years after Marcus Aurelius, the barbarians actually won. So, you could make the point that whatever the intelligence used militarily for might and to conquer, ultimately leads to a dead end. The same with Hitler. He did not create his Reich or transcend himself. He got lost in his own propaganda. So, the Roman Empire experienced decline and fall. You're right that there is a magnetic attraction to this military machine while it is there in front of you.

Bernie:

And that is one of the seductions of stoicism.

Peter:

I would like to add something on war which shows the opposite of the successful Roman war machine. It is Mel Gibson in *The Patriot* and the American war of independence. Here the English war machine is so perfect and Cornwallis wanted to use the protocols, the courtesies and the hierarchy of battle and he did. But the Americans didn't. They had rough riders. They were more like the barbarians except that they had learned from past battles and their experiences. They knew how to be saboteurs with guerrilla tactics.

The British press was upset about one English soldier who wanted to (and sometimes did) use those same tactics ruthlessly. In the screenplay, Mel Gibson's character has a lot to say about his experience in fighting the French and the Indians when he and his men had committed such atrocities, so there was acknowledgment of blame on each side.

But Cornwallis was so entrenched in the 18th century, Age of Enlightenment, classic codes of warfare. When he finally insists on this kind of intelligent war machine crushing the Americans but the Americans use guerrilla tactics, he is unable to adapt and respond and is defeated. The majestic might does not prevail.

Bernie:

Yes, it was something the same for the way the Americans fought in Vietnam and did not win. Which brings to mind *Fight Club*. It shows where masculinity and intelligence logically taken go. If you take Brad Pitt's character, he was very charismatic and intelligent. He used this intelligence logically. And, to make a point about today's society: many men today are lost and any sharp politician could harness that power in terms of appealing to a cause to rally them.

Peter:

Did you see Russell Crowe in *Romper Stomper*? It's the same thing even though it is suburban thugs against the Vietnamese in Melbourne. The cause seems to be intelligent but it is completely destructive.

But you have also noticed something significant about some symbols in the movie. Maximus' dog, for instance.

Bernie:

I think the silent understanding was stronger between him and the dog than with his troops. He just looks at the dog for a moment, and in his look there is both command and affection. And the dog looks back with intelligence and knows. Something passes between them in that moment, and the audience knows these two are united. This is no one else's dog. Not a word's been said and it was just a snippet of a scene.

But when they are amid the trees on fire from the catapults, he's riding with the dog running alongside, there's a spectacular scene, once again very quick, and the dog leaps through the fire. I've never seen war dogs with Romans, so I thought that was very original, probably historically true. But in terms of the symbolism, it really gave us an indication that this Maximus, who had a spiritual perspective and could contemplate, also had, like Lawrence of Arabia, the ability to be psychopathic, because that's what he was in those scenes.

Peter:

As General?

Bernie:

As General, yes. He was a soldier. It is when you kill with that kind of total red mist in the atmosphere, when you're on the edge for your own life as well. I think the dog was a symbol of that, snarling, the animal of the man.

Peter:

The horse was another obvious symbol, as it is in the westerns. Maximus' horse knew him and he shared that unity with him but, yes, the dog symbol took it further. In fact, from what we have discussed so far, Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, Lucilla, his wife and child, the army, the dog, the horse, each is a symbolic objective correlative of each aspect of his personality.

Bernie:

He was multi-faceted. He could have simply been seen as a warmonger, psychopathic soldier. But like Lawrence, he had many other facets. And the same could be said of Maximus as of Marcus Aurelius, 'What will be remembered when I'm dead? How will I be remembered?'.

Peter:

The portrait of Maximus in the German forests is then different from the portrait of Maximus in Rome as a gladiator. Now other characters mirror facets of his personality, Oliver Reed a mirror of the cynicism and exploitation that could have consumed him, the fellow slaves and their response to his leadership and strategies, the Senator who brings some integrity back into his life.

Bernie:

The presence of a natural leader galvanised the other gladiators. They drew something, some healing, from knowing him. He organised them, 'Stay together. That's how we're going to survive this'. And that's an interesting issue for people as well: when you stay together, you can survive.

Peter:

And that was the Senator wanted of him. All Commodus was offering was, literally, bread and circuses. Maximus is offering a transition from survival to integrity to some kind of life for Rome. However, Commodus does kill him. This leads to the Roman Empire's actual decline and fall.

Bernie:

I was reminded of the Bible's saying, 'Whoever who lives by the sword dies by the sword'.

Peter:

But you also thought about his suffering. You made other Biblical links in terms of death, even a kind of Crucifixion.

Bernie:

I still need to unpack this. When he was in the prison and Lucilla visits him, he's chained and can only move his arms as if it were a crucifixion. So I was thinking that here is this man, loved by an elder wise man, a legend, reminding me of Jesus Christ and God, who is sent into the world to do the bidding of Rome. It's now his rite of passage, being crucified for that, losing everything. That's the parallel with Jesus. It was picked up again by the way he was weakened by Commodus, stabbed in the side to weaken him for the battle. Like Jesus, his life ebbed away.

Peter:

Like Jesus, his side is pierced.

Bernie:

Again it was a spectacle. Jesus was on the cross. It was not exactly, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me'. It was more, 'My strength, my strength', the strength of a gladiator, his physicality.

And then suddenly he has a rebirth when he experiences that meditation. He is almost knocking on the door of death, but he hasn't avenged yet. It was a struggle where he moved into the realm of the supernatural. People can do things

like that, the ordinary man who lifts up a car that's a ton and a half because there's a little girl trapped underneath. So it's that kind of moment where he found a strength that was archetypal. It wasn't just him.

Peter:

It's interesting that the movie was set in a non-Christian Rome, although it is the Christian era, the second century when Christianity had not spread so widely. The Jesus analogy is interesting and relevant. I was reminded more of Spartacus and the slave parallels where Spartacus in a pre-Christian era was crucified and there is that same kind of dynamic in his living and dying.

With your reference to God and the Son and the father, Marcus Aurelius, sending Maximus into the world of Rome, if we were to keep using Trinitarian language, we could introduce the language of Spirit. Whatever the spirit that can come to birth in Maximus, even in his dying, is the spirit needed for the Roman Empire to survive in integrity.

Bernie:

I think that had Maximus lived, he would have become a Christian.

Peter:

I hadn't thought of that. The integrity of his life was symbolised by the continual reminder of his relationship with his wife and child. There was the deepest humanity, the deepest human qualities in him, no matter what.

Bernie:

And the rejection of taking up again his sexual relationship with Lucilla. His total disregard for anything for himself. His spiritual development was equal to his physical aggression. He was a balanced man in that sense.

Peter:

Your comment on Russell Crowe in this role. He has become something of an icon for movie audiences. A poll conducted by Empire (for what it is worth) found that he was 'the sexiest film character of all time!' They quoted a reader, 'Maximus is everything a woman could want - strong, noble, brave, loyal, devoted to his family and just about sexy enough to light any woman's fire!'

Bernie:

He comes across as a sensitive man who is as tough as anyone. So men who come from the macho position find he gets under their defences, because he's an image of absolute macho -except that he's real. Women see the sensitivity in a man who could share the lighter and the more human experiences, the intimacy of life. At the same time, they protected by this masculinity. So he can't lose. I admire Ridley Scott's ability to bring out of Russell Crowe a fine performance: some of his close-ups are so subtle you can see the thinking flash in his eyes, then it would be gone. He has great quality.

Peter:

Earlier you mentioned red mist.

Bernie:

The battle scene where all went silent brilliantly portrayed the power of the red mist syndrome. It was shock red, obviously with the blood, and the smog and the fires hinted red all the time. There is a well-known factor called a red mist syndrome, when trained officers or trained army personnel lose it. They just literally see red and they're no longer in control of what they're doing. I think the movie was showing a terrible beauty that was sublime, really. There was a peace, a quietness in the silence that gave us the impression of the spirit. All the energy of the ego had been used. In the silence, we had a sense of the spirit uncontaminated at the heart of it all. Maximus was silent with the dog, the understanding between the two, but also in the red mist scene, the terrible beauty.

Peter:

So Gladiator is not merely a high-class Saturday matinee show.

Bernie:

And it's so much more than Carry On, Maximus!

THE MILLENNIUM, PLANETS OF APES, AND KUBRICK

Peter:

Bernie, how did you find Planet of the Apes by Tim Burton. He has said it's not a remake. In fact, he was very insistent it's not a remake. It's a 're-imagining' and a 'revisiting' of the original. But when I mentioned 'apes' to you, you actually thought of 2001: A Space Odyssey, rather than the original Planet of the Apes. So two films about apes which lead us to think about what it is to be human. The other point you made was that at the beginning of the millennium, here are two films of 2001. What drew you to think about the millennium in this context of the apes?

Bernie:

I wondered about the premise of the Planet of the Apes. Are they mutants from atomic explosions?

Peter:

In the original, yes, but in the 're-visit', it's time-travel. Humans were training the apes to do human jobs, even pilot spacecraft but one ape developed his intelligence and moved through space and time. The situation reversed, the apes being more cunning than the humans thought, and they eventually dominated. That's interesting, the 2001 version focuses on space travel, whereas in the 60s original, the world was much more concerned about nuclear warheads, bombings and mutants. We think of films like Fail Safe, Seven Days in May and Kubrick's Doctor Strangelove.

Bernie:

If you come from the 60s and talk about mutation, you find transitions in Planet of the Apes, that the human race lives, then blows itself up and returns to an ape world again. In other words, there was a period when man was highly scientifically sophisticated and built the seven wonders of the world. Is that what we keep doing, thinking we're the only humans who have ever achieved anything.

But the other side of the coin has a seemingly unlikely connection, the apes in 2001 representing our fears of artificial intelligence in computers. So it represents the fear of the age. In the '60s it was the bomb. Now we are teaching computers to be so intelligent on their own. We already had a glimpse of this in 2001 with Hal becoming independent and taking over the mission. I wonder whether, nowadays, it is still an unconscious fear that's being projected, and on to apes.

Peter:

Let's stay with Kubrick for a moment see look at what happened to him in the later decades of his career. In 1963 he blew up the world at the end of Dr Strangelove; he absolutely destroyed our human stupidity. Five years later, with 2001, he actually presented a picture of linear evolution from apes to humans, despite the murderous behaviour of the apes. But into the apes' experience comes the monolith. The monolith, for me, represents something of the transcendent. It exercises some kind of influence for intelligence and goodness for the apes as they touch it. The monolith reappears throughout all the ages and into the future. The Star Child is present at the end of the Odyssey. Is this an embryonic symbol of new beginnings? Kubrick, with 2001, seemed positive in his outlook.

He died without making AI, bequeathing it to Steven Spielberg who wrote a new screenplay and directed the film. The theme of artificial intelligence obviously fascinated him all these decades, from Hal to AI. Kubrick dies in 1999, but his film is re-released in the year 2001 for the kind of reconsideration we're doing now. But it was also in 1968 that the first version of Planet of the Apes was released around the world. Now in 2001, Kubrick's year, comes this revisiting. In terms of millennium expectations, Planet of the Apes mirrors the good and bad of human behaviour. Why should this be, at the turn of the millennium? What are the issues that it suggests to you?

Bernie:

That control is being wrested from us, that we are going to become the controlled. It seems an exercise in humility. Remember the empty arrogance that no-one could see that the Titanic could sink. It seems that we have to learn that lesson, that we are arrogant.

Peter:

It is fascinating to look at the images in both Planet of the Apes, how the humans were controlled, whatever the reason for the ascendancy of the apes. It seems to me that the apes in the original are much more benign and humane than most of them in the new version. In the original, we are offered much more time to see and appreciate how ape society developed. There is a greater number of wise apes as well as the vengeful apes. In the present version the action happens very fast. The beginning of the escape occurs on the first evening that the human is in captivity, and while he's helped by Helena Bonham-Carter as a human rights activist ape, the main focus of the film is on the action in the escape and the battles. Further, in terms of screen heroism, Charlton Heston in the 60s obviously follows the tradition of Moses, Ben Hur, El Cid, great ambition and achievement. He ultimately weeps beside the toppled and broken Statue of Liberty.

In the 2001 version, Mark Wahlberg is small, very ordinary, not charismatic like Charlton Heston (who makes a guest appearance as the patriarchal dying ape, father of the villain, Thade). Also, the kind of Tarzan, primitive, loin-clothed

Heston is different from Wahlberg who stays in his military uniform all the way through. When he returns to Earth and the present, he goes to the Lincoln Monument in Washington, looks up at Lincoln's statue - and Lincoln has an ape's face! As the police come to arrest him we see they are all apes. (A witty critic said they monkeyed with the ending; another said they offered a monkey puzzle!) It's a time-shift, time-dimensional trick, in a way, which I gather comes from Pierre Boulle's original novel. So you're right, both films are quite strong dramatisations in their own way, of humans being controlled or losing control, even when, in the new version, the hero thinks he's regained control by returning to Earth.

Bernie:

You say the action happens quickly, and the apes are less humane in the new version. Once again that seems to me absolutely viable, reflecting that that is how we are. We are less human. We don't have time. We do rush about more quickly. We are much more aggressive and our crimes worse. There is less compassion. So it perfectly reflects our artificial intelligence plus society as it is. The artificial intelligence has taken on not only control but the worst aspects of the society that formed it. In some ways this might seem a bit far out. But you could see it as prophetic and as a warning.

Peter:

I hadn't thought of that. Part of the problem is that Helena Bonham-Carter's character is quite subtly drawn. She represents the best aspects of human life. She has a servant assistant who is the only ape in the community who is in agreement with her. The other ape who has to escape with them is a comic character, a slave dealer who's stranded, and has to survive with them. The aggressive ape, Thade, played by Tim Roth, is absolute fascist aggression and power. This confirms your thesis. There is not so much subtlety in the apes' civilisation as there was 35 years ago in our hopes of what a planet of the apes might be like.

Bernie:

You've raised the impatient, right-wing aspects of fascism. This is very much on the rise. Listening to a radio program the other day I heard that the attacks on Jewish people world-wide have gone up enormously. What does this reflect? These fascist leaders always emerge, don't they?

Peter:

I am interested in the theme which is mentioned in both films, that the ape society mirrors human society. But I had been looking at the more favourable image of 1968 while trying to analyse this fast, more superficial, aggressive society that is mirrored in 2001. Did you want to say anything more about Kubrick and 2001?

Bernie:

Only to say that I think all his films need to be regularly seen, because there is such depth. Kubrick had a mission with his talent, and his films are sometimes easier to understand after some years have gone by. His breadth and depth and vision often takes us beyond what we can comprehend but, visited later, they become much more comprehensible. I think Kubrick's in a special position of being a director whose films should be regularly seen, even though we might have seen them two or three times before. They make more sense with age, as we evolve. That, I think, was his genius.

Peter:

Yes, we have Spartacus and Gladiator, 40 years apart, yet Spartacus can stand up more strongly than Gladiator on Roman Empire themes. And Paths of Glory, in terms of war issues. The film that I think needs to be seen often is A Clockwork Orange. If ever there was a mirror of abuse of authority and abuse of the individual, it's A Clockwork Orange. It's about control and freedom - of the individual and society.

With 2001, seeing it again after 20 years in early 2001 itself, I was very impressed by the first part of the film. I thought it stood up particularly well as a picture of evolution plus an image of the transcendent. I also found the final part, where Hal controls the humans, probably more relevant, especially in terms of what you were saying. I noticed that even the popular thrillers of 2001, like Anti-Trust, where Tim Robbins is a Bill Gates-like character who wants to get control of all space communications and media, but is thwarted by the nerd individual hero, and Swordfish, where

John Travolta is a kind of fascist-American terrorist using, once again, computers to access information and money allegedly for the terrorist-like destruction of America's enemies. That's certainly very relevant as our computer age has developed.

The part that didn't stand up very well is the 2001 section itself. It now seems rather mundane. The technology and public access to the space station hasn't been accomplished. Travel to the moon has been minimal. The interesting part of the 2001 section is the new discovery of the monolith.

Bernie:

But there's something we've missed out on if we take Kubrick's films. We have been saying that 2001 and both Planet of the Apes can be looked at from a sociological perspective. It is interesting that while he was working on AI for a long time, his last film was in fact a psychological film, Eyes Wide Shut. I'd like to think about a connection; that he's gone from broad society to the individual, from the macrocosm to the microcosm of individuals living within their societies and their relationships. It's all in the title, Eyes Wide Shut. I interpret that as saying that, while our eyes are open, we are not seeing. We are robotic.

Peter:

Speaking about Eyes Wide Shut has become more complicated because of Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman spending so much time close to Kubrick and each other making the film and, two years later their separation and divorce. While Kubrick himself was non-communicative, now that he is dead, we have no way of knowing what he thought about his project and its stars. My impression at the time of seeing Eyes Wide Shut was that Kubrick directed Nicole Kidman very well, created a multi-dimensional character and I would have liked to have seen her in the film much more, not just at the beginning and at the end.

She tells Tom Cruise, her husband-character, about her sexual fantasy, which was in no way a reality. His psychological reaction is to perform robotically with his eyes wide shut. He spends most of the film playing a kind of asexual sexual odyssey with a motivation of emotional revenge, with no attempt at understanding of his wife, a petulant character, going out on the town in New York City to seek some kind of compensation, which leads him in most bizarre directions. Whether Kubrick saw something destructive in them, I don't know. But it's proved itself, since you're focusing on individuals, behaviour, control and loss of control. Kubrick was alarmingly prescient as regards his protagonists.

Bernie:

I suppose you have to ask yourself the question, was Kubrick's commitment to showing truth so strong, that he was showing it in two protagonists who weren't fully aware of that truth. Was this artistically, morally and ethically acceptable to him - and, now, to them?

Peter:

And what was his contribution to their development as persons by having them involved so long in making such a film, with such demands.

Bernie:

Was his contribution the major factor in their break-up? And, if so, was that necessarily bad, or was the relationship flawed from the beginning. If they knew from the beginning their involvement in the film that their marriage and relationship were in trouble, then it seems a very brave artistic collaboration to portray truth, in the way that Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor did in the Edward Albee film.

Peter:

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf.

Bernie:

It said that their marriage would be destroyed, which it subsequently was. Of course, there were other factors involved. Kubrick was moving from his sociological perspective into a portrait of relationships. And this is ordinary, if you like. I tell you, my husband, a story about my sexual fantasy, and you cannot hold it or contain it because of your insecurities, so you go out and seek security, confidence and revenge, and this is what it brings you to. Isn't that a very common theme in Mr and Mrs Everyman's relationship?

Bernie:

The interesting thing is how much credence do we give to Kubrick when he is doing a very personal film, as opposed to a visionary film?

Peter:

Eyes Wide Shut seems to me a psychodrama, an elongated psychodrama - far too drawn out for what is really a small-focus psychodrama.

Bernie:

But, again, there's the amoral, ruthless fascist power in the elite, in the masks at the ball. Perhaps we are back at the apes again.

ENEMIES AT THE GATE AND IN THE HEART OF DARKNESS

Peter:

There are films like Apocalypse Now which have had an important impact on you. In a sense, it is not an exhilarating experience by the end of Willis's journey up river. It is a journey into the heart of darkness.

Bernie:

What *Apocalypse Now* did for me was to make me look at my own heart of darkness. It made me experience how I think about the veneer of civilisation. When you go into Kurtz's compound with Willis and see dead bodies just hanging there in an extremely primitive, terrible way, I think there's something about all that horror that makes you realise what we are capable of, given the circumstances. We can't be too dismissive or judge that we could never do such things. I think that's the message of Auschwitz and the Holocaust. It's something we really need to know about ourselves, however distasteful and revolting it is to us. It's a way of coming to terms with our own shadow.

Colonel Kurtz is the absolute zenith of the perfect soldier for any country. While his modum operandi is not acceptable, he gets results. And I like this theme in films. But it left me with a disturbing realisation - again coming back to this thin veneer of civilisation - that the bestial is not very far below the surface. You have My Lai and all those crucial situations in Vietnam. They happened in the '60s and are still happening. We've got Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Afghanistan, Israel and Palestine, Iraq.

The film says something powerful to me insofar as it enabled me to integrate a mood of horror which was very well portrayed when Willard goes in to assassinate Kurtz but realises that Kurtz is a mirror to himself. Kurtz says that people like this are tough enough to perform these actions. They are perfect warriors. They don't have scruples. If it's war, it's war. They don't have any other agenda. There's something about all this that I find disturbing and fascinating at the same time. It's an all or nothing at all mentality.

Peter:

I have heard you say that *The Ride of the Valkyries* playing behind the helicopters was a very moving symbol for yourself.

Bernie:

Yes, I did find it very moving. I can't hear that music without seeing Robert Duvall saying, 'I love the smell of Napalm in the morning. It smells of - victory'. And I just thought of that conditioning of perversity. He knew what that napalm was doing. The war has turned a man into another monster, whose pleasure was the smell of napalm and the burning skin from babies' bodies. This is absolute disconnection. I thought it was appalling. So, the music is connected to that scene where I see him, Kilgore, standing there defiantly. At the same time there's the music from *The Doors* and Jim Morrison, which I think sounds prophetic. Coppola put that music in, whether consciously or unconsciously: we passed the Rubicon somewhere in society; somewhere we have gone over the line; this is the end. It's using the prophecy of another artist. But it all fits together like links in a chain. I think there's a sociological Rubicon we've gone over. I think that this is what, consciously or unconsciously, *Apocalypse Now* pointed to. It's not just Vietnam. I always thought it was a message for people in a much broader sense.

Peter:

Something that moves me is a sequence in *For the Boys*. Bette Midler is an entertainer who goes to Vietnam to sing for the troops. She's actually come to see her son who is on sentry duty during her performance. A bunny girl has come out to dance. The momentum builds and the soldiers become a pack of randy louts. They converge on the bunny who becomes very frightened and she has to be rescued. Bette comes out and tells them to shut up and act like gentlemen.

Then she sings John Lennon's 'In My Life', quietly and tenderly, for me one of the highlights of the movies. As she sings, one of the African American soldiers comes out and dances a minuet with her. As the song finishes, planes come roaring in and everybody takes cover. There's strafing, there's bombing and her son, running to warn the others is killed. The whole sequence takes about ten minutes, if that. From pop-America and sentiment into the heart of darkness within five minutes.

Bernie:

Another film that comes to mind about war which I was absolutely fascinated with, especially the confrontation between Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson, is *A Few Good Men*. What electrified me was that they both talking the truth and that there were two sides of that truth. A very important thing that Jack Nicholson said - and I remember

watching this film at the height of the conflict in Kosovo, bombings and atrocities - 'I do things that you want me to do, but you don't want to know how I do it. You can't handle the truth'. I think that's very, very true. There is a double standard, there is a denial; we do want harsh things done, but we don't want to know about it. But we have no hesitation in pointing it out in other people. Then, when it becomes us and the enemy, it's okay. Rather than seeing all of us as part of the human race and forgetting about countries, it's again it's right for us and not for them.

What I liked and what was more positive was the redeeming and brilliant arguments that the Tom Cruise character brought to the prosecution about moral standards and how, even in the most difficult circumstances, they are necessary. It's how we hang on to civilisation and all that's good, pure, passionate and excellent and healthy in mankind when faced with the temptations of the heart of darkness and the thin veneer that's civilisation.

The very thing that we need, which I find so passionate, is clear intelligence which is positive. When you bring these elements together in a war situation, you're bringing them together at the sharp end. You are not theorising. Both sides in that court case in *A Few Good Men* had to bring very believable and inspiring answers to what each of them was saying. I think the metaphor of war brings out what's important in our lives much more sharply because of what's at stake.

I've never spoken on this before, so it's interesting for me to search my own depths to find out why I think in this way. I had exactly the same experience with *Crimson Tide*. You had the world-weary, highly experienced captain, played by Gene Hackman, wanting to stop World War III, and the brilliant portrayal of the younger, different philosophical approach from Denzel Washington. It was brilliant in terms of philosophy about war, philosophy about how you handle things, philosophy about the possibility of the end of the world. These films have a lot to teach us over and above themes of war.

Peter:

Between 1998 and 2002 we have had a considerable number of big war films on our screens. I'm thinking of *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Thin Red Line*, *Enemy at the Gates*, *Pearl Harbor*, *Charlotte Gray* and *We Were Soldiers*. The war has been over for more than 55 years. Why these films at the end of the 90s and the beginning of the century, and why were they so popular?

Bernie:

I think mankind is extremely confused, extremely frustrated and very angry alongside that confusion. There are incredible demands on people. Of course, in each culture they're very different. But the war films act as a kind of siphoning off of that fury, that rage, that anger - where, collectively, it can be lived out in a safe way. Part of the inner experience is that a person can feel that they should go and shoot and blow everyone up. Everyone feels this as they take their sides in a given war film. The difference in a film like *Saving Private Ryan* is that the full horror of war is portrayed in the first 25 minutes in such a way that it cannot be seen to be romantic. It reminded me of an older Korean War film, *Pork Chop Hill*. It was much more reality-based than many war films. I heard of veterans being very affected by it. It is excellent film because it takes away any romance of war.

These war films work on many different levels, especially that cathartic level for anger and frustration and fury that people feel because of their powerlessness.

Peter:

This is certainly reinforced by box office returns, even for a film that received a critical drubbing like *Pearl Harbour*.

Bernie:

I have to mention the music as well because films touch on the deepest stirrings in our soul. If you look back in history, we have churches with icons, stained-glass windows, we have paintings on cave walls, and there's always been music. They're an integral part of our psyche. So why not let music, in a constructive way, affect us, especially in the most disturbing films because sometimes they help someone. That was a very difficult thing for me to come to terms with, but they do. Someone who was quite severely handicapped was given great catharsis of freedom and relaxation from watching Tarantino. Can I say that this is wrong for that person, after having seen those films, to feel at peace, to be able to sit there and have some contact with their spirituality and wellbeing, having burst that fury because of the way

he's been encased in his body which is now a prison?

Peter:

A colleague of mine, who's very gentle in his personality but very tenacious when acting as a counsellor, discovered in 1972 this after a T-group experience when he saw A Clockwork Orange. He said that this 'ultra-violent' film was just the thing to enable him to come back down to earth. He was surprised over the years how many times he relied on this kind of violent story. At one stage he had developed glandular fever but he wasn't aware of what actually was wrong with him. He felt more than a bit tense and went to see Sam Peckinpah's strong war film, Cross of Iron. For a while he felt much better. So there are stories and there are people, whatever the complexity of the personality, for whom these tough stories and experiences are important.

Bernie:

And do you know what's very interesting about this. From the Jungian standpoint, the brightest people have the darkest shadows. We have to keep talking about the heart of darkness and accept our own heart of darkness. This is where these films are therapeutic. They aid integration and liberation rather than anxiety and denial - neither of which confronts or deals with that heart of darkness.

THE ARCHETYPAL AMERICAN MOVIE - IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

Peter:

Bernie, why has It's a Wonderful Life become the archetypal American movie?

Bernie:

I think it's because it deals with depression, and there's a lot of depression in America and around the world.

Peter:

When people talk about Frank Capra, they always refer to his being up-beat and having happy endings. However, I saw an excellent documentary on him recently and they showed clips from most of his movies, especially the classics, Mr Deeds Goes to Town, You Can't Take it With You and Mr Smith Goes to Washington. It made me realise that his themes are actually quite grim. So, when you mentioned depression, I wasn't surprised, but I think a lot of people would be.

Bernie:

There are two things to consider: one is that Frank Capra was part of the army unit that filmed the atrocities of World War II. I think he came back a changed man, with a re-evaluation of what his priorities in life really were, what really mattered. The second thing is that he found the integrity he wanted to show in the qualities James Stewart brought to the screen.

Peter:

It's made an impression ever since and it's always quoted. In so many movies the characters turn on the television and there it is, especially at Christmas which is, of course, the setting. But did it make that impact in 1947? It didn't get any Oscars.

Bernie:

No, it was something of a flop. But Frank Capra's son said in a television interview that when his father made the film, he received literally thousands of letters from people saying that it turned them around, stopped them from committing suicide. And this at the time it was a national flop. What was really interesting was that many of the letters were from San Quentin, from the prisoners. So here were people at the sharp end who drew some spiritual strength and meaning in life from the film. Gradually its message has caught on. There's an aching need in audiences to see nice people. There's an aching need for community that works. Where we have the tough New York or London attitudes, city life, there's a need for simplicity and trust, which Capra represents.

Peter:

The scene which is always quoted in the movies is James Stewart's George Bailey running and shouting happily at the end and it is something of an archetype itself.

Bernie:

It's a sociological archetype, in the sense that he's not talking about his inner feelings so much as the town and the people. In Buddhist terms that would be called a Sanga. In Christian terms it's a community or brotherhood. The spirituality of the town had been brought alive for him.

Peter:

Yes, because he saw its absence. He was given a vision of its absence.

Bernie:

What a brilliant therapist the angel, Clarence, turned out to be.

Peter:

I think that the American male is generally considered to operate with his Thinking function, very objective. But when I looked at *It's a Wonderful Life* again recently, I thought that George Bailey is portrayed as much more a personalised decision-maker, a Feeler. The screenplay has him saying that he wished he could build bridges in Venezuela and other projects around the world. I really didn't quite believe those parts of the dialogue. He was much better at building bridges between people, which is what he actually did. In some ways he is the victim of the pressures of a society which expects him to be very objective, achieve success in the savings and loan society, and in his own strong personality, which was very much people-oriented family. In a sense, the hard expectations of American life on a more Feeling person were overwhelming.

Bernie:

Absolutely. You see as with a lot of genuine feeling people who are carers, the tragedy of George Bailey was that he cared for everyone except himself. And when he lost everything because of the run on the savings and loan, his anger and his suicide attempt meant that his anger was turned against himself. And it's only in that moment when he talks with Clarence that he realises who he is.

When you look at the film, you see all his dreams are put to one side. His honeymoon is put to one side. His friend asked him to join in with him in business, and it's put to one side. He lets his brother have his career - he keeps putting himself to one side. And that's classic for nice people who get depressed because they're all-caring. But the one person they don't care for is themselves. There is some sort of early conditioning or even religious upbringing that is actually selfish rather than healthy, because if you can't look after yourself, how much can you give to others before you crack? And in the harsh society that we're talking about, this can come about more quickly, can't it?

Peter:

Yes. But if somebody had been able to work with him, "You're an ENFJ and we affirm that those wonderful brainwaves you have for society here in Bedford Falls, and doing this in Bedford Falls is where you will really be

yourself", then it would have been a wonderful life all the way through.

Bernie:

The question I always put to my clients when I'm working with this movie is a simple question which, if you answer it truthfully, you won't have merely a conceptual understanding, you will have an experience. And that question is: if you hadn't lived, how much happiness would not have happened in the world? In other words, how many people's lives have you touched by your own living? When any individual asks that question of themselves, they have to realise that they have helped or affected someone through their life. And if that's happened, there's an experience of self-esteem the moment you recognise it. And that's anti-depression. You've started to have an inner experience that says, "depression's not the only way." And that's why I think it's a very powerful film. It asks everyone to experience what it might have been like had they not lived.

Peter:

Potter was the shadow of George Bailey, Pottersville the shadow of Bedford Falls.

Bernie:

That was the symbolism of the movie; it also was the symbolism of his life. He came back purged, he came back cleansed. He realised his value and his brother says it: "To my brother, the richest person in the world."

People can say it's schmaltzy or whatever, but experiences like that do come to us. Like, if you find the Kingdom of Heaven, all else will be given to you, or "Cast your bread upon the waters and it will be returned." It is Karma, in Buddhist terms.

Peter:

The hundredfold in Gospel terms.

Bernie:

"And the truth will set you free."

Peter:

One of the signs of the depression which struck me last time I watched the movie was when he went up to his children's room towards the end and was angry with them. Some people in the audience were scandalised that he should have been so angry. And yet we do say, don't we, to be true to yourself, you've got to let your anger out? How you do it is another matter. But in saying, "Isn't that a terrible part of the film?", they should have sensed that this was a sign of health, that at least he was becoming so desperate in his anger that he was expressing it.

In type terms, I would see him as a dominant Feeling function person. But the way that he laid down the law to the children showed that he was going into a kind of ultra-logical, ultra-rationalistic explanation which they didn't understand at all. That was a danger signal that he was going into his uncontrolled shadow in his depression.

Bernie:

I agree with that entirely. When he does hold the child, then stops and goes out, he has just lost control, which he's never done, and just re-gained it long enough to go out and be safe. But then he goes to the bridge to kill himself. So he doesn't express it in a healthy way after all.

Peter:

After I saw that documentary I mentioned, I said I would never use the adjective "Capra-esque" to express mindless optimism. But I think Capra-esque describes how you have analysed It's a Wonderful Life.

Bernie:

An intelligent man like Capra who went and photographed war atrocities would have been extremely affected by it. He was a man, who would want to use his art to come back and make some impact on society, and this movie is still doing that.

TO MAKE HER FANTASY A REALITY - MURIEL'S WEDDING

Peter:

I'm surprised to find somebody in England who's not only seen Muriel's Wedding but enjoyed it and has actually used it for some therapy sessions.

Bernie:

Everything is there in the film: the tragedy for Muriel that you see in the early part of the film is in the way she is shouted at by her father, humiliated by him, often in public. You see the same pattern with Muriel's mother, who has 'dumbed down', has become very passive and acquiescent in her behaviour.

This pattern carries on in so many people's lives; the emotional climate shapes and forms it. So the kind of friends, for instance, that Muriel takes on are not real friends; they're people who also carry on humiliating and having a go at her in public, shouting at her in the street in the way that she's become used to. It isn't unfamiliar to her at all. It's only when she meets a real friend as opposed to an acquaintance that you see real friendship and change because someone trusts her as herself.

It's a very powerful film to watch, because Muriel is not the classic beauty. Of course, there's lots of talk about beauty being in the eye of the beholder as well as about beauty being the inner person and, whilst all that is true, I can hear a lot of people who may not be feeling very beautiful saying, 'Claptrap!'. But look at the contrast so very clearly shown in the ugliness of her so-called externally beautiful friends.

Peter:

There's a scene at the end where Sophie Lee, the bride who screams at her, screeches down the street, with her face contorted, 'But I'm beautiful'.

Bernie:

Exactly. And when you look into her eyes and you look at those women's behaviour, it's mean, it's vindictive, sadistic, and it's far from beautiful. But when you look at Muriel's dream, she simply wants to get married, she just wants to know she got to the church and how she had someone on her arm - that she was special and that was what she achieved.

Peter:

Except that she was being used by the swimming coach to get the South African swimmer his Australian citizenship.

Bernie:

But Muriel is not silly, either. She also used them, realising that this wasn't a real love match, but it would at least enable her to make her fantasy a reality.

Peter:

Yes. The complete joy and satisfaction in Toni Collette's smile as she walked down that aisle stays in my memory.

Bernie:

Yes, 'I've got it. I've done it'. In that moment, Muriel had transcended her conditioning. That's a very important message for people. It's not a feeble message at all. There's hope, there's inspiration insofar as this can happen and that it does happen in life. This is not just a film thing. Films come from our lives. Writers draw out and write films from their experiences of people they've known. Some critics do their reviews with a kind of world-weary attitude, that everything that goes up on the screen is like some kind of Walt Disney world and bears no relation to life. I think they are looking only at half of life and think grim endings are the only 'real' endings for films.

Peter:

In Myers-Briggs and type terms, I would see Muriel as almost a standard Australian character, perhaps English character as well: she's an extraverted type, she's not a decisive type, she's very subjective and personal and she lives in the present, so I would suggest ESFP. And a sizeable number of people identify with this type - I suppose Australian sunshine and weather contribute to a more easygoing, pleasurable (some say 'hedonistic') atmosphere. But the film shows that, in a sense, her father's brutal treatment of her, her brothers and sisters criticisms - you know, the big sister saying, 'Muriel, you're awful' - and her mother's frustration somehow or other galvanised her to move beyond herself towards some kind of individuation.

It might have been going on the holiday to the resort or stealing the clothes, or going to Sydney and trying to get a job, even that overwhelming dream of getting married, but there was something moving her away from merely being one of the complacent people as were so many around her.

Bernie:

And I think it was important that she actualised her anger. Anger gets a bad press. But there can be some kinds of anger that move you out of your complacency into actually doing something, which is what I think she did. She changed in her inner attitude from being victim to being survivor.

Peter:

Her friend, Rhonda, was so crucial in that. Maybe dramatically it all seemed a bit overdone in the sense that Rhonda became ill and paralysed, but she was the catalyst - she could be angry as well - she was the catalyst for Muriel. And then they fell out. But each of them did have the capacity to come together again and be complementary to and for each other.

Bernie:

Muriel's handicap was her upbringing, her inferiority and her victim mentality. Rhonda didn't have that. Rhonda's physical handicap came later. There could be a Muriel's Wedding 2, really, to see how those two got along, how they got in life. They're not Hollywood caricatures; they seem like real people facing real problems today.

Peter:

And the farewell was genial, with Abba's Dancing Queen as they got the taxi out of Porpoise Spit and called out their goodbye to everything. It was a light-hearted, smiling way they did it, but it was really saying goodbye to all of their

past.

Bernie:

They put their anger into action, which enabled them to have a kind of a tongue-in-cheek goodbye. They had some measure of compassion, I think, for Porpoise Spit, but they'd grown bigger than Porpoise Spit.

Peter:

Otherwise Muriel would have ended up like her mother.

Bernie:

But probably a much more tragic figure than her mother, because she would lose it in terms of a much larger reality that she had discovered.

Peter:

The thing I remember is the mother burning the backyard before killing herself and the family not even being aware that she was on a path to suicide.

Bernie:

Exactly. The insensitivity, everyone living in their own bubble. There wasn't a connection.

Peter:

'Bubble' is the word for her father. In type terms, he was an example of the archetypal Australian male. Whatever of our convict origins, he was crooked in his own way, genially crooked, but there was a hardness in him that creates a society where external material success expectations are put on people.

Bernie:

Yes, and I think that many Cockneys in this country would identify with that kind of a man as well.

Peter:

A bit of a spiv?

Bernie:

In terms of the pressures that society put on men, I suppose the issue now is to question whether they submit to those pressures. Many men now lack commitment to marriage. You find many women talking about this lack of men's commitment, and it doesn't take much to see why. No jobs are as safe as they used to be. You worked at it for 25 years and got a gold watch. However boring that was, it was secure. Now you don't know how long you're going to have your job, but you're still saddled with a 25-year mortgage. Who wants to rush into that at 22 - and then the babies?

When you ask about the expectations of a man in the past, the man of that age and generation took on the responsibilities and expectations of what society wanted. Many young men now have seen what has happened to their fathers and they are not willing to make those choices in today's world. That's what I'm trying to connect with the lack of commitment and the questions, 'Do I want to be like that?' There's a different sets of values.

Peter:

I first saw Muriel's Wedding at the opening of the Melbourne Film Festival in 1994. There was a festive mood. The parodies and nostalgia of the Abba songs were so funny that people tended to be laughing all the way through. When I saw it alone in a multiplex a couple of months later, all I could see was the sadness, especially focused on the mother.

Bernie:

The mother was a haunting character. Although Muriel was the main figure, I think that many women would identify with the mother, and that hasn't been said enough. That is a lot of women's experience of marriage today.

METTA, JESUS AND MGM (Words: 5200)

Bernie:

I was trained as psycho-spiritual therapist at Karuna. In recent years I have been pioneering the use of movies and movie sequences in my work as a mode of access for some clients who find it helpful in therapy. Many disgruntled Catholics, predominantly of a certain age, are coming to me with a crisis of faith. Some are looking towards becoming Buddhists and feel somewhat guilty about that. At the same time there is some kind of psychic confusion with what I understand are the doctrines of the Catholic Church.

In my experience, they use, unhealthily, the power of the Church and of confession to fuel this Inner Critic and give it the spiritual authority of the Church. This is turned into quite a wrathful self-judgement, negative Inner Critic, which often leads into a pattern of very rigid disciplinarianism. They use the power and authority of the Church to turn it on themselves and, in terms of a judgmentalness, on their relationships. What happens, then, to their relationships? Subsequent relationships with their children can make them very unhappy. This relates to my work with MGM on The Wizard of Oz where I highlighted the Wicked Witch of the West as the personification of this negative Inner Critic.

It's extremely painful for the therapist (or at least it is for me) to contain the pressure and suffering when dealing with this kind of wrathful judge that they have inside them. There's superego with a spiritual content there as well and they turn it on themselves. Could you say anything that would be helpful – that would help to alleviate the pressure - from your position as a priest for many years in the Catholic Church? From your work in reviewing movies and using them in counselling, can you suggest some movies that could be useful to Catholics dealing with this problem?

Peter:

Bernie, I think that a lot of Catholics who stay within the church are having the same experience, especially those who are leave the practice, Sunday Mass and so on, but would still say that they are Catholics.

And those who are very loyal to the church, and find a vitality in their seemingly contradictory Church, would still share some of that anger. They probably do have some of that rigidity in themselves, depending on how old they were. But they often see this rigidity in their contemporaries who may be in positions of authority in the church and who are acting in this rigid way within their ministry. So, it seems to me, it's not just a Catholic thing but a universal thing.

Two points I would like to make for a start: I think that with the Second Vatican council in the first half of the sixties we were very lucky in the Catholic Church that, as the world and culture were changing, we had an official opportunity to change (and 'renew' and 'update' as we said at the time) on a world church level. I don't

know where we would be otherwise - a small sect perhaps!. So the last forty years or so have seen an extraordinary ferment within the worldwide Catholic Church. This also means that the church is not monolithic in any way. Hispanic American Catholics are so different from Asian Catholics compared with British Catholics that you wonder at times if they do belong to the same church.

The traditional Catholic emphasis on belief rather than experience is another area where there is change over the last forty years. Many Catholics have been able to move with that dynamism and they've been able to change and develop. When there is a rigidity in images of God, God is seen as angry and vengeful. There also tends to be an absence of an image of Jesus (which I think is a really detrimental thing). With these people there is almost no image of the Spirit of God. Whatever one's image of God, God needs to be seen as a loving father to Jesus (with maternal characteristics); Jesus embodies the very heart of love and compassion of God. A lot of Catholics have missed out, unfortunately, on a lot of this spirituality. If only people could rediscover this.

Here are two further suggestions as to what has happened. What your clients may see as the church is not the church but individuals representing the church – which is a pity in any organisation. The Royal Family is not Prince Charles, nor Prince Edward, nor the Queen. But that's what happens in life, people judge the church through some individual representative, and we have to accept that. But if they can break through, even only in some images. Which is where our film work and therapy might be useful: – to see a film about the work of El Salvador's Archbishop Romero in the movie Romero, to see Sister Helen Prejean and her work with death row prisoners in Dead Man Walking, to see the controversies and conflicts of a priest's celibacy embodied in a film like Priest could do a great deal to change images of church.

There are other images of the contemporary church which would broaden the narrow horizons. Often the criticism is not merely of an individual, it's often a critique of the culture. A lot of the religious cultures are strongly, sometimes fiercely, Patriarchal. But it's not really the church as such, it's Dad and Grandfather who are really very dominating and who have given their precepts and injunctions for behaviour in the name of the church. There's an Australian film, Bad Boy Bubba where his mother keeps her simple son of thirty-five years hidden in a cellar home. There's a crucifix on the wall (it hasn't got a head) but she says, 'if you move while I'm out, he'll know. God will tell me'.

Bernie:

I agree with all of that. I'm very glad you're interested in and have been using films. I'm very interested in what you were saying. I agree with you that often it's a very disgruntled Granddad or a very stern Father or Mother who has been the personification of spiritual instruction. The shame is that when the children have gone to a Catholic school, or whatever, that rut of experience is compounded because that's where they take it. And then that's how they receive more Catholic instruction. And it may not be intended to be given but that is where the damage is done and the wound is made even bigger.

There are two things I want to pick up. It's very important because I think that Catholics that I see are picking up, hopefully, some kind of compassion, that they're being met, they're being heard and feeling less discipline, judgement and inner criticism from the therapy. I hope that they could see something of this from the films.

But, at the same time. Buddhism is very big on metta and compassion. It really is the centre of it all. I think it's a shame what has happened to the Catholic Church. I don't sit in judgement on it. What I very much like to do when I work with Catholics, I want them to stay with their faith. I'm not a campaigning Buddhist that wants to win anyone over. I have no interest in that whatsoever because I think there's a lot of positive strength in the religious upbringing. But, how can we mitigate the negative experience? I think we've gone some way to answering that and the authority from which you're making your points may well help clients risk breaking down some of their cherished beliefs that have also become their strategies for dealing with life

Peter:

And these beliefs and strategies have often become ossified. They're really out-of-date strategies. With a number of Catholics who didn't like the Second Vatican council, they found when the council was called they had such a 'siege mentality', developed since the sixteenth century Reformation, that they were hiding inside the church. And they were so defensive that they hadn't realised the enemy had lost interest in the church and had long gone away.

One of the things that I've found very helpful with a number of people within the Catholic church - or people trying to find a way of staying within the church is a retreat called Life's Healing Journey developed by some American confreres of my religious order and which is very popular now in Australia. It's a ten-day or so process, full time in which people have personal guidance, not so much therapy but spiritual direction. Then they go into retreat but also have an opportunity to share with other people. Naming the hurts in one's life, being able to name the hurts and to share the hurts with others who have experienced the same kind of thing is important. But it is in the context of openness to God, openness in prayer. It's called Life's Healing Journey - where some of the wounds haven't even as yet been opened, the participants will eventually be able to heal appropriately and find some sense of direction.

Many who haven't opportunities like this could look on the face of Cardinal Hume or Mother Teresa or other significant Catholics who are credible to them. These are alternate images of the contemporary church other than the priest who was unwelcoming, the nun who was brutal, the family member who was a harsh disciplinarian – people who were really living out their own unresolved tensions.

Bernie:

I'm very glad that we are saying this because I think that with the weight you carry within the church, you will be giving permission to people to risk doing this by means of such things as the healing retreats or the equivalent in England. Or the images that you suggest.

But, again, I think it would be helpful for therapists like myself – that when people come they realise that they have this permission. That seems so important for them to break through. It's very difficult for them to break through without permission. Even if they become lapsed, there's a knee-jerk reaction into doing what they were taught to do when they were very young, especially in stressful situations.

Peter:

I don't know what the answer to that is. It's probably for each individual. To use the older Transactional Analysis terms, these clients are 'stuck' in a very wounded child condition. The church has been such a 'critical parent'. If only there were a magic formula for people to perceive the adulthood of the church in an adult way! If you as the therapist can work on that, there is hope for breaking out of the rigid patterns and of seeing their church experience quite differently. The permission the clients need becomes a mature experience. They give themselves permission to make their decisions.

How that can happen, it's over to you. The things that I'm keen on that are, of course, from my perspective: adult education within the church, spirituality which is experiential, the spirituality of justice. There is a great deal of this going on at present and the centres where people can engage in this could be helpful references for you as a therapist, seeking out the places where a particular client might feel at home. It might be in a prayer group. It might be in attending some course. It might be in a retreat or it might be by getting involved in some charity or justice activity. I have been based for many years at a spirituality centre in Melbourne where we, in fact, train spiritual directors and that is what we do.

Somebody contacts us and says they would like some spiritual direction. We have a person who is very skilled who conducts an initial interview. The interviewer is able to discover with the client which are the areas, the questions, the dilemmas they need direction for. We are able then to advise that one director might take an affirming approach while another would be more challenging. That is the kind of personal accompaniment that I'm most familiar with.

Bernie:

The P.A.C. model is what I use, not with all Catholics, but in the main. Because it seems to me, and I like what you said about the church, that what I'm doing is helping the frightened child who has internalised so much from an internal critic or parent, a negative parent, an unhealthy parent if you like. My work is to help them feel a nurturing power which is to be associated with the good and positive spiritual experience within the church. And, at the same time, I am very much trying to strengthen the adult. I liked it very much when you said to look at the church as the adult because I think a lot of Catholics I see, and Catholics in general, will be interested to hear that they may well be looking at the church as a parent. There's 'mother church' and all those images. It would be very interesting to make that shift and very healthy for a lot of people (Catholics) to have permission to look at the church as an adult as opposed to a parent.

One more thing I want to add - the confessional has come up many times. I listen and I've thought about it prior to seeing many Catholics. One of the things that struck me is that it is all about the acceptance of sin. The emphasis seems so strongly on that they have done something wrong. I've developed an approach in my work with Catholics that I call the confessional of what they do right in the day and every day. I don't know whether the terminology is the same in the church but I work with them so that they can affirm themselves, they can balance up that they are good enough - that they don't come from a position of concentrating on the power, the majesty and the ritual of the church and conclude that they're not good enough.

Peter:

In more recent Catholic terminology there is a shift from 'confession' to 'reconciliation' and a change in the way in which confession is conducted. The recommended way of confession these days is sitting and in face to face talking between the person 'confessing' and the priest. It's not meant to be that quickie ritual that we see in so many films of the past - and, I'm afraid, the present. The focus now is on reconciliation with God, with the Church and with fellow human beings through the confession. St Ignatius Loyola, the Spanish spiritual master of the 16th century developed a method, which I hope comes back more and more into use. We are rediscovering it. Ignatius said that it is not so much an examination of conscience, a noting and listing of our sins but a 'Consciousness Examen'. This means a method of gaining awareness of, or a look at, our consciousness of our relationship with God. He recommended that we start with a prayer of thanks. It seems to be something of the equivalent of what you were saying about the confessional of doing good in the day.

Bernie:

That would be mindfulness in the Buddhist sense.

Peter:

Yes. It is a thanking God for today and for the period since we were last in a ritual of reconciliation. The second prayer step is in the looking at one's life in the light of God. One of the Psalms says, 'God, in your light, we see light'. God's light illuminates where our failings and sinfulness lie. This is no excessive breast beating. Our awareness of sin is meant to be in that context of thanksgiving. And it is not just our own personal sins that we focus on - which is the 'guilt trip' kind of thing. In the Catholic Church there is a rediscovery and a changing awareness of sin: the social dimensions of sin, in our actions and attitudes we affect one another, that society is sinning and that we are caught up in all of that. The questions arises, what does this mean in terms of reconciliation with others, in justice for others? It's a whole mind-set shift from me and my terrible sinfulness to me in this world of others struggling within church that we can be reconciled in Jesus and in his compassion. Ignatius says that it is on this prayerful basis that we go forward in making amends for what we have done move to whatever grace there is in the next stage of our lives.

Bernie:

I suppose in Buddhist terms it is realising that we are in the world of struggling and sin, that it is a sharing of a broader community of compassion into relatedness and interconnectedness. But, again, I want to emphasise the good things that people do, the little things that they don't even think about whereas they might study the minutiae of what they did wrong. And it's this imbalance that I'm always trying to get at.

Peter:

To that extent some of your Catholic clients may be twenty or thirty years out of date with the main current church thinking and practice. Somehow they are trapped back in that harsh past. They may not have been participating in church in recent times and do not realise that they are church just as much as the next person in the pew as Cardinal Hume or some well-known Catholic. It is that old Church and those old images of Church that religious education has been trying to move away from for, at least, twenty-five years.

Bernie:

Sure. My problem with the Catholics of a certain age who cling to the memory of the harsh discipline and are looking elsewhere is that they still hold on to doctrinal beliefs of that teaching and this conditioned reflex reaction to be self-critical and judgmental. How can we communicate to them that the Catholic Church is no longer like this? It's what we've been talking about predominantly and it is my mission with using film that it is about experience as opposed to belief. And I wonder, because I want to be very clear in this and it might be helpful to Catholics who may read this, are there any films that I don't know of but which you may know of that would illustrate the modern approach that you have been talking about?

Peter:

Some titles would be Dead Man Walking, Priest, Romero, Choices of the Heart.

Bernie:

I would use the Sister Helen Prejean in Dead Man Walking as the personification of the Nurturing Parent part of the person's psyche to be developed in relationship to the Sean Penn part of their psyche (the criminal who has been judged for his sins and condemned).

Peter:

Yes. On reconciliation I'd certainly recommend Dead Man Walking where Susan Sarandon as Sister Helen virtually hears the condemned man's confession. Unfortunately, because of our ecclesiastical discipline (as is made clear in the film), she cannot officially give him the absolution blessing. But, if there is any reconciliation at this moment, he is able, through her compassion, to actually speak of the terrible crimes he's committed and acknowledge within himself that there is some kind of forgiveness.

A lot of that pervades the film Priest, especially the final scene where parishioners want to walk away from the Eucharist. They refuse to receive communion from the homosexual priest. They can't be reconciled even they're 'good Catholics'. But, then the child who has been the subject of sexual abuse by her father comes up to the priest to receive. That's a wonderful scene of reconciliation.

Films about El Salvador like Choices of the Heart and Romero are stories from the 70s and 80s and are powerful and moving.

There are some scenes from a rarely seen small American film of the 80s called Impure Thoughts (a very Catholic title!). If you have clients who are able – and who really who need to laugh at the stupidity some of the rigidities of the past - I would heartily recommend Impure Thoughts.

Bernie:

Brilliant – that you were using humour.

Peter:

There's another film about schooldays in New York in the 60s called Heaven Help Us (aka Catholic Boys) with Donald Sutherland and Andrew McCarthy. There's a strong Australian film called The Devil's Playground by Fred Schepisi which is also very powerful. It is set in a junior seminary. While some of it is funny, it raises a lot of these issues, even making some audiences angry.

So there are quite a number of interesting films that your clients might find helpful in surfacing Catholic questions that they want to face.

BUDDHISM AND CATHOLICISM AT THE MOVIES

Peter:

Bernie, you have a great love of films. You've been watching them since you were very young and now you're using them seriously in your work as a therapist. You use particular sequences to help people to respond and share their experiences. But you also bring you own personal Buddhist appreciation to films. The films are 'the movies'. How do you actually use movies in therapy?
Bernie:

It's really the magic moments in the movies. Movies do have moments that touch people and what I am doing is pioneering an approach in therapy to look at what it is in those moments, in those particular movies, that touches people. What makes them feel very happy? What makes them feel very sad? What makes them feel very angry? What is it that is making them cry?

When we investigate this it can sometimes be a very small thing and sometimes it can be the issue of the whole movie. But often it's a moment in the movie that unconsciously triggers a memory, something to do with their own life. There can be a moment when they're discussing a scene in a movie and I'm asking them to tell me what the character feels, tell me what they see the character experiencing, and it becomes a moment of transition from the movie experience to their own personal experience. A memory will come back. It could be a song. It could be a memory of being somewhere with someone. They might say to me, 'you see what's happening here as these two people are talking in this lounge with the curtains like that? That was exactly the atmosphere that I experienced when I was young. That was exactly how people would talk and that's the kind of mood I grew up with'.

For me as a therapist, that is an absolute gift. They are giving me the best self-representation that they can find of the emotional climate that shaped them. And I'm not having to intuit or guess. I've actually been given it – this is it. So, with my knowledge of movies – because I'm a film buff and movies have shaped my life - I'm able to empathise more deeply and follow through what the memory and the experience are about.

One major benefit of using a movie is that it gets around denial very quickly. If someone is watching the movie from a third person perspective, they are able to have some objectivity about their feelings.

Peter:

Although I have been watching movies since I was very young, my working approach to films was first as a reviewer. Reviewing has always seemed to me to be the mediating of the movies to people, to audiences. I had to get to know and appreciate my readership well so that I could communicate my experience of the movie to them. I've been doing it for a long time now but it's still tricky. For instance, I tend to be rather introverted but I have to review so many 'extroverted' movies. When I began to appreciate this - over twenty years ago - I remember writing that anybody going to see Clint Eastwood, his bare-knuckle fights and his orang-utan, Clive, in *Every Which Way But Loose* needed to remember that it seemed to be made for Extraverts Anonymous.

I also worked for a long time with students in the religious order I belong to, many of whom were also training for priesthood. But I was able to take them with me to film previews and review screenings and found that the movies were helping me to understand how the various students ticked. I noted which student would like a particular film - there were two who always booked the westerns! - or disliked a particular film or couldn't deal with it. And I was learning this before I had any language to use to name what was happening. It was clear that the film experience was different for different people.

In the late seventies I was introduced to the Jungian approach to Personality Type as developed by the American women, Katherine Briggs and her daughter, Isabel Myers. They had adopted Jung's categories on Type and how we function. So I found myself looking at movies, especially those that were well-written and which showed a more real understanding of human nature, and seeing that they were dramatising particular types and different ways of functioning.

I found that this was helpful not only with counselling the seminarians but also in working with people in groups. In seminars with school staff, for instance, I show them clips from movies which illustrate how they might function, as being intuitive, say, or as being a sensing type or which dramatises the way somebody else functions, different from the way they do - a 'let's get on with the show' type compared with someone who always wants more information before they can decide and act. There are scenes of complementary interactions with which they can identify as individuals or as staff as well as of type conflict. To that extent it is not a therapy exercise but I am sure that it is therapeutic in the sense that people are identifying their own traits from what they see and identify with on the screen.

That has become an important part of my approach to movies. But each of us has a specific religious background. Yours is Buddhism?

Bernie:

My Buddhism! I wouldn't say that Buddhism has a monopoly - I have no practice or belief about that - on spiritual ways to God or God experience but that is the way for me. It would probably be best to use the vehicle of a movie like *Awakenings* to make my points.

As a Buddhist I found that, interestingly enough, I was a better Christian! What I find fascinating about Buddhism is that it is not a religion of belief. It's a religion of experience. You have drawn on Carl Jung in your approach. He was very important for me because of the interview that he did in the late 50s with John Freeman. Freeman asked him whether he believed in God. And he said 'no' - which shook us all up. And then he said, 'I know'. And, from that moment, I realised that what was very deep in me was the conviction that it was possible to know and that it was different. Religion in

Western cultures is about belief.

But I immersed myself in following Eastern practices and I found the Buddhist way to be the best for me. Just in the observing of the breath. The essence of the observing of the breath is in training the mind to be in the moment. And when you truly realise that you are in the moment you cannot be obsessing or worrying about the future or obsessing or worrying about the past. Free from all that anxiety, you are purely energised in the moment with a great deal of visual, emotional and physical clarity, which I would say is a glimpse of Enlightenment.

I think *Awakenings* is a classic example for illustrating the very powerful way my Buddhism and my understanding of Buddhism affect me. When the doctors are giving the patients in the New York clinic L.Dopa and some of them, such as the character, Leonard, played by Robert De Niro, are brought out of their handicap (for want of a better word) that is like an awakening in the Buddhist sense. When a Buddhist is meditating, everything drops away, all the conditioning drops away.

It is exactly like that at the moment when Leonard awakes from the prison that he has been kept in with his illness (his condition, a kind of catatonic coma) and he comes right into the present moment. His physical condition drops away. But, because of the experience of being locked in that condition for years and the terrifying sword of Damocles hanging over his head that he may well very soon regress, he has something to tell us.

He is, in a sense, enlightened in that moment in his perception that 'We do not realise the now enough. We do not experience the now enough'. It is like what John Lennon said, 'Life is what happens to you while you are thinking of something else'.

Peter:

It is interesting that from my Catholic background, as a member of a religious order and as having been a priest for many years, I find that I agree with you that there has been too much emphasis on belief in western Christianity and in the Catholic church. There is affirmation for those who see themselves as orthodox, who are strong on acknowledging the truth of their faith. But St Augustine said that faith in the sense of commitment to God, our experience and faith in action are equally important. I think that is what we are trying to rediscover in many of the Christian churches in recent decades, so when I look at a film like *Awakenings*, while I appreciate your focus on Enlightenment, I am responding with something of a dialogue between the movie and the gospel.

I chose *Awakenings* for a consideration of the raising of Lazarus from the dead in Jn 11. Lazarus is always used as an image of Jesus and the resurrection - Jesus' fullness of resurrection - because, in fact, Lazarus is actually resuscitated and he must die again. It is similar to the experience of Leonard who is raised from a kind of death but soon goes back into his 'prison condition', as you called it. Leonard's awakening in the movie can make us ask what is the meaning of Lazarus coming alive again? What was the experience of death that he had been through? How did that effect how he would live his regained life? He has to face dying again. *Awakenings* is a reminder of our mortality but also of the 'grace' that can bring us to life during our lives, our graced moments.

When you spoke of the breath and of the now, I am reminded of a spiritual writer of the eighteenth century, Jean de Caussade who used a phrase, that was a feature of our formation years, 'the sacrament of the present moment'. The present moment is a visible, tangible way of being touch with God. In a sense, that was what Lazarus was brought to: he had died once, he had to die again but had the opportunity to live in the now, this sacrament of the present moment.

But how does your Buddhist approach help you to appreciate the character of Dr Sayer, played by Robin Williams and based on Dr Oliver Sacks with whom Williams spent a lot of time in preparation for the movie? What of Dr Sayer's own journey?

Bernie:

In many ways he was very concentrated, but he wasn't concentrated as being a person in the world. He was concentrated on his clients, but he left his self out. He was in the tradition of selfless heroes who leave themselves out of their own lives, like James Stewart's George Bailey in *It's A Wonderful Life*. As he progresses through the movie, it seems to me that his engagement with Leonard brings him into realising what it was to be 'in the moment'. He has to come to terms with, for instance, simply having a coffee with his nurse assistant instead of automatically saying no, that he was busy and going home to play his piano, not burying himself, studying hundreds of different microbes, or in his workaholic devotion to using L.Dopa.

It is as if he is somehow escaping from life but the down-to-earth nurse and the experience with Leonard brings him out of that. I think that a crucial symbolic moment occurs when Leonard smashes Dr Sayer's glasses but, after a time, he gives him back the glasses mended. It is as if Dr Sayer doesn't see! And it's a symbol that he doesn't see! But when he's given his glasses, he does see.

And then there is the sequence in the auditorium when he is speaking to his peers about what all the patients, especially Leonard, have been saying about their experience. It is we have the problem in our lack of ability to see and understand.

At the same time it was very interesting that Leonard had for years in his condition been subject to physical control, that is, his paralysed body. But, after his awakening, the hospital authorities still enforce their own external physical control over him. So the scene where the glasses are smashed is the scene where both Leonard and Dr Sayer are grappling with each of their individual problems. That is a climax and they are both beginning to make their breakthrough. It's not so much an enlightenment on the part of Dr Sayer but it is an important experiential and spiritual insight of psychological growth.

Peter:

I agree with that. However, my angle is determined by my interest in Psychological Type. And I was looking at Dr Sayer as being very introverted. He seems to be an intuitive type, always with his theories- even about L.Dopa and the patients. His decision-making, however, is very objective; he likes to construct objective big pictures, of science that can work. But he is patient and can 'go with the flow'. In Type terms, the letters INTP are used as a description for that kind of character.

But the problem with Dr Sayer is that he lives so much in the mind that he's divorced from the reality of the body.

Bernie:

That he's not embodied.

Peter:

So I see his journey certainly as one of insight (and the symbolism of seeing and not seeing through the glasses). But the sequence which comes to mind is where he went with the patients and they danced - and he couldn't. When he was invited to participate in the dance with them, he gained some sense of bodily wholeness, a totality of his personality which he lacked, especially because of his shyness. He had initially refused the cup of coffee with his sympathetic nurse but, after the episode you mentioned with the glasses, when all the patients have reverted to their comatose stage, he experiences his awakening, enabled and empowered by what has happened. Concretely, then, although he automatically refuses the cup of coffee yet again, he can change his mind. And he 'Awakens'. This is where his sacrament of the present moment is on this night. Here and now, to have a cup of coffee with this person who has helped me, who has worked with me, who has a devotion to me and whom I appreciate – this is a way of being in the world concretely.

Bernie:

I couldn't agree with you more. And using your Myers Briggs' language, it is the nurse who supplies what is lacking in him, his opposite, his 'inferior function' of personal and practical warmth it seems to me.

Again an interesting symbolic moment occurs between Leonard and Dr Sayer when Leonard walks into the sea, absolute ecstasy and bliss in being liberated from that physical condition, that prison he's been confined in. But Dr Sayer won't go into the water. His psychological prison becomes much more evident. He is very worried, walking up and down nervously – very much out of his depth. Leonard realises the moment and knows what life is about. Dr Sayer is closed to it.

Throughout Leonard's awakening it is something of an experience of, in Buddhist terms, of mindfulness. Mindfulness can be described as being completely aware of the moment, just witnessing that moment and noting the thinking, feeling, sensation - there is no judgment of it. Leonard is mindful so he is very humble when he's observing what's going on. He then finds he has to catch up and learn. But he comes through all of this very quickly and by very 'skilful means', which is another Buddhist term. He eventually finds a 'right way' and 'right speech' to communicate this to Dr Sayer and the others.

Peter:

In terms of Christian spirituality, it is said the 'Grace builds on nature'. Dr Sayer also has to find his 'right way'. He is strong in his introverted, intuitive and objective type, but if he doesn't develop and branch out (if he does not have his awakening), he will become trapped in that situation and become 'graceless'. Fortunately he has been offered an opportunity. God intervenes, so to speak, in his life and graces him with a situation, which he himself has contributed to, so that he is actually drawn out of himself by Leonard and the patients.

The challenge for him in spirituality terms is as St. Ignatius Loyola and others have said is in an Asceticism of spirituality: to go against oneself, Agere contra. In Jung's terms that would be not so much a negative thing as going away from oneself, but moving towards one's opposite. And so as he reached out to Eleanor, the nurse, to go to have the cup of coffee, he was really profoundly doing an exercise in agere contra, going against his natural inclination to be reclusive and retiring. And that was a moment of spiritual growth.

Bernie:

In Buddhism it is exactly the same. If you find yourself full of anger then you will be asked to practise being full of the opposite as the only antidote. Because that is what makes the complete whole. Rather than being all one – it is the whole – both. In Jungian terms that would be embracing the shadow.

Our conversation about Awakenings has shown me that we watch the same movie but bring our own religious background and experiences to appreciating it. We use different language but there seems to be a closeness in the spiritualities that we express. This gives solid grounding to the use of movies for therapy and healing.

RESENTMENT, ANGER, GUILT

Peter:

One of my difficulties in reading ex-Catholics' letters about their experiences is that I acknowledge the

concern, even anger, about the experience of guilt and shame in the Catholic Church and the feeling that Catholics are burdened by this when they shouldn't be. But often they use a number of theological terms as well as emotional terms and refer to creeds and prayers. My difficulty is that I would have quite a different theological interpretation from the one that they put forward. I immediately experience a tangle with the question of how do I approach - the feelings, the concerns for the present or the theological references?

Bernie:

The real point is that whatever the truth of the position, whether they are talking about a prayer or a creed and whether they are up to date with the 'new' Catholicism, for want of a better way of putting it, this is how he feel and believe. It's dealing with that central issue in a way that defences do not reject what you are trying to open up.

Peter:

So, it's particular and personal questions rather than what is the 'Catholic' question. To that extent someone could raise a similar question about Buddhist theology and it would not so much be a response of explaining Buddhism. But the same question needs to be asked, 'what is your personal question? what are you (or do you seem to be) angry about?

Bernie:

First I would ask what reasons you have for disregarding Catholicism.

Peter:

I would guess that people are coming from positions in the Catholic church from some decades back, that their experiences would be something like someone who went to school in the 40s and 50s, even the early 60s. As we look back in the Church now, we see it as the era which was the end of an old style of religious practice of Catholicism which the 60s and the Second Vatican Council asked the church to re-think and re-express. Often the angry people do not sound as if they are familiar with this and that is part of the problem in finding how best to respond.

Bernie:

My reason for framing my question to you about the issues and feelings is that you in some sense are answering for them, an assumption about what they know and believe. But I want to give them the benefit of the doubt, that they have actually read the new material and disregarded it. So when they respond, they do not have to be defensive or feel that they are being attacked. We are working on an equality level for an honest debate. This leads to a spiritual dialogue rather than a discussion from entrenched positions.

Peter:

Well, following your suggestion, can I ask you as a Buddhist and as someone outside Catholicism, what do you think the key issues are, especially when there is a focus on the inculcation of shame and guilt?

Bernie:

What many are primarily concerned about, I think, is injustice. They are concerned about facing up to how that injustice can be acknowledged and turned into nourishment.

Peter:

One of my difficulties, therefore, when people speak about shame and guilt, is wondering whether their experience of Catholicism is the same as mine or not. When I think about different Catholic cultures in

terms of shame and guilt, I see that Italians and Spaniards differ greatly from, say, the Irish or the British. The criticism may be true of Britain and Ireland, or Australia, but not true, necessarily, of Italy and Spain. What do we do with that in order to have a fruitful dialogue?

Bernie:

First of all, they have to recognise that you are not on the defensive but rather you are pointing out that there are many cultural attitudes towards Catholicism and interpretations and you are asking them to look at those. But, all the time, if they are thinking you are moving to knock their argument down... I don't think they are interested in the argument. Rather, they are often more interested in finding truth and the opening up the lapsed spirituality.

Peter:

Our conversations have used movies to illuminate experience so I would like to bring in here the film of Brian Friel's play *Dancing at Lughnasa*. What underlay it seems to be, on the one hand, the hard Irish experience of God and, on the other, a Celtic paganism.

Meryl Streep portrays Kate, the eldest of five unmarried sisters in Donegal, 1936 (when their priest brother returns from the missions in Uganda after 27 years). She talks about modesty and being prim and proper in that external Catholic way. The situation is complicated because the youngest sister has an illegitimate son whom they all love. The sisters love music and have a driven eagerness to dance. Finally, they do all dance and dance most vigorously, even Kate. It serves as a symbol of Irish ascetical spirituality as well as an acknowledgement that we are bodily people. In so many Catholics these two aspects seem contradictory. And that leads to an over-emphasis on guilt and shame.

Bernie:

Yes. The problem with statements of issues is that they move us towards theoretical positions concerning the reality of the experience of shame and guilt. Unless we address the emotional issues, we go round and round in circles.

Peter:

So many angry former Catholics issue a challenge to us on the intellectual level. But you, as therapist, are hear it at another level, looking for the experience of where the people are coming from. My tangle is that I would like to respond at both levels. So, there are two agendas. The surface agenda is the thesis, the intellectual agenda - and this includes a theological agenda with reference to formulations of doctrine, which are also open to varied theological interpretations. The second agenda, the personal one, is the one that you want to go to immediately and directly, going to experience, irrespective of the rights and wrongs of Catholicism.

Bernie:

The reason for this is that wherever we are in our life, we go by our experiences and spend the rest of our lives trying to justify them.

Peter:

And that's the difficulty for someone expressing their intellectual agenda. They don't spend time examining thoroughly the experience on which they are basing their personal resentments and the reason for making their intellectual statements in the first place.

Bernie:

Yes, when I was studying to be a therapist, I had a great difficulty in finding a topic for a 15,000 word thesis. What I finally did was write 'On Becoming a Therapist'. I had to set myself a title which would

unpack my experience of working in various hospitals and being a therapist in private practice. The disparity between that and the training was quite deep.

Peter:

I wanted to ask you if in Buddhism sin, guilt and shame are central preoccupations.

Bernie:

There not preoccupations. There's not the idea of sin or guilt which would generate such feeling. There isn't a doctrine. I can tell you that this particular way of acting helps. I can tell you that that particular way of acting helps. But, it's your choice. Cause and effect happen both ways. That's the essence of Buddhist teaching.

Peter:

So, it's not a matter of an authority stating commandments about how life should be lived.

Bernie:

No, that's the judge. That's the paternalistic attitude. If you like, Buddhism comes from an absolute adult attitude. Buddhist faith comes from you making an adult choice. Are you will to bear the cost to have the benefit?

Peter:

But those who don't follow the right path and then repent for not having made the responsible choice and have followed a way of selfishness and suffering? Is that sin?

Bernie:

No, all that kind of thinking is redundant in Buddhism. We are talking in cross religious terms. By choosing a path which you are free to choose but only with saying that way lies suffering but it's up to you. You are choosing to have that suffering.

Peter:

If it causes suffering to others, you are choosing that and taking responsibility?

Bernie:

Yes, you are.

Peter:

A devout Buddhist becomes angry and commits violence on another? Sin?

Bernie:

No. Not a sin, and not guilt. But they are unhealthy and unwholesome acts.

Peter:

Now, the burden of having done that...

Bernie:

It's the cause and effect. It's the Karma. In Christian terms, 'Cast your bread upon the water', and

whatever that bread is, it will come back to you. You kill someone, you cause people suffering and it will come back to you.

Peter:

What are the emotional feelings about that? Sorrow, repentance, guilt?

Bernie:

You may have guilt feelings and you may have sorrow but they are not prescribed or pre-requisites of Buddhist teaching. They are for your own conscience. They don't carry any spiritual authority. It's really sad that someone might say, 'I knew it was going to cause that' but they go ahead in the situation, thinking at the time that it was worth it. But then you count the cost and ask whether it was worth it.

Peter:

That sounds a touch abstract and pre-meditated rather than passionate and immediate choices and actions, not well thought through.

Bernie:

You're spot on and that is where there is the only guidance in Buddhism. There are Right Action, Right Speech, Right Expression, Right Livelihood. You can choose. With Right Livelihood there is a livelihood like that of a butcher which is not looked on by a Buddhist as a Right Livelihood. Anything to do with violence, like the life of a soldier, is not looked upon as Right Livelihood. That's on one level. But on another level, and this is the dominant factor is Intention. So, if a soldier becomes a soldier to fight for peace, it's the intention which matters - whereas, if a soldier became a soldier to gratify a lust for violence or to express his hate, that is not a good intention. You could have two soldiers side by side each with a quite different spiritual development. Different Karma from where they're coming from. And then there is Compassion. The whole practice of Compassion and Meta Meditation is absolutely vital. Buddha knew that we were going to make wrong choices. He himself almost died for asceticism and had to be fed to keep him alive. And that is why Buddhism became the middle way: not too intellectual, not too dogmatic or too ascetic.

Peter:

I take your earlier point about the Judaeo-Christian tradition being very paternalistic whereas Asian traditions, while they have their hierarchies, are community-oriented.

Bernie:

Yes, and that's one of the three gems. There are only three. One is the Sangha, spiritual practice and community.

Peter:

Now, that's all there in Christianity, often only in theory, of course. Acted out in different cultures in different ways. But the paternalistic perspectives and expressions, say in the absolute statements of the Decalogue, are meant to be guiding principles. But there is a potential for feelings of guilt and shame in that kind of paternalistic atmosphere.

It reminds me of the Transactional Analysis terminology, that the Judaeo-Christian tradition has a great deal of interaction on the level of Critical Parent to Adapted Child. And this has been pervasive. I experienced something of this in the Australian Catholic tradition, especially from Ireland, with the hard God and the attitude towards sexuality being a mixture of prudishness and prurience. But there is also something more, along the lines of what you were describing as a spirituality.

On the theoretical theological level, the doctrine of Original Sin does not mean that we are all prone to be sinners, destined to be sinners - perhaps there is more of that tradition in Luther's theology of the soul being corrupted by sin and saved only by the merits of Jesus and his suffering covering over that sin. As I understand it, Original Sin (and I wish that the term 'sin' had been avoided) means that all human beings of themselves do not have the capacity to love God above all things while still being able to respond to God's gift which we call Grace, which transforms us enabling us to live good lives. This seems to me to be a far more optimistic theology. But, of course, I know that not every Catholic understands it in this way.

Bernie:

And that brings us back to the experiences, the intense experience, even anger, that brings former Catholics to take issue with the statements of (and the power of) the Church. Part of the difficulty is looking at the Church and seeing the Adult experience there. The complaint might be that, while the new Catholicism might be getting it right theoretically, Catholics have to come to grips with the experiences of the past. And the new ideas may take decades to filter down throughout the Church. The heart of the problem is the difference between paternalistic language and adult language.

Peter:

And the presentation and communication of that. I'm thinking of Pope John Paul II who has been strong and dogmatic on moral and sexual issues - and people still take issue with him - but on matters of social justice, he has used a different kind of language, adult language about human rights and has lived it in his various visits, his various meetings, an encounter like that in Jerusalem and his sensitivity to Jewish sensibilities where he prayed at the Wailing Wall with the Israelis. This seems to me to be the kind of adult witness you were speaking of contrasting with paternalistic statements.

We were wondering how this is shown in a contemporary movie and we both thought of the British movie Priest. It has Catholics of all stripes, of all attitudes and development or lack of development: a harsh bishop, genial and critical parishioners, a narrow priest who judges (and speaks in Latin at the table), an abusing father, a parish priest living with a woman and, of course, the central priest who is struggling with his homosexuality.

The final image of the movie shows a lot of what former Catholics raise and a lot of what we have been talking about. The gay priest celebrates Mass in the parish. When he goes to give communion, many of the righteous and die-hard parishioners refuse to receive from him. But, it is the young girl whose confession he heard and learned about her suffering abuse from her father. It is she who moves over to receive the Body of Christ from him. That was a lived reconciliation.

LIAM: ONCE A CATHOLIC

Peter:

We're forever reading stories about celebrated former Catholics who remember their past and stern

upbringing, especially in the matter of sexual sin and their phobias about going to confession. You would be dealing with ordinary people, clients who have the same experiences as the celebrities. I would have memories of similar experiences, but they have had a less destructive effect on me. What has brought this to mind is our going to see Stephen Frear's film Liam. It was written by Jimmy McGovern, the writer of Priest and Cracker.

The International Catholic Jury gave Liam its main award at the 2000 Venice Film Festival. I had been president of the Jury and when I advised one of the film's publicists that it had won, she remarked, 'What a courageous decision'. I was rather surprised at this and mentioned it to the Jury members. They were very surprised as well because, while the publicist thought the film was very critical of the church, we did not see it that way. We did not think it was critical in any destructive way, but rather - at least from the inside - it seems quite appropriate to be able to look at the institution in which one lives and feel free to criticise what is bad as well as praise what is good. We felt that Jimmy McGovern was giving a fair picture of some aspects of Catholicism in the past which needed criticism.

When I presented the prize to the representative of the company, he pulled out a note, a letter from Jimmy McGovern, who said he was very glad to be receiving the Catholic prize in a Catholic country. He added that some people had interpreted his work as being against the church, but that, in fact, it wasn't.

I was most impressed by Liam. How did you find it?

Bernie:

I found it reinforced my own experience of Catholics and Catholicism. To be fair, I'm not saying that mine is a major experience of Catholicism because I haven't had experience with younger Catholics. And that may be more important. But it would be right to say that that is the message I have received from Catholics I have met. One woman has allowed me to quote written material that she sent to Jimmy McGovern, 'Once a Catholic, Twice a Catholic, Never Again'.

He gave it his endorsement. He still finds these attitudes up and down the country and in reactions to the film.

Peter:

What were the main criticisms of the woman who wrote Once A Catholic, Twice a Catholic; Never Again?

Bernie:

One story. For instance, she went to see a Cardinal who is a member of the family and castigated for the fact that her children were not baptised. She caught herself in a knee-jerk reaction of past religious conditioning and feared for her children. She became furious, absolutely furious, enraged, that any kind of ritual could be thought of to give her pure children any more purity. That really got to her. I'd say that that was probably the major experience that meant that she left the church forever. She said that there was a kind of intellectual vanity that the church's ritual could do that, as opposed to her children's inherent - what they were born with - birthright of innocence and purity. That really got to her. And that she could be taken to task about that by someone who claimed to be so holy and religious. I think that was very stark for me. It stood out. Her treatment by a bullying priest.

I have some compassion for the Catholic Church which, I think, is on an extremely difficult wicket. On the one hand Catholics have to accept things that were done in the name of the church that were wrong and were misguided. On the other, individuals, according to their psychology, have used their religion to off-load their problems. I think that's the nub and that's what is so difficult.

Peter:

It is, and it's dramatised strongly Liam. But there are problems which come from the longer tradition of the church. We are having this conversation on a Sunday. The Gospel for the Mass of today is that of the woman was arrested by the authorities for committing adultery. It is John, chapter 8. The religious authorities are presented as hard, castigating types. They were the Pharisees, interpreters of the Jewish religious Law - they have given their name to hypocritical, 'pharisaic', behaviour. The contrast with Jesus is powerful. When he is confronted by the woman -the Gospel says she was taken in the very act of committing adultery, which makes one wonder about the voyeuristic officials arresting her - Jesus speaks one of the best known of Gospel sentences, 'Whoever is without sin, cast the first stone'. The accusers walk away. No one remains to condemn her. Jesus says, 'Neither do I'.

If you were to take this pattern of Jesus as a norm for the Catholic tradition, it ought to be that of, 'I don't judge you'. Jesus does add, 'Don't sin any more'. He implies, 'Let your behaviour improve'. He's not approving the adultery. He's urging her to a life of better relationships. Jesus does not castigate her.

And, that's the worrying thing, whether it's a national, cultural or a historical tradition, too many people do castigate. That's the individual experience or the group experience of so many Catholics, perfectly understandable as they move away from that kind of church. You encounter a number of people with these experiences in your practice?

Bernie:

You get a man living out his rage at the infidelity of his wife, but taking it out on his daughter in unhealthy ways. It also comes out in how he sees practising his religion as the problem. Everything is about perception. While a church or religious message may be great, perception and the implementation of the message by borderline or personality disordered people are not going to be the way that it was originally intended. That is the problem.

Peter:

I think you're right about perceptions. All of us, no matter how well we feel we belong to the church, nevertheless have critical or negative perceptions on particular people in positions of authority who seem to abuse their power. They appear to be most unChristlike in their behaviour and attitudes. People who are operating perfectly ordinarily in life learn to live with this, but the perceptions are still there.

Talking of Liam - and this may correspond with some of your clients in particular age groups - Jimmy McGovern sets the story in the 1930s. When we met him after the screening, he was very strong in pointing out that it was virtually his own story. In real life, he was Liam's age in the 1950s. So he was doing an unusual thing, transposing real life in the 50s in Liverpool back into a fiction of the 30s.

The Depression and the anti-Semitic prejudice which he used for the themes of the film certainly seemed credible. I could identify with the little boy Liam, who's eight years old in 1934, because I made my first confession in 1946. I can remember some of the classes and some of the preparation for first confession and first communion to be as severe as those in the film.

One of the situations in the film concerns Liam eating something before communion. Jimmy McGovern got that historically wrong. In the 50s there wouldn't have been any problem, but in the 30s Liam would not have been allowed to go to communion at all on the day because he had eaten. The fast was from midnight then. When I made my first communion, a boy had a drink of water - not thinking, age seven - and he was not allowed to make his first communion that day, even though we were all dressed up, ready. He had to make it privately later during that week. These are the kinds of things, maybe small in themselves but big in perception, that I found that I was empathising with.

Another aspect of the film was the severity of the lay teacher in her explanations of hellfire. Hers was a frighteningly physical hellfire. Then she asked 'Father' to explain eternity to the young class. I think Jimmy McGovern took it straight from James Joyce's, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the sermon about transporting one grain of sand per year from one beach to another. And when you've

transferred all the grains of sand individually, eternity is only just beginning. Many people still resent those frightening aspects of, especially, an older Irish Catholicism. I presume that your Catholic clients in their 50s and 60s may be drawing on that kind of rather severe training in those times.

Bernie:

Yes, I think they are. But I think your term 'training' seems to have been an excuse for much cruelty. I don't think it was training. I think this cruelty was done under the guise of training, but it was personal expression of resentment, of unconscious frustrations. I don't get the feeling it was done for spiritual advancement.

Peter:

What would you speculate, as a therapist, were some of the reasons for resentment in the teachers of those times? Many of them were teaching in schools as members of religious orders, professed members of the church?

Bernie:

I think there are many. I don't think there is one. There is the problem of celibacy and the repression of sexuality. For some people who have a low sex drive, who marry and have sex once or twice a month, that's okay. But when you have someone who's much more pressured in their lives, it's much more of an issue. It's like squeezing a balloon. You stop the air getting in one place but it comes out somewhere else. I think that's true for one set of people. There's another set where inherent sibling rivalry and envies come out. This can happen in any group of people, but this religious group was in a position of power over people who were powerless.

Another issue was the politics of the given religious order and the given group of people they worked for. They experienced disappointments and they wondered, 'Did I make the wrong choice?' And all of that too late for themselves. It came out in resentment, again played out on their charges. The kind of zealotry I'm talking about did not necessarily come from religious training, but that's the lie they told themselves.

Peter:

I would like to mention the Australian novelist, Morris West. He spent 12 years as a Christian Brother and then left the order. Right up to his death in 2000, he was a very progressive Catholic, but faithful to weekly Mass and all other Church requirements. He spoke at many Catholic conferences before he died. But his final memoir was called *A View From The Ridge* (where you stand before you reach the peak). It's probably one of the best-written explorations of those themes that you've just mentioned. It's a very interesting end of life book.

There is another factor in all of this, not particularly religious, but cultural and traditional. It is loyalty. The loyalty that is inculcated in any very tightly structured and strict organisation is loyalty before all else, (even sometimes common sense and reason). Coupled with that in the Catholic church, there was the formation program for members of religious orders and for seminarians preparing for ordination in which, we realise now, most were kept at a fairly childish level of maturity. The system fostered it. There was the exhortation to be 'striving for perfection' which was, in fact, ideal and ethereal.

This meant a lack of personal development into adult maturity. So, the heavy demands of enormous classes, for instance, in schools or rigorous, endless parish ministry took their toll. Ample cause for conscious and unconscious resentment.

Bernie:

Sure. The pressures of workload.

Peter:

We can see this in the film in the character of the father, especially when he loses his unemployment and takes it on in erratic behaviour towards his children. You can see it in the lay teacher - I find it interesting that Jimmy McGovern didn't choose to show a nun but a woman lay teacher. She is harassed in that class. And the busy priest.

Bernie:

There's something I haven't quite tied up in the film. It's to do with the shadow of Catholicism where the angry, unemployed father goes to join the Blackshirts. It seems very interesting that he should choose a political expression of resentment against a group of people. I'm almost saying that a lot of the Catholics who I see in therapy seem to be still under the yoke of a fascist Catholicism. When he splits from the church, he becomes a fascist.

Peter:

A fascism that seems even worse than that within the church.

Bernie:

Yes.

Peter:

Do you find that some of your clients, almost despite themselves, yearn for a stricter regime, even having left a strict one which they resent?

Bernie:

I think the trouble is that such is the indelible conditioning of the early patterning into Catholicism, that that is exactly what happens. The church is found wanting, but the pattern for authoritarianism is sought elsewhere. My role is to look at that pattern, say, 'Forget the church. Are you just going to repeat this injustice again on yourself with such punitive energy?' So that raises the very interesting question about how you train very young people in their Catholicism.

Peter:

Taking Liam again. If he's making his first communion in 1934, it means he was born in 1926. He's now 75 as we speak or going to turn 75 this year, 2001. He's a veteran Catholic and in the old mode if he has stayed a Catholic. You could argue, looking at the pattern of his father, that he could well grow up doing exactly the same kind of thing as his father.

But there's something in the film which I found most significant. It's in the area of sexuality, which you have talked about in terms of the celibacy of the teachers and the clergy. It's where Liam has been looking at the book with the works of Renaissance art and the nude women. Later, by chance, he glimpses his mother in the shower. And the shock of the difference between seeing the pubic hair of the reality compared with the lack in the paintings, creates an impression at that age that seeing his mother is sinful.

Where he absorbed this was not spelt out in the film. We didn't hear the priest or the lay teacher condemn sexuality at all. Yet there's an atmosphere in the school, in his home, that there's something wrong. But the scene that reassured me when Liam goes to confession for the second time. He stammers - as Jimmy McGovern said he himself stammered. He also told us of how exposed one is when stammering and having to rely on the well-known formula to actually get through the confession.

In his second confession, he was able to tell the priest what had happened. He couldn't in his first. In this scene, the priest is most common-sensed, doesn't get scandalised, doesn't castigate Liam. He

reassures Liam that that is how all women are and not to worry about it. In fact he's the opposite of the stereotype that many people perceive. And yet, listening to people who'd seen the film and who expressed anger about the priests, this sequence they had forgotten.

Bernie:

I think that's a very important point, because I think that such is the message from the over-50 Catholics that it blinds people. They are not taking in information. They are staying with what they thought, rather than what is actually being shown them. That's a very important point.

Peter:

Yes, it's disappointing that people who are critical of the church are so conditioned to be critical that when there is something with which they actually agree, when it's pointed out to them, they didn't see it.

Bernie:

What is a very interesting and very important question for the Catholic church to answer is: why don't people see it when it's glaringly obvious? What is the blindness that says, 'My perception screens that out. My blinker says that didn't happen'.

Peter:

It's back to Once a Catholic, Twice a Catholic. Never Again and the individual experiences that have so traumatised people that no matter what is presented that might show the church in a good light, the past trauma won't enable them to see it.

Bernie:

I think that's the key. It's the trauma. In the shock of that trauma, the person closes down forever unable to take in new information. The shock recurs, like flashbacks, and nothing gets in.

Peter:

Can you get in in therapy?

Bernie:

Yes.

Peter:

Could Liam help a particular client to break that perpetual loop of trauma and bad perceptions of a church?

Bernie:

Yes and no. The honesty of Liam is that it shows both. And, again, with perception, you take your choice. With trauma you take your choice but, to a degree, your choices get away from you. In a hypothetical case, working with a client who had problems with Catholicism, I think I would work with the scene that you talked about and I would say, 'These are fair representations of the Catholic church. Let's concentrate on them'. Liam showed over and over again that their pattern would be to drift back to the hurt, betrayal, prejudice that now grips them.

Peter:

Now you're worrying me, because I noticed all those sequences, but it wasn't till we were having the

discussion with Jimmy McGovern (and we were a Catholic group, apart from yourself, discussing with him), and he emphasising that he's a practising Catholic - it was that the priest actually was supporting the unemployed and actually collecting money. And so that again, on the social justice side, the priest actually was far more effective. All I could remember was Liam's father standing up at the first communion in the church and having a go at the priest, and we'd forgotten then that the priest actually was doing something good. He looked as if he was a money-collecting priest, an Irish kind of collecting priest. But in fact his concern was for the parishioners in the justice issue. I had forgotten that. So you're right, it's very difficult to break the loop.

Bernie:

That's the thing. I don't think I'd be doing justice to Jimmy McGovern's film without seeing it again because there was such a great deal in it. There's something niggling at me which I don't know how to put into words. I don't know whether it was a letter that you wrote to me about a Catholic man arguing about the wrongs of the Church. He was still with his war on the church. I felt the pain was so great. I'm surprised that he's still a Catholic. That's what I'm coming at. I just can't understand that he's still a Catholic.

Peter:

Well, that's the thing about Catholics who have grown within the church, and I hope have grown into adults, where loyalty is not the first virtue; obedience is. But obedience is an adult virtue, not just simply children doing what they're told because they're told. But obedience is listening, let's say to God's Word, so to speak, to the message of Jesus, and discerning how it's actually lived out within the church; and where it is not, having the courage to actually point that out. Now, that's not disloyalty. It's a kind of loyal dissent in some ways. And it seems to me that being an authentic and true Catholic is actually, to use your phrase, participating in some war on the church, because one is in it as an adult and believes in it.

Bernie:

Yes, I think that's very fair. I think that's a healthy Catholic position. But again it really needs people like yourself saying that over and over again like a drip, drip, drip, to get through, because people seem to become marginalised between the traumatised and the people that are trying to keep the message going.

Peter:

That's true. The other thing is, of course, that we've all got our cultural baggage: somebody from a South American country looking at the church from a Hispanic colonial point of view - perhaps wanting some kind of liberation - a liberation theology, compared with somebody from Italy or Poland, and they're all making up a universal church. So, unfortunately, you're going to get all kinds of clashes. I'm really surprised that we survive as well as we do. But in terms, say, of the Pope, there's a lot of hostility by some people towards his moral stances, which tend to be absolute and emphasise Natural Law, who are in deep admiration for his social justice teachings and his visits as to Eastern bloc countries. They admire him for his visit to Jerusalem and that he would put his prayer in the Weeping Wall in interfaith solidarity with the Jews. So those are some of the complications in trying to talk about what it is to be a truly adult Catholic. And that again, I suppose, is the challenge that you experience?

Bernie:

There's something else in it. I think it's that saying of the Jesuits, isn't it, 'Give me the boy for the first seven years, and I'll give you the man'. I think that's what we're talking about. Now, whether that's right or wrong is the issue that I'm looking at.

Peter

I think we're in a position to know - and you can say quite clearly it's wrong. It's 99 per cent wrong. It's correct in the sense that our formative years are significant - and any child psychologist I presume is going to remind us of this. But on the other hand, one presumes then that, with free will and opportunities of growth and education, one can see the results of those first seven years in perspective and grow through them. You wouldn't be in business if you didn't believe that.

Bernie:

But, you see, the thing about what you just said there is that there many more people than those you're speaking of who have to survive their ordinary existence and don't have the chance to get to the level of sophistication that we're talking about here. I think it's a comfortable answer for, say, middle-class Catholics who might wonder whether they are sinning by going to therapy. I wonder about that as well. So, I don't sit comfortably with that one. In Transactional Analysis terms, the child has been dominated by the church and has absorbed the super-ego of a critic so that this is also part of the integrated psyche of that child. For this person to suddenly develop from nowhere into a powerful, independent adult, that's asking a lot.

Peter:

Yes, I know, and I don't expect sudden healing. I'm sure it has to be long-term and therapeutic in whatever sense. A lot of people who aren't in therapy, but who get involved in some kind of, say, social concern, realise that there is growth in helping others, the marginalised, whether it be poor people, whether it be street people, whether it be people with AIDS. In a sense the Gospel compassion of Christ has dawned on many people in these circumstances and reshaped their image of what it is to belong to church. The middle-class comfortable ideal now seems too comfortable. I would think that those kinds of experiences, especially if there is some role-modelling, enable people to grow without their necessarily going near a therapist.

Bernie:

Yes. But what about the reasons for these choices? Is it because they want more meaning in their life? Is it because they're bored with mundane comfort? Motivation is important - what are they doing it for? They need to know what they're doing. Some people become martyrs, but often because they have no self-esteem. This is not necessarily a positive. It's based on a negative experience from not having compassion as part of their self.

Peter:

They're victims?

Bernie:

Yes.

Peter:

See themselves as victims?

Bernie:

And, even more, treat themselves as rubbish by forgetting themselves for others. This is where it's very interesting because, if you have someone who's confident, you can transcend their personality. Personality can be transcended into the divine. If you have someone who hasn't experienced any sense of self other than super-ego, say by the church decreeing, 'You must do this, you must not do that', they do it at the expense of becoming dysfunctional, drunks or sexual perverts. That's the tragedy of good people going adrift, trying to follow an ideal which is about salvation, but which is leading them into hell. That's the tragedy that I sense. That's the anger that I have for the church.

Peter:

I think I'd share that. From within the church you can see that. And the tragedy is, then, that the people who opt out, for whatever trauma and perception, haven't seen the possibility of a path which leads to salvation, which is heavenly and not hellish.

Bernie:

Exactly. As long as they're perceived in that way. That seems to me to be the key. I suppose it's hopeful, because it sounds like there is a place for practising Catholics who have got through this whole process to get back to the church and refocus the church. They see how it wants to be, as opposed to how it is perceived or was perceived in the past. People have to be able to have enough coverage in the media to see those films through that focus, through that lens. Otherwise transformation doesn't take place.

Peter:

That's why Jimmy McGovern has done a good service in making Liam, otherwise we might not have been having this conversation about the issues.

ANGELS

Peter:

I was more than a little surprised, Bernie, when you named Angels as one of the topics it would be helpful to have a conversation about. What did you have in mind when you mentioned angels and the film, City of Angels?

Bernie:

It was because angels seem to be appearing now in a lot of television programs and in a lot of books. It's not taboo anymore to talk about angels and miracles. It seems to be open-house! I thought City of Angels would be interesting because I had a number of reactions watching that film that I'd like to talk about.

First of all there appears to be some confusion in City of Angels about angels themselves, being an enlightened being isn't enough, that those with the highest spiritual attainment can be lonely for romantic love. So it turns the whole idea of enlightenment on its head to appeal to the more mortal among us who need romantic love. There the whole idea of enlightenment on its head to appeal to the more mortal among us who need romantic love. There is also the inner struggle of any spiritual seeker between flesh and the spirit. In the end, the film comes down on the side of us, the audience. I would use this film in seminaries and in religious training institutions to reflect on spiritual dilemmas and misrepresentation of what spirituality brings. The fusion of romantic

love, sexuality, bliss and emotional intimacy with God (or the higher power), the experience of union with the divine is totally missing.

It becomes clear that the angel represents Everyman's struggle, choice and compromise. But, paradoxically, it raises a fascinating question: can we experience divine love in romantic love, that will help us progress in our spiritual journey? This idea has fascinated me for a long time.

Peter:

Before you start drawing out these themes, I want to say that I found City of Angels one of the least interesting of the angel movies. I found I couldn't quite believe Nicolas Cage as an angel. In fact, somebody remarked that in his care for Meg Ryan, he pried on her so much that had he been human, he would have been arrested for stalking.

The other difficulty I had was with Meg Ryan's character. I couldn't believe her as a heart surgeon. And I was very disappointed - couldn't believe the screenplay - that she was killed at the end of the film, stranding the humanised angel on earth.

Having said that, I'd also have to say I had a difficulty with the original film, Wings of Desire, which started most interestingly, with the angels looking down and listening to the people in Berlin. But, as it went on, I found it rather tedious and I lost interest in the characters and their credibility. I had better add that in north-western Europe, Catholic commentators almost genuflect when they mention Wim Wenders and Wings of Desire. I seem to be so I'm a bit out of sync there.

But back to angels. What are they for you? And how do you see them as a Buddhist?

Bernie:

I think the most common understanding of angels from my perspective, from being brought up as a Christian and who then became a Buddhist, is predominantly one of guardian angels. It is a much more personal association, as with a guardian angel. Obviously there is the influence of Christian art. Until I became a Buddhist, they were like characters in a fairy tale. I have not had any experience which proves otherwise.

Fundamentally it goes to why I changed my faith. I've mentioned this before. In the famous John Freeman interview with Carl Jung, Jung was asked whether he believed in God. His reply was, 'No'. Everyone seemed quite shocked. Freeman said, 'Well, Mr Jung, you've written all these books about religion. What do you mean, you don't believe in God?' Jung impishly put his hand up to his face, a twinkle in his eye, and he said, 'I know. I don't have to believe'.

Now, for me, that was a very powerful spiritual turning point. I thought, 'That's it. I don't want to have to know'. That also led to reading books like The Razor's Edge by Somerset Maugham. The effect on me was that I had to go and look, go to all the different gurus, go on the spiritual journey that most people went on in the 60s.

In terms of being a Buddhist and having extremely powerful experiences of bliss, of oneness, of interconnectedness, all to the backdrop of mystery – if you can explain in words that really convey spiritual experience - and because I was going through a period where there were many different things happening, a quite senior monk told me that the 'devas' were after me. It was my first introduction to angels, as we would call them. Devas is the Buddhist name for angels.

I think what he was saying to me was that what can appear to be negative experience is, in fact, a sign of the introduction of devas trying to pull you through to a higher spiritual plane, through some worldly crust, so it can be painful.

Peter:

Who are these devas? How would you describe them? Where do they come from in the Buddhist tradition?

Bernie:

In the Buddhist tradition, it's just like having a different name. The visual way they've been depicted in art reflects the culture. They don't have wings. They seem to be quite wispy, on another level outside our usual understanding and connection and existence.

Peter:

So they would be spiritual beings?

Bernie:

Spiritual beings, yes. Like a sprite.

Peter:

In a way, this links in with the Catholic tradition, which is a bit more metaphysical than fairytale, even though fairy tales characteristics are seen in popular and classical art. In the Jewish scriptures angels are, as the Greek word 'angelos' means, messenger. But they are not only messengers of God. They are personalisations of facets of God. They become the visible face of God. The names are significant. Michael, Raphael and Gabriel, 'who is like God'. These names, indicate that originally it was humans trying to find a language for God's saving intervention in their lives, a bit like what you were saying, pulling them through difficulties. Raphael, in the Old Testament Book of Tobit, guides along on his quest to help his father who has been blinded, and to encounter Sarah, from whom devils have been thrust, whom he will eventually marry. Michael becomes a warrior, actually fighting, which a dragon-devil in the Book of Daniel.

What we have in common in both religions is the guardianship, and that there is a language, as you used it: guardian angels. This has always been present in art and in people's popular devotion. Now it seems to have made a comeback, doesn't it? A desire in post-church people to want and experience some kind of spiritual guardianship. And they use the language of angels. Do your clients bring those experiences to you?

Bernie:

Yes, they do. I'm always quite analytical. Not analytical to be devoid of belief, but to define real experience as opposed to wishful thinking or psychosis.

Peter:

Or hallucinations?

Bernie:

Exactly. So with that proviso, yes, I do hear some experiences though I don't hear a great deal of them. In the cases of lapsed Catholics, there is something in their psychology, their psyche. In my experience with some lapsed Catholics, the psychological decision to be lapsed is, in fact, a surrendering that opens them up to further spiritual experience - which they may align with a new spiritual practice that they've taken up.

Peter:

Orthodox Christians and, I suppose, orthodox Jews and Muslims would say the same thing about people who lapse: that that is the end of their faith. You would be saying very strongly that

this is another step in their spiritual journey.

Bernie:

Absolutely.

Peter:

Which could take them back to where they started, in the T.S.Eliot sense of seeing it for the first time, or, as happened with you, a journey elsewhere?

Bernie:

Yes, I think that sums it up. I think man has narrowed the spiritual journey in his struggle to communicate. The spiritual journey is the spiritual journey of all religions and all practices help. I think one of the great books about spiritual journey, but not taking any position, was Rama Krishna's life story. He became a Catholic, he became a Muslim, he became a Christian.

Peter:

That sounds something like the journey of Tolstoy. In view of this and your choosing City of Angels for discussion how does the film connect with these themes of angelic experience of whatever nature?

Bernie:

Your question goes right to the heart of what I'm struggling with, the concept of a fallen angel.

Peter:

There is a difficulty in language here. In the Catholic tradition fallen angels refer to the devils, whereas in City of Angels Nicolas Cage is a good angel. The point is that he chooses to fall to earth. He is a good 'fallen angel'.

Bernie:

So my focal point in looking at angels is this: is contact with the divine possible via earthly romantic love? In our language, people call their partner, 'an angel'. People call their daughters and sons 'angels'. So within the language and within consciousness and through the history of art, the psyche, has built up some understanding of what angelical qualities are.

Now, I think it's interesting, in romantic love, that can there be such moments of union - whether it be just in a look across the room or in just emotional intimacy in terms of talking, or in sexual union, or after sexual union - it's like, are these different for different people? Are they the same for all of us? And then we can also connect the whole idea of this with the Indian tantric sex love idea as a religion, as a way of not experiencing orgasm, control of orgasm, why the partner loves their partner. And at the same time, that has pumped up the whole system to spiritual experience and the oneness of the partner, and the experience of their flesh vanishes in a blissful state, a spiritual union and oneness.

Peter:

Where does that tradition come from?

Bernie:

Tantric. It's Indian.

Peter:

Is it more of a Hindu tradition?

Bernie:

Yes. But I think it's relevant to what we're talking about because it's the farthest end of the spectrum from finding the divine in romantic love. In our stories angels come from the collective unconscious. Angels come to guide. They will come in in any given story to get someone go on a certain journey, take a certain road or go into a certain shop where they will connect with their loved one. Angels come, via the movies as well, as a guide to help at crucial moments to achieve what the person wants in their life. It may not always be apparent that someone loves their partner. But, this builds up to spiritual experience and the unity of the partners, and the experience of their flesh vanishes in a blissful state, a spiritual union and oneness. It may not always be apparent either that the place the angel has guided the person to is necessarily going to get them what they want. The person cannot have the angel's vision.

Peter:

So, in many traditions, and especially in the movies, angels can be seen as some kind of projected symbol of the inner person, projecting it towards something transcendent or even divine?

Bernie:

This is where we have a problem with language, so we have to be careful. From one person's point of view, it could be their higher self that they would call on in these situations. Another person would call on an angel. When this becomes visual or auditory, I would have to say, 'Hold it. Is this psychosis or schizophrenia?'. The acid test of schizophrenia or psychosis would be: does it advance the person in terms of their balance, their emotional grasp on life, and their spirituality? If it doesn't, then it's probably one or two of the latter. But if it does and, maybe, that is a further part of a test, then it could be some kind of an emissary, a divine intervention.

Peter:

A significant example is Joan of Arc. She heard the saints, the voice of St Catherine, she heard St Michael the Archangel. In the way that you put it, would you think she was advancing in her personal and spiritual journey, so that they were divine emissaries rather than something from within herself?

Bernie:

I'm not sure about Joan of Arc. I have mixed feelings. The therapist in me has a strand that thinks she was psychotic. But it's based on my own prejudice, and based on that prejudice is, I cannot get a sense of war being compatible with spirituality. So I don't understand it. I would need to look at it more deeply.

Peter:

But it is interesting that she connects her voices with the language of saints and angels.

Bernie:

Her experience is very different from what I know of phenomena like the apparitions of Mary at Fatima. Being a Buddhist, it's the concept of ahimsa, non-violence, which obviously guides a lot of my thinking and reactions. It's like the Crusaders who fought for religion. Bob Dylan touched on it with a brilliant pop song, 'God On Our Side'. Any country of any religion or culture could sing that song and feel that it applies to them. I want to take a global view so that we get outside any cultural or spiritual narrowness, and look at mankind in all of its cultures and all its religions.

Peter:

How do you see this in a film like City of Angels?

Bernie:

I think City of Angels has got it upside down. It says to me that being enlightened is not enough. I was amazed that none of this, in this day and age, was picked up on the film's release. There are so many people who meditate, so many people who are going on retreats in a way as never before. City of Angels has this idea that being enlightened and being a spiritual being high enough to be an angel is a place of loneliness. It doesn't speak of any kind of connection with God. But think of a taste of bliss in a spiritual retreat. You may get it once in a lifetime, but you never forget it. But here is an angel... so the whole premise concerns me.

Peter:

Could you develop that 'Here is an angel.

Bernie:

Here is an angel that has found that angelic enlightenment is not enough. It is wanting. This seems to be a contradiction in terms. Although I loved the story - basically, I'm quite a romantic myself - but my spiritual experience and spiritual life could be drained away by any strong areas of romanticism in the experience because, in the Buddhist sense, it would be called a hindrance. Emotionality is a hindrance that draws you away from the clarity and the experience of enlightenment, or glimpses of enlightenment, or spiritual advancement.

Peter:

So let me get this clear: the Nicolas Cage character really is set up as a contemporary angel, but you're saying that, as you perceive him, he really isn't angelic in any of those senses that we are reflecting on: the contact with bliss... And he opts, then, for human love and makes the decision then to become human.

Bernie:

Yes.

Peter:

Now, the romantic aspect of the film certainly highlights this and suggests that this is his bliss. Is that enough? To become human and love Meg Ryan...

Bernie:

That is held up as his bliss.

Peter:

And for you, that's not enough?

Bernie:

No, it isn't that it's not enough. It's having been in the position he was, he would not have had and experience of the absence of God.

Peter:

So, what is he doing? Opting out?

Bernie:

He seems to be moving in the opposite spiritual direction.

Peter:

Would you use the film with clients or with groups?

Bernie:

I haven't yet, but I would like to use it for discussion. For anyone who's on a spiritual journey, it gets at two very important aspects of our life that come to us via the movies: spirituality and romantic love. You can have absolute spiritual moments when meeting someone in a romantic situation, a heightened sense of colour and beauty that can lead to spiritual receptivity. You function at your best.

Peter:

Is that the same with the angels in Wings of Desire?

Bernie:

I haven't seen Wings of Desire, but I've had interviews with people who have. A BBC radio interviewer said that he could never forget Wings of Desire. When I asked him what was his key moment of Wings of Desire, he told me that it was the part where the angel is walking through Berlin and hears rock music from a distant house. That really touched him deeply and I asked him why. He said, 'Well, it reminds me of when I lived on my own, all the music I used to have'. He was a sort of a closet musician. All of that was evoked and surfaced in terms of nostalgia and memory.

Peter:

With Wings of Desire, I think a lot of people like it (and this is different from City of Angels), is that the angels in Wings of Desire are concerned about humans. It is a parallel with the incarnation of Jesus, whose state was divine, as St Paul said, that the option is to come to earth and to choose to be loving within the limits of humanity.

Bernie:

That I would absolutely agree with in context and as more acceptable for the spiritual journey.

Peter:

Isn't that true of Nicolas Cage in City of Angels? You think not?

Bernie:

No, I don't get it at all. It all seems to be about his needs and his love for Meg Ryan when he has to make the decision, the choice to remain on earth. It doesn't seem to be part of any broader enhancement of her spirituality.

Peter:

The horrible thing for me - and I can't understand it dramatically - is that the screenplay kills her off. Nicolas Cage has not only (in your terms) moved from bliss to earthly experience, he is stranded forever in this lesser place.

Bernie:

I think that is quite a despairing thought. But in some ways, for me, the ending is redemptive.

Peter:

For me it's horrible. Tell me about the redemption.

Bernie:

The idea that she dies brings us back to asking what this is all about? There are different perspectives on the ending. Was he an Angel of Death? He brought death to her while she brought human life to him. There's a connotation of the Angel of Death still visiting someone, but with a kind of delayed action.

The other perspective is that he has now come to see her death is where he came in; that everybody dies. Why didn't he see that when he was in Heaven? He appears to be a short-sighted angel.

Peter:

City of Angels is a question-raiser rather than an answer-raiser.

There are two other angels in recent films. One is John Travolta in Michael. The other is Will Smith in The Legend of Bagger Vance. Bagger Vance is almost the ideal angel. He comes at a crisis time, guides a young man who's seen fighting in World War I and has returned home in despair. He recovers his championship golf talent, recovers his life. Bagger Vance then moves on.

In a sense, he fulfilled his life-giving mission. Perhaps he is a projection of the desires of the Matt Damon character. That's the kind of angel a lot of people are hoping to see in angel films.

But an interesting question comes up in another film: what - on earth - was happening in Michael!

Bernie:

My thoughts move, with Michael, to something of the tantric experience. The Americans making that film seem to have used Indian tantric ideas, that Michael can use sexual seduction as part of the spiritual journey. Michael's humanness identifies with our frailties, and that's his popularity.

Peter:

So he's a slob in the way he dresses. And he smokes and he drinks.

Bernie:

Yes. He identifies with all our frailties. He identifies with style and sexuality. He meets us where we live. But the difference is, when we encounter Michael, we bring to the encounter our humanity. When he meets us, he brings us the thought of spirituality - which we don't bring to Michael.

Peter:

Are you seeing it as more redemptive than City of Angels?

Bernie:

I wouldn't go so far as to say that. I'm just answering your question, that into the rock 'n roll and the beer-swilling, smoking, lives of all, he brings feathers, wings, spirituality. It's that symbol of spirituality and his non-judgmental views which meets us.

Peter:

To finish, what would be an ideal kind of angel film that you would recommend to people that you work with? Or to go back to It's a Wonderful Life? Would that do?

Bernie:

No. I first thought of It's a Wonderful Life, but I think the angel's a bit of a joke. He certainly does his stuff, but he reminds me a bit of the aunt who wasn't properly a witch in Bewitched. Her powers would falter and bounce off the wall now and again. She couldn't always work through it. Clarence is a kind of comic figure. A real angel would have much more sense of presence and evoke much more sense of reverence in us than that.

Peter:

He's still meeting us where we are, but brings more of a desire for transcendence, a desire for something beyond ourselves and our world.

Bernie:

The pictures that come into my mind don't bring an angel, but they bring figures like Christ - in Ben Hur, where Ben Hur sees Jesus' eyes where he gives him water; he never forgets that experience. That was a tremendous moment. Although The Greatest Story Ever Told is very American, I think Max von Sydow sometimes had a look that was pure spirituality. And that's my idea of an angel.

Peter:

To bring us back finally to the deva and your Buddhist thoughts, is the deva an angel who has this kind of presence and the capacity to draw us to fulfilment of our aspirations and hopes, even though this is through some kind of hard crust.

Bernie:

Painful experience. The secret is to have faith and trust in the midst of that suffering. The other side of that suffering is the finer tuning, if you like, to more subtle spiritual experiences than you thought possible before you break through that crust. The appreciation of life and its spirituality becomes deeper.

DEVILS

Peter:

We have talked about symbols of goodness, especially as embodied in angels. Can we now take up the question of evil? That brings us to the issue of the Devil and devils. When we speak of the Devil we are using a Judaeo-Christian concept. I'm not sure what the Buddhist tradition contributes to the image of devils.

In the popular movie imagination, the incarnation of evil in Rosemary's Baby and The Omen films, or the casting out of the Devil from a possessed child in The Exorcist and films like that would be the

main devils that people imagine. Is that the kind of film you go to first, or would you go to something else?

Bernie:

I would go to the Ken Russell film, *The Devils*, with Oliver Reed because I think it goes to the heart of my twin way of looking at it: is there really a supernatural force and power which can be ascribed to a devil or *The Devil*? or, in negative terms, is it mass hysteria and psychosis in the collective unconscious being acted out? In *The Devils* the hysteria is centred in the sexual frustration of a convent of nuns.

Peter:

So *The Devils*, while it has the title, isn't in the same league as stories of individual possession. *The Devils* is, rather, a 17th century story actually based on history, Cardinal Richelieu wanting to take control of the city of Loudun and fabricating a reason for doing so. He used the hysteria of these enclosed women (who had been placed in convents by their families and did not necessarily want to be nuns. They became infatuated with their parish priest. It gave a justification for Richelieu to intervene politically and militarily. But it still raises the question that you've raised: what was actually happening there? Was it supernatural or was it merely psychological?

Bernie:

In fact, is there anything supernatural? What is the leap to films like *The Exorcist*? Is there a real power that could be called devilish? It seems to me that that is still open for analysis. If someone believes that there are devils or a Devil, this has a profound effect on the believer. If you believe it's part of a psychological mechanism, then that has a profound but different effect. It almost gives you a sense of choice. The first deeply involves fear beyond you. The second is within and can be reached and dealt with.

Peter:

Would you comment on the fear that is beyond us? Any experiences of clients who have raised this kind of question, or your own response, say, from your Christian days?

Bernie:

My personal response to *The Exorcist* raised for me much more of a supernatural experience. I found it the most disquieting of all of the films I've seen. I think it had another dimension to it. In terms of negativity, it communicated evil with the same brilliance with which *Dead Man Walking* conveyed balance, spirituality and transcendence.

Peter:

So *The Exorcist*, which allegedly is based on a true story of a young boy in Georgetown in 1949, I think, does make plausible the possibility of an evil outside individuals and the world?

Bernie:

Yes. I think it captures the evil - everything has been a pale reflection of it ever since. Perhaps the only one film which might come near it was based on another true story, *The Entity*, which again presupposed that there really is some external power. With *The Exorcist* it was the Devil. In *The Entity* it could be any evil being, not simply a personification of the Devil. So it raises many more questions than answers.

I think the important thing is the fundamental impact of this on any person's life, whether they believe it's supernatural or whether they believe it's psychological. This is the major, major thing.

Peter:

You have suggested that with people who are believers, the experience is very much that of fear. What form does that fear take? How damaging is it?

Bernie:

The fear can be used in a way that is positive to drive people very aggressively to good. Probably this is what had to be done with religion in earlier centuries. But fear as a basis for religion is not a healthy basis at all. It's the very opposite to what religion is supposed to stand for, which is love. If someone on their personal journey can face the idea that evil is either personal evil or there is a supernatural evil, to be able to face either one with an all-embracing compassion is spiritual growth at its finest.

Peter:

I would suggest from a religious point of view that the horror films of possession or incarnation of the Devil actually stay very much on the level of the fear, that they don't go much beyond it. In *The Exorcist*, through rituals which actually kill the priest exorcists themselves, the girl is saved. But at what cost? At the end of *The Exorcist* you're left not much further along the way in terms of understanding the transcendent than at the beginning, except that evil is horrible.

Bernie:

But if you go back to Christ in the desert being tempted, if you look at his attitude there, he was able to contain and resist the spiritual temptation that confronted him. His attitude in his words towards the devil, 'Get behind me, Satan', are not exactly loving. They are quite authoritative, but like a naughty child.

Peter:

I'd interpret those words in a more adult way. They are actually spoken by Jesus to Peter later in the Gospels. Peter is saying, 'There's no need for you to die. We'll protect you'. And Jesus replies, 'No, that's a temptation'.

Bernie:

What's interesting then is that he perceives, in Peter's innocence, the Devil's seduction.

Peter:

Although, interestingly, in the New Testament there are different angles on the Devil. The Devil is certainly presented as evil, the seducer, that kind of language. But there is an Old Testament tradition where the Satan is one of the angels in God's court. He is more of 'the Devil's advocate', so to speak, the adversary who's not necessarily evil in himself but, rather, has the particular juridical role of testing people. It's not temptation but a kind of moral examination that Satan performs. It is in the book of Job. Job accepts the suffering and doesn't turn against God. In the desert that's the kind of tester Satan is for Jesus, but, with overtones of the more 'diabolical' role.

This raises the complications for contemporary people facing films like *The Exorcist*: what image of the Devil or of the Satan are they coming from: a Devil of faith or just simply a movie horror show devil?

Bernie:

The question is best answered by the perspective or the different perceptions of people in the audience. It is a different question as to what was the director's intention. I don't want to generalise about something so important. I think he was really trying to come to terms seriously with *The Exorcist*. But

we have to go on a spiritual journey within ourselves. We have to come to terms with it. And it's essentially about faith, isn't it? It's about: can you face all of that even though you may waver? But do you let go and get swept away?

Peter:

I like that as a question. Pauline Kael of The New Yorker famously said at the time that The Exorcist was the biggest pro-Christian poster since The Bells of St Mary's. In the sense that it asks that deeper question about faith-no-matter-what, 'Will you hold on?', it seems to me that this is probably the response of believers who actually didn't take umbrage at the film. Believing Christians were able to say, 'Yes, that's a story that has a resonance with Gospel stories or experiences of the saints, and so we can watch that and learn from it'.

A priest friend remarked on the film's release that the people who might have been most upset by the film were lapsed Catholics, because Ellen Burstyn's Chris, as the mother of Regan in the film, is a lapsed Catholic. She has the Catholic background but she has let go. Then the evil attacks her daughter, whether she believes or not, likes it or not.

So the question is: in terms of lapsed Catholics, what does that do to their experience of fear?

Bernie:

We have to look at, and underline in red pencil, the word 'lapsed' because such is the terror that can be evoked by The Exorcist that, if someone who has had a Catholic upbringing which has been quite powerful, then they may well have lapsed. But such is the early indoctrination that there is a residue left and they can ask themselves have they made the wrong decision.

Peter:

For the non-believer, what's the effect on their psyche, in terms of good and evil, of watching a film like The Exorcist, and their possibly seeing it as a manifestation of psychological disturbance?

Bernie:

If I watch that film and believe it is a matter of psychological disturbance, I'm left with optimism and hope. If I let myself believe that there is an external force of evil that no-one can control, that certainly does not leave me feeling safe in the world. I don't see myself turning to Catholicism or any other ism for reassurance but I ask what can give me a sense of safety when faced with such experiences.

Peter:

In view of that, the thing that puzzles me is that for the last 35 years or so there have been a lot of films about the Devil or devils. Up until, say, the mid-'60s, there were few 'serious' films about the devil. Now, the '60s was characterised in the United States by the 'Death of God' movement - whether it was people who didn't believe in God any more or wanted to get rid of the word. 'God'. As I remember it, they suggested a moratorium on the word 'God'. But it seems to me that when that happened, along with all the other revolutionary experiences of the '60s, there were two responses. One was a very fundamentalist Christian response of charismatic renewal - Pentecostalism, Jesus movements, which led to Godspell and Jesus Christ Superstar. The other phenomenon was the trend towards serious Devil stories whether they be incarnations of the devil like Rosemary's Baby and The Omen series or the many diabolical possession stories like The Exorcist. Prior to that, perhaps because so many people believed in the Devil or took the Devil for granted, there's virtually nothing before that of such serious intent on screen which says, 'Yes, there is something overwhelmingly diabolical which can enter into our world'.

So this happens at a time when people are actually saying, 'Let's get rid of God'. These movies are still flourishing. In 1999 on the eve of the millennium, Arnold Schwarzenegger in End of Days is literally fighting an incarnated Devil who turns into a physical dragon monster. And it seems to me sometimes

people give more credence to that kind of existence of diabolical power than they do to the existence of God. Now, why people believe in the diabolical and not the divine baffles me.

Bernie:

People's predominant focus means that they will remember terror longer than they remember happiness. The nature of terror and fear is so different from happiness. I was in a Buddhist retreat once - this may go some way to answer your question - a 14-day silent retreat, one meal a day and a very strict regime. I reached some extremely happy blissful states in meditation, beyond anything I dreamed was possible. I have never forgotten. But whatever you get to in any kind of meditation, the instruction from the Buddha is always not to be fascinated, not to be caught up in the desire for that bliss, that any subtle self-regard, even in meditation, is a hindrance.

Now, there was a moment in my meditation where I had to make a kind of course correction. I let go of this nectar of bliss that shook my whole body. I thought I might never get back to this again, an experience of a lifetime, a profound spiritual, mystical experience. I decided to stay with the Buddha's instruction. What happened was that I switched - or it switched - to the most profound peace and safety that made the bliss and happiness seem gross. And I think that's my convoluted answer to the question: to get to that level of peace and growth is the way to face the Devil, whether he's real or not. That's why I'm talking about spiritual development.

Peter:

What you seem to be implying is that, in the West, since the death of God movement, people have lost their contact with religion. They talk about spirituality, but the kind of spirituality is of longing. It may get you to that state that you were speaking of, bliss, but it tends to end there. There is very little encouragement for people to be able to transcend that. And so you have the advice of the Buddha to let go. Catholic writers like St John of the Cross say exactly the same kind of thing for people to transcend that state of happiness, not desiring it for itself. The language would be that God's grace draws them to that further stage. The potential for deep mysticism is present in all world religions.

But somehow or other, the western culture, especially does not see this. There is very little encouragement for people to move beyond. Perhaps, because, commercially, the movies act on the fact that our feelings of terror are remembered longer than those of happiness, they play on that baser level before people get to happiness; that people may get stuck in terror; that there are all kinds of powers of evil that can get to them. That continues to be fascinating - all the Dracula and vampire stories, Frankenstein, the lot.

Bernie:

That's why we don't give the Devil the cinema. He shouldn't get all the best stories. We're all involved in this. Someone may be able to counterbalance way, once again bringing balance to the range of choices for box office movies. That's one aspect. The deeper, spiritual aspect seems to be - and I'm not against any belief in God - that Buddha never talked about a god. Although he's gone from earth, Buddhists never wanted any images of him. All he encouraged people to do, like the Gnostics, was to find the transcendent themselves. I think that's the best way of communicating to people at large how to make a positive experience of their terror and of these films.

Not that I don't enjoy them. Some of them are not worth it and I just don't enjoy them at all. I can find more evil in Natural Born Killers. I think there's a personification of evil there. It's really helping people to identify evil which is not always in a religious context. If faced with Natural Born Killers, if faced with The Exorcist's situation, if faced with The Entity, have we developed enough spiritually to be able to surrender in peace at that moment and see what happens. Moment of truth.

Peter:

Yes, it's facing the reality of evil and of sin, not being afraid of using the language of sin, but interpreting it in an adult, responsible way: that we are responsible for our actions, that we're not just

necessarily taken over by this outside power. It would be interesting to look at Natural Born Killers again to see how, in the screenplay, how the Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis characters perceive their responsibility for these killings - whether it's from inside themselves or some force outside themselves. That seems to me to be a great challenge these days, because sin - at least in Christian traditions - is looked on with some suspicion. And in some ways, rightly so, because people have developed that psychology of fear along with certain actions which, from an authoritarian point of view in the church, have been labelled as sin, especially in sexual morality. So there's an enormous sorting out needed, of accepting one's own free choices and the knowledge and awareness that one has of one's actions. Maybe until we get there, there'll be this tantalising mixture of horror films with religious overtones and this kind of audience fear.

Bernie:

For the people I work with, one of the first things I start developing - because I don't use such terminology as 'sin' - will be the terminology that should become second-nature to them: 'these are my choices'. People often come to me speaking as though the consequences of the choices 'just happened to them'.

I'm always pointing out, 'No, you chose'. Even not choosing is a choice. 'Choice' is dynamite, because we are all choosing. When we become choice-conscious, we realise our own conscious choices as well as the unconscious choices. It is these which lead people to say, 'it happened to me'. 'No, it happened to you because of the choice that you made.' Choose the behaviour, choose the reaction.

Peter:

Allowing for the fact of diminished responsibility, especially because of pressures from internal sources, if people did not presume that choices were to be seen in such absolute terms, either a simple yes or a simple no, they might be willing to take more responsibility for their choices. In the authentic Catholic tradition, full responsibility required a full knowledge of the issue and a full adult consent. Force and fear were seen as impediments to making full adult decisions. This applies especially for the annulments of marriages: if there was the element of fear of force, that nullifies the ability to give full consent. People get caught up, I suppose, in all these tangles...

Bernie:

The tangles need to be untangled and a real light shown in those dark places. But, aligned with my attitude towards choice, there's another word which is hand-in-glove with it. It's 'compassion'. Choice and taking responsibility seems to unconsciously imbued with the idea that if someone takes responsibility and they've done wrong, they deserve to be punished. This seems to be inherent in so many people's psychological makeup. But that's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is that they should also recognise the freedom in choice and recognise and acknowledge where they have made the wrong choices - wrong choices that have affected them: yes, you've suffered, you've experienced your karma, now have compassion on yourself for those wrong choices.

Peter:

Bernie, say something more about karma and people's responsibility.

Bernie:

If you throw a ball against the wall, it will come back to you. If you cast your bread upon the waters, it will come back to you. If you do good deeds or you do things that are helpful to people, independent of any religious belief, good things in general will come back to you. That person may well remember and be just the person you need to meet on a given day when you're looking for a job and they give you an introduction based on your helping them at the side of the road when they broke down two years ago. It works. I've pointed out a mundane thing, because I don't want to over-emphasise or make it too 'miraculous', this kind of thing.

That's the nature of karma. It's very simple. It's the law of cause and effect to use scientific or philosophical terms. It absolutely works for people. If you're an Al Capone of this world, you do go down. You do suffer. Even when people have said to me, 'Yes, but these gangsters live comfortable, with lots of money, great clothes, everything they want'. But this is on the outside and on the material level. What we don't see is the level of experience which is psychosis, fear, paranoia that this kind of wealth brings with it.

Peter:

We began by talking about images of evil, but it has led us into the language of fear, the language of sin. Ultimately, through that mystical reflection you offered, we have come to a much more honest and balanced understanding of responsibility and choice - you using the Buddhist language of karma, while I would use the Christian language of grace.

Bernie:

Cast your bread upon waters.

Peter:

And you receive grace and compassion from God, and forgiveness.

JUDGMENT AND DEFENDING YOUR LIFE

Peter:

You wanted to say something about the Holocaust and evil.

Bernie:

Evil has to spoken about. And in our own time, the Holocaust. Such an enormous thing, the 6,000,000 Jews that died, the gypsies, the homosexuals, all those people who died because of the evil of Hitler, it's like. We ask the question: where's the karma in that? Does it come back on to Germany? Has it come back on to Germany? Is it visible? No, Germany seems to be doing quite well, economically. But one has to wonder about the psychic guilt that German sons and daughters feel, because there is a lot of Jewish angst in the experience of Holocaust camp survivors. Second generation are still dealing with all that. I have clients... And is the reverse true for being German and having a grandfather who was an SS man? How much do the sins of the fathers and grandfathers fall on the children? I think that's another aspect of evil that needs much more looking into.

What's odd is that in talking about evil and talking about a given film - which is a mere speck, yet a microcosm of the evil which was committed within the Holocaust - somehow or other the perspective of karma on this huge subject, this huge real experience of horror is lost. I find it totally mysterious that something so big as this personification of evil is so often a blank.

Peter:

We are leaving it as a question at the moment.

Moving on to judgment, however, I'm a little surprised when you tell me that one of your favourite films is *Defending Your Life*. I enjoy Albert Brooks' films, but he's not in the centre of the mainstream. Why does *Defending Your Life* find its way on to your list of films?

Bernie:

For the very simple reason that *Defending Your Life* hits right at the heart of a lot of therapy I do,

especially about choice. I think that's what the film's central message is: what choices have you made in your life? they are now about to be reviewed so what will be the consequences? It's very timely for people to see that film but not just take it on the entertainment level. It suggests to people that they take a few steps back and ask whether their lives are merely knee-jerk reactions to circumstances or whether they are considering enough their lives in terms of responsibility, in terms of social attitude, in terms of their relationship with spouse or children?

Peter:

The entertainment level. Not so many people went to see it in the cinemas. But, watching it on television or on video, would audiences be prepared to stand back (or sit back!) from *Defending Your Life* and think about it? Or is it just a light fantasy touching on some of those issues which then disappears from the screen? Do you see it as something more profound?

Bernie:

I see it as both. For people it has something to say to, it will make them think. I would never generalise. For people who see it for its entertainment value, I think some of it will lodge in the unconscious and work away there, and they'll remember something from it in ten or twenty years' time. I don't think any of it's lost, but my role as a movie therapist is to bring people's consciousness to the level of the healing. This is the 'helping ability' of film. It's the same with your work on films linked to Gospel stories. As a therapist, I, following the Freud dictum that our task is to make the unconscious conscious and, so, people are better able to deal with it.

Peter:

Why do you think that Albert Brooks chose to write and direct this kind of theme in the early '90s? Is it a film of its time?

Bernie:

I think it's a film that's timeless. The theme had been filmed before with David Niven and Marius Goring, *A Matter of Life and Death*. That is a film that shocks you about death, challenges you to re-evaluate your life in the here and now, while you're still alive. Are you doing the best that's possible for your experience of life and those around you? This is not a bad question at any time in any of our lives. This is purely my projection and assumption, but if you take Albert Brooks as an artist with a social conscience, he's probably looked around the world and at America in particular, the society he lives in, and judged that it could do with standing back and looking at itself. And film was his medium to do it.

Peter:

He always seems so hang-dog and forlorn in his films, though they are laced with very funny, often deadpan, cracks. That seems an unusual style for raising a serious issue like judgment about one's life. When you think back to *A Matter of Life and Death*, it was fairly solemn in its tone, coming, as it did, at the end of World War II. That was the kind of sombre mood people were in. What do you think is the effect of this picturing of judgment?

Bernie:

The word 'judgment'. I would like people to look much wider than the immediate meaning of the word and look at whether they are interpreting judgment as a negative judgment, a condemnation, or as discernment or constructive criticism. Judgment is used as a catch-all. But the knee-jerk response and attitude is the first thing people need to observe so that they can understand whether it's their inner critic taking hold of this with glee, to beat them up even further. Or is it constructive criticism so that they can learn about themselves with some compassion and develop further. Another aspect is judgement as discernment, like that of judges in High Court cases or any cases where people have to exercise judgment with wisdom over other people's lives. So I think the film raises a lot of questions.

Peter:

The title is *Defending Your Life*. That sounds as if Brooks is already on the defensive.

Bernie:

It probably says something about Brooks' position in his own life at that time. He probably feels a lot of guilt, but thinks he has to defend himself. This may have some social implications as well as the personal implications and he is working out his defence in comedy and drama. By the same token, you mentioned his hang-dog expression. Maybe he feels quite persecuted.

Peter:

He actually visualises a judgment. In Christian terms, there's a theological language used to describe judgment, the Last Judgment or the General Judgment. Brooks is coming from a Jewish tradition. How religious that is, I don't know. Maybe it's a secular Jewish tradition. But what about your clients, in terms of judging their lives? Do clients with a religious faith have some image of death and a Last Judgment, inculcating honesty and/or fear?

Bernie:

If it is a Catholic, you certainly have quite a lot of fear from the judgment of the church. A person's 'inner critic' is given spiritual power in Catholics. It is negative in the main. So they're a special breed. In terms of the inner critic in people that do not have very strong religious belief, my work is still to redress the balance. I always facing them with, 'Tell me about your attitude towards yourself'. And I get all the negatives that they can possibly think of. They are slanted towards the negative, towards the judgment on where they've gone wrong, where they've made mistakes, where they haven't done well enough. They can give it to me in detail, chapter and verse.

And then the therapy starts: 'We will now study with absolutely the same energy and the same attention to minutiae, all the good that you've done'. And they don't say a word. It's at that moment they realise the imbalance of their perspective on life. That is the work, to bring back balance in their psyche. If they're going to judge and condemn themselves, let's at least do it fairly; let's defend our life on a fair basis, rather than through a biased perspective. Remember the patch that kids used to have over one eye of their glasses if they had a lazy eye? Well, let's take it off.

Peter:

Back to your believers. It probably depends on how fundamentalist their beliefs are or the kind of religious instruction they received about what are called 'The Last Things' (that's Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell) but many would have an image of what is called 'a Particular Judgment'. This not just a situation where their inner critic goes into action. Rather they have an image of themselves standing in the presence of God or in the presence of Jesus, who is assessing their life. They might or might not imagine, as Albert Brooks does in his film, their actually looking at scenes of their life over again and defending them, but rather an honest acknowledgment of the evil committed during their life, which needs somehow to be purged from their heart or their soul before they can be fully in God's presence forever.

The other image is of the Last Judgment, which is at the end of time (whenever that is), in which the vast numbers of people who have ever lived, everybody, are there before the judgment seat of God. We are familiar with these images from Renaissance artists - like Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel. Many believers imagine this kind of Last Judgment. do you think *Defending Your Life* is playing on those religious themes a little, affirming them or criticising them or both.

Bernie:

Big question. It's a big question and a difficult question, because being a Buddhist, much of what is

written and the big glimpses of experiences are considered as all an illusion. To a difference faith, that can sound like a cop-out, so I'll try and answer both ways. But I must admit that the first thing that comes to my mind as an image for experiences is the ocean: a wave forms, it's there for a moment in time and then goes flows back. It was always water, it was always part of the ocean - that's a Buddhist view, that that wave is a moment in time of an individual.

Peter:

But the individual, in Buddhist teaching, has the opportunity for another life, reliving and improving one's life in reincarnation.

Bernie:

But it's only living one's life within the ego sense, to develop to the point where you realise it was all illusion and was never separate from God. So, at the end of time, all that that will mean to a Buddhist is that the cosmos has decided not to have the illusion of individual life any more. The ego has been shown for what it is.

Peter:

Therefore, eternity is what?

Bernie:

It is the eternal experience of now.

Peter:

And we are?

Bernie:

We are one. We were never separate.

Peter:

While persons are always individuals, the Catholic tradition has something of that union for eternity. I am not so keen on a theology of judgment where there is a long separation between what is called the Particular Judgment of the individual and the Last Judgment of all people. I'm happy to be influenced by The Matrix! At our death, we move into a different dimension of experience. And that's why I was interested in the film. As Albert Brooks replays some of his life and assesses it, it's his Particular Judgment. I believe that in our death, in our dying, our full life is placed before us, the good and, especially, the evil which needs to be got rid of so that we can be with God for whatever eternity is. The traditional word for this after-death experience of our evil, of our sinfulness, was 'purgatory, not necessarily a place, but an experience of being before God and being one's full self, repenting of the evil one has done, whether one is Hitler or whether one is a child.

Bernie:

If it comes to having a moment of deep - in your terms - repentance and humility, which has to happen as part of the process to access God, I agree.

Peter:

This is the fullness of 'personal' dying, that dying is not simply, in the most comfortable sense, going to sleep and waking up in eternity. It must be, somehow or other, a letting-go of this world and being in the full adult alive experience of eternity. This happens to all of us in that dimension, which is a Last Judgment.

Bernie:

It's an experience of faith and trust that this is going to happen. However, you have atheists who don't have that belief. What I think is interesting is that they may not have that belief, but I would be very interested to hear the psychological experience of atheists on their deathbed.

Peter:

At their moment of truth.

I can understand the atheist who will say, 'There is nothing'. The atheist of integrity, of course, says the nature of being fully human is to live a proper life. And they want to die with that consistent integrity.

Whether they have intimations of immortality as, maybe, agnostics do, who knows?

Bernie:

If I face my own experience of having a heart problem, of being told that I'd had a heart attack and that I might have another one soon (consequently it was a wrong diagnosis), there I was, wired up with everything beeping all round me, my family crying, the doctor telling me that I might have another attack, it was very real. There was the realisation that with any breath I could die, that I had absolutely no control over it, that life ends. It means to be invited to shut your eyes in a childlike way - does that make any difference, whether you die with your eyes open or closed? And then the complete natural surrendering, that I didn't immediately do - it happens. When that natural surrendering happens, with peace, magnanimity and acceptance, and a softness of your experience of the world, it is not anything to do with intellectual decision. This is the experience that the atheist faces as well. The atheist is coming, in the final analysis, from an intellectual stance. Reason cannot prove to him that there is a God; it may prove to him there isn't.

Peter:

They have to make a transition, then, from that intellectual stance to the experience of surrendering ...

Bernie:

Yes. And that experience of surrendering is not a conscious control.

Peter:

They might not surrender. They could hold on.

Bernie:

I've wondered whether that is possible.

Peter:

So in theory, rationally, one can say, 'Yes, I will hold on to my stance that there is no God, no afterlife'.

Bernie:

And go kicking and screaming into 'that dark goodnight'. No, from my experience, that's a wrong understanding of what happens when you're faced with dying.

Peter:

We began this conversation with a comedy which was fairly deadpan. In their way, that's what the

movies can do to us: give us a pleasant, humorous, tantalising entry into something which really does take us deeper. That's what Albert Brooks' films generally do. They take us into deeper human experience through the humour of the deadpan.

Bernie:

And we are promoting this interaction with films as spiritual intercourse, social intercourse, an enrichment to give life meaning, as opposed to not relating with, not looking at life.

THE OPPOSING BALANCE OF SUFFERING AND GUILT - DEAD MAN WALKING

Peter:

Watching Dead Man Walking on its first release was something of a shock. I had heard vaguely that Tim Robbins had made a film about a nun with Susan Sarandon, but I didn't know anything about it. I had not heard of Sister Helen Prejean's book about her experiences in prison chaplaincy. I saw the film at a preview in Melbourne a couple of months before it was released. We were amazed that such a moving film could come from the United States, that Susan Sarandon could dramatise a contemporary nun so movingly, and that the issue of capital punishment could be presented very fairly, with supporters of each side of the argument not feeling threatened. While the film came down against capital punishment, it was profoundly thoughtful for all concerned. That was my response. What was your response and why do you hold the film in such esteem?

Bernie:

I think the one thing the film does, whichever side of the divide that you stand on, for or against capital punishment, it 'spiritualises' all the participants. It takes you through all the opposition, the opposition from the victims' families and Matthew Poncelet as a victim deciding to be an abuser and a killer.

The portrayal of the nun, Sister Helen, who somehow found the extraordinary ability to contain and hold together the opposing balance of suffering and guilt, was edifying to observe.

Peter:

'Edifying' is an interesting word to use, a bit old-fashioned. It comes from the Latin, doesn't it, from the word to build? Edifying means that it really does build up something worthy through its impact on the audience.

Bernie:

Yes. I think what it builds up is a spiritual cause in an age of knee-jerk cynicism. In other words, we are taken further than the decisions that we've already unconsciously made about capital punishment. And we are not given some goody-goody film. Poncelet gets his comeuppance in terms of the people that are pro capital punishment and for the families who want some revenge and recompense. At the same time, we've been taken on the spiritual journey of the nun and her impact on Poncelet. The film is so balanced that it doesn't take a position. It tells a story. But, in telling the story, it's spiritually edifying and uplifting, where you have to think again. You have to readdress any kind of prejudice that you have, whether you're for capital punishment or against it. I'm not coming down here one way or the other myself, because I think the whole point is the film's balance for us to make up our own minds. Sister Helen spiritually contains both positions without judging.

Peter:

While the film tells a story and the journey, the real-life journey of Sister Helen Prejean, I found I was empathising with her, very pleased to see a contemporary nun on screen. It showed, quite credibly, the transition in the Catholic church over the last thirty years, enabling sisters to move about more freely, not necessarily wearing the religious habit, but having a symbol of her congregation or a cross - and being involved in a ministry which was really grassroots, down to earth, however you like to describe it. For me, that was a breakthrough in religious representation by Hollywood.

Having said that, and identifying with her, I was truly taken aback at the sequence where she went to visit the parents of the victims and they turned on her. She suddenly realised that in her exclusive ministry to Matthew Poncelet, she had actually neglected the ministry to them in their grief. That was the beginning of an even greater presentation of balance, not only on the theme of capital punishment itself, but on the emotions and all the stories of all those concerned. From then on, I felt the film had an even greater depth.

Bernie:

I think this is absolutely pivotal in the film because it gives us the very real humanity in the spiritual development of the nun. She had to realise she was not some spiritual archetype, an unreal person. She's capable of learning and making mistakes. But she picks up on them and follows through. A lot of factors come into play here, very much prompted by what you were saying, in terms of a down-to-earth presentation of the ministry. That touches a deep chord in me, a down-to-earth presentation of spirituality, uplifting stories and healing via movies. So I connect with her doing that very down-to-earth approach. There's something about the honesty of taking a balanced approach rather than taking a political party approach to issues that gives the film so much more power. I keep coming back to that.

Peter:

That's an interesting theme, honesty. It is truly appropriate for *Dead Man Walking*. Many films which are partisan are also honest, insofar as they are heartfelt statements supporting a particular cause. But the type of honesty that you have highlighted here, along with that word 'balance', does seem to be a deeper kind of honesty. Thinking of your work with clients as well as some of the struggles of people lapsing in their faith, this kind of honesty and balance are two of the qualities that you would be getting people to identify with and reflect on so that they can grow in those ways.

Bernie:

I'm not a campaigning Buddhist but both those qualities have struck me deeply and are what made me become a Buddhist. Because you are able to see the balance in the film, as pure Buddhist strength, if you wanted to hijack it - which I don't - you could consider it from a Buddhist perspective. In terms of the practice of meditation in Buddhism, it's predominantly developed mindfulness, mindfulness as a distant witness consciousness that watches and observes our judgment, watches and observes everything, but does not take up a position. It is like a camera; it watches and observes. The capacity to do this is built up through meditation, which gives you balance, which gives you the middle way. Buddha's way was the middle way. *Dead Man Walking* is an exemplary presentation and experience of spirituality. I don't even want to name it as Buddhist or any other name. It just seems to me - spirituality.

Peter:

So, not allowing you to hijack the film, since its themes and treatment are of a Catholic background ... it could serve a wonderful purpose for some of the people that we've talked about at other times, people who are struggling with the credibility of somebody living a Catholic faith. This is what Sister Helen Prejean has done in real life. I understand Tim Robbins has a Catholic background but I believe he is more interested in Buddhism these days, as is Susan Sarandon herself. While letting go the practice of their Catholicism, they have nevertheless preserved some of the depth that transcends the difficulties,

and they have been able to translate it back into Catholic images and language. Towards the end, when Sister Helen has listened to Matthew Poncelet and he finally takes responsibility when, like a confession, he tells her honestly what he did, she is able to say, 'God loves you still, and you are taking responsibility for the evil that you have done'. Had she been able to be ordained, she could have given Poncelet what we call sacramental absolution. Before he went to his execution, she sang for him a well-known hymn from the St Louis Jesuits, 'Be Not Afraid'. I'm sure a lot of Catholics were identifying with her at this point.

If *Dead Man Walking* is portraying honesty and balance for Buddhists, then it's also doing the same then for confirmed Catholics as well as those who may be struggling with their own faith and life stories.

Bernie:

Yes. Honesty and balance and their spiritual power are just that, without any creed to them. But I do think there's more to that film, because it isn't an intellectual, conceptual film in the main, although there are debates about capital punishment: it is, in fact, a spiritual experience you take with you. And that's the difference, a spiritual experience which becomes part of you. That's the connection audiences have with healing movies healing as they raise people's consciousness. Not all films do this, but some, have that enormous power.

Peter:

There are a couple of other capital punishment films: *I Want to Live*, with Susan Hayward back in the '50s, and a remake for television with Lindsay Wagner. At the same time as the release of *Dead Man Walking*, there was a telemovie called *The Execution of Raymond Graham*, with Jeff Fahey as the condemned man and Morgan Freeman the prison governor. There was Bruce Beresford's film *Last Dance* with Sharon Stone on Death Row taking us through much the same experiences. But *Dead Man Walking*, with its explicit religious concept, stories and language, was able to do - it seems to me - so much more.

Bernie:

One of the things I did want to say, not from a spiritual point of view or from a Buddhist point of view is that when Matthew Poncelet is - from a psychotherapist's point of view, I think - able to make his confession or unload his level of guilt and anger, bitterness and hurt, the singing of the hymn as a ritual spiritual moment is most important. Having unloaded the poison that was in him of guilt and murderous rage, he is now open as a vessel to fill up with being - which is always there, regardless of all our churches. It's always there. Our problem is that it gets clouded, and we believe the clouds.

Peter:

I'd like to mention another film on this theme. It's called *In the Name of the People*, in which Scott Bakula plays a condemned criminal who has been in jail for four years and is now about to be executed. His crime was to have killed, in a rage, a young girl 'because she was there', the daughter of a couple played by Richard Thomas and Amy Madigan. The mother belongs to a support group for parents of murder victims. The father is a bit more gentle. He wants to go to visit the killer in prison. The film is about closure for parents.

He does persuade his wife, who is most unwilling, to go. In the end they actually take the man's daughter into their home to care for her. The mother is present at the execution, whereas the father is minding the girl. As the dying man looks, she is able to say, 'I forgive you'. It's an extraordinary experience of being purged, not just on the part of the killer, but on the part of the parents of the victims. That's why I like the last moments of *Dead Man Walking*. The camera tracks outside a church and you see the father of the murdered girl, who had clashed with Sister Helen and who had attended the execution. He and Sister Helen are simply kneeling in the church, both praying. Not an easy ending, but a hopeful end.

Bernie:

An end where the spiritual adviser is still with the father of a victim, which is nice, in the sense that it shows the balance. It's the transcendence of this moment that's so powerful.

Peter:

You were wanting to say something about Sister Helen being Christ-like.

Bernie:

It's something about the spiritual and emotional pain, the loneliness and despair which she went through, that remind me of Jesus' suffering and such sayings as, 'Forgive them. They know not what they do', the loneliness of, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'. I wonder how many times she felt that within her journey, especially seeing the parents. I'm reminded of a recent article that I read, of a man who was a serial killer, who has been in prison for 25 years and then on Death Row. He's a highly intelligent chap. He's involved himself in therapy as much as he could, and writing. He obviously had the classic background of abuse and became the abuser instead of being the abused. He wasn't going to take abuse any more, so he had the classic abuser profile. He identified with power as opposed to helplessness. After 25 years of this on-and-off therapy, he said a very interesting thing: that all of his killings were about hate and revenge, but what it's taken him so long to learn has been that hate and revenge are like a hot coal that you hold in your naked hands to throw at someone else. I think that's brilliant.

MARTIN SCORSESE

Peter:

Bernie, would you call yourself a fan of Martin Scorsese?

Bernie:

Yes. I like him because of his subject-matter. And there is his ability to show passion in his very individual way. He deals with passion all the time. There's nothing really light-hearted about him.

Peter:

Have you seen him speak in television interviews?

Bernie:

He's very staccato.

Peter:

Yes, short, staccato, intense.

Bernie:

Energy bursts.

Peter:

Full of energy.

One of the reasons I found him interesting from the Catholic point of view is his New York-Italian-Catholic background, a year of studying and training for the priesthood - I don't know what age he was when he did that - and a lot of the imagery, iconography that he uses.

His first feature film in 1968, *Who's Knocking at My Door*, with Harvey Keitel, is full of churches, statuary, crucifixes and a powerful confession sequence. He was still in his 20s then, twenty years before *The Last Temptation of Christ*, almost thirty years before *Kundun*.

Bernie:

While I find him very profound, I can't always follow him, to be honest.

Peter:

He sees himself as like a priest.

Bernie:

Yes, I've heard him interviewed and say that.

Peter:

At the end of his three-part series on American movies produced for the centenary of cinema, that's his final conclusion. This is important in terms of his vocation, that he's not just an entertainer, he's making some stories sacred, communicating through these stories and, with his audiences, forming community with them.

His most explicitly 'sacred' stories in film are *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Kundun*, a Christian story and a Buddhist story.

Bernie:

What do you think he was saying in *The Last Temptation of Christ*?

Peter:

He was certainly very interested in the humanity of Jesus and what it means to be human in relationship to God. Instead of making a literal Gospel movie, he chose to film the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis. Kazantzakis might have had a similar relationship with his Greek Orthodox Church as Scorsese has with the Catholic Church, considered on the outer - genius, but on the outer - and possibly offensive.

An intriguing issue with the movie is Scorsese's collaboration with his long-time writer, Paul Schrader. Schrader has a strong evangelical, Middle American Protestant background. He is from Grand Rapids, Michigan. Their working together on *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Bringing Out the Dead* has given rise to much interesting Protestant-Catholic interaction. Schrader himself is also a theorist on film-making, especially about what he calls 'transcendence' in movies like those of Ozu, Dreyer and Bresson. His own movies have sometimes been rather austere (most recently, *Affliction*). So, Scorsese relied on him to explore the character of Jesus leading to an unorthodox

Orthodox view filtered through an evangelical Protestant and then dramatised by a very emotional American-Italian Catholic.

Bernie:

Yes. I'm very interested in Kundun and Buddhism. I think Scorsese brought the sheer majesty of Tibet alive as well as the people and the religion in a way that I haven't seen before.

Peter:

It's fascinating that he would have had such an admiration for the Dalai Lama to risk making a film which wasn't going to be a box-office success and which ran the danger, as it did, of negative pressure against distribution from China.

Bernie:

He probably identifies strongly with minorities. He saw an association with a repressed minority insofar as he came from a ghetto, the Italians in New York City. He's using his power as a film-maker to identify the oppression of a minority. It's a unique minority in the sense that, although the Dalai Lama has a similar position of respect and admiration to Gandhi, Tibet is nowhere near as big as India.

Peter:

Could Kundun could be described as a Buddhist film?

Bernie:

I think it can be seen as a reasonable, impassioned documentary of what has happened. Obviously a lot of the earlier part of the film gets overshadowed by the sequences of oppression by the Chinese and their atrocities. That magnificent aerial shot of the massacred Buddhists was like a mandala of death. Scorsese is using Tibetan imagery. I hope it doesn't turn out to be prophetic.

Peter:

You have said that one of the main themes of Buddhism is the realisation of impermanence.

Bernie:

Yes, but, of course, that is not on the ego level, not on the level of transcendence. So, there is a balancing act which the Dalai Lama has to walk in terms of reassuring the ego in his followers, but at the same time he's walking with the experience of historical and political impermanence.

I think the scene with the destruction of the sand paintings, the sand drawings, is a much more persuasive image of the impermanence. It is an image of 'dust to dust'. You cannot hold on to anything too strongly. One of the leading tenets of Buddhist impermanence is being desire-less.

Peter:

From a western point of view, I was admiring the sand trays with the beauty and artistry of their design and was rather horrified when something so profoundly beautiful was so quickly destroyed. We do want to hold on to things, especially something like these sand trays. So this sequence is like a lesson, I presume, from eastern religion to western religion that there is and has to be a certain detachment and impermanence in human reality.

Bernie:

That's exactly it.

Peter:

What you were saying about desire-lessness reminds me of a Catholic tradition developed by Ignatius Loyola. He uses the word 'detachment', not in the sense of a disdain that things are not worth having - a sense in which some austere people do interpret it, a despising of worldly things - but rather it means not being enslaved by desire for those things. We must use them when we must, letting them go when we must. I presume that is something of what you would understand by impermanence and desirelessness.

Bernie:

It's the ability to let go. One of the main facets of, of reasons for, meditation is the ability to let go in the present moment of things and events that are in the past, as well as to let go of whatever is to come in the future. Just being with the breath in the moment is in itself a training to stay in the moment when you are not meditating as opposed to worrying or obsessing about the past, about which you can do nothing. It might be affecting you now but you have to let go. It is useless to be obsessing and catastrophising about what might happen. You can do nothing about that.

Peter:

That seems crucial to Scorsese's interpretation of Tibetan experience in the twentieth century. The opening sequences of Kundun where the authorities are searching for the new incarnation of the Buddha compelled me to think of the parallel with the incarnation of Jesus. But the search and the criteria for identifying the Buddha were in harmony with a long tradition. But, in the twentieth century there is an evident need for some change in Tibet - even the advent and use of the movies. But then with the Chinese aggression and the visit of Mao and his encounter with the Dalai Lama followed by his escape, Kundun shows how there has been a long past but it has now gone. Who knows what the future will be?

Bernie:

There's actually a Buddhist text and predictions that this Dalai Lama is the last one. There is also the Chinese involvement with the pseudo Dalai Lama which the Chinese have chosen, and the real one, who was kidnapped by the Chinese and was not seen for a long time. Buddhists have come to a crossroads about where the religion is going after the present Dalai Lama. However, there are now so many people who have embraced Buddhism - and the West is embracing it as well - so 'Tibet' has just got a lot bigger. It's kind of Global Tibet.

Peter:

Which could then develop without a Dalai Lama?

Bernie:

Without the original base, yes.

Peter:

Except that the present Dalai Lama is such an extraordinary presence up till now and has been for many decades. It has been a moral leadership in the world for over four decades.

Bernie:

History bears this out, it will be very interesting to see whether the road that he has walked in terms of Buddhist doctrine bears fruit. He has been in a very difficult position on the world stage, always being observed. He cannot be involved in any kind of political skulduggery. He's in the difficult position of being a spiritual leader and a political leader. He doesn't have the freedom for any political manoeuvring, but at the same time he's a spiritual leader, so he has to 'walk the talk'.

Peter:

Scorsese portrayed that very well especially in the Dalai Lama's earlier years. We had better acknowledge the screenwriter, Melissa Matheson, who wrote ET and The Indian in the Cupboard amongst other things, and the skill she has shown in writing such an insightful screenplay. Kundun seemed to me a way of communicating, at least to western audiences, significant aspects of Buddhist teaching, portrayals of the rituals, and many colours and symbols, details of Tibetan Buddhism, which then gives the pattern for what you have called global Buddhism. Did Scorsese do this well?

Bernie:

I think so. He brought the plight of Tibet to the world, to many, many people who would not have been aware of it, which in political terms, in worldly terms, must have put enormous pressure on China.

Peter:

It did, although China brought terrific pressure to bear on the Disney Corporation not to release the movie in many countries. But what about in the non-political message, leading people to some understanding, even attraction towards Buddhist beliefs and practice?

Bernie:

Any religion has people who will be attracted to it for certain aspects. Obviously, if you appeal to a wide audience, there will be more people who are attracted to Buddhism who may not have looked at it in the beginning.

Peter:

If Buddhism is not a religion so much as an ethical (or religious) way of life, the western audience is still going to look at a film like Kundun assuming that it is presenting a religion like a Christianity that they are familiar with.

Bernie:

The difference is that Buddhism is not a religion of belief. It doesn't call upon belief at all. It calls upon you to meditate and have your own experience - something like the gnostics, really. That's the message of Buddhism and it can be looked upon as mental exercises. It doesn't necessarily have to be religious. There is no idea of praying to Buddha. He didn't want to be enshrined in any way.

Peter:

But in fact he sometimes is.

Bernie:

But in the sense of evoking the atmosphere of self-discovery and meditation. I think that's how he's been used.

Peter:

The rituals are not worship, but of meditation and prayer?

Bernie:

With meditation, the experience of meditation gradually unfolds specifically in you and for you. You find interconnections with other people in ways you didn't before.

Peter:

So there's an integrity for life.

Bernie:

Because it's the essence of who you are, it feeds into your integrity, your sense of honesty, your sense of not harming anyone else and your sense of not harming anything, even any insect, a reverence for life in the Schweitzer sense. At the same time, you start to connect with people in an instinctive, intuitive way. The interconnectedness is felt more strongly in a nourishing sense.

Peter:

In terms of interconnectedness, there's the doctrine of reincarnation. Kundun begins with reincarnation so it is somewhat alien for a western audience, unless they really do believe in reincarnation. And this is the search for the contemporary reincarnation or manifestation of the Buddha.

Bernie:

There is supposed to be a reincarnation of the Buddha for each era. When the Dalai Lama was asked directly, 'Are you a reincarnation of the Buddha?', he said, 'I'm a reflection, I am the mirror that reflects on the water'.

Peter:

Scorsese with his background - and Melissa Matheson also comes from a Catholic background - strive to be perceptive and open to an eastern, 'religious' way of life. It's a challenge which they've responded to worthily.

Bernie:

I imagine that probably their own involvement in meditation has led them to deeper insights into Catholicism and Buddhism. And I sense that is what has happened with the film. My own experience was that I could not go along with Christianity. But, after meditating for some time, I became a much better Christian, and I understood it in a different way. For instance, I was in a retreat and out of the blue the scene came to me of Pontius Pilate and Jesus. And when Pontius Pilate said to Jesus, 'What is truth?', Jesus didn't answer. Well, after I had meditated and even without even thinking, the answer came up in me: truth is an experience, it isn't verbal.

Peter:

Truth is not confined to an intellectual assent.

Bernie:

So with Jesus not saying anything, it did not mean that he didn't answer.

Peter:

In fact earlier in John's Gospel says, 'I am the way, the truth and the life', so Jesus' own experience and our experience of him is an experience of God's truth.

With Scorsese's interpretation of Jesus in The Last Temptation, he decided not to do a Gospel movie. Taking Kazantzakis text and interpreting the Gospel enabled him - much to the horror of some Christians - to work with a greater freedom, which he took. The Jesus he presents is a different figure, say, from the Dalai Lama who is something of a hierarchical person with a long tradition and a place in that tradition.

Jesus in the movie (as well as in the Synoptic Gospels) is on a journey of self-discovery and Matthew, Mark and Luke. That makes him a Scorsese hero. Whether it's the Taxi Driver or Robert de Niro in the Mean Streets or Nicolas Cage as the driver in Bringing Out the Dead, each hero is on some kind of redemptive spiritual quest.

At the opening The Last Temptation Jesus suffers with doubts. The screenplay here is reminiscent of the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the 'terrible sonnets'. This torment, is evocative of the agony of the garden and is consistent with the Gospels. From the very beginning of the movie, Jesus is shown to be very human. And this is the challenge to many Christian audiences. Was that your impression?

Bernie:

I thought Scorsese was very clever by immediately showing the doubts. It helps to see Jesus as an Everyman, to identify very quickly with him, right from the beginning. We literally take up the struggle with Jesus and we understand it has meaning within our own experiences of life. It is different with the Dalai Lama who is an archetype of spirituality which people are trying to attain to. But in any personal meeting with him - when I've been in halls and seen him - such is his humility and, yes, his sense of humour that they immediately communicates to us in a different ways from the spiritual authority that he is and has. It is there you find his humanness.

Peter:

In seminars on the Jesus-movies I like showing the scene where he stops the crowd stoning Mary Magdalene. Again it's part of his struggle. She was Jesus' childhood friend. He's seen what's happened to her. He has waited, sat there in the brothel waiting for her. He has supported her and he defies everyone to throw the first stone. What follows immediately is Jesus preaching, the parable of the sower and the Beatitudes. There's an exhilaration in the way Willem Dafoe speaks these lines as if this is the first time that he has thought of them, so to speak, to express them in that way. The audience is drawn to Jesus, taken along with him.

Scorsese is very solemn sometimes, with sequences like the temptations in the desert. But at other times it's almost the joy of Jesus bursting forth despite the anguish.

Bernie:

That's right, the agony and the ecstasy of his spiritual journey.

Peter:

But the 'temptation' is, of course, at the core of the movie. In 1988 at the time of the controversy and protests, - I don't know whether this is an exclusively Christian thing or whether it is universal - but as soon as people heard the word 'temptation', the other word that occurred to them was 'sex'. The assumption, then, was that the movie was a blasphemous treatment of Jesus and sexuality. But at a round table discussion immediately after the movie, we were reminded that the last temptation, the ultimate temptation is a temptation to ordinariness, not fulfilling your vocation in life. In that sense, the Dalai Lama's history of the last forty years, shows he has not succumbed to any last temptation. The temptation for Jesus was effectively dramatised by Scorsese. The sound goes recedes and the angel from the temptations in the Desert comes to the foot of the cross, so the audience know that it is not to be interpreted realistically. It also comes after Jesus cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' So, in this context Jesus is urged, 'Come down from the cross, you don't have to do this. Get married, have a family'. Later, Paul is preaching in Nazareth and tells him he should be back on the cross because that is what Paul is preaching. When Judas, Peter and the Apostles visit Jesus in his old age, they rebuke him. Their faith in him was that he was that he was the Saviour. And, as Jesus comes to after this hallucination/dream, he is able to pray the other words from the Psalms, 'Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit'. With his two movies, Scorsese has shown us Jesus achieving in death what the Dalai Lama has been asked to continue in life.

Bernie:

Because the Dalai Lama's martyrdom is his life as opposed to a dramatic moment. The Dalai Lama's crucifixion is taking a long time.

Peter:

Whereas the movie is suggesting that if Jesus had lived on, it could be interpreted as a failure in vocation. His crucifixion was immediate. He had to die and then he could send the spirit to the world.

Bernie:

I think the power of those words is extraordinary. Anyone who's been lost in their spiritual journey knows that, 'My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me', is probably the greatest cry of abandonment that's come down through history. It is very important part to have this prayer in the movie because most people will have a spiritual crisis if they are on a spiritual journey. That's the nature of the journey, the with its dark night of the soul.

Peter:

That's Scorsese's achievement. He has told the core Gospel story, even when he says it's not a Gospel movie. The Jesus of The Last Temptation is someone we can identify with, who shows us the way, whereas the Dalai Lama of Kundun is an archetype of spirituality that, with his humility and his length of life, we are invited to attain to.

Bernie:

He is the living embodiment of that spirituality. The only other person on the world stage like him in the last century is Gandhi.

Peter:

What parallels do you see?

Bernie:

That Gandhi again, for want of a better way of putting it, walked the walk and talked the talk. He did ask his people to be non-violent. He did have them march, but non-violently, although many of his followers could not stay with it. But the power of his spirituality was seen in India in a way never been seen before, and the British did finally move out of India.

Politics is at the level of power in the world, but Gandhi was dealing at another level altogether, a spiritual level. Gandhi was also for the whole world. What's happening with the Dalai Lama as that Buddhism becomes Buddhism for the world not solely for Tibet.

Peter:

With Gandhi and with any religious leader, if they are archetypal, they have, by definition, universal appeal and attraction. And Gandhi finishes by paralleling Jesus in his death.

Many people saw Brad Pitt in Seven Years in Tibet. Were you satisfied with the perceptions of the Dalai Lama in that movie?

Bernie:

I thought it was very good. In the West it was obscured by the pedigree or the background of Heinrich Harrer, the Nazi connections. I didn't have any strong feelings about that. Brad Pitt caused another problem in the sense that he had just made The Devil's Own with Harrison Ford on the troubles in

Northern Ireland and the press was critical of him for that. Then he came up with this one. So there was a lot of that kind of discussion going on in this country.

Peter:

So you would have judged the presentation of the Dalai Lama in Seven Years in Tibet as accurate enough and spiritual enough?

Bernie:

Yes. But I don't feel the definitive film about the Dalai Lama has been made yet. His life is such a big life. I think there are ways of showing much more about him. We've seen his upbringing. We've seen the ritual in terms of how he was chosen. But there is a lot more to know about the man and his thoughts which can be found in his books. There is more to be said about the man uninvolved in the political struggle of his country, much more of his spirituality.

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