



Becoming Ourselves

by Robert Moore-Jumonville

What sort of creatures are we becoming? That question lays at the heart of *The Screwtape Letters* as Lewis intends to wake us up to the spiritual forces and choices around us. Spiritual Directors who work in the Ignatian tradition often emphasize the prayer of Examen less as an examination of *conscience* (which can devolve into feelings of shame and self-loathing) and more as an examination of *consciousness*. Spiritual formation so often encourages us to see life with a new set of lenses, to see the world from God's perspective, to see the spiritual side of life that always permeates our ordinary material existence.

Isn't this how we think of Jesus' relationship with the Father? When Jesus looked at life, he saw the world through the eyes of God. In this last article, therefore, I'd like for us to focus on the goal God has in mind for us, "the end for which we were formed," as Lewis put it in his last sermon. *How* we read *The Screwtape Letters* determines *what* we will see. Let me encourage us, then, to read the book conscious of Jesus by our side and on our side, guiding us and encouraging us as a friend.

God's desire to transform us is never punitive. Moreover, God respects our freedom. As Uncle Screwtape admits, God "*cannot ravish. He can only woo*" (p.39). Thus, spiritual transformation always works to set us free—free to become our best selves in Christ. Do you recall the scene in John 8 where Pharisees bring a woman caught in adultery to Jesus? He delivers his famous line, "*Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone*" and one by one all of the accusers depart. Left alone with the woman, the story concludes with Jesus telling her that he does not condemn her, but then he adds, "Go and sin no more." Consider Jesus' parting words to the woman, here, not as mere censure, not as a further scolding, but as the loving counsel a father would give his daughter: "*Darling, I hate to see you in this pain. You deserve better than this. Claim your freedom.*" Somewhere I read a parable about Rabbi Zusia. All I remember is the punch line. "*When I get to heaven,*" he said in a thick eastern European accent, "*God won't say: 'Why weren't you Moses, or why weren't you Elijah, or why weren't you David?' No, instead God will ask, 'Why weren't you Zusia?'*" God wants us to become our best selves, in other words, striving to live our lives on the top floor of our houses.

If, as I've argued, *The Screwtape Letters* invites us to apply a reverse spiritual direction to ourselves, then this partly comes from inversions or role reversals at the heart of the book. We see vivid depictions, for instance, of hell and of heaven—but both from hell's perspective. Uncle Screwtape, though he cannot fathom what heaven is "*up to*" (pp.100-101; 175), nevertheless paints for us an accurate and compelling picture of the motivating principle of heaven. In this way, we are offered a glimpse of what it is we are striving for in our spiritual formation: "*the end for which we are formed.*" As we began our study thinking about the brevity of life—remembering that it as beautiful as it is brief—we were reminded "*to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom*" (Psalm 90:12). What sort of creatures are we becoming, asks Lewis—more heavenly or more hellish? Also, we receive an image through the book of what to avoid.

In the Preface to the 1961 paperback edition, Lewis explains his symbols for hell, suggesting he took for his inspiration "something like the bureaucracy of a police state or the offices of a thoroughly nasty business concern." "*'Dog eat dog' is the principle of the whole organization. Everyone wishes*



everyone else's discrediting, demotion and ruin; everyone is an expert in the confidential report, the pretended alliance, the stab in the back."

Fear and hunger stand as the two motives driving hell, according to Lewis. Fear makes sense. Fear of getting stabbed in the back keeps me maneuvering to stay on top of others. But what does Lewis mean by hunger? Hell consists of consuming others—almost eating others spiritually: *"the passion to dominate, almost to digest, one's fellow; to make his whole intellectual and emotional life merely an extension of one's own"* (1961 Preface, xi). As the book proceeds, we see Screwtape's "desire" for Wormwood unfold sinisterly, until his doom is spelled out with his uncle's last signature: "Your increasingly and ravenously affectionate uncle SCREWTAPE." He begins this last letter by laying down his cards: *"I have always desired you, as you (pitiful fool) desired me. The difference is that I am the stronger. I think they will give you to me now; or a bit of you. Love you? Why, yes. As dainty a morsel as I ever grew fat on"* (171).

Few of us can imagine engaging in this kind of predatory practice. It's the sort of spiritual cannibalism that belongs instead with history's monsters—like Adolph Hitler, Osama bin Laden, or Jeffrey Dahmer. We might, however, recognize—even within ourselves—the desire to possess or control another human being. Consider, for example, how the Patient's mother controls others with her gluttony of delicacy, wanting her food "just so." Think of how often our parental love lives "through" our children, or how we seek to "control" our spouse, or to dominate at work. Hell is parasitic. It feeds off someone else's good.

Heaven's spirit, in contrast, lets the other "be," allowing freedom for growth. "Remember always," Screwtape warns Wormwood earlier in the book, *"that He [God] really likes the little vermin, and sets an absurd value on the distinctness of every one of them. When he talks of their losing their selves, He only means abandoning the clamor of self-will; once they have done that, he really gives them back all their personality, and boasts ... that when they are wholly His they will be more themselves than ever"* (65). In one of the most telling passages of the book, Screwtape contrasts hell and heaven: *"To us a human is primarily food; our aim is absorption of its will into ours, the increase of our own area of selfhood at its expense. But the obedience which the Enemy demands of men is quite a different thing.... He really does want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself—creatures whose life, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like His own, not because he has absorbed them but because their will freely conform to His. We want cattle who can finally become food; He wants servants who can finally become sons. We want to suck in, He wants to give out. We are empty and would be filled; he is full and flows over"* (39).

In conclusion, the book challenges us to keep pursuing our spiritual work, assuring us that when we do, ripples of grace and strength and wholeness radiate out from us as blessing to those around us; but also warning us that when we neglect our spiritual work, what radiates out, instead, is pain and suffering for others. Through Uncle Screwtape, Lewis invites us to enjoy becoming more like Christ, while at the same time becoming more fully ourselves.