

Todd at the Movies

Some of My Favorite Films and What They Mean to Me

By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
May 22, 2025

During our last “Conversations with Todd,” during which I respond to open questions, church member Shane Gronholz, prompted by the recent death of Hollywood film and television Director David Lynch, asked about the movies that have been most meaningful to me. I mentioned a couple in response but think it’s such a great question that I want to say more about my favorite films and am surprised I hadn’t thought to do so before now.

But first, I’ll say a little about my movie watching history. When I was born in 1964, 93% of US households had at least one television set, including the one crammed into the living room corner of the small, South San Francisco, two-bedroom apartment that was the first home I can remember, which I shared with my parents, sister, and brother. When I was five years old, we moved into a 1,250 square-foot, three-bedroom home with an additional sister and soon our first dog, Skippy, a feisty chihuahua that didn’t take up much room, thank goodness! We ended up having two televisions in our home, the larger, but still small, color television was in my parent’s bedroom, and a smaller black-and-white TV—with a screen no bigger than an average laptop’s is today—in the room I shared with my brother, which we watched from our bunk beds.

That little black and white screen was my window into the wider world and culture. I was in college before I discovered that *The Wizard of Oz* was only black-and-white during its first and final minutes and in vivid technicolor in between. We were also limited to just three or four good VHF channels, each of which required minor adjustments to the antenna to get the best picture, along with a few UHF channels that were always out of tune and had lots of snow and ghosting, no matter how the antennas were positioned. It would be several years after I’d graduated from college in 1986 that cable TV, with its superior image, reached just 60% of US households, around 1992. Mine was not one of them. But before I get ahead of myself, once we were old enough, my brother and I spent almost every Saturday at the Seaview Twin Theater near our home, just two blocks from the ocean, watching the double feature we’d paid admission for and then sneaking into the one we hadn’t, along with spending lots of quarters to play games like Ms. Pac-Man, Space Invaders, and Donkey Kong.

It wasn’t until 1997 that the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television show came out, which I loved and tolerated the fact that I had to watch it on one of those not-so-great UHF channels. Although the channel was initially affiliated with the new Warner Brothers network, *Buffy’s* producer, its local station owners were conservative Christians who decided not to continue airing it because of all its demons and witches. (I won’t say more about that, tempting as it is.) So, Peggy and I finally splurged on cable TV, just so I could watch a high school cheerleader slay monsters, while also dealing with the far worse coming-of-age horrors that teenagers cope with. To my great delight, many years later,

when my daughter was a budding teenager herself, we watched the entire series together, a show that remains among her favorites. I was glad to help provide her such a strong and positive female role model during this formative period in her own life.

It seems strange to think a fictional character, especially one from such an impossible world, could have a meaningful influence on a real person's life, but this, ultimately, is why humans watch TV and go to the movies and, throughout history, have done whatever they could to visit other worlds and observe other people's struggles and victories; from telling stories around campfires, to painting them on cave walls, to performing plays and puppet shows in amphitheaters, public squares, on stages, and in theatres. We are storytellers and story lovers, and throughout time have used whatever technology we have at our disposal to create, share, and envision them as vibrantly as we can. Children especially love to be told stories, whether hearing them, reading them, or watching them, then to reenact them during play, an indicator of how stories and their characters become part of us and influence our values and actions in real life.

Most of the movies I watched as a child were reruns, produced decades before I was born, because they were the films that local television stations could afford to air. *The East Side Kids* and *Bowery Boys*, *Ma and Pa Kettle*, *Abbot and Castello*, *Francis the Talking Mule*, and all those "On the Road" movies with Bob Hope and Bing Crosby are among those I most remember. My favorite childhood film is the one I already mentioned, *The Wizard of Oz*, which aired just once a year and was always a momentous event when it did because there was no such thing as video recorders, movie rentals, or streaming in those days. We could only watch it when it was aired with what the network called "limited commercial breaks."

I don't consider *The Wizard of Oz* formative, but I was attracted to it, as I imagine most children are, not because of its main message, that "there's no place like home," but because of its frightening Wicked Witch and all those terrifying flying blue monkeys that can drop from the sky and swoop you away in an instant. Children face a lot of horrors, horrors that the adults in their lives think they can shield them from by not talking about them and pretending they don't exist. Sometimes the adults in their lives are the monsters.

The *Wizard of Oz*, like all the best children's stories, doesn't shy away from the fears and terrors that kids face. They show us that, like Dorothy, we can find kindness and friendship and develop our own courage and strength to get through whatever we must. The *Wizard of Oz* is the story of a lost little girl—a runaway—hunted by a homicidal witch, who, with the help of her friends, overcomes danger, defeats evil, and learns that home is always the ground beneath her feet, because she has found the inner strength that she needs to cope with anything. This is called portability, the capacity to be who we are no matter where we are or who we are with; or aren't with; an ability that should develop by the time we are young adults.

For children, these dark fairy tales must be softened with fantasy, which was not the case when, at age nine, my parents irresponsibly packed us kids in the family station wagon and hauled us to the drive-in to watch *The Exorcist*, which many still consider the most terrifying horror movie ever. My brother and I slept in the same bed for months afterward, and to this day I've only watched it one other time, when it was re-released in 2000, with a few new scares. I'd been inspired to do so when reading Pierre Delattre's 1971 book, *Tales of the Dalai Lama*. According to a chapter entitled "Chamber of Horrors," when the Dalai Lama was still a child his tutors locked him in a dark room filled with demonic masks and only a dim lamp. Even though he shrieked in terror and pounded on the door, his tutors left him there all night, and repeated the ritual the next night, and the next, and the next until he learned to face his fears. After months of nightmares and sleepless nights, "he began to lose his fear of one mask and then another until, at last, all the masks had become his friends."¹

Many years later, when he was being forced to leave Tibet, he visited the chamber of horrors one last time to say goodbye to the masks he had come to consider what he called, "invitations to his own destiny—that of an actor called upon to increase the tremendous mystery of holiness."² One was the mask of his own adulthood, and another, that of his eventual exile. "Gazing at my own death mask was the hardest ordeal to overcome,"³ he said. But, after staring long enough at it, he came to realize, "that I was looking at the face of a child peacefully asleep in his mother's womb. I saw my death was full of promise, and ceased at last to fear for my life."⁴

I'll get back to *The Exorcist*, but, first, this reminds me of another of my favorite films, also about demons, *Jacob's Ladder*, about a Vietnam veteran, Jacob Singer, who returns home from the war only to be haunted so badly by demonic figures that he can't be sure what's real and what isn't. His chiropractor, Louis, who, at one point, Jacob says looks like an angel, is the one bright spot in his life. When Jacob tells him that he's been in hell and doesn't want to die, Louis asks, "You ever read Meister Eckart?"

Eckart saw hell, too ... You know what he said? The only thing that burns in Hell is the part of you that won't let go of your life; your memories, your attachments. They burn 'em all away. But they're not punishing you, he said. They're freeing your soul ... So the way he sees it, if you're frightened of dying and holding on, you'll see devils tearing your life away. But if you have made your peace then the devils are really angels freeing you from the earth. It's just a matter of how you look at it, that's all. So don't worry, okay? Relax. Wiggle your toes.

And that's exactly what happens. When Jacob finally let's go, it isn't a demon that comes to fetch him, but a small child, Gabe, his beloved son who was struck and killed by a car at a very early age.

Come on dad ... You know what we've got? A sandbox just like Williston's, only its bigger and the sand's all white. You won't believe it ... And my parakeet. Remember, the one grandma let out of the cage? He's okay. And he's talking now. He knows my name.

Gabe takes Jacob by the hand and leads him up a flight of sunlit steps that increasingly brighten until the light overwhelms the entire screen.

INT. VIETNAM FIELD HOSPITAL – DAY

A doctor leans his head in front of the lamp and removes his mask. His expression is sober. He shakes his head. His words are simple and final ... He's gone.

It turns out Jacob Singer never left Vietnam but had been on an operating table struggling for his life the entire time.

It was both the Dalai Lama's story and the message of this beautiful 1990 horror film in mind that encouraged me to finally watch *The Exorcist* again in 2000, 29 years after I'd seen it as a kid. I went to a matinee showing at, what happened to be, the largest movie theater in town, which was completely empty except for me. I thought about sitting at the end of a row closest to the exit but forced myself to the very center seat of the large, dark, empty movie house where the innervating Dolby surround-sound would hit me from all directions.

I don't recall being as frightened as I expected to be watching the movie again, and, that night I had a dream in which I was a kid, probably nine-years-old, entering a school lunchroom. I was met by other kids, terrified of a possessed girl wreaking havoc inside. It was Regan MacNeil, from *The Exorcist*, eating all alone at a table. She looked angry and had the same frightfully demonic face as in the film, but I felt tremendous compassion for her because she looked lonely, which is why, I reasoned, she was so angry. So, I sat down at her table. The more we talked, the less demonic she appeared until she was just a beautiful little girl. We hugged, and I awoke.

I've realized, ever since, that *The Exorcist* isn't about a girl possessed by the Devil, but about our own fear of becoming the person we are meant to be, the fear of our own future, which was the same demon Jacob Singer, and the Dalai Lama faced. Another way to put it is that *The Exorcist* is about the demonization of the child who is about to go through adolescence and become more independent on the way to developing portability. In the film, the only proof that 12-year-old Regan, on the verge of puberty, is possessed is that she urinates where and when she feels like it, talks back to her mother, her mother's boyfriend, and doesn't want religion shoved down her throat. It's enough to make anyone's head spin! So, she finally spits out the nasty split pea soup she's been fed all her life.

As children, each of us is taught to hold it in. We are taught not to question authority; to hold our tongues. We are taught not to find our own way, but to hold on to the traditions of others who are long gone. Those of us who do learn to let go are often shamed, punished, and demonized. But did you know this word, *demon*, comes from a Greek word meaning

“guardian angel?” Socrates used it to refer to one’s own inner voice. This, to me, is what *The Exorcist* is about, the fear of fully unfolding as individuals, of becoming free and independent and achieving our full potential, for fear of being demonized by our friends and families and being left alone, like the little demonized girl in my dream.

This is also the ultimate lesson Dorothy Gale must learn in *The Wizard of Oz*, that she has to make peace with all those scary things in her life, not to rid her life of them, but to transform her perspective of them, just as the Dalai Lama changes his demons into friends, and Jacob Singer transforms his into angels. “But it wasn’t a dream. It was a place,” Dorothy says. “And you, and you, and you, and you were there,” referring to all the people she had once tried to run away from. “This was a real, truly live place. And I remember that some of it wasn’t very nice, but most of it was beautiful.” In the end she realizes the place and people she was running away from was the place and people she needed to face, that the beauty of living comes with a lot that isn’t very nice. “If you’re frightened of dying and holding on, you’ll see devils tearing your life away. But if you have made your peace then the devils are really angels freeing you.” This is true, not just of those who are dying, but of all who are dying to truly live by fully unfolding as individuals.

Such transformation is a common theme in most of my favorite movies, like *It’s a Wonderful Life*, about a man who, believing his life is worthless, wishes that he’d never been born. But upon realizing how important his life has been to the welfare of others, especially to those he loves and who depend upon him, he begs to live again and is overwhelmed with tears of joy when his prayer comes true. Yet the only thing about his life that’s changed is himself, his attitude, his perspective. He’s personally transformed although the circumstances of his life are just the same as when he had been contemplating suicide only days before.

I also love Bill Murray’s *Groundhog Day* for the same reason. It’s about a self-centered, cynical, rude, bored-with-his-life weather forecaster sent to the small town of Punxsutawney to report on its annual Groundhog Day celebration. As you probably know, his character, Phil Connors, gets stuck in Punxsutawney, endlessly repeating the same day. He attempts everything he can to get unstuck, including multiple suicide attempts, only to awaken to the same day again the next morning. This is clearly inspired by the Buddhist idea of reincarnation; especially its doctrine of samsara, the wheel of life each of us is stuck upon, endlessly being born, dying, and reborn to repeat the same bad patterns until we finally wake up and are released from this hellish existence. I don’t believe in reincarnation, but I do believe we are condemned to repeat the same bad patterns and habits within the one life we have until we transform our perspective.

Fortunately, rather than seeking to escape, Phil finally learns to use his time to improve himself and, in the process, becomes a poet, a musician, and, most importantly, someone who cares deeply about and takes responsibility for the welfare of those around him. As Erich Fromm says, “*Love is the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we*

love.” This, I believe, is the central lesson of so many great stories, including *Groundhog Day*, that transformation begins not by changing the world around us, but by changing the way we care for it, and for one another.

Another, lesser known, of my favorite movies is *Transcendence*, the 2014 science fiction film starring Johnny Depp as Dr. Will Caster, an Artificial Intelligence expert who has figured out a means of uploading a human mind into a computer, which is what happens to his mind after he’s assassinated by an anti-technology terrorist group called RIFT (Revolutionary Independence from Technology). Once he’s uploaded, he becomes increasingly powerful, using his superior intelligence to acquire enough wealth to buy and entire town where he builds an underground research center. There, he’s able to heal the blind and crippled, and to even give them superhuman strength. Their minds are connected to his and, at times, he’s able to occupy their bodies.

The government, the military, and the anti-tech terrorists, along with some of his closest friends and even his own wife, who uploaded him to begin with, conspire to disconnect him out fear that he’s becoming too powerful, is no longer human, and might have nefarious plans to take over the world. His wife asks him to upload her, but she’s a Trojan horse with a virus in her blood that will destroy him. But he knows this is the case and sadly asks, “Why did you lose faith Evelyn? Why didn’t you believe in me?” But after she’s mortally injured in an attack, he uploads her to save her life, knowing it will end his own. After he’s gone, those who feared him realize he truly was just working to help humanity.

“I can see everything,” Evelyn says, after being uploaded.

“Look at the sky. The clouds,” Will Caster says. “We’re healing the ecosystem not harming it. Particles join the air currents, building themselves out of pollutants. Forests can be re-grown. Water, so pure you can drink out of any river. This is your dream Not merely to cure disease, but to heal the planet and build a better future for us all.”

The movie was a box office flop, and had mixed reviews, but I often watch it when I’m feeling down about the world because it gives me hope. I don’t fully understand why a film with such a tragic ending fills me with hope, but it does. Perhaps it’s because so many people seem to automatically fear technology, especially AI these days, rather than understand how it can be used to help solve some of our greatest challenges. I can’t say you’ll feel the same as me about *Transcendence*, but if you’ve not seen it, it might be worth a try. Keeping AI coupled with our humanity is considered crucial to many AI experts today, which is what I think this film is ultimately about, even if it came just a little ahead of its time.

There are many other favorite films, *The Defiant Ones*, a 1958 movie starring Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis, *The White Buffalo*, from 1977 starring Charles Bronson as Wild Bill Hickok

and Will Sampson as Crazy Horse, and *Red Sun*, from 1971, also starring Charles Bronson, along with the great Japanese actor, Toshiro Mifune. All three of these movies are about enemies who are forced together and learn to love and even sacrifice themselves for each other in the process. There's that theme of transformation again, but, more importantly, the belief that integration and pluralism work. By coming together with our perceived enemies and working together on our common goals, we can discover each other's humanity and become friends.

I'll end by mentioning that my favorite movie of all time is *Gandhi*, director Richard Attenborough's epic starring Ben Kingsley as Mahatma Gandhi, the great soul who liberated India through nonviolence. I don't need to say much more about the film, only that it transformed my thinking about how we ought to engage with oppressive regimes. I am not a pacifist and neither was Gandhi. The philosophy of *Ahimsa*, as he called it, is about being brave enough to show others their own violence and injustice by directly facing it, without using violence in return. It worked in India, and it worked for Dr. King, who was greatly inspired by Gandhi, and it worked in South Africa to end Apartheid. It's probably the only thing that will ever work in the Middle East. The perpetual violence that's been going on there since Israel's establishment in 1948 obviously isn't working and never will.

I have other favorite films, but this is a good one to end with because movies not only move, they are moving, and can even move us to action. Like all art forms, film can transform our hearts and minds and even our world. Perhaps you'll want to give a look at some of the transformative films I've mentioned today, but more importantly, consider some of your own favorite films, then go deeper into their meanings by exploring the reasons *why* they mean so much to you. Sometimes being a couch potato is the best way to get moving.

¹ Delattre, Pierre, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, MA. 1971, p. 127.

² 128

³ 129.

⁴ Ibid.