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Searching for Truth Through Fantasy | Madeleine L'Engle

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The Veritas Forum

Madeleine L'Engle, award-winning author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, defines "fantasy" as that which "pushes us, opens us, makes us aware of who we are and who the other is." In this recording from a Veritas Forum at UC Santa Barbara, L'Engle draws from her experiences in school, church, and life to explore the relationship between fantasy and truth.

Transcript

We think because we have words, not the other way around. And once we have words, we begin to understand that in fantasy is where we get a greater idea of what the human spirit is like. The late Madeleine L'Engle, award-winning author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, defined fantasy as that which is without proof, but which pushes us, opens us, makes us aware of who we are and who the other is.

In this recording from a Veritas Forum at UC Santa Barbara, L'Engle draws from her experiences in school, church, and life to explore the relationship between fantasy and truth.

[MUSIC] I'm not going to be like Pontius Pilon to ask you if you know what truth is. But I would like to know what you think fantasy is.

What do you think fantasy is? That's part of it. Oh, a way of finding truth. Yeah.

What? [INAUDIBLE] No, I think it's more a way of going through that into truth. That truth, the truth that we seek, is always beyond ordinary facts. And we tend in our educational system to be taught the facts.

And I certainly was. And the facts are important, but they're not enough. They don't take you as far as you need to go.

And one of the great mistakes that many, many people make is to confuse fact with truth. Facts are facts and they're necessary. But truth is beyond out on the other side of facts.

And when we want things to be only factual, we really get into trouble. At Berea College in Kentucky, a young woman asked me, what do you think about creationism versus evolution? And I said, well, I really can't get very excited. There's only one question worth asking, is did God make it? And the answer is yes.

Why get so excited about how? That's peripheral. [LAUGHTER] [APPLAUSE] The central thing is this incredible universe, which may be one of many universes, planned, organized by a benign creator. Or are we just some kind of a cosmic accident? By and large, the physicists feel that there are so many extraordinary coincidences in the makeup of the universe from the Big Bang to solocents of capable sustaining life, that it has to be part of a plan.

Now, there is a story that after the Big Bang, the voice of God was heard saying, whoops. [LAUGHTER] And I kind of like that. Here is God was an enormous thing, booming out into space, making sound because there was no sound before there was space.

And what is God going to do with it? Well, the great creator has ideas. And part of fantasy is moving beyond that which is limited, to that which is unlimited and helps us to grow and develop and be. In most of my pre-college schools, we were completely stuck on fact.

And some of them were stuck on fact to the point of absurdity. I went to an English boarding school for a while, and one of the teachers asked us what our father's middle names were. Well, my father's middle name was Wadsworth, which is a good Philadelphia name.

Emily Dickinson's great friend was a Reverend Wadsworth. So I said, my father's middle name was Wadsworth. And he said, no, no, dear, no, Wedgeworth.

I couldn't win. I mean, there are times, you know, when to give up with a teacher. [LAUGHTER] As a small child, I grew up in New York City as an only child.

And I was not allowed to go out and play with the kids on the street because that something wasn't done. And I began to understand fantasy. Now, I read and read and read.

One of my favorite writers was George McDonald. And he won a wonderful description of the Holy Spirit, reading the back of the North Wind. The North Wind is the Holy Spirit.

But I began to understand that the world I was getting in school and the world I moved into when I came home were far removed from each other. The world of school was simply a world of fact. And the world I came home to was the world of transcended fact.

One of my favorite books was a lavishly illustrated book of Bible stories, which I loved dearly. But what I loved most about it was that it transcended fact. Try and put the

incarnation into a fact.

Can you do it? You can't. It doesn't work. It's absurd.

Actually, the whole idea of the incarnation is hilarious. That God should so love us. We are weird.

But God should so love this weird part of this whoopsie creation that God, Elself, would come and be part of us to show us what it's like to be human, what being human is meant to be. And it's not meant to be restricted. It's meant to be open so that we grow and develop.

And one of his books, Lauren Isley, writes that at a certain point, the human brain grew far faster than any evolution would account for in order to make way for a brain as complex as our brains. He gives no explanation of that. I like things that do not have explanations.

But we suddenly had this great brain pan and our brains could evolve and think forward as well as just remember backwards. Now thinking forwards involves believing in things that are impossible. I think like the white queen in Alice in Wonderland, we should believe seven impossible things every morning before breakfast.

It's a very good practice. Everything that I believe is impossible. I can't put God the Creator into any kind of possibility that can be proven with a QED.

It's a matter of faith. And faith is for the things that cannot be proved. We can prove it.

What do we need faith? The Ingers, theologians, and H.A. Williams said that faith is the acceptance of doubt rather than, as most people believe, the repression of it. Doubt has led us into faith, whereas refusing to doubt tends to make the faith restrictive and judgmental. And what we believe is better than what anybody else believes and they're wrong and we're right.

And we begin to make comparisons. And I keep going back to Jesus saying, "Don't judge. As you judge, so should you be judged." Now I tend by nature to be very judgmental.

This is something I've had to work on hard all my life, not to make dogmatic judgments. But to keep open, one time I was speaking at a university bookstore. And at the end of the day, a young man said to me, "I really like what you've been saying, but I haven't read any of your books because I hear that very religious."

Well, all my little red flags of warning on furloughing and blowing wildly in the wind." I said, "What do you mean by religious?" Commenie was alive then. Commenie's religious. Jerry Foll is religious.

What do you mean by religious?" And then I heard myself saying, "My religion is subject

to change without notice." And that is true. If it is not, it is dead. If I am not open to God's revelation, which may shake me to the core, my religion is dead.

We certainly, as we look at what we have believed over the centuries, starting going back to Abraham and Sarah, we've changed enormously in our concept of God. From an anthropomorphic, bigger than life human being, to the God who created the stars in their courses. All the wonders who created each one of us with a capacity to be creative or destructive.

If when I was your age, I had looked at any evening news, I would not have believed it. But we do have the capacity to change. And that is often urged on and held by fantasy.

Now, fairy tales are largely folk tales rather than fantasy. Fantasy is trying to move to that truth, which is beyond truth. George McDonald was my favorite, but I read also H. G. Wells.

And I read twice his fabulous book, *The War of the Worlds*, which is the descent of the Martians, bent on destroying us. And my sophomore year in college, Orson Wills, every Sunday night was doing an hour and a half play. So we sat down in front of one of the girls who had a radio to listen to *The War of the Worlds*.

And it was fantastic. It was wonderful. And I kept thinking, "No, if people didn't know this as a book, they might take it seriously." And they did.

And that was exciting. But it isn't really fantasy because fantasy is going beyond easy possibilities to the possibilities which are much harder, which open us and push us. C.S. Lewis wrote his fantasies and my favorite is "*Paralandra*." Because his books of theology did not say enough about God.

Theology does not say enough about God. It tries. The German theologians try.

They try very hard. I don't much like German theologians. They're very useful for one thing, insomnia.

Those long Germanic sentences will put you to sleep. But they're also trying to prove. They're trying to prove things that can't be proven.

And fantasy never makes that mistake. But fantasy goes beyond proof into possibility. And the possibility should be, it is not always is, but it should be always hopeful that we can do better.

We can stop making the same mistakes over and over again. We can love. It's a strange thing that after the crucifixion and the resurrection, I try to put those in the language of proof, nothing much changed.

And yet everything changed. And that is again the world of fantasy. Now it may sound

offensive to say that the incarnation is a fantasy, but fantasy is true.

It is that which cannot be proved, but which leads you to a larger truth, one that you can get to otherwise. Without fantasy, I suspect we might never have stood up on two feet, but would be still four-legged creatures. But somebody reached down and picked up something and looked at it and dreamed about it.

And we became the person who makes tools and then the person who tells stories. I think that was probably the first thing. We can do almost everything without language.

We can make love. We can say I'm hungry. We can build houses, but we can't ask questions and we can't really worship without words.

One word will do, "Allylonia" is enough. But we need language. We think because we have words, not the other way around.

And once we have words, we begin to understand that in fantasy is where we get a greater idea of what the human spirit is like. Now, scripture is full of fantasy. One of my favorite bits is Ezekiel's incredible wheels.

They are totally outside the language of ordinary proof. There are all kinds of things that are outside proof. And what we have to do is to look at the, is this real fantasy? Because fantasy leads to truth.

Or is this phony fantasy? A lot of phony fantasy is published. It doesn't lead anywhere much. But real fantasy pushes us, opens us, makes us more aware of who we are, who the other is, and that the other may be different.

We've always been frightened by differences. And fantasy, again, awakens us to the possibility of differences being positive. We're brought up to fear those who are different.

And certainly we live on a planet of very varied and different people, of different languages and different colors and different face shapes. And yet we are all one. We are all part of that one creation.

And perhaps only as we learn to look at fantasy, do we understand that all of this is real? Now, story takes me further than almost anything else. Little tiny stories. There's a story of the little girl whose parents were having another baby.

And they read all the write books about sibling rivalry. They were not going to have their little girl upset. So they had the baby and they brought her home.

And the little girl was allowed to hold the baby, help change the baby. And everything was fine until time to put her to bed. And she got upset.

And she said, "I want to see baby." They said, "Well, of course, darling, we'll go see the

baby." No. I want to see baby alone. Well, mommy and daddy will go with you.

No. I want to see baby alone. And she got almost hysterical.

So they finally let her go into the baby's room. And she bent over the crib and she said, "Tell me about God. I'm forgetting." I think we forget.

I think when we rule out the world of fantasy, I mean, as kids we're told, "Oh, fantasy, all right for you as kids." We outgrow it. Get back into the real world of fact, of provable fact. It's not a very real world.

It certainly has not got much to do with truth. And it has nothing to do with that fantasy which enlarges us, which takes us further. Stories are sometimes serious.

They're sometimes hilarious. And we do well not to forget the hilarious ones. Because laughter is part of what makes us human, the ability to laugh at ourselves and each other without being derogatory.

There is a story, and many stories about St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. That's what I'm particularly fond of when Peter goes to Jesus as Jesus. I'm really burned out.

I mean, I have been here for hundreds and hundreds of years, and I'm just burned out and I need a day off. Would you mind taking the gates just for one day? And Jesus said, "Well, sure, Peter, I'll be glad to do that." So Peter goes to lie down, and Jesus goes to the gates, and the first person to come knocking is a little old man, all nor old and ancient. And I'm not sure he should really be there knocking at the Pearly Gates.

And he says, "I'm a little old man, and all my life, I've been a carpenter, and I had a son, and he died." And Jesus said, "Father?" And the little old man said, "Panoquio!" Sometimes we need to be knocked. A story needs to knock us back. It usually comes at a time when we've been a little too sure.

A little too fast with the answers that really are not answers at all. We forget what one of my favorite theologians called "the mystery of the word made flesh." It is a mystery. It cannot be explained.

When I go to communion, I'm taking the entire universe into my body. And it cannot be explained. It is mystery, it is fantasy, it is that which is beyond ordinary speech, ordinary thinking.

Our dreams sometimes help us understand this. I sometimes get little instructions in dreams. I'm going next week to the prairie of the Mount Calvary.

I was there a few years ago, and Brother Williams said, "Maddlin, I have a story for you." And I thought I'd beamed in expectation. And Williams said, "There was this preacher who was preaching hellfire and damnation and weeping and wailing and gnashing of

teeth." And this little woman said, "Oh, how many trees?" And the preacher, "Teth will be provided." So that night at Vespers, the last reading was one of Matthew's hell and damnation readings. And I went to bed and I went to sleep and I dreamed.

And I dreamed that Jesus said, "No, no. You don't burn the sins away. You wash them away with pure, clear water." And if they're ingrained very deeply, you use warm, soapy water.

But you wash them away and you must be very, very gentle. Now that may be in the language of fantasy, but it is also true. We need to be gentle with each other.

We need to have people be gentle with us. Because often, beyond brutality, the only thing that works is gentleness. Another dream I had that's very important to me was I was at a conference center in Louisiana to give a retreat.

And it was a huge Catholic conference center with a school, a seminary, a church, and the conference center. And there were people going in and out of the church. And I was told that it was a funeral for a high school girl whose car had somehow unaccountedly wrapped herself around a tree as she was coming home.

And it was heavy. But the conference began and we had rice and red beans and chopped onions, so I knew I was in the south. And I went to bed and to sleep.

And I dreamed that I was outside the conference center with far many more people than were there. And here were these great live oak trees dripping with Spanish moss. And the stars were far more beautifully patterned.

They were far more of them than we normally see. And then in the east, there was a child of light. And the stars began dancing around the child.

And I realized when I woke up that I had been given a resurrection dream for that girl. And that has stayed with me all these years since as being not a fantasy in the sense that we tend to use fantasy. But if fantasy in the real sense, that resurrection is real, that it isn't made up, that it's a promise that it's true.

Back shortly after the Russian Revolution, all the people of Moscow were called into Red Square. And for an hour, one of their new atheist leaders harangued them on the non-existence of God. He proved conclusively that there is no God.

And among the people was a Russian priest and he had to say three words and he was given permission. And he stood up and he said, "Christ has risen and the entire mob yelled out. He has risen indeed." You can't kill it.

You can't prove it, but you can't kill it. And that was just true fantasy, cannot be killed. It cannot be proved, but it cannot be killed.

And it is what makes us human creatures. Able to say, "I'm sorry. I was wrong.

I didn't understand. Please forgive me. Please tell me you still love me." And that may be the most important one of all.

Because in the world of fantasy, love is primary. Love, no matter what we do or how little we deserve it, God help us all if we had to deserve it. But it is the primary fundamental foundation of a world where fantasy is possible.

Now, I've also had to learn the hard way that God has a sense of humor and often at my expense. There was one time I was going to Mundelline College in Chicago, which is Catholic, to Wheaton College in Illinois, which is evangelical, and to the Episcopal Diocese of Idaho, which is a Episcopaeid, a nice ecumenical trip. And as I was being driven between Mundelline and Wheaton, I could feel myself coming down with a heavy, the rinjal cold.

It was a lot worse than the analogies I've got today, but it was a real, bad rinjal cold. And I said, "Dear God, please, please, I've got eleven more talks to give. Please don't let me lose my voice." Within 24 hours, I had the worst attack of intestinal flu I have ever had.

(Laughter) And my voice was fine. (Laughter) And I said, "I am not amused." (Laughter) It, uh, to a certain extent, changed the way I pray. I'm a little more careful.

I mean, give God a chance, He'll give us a poke. And that's wonderful, because that means God is present. God is part of the real fantasy, the real fantasy that informs the Gospels, that allows us to believe that God did come, that we're so loved.

Not hated, but so loved. I've bumped into a lot of people who think that God is a God of punishment, primarily. You know, if you do, you don't watch out, God will get you.

You have to be good, otherwise God will get you. Well, we're not good. I mean, I knew one good person.

She was absolutely dreadful. (Laughter) We're far too complicated to be good. But the one thing that saves us is we know that we are loved.

No matter what we do, we are still loved. We are God's beloved children by adoption and grace. And nothing can take that away.

In, uh, some colleges I have been to, God does look like Moses, and Moses is in a bad temper at that. (Laughter) That is not my vision of God. If I had to have an anthropomorphic vision of God, it would be very feminine.

It would be George McDonald, who had a long beard. And I see myself sitting in his lap and stroking his beard and having his put his arms around me and saying, "They're there, dear, it's all right." That's a feminine image, even it's of George McDonald. But it's

of that love that affirms, "Yes, this is quite terrible, but I'm with you.

I'm part of what you're going through. That's what the incarnation is all about. I am part of it." And even in Hebrew scripture, God is always in there, poking his nose in, seeing what's going on, being chastised by Abraham, who said, "Should not the maker of the universe do what is right?" All through scripture we have a very active dialogue with God.

One of the most glorious lines which may seem to be fantasy is from Job, where Job, all those thousands of years before Christ says, "I know that my Redeemer liveeth, and that I shall see him face to face." And we know that, and we also know that at this point we cannot see God face to face, or we will die. Moses wanted to, and God put him in the cleft of a rock and protected him with his hand, and all Moses saw as God's backside as he passed by. God's hindquarters, that's all Moses got.

I think that's wonderful. It puts us in our place, we are not gods. We may be a little lower than the angels, but we are not gods.

We are creatures whose call it is to serve, to listen, to worship, to adore, to forgive ourselves firsts, and then others, to dare try things we really shouldn't dare try, but nothing would happen if we didn't. And something that fascinates me is that most of the great scientific discoveries have been made when the scientist was not thinking. There's a story of one scientist who sat in his study, it is white robe, and thought, and thought, and thought, and nothing came, and he finally said, "Put his hat and coat on, this is in Vienna." Went and got on the trolley car, as he stepped on the trolley car.

It came. It stopped thinking, and it came. The discovery of, which one is it that looks like a snake swallowing its own tail.

Yeah, he dreamed that the snake would swallow his tail, and then it came when he was not thinking. When I conducted by his workshop, the last thing I say is when you write, don't think, write. Because if you think you're in control, you're in charge, you'll get in the way.

Now, I'm not putting down thinking, I had a very good education, I'm very grateful for it. But that comes a point when you have gone as far as thinking will take you, and then you will move into the world. It might be called fantasy, which is that world beyond where your mind will take you.

And then you stop, you stop short, and you listen, and you may hear some extraordinary things. But they will be exciting, they may push you in places you don't want to go. And they may lead you temporarily to anxiety and even despair.

When I wrote A Wrinkle in Time, we were living in northwest Connecticut, and I was asking all the big cosmic questions that we tend to ask as adolescents, but I was married

and had three children, I was still asking them, and finding no answers, and reading theologians, and finding no answers. They're not all as bad as the German theologians, but they still are dealing with things in terms of fact, which should only be dealt with in terms of fantasy. And I picked up a book which quoted Einstein as saying, "Anyone who's not lost in rapturous awe at the power and glory of the mind behind the universe is as good as a burnt-out candle." And I thought, "I have found my theologian." And then I began to read Particle Physics in Quantum Mechanics, which I still read for theology, because they're dealing with the nature of being.

When we discovered the world of Particle Physics, everything changes, everything changes with every major scientific discovery. I've never seen any conflict between science and religion, because all science can do is enlarge our vision of God. I mean, it really threw the church into a terrible tizzy when they had to accept that we are not a planet that is the center of the universe.

With everything revolving around us, we are in fact only a minor planet in an ordinary solar system, in the outskirts of an ordinary spiral galaxy. I mean, that's a big displacement. And yet we somehow managed to accept that.

Well, what we're asked to do now is just as enormous, because the world of the very, very small is quite different from the world of the incredibly large and far more intimate. In the world of the very, very small, nothing happens in isolation. Everything affects everything else.

You can never say it's my own business. It's the business of the entire cosmos. The scientists have discovered that nothing can be studied objectively, because to look at something is to change it and be changed by it.

I mean, we'll all be changed because of the weather, and of the destruction of trees. I think we're being told something about the destruction of trees. In northwest Connecticut, where I have a cottage, there was the last stand of virgin pine left.

I mean, these great two and three hundred-year-old trees. We're not tornado country. Three tornadoes came in, meant and wiped it out.

There was very little house damage. It was all tree damage. The only building that got damaged was the Methodist Church.

And it vanished. It simply vanished. There was nothing left.

Not a piece of wood, not a piece of glass, not a nail. Nothing. It was loaded.

Never been there. I thought there must be a message in that somewhere. But it was the loss of those trees.

I was still sometimes drive by where they were, and you can't see that they were ever there. I think the planet is trying to tell us something, because all of creation is far more sentient than we realize. God didn't make dead things.

God made living things. Have you ever gone out and put your ear to a tree and listened to its song? Each tree sings a little bit differently, and you can hear it. And those magnificent trees which had seen three hundred years of history in New England were gone.

This is so they had never been there. We are supposed to be able to listen, to care. In the world of fantasy, there's a great deal of caring.

We don't take things coldly. And nor are we told to keep a stiff upper lip. I went to the same sporting school where I was not allowed to have my father's name be Wadsworth.

We were taught to have a stiff upper lip. Never to show emotion. This is an Anglican school.

Never to show emotion. Never to cry. Never to grieve.

Never to ask for help. As far as I would say, we were asked to be dead. We had mandatory morning and evening prayer read badly by one of the mistresses.

And somehow the great language of Cranmore and Coverdale seeped through the cracks. And we were nourished even without knowing it. Because language is nourishing, and the English language, which is very complex and unruly, is thereby even more nourishing.

Wonderful, wonderful words. One of my favorite ancient prayers is for about the third century. It's a nighttime prayer.

It's guide us waking in Lord and guard us sleeping. That awake we may watch with Christ, and asleep we may rest in peace. And that's from the office of Komplin, which is to go to bed quietly, and fearlessly office.

Not set in chapel, not set on the knees, or standing, but the monk just said it wherever they were sitting. And with this beautiful intimacy with God, where they could hear Jesus saying, "Fear not, little flock. I'm with you.

I came because I care. I came because I love you. There are people who can't believe this.

And the idea of the incarnation is just too fantastic. Well, it is fantastic. It is high fantasy, which is high truth.

And we do well to remember that, not to push it down and say, "Oh, this is childish." It

isn't. It's being the most grown up we can possibly be. It's what gets us through the horrendous vicissitudes of life, through death, through other kinds of losses.

And yet affirms that we are still beloved, and that we understand this love largely as we dare to move through the world of fact, into the world of fantasy, which affirms us, affirms that we are loved, and that we are capable of loving in return. If we base our emotions on TV, particularly the commercials, we get wiped out. The Deek TV commercials try to get us to believe that life is normal.

And life is not normal. Life is like the weather we've just had. But we're fooled and thinking that life should be normal.

If it's not normal, then our feelings are hurt. And we're upset at the weather, and we're upset at God, and we think, "This is all I've known." This is the way it is. There's the Psalms that talk about God's writing on the cherubim, on the flames of wind.

It's a wild and wonderful universe. The sun is an atomic furnace, bursting with explosions all the time. It's at this point a middle-aged sun.

It will run down ultimately. Not in our lifetimes, not even in yours, but it will burn itself out. We don't understand black holes.

I don't think even Stephen Hawking really understands black holes. But maybe if we get through one, we would come out into another universe, something quite different, and yet it would still be God's universe. The extraordinary and wonderful thing is that God has been most with me when things have been worse.

When things go well, I mean, I thank God. But it's when things are really bad that I'm aware of God's presence and the wonder of the incarnation. When I go to bed at night, I read the office of Compeland, that last office of the day, and I ask myself two questions, and I'll tell you what they are.

One came from a conference in Texas when a first-grade teacher told us about a little Mexican boy who looked like a little old man. He had calloused hands, and he wore little old man's clothes. He didn't know anything.

But he was quick. He was eager. He wanted to learn.

He was wonderful. And she thought he was terrific. And she began teaching the kids behavior she thought was appropriate and behavior she thought was inappropriate.

And he was fascinated. So one day she said, "Now, Carlo, what have I been teaching you?" They said, "We are not supposed to behave with behavior, we are just inappropriate." I said, "That's right, Carlo. Why is it that we are not supposed to? We are not supposed to behave with behavior."

We are just inappropriate because it pisses us off." [laughter] And I told that to my friend, David Somerville, the Archbishop of Vancouver, who said, "What a wonderful way to examine the conscience." [laughter] And it is. So that's one of the questions I ask. Then I dropped down three centuries of Thomas D'Hern.

And Thomas D'Hern said, "We are supposed to give pleasure to God." And I asked myself, "Did I do anything today that would give pleasure to God?" And that is sometimes harder to answer than the other one. But there's almost always something. Maybe it was just that I managed to cook dinner for 50 people, which quite often happens.

But there's always a little something that, where you weren't in the way, which means, therefore, that you're open to the world of fantasy, and you were able to give pleasure to God. And that's what we're called on to do. It's a wonderful calling.

I think growing up with the world of fantasy as a real world, as my parents allowed it to be, was an enormous help to me. My father was a music and drama critic. My parents were out at night.

And it was nobody to take me to Sunday school on Sunday mornings. And I feel very blessed. [laughter] I missed all of that garbage that so many people have to spend their lives unlearning.

I was always given a God of love. And a God to whom I was supposed to give pleasure. That's what college is for.

It's good for the things of the mind. We do need to use our mind as far as we can use them. But then out on the other side of the mind is the world of fantasy, the world of reality, and the world of love.

[music] I wonder if you could comment on the fantasy of the world also dreaming us. If there is something about that that you might be able to talk to me or to us about in terms of fantasy. I think almost everybody has a dream.

It's a little easier to express the dream for those of us who believe in God. Because if you live in an accidental world, the dream gets diffused. I find that there is a great longing for God in many people who have grown up without God today.

A longing for understanding that we are important, that we matter. That what we do matters. And without knowing that we can't dream, we can't have this fantasy for the world that we want and for ourselves and for the whole cosmos.

[silence] Also I'd like to invite you to my home state, which is Maine. I'm here visiting and I happen to find out that you were speaking today. So I needed to be here to hear you.

But I run a center in Maine and I would love to have you come as a guest speaker. So I might try to catch you afterwards. That's great.

Get me through the, just right to the Cathedral of St. John, the Divine in New York. And I will get your letter. Wonderful.

Thank you.

[silence] Hi. I also want to thank you for having written a wrinkle in time.

I loved it so much when I was a child. And I just bought it again to reread it as an adult. I was intrigued by the title of your talk about going beyond fact to a greater truth through fantasy.

I guess one of the reasons why I have never believed in God is because to me it always seemed like such a, as you said, an easy fantasy. And I am so much in awe of the universe that any idea of God that I've ever heard of seemed like such a limited, easy fantasy compared with just the wonder that we find when we explore and think about the universe. I guess I just, I, I, I, I understand everything that you've said at a certain level except all this use of God.

And I guess I just don't. I hope I never said it was an easy fantasy. It's the hardest one in the world.

I say it's the one theologian in the same. I forget it's a God must be very great indeed to have put us in a universe where there's so many things to negate the whole idea. So many things against him.

The idea of God is not easy at all. I mean, I have to hang on till my nails are bloody to keep believing in God. It's no easy fantasy.

But it is, it's kind of like the man who was on a cliff and he fell off and he was caught by a little tiny bush, just a wee little bush, which wasn't going to hold. And he yelled, is anybody up there? And this boy said, yes. He said, what shall I do? The boy said, let go.

Is anybody else up there? [laughter] If I believe in God, wholly and completely, for two minutes, every seven or eight weeks, I'm doing well. This is not something that is easy or that we can hold on to every day and say yes. It is life-threateningly difficult, but it matters.

[laughter] In your fantasies, like *Wrinkle in Time*, you have embedded eternal truths in that fantasy, very much like C.S. Lewis does. Yesterday you told us that your characters must be themselves and they take on their own lives. Did you plan beforehand that your characters would do this or did they decide to put these eternal truths in the book? Oh, the character decided I didn't.

And I think probably most of you know that *Wrinkle in Time* almost never got published. I would occasionally get a question. Who is this book for? Is this book for children? Is this book for adults? Who is it for? Well, it's a people-on-people read books.

[laughter] And I had actually called it back. It had gone the rounds of all of the publishers. And I called my agent and I said, "Send it back."

Nobody's going to buy it. It's not going to work." And he sent it back and I said, "It'd have been the end of it." And my mother was with us for Christmas and I gave her a party with some of her old New York friends. And one of them belonged to a small writers group that John Farah, Ferris Druscheru, ran.

And she wanted me to meet him. Well, I was not particularly interested at that point. But they had turned the book down with an odd proviso.

If nobody else wants it, let us have it again. [laughter] So this being in the days before photocopies, I took my battered manuscript, took the subway downtown, and went to John's office. And he had read my first novel, "*The Small Rain*," and he had liked it.

And he read "*Rinkle*," and he loved it. But he was scared of it. And when a publisher is scared of a book, they go to a librarian for assessment.

And this librarian's assessment was short. It was, "I think this is the worst book I have ever read. It reminds me of the *Wizard of Oz*." [laughter] So they decided they would publish it.

[laughter] And they took me out, and I said, "Now, this book is not going to sell. Of course, it can't be read below high school, that typical underestimation of kids. We'd just like to have you on our list to get you to do something better next time." So when it took off like a skyrocket, they were totally astounded.

And that's how things happen. And I'm very glad it was published. And by Ferris Druscheru, because they have allowed me to write what I want.

When I wrote, I went in the door. It was ten books and ten years later. I haven't put -- Roger Strauss once said it, a little lunch 40.

And Madeline Duhaf would admit, "We've never once asked you to write "*Son of Rinkle*." [laughter] Now, a world of not very nice fantasy is the world of Hollywood. And I finally had a contract that I was willing to sign. Because I will -- I have to have that clause giving the producer freedom to change character and theme reversed.

Well, that was reversed. But they had a clause that it giving them the rights to the movie in perpetuity throughout the universe. So I took a red pen and I made an asterisk.

And I said, "With the exception of *Sagittarius* and the *Andromeda Galaxy*." [laughter]

Well, they had a serious meeting of the lawyers. [laughter] In case I knew something they didn't know. [laughter] We're still futzing over a movie.

Miramax has it now. We'll see. [laughter] Um, I just wanted -- when you talk about, obviously, the love -- and the love of God is the main, like, mercy.

And, you know, how -- I do think that a lot of people do -- I see a lot of people shy away from Christianity, from God, because they -- they don't want to have that childhood that they had guilt or, like, sin, God's going to, like, hit me or something. But I just wondered how you reconcile them. Because while I believe that, I think that's the most fruitful way for us to come to God, is to just realize that we want to do good for him.

We really -- that's the best thing. We want to love him and please him. But all the hard scenes in the scriptures, you know, like when Christ is like, you know, you're going to come knocking and say, "Lord, Lord," and I'm going to say, "I -- you know, I didn't know you." I'm sorry.

I can't -- I'll reconcile what with what? Uh, how -- the hard scenes in the gospel, it seemed like there is a side of God that is sort of, you know? And so I just wondering what your thoughts were on those ones where he says, "You know what? There's going to be a line, and I'm going to say, look, I didn't know you. You didn't know me or something, and -- and how we -- I don't. Yeah, okay.

I don't reconcile it. Uh, I -- I tried it by saying, "Well, that was written a hundred -- you know, years after Jesus died. We don't know exactly what he said." Is this consistent with his entire personality that comes through the four gospels? Um, I don't know.

I think there's only one purpose for punishment, and that is to teach a lesson, and there's only one lesson to be taught that is love. Otherwise, it's not punishment. It's retribution or revenge, and I don't think Jesus went in for retribution or revenge.

So there's a lot of stuff I don't reconcile on the Bible. Uh, there's a lot of quite dreadful stuff. In, um, judges, I think, if a woman sees her husband is fighting with another man, she goes to help and touches the other man's balls, her hands get cut off.

I mean, and what about that woman who's cutting 12 pieces? And, uh, there's a real lot of terrible stuff, but I don't believe in just reading bits of the Bible. I read it all, including the begats. And the begats are great for characters' names.

But we don't have to reconcile it all to have it be a great book. I don't go for biblically oratory. That's as much of an oratory as any other.

Okay, I kind of had another, when you were bringing up Hollywood, I had, um, another thing I was wondering, um, did you see Amastad by any chance? What? Amastad? Amastad, it was a movie. Oh, I haven't seen it. Oh, okay.

Well, they have amazing, right in the middle, like this sort of Christ-like, the slave's looking at a picture of the Bible, and this is beautiful, like, part, it just made me. And it was the first thing, and I've been, I know you said yesterday, it's horrible to say, you know, Christian films or Christian music versus, you know, it should just come through. But I was just wondering, and now that I've been thinking about entering that field and putting stuff out there, sort of like, maybe your books in the way that it just, you know, brings across truths in a way that people can maybe actually stomach them, or like, would pay to, you know, and not think that it's going to be some brainwashing.

If I was wondering, it's one of those things that seems like you'd wake up in the morning when you're seven impossible things that the world would actually, because it seems like there's so much bad TV and so much bad movies, and like, just wondering if you had any questions. I mean, if you had any comments or encouragement for trying to, even though against all the odds of getting some really good stuff out there and stop complaining about it, but really doing something about it, like what you might have to. I saw a video of the mission not long ago, and I said, have we ever done anything good in the name of Christ? You know, sometimes it's a question I wonder about.

But yes, we have, and whenever we love, we make ourselves vulnerable, and the more people we love, the more vulnerable we are. And if we're not willing to be vulnerable, nothing is going to work. And if we make ourselves vulnerable, we're going to get hurt.

It's as simple as that. There are no easy answers, but also we may be more alive. And I should see Amistad, I'm sure.

I was wondering if maybe you could talk to us a little bit about the issue of forgiving ourselves. I know you touched on it a little bit speaking to us, but I think it's a struggle with me and with close friends who are trying to follow Christ too, is the issue of God has forgiven me, but how do I reconcile it with my own spirit? The thing that helped me most was one time somebody I loved had done something absolutely awful, and I went to my confessor, and I said, I have failed her. I have failed her completely.

I have failed her or she couldn't have done that. And he said, calmly, who were you to think you were better than our Lord? After all, he was singly unsuccessful with a great many people. [laughter] And that helped me to forgive myself.

Sometimes not forgiving ourselves as a supreme act of arrogance. And we have to let it go. That is hard.

I loved your story of the two-year-old speaking to the baby. I have a one-year-old now, and I agree with that story. Would you mind using that, Mike, because I can hear better out of that one? Can you hear this better? Yeah, much better.

I'm a mom of a one-year-old now, and I love that story of the baby and the two-year-old.

And recently I was thinking along those lines, and after hearing you speaking, what advice could you give a new mom or parents after knowing what you know now about fantasy to help our children stay close to God? And, you know, I guess that's it. Help us.

Also, come back. A library at Largent once asked me, "What do you think you and who did that was best for your children?" I said, "We love each other." And I'm sure that was the right answer. And I look back on my children who are wonderful grown-ups, and my grandchildren are so magnificent I couldn't begin to describe them.

But I think some of the things we did were the best will in the world were the worst. Some of the things we did absolutely, accidentally, were the best. We just fumble along and love each other and love them, and no will make mistakes.

And that the best thing to do is pick the kid up and hug. You know, there is no real model for parenting that I have found that is any good. We just try the best we can, and the main things don't lose your temper in front of the child if you can help it.

And if you do lose your temper, apologize. I apologize daily. And let yourself be real.

And then read to them at night for hours. And let them pray for hours. [applause] This is a question a little bit left over from yesterday from the writer's workshop, which I asked you at the end.

And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the process of acting because of your experience in the theatre, and how the creation of a character that you would present to people in a play or in a dramatic situation, and how that process is connected or similar to the process of writing. I'm very glad I did have my time in the theatre because I heard words. I didn't just read them.

I always advise my writers' students to read aloud to themselves or to somebody else if they can, so they can hear it. Because what you hear has a different effect than what you write. And I was always a general understudy, and nobody ever got sick.

[laughter] And the most exciting thing I ever did was play the musical "Saw". Now, there's a line in the chariologists that says, "What was that sound I just heard? It sounded like a bucket being dropped in a pit or a harp string being broken, so we dropped buckets. We broke harp strings.

Nothing was right. It finally started to come up with the musical "Saw". If you hold the musical "Saw" just right, and you go like that, it goes, "Ooh!" And you hold it not quite just right, it goes, "Clunk".

[laughter] And I was terrified every night that it would go clunk. As you went clunk in rehearsal, it never in real life. That was the hardest I ever did on stage.

[laughter] I had two lines in one show. I was playing the "Matement of a Prison in the Last Act". My two lines on Broadway were, but it might be important, sir, but it can't do any harm.

[laughter] [applause] I think all of the arts feed each other that is important to go see pictures. I had a friend who went to what he thought was going to be a real mishmash of loads and loads of pictures at the Metropolitan Museum, instead of which they would take into one picture and told to stay there and look at it for 20 minutes, and then to write down what it meant to them. Then they would take it another picture and tell to stay there for 20 minutes and look at it.

And then write down what it meant to them, but not use any words they hadn't used in the first piece. And they really were taught to observe. I know far too often in museums I go clunk, clunk, clunk from picture to picture, instead of absorbing what it's about.

There is one picture in the Clark Museum in Williamsburg, Mass, which is one of the great small museums. They have a wonderful collection of Dutch painters. And it's obvious that the artist is the best he could for this woman who was ugly.

[laughter] The best he could. But in the background it's a very dark picture. In the background is a little monkey gun.

[laughter] So he had his say. [laughter] Music is important to me, listening to music. Because each art nourishes the other.

And of course we have to read. [laughter] I think there are a few among us who are Sunday school survivors. And it really brings to mind the question, what can the church do to promote fantasy? A little persecution would be a help.

[laughter] We do best when we are persecuted, but we really have to think what we believe and stand up for it. It's too easy. We're getting too tolerant.

And I'm totally against intolerance and thinking that such a discretia is better than that Christian. But we're allowing almost anything to go. And that isn't true.

Jesus makes demands. Whether we're Baptist or Catholics, there are certain demands that are made of us. When we forget them, we lose a lot.

Truth, telling our kids to tell the truth as far as they can see it. Not to alibi. My favorite alibi story comes right out of scripture.

And it's when Moses is up in the mountain talking to God. He's up there much too long and people get restive. And they want something to worship.

So they get Aaron to take all of their earrings and all of their gold beads. He makes them a golden calf. So they're very happily dancing around it, worshipping it.

And Moses comes down and he is furious. Furious with Aaron. And Aaron says, "Well, I mean, I just took the people's earrings and the gold and I put them in the furnace and I quote, "Out came this calf." [laughter] We did it then.

We do it now. So learn not to alibi to say, "Yes, I'm sorry. I blew it.

I was wrong. Forgive me." Even if I haven't been to Sunday school, I still learned a lot to survive in that endless boarding school. Pardon me.

Disregarding the events of the past two weeks, are we rapidly approaching the conditions of the time of Noah? [laughter] I heard that God wept, I told this yesterday, that God wept and wept and wept for 40 days and 40 nights. And that was the flood. God's grief, not God's tears.

I don't think we have to approach a time of Noah. Anyhow, God's had fire next time, not flood. I suspect that the American people have had it.

I mean, simply the fact that Clinton's popularity has gone up instead of down means we've had it. We've had it with vicious gossip, whether it's true or not. There are things that need to be in what my son used to call privacy.

We need to have the media stop slamming it all over our faces. We need to think, now, are we for or against capital punishment? And if we are against it, what do we do about it? I'm not ready for the millennium besides it's four years off. I mean, the date's wrong by four years.

And nothing happened at the first, so why should anything happen at the second? We just need to get to it, think about ourselves and confess. When I go for my dog walk at night, I walk past a Buddhist temple, in front of which it's a very large, larger than life-sized statue of St. Shindran Shouni, and it was a Buddhist saint of the 11th century. And this particular statue was in Hiroshima when the bomb fell.

And he was sent by the Buddhists of Japan to the Buddhists of New York as a symbol of forgiveness and peace. And I walk by it with my dog and I say, "Good night, St. Shindran, forgive us. We have not yet confessed as a country of many things that we have done wrong.

We do alibi. We say, "Out came this calf." We need to stop doing that. We have time for one more question, and then we hope that you'll all stay on for a worship service at four.

I've sort of been thinking about this for a while about why the heck God created us in the first place, because I feel like we just caused so much havoc. So that was one of my main questions. Why would he create us? What was his reason for putting us on this earth? And sort of like I believe in the whole, he knows what's going to happen, but we have free will.

But it's that sort of a weird boundary and I was just wondering if you had anything to say about that. My favorite theologian said it is in the nature of love to create. As for God's foreknowledge and our free will, the Russian theologian, Bergeiaph, believed that there were things God chose not to know, so it's not to interfere with our free will.

This is, again, one of those questions that has no answer. I know that God allows us to use our free will. I mean, we're not puppets.

We're not Pinocchio's. He doesn't come in and wave magic wands and pull strings and get us to the right thing. Let's just make our own mistakes.

And we have made terrible mistakes. We've also done wonderful things. One summer, my nine-year-old granddaughter was hit by a trucker.

She was in the hospital all summer. But we saw kids coming in looking pale and wand and two days that have been wheelchair races as their hearts have been fixed. I see because I have contact lenses on.

I mean, 50 years ago, I'd be blind. We've done terrible things. We've done wonderful things.

We need to look at them and say, "Okay, which was great and which was not? How are we creative and how are we destructive?" And there is hope. There is always hope. I'm not sure whether optimism and pessimism are genetic or not.

But my writing slants up. And I'm basically optimistic. And I don't want it otherwise.

We do find what we look for. We look for the bad things. We'll find them.

If we look for hope and strength and courage in spite of all the bad things and laughter, then we'll find those. [applause]

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