

Glimpses of goodness

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [March 15, 2000](#) issue

Science fiction, mystery, comedy, serious drama, cartoons, art film—with the exception of musicals, slashers and cowboy pictures, I love movies. My husband, Richard, also enjoys them, though he is less fussy about the type of movie he watches. So when we read some favorable early reviews of *Magnolia*, we were eager to see it.

From the beginning, I found this film engrossing, engaging spiritually and theologically as well as emotionally. The acting was terrific. Some parts were harrowing. The unending use of vulgarities, in particular the “f” word, was irritating, and before I understood the point, seemed unworthy of the rest of the movie. On the whole, however, both Richard and I found *Magnolia* wonderful. After three hours, we left our seats exhilarated and ready for conversation.

It wasn’t until I was in the ladies’ room that I realized that not everyone who’d seen it liked it. I was surprised then horrified to hear woman after woman come in complaining to her female companions.

“Well, I don’t know what you think, but as far as I’m concerned, that was a lot about nothing,” one large, grim-faced woman said as she washed her hands and shook the water off into the sink.

“You’re darn right,” her smaller, middle-aged friend replied angrily. “I thought the whole thing was repulsive. It just goes to show, you can’t trust what you read in the paper.”

Back out in the hall the reviews were no better. “That was awful! Why did you have to drag me here anyway?” a man was complaining to his apologetic wife. I was stunned to hear all of this about a movie I had experienced as profound.

Thinking about it later, I could identify some reasons for their reactions. With a dozen major characters and eight different plot lines, *Magnolia* is more like a complex novel than a short story. The pacing is sometimes frenetic, sometimes so slow as to be hallucinatory. Throughout the movie the music is crucial but often

excruciatingly loud. Finally, there is the problem of the intensely theological nature of this film. Few of us are accustomed any more to reflect on or even recognize theological issues unless they are made explicit.

But the real difficulty is in the ideas. *Magnolia* asks us to become genuinely good and loving people, and to look honestly at ourselves and repent of whatever keeps us from being good. These things are hard, and they are seriously, painfully at odds with the assumptions of our general culture.

For one thing, behind our protestations of American optimism is the reality that we don't really believe in human goodness except in freaks or the naïve. Since at least the time of Mark Twain, Americans have been accustomed to distrusting the appearance of goodness, especially in anyone we might take to be a role model. When we come upon "shocking exposés" of the character of others, we generally choose not to question what we hear. Having decided to believe that deep down most people, especially those in the public eye, must be rotten to the core, we take a self-righteous satisfaction in their unmasking.

Ancient Christian writers Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa, as well as the Abbas and Ammas of the early Egyptian monastic tradition, tell us that cynicism about the possibility of human goodness is not only misguided, but positively dangerous. We are made in the image of the God who is love, and sin, although it covers over, damages and even partially erases that image, does not totally destroy it. It is the image functioning within us that allows us, with the help of God's grace, to grow into love of other human beings as well as God. This is our lifetime's work.

Growth in love is not possible, however, unless we are able to be honest with ourselves, to feel deep regret and repentance. *Magnolia* illustrates all too painfully what it is sometimes like to do this work. The regret of the dying Earl Partridge for betraying his first wife; the broken-hearted repentance of Linda, his current wife, who married him for money but who has grown to appreciate and love him; the shattering self-awareness that shows Earl's son Frank he cannot escape his past; the struggles of Claudia, an abused drug addict—their struggles suggest to the viewers that we, too, if we desire to be restored to love, might be called to such a willing suffering. It is not an entertaining thought.

Entertaining or not, the teachers of the early church did not think that Christian repentance and growth in love were likely to occur without role models. We learn

Christianity as St. Anthony had to learn—by seeing and imitating those who can show us what good people look like. If our forbears are right about the importance of imitation, however, then our cynical unwillingness to believe that a human being really might be good leaves us up a creek without a paddle. How can we grow in love and goodness if we don't believe that we can see it done?

The real contribution of *Magnolia* is that it goes beyond painful images of repentance to offer us glimpses of two genuinely good people. The first is Phil Parma, Earl Partridge's hospice nurse. Phil is strong, compassionate to the point of frequent tears, resourceful and nonjudgmental. It is his exercise of these qualities that makes possible the salvation of both Earl and Frank. The other is Jim Kurring, a local policeman who understands his job (and his life) to include figuring out who needs to be forgiven and then offering forgiveness. Though Jim is very different from Phil, he too is humble, quick to admit his own faults and exceptionally compassionate and concerned. He too sets free those on whom he bestows his compassion.

Both men have much in common with the Abbas and Ammas of the ancient Christian desert: they see, respond to and nurture the image of God in those for whom they care.