

*Whedon fans are by nature attracted to strong, daring characters. A diehard fan myself, I have an unwavering admiration for those whose readiness to take a stand against evil is greater than their instinct to cower. As I read of Stephanie R. delusé's face-off with her own intimate demons, of the brave sacrifices she made to save herself from a cult of emotional vampires, I became her fan, too. With shameless vulnerability, delusé reveals her deep reflections upon the Jossverse as a self-healing crucible. How she learned to extract power from the psychic pain she might otherwise have kept buried away, and how similar reflection might confer power to any viewer, makes her tale as universally significant as it is moving.*

---

## **MORE THAN ENTERTAINMENT**

---

*Notes on a Spiritual Recovery and What Jossverse  
Gave Me that Religion and Therapy Didn't*

STEPHANIE R. DELUSÉ

When I do good, I feel good; when I do bad,  
I feel bad. That's my religion.

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN

**I**t's been tough to write this essay. Many a word has already been written about Joss Whedon and his creations. Many, many a word. A bit of research would convince anyone that there is little left that is new to say, as Joss has inspired rabid fans in and outside academia such that, it seems, every laudatory and critical thing that can be said or theorized about him has been said or theorized (except as he unfolds new projects for us to consider). I had a potentially fresh idea or two, especially about *Firefly/Serenity*, but this is an essay for *The Psychology of Joss Whedon* so my preference was to somehow write about him and his impact rather than about a specific show or character or how some theory could be tied to yet another aspect of his work.

So I labored in the quarry of my mind, throwing the hammer of my pen to crack open this bit of ground, then that bit, to see if I'd hit a rich vein. I moved several mental rocks and then I had to push particularly hard against

an old stone that, I learned, was weighty with more than thoughts—there was emotion there. I finally craned it up to see moist earth, wet with tears and sweat, and a mess of worms and bugs. Out of respect for squirmy life that likes to live in the dark, I lowered the stone back to look for my angle in some other part of the landscape of my mind, my experience.

Then it came to me. If I felt that respected writers had already researched and written on most every angle on Joss and Jossverse then what was left for me to do was some me-search. What was left was to write what no one else could (though I know you each have your own story): a personal account of how Jossverse affected me. After all, in so doing, what is learned is still, really, about Joss. What was left for me was to lift that stone and let the worms see the light . . . and to show a few of those worms to you, dear reader. Because perhaps by sharing my tale, my process, I will encourage you to lift a few stones of your own.

It seems small, I know, but there's some heroism involved in being willing to move the stones and take a peek, in being willing to realize something, perhaps let something go, accept something else, or make a change. It's not necessarily easy. The stones can be heavy and what we see isn't always pretty. But by unearthing hidden issues and bringing the worms into the light, we invite a phase of growth that lets us take power from the very things we once hid, or hid from. And that's something that thoughtful entertainment, in the form of well-written characters and stories in television, books, and other media, can help us do if we let it. In gentle and not-so-gentle ways they invite us to move aside, crack open, or pulverize some stones by stimulating thought or offering examples of others making choices (good and bad) that we can learn from. Beyond just living vicariously through characters, we can—in the small-time parallel of our own personal universe—identify with and grow through some of their struggles.

#### *Tips for Excavating Worms: What Shows Can Help Us Do*

The proof is in the pudding, as they say. There is evidence that Jossverse can help heal, if one is mindful and open while watching, because I'm living proof of it. I'll not get heady or deep on psychology-speak here, as this is about what techniques I used personally. You can consider this a "phenomenological" account, of sorts, for phenomenologists generally believe (of

course, there are divisions among them) that one's understanding of life, and of truth itself, comes from one's own, or others', life experiences—that meaning is developed by conscious consideration of the world in which we live. Thus, I'm talking to you as a person, who happens to be a psychologist (not as a psychologist who happens to be a person). But while I may not get technical or theoretical here, I trust you'll see the connections to terms many routinely associate with psychology, like "denial"—that's a big one, isn't it? Actually, let's start with that . . . with denial, and with make-believe.

Why is it good to use television for excavating versus, say, just talking it out with a friend or going to therapy? Well, I'd never advocate that we should avoid friends, counseling, or therapy as we know social support and counseling have real value. Yet many folks don't care to open up to others on some topics (preferring a private "catharsis," or emotional purging), can't afford counseling, or, like me (as you'll see shortly) don't even realize they have an "issue," or remnants thereof, to resolve. Thoughtful watching of certain shows can be of value in bringing buried skeletons to the surface and re-framing past events to bring greater awareness or peace. Truth may be stranger than fiction, but watching such realistic interactions in the clearly make-believe world that Joss and his team created allows us to suspend our disbelief at what we are seeing . . . to accept it as "real" long enough to pry up some of those rocks and see what's underneath, as long as we are also willing to suspend our disbelief about ourselves. That is, most of us live in some form of denial. We refuse to see things about ourselves or our relationships. We get comfortable with believing the status quo or, more often, we are afraid to question it. If, when watching Jossverse shows, we allow ourselves to momentarily suspend our comfortable denial and recognize ourselves in them, or momentarily question the tenets of our own world, we can use the material for personal growth.

I'll describe a few techniques that I used. As you read, see if they might also be of use to you.

#### *Reflective Empathy for Compare and Contrast*

Depending on what you read, some would call what I'm about to describe "reflective empathy" (rather than "reflective empathy"), but really, in many places the terms are used as if they are interchangeable. I've seen both terms

used to mean what I'd call, simply, good ol' "empathy." Empathy, in contrast to feeling compassion or pity for some struggle a character faces (which is sympathy and can keep us at a distance), is putting ourselves in that character's shoes and feeling what they feel. When I use the word "reflective," I mean it in the sense of your reflection in a mirror—catching a glimpse of oneself in the mirror of, for instance, a television show about a vampire slayer. I mean using that glimpse to understand one's own life better through thoughtfully considering the lives of others.

Let me expand. With plain ol' empathy we experience a character's emotions instead of just watching the character as a voyeur. Doing so helps us access our own hearts, our own feelings, which are often buried too deeply in the busy-busy, head-heavy society in which we live for us to easily reach them. But where the empathy gets *reflective* is in the way I have often watched Joss shows. When the commercial break came on (or after the show went off—or I hit pause, if watching a DVD), I'd let myself take a few minutes to process the story that had just unfolded and what the characters had just gone through. Sometimes I would see myself or my life reflected so clearly in the events of an episode that I couldn't help but think more about it. I'd remember a time when I, or someone in my circle, had been in a similar situation. And I'd imagine what I would do if I had to make a similar choice. I'd think back to the choices I'd already made and consider their wisdom or folly.<sup>1</sup>

If you are like me, you may find that your understanding of yourself or someone else starts to shift a bit. You may find that you decide to think, say, or do something a little bit differently based on what you've seen on your television screen, and thought or felt because of it. Which brings us to the most important part of what Jossverse helped me do, which was to heal.

#### *Backstory and the Realization That I Needed Some Work*

Put yourself in my shoes. I was raised in a strict fundamental Christian religion that I valued, and value, as lovely and important to my develop-

<sup>1</sup> Now, when I say "similar situation," I don't mean to imply that any of us know folks who are actually slaying demons and vampires. As "real" and ordinary as those demons and vamps were in the shows, as real as they were to Buffy and the gang, they were also metaphors or analogies for other things going on inside of them. So it is with us.

ment in many ways. That said, suffice it to say my religion had a very limited worldview. For instance, as a child, I was expressly forbidden to, among many other things, watch *I Dream of Jeannie* or *Bewitched* because of their connection to "the occult." We really didn't watch much television. All grown up (as if one ever is), a student of psychology, and having theoretically long since abandoned those beliefs, you'd think I'd have slain any fear I had of overexaggerated or fluffy entertainment versions of occult topics. Despite an admitted avoidance of devilish or ghost-related movies like *The Exorcist* and *Poltergeist*, I certainly thought I had. Though, really, I didn't watch many movies or much television at all, and had gone a full ten years without a television in my home.

So imagine my surprise when, not long after getting a television again, I accidentally tuned in to an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and was watching some perky girl and her friends when, hello, there was suddenly some, to me, convincingly evil vampire violence and demon activity. I was taken aback but transfixed. Oops. Had I just fallen prey to the spell my lovingly overprotective, hypervigilant parents had warned about—had I just been pulled into an association with evil simply by watching it on a small screen in my living room? I felt some serious internal conflict even though I knew—of course, as I'm not given to breaking from reality—by the comic quips and commercial breaks that this was just a fun story, all make-believe. No worries. But still, I was worried in some ways. I remember having to leave the house for an evening appointment and walking with a false confidence through the very dark spaces between my apartment and my car. Despite my purposeful stride, my insides were fearful and tender from having just seen nasty vampires stalking prey and feeding in the dark. I couldn't believe how silly I was. I couldn't believe how powerfully intact my long-buried childhood belief systems still were. Never one to shy from growth, I tuned in the next week.

Watching *Buffy* was, after I got over my initial surprise, a safe way for me to explore in bite-sized portions not just my fears around religion and worldviews but also personal purpose and relationships with men, friends, and community. These issues—especially regarding the relationship between men and women in couples and as groups in society—hit close to home for most of us in some way or another. So, while I've alluded lightly to some beliefs about Bogey-Men and the occult that I

started thinking about because of watching *Buffy*, permit me to expand, to share a more important and personal example to help illustrate how thoughtful television watching can help us grow and heal.

#### *Re-Evaluating Past Events to Heal: Icky Fates, Patriarchy, and Choices*

I'd been raised to believe that men are always right and that having their approval—having a man like you—is more important than liking yourself. From the day I was born I was taught that God was the head of Jesus, Jesus was the head of the Congregation of men, men were the head of households, and women were subservient to men. Watching *Buffy*, even years later, it made perfect sense to me that there would be a Watchers' Council (of men), that Giles (a man) would tell Buffy (a woman) what to do, and that she, following a long tradition of slayers (always women), should obey. When I was younger, that belief system was so ingrained in me that it was natural for my father to offer me only three choices when I came of age: serve the religion by being a missionary in a distant land, do full-time "pioneer" work as a local missionary, or marry—as women needed to be ruled by some rigid structure, or else have a man in charge. I married at the tender age of seventeen to a twenty-six-year-old man that my father didn't select, *per se*, but had pointed me toward—and limited me to, once mutual interest was detected.

Buffy resonated with me in part because she was a petite blond girl battling evil and figuring herself out. Hmmm . . . can you say "mirror"? Okay, not a perfect mirror—I was by that point a little bit older and a little bit more experienced than she was—but I too was once a petite young blond who had battled evil in the guise of severe patriarchy within the religion to which I'd been bound. And I was still nursing old scars from those battles, still figuring out my relationship to evil and good, to God and humankind, to others and self.

I'd had to turn into a slayer of sorts myself when my marriage turned out to be a twisted, oddly abusive sham and it came down to me or him (or them, as the case could be seen). I had tried to hold out and be subservient to my husband, and to the patriarchy of the religion, but when, due to abuse, I developed health problems from which I was warned I might not recover unless I left soon, I faced a choice not unlike the one Buffy faced as she struggled to accept her fate as Slayer. Buffy didn't want to be Slayer and leave

behind her normal life—she fought it as long as she could. I didn't want to leave behind the only belief system and social circle I'd ever known, and stayed as long as I could. Buffy had to accept her fate or suffer the consequences. I had to decide whether to stay faithful to my religion and succumb to the fate of dying both spiritually and, potentially, physically, or to fight for my own survival and create a different fate, which would require me to cross a line that, once crossed, would likely cost me both my friends and family (as divorce was forbidden except in cases of adultery). And though I'd ultimately seek a legal annulment, that didn't change matters in the eyes of the congregation, as "legal" did not mean "scriptural." If I left, ostracism would follow. I left. And, yes, good ol' fashioned shunning followed. Still does.

Now, while I didn't meet Buffy until after the crux of these events had passed, I was still wounded from them inside when I did. So it's no wonder I saw Buffy's situation as relating to my life. Buffy had her own male patriarchy to deal with and, for awhile, Giles wanted her to abandon the Scoobies and fight alone. (I had the Brothers—the elders in the congregation—and my father and husband telling me what to do.) Buffy was painfully aware of her obligation as Slayer and the danger she put her loved ones in, but bucked tradition anyway—and learned she was stronger with her support system than without it. Watching Buffy, I was able to see that while, no, I hadn't been chosen as a hero to save the world, I had saved myself, watching Buffy I was able to see how I'd chosen similarly and differently. That is, as Buffy chose to leave (in a manner of speaking) the system set up by the Watchers' Council, I too had chosen to buck the system and leave—ultimately getting officially kicked out for having the nerve to choose life. For Buffy, the whole slayer biz was new, so it was easier for her to deny the old traditions, and in so doing she got to keep her Scooby friends instead of ditch them. Unlike Buffy, my traditions were long held and cherished, and my choice cost me the only support system I'd ever known. I know, I was no Slayer—but each of us have our own demons we must slay and our own sacrifices we must make.

#### *High-Tech Tools for "On-the-Fly" and "Post-Show Review"*

The level of engagement that allows such serious emotional, mental, and behavioral worm-excavation can be aided by using two very high-tech

tools: paper and pencil. I've used them in a couple key ways: First, for things I'd notice *on-the-fly*—a line or a quip that would catch my attention as funny, insightful, or worthy of more thought. I'd jot down a word or two to capture it (knowing my sieve-like mind wouldn't retain it otherwise), so I could remember to think about it later. After all, what catches our attention usually does so for a reason—even if that reason isn't immediately apparent. When we are drawn to a line, or character, or story, a little work can help us figure out why.

I caught an *on-the-fly* recently while re-watching the *Firefly* episode "The Message." An old friend of Mal and Zoe's resurfaced, and to keep him from harming the crew, Mal had to shoot. He said to Mal, "You just murdered me," to which Mal replied, "[You] murdered yourself. I just carried the bullet awhile." There's a number of places we could go with this interaction, beyond the obvious opportunity to ask ourselves if we are placing blame appropriately in our own lives (and there is often plenty of blame to share). We could consider broader issues of personal responsibility, personal agency, karma, or you name it. Indeed, what I'd consider might be different from what you'd consider. And what I'd consider could change depending on what sparks got fired in my mind or what was going on in my life at the time.

Which leads us to the second key way I've used my pencil and paper: *post-show review*. For me, *post-show review* involved taking the time after the end credits to think through the impact what I watched had made on me. It could involve putting some flesh on the bones of the word or phrase I caught *on-the-fly*; after all, I wrote it down for the express purpose of thinking about it later. But it could also include capturing some key point from the *reflective-empathy style* viewing described above—that is, actually writing down the lessons I'd learned or capturing the thread of a theme.

I know, I hear some of you moaning, "Is she actually suggesting I journal about *Buffy*?" Well, no and yes. It's better if you're writing about you rather than *Buffy*. Consider Jossverse as just the stimulus, or a prompt . . . an entry point of sorts to get you thinking about yourself through first seeing some aspect of your life in the mirror of the show. Our personal habits, and culture, of denial means it is often safer for us to first think about others in order to crack open the door to ourselves.

And I'm not suggesting a journal, *per se*, though that'd be cool. My personal favorite is sticky notes that I can stick on my dashboard, my mirror, or in my journal depending on if, and how, I want to think more about a particular insight. So, no, this doesn't have to be a tome, but don't be surprised if you try this technique and end up having moments of fluid clarity that encourage you to write more than you'd have guessed you would. Writing about how stupid *Buffy* was to make that choice or how sweet Spike was when he protected Dawn can get you going on the stupidities and sweetnesses (or absence thereof) in your own life, and before you know it, you've traversed into something more personal and meaningful for you.

Truly, length and approach are not as important as doing *something*, as it's still a personal gain to routinely capture even just a moment of thoughtful, mindful awareness. Sometimes one line (an *on-the-fly* scribble) will stick with me and haunt my reverie. Like Wash's, "I am a leaf on the wind," in *Serenity*. There is the obvious interpretation: it's his desperate attempt to be Zen-like under the pressure of having to outmaneuver Alliance and Reaver ships. But then, moments later, he dies, becoming yet another kind of leaf on another kind of wind—or is it really any different at all? That kind of thing can take my mind and heart down side-roads I'd never have traveled if I hadn't taken a snapshot of the phrase and made the time to reflect on it. Letting it go too quickly would have cost me ready opportunities for observations about myself—how I handle stress, how I handle the inevitability of death (Am I "ready"? Am I living the sort of life I want to live? What would I want the last words out of my mouth to be? What's my legacy?).

#### *Realizing Leflover Biases and Introducing New Thoughts: Morality, Sacrifice, and Ethics*

Jossverse raised questions in me on many fronts, including how one defines evil. I considered, for instance, the complex roles and various transformations of both Angel and Spike. I reflected on sacrifice: what Angel had to sacrifice in order to work out his redemption, what Spike went through to get to the point where he could sacrifice himself to save the whole world at the end of *Buffy*. Self-sacrifice came up in other ways,

too, both big and small, and that brought up, for me, a lot of leftover thoughts about Jesus. *Buffy* let me think as well about what it meant to sacrifice others for a cause—through for example, how Professor Maggie Walsh sacrificed Hostile Sub-Terrestrials (like vampires and demons) in the service of her interpretation of a greater good. And even when sacrifice didn't come up in one of the stricter senses of the word, I still thought often about sacrificing beliefs. I had done this to some degree when I left, was cast out of, my childhood religion, but I was subtly sacrificing still more beliefs—or at least remeasuring them—along the way as I watched and processed Joss's shows. These were issues (evil and sacrifice and such) that, in my childhood religion, had always had pat answers. No form of true, expansive dialogue was encouraged or permitted.

Watching *Firefly* and *Serenity* blurred the lines of what I'd thought I'd known even further, continuing to open up broader ethical and social issues. I'd reflect on evil Niska's penchant for torture. I'd reflect on how Mal's behavior often demonstrated pro-social, altruistic, and ethical tendencies and then how it would not, at times, in sudden and spectacular ways. In one scene he would return much-needed medicine to the locals he'd stolen it from, and in the next kick a man into *Serenity's* engine. Mal and his crew offered many opportunities to reflect on shifting meanings of ethics, selfishness, and compassion. Despite doing bad things to real people, Mal retained, it seemed, a moral compass of which many would approve. Every gray area I encountered in *Firefly/Serenity* reminded me of the black-and-white clarity I'd left behind, and made me question which way of being is better—if there is such a thing as "better." I'd reflect on how in all Jossverse shows, you are invited, if not forced, to make experience count for something: the best learning wasn't all from books and Bibles.

*Firefly/Serenity* made me think, too, about political ethics. It struck me as true, and offered another opportunity for reflection, when I heard River, in a real or induced memory of her childhood during her torture at the hands of the Alliance, reply to a teacher that the Independent Planets didn't like the Alliance because they were meddling, because the Alliance told people "what to do, what to think, were in their homes and in their heads and they didn't have the right." I'd lived the Alliance in the guise of an oppressively "loving" organized religion for all too long.

I could especially appreciate Mal's loss of his ideals, hopes, and comrades when he lost the battle of *Serenity* Valley, and how that made the not-so-small victory at the end of *Serenity* more poignant: Mal revealing the Alliance's damaging secret about the Reavers, in helping to restore the balance in the political world, also helped restore some of Mal's serenity, and some of his hopes and ideals too. Even as recently as the movie, then, I used the material to allow little observations like these to remind me of the small ways I had restored serenity in my life, and to think, on a larger scale, about the influence of other powerful institutions, policies, and laws in all our lives.

#### *Alternate Endings*

Playing the "what if" game is something most of us have done in our day-to-day lives: "What if this happens?" Or, "What if that had happened?" Thinking of different possibilities can be useful; it allows us to consider how to respond to different outcomes, and inoculates us against the worst that could happen in addition to giving us a taste of the best. The process of thinking and feeling out those possibilities, and others in between, helps us identify and avoid, or even overcome, obstacles (thus increasing the likelihood of a positive result no matter what happens).

So it is with another tool for effective excavation: making up *alternate endings* for storylines. While I'd, say, brush my teeth (or perhaps weed the garden or run errands) after watching an episode, I'd think through various "what if" scenarios for key scenes. I'd imagine what would have happened had a character made a different choice, and think through how it might have affected the end of that episode or season-long plotlines. I'm not talking about trying to be as clever a plotter or as colorful a quipster as the Jossverse writers (could that even be done?). I'm talking about thinking through reasons and relationships, about our choices, and about how the way we communicate them (or fail to) can really impact outcomes. Blend that with the compare and contrast that comes with reflective empathy and, *voilà!*, you've got the recipe for some good *self-awareness* (not just the ability to chat more thoughtfully on a Joss fan Web site, though you'll probably have that too). After all, most of our own heartaches and headaches—or at least mine—can be traced back to our failure to make

better-informed decisions or to be clear and compassionate in how we speak to others. As you think about how the show could have gone differently, it's a short skip over to how *you* could do things differently.

For example, think about Buffy and Riley. I know, it would have spoiled other interesting plot twists if they'd stayed together, but it's still fun to think about what might have happened if they had. Which leads right to thinking about the reasons they broke up, and how they might have prevented it. Think about your own romantic relationships. Have you ever taken someone for granted, kept them out of the loop, or pushed them away (especially someone who is actually good to you or good for you)? Why? How did that serve you? Have you ever chosen to "cope" or tried to "prove" something by being self-destructive and risky (like when Riley let skanky vampire-chicks suck his blood) and told yourself some silly self-denial tale about it? As much as we can learn what to do from watching others, we can also learn what *not* to do. What can we learn about our own misunderstandings and missed opportunities by pretending that Riley or Buffy had done something more or different? What could they (or we) have said that might have helped?

I'm not suggesting we get caught in an over-analytical loop that causes us to question everything we've ever done, *ad nauseam*. I'm suggesting that a little fun, but thorough, thinking about alternate endings can lead to improved endings in our own relationships at work and at home.

#### *Overcoming Fears: Prophecies, Prophecies Everywhere*

During my childhood, watching world affairs was only deemed useful for showing us that prophecy was being fulfilled, that we were living in "the time of the end"—and the end would probably come tomorrow. The palpable "reality" of prophetic fulfillment was such that I was not raised with any long-term perspective. There wasn't any point in thinking past the immediate or near future, because Armageddon was just around the corner. My parents didn't believe in the benefits of long-term savings or accruing funds for college (which we weren't supposed to go to anyway because it took time from the ministry, exposed us to worldly people with crooked values, and encouraged faulty thinking with lessons in, for instance, evolution).

So when I started watching *Buffy*, it was comical and silly in some sense, yes, that the world came close to ending most every season. But in another sense, it spoke to my worry, not-completely-discarded fears about the end of the world. Each apocalypse Buffy averted, each new one that arose, I'd revisit how far I'd come since the last time. I'd think about how those fears had affected my choices in the past and what remnants of those fears continued to affect my choices in the present. I still think about this (especially with 2012—which is when many consider the prophet Nostradamus's end-of-the-world scenario will play out—looming on the horizon), but not nearly as often or as much. That's good, but I have to wonder, is it because I'm pretty much over it, or because I'm not being as thoughtful about it anymore because I'm not watching *Buffy*, *Angel*, and *Firefly* as often as I did when they were first run? Yes, I finished the meat of my personal processing on these shows years ago and now can more or less watch them strictly as entertainment, but still, any one of us, if we allow ourselves to be receptive to our feelings, beliefs, and connections, can sit down with the DVDs and garner some good reminders and insights. I'd worked through my worry Armageddon fears well before *Firefly* and *Serenity* came out but it's funny how I still thought about them when I considered *Firefly*/*Serenity*'s post-apocalyptic (of sorts) future where, while life was not ideal (and was downright bad for many), it went on in a passable way. I found it much more comforting than, say, Mad Max's world. I found myself thinking, too, about the tempering statements, like Zoe's to Wash in "Heart of Gold," that gently warned against losing time to fear. Wash felt that, considering the conditions under which they lived, it was too dangerous for them to have a child. Zoe agreed that their life was dangerous, but pointed out that they shouldn't be so afraid of losing something that they didn't even try to have it.

#### *The Meritorious Evils of Being a Fan*

So, then, I've given you a snapshot or two of some of the skeletons in my closet and cobwebs in my mind, by sharing a selection of topics and issues I engaged via Jossverse—issues that I don't think I would have otherwise engaged, or at least not as soon or as pleasurably. And I've shared some techniques for more effective thinking, my strategies for

viewing that allowed me to turn watching Joss shows into real self-growth. But there's one last thing that bears discussing.

It wasn't until *Firefly* that I realized that, without even noticing, I'd slowly and surely become a fan of something, of someone, of Joss Whedon. I'd never been a fan before. The reason I'd never been a fan before was because, you guessed it, my childhood religion forbade that too (shocker!). We weren't, for instance, allowed to engage in politics or sports (or cheer for a team) because it encouraged divisions in the group, and to elevate a team or politician as such edged too close to idolatry. Similarly, we weren't allowed to celebrate birthdays because there were no positive examples of them in the Bible. (There were only two birthday celebrations mentioned in the Bible—one in the Greek scriptures/New Testament and one in the Hebrew scriptures/Old Testament—and both were accompanied by someone getting their head cut off.) But, mostly, we didn't celebrate birthdays because it was unthinkable to elevate oneself above our fellow human beings. And, thus, we weren't supposed to elevate anyone else either (say, by being a fan), as it took glory away from God (who was the only one worthy of fandom). So, there was another worm from under the rock: I was actually becoming a fan. No, I didn't join a club or spend any time on the Web posting to fan sites, and I've never gone hog wild or anything (though I am known to go, "Grrrr. Arrgggh." like the Mutant Enemy logo now and then), but I was/am a fan, nonetheless.

Reflecting on how very much that would have been disapproved of (especially given the nature of Joss's work!), I realized that it was about power, the underlying theme of *Buffy*. My parents' religion feared what would happen if they let us followers have any power, whether through birthdays or fandoms or, say, thinking for ourselves. It was about power and how much of it I had reclaimed when I stood up, struggled, and left. It was about power and how much more I had yet to reclaim. And, perhaps paradoxically to some, it was about sharing power, as Buffy did with all the potential slayers in the series finale in order to conquer evil.

Yeah, so I'm a Joss fan. I'm a fan who watches his shows for the pure fun of them, yes, but as you now know, I also let them take me away into deeper thoughts. I know that those who like Joss or his work all have their own personal reasons. I read or hear a lot that suggests many are

fans of his artistry . . . of the entertainment value of what he's done, his genius or creativity, or the impressive amount of quality work he can turn out in small periods of time. Others are fans because Joss wrote strong female characters (though certainly some disagree with this) and male characters that were happy to walk equally with, or even subordinally to, those women. He embodied this in his speech, kindly archived on several Web sites, when he was recognized at the Equality Now "On the Road to Equality: Honoring Men on the Frontline" conference:

[E]quality is not a concept. It's not something we should be striving for. It's a necessity. Equality is like gravity; we need it to stand on this earth as men and women, and the misogyny that is in every culture is not a true part of the human condition. It is life out of balance. And that imbalance is sucking something out of the soul of every man and woman who's confronted with it. We need equality, kinda now.

Yep, having lived through several very personal soul-sucking experiences myself, I can see why folks would be fans of Joss for this. But while I appreciate all those things about him, and the casts and crews that helped bring his work to life, *Buffy*, *Angel*, and *Firefly/Serenity* were more, were different, for me. Like so many others who've no doubt experienced some form of personal growth through the work of Joss Whedon, these shows provided some tools—some opportunities for insight—to help me, with a straight-to-the-heart witness I so value, lift the stones and dig in the dirt, to excavate, to grow, to heal.

*Many thanks to my friends and colleagues Dr. Stanley Parkinson, Dr. Linda Luecker, and Tracy Perkins—for a subset of my own Scoobies without whom I'd be weaker and less happy—for commenting on drafts of this work. The patient support, wisdom, and good humor of these friends are priceless. Thanks also to the patient Leah Wilson, whose comments and suggestions most assuredly helped the final product.*



STEPHANIE R. DELUSÉ, PH.D., psychologist, researcher, author, and teacher, is also associate faculty director of the Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies (BIS) program at Arizona State University. Her graduate training focused on social and personal issues that affect most of us at one time or another—issues around individual/group interactions, family and divorce, and health and wellness. Her most recent academic efforts have earned her recognition for her teaching, including selection as one of ASU's Featured Faculty in 2006 and an Outstanding Faculty Award in 2005. In her spare free time she communes with nature most frequently in the guise of her cat, her trees, and her herb garden replete with insect life and lizards. As she edits this essay, she is teaching in London for the summer and getting acquainted with all manner of new flora and fauna—and seeing some very spooky, ancient ceremonies where the likes of vampires, rogue-demon hunters, and the Slayer must surely roam.

*Like ice cream, psychotherapy comes in many flavors and colors, and most practitioners mash it up a bit, eventually dishing out multi-hued swirls rather than pure chocolate or vanilla. Yet psychological theories are often taught as if their conversion into practice was pristine; chocolate theory yielding chocolate cones, vanilla yielding vanilla, and so on. While that may not be so in clinical work, nevertheless, Mikhail Lyubansky allows us a glimpse of pure strawberry: existential theory and therapy unsullied, as applied to Buffy Summers. Considering the unimaginable responsibilities and undeniable confrontations with death that Buffy must endure year after year, Lyubansky views an existential approach to making sense of it all as just the right flavor*

## BUFFY'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

MIKHAIL LYUBANSKY

The hardest thing in this world . . . is to live in it.

—Buffy Summers, "The Gift" (5-22)

I'm just going to go ahead and say it. Buffy Summers, the blond former cheerleader and long-time vampire slayer, is the most psychologically well-developed character on television. Ever. Her character, like the show itself, probes deeply into life's biggest questions: the nature of good and evil, the meaning of love, the weight of responsibility, the fear of death. In this essay, I approach Buffy as an existential therapist, using existential theory and therapeutic principles to make sense of Buffy's motivations, worries, and behaviors.

The therapeutic lens is not intended to imply that Buffy is "crazy."<sup>1</sup> She most certainly is not; for delusions cannot be shared by so many people. The fact that Willow, Xander, Spike, and the rest of the Scoobies all share Buffy's reality indicates that Sunnydale and all its monsters and

<sup>1</sup> "Crazy" is not a psychological or psychiatric term, but the popular connotation of the word suggests a thought disorder, like schizophrenia in which a person experiences a different reality than other people (e.g., hallucinations, delusions).