

The Colours of Life: A Yellow Tinge
A Reflection on *Brokeback Mountain*
The fourth in the five-part Lenten series – Reel Theology
by Robert Oliphant at Eglinton St. George’s United Church
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Numbers 21:4-9

⁷*The people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’ ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.*

Numbers 21:7-9

Buddhist teacher, Sharon Salzberg was once asked by someone wanting to know how to be more compassionate and loving, “How do I open my heart?” She replied, “Usually it’s broken open.” Ang Lee’s wonderfully written and directed film, *Brokeback Mountain* will break your heart and, I think, if anything can, open it.

Based on a short story by Annie Proulx, which first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1997, *Brokeback Mountain* begins as the story of teenage cowboys, Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist, who meet in 1963 in Signal, Wyoming. (Aren’t those great names? Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist. Worthy of Jane Austin, I think.) Ennis and Jack, perfectly played by Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal, get jobs together tending sheep one summer on Brokeback’s mountainside. Ennis is a 19 year old of so few words that he can barely utter an audible, intelligible sentence. He is guarded and fearful, though I expect even he doesn’t know what it is that he is afraid of. Having just one year of high school, parentless and alone, his long-term plans consist solely of settling down with his girl and becoming a ranch hand. Jack, also 19, is more outgoing, seldom seems at a loss for words. He has done a bit of rodeo riding, and has dreams of making his living on the rodeo circuit. They are, in Proulx’s words, “a pair of deuces going nowhere.” While they want to be cowboys, they are cast as shepherds. Sheep herders have always been looked down upon by cattle ranchers; it’s a history not lost on the author. We sense right from the beginning that nothing much good will come of them.

On horseback and foot, Jack, Ennis and their sheep dogs drive a thousand sheep high onto Brokeback Mountain, taking them ever higher to greener and greener pastures. Filmed on location in Alberta in the Canadian Rockies, the mountain with its tremendous beauty, breathtaking vistas and chilling isolation is as much a star in this production as is any of the actors. It is an idyllic setting, and the two men who have never known home discover that it is home to them. There they are hailed on, snowed on, rained on and finally, struck by a kind of lightning. That lightning doesn’t come from the great beyond, but it is just as natural. It comes from deep within the two of them. As they come to know and depend on each other this lightning is the electrical charge of physical attraction that can only be actualized in a physical relationship of sex, and gradually grows to love.

They are awkward and clumsy in their relationship as their physical attraction moves slowly to romantic love. They both want and need each other but have no experience in, or ability for, a meaningful relationship. We see them at turns kissing and hitting, holding and drawing blood, loving and despising.

As their summer on the mountain comes to an end, they are forced to go their separate ways, one going north and one going south in the great state of Wyoming. Four years pass before they see each other again, long enough for both of them to have married and become fathers. Ennis has married his teenage sweetheart Alma (played by Ledger's real life wife, Michelle Williams) whose strength of character comes through early and pervades the rest of the film. Lureen, a Texas rodeo queen with a wealthy father (Anne Hathaway) has lassoed Jack, but that rope slips off fairly quickly. Jack lives as though he is just biding his time until he and Ennis can build a life together, a lasting and secure partnership for life. Ennis never really admits that as a possibility, haunted by the childhood terror of having seen a man who was beaten to death for his supposed "lifestyle."

Over the next two decades, Ennis and Jack raise children, work on ranches and in rodeos, sell farm machinery and take occasional "fishing trips" near Brokeback – the only times and places that they can be true to who they really are. The movie goes back and forth between the occasional trips to the lush, verdant foothills and mountains and the dry, arid flatlands where Jack and Ennis are forced to spend 95% of their lives. In one of those dusty places, Alma begins to realize that no fish are ever caught on these trips, and in the other, Lureen seems to resign herself to an affectionate but loveless marriage.

Over the years, Ennis develops the philosophy, "If you can't fix it, you gotta stand it," while Jack pines for something fuller, something more authentic. Gradually, Jack turns to other sources to satisfy his longings and Ennis becomes an angry, bitter drunk always looking for a fight as he resists his love for Jack. Everyone around them is hurt by their inability to express their love, their longing, and their companionship honestly and openly. The years of living in the dark, of emotional physical isolation, the internalized homophobia, the denial of self and the denial of love lay waste to all around. All that we see and feel is desolation and pain. (see *Epiphany on Brokeback Mountain*, David Jenkins, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, February, 2006).

This movie, which some think was robbed of Best Picture of the Year at the Academy Awards, has been dubbed the "gay cowboy movie" of the year. Even actors like Tony Curtis refused to see it because of its gay theme. And he had a vote! In some senses it is a gay cowboy movie: two young, gangly Marlboro men-in-the-making develop and act on an attraction that breaks their hearts, the hearts of everyone around them, and the hearts of people like us who listen to their story. Annie Proulx, however, has been clear about her full intentions with *Brokeback Mountain*. In simple language she has said, "It is a story of destructive rural homophobia." In that senses, the conservative Christians who have warned their adherents against this movie are absolutely right. It is about changing hearts and minds.

Throughout the film we witness panoramic views not only of glorious mountains, but of systemic, cultural homophobia ruining the lives of everyone it touches – it ruins them physically, emotionally, economically and socially. No one is immune – not their wives, their children, their friends, their parents. Jack and Ennis themselves store it in their bodies stifling hope, feeding fears, blurring the lines between intimacy and violence. It isolates them from each other, from the world and from themselves. They know its destructive force but are powerless in dealing with it. At one point, in justifiable fear, Ennis says to Jack, "Bottom line, we're around each other and this thing grabs on to us again in the wrong place, wrong time, and we'll be dead." This is hardly overly dramatic when you remember that Matthew Shepard, (the name is almost ironic given this film) a young gay man was crucified on a fence in rural Wyoming in 1989, a year after Proulx penned her story. This story touches hearts, because this story continues today.

Perhaps this is why it took eight years to get this story on to the big screen. Producer after producer, director after director, actor after actor admired the intensity of the story, confessed that it brought them to tears, but steadily declined to participate in the project. Now that the film has been produced, it has received huge critical acclaim. Ang Lee the wonderful Taiwanese director of films like *Sense and Sensibility* and *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* picked up the script and said that it was a love story that had to be made. Together, they shopped it around and finally got the money and the people to put it together.

Now that the film has been made it has received rave reviews from everyone. Peter Howell of the *Toronto Star* praised both its director and cinematographer for their minimalist approach, “focus[ing] on the space between the lines, the sighs beneath the wind, and the long empty highways that lead to all places, and to nowhere.” The sound track has been praised for its plaintive Latin-American inspired guitar instrumentals and plaintive country and western tunes, both of which set a mood of isolation and yearning. Endless reviewers go to great lengths to underscore the universality of the theme of this movie, down-playing it as a gay movie, claiming that it is almost incidental that it is two men who fall in love in the story. They say that any two people who have found love and been denied it or robbed of it in some way due to race or ethnicity or religion can relate completely to its theme of forbidden love. Roger Ebert even went so far as to say, “I can imagine someone weeping at this film, identifying with it, because he always wanted to stay in the Marines, or be an artist or a cabinetmaker.”

While I agree that it has parallels with stories of love lost, of dreams dashed, I think it is more than that. If this were just such a universal story it would not have taken eight long years to get it produced. Producers, directors, actors, even location managers, would not have avoided it like the plague if it were just a story of forbidden love. If there were not something more potent here, the producers would not have gone to such great lengths to completely avoid the words “gay” and “homosexual,” in their forty-nine pager press kit. If there were not something in this film that would bite at the nerve of mainline audiences, challenge some long-held assumptions, and capture the wrath of conservative Christians around the planet, it would not have been reduced to “a story of monumental conflict” at the Golden Globes, and Heath Ledger’s character would not have been simply seen as “a cowboy caught up in a complicated love.”

Yes, this is a story of monumental conflict and it is about a complicated love, but, my friends, it is much more than that. It is a story about the psychological terror that many young gay and lesbian people have and about the great strides that society still needs to take in helping them, helping us, simply accept who we are. It is a story of the psychological terror that many gay men, and many lesbian women have about their desires, their being, their very makeup. That makes it different from stories about love denied because of ethnicity, or religion, or class, or race. Romeo and Juliet may have been denied their love by family, by social structures, by the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues, but they did not grow up hating themselves, and imposing upon themselves what has become known as the closet. The difference in this story has to do with the self-loathing of the characters. These two men cannot move beyond the internal and external constrictions that they face in their own lives and to express whom they feel God has called them to be. That’s the drama of the story, that’s the heartbreak of the story. That’s the reason it wasn’t produced easily.

Daniel Mendelsohn, in an article in *The New York Review of Books* (February 23, 2006) claims that Annie Proulx, the writer of the story, Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana, its screenplay writers, and Ang

Lee, its director, were well aware of this reality, and exceedingly sensitive to it – despite the official rhetoric about the universality of the film. The themes that they are working with are not unique to the modern homosexual experience, but they combine together in a unique way in our era among gay and lesbian people. They are themes of repression, both self-repression from within and repression from others, containment, the emptiness of unrealized lives, fear, self-loathing, and violence. These themes are magnified because they so profoundly have affected the natural instinct for people, for all of us to form, maintain and cherish healthy relationships. Systemic discrimination cripples gay and lesbian people and that crippling ripples through families and communities in violent and self-destructive ways around the world.

Yes, this movie is a love story, a fragile love story. Yes, I am glad that some people see it simply as that and are big enough, strong enough to say that it is universal in nature and that even from their heterosexual vantage point they relate to it. Yes, I am glad that folks have dared to make a movie about love that is limitless and loneliness that sees no possible relief. But, friends, the Christian fundamentalists are right in one respect, this is a gay movie. It does promote an ideology. It is a call for social change and it does demand a response. It does that by portraying, with particular grace, a gay story that I know far too well, both first and second hand.

It portrays that story not only through dialogue but also through the use of space. The lovers are only happy outdoors, unfenced, where enormous skies and vast landscapes suggest that what these men feel for each other is as “natural” and God-given as anything. Other scenes, where they are separated from each other look cramped and claustrophobic, often in their homes pacing like caged animals. It is in the verdant lush and green mountainside where the two men are open and happy and unfettered to be who they are. In the rest of the film the scenes are always on the flatlands, dusty places where hearts are broken and lives are twisted. Ang Lee knew what he was doing in this film.

In our colour theme this year, one could easily characterize both Jack and Ennis as cowardly, as yellow. And, in some ways they are. They are fearful. But there is a reason, and that reason has more to do with us, with society, with the church, with “the majority” than it does with these two men. I think casting actors like Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger in these roles and having them portray Marlboro men in the making, reminds us that it is not their weakness, their lack of courage, or their lack of strength that forces them into this situation. It is the lack of courage outside and around them. Frankly, if the story had been about two fabulous show dancers who discover love for each other on Broadway we might have missed this point. Because this is a “gay cowboy” movie it portrays strength of character and redirects our attention from them to their pain and brokenness. Proulx has brilliantly managed to tell a story that points its finger back at us, and challenges those with power in society to make a difference. To let the sun shine for others.

Our reading from Numbers today is a strange reading about the people of God facing dangers and being afraid. The people of God are afraid. They have been denied water. They have been denied food. They have been denied sleep and they are longing to go back to Egypt to an old way. They are afraid to carry on in this journey. In the latest disaster, poisonous snakes have surrounded them. They ask Moses for help. Moses cries up to God and says, “What should I do?” Very strangely the message that Moses gets, is to fashion a poisonous snake and put it on a stake and show it to the people. What Moses is doing is asking the people to confront their fears, to face their fears and to trust that God will guide them. There is nothing too great for God not to satisfy. There is no fear too strong for God to abate.

The Gospel reading today reminds us that *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* Did you get that? God so loved the world. Not some of the world. Not the world of the majority of the world. Not some of the world – those who are right handed, rather than left handed, those with brown eyes rather than blue eyes, those with pale skin rather than dark skin, those with higher intelligence rather than those with lesser. God so loved the whole world. God loved every living creature in that world, and God longs for that world to be redeemed, made whole and to be made healthy. God gave that story to Annie Proulx to tell, to remind us that God's love knows no bounds. It is wide, it is deep, it is long it, is high, it is as big as the Rockies, it is as deep as any river

Ennis says, "If you can't fix it, you gotta stand it." God says that you can fix it. God says that you have the power to face the world in all its difficulty, in all its betrayals, in all its anxieties, in all its fears, with every tire iron that is going to bash a young person and say indeed you can fix it. Thanks be to God, for that is the world that God loves. Amen.