The Great Transition

Which Road to Reality?

Both Lewis and Freud agreed on the most important question concerning the spiritual worldview: Is it true? Freud admitted that embracing the "fairy tales" of religious faith might bring one con­ solation. But he insisted that in the long run it could only create difficulty: "Its consolations deserve no trust. Experience teaches us that the world is no nursery." This raises another central question: Does it work? Does· the spiritual worldview hinder functioning or enhance it? Does it provide resources that make our few days on this planet more meaningful? Freud argues that because it is not true, it can't work. Basing one's life on an illusion, on a false premise, will make living more difficult. Only the truth can help us confront the harsh realities of life. Lewis, however, argues that the most important reality concerns our relationship with the Person who made us. Until that relationship is established, no accomplishment, no fame or fortune will ever satisfy us. Who is right? Before looking further into the arguments and lives of these renowned intellectuals, let's consider Lewis's change of worldview. Is there anything to be learned from this transition?

It happened when he was thirty-one years old. The change revolutionized his life, infused his mind with purpose and meaning, and dramatically increased his productivity; it also radically altered his values, his image of himself, and his relationships to others. This experience not only turned Lewis *around,* but turned him *outward­* from a focus on himself to a focus on others.

Even his temperament changed. People who knew him before and after his conversion write about his becoming more settled, with an inner quietness and tranquility. A buoyant cheerfulness re­ placed his pessimism and despair. On the last days before he died, those who were with Lewis spoke of his "cheerfulness" and "calm­ ness."

Lewis referred to this experience as "my conversion." Webster's defines conversion as "an experience associated with a definite and decisive adoption of religious faith." The term conversion occurs in­ frequently in the Scriptures. In the Old Testament it refers to the people of Israel turning from idolatry to the true God, "the Father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." In the New Testament, it is synonymous with being "born again." In the third chapter of the Gospel According to St. John, Jesus tells a Jewish ruler named Nicodemus, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." When the puzzled Nicodemus asks how a person can enter again into his mother's womb to experience rebirth, Jesus explains the second birth is not physical, but "of the spirit." As one's physical birth begins one's relationship with parents, one's spiritual birth begins one's relationship with the Creator.

According to a recent Gallup poll, about eight out of ten adult Americans profess faith in a personal God, and about half of them report having a conversion experience. Many prominent men and women from the apostle Paul, Augustine, Blaise Pascal, Jonathan Edwards, David Livingstone, Dorothy Day, and Leo Tolstoy to more modem writers such as Malcolm Muggeridge, Eldridge Cleaver, and Charles Colson-all describe in their writings spiritual experiences that radically transformed their lives. To understand this significant part of our population, we need insight into the process of conversion. How does it happen? What actually takes place in the individual? As a psychiatrist, I have had a long-standing clinical interest in these experiences.

Freud expressed doubt about them, especially the claim that they formed the basis for insight into the spiritual worldview. "I . . . once ... was blind, but now I see," wrote John Newton after his con­ version, in the famous hymn "Amazing Grace." Newton, the former British slave trader, who, with William Wilberforce, became a seminal figure in the abolition of slavery in Great Britain, wrote this hymn some fifty years before Freud's birth, and it may have been known to Freud. If a conversion experience is necessary to "see" spiritually, Freud wonders about all those who do not have this experience. He asks, "If the truth of religious doctrines is dependent on an inner experience which bears witness to that truth, what is one to do about the many people who do not have this rare experience?" In other words, Freud asks, 'What about me?"

Freud appears to accept these inner experiences when they occur in people he knows and admires. For example, he never questions his close friend Oskar Pfister about the possibility of self-deception, of harboring an illusion. And Freud makes little mention of the famous conversion experience of St. Paul, whom he quotes frequently and classifies among "the great thinkers": "I have always had a special sympathy for St. Paul as a genuinely Jewish character. Is he not the only one who stands completely in the light of history?"

Paul describes his experience-perhaps the most dramatic and famous of all conversions-in Acts 22: "About noon ... suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice ... “If one begins with Freud's assumption that God does not exist, then the experience of Paul can only be explained as an expression of pathology, a case of visual and auditory hallucinations. Indeed, some modem neurologists have attributed his conversion experience to a seizure disorder known as temporal lobe epilepsy.

In an interview published in 1927, Freud mentioned his lack of faith and indifference to an afterlife. In response, an American physician wrote Freud of a recent experience in which "God made it clear to my soul that the Bible was His Word that the teachings about Jesus Christ were true, and that Jesus was our only hope. After such a clear revelation I accepted the Bible as God's word and Jesus Christ as my personal Savior. Since then God has revealed Himself to me by many infallible proofs . . . I beg you as a brother physician to give thought to this most important matter, and I can assure you, if you look into this subject with an open mind, God will reveal the truth to your soul ..." Freud wrote back that "God had not done so much for me. He had never allowed me to hear an inner voice; and if, in view of my age, he did not make haste, it would not be my fault if I remained to the end of my life what I now was-'an infidel Jew."'

Shortly afterward, Freud wrote an article titled "A Religious Experience" in which he psychoanalyzed the experience of the American physician, concluding that he suffered from "a hallucinatory psychosis." Freud wonders if this case throws "any light at all on the psychology of conversion in general." He admits, however, that "by no means" does this explain "every case of conversion." Perhaps Freud's different attitude toward people like St. Paul reflects a tacit acknowledgment that some of these experiences may be genuine and others pathologic. Or it may be simply one of the contradictions in Freud stemming from his deep ambivalence toward the spiritual worldview.

The field of psychiatry, strongly influenced by Freud, has tended until relatively recently to ignore the spiritual dimension of a person, and to dismiss all faith as "neurotically determined," "an illusion," "a projection of childhood wishes," "a hallucinatory psychosis," etc. During the past several years, however, physicians increasingly recognize the importance of understanding the spiritual dimension of their patients. At the Annual Meeting of the American Psychiatric Association held in May of 2000, no less than thirteen of the proceedings focused on spiritual issues, the highest number of such events in the history of the organization.

Several years ago I conducted a research project exploring Harvard University students who, while undergraduates, experienced what they referred to as "religious conversion." I interviewed these students as well as people who knew them before and after their conversion. Were these experiences an expression of pathology, i.e., isolating and destructive, or were they adaptive and constructive? Did these experiences impair or enhance functioning? Results published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* stated that each subject described "a marked improvement in ego functioning, [including} a radical change in life style with an abrupt halt in the use of drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes; improved impulse control, with adoption of a strict sexual code demanding chastity or marriage with fidelity; improved academic performance; enhanced self- image and greater access to inner feelings; an increased capacity for establishing 'close, satisfying relationships'; improved communication with parents, though most parents at first expressed some degree of alarm over the student's rather sudden, intense religious interest; a positive change in affect, with a lessening of 'existential despair'; and a decrease in preoccupation with the passage of time and apprehension over death."

The question remains, however, how do these experiences occur? What causes these dramatic changes in individuals? How did C. S. Lewis, a gifted, highly intelligent, critical, militant atheist, and a respected faculty member in perhaps the most prestigious university in the world, come to embrace a worldview so in conflict with his atheism? What led to that experience that so radically transformed his life-his temperament, motivation, relationships, productivity, and his very purpose? What led him not only to embrace the spiritual worldview, but to spend the rest of his life defining it, defending it, and becoming its "most influential spokesman"? What led Lewis to his firm conviction, not only that an Intelligence exists beyond the universe, but that that very being stepped into human history?

Beforehand, Lewis had been even more certain of his atheism than was Freud. Freud wavered in his atheism as an undergraduate at the University of Vienna; Lewis, at Oxford, never wavered. He met and liked people in the clergy, but writes, "Though I liked clergymen as I liked bears, I had as little wish to be in the church as in the zoo." The notion of an Ultimate Authority who might interfere in his life made him feel nauseated: "There was no region even in the innermost depth of one's soul ... which one could surround with a barbed wire fence and guard with a notice 'No Admittance.' And that was what I wanted; some area, however small, of which I could say to all other beings, 'This is my business and mine only."' Lewis recognized in himself a deep-seated wish that God not exist.

Lewis wrote in a letter that the transforming change in his life was "very gradual and intellectual . . . and not simple." First, throughout his life, from the time he was a boy living in Belfast to his conversion in his early thirties, he periodically experienced a sense of intense longing for some place or person. He struggled for years to understand it. Lewis recalled that when eight years old, an intense desire "suddenly arose in me without warning, and as if from the depth not of years but of centuries . . . It was a sensation, of course, of desire, but desire for what?" Then, as suddenly as it appeared, "the desire was gone ... the whole world turned common­ place again, or only stirred by a longing for the longing that had just ceased. It had taken only a moment of time; and in a certain sense everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant in comparison." Lewis described this longing as "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction ... I call it Joy ... I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it, would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world." And he carefully distinguished this desire from wishful thinking. He writes: "Such longing is in itself the very reverse of wishful thinking: it is more like thoughtful wishing."

Although Lewis described this experience as "the central story of my life," he eventually came to realize that no human relationship could ever satisfy this longing. Joy was a "pointer to something other and outer," a signpost pointing to the Creator. After his great transition to faith, the experience of Joy "nearly lost all interest for me." He explains that "when we are lost in the woods the sight of a sign­ post is a great matter. He who first sees it cries 'Look.' The whole party gathers round and stares. But when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles, we shall not stop and stare."

Lewis's friends also played a critical role in his transition. When Lewis was a young Oxford don, a few of his close friends, people he admired, rejected their materialist worldview and became what he called "thoroughgoing super naturalists." Lewis thought it was all "arrant nonsense" and felt there was no danger of his being "taken in." Yet he experienced a "loneliness and sense of being deserted" by these friends. Then he met other faculty that he admired, especially Professor H. V. V. Dyson and Professor J. R.R. Tolkien. Both men were devout believers and both were to play an important role in Lewis's great transition. Lewis writes that these strange people "began to pop up on every side."

Lewis became aware that all the authors he most admired, both ancient and modern, embraced the spiritual worldview-Plato, Virgil, Dante, Johnson, Spenser, Milton, and more modern writers like George MacDonald and G. K. Chesterton. The materialists he read seemed by comparison "a little thin." (To be sure, Plato's spiritual­ ism differed from Chesterton's; but in a world divided between materialists and spiritualists, he could only be classified among the latter.)

G. K. Chesterton's Everlasting Man, a book that profoundly impressed him with arguments he later used in his own writings. Chesterton was a prolific British author, journalist, poet, and liter­ ary critic. Lewis first encountered his writings when nineteen years old and serving in the army. He became ill with trench fever and, while recovering in the hospital, read a book of Chesterton's essays. Lewis could not understand his positive reaction to Chesterton's spiritualism. He notes: "My pessimism, my atheism, and my hatred of sentiment would have made him to me the least congenial of all authors." Lewis then adds: "It would almost seem that Providence . . . quite overrules our previous tastes when it decides to bring two minds together."

In an interview in 1963, Lewis acknowledged that "the contemporary book that helped me most is Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man."* Elsewhere in his autobiography, he explained: "I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading." Al­ though "Chesterton had more sense than all the other modems put together," he suffered from that same "kink" as most of the other authors Lewis admired: Chesterton was a believer.

Then a second event happened that had "a shattering impact." One of the most militant atheists among the Oxford faculty, T. D. Weldon, sat in Lewis's room one evening and remarked that the historical authenticity of the Gospels was surprisingly sound. This deeply disturbed Lewis. He immediately understood the implications. If this "hardest boiled of all the atheists I ever knew" thought the Gospels true, where did that leave him? Where could he turn? 'Was there no escape?" He had considered the New Testament's stories to be myth, not historical fact. If they were true, he realized all other truth faded in significance. Did this mean his whole life was headed in the wrong direction?

Lewis remembered an incident that happened several years ear­ lier-on the first day he arrived at Oxford as a teenager. He left the train station carrying his bags and began to walk in the direction of the college, anticipating his first glimpse of the "fabled cluster of spires and towers" he had heard and dreamed of for so many years. As he walked and headed into open country, he could see no sign of the great university. When he turned around, he noticed the majestic college spires and towers on the opposite side of the town and realized he was headed in the wrong direction. Lewis wrote many years later in his autobiography, "I did not see to what extent this little adventure was an allegory of my whole life."

Lewis writes that he began to feel his "Adversary''-the One he wanted desperately not to exist-closing in on him. He felt hounded. Most of the great writers he admired and many of his closest friends were believers. "The fox had been dislodged ... and was now running in the open ... bedraggled and weary, hounds barely a field behind. And nearly everyone was now (one way or another) in the pack." Lewis wondered if they might be right. He realized he could use his will to "open the door or keep it shut."

He then made one of the most fateful decisions of his life. Lewis decided to open his mind and examine the evidence. "I was going up Headington Hill on top of a bus ... I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out . . . I could open the door or keep it shut ... The choice appeared to be momentous but it was strangely unemotional ... I chose to open ... I felt as if I were a man of snow at long last beginning to melt ... " When he made that decision, he began to feel the presence of Him whom he had desperately wanted not to meet.

Finally, Lewis surrendered. "You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity term ... I gave in, and admitted that God was God and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."

This first phase in the transition, Lewis explains, "was only to Theism, pure and simple ... I knew nothing yet about the Incarnation ... The God to whom I surrendered was sheerly nonhuman." Lewis experienced no personal relationship with this God, and at times, when he prayed, he felt he was "posting letters to a nonexistent address."

Once he accepted, with considerable resistance, the presence of an Intelligence beyond the universe, Lewis concluded that this Being demanded complete surrender and obedience:"... the demand was simply 'all' ... God was to be obeyed simply because He was God ... because of what He is in Himself ... If you ask why we should obey God, in the last resort the answer is, 'I am."'

At this time Lewis expressed confusion about the doctrines of the New Testament. He found that it was difficult to "believe something one doesn't understand.'' Lewis also wondered about the relevance of the Gospel story to modern life. 'What I couldn't understand was how the life and death of Someone Else (whoever he was) 2000 years ago could help us here and now ... " He found expressions like "'propitiation,' 'sacrifice' and 'the blood of the Lamb' either silly or shocking." He wrote: "My puzzle was the whole doctrine of redemption."

So he began reading the New Testament in Greek. His experience teaching philosophy made him aware of "the perplexing multiplicity of 'religions'" with conflicting claims. How could he possibly know which one contained the truth? Yet the comment by the "hard boiled Atheist" T. D. Weldon concerning the historical authenticity of the Gospels haunted Lewis. As he read the New Testament, he was struck by it. Lewis had spent his life reading ancient manuscripts. As an atheist, he, like Freud, considered the New Testament story sim­ ply another of the great myths. He knew well the ancient myths and legends-especially Norse mythology-and they moved him deeply. As a young adolescent, Lewis came upon the book Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods, and it rekindled the experience of joy that had been missing for many years. Many of these myths, such as those of Balder, Adonis, and Bacchus, contained stories similar to the one in the Bible-of a god coming to earth, dying to save his people, and rising again from the dead. Lewis had always considered the New Testament story simply another one of these myths.

But the Gospels, Lewis noted, did not contain the rich, imaginative writings of these talented, ancient writers. They appeared to be simple eyewitness accounts of historical events, primarily by Jews who were clearly unfamiliar with the great myths of the pagan world around them. Lewis writes: "I was by now too experienced in literary criticism to regard the Gospels as myths. They had not the mythical taste." He observes that they were different from anything else in literature. "If ever myth had become fact, had been incarnated, it would be just like this." In his book *Miracles,* Lewis explains that God sometimes uses myth to foretell what will eventually occur in history:"... the truth first appears in mythical form, and then by a long process of condensing or focusing finally becomes incarnate as history." Lewis felt that as the truth became historical reality it be­ comes more simple, "more prosaic," than the myth and is "less rich in many kinds of the imaginative beauties of the Pagan mythologies.” "Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it really happened ...," writes Lewis to Greeves.

He noted both the style and content of the Gospels: "Now as a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that whatever else the Gospels are they are not legends. I have read a great deal of legend (myth) and I am quite clear that they are not the same sort of thing. They are not artistic enough to be legends. From an imaginative point of view they are clumsy, they don't work ... Most of the life of Jesus is totally unknown to us ... and no people building up a leg­ end would allow that to be so."

His concept of the Central Figure in these documents began to change. As an atheist, Lewis had dismissed Jesus of Nazareth as a "Hebrew Philosopher," another great moral teacher. Now he began to see this figure in a different light: "... as real, as recognizable, through all that depth of time, as Plato's Socrates or Boswell's John­ son ... yet also numinous, lit by a light from beyond the world, a god. But if a god-we are no longer polytheists-then not a god, but God. Here and here only in all time the myth must have become fact; the Word flesh; God, Man."Lewis began to realize that this Person made unique claims about himself-claims that if true ruled out the possibility of his being a great moral teacher. First, Lewis points out that Jesus made the "appalling claim" to be the Messiah, to be God. He quotes Jesus Christ saying, "I am begotten of the One God, before Abraham was, I am"; Lewis continues: "...and re­ member what the words 'I am' were in Hebrew. They were the name of God, which must not be spoken by any human being, the name which it was death to utter." As a philologist, Lewis focuses on passages in the New Testament that refer to Christ as "begotten, not created" and "only begotten son." Lewis explains that "to beget is to become the father of: to create is to make ... What God begets is God; just as what man begets is man. What God creates is not God; just as what man makes is not man. That is why men are not Sons of God in the sense that Christ is."

Lewis noticed that this Person also claimed to forgive sins, to for­ give what people did to others. He wrote later: "Now unless the speaker is God, this is really so preposterous as to be comic. We can all understand how a man forgives offences against himself ... But what should we make of a man . . . who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men's toes and stealing other men's money?" Even Freud seemed to realize the uniqueness of this claim. In a letter to Oskar Pfister, Freud writes: "And now, just suppose I said to a patient: 'I, Professor Sigmund Freud, forgive thee thy sins.' What a fool I should make of myself."

Lewis argues that the claim of Jesus to be the Messiah and to for­ give sins rules out the possibility of his being simply a great moral teacher. Here he was influenced by Chesterton. In *The Everlasting Man,* Chesterton pointed out that no great moral teacher ever claimed to be God-not Mohammed, not Micah, not Malachi, or Confucius, or Plato, or Moses, or Buddha: "Not one of them ever made that claim . . . and the greater the man is, the less likely he is to make the very greatest claim.'' Lewis expands on Chesterton's point by writing that "if you had gone to Buddha and asked him 'Are you the son of Brahma?' he would have said, 'My son, you are still in the vale of illusion.' If you had gone to Socrates and asked, 'Are you Zeus?' he would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mo­ hammed and asked, 'Are you Allah?' he would first have rent his clothes and then cut your head off ... The idea of a great moral teacher saying what Christ said is out of the question."

The claim of Jesus Christ to be God and to have the authority to forgive sins left only one of three possibilities: he was either deluded or deliberately attempting to deceive his followers for some ulterior purpose, or he was who he claimed to be. As Lewis continued his reading of the New Testament documents, he agreed with Chesterton that the evidence weighed against this Person being evil or psychotic. (Psychiatrists do indeed see people who claim to be God, but they are invariably severely impaired in their functioning and have a distorted concept of reality.) For Lewis the eyewitness accounts of the New Testament did not reflect the teachings of a lunatic. He notes "the general agreement that in the teaching of this Man and of His immediate followers, moral truth is exhibited at its purest and best . . . it is full of wisdom and shrewdness . . . the product of a sane mind." Later he closed a chapter in his most widely read book with "A man who was merely a man and said the things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic ... or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice ... You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

Chesterton profoundly influenced Lewis's acceptance of "the Incarnation," the astounding conviction that the Creator of the universe actually stepped into human history. Chesterton writes that the New Testament story "is nothing less than the loud assertion that this mysterious maker of the world has visited his world in person. It declares that really and even recently, or right in the middle of historic times, there did walk into the world this original invisible being; about whom the thinkers make theories and the mythologists hand down myths; the Man Who Made the World. That such a higher personality exists beyond all things had indeed always been implied by the best thinkers, as well as by all the most beautiful leg­ ends. But nothing of this sort had ever been implied in any of them ... The most that any religious prophet had said was that he was the true servant of such a being ... The most that any primitive myth had ever suggested was that the Creator was present at the Creation. But that the Creator was present . . . in the detailed daily life of the Roman Empire-that is something utterly unlike any­ thing else in nature. It is the one great startling statement that man has made since he spoke his first articulate word ... it makes nothing but dust and nonsense of comparative religion." The word "Gospel" means good news. Chesterton notes that it is "news that seems too good to be true."

The news is good because it offers a way out of the despair of *try*ing to keep the moral law and failing-as Lewis did. As he continued to read the Bible seriously, he noted that none of the main characters (except one) kept the moral law. Adam blamed Eve for his disobedience-the Fall, which marked the separation of the human race from the Creator and the beginning of disease and death; Abraham lied about his relationship to his wife Sarah; David committed adultery and murder; even the apostle Peter denied knowing Jesus. All this drove home the point that no one except God Him­ self could keep the moral law. Transgression of the law separated us from God. All needed atonement-to be reconciled to Him. The New Testament affirmed that God sent His "only begotten Son" to make this reconciliation possible-to redeem us. Lewis began to realize that all of the pagan myths about a dying god, the prophesies of the Hebrew Scriptures, and even the pattern of vegetable life-­ "it must belittle itself into something hard, small and deathlike, it must fall into the ground: thence the new life rescinds"-all point to that moment in history when the Creator Himself would come to earth, die, and rise again. All this to free humanity from the consequences of the Fall-to redeem the world. Lewis began to "see" what previously had appeared "silly or shocking." The pieces of the puzzle were coming together.

One might ask how Lewis, as an atheist, a brilliant scholar who spent a good part of his life in the Oxford libraries, could have avoided reading the New Testament documents-- considered among the most influential works in the history of civilization. Lewis certainly knew more books had been written about Jesus Christ than about anyone else in history, that He appeared in the writings of Roman and Jewish historians and therefore was more than a myth. Indeed, all events in Western history are recorded as happening before or after His birth. Perhaps part of the answer is that during his years as an atheist Lewis describes in himself a "willful blindness."

On the evening of September 19, 1931, perhaps the most significant in his life, Lewis invited two close friends-Dyson and Tolkien-for dinner. They began discussing myth and metaphor. After dinner they strolled the Oxford campus, along beautiful Addison's Walk. This mile-long path under magnificent beech trees cuts through open fields of flowers and is often visited by deer. The men talked late into the night on this warm, still evening, and as Lewis would later recall, a sudden rush of wind caused the first leaves to fall. The three men stood in the dark and listened. Perhaps this came to have symbolic meaning for Lewis, who had been reading in the Gospel According to St. John: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). The discussion continued until the clock in Magdalen Tower struck three in the morning. Tolkien, who apparently didn't realize how late it was, hurried home to his wife. Lewis and Dyson continued for another hour.

Twelve days after that evening, Lewis wrote to Arthur Greeves: "I have just passed on ... to definitely believing in Christ. I will *try* to explain this another time. My long night talk with Dyson and Tolkien had a good deal to do with it." And in other letters: "... the intellectual side of my conversion was *not* simple"; "Dyson and Tolkien were the immediate human causes of my conversion." "Conversions happen in all sorts of different ways: some sharp and catastrophic (like St. Paul, St. Augustine, or Bunyan), some very gradual and intellectual (like my own)."

But how exactly did this take place? He writes that he knows *"when"* it happened but not exactly *"how."* He was on a motorcycle heading to the zoo. He writes: 'When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the Zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion ... " He then uses a rather striking yet familiar metaphor: "It was more like when a man, after a long sleep, still lying motion­ less in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake."

Certainly we all experience, almost every day of our lives, without knowing exactly how, the transition from the unreal world of sleep and dreams to the world of being awake. We know when we awake, as Lewis knew *when* he came to believe in Jesus Christ. He knew what people and events influenced that process just as we know what events-the daylight, the alarm clock, and others-influence when we awake. But *how* the actual process of his change from un-belief to belief occurred-like our process of change from sleep to wakefulness-remains largely undescribed by the articulate Lewis. Once Lewis made the conscious decision to overcome his "willful blindness" and examine the evidence, and the second decision to surrender his will, only then did he pass from what he described as the darkness of unbelief and into the light of reality. He awakened. Lewis insists that his conversion was primarily "intellectual" and gives a long, detailed description of the thought processes involved. On the motorcycle headed for the zoo, Lewis is careful to explain, "I had not exactly spent the journey . . . in great emotion ... 'Emotional' is perhaps the last word we can apply to some of the most important events."

As a psychiatrist, I find it difficult to believe that these events were entirely unemotional, even for Lewis. We feel more easily than we think, and our feelings often control our decisions and behavior more than our thoughts. Perhaps, because of the traumatic experiences of his early life, Lewis found his feelings less accessible. There is considerable evidence for this in Lewis's autobiography. For example, he comments: "... the ups and downs of my father's emotional life ... bred in me, long before I was able to give it a name, a certain distrust or dislike of emotion as something uncomfortable and embarrassing and even dangerous."

Nevertheless, Lewis's intellect certainly played a significant role in his conversion. He realized his lack of knowledge formed the basis of his unbelief. As Lewis explained in a letter written shortly after his transition, 'What has been holding me back ... has not been so much a difficulty in believing as a difficulty in knowing ... you can't believe a thing while you are ignorant what the thing is." Only after reading the New Testament did he acquire the knowledge and begin to understand what eventually formed the basis of his faith.

There are many similarities between Lewis's transition and the conversion experiences of the undergraduate students I have re­ searched. First, all the experiences occurred within the context of a modem, liberal university where the climate tended to be hostile to such experiences. Second, both Lewis and the students observed in the lives of people they admired some quality they found missing in their own lives. Lewis observed this in the lives of the great writers as well as certain members of the Oxford faculty; the Harvard students, in the lives of other students. They were clearly influenced by their peers. Third, both Lewis and each of the students made a conscious exertion of their wills to open their minds and examine the evidence. Lewis began to read the New Testament in Greek; the students tended to join Bible study groups on campus. They be­ came convinced of the historical reliability of these documents and came to understand the Central Figure not as one who died two thousand years ago, but as "a living reality" who made unique claims about Himself and with whom they had a personal relationship.

Fourth, both Lewis and each of the students, after their conversion, found their new faith enhanced their functioning. They reported positive changes in their relationships, their image of themselves, their temperament, and their productivity. People who knew Lewis and those who knew the students before and after their transition confirmed these changes.

But could all of these changes be explained psychologically? Could Lewis and these students have experienced some kind of emotional breakdown? If Freud placed Lewis on his couch, would he have found evidence for "obsessional neurosis" or "hallucinatory psychosis"? The evidence weighs against this possibility. Emotional illness, as understood by Freud (and most dynamically oriented psychiatrists today), is caused by unconscious conflicts that seriously impair the functioning of patients in important areas of their lives. Psychiatrists determine whether a patient needs treatment by the degree of impairment in functioning. If Freud analyzed Lewis, the evidence suggests that he would not have dismissed him as dysfunctional; rather, Freud would have admired him-his intellect and his literary skills-as he did St. Paul and his close friend Oskar Pfister. As a skilled clinician, Freud would have observed that the transition Lewis experienced matured him emotionally and did not impair, but enhanced, his functioning. Perhaps he might have concluded, as the noted psychoanalyst Erik Erikson did, that the per­ son who, like Lewis, experiences a spiritual transition "is always older, or in early years suddenly becomes older, than ... his parents and teachers, and focuses in a precocious way on what it takes others a lifetime to gain a mere inkling of: the questions of how to escape corruption in living and how in death to give meaning to life."