4-28-2022

Identity Formation and Powerful Narrative: What the Church Can Learn from Disney

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IDENTITY FORMATION AND POWERFUL NARRATIVE
WHAT THE CHURCH CAN LEARN FROM DISNEY

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Practical Theology
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
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February 2022

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For Maxx, and for Mom and Dad.
Thank you for filling my life with stories.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the love and support of my husband, Maxx Fisher. I am incredibly grateful for the immense amount of encouragement you have shown me over the past several years, and especially during this writing process. We have experienced some major changes together, between getting married, moving into a new house, starting your first call, beginning my internship, and finishing classes at the Seminary. I am so blessed to have you to navigate life with. I will forever appreciate our many conversations about this thesis, and all the caffeine you bought me. Maxx, you inspire me every day with your dedication to your loved ones, and I am so incredibly proud of you.

I would also like to acknowledge my amazing parents, Chuck and Mary Schlie. With your words and your actions, you have taught me so much about God's love. Your marriage and your lives are a beautiful example of how to live out the Christian faith, and I am so thankful to have parents who I respect so immensely. "Keep it Crisp!"

I wish to extend a special thanks to Dr. Nielsen, my thesis advisor. You helped take a simple idea and turn it into something to be proud of. I truly appreciate all of the time, devotion, and effort that you dedicate to all the students at Concordia Seminary. I would also like to thank Dr. Bond for your wisdom over the last several years, and Dr. Hoeltke for your guidance throughout the writing process. Thank you to my fellow students, Alicia, Christina, Erin, Sarah, and Zoe, for learning with me and growing with me in the Deaconess program. Your friendship has been an incredible gift, and I cannot wait to see how God uses your lives for his kingdom.

Lastly, I would like to give thanks to God for all of his abundant blessings and everlasting love. I am so grateful for the opportunity to attend Concordia Seminary to learn more about our Creator's divine goodness and mercy. All Glory be to the one who reigns forever, Amen.

ABSTRACT

Fisher, Janie, B. "Identity Formation and Powerful Narrative: What the Church Can Learn from Disney." Master's. thesis, Concordia Seminary, 2021. 104 pp.

This thesis explores a phenomenon I first observed while working for The Walt Disney Company in Florida. Many people seem to be dedicated to Disney in a distinctly religious way, giving the company their time, money, abilities, and heart. Disney is one of the most successful organizations in America, and they have mastered the art of storytelling in their films and theme parks. These stories can be used for identity formation, as they teach people who they are, what the world is like, and how they ought to live. Disney uses religious means to help their fans feel as if they are a part of a bigger picture and narrative. When people do not see themselves as a part of God's grand story, many times they look to the things of this world to find meaning and purpose. This thesis explores Disney as an example of what religion looks like in modern America, and why a religion centered around making one feel happy is so enticing. I consider what the church can responsibly learn from Disney, and how to utilize their wisdom to bring people to the true faith and lasting fulfillment in Christ Jesus.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Walt Disney Company has been a staple in American culture since the 1930s, becoming synonymous with the world of entertainment with conglomerates in movies, television, theme parks, stores, restaurants, toys, merchandising, and other commercial arenas. The average American can hardly experience a single day without seeing at least one product of this megacompany. Part of Disney's success is its loyal fanbase. Disney fans line up again and again to attend its theme parks: Disneyland, Walt Disney World, and international locations, despite cost increases over the years. Individuals "Disney-fy" their lives by incorporating Disney décor into their homes, purchasing Disney wardrobes, and getting Disney themed tattoos. The company even provides a wedding planning service, fittingly titled "Disney's Fairytale Weddings," so that couples can create a magical themed nuptial experience. Still, perhaps the most dedicated fans are the employees of the theme parks, known as "cast members."

In September 2020, in the midst of the Coronavirus global pandemic, Disney made the decision to terminate the positions of 28,000 cast members.[1] Josh D'Amaro, chairman of Disney Parks, Experiences and Products, said in an email to cast members, "As heartbreaking as it is to take this action, this is the only feasible option we have in light of the prolonged impact of Covid-19 on our business, including limited capacity due to physical distancing requirements and the continued uncertainty regarding the duration of the pandemic."[2] This decision was shocking to many, especially long-time employees of the company, who relied on their positions

[1] Brooks Barnes, "Disney Lays Off 28,000, Mostly at Its 2 U.S. Theme Parks," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/business/disney-theme-park-workers-layoffs.html.

[2] "Letter From Josh D'Amaro, Chairman, Disney Parks, Experience and Products to Disney Employees." *DAPS MAGIC*, 30 Sept. 2020, dapsmagic.com/2020/09/letter-from-josh-damaro-chairman-disney-parks-experience-and-products-to-disney-employees/.

to financially support their families. Some would expect these former cast members to be bitter or angry towards the Disney company. But even after losing their jobs and their livelihoods, many former cast members have stood with the company on their decision, supporting Disney on social media, and continuing to be a patron of their brand. One cartoon circulated on current and former cast member social media pages. The image,[3] pictured below, is a depiction of the famous "Partners" statue, located in the center of Walt Disney World's, Magic Kingdom.

Figure 1: Partners Cartoon

The statue ordinarily is the representation of Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse holding hands, with Walt pointing out to the distant future. However, in the cartoon, Mickey is featured consoling Walt, saying "Don't worry partner, they'll (the terminated cast members) still believe in magic." The cartoon is an example of how loyal some Disney fans are to the company. One

[3] Jason, Zucker (@jason.k.zucker), "Don't worry partner, they'll still believe in magic," Facebook, September 30, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/JustDisney/posts/dont-worry-partner-theyll-still-believe-in-magic-credit-jason-zucker-facebookcom/1561030217413931/.

might even call it a type of religious devotion and could represent the culture's move away from the church to other places of "worship."[4]

As more Americans leave traditional religions such as Christianity, they seek meaning and purpose in other places. Many worship the god of entertainment. According to James K. A. Smith, "human persons are not primarily or for the most part thinkers, or even believers. Instead, human persons are-fundamentally and primordially-lovers."[5] We can see what people truly love by how they spend their money, time, and thoughts. If they love an idea or brand, like the Disney Company, that may become a religion to them, and it will become an identity forming framework by which they view most everything in the world. In a significant way, the Disney Company creates this identity for their fans through the use of narrative, revealing their masterful use of story. They have the potential to teach language, ritual, and values to the next generation. In fact, Disney is doing this so well that the church may benefit from studying how this company has become so successful in creating a religion-like following through the use of narrative and other religious means.

The Thesis

By studying why people are religiously affected by Disney, this thesis will ask what the church can learn from Disney and use appropriately in our care of members of the church. Disney uses the historical church's elements of storytelling, history, moral teaching, and language to help their fans feel a part of a bigger picture and narrative. This company has also mastered the art of embracing change and updating the technology in their parks to make it

[4] NPR Staff, "More Young People Are Moving Away from Religion, But Why?" *NPR*, January 15, 2013, https://www.npr.org/2013/01/15/169342349/more-young-people-are-moving-away-from-religion-but-why.

[5] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 41.

accessible to future generations, all the while retaining the traditions and nostalgia that keeps the atmosphere familiar to previous ones. Disney provides a structure of ideas and terminology in which to navigate the world, including for those who do not have traditional religious affiliations. They teach people their place in society, how to cope with death and loss, and what values ought to be placed in the highest importance. These are all crucial to identity formation. While all these factors would be profitable for study, this thesis will focus on how Disney can help the church serve their neighbors and the church better in the area of identity formation through powerful narrative.

The Current Status of the Question

Many scholars have written on Disney—its history, ideologies, and impact on American culture. In *Walt Disney: Art and Politics in the American Century*, Steven Watts explains why Disney stories are so appealing to Americans. Watts uses religious language in the first page of the journal article, saying, "Disney disciples venerate Saint Walt as the purveyor of innocent imagination and uplifting fantasy."[6] The article comments on how in a modernist environment Disney stories embrace the illogical, with cartoons that romanticize the ordinary and bring life to the sentimental. These stories connect with people on a primal level, in a similar fashion to sharing folk legends around the fire. People simply found themselves in Disney cartoons. "Evoking an image of the vigorous, virtuous common man, Disney's 1930s films presented scenarios where the dogged persistence of Mickey Mouse and the libidinous outbursts of Donald Duck reaffirmed the ordinary citizen's capacity to survive and conquer all adversity."[7]

[6] Steven Watts, "Walt Disney: Art and Politics in the American Century," *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 1 (1995): 84, https://doi.org/10.2307/2081916, 90.

[7] Watts, "Walt Disney: Art and Politics," 97.

As the Disney company expanded from films to theme parks, scholarly works followed suit. Academics commented on how theme parks provide a lens through which visitors can view the world. While films grant access to concepts and stories, theme parks offer complete immersion into worldviews. William F. Van Wert, Author of *Disney World and Posthistory,* describes Walt Disney World's entry point, titled "Main Street USA" this way, "Once more, temporality is belied. No Main Street ever looked like this, except perhaps in movie musicals like *State Fair* or *Meet Me in Saint Louis.* Yet this Main Street does a lively business, surviving its supposed death and disappearance through ongoing sales. No signs of decay anywhere. No signs of change."[8] Van Wert continues on to say that while Disney's Main Street is alive and well, millions of real-life Main Street's across America have already disappeared. The reality of this era may be gone, but it can be experienced by new generations in the utopia of a theme park, where even death is conquerable. "Disney World is presented as imaginary in order to make us disbelieve that the rest is real. History can be evaded. Death can be deferred."[9] *The Disney Way of Death* elaborates further on how the Disney company guides Americans in how to process death.

> His films are especially significant cultural productions; they act, in fact, as modern fairy tales, primarily but not exclusively created for consumption of children, and convey distinctive religious messages about life and meaning in the twentieth century. These messages can be characterized as "religious" because they teach about order, meaning, transcendence, and orientation. In addition, like many religious expressions, they acquire social weight because they are so intimately tied to a desire to triumph over death.[10]

Americans are famously uncomfortable with death, and without Christianity, they may turn

[8] William F. van Wert, "Disney World and Posthistory," *Cultural Critique*, no. 32 (1995): https://doi.org/10.2307/1354535, 192.

[9] van Wert, "Disney World and Posthistory," 209.

[10] Gary Laderman, "The Disney Way of Death," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 1 (March 2000): 37.

to other sources, such as Disney, to help them cope with this reality. These ideas were expanded upon by scholars who recognize how Disney uses the incredible and the exceptional for commercialistic and consumeristic purposes. Sarah Marshall tells the story of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel visiting Disneyland during his tour across the United States. He observed that Disneyland was, "A kingdom unto itself-quite literally. A kingdom all of whose citizens are happy. . . In Disneyland, the land of children's dreams, everything is simple, beautiful, good. There, no one screams at his fellow, no one is exploited by his fellow, no one's fortune derives from his fellow's misfortune"[11] Marshall continues by noticing that Wiesel did not comment on the fact that you have to pay to enter Disneyland. In this kingdom, childhood is for sale.

This version of life is not reality, as noted by Justyna Deszcz in *Beyond the Disney Spell, or Escape into Pantoland.* "It seems that it is this standardized vision that attracts audiences and makes the synthetic bliss of Disneyland so seductive. It is there that people can perceive themselves as members of one united community that shares norms and values, and cherishes the same concept of happiness. Unfortunately, this feeling is actually an illusion, a short-lived escape from reality."[12] Perhaps the former CEO of the Walt Disney Corporation, Michael Eisner, said it best in a staff memo from 1981, "We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. To make money is our only objective."[13]

While much has been written on the Disney corporation, even more is being discussed on changing needs and desires of humanity in the broader sphere of the modern and postmodern

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[11] Sarah Marshall, "The Magic Kingdom," *The Baffler*, no. 45 (2019): 50.

[12] Justyna Deszcz, "Beyond the Disney Spell, or Escape into Pantoland," *Folklore* 113, no. 1 (April 2002): 87.

[13] Linda Pershing and Lisa Gablehouse, "Disney's Enchanted: Patriarchal Backlash and Nostalgia in a Fairy Tale Film," in *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*, ed. Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2010), 140.

ages. In *The Triumph of the Therapeutic,* Philip Rieff outlines the needs of the Psychological Man, famously saying "Religious man was born to be saved; psychological man was born to be pleased."[14] In his "cultural liturgies" volumes, James K. A. Smith provides a theology of culture, and focuses on the themes of liturgy, formation, and desire. He writes, "To be human is to love, and it is what we love that defines who we are. Our (ultimate) love is constitutive of our identity."[15] Christian Smith elaborates further by putting a name to the religion of this new man, "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," in his book *Soul Searching.* "What appears to be the actual dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace."[16] According to Smith, the goal of life in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.[17]

Disney promotes this idea by promising that upon entering their theme parks, happiness can be found. In the prospectus for Disneyland, Walt Disney himself wrote,

> The idea of Disneyland is a simple one. It will be a place for people to find happiness and knowledge. It will be a place for parents and children to share pleasant times in one another's company; a place for teacher and pupils to discover greater ways of understanding and education. Here the older generation can recapture the nostalgia of days gone by, and the younger generation can savor the challenge of the future.[18]

This is a bold declaration, and it falls perfectly in line with the needs of the "psychological man," that is to be pleased. Disneyland is, as advertised, a happy place, and a place where the God of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism fits right in. This can certainly be contrasted with C.S.

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[14] Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006), 19.

[15] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 51.

[16] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 164.

[17] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 163.

[18] Andrew O'hagan, "The Happiness Project," *The New York Times*, July 17, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/17/t-magazine/happiness-project-disneyland.html.

Lewis' comment from *Mere Christianity,*

> Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. This is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.[19]

In this explanation, happiness is found not on our terms, but on God's terms.

While the church has always sought identity formation, today the effort to provide a counter to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is essential. Indeed, the importance of narrative has hit a resurgence of interest in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). Joel P. Okamoto discusses this concept in his article, "The Word of the Cross and the Story of Everything." He explains that for many years, Christians did not need to provide an account for the Christian story; it was simply assumed. However, today it is necessary for Christians to understand their place in God's story. He writes that "This rendering of the story also makes sense of the lives of individual Christians, because the story itself leads Christians to their identity and their life."[20] Jesus Christ's death and resurrection is significant because he came to bring forth God's creation and redeem all things. "Our entire identity as Christians and everything that we are in our lives are implicated with Jesus Christ and him crucified."[21] According to the Christian account, our identity is formed through the narrative of the story of God and his people.

In his article "Back to the Beginning, Creation Shapes the Entire Story," Charles Arand declares the importance of emphasizing creation when sharing the narrative of the Christian story. He writes that rooting our identity in our creatureliness helps us understand our

[19] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harpercollins, 2017), 50.

[20] Joel P Okamoto, "The Word of the Cross and the Story of Everything," *Concordia Journal* 45, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 63.

[21] Okamoto, "Word of the Cross," 67.

accountability to God. He asks, "Isn't this emphasis on creatureliness not a theme that runs throughout the entire story down to the present day? Isn't the storyline of Scripture about human creatures who do not want to be creatures?"[22] The Christian narrative tells us who we are in the world, where we belong, and what we ought to do with our lives. When we use this narrative to recognize our identity as creatures, it influences the way we see ourselves, our neighbors, and our relationship with God.

In addition, David Schmitt notes the implications of sharing narratives to help define and shape communities. In *Telling God's Story* he writes, "Within community, personal narratives can be questioned or affirmed. Communities can frame or reframe life narratives, supporting or subverting them, reinforcing or recreating the way in which individuals experience their lives and tell their stories."[23] Narratives have an even fuller meaning when we are brought into God's community by Jesus through a master story.[24] Schmitt notes that ignoring the greater story of God in favor of our individual stories limits God and his work in the world to be a "nationalistic and therapeutic agenda for self-actualization in a capitalistic consumeristic culture."[25] This is the danger of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, and to counter it the church needs to continue to share the greater story of God and his people with their members.

The Thesis in the Context of Current Scholarship

Scholars have written on how our current culture desires a religion that subscribes to the rules of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). The ideal MTD religion would contribute to

[22] Charles Arand, "Back to the Beginning Creation Shapes the Entire Story," *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 2 (2014): 135

[23] David Schmitt, "Telling God's Story," *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 2 (2014): 105.

[24] Schmitt, "Telling God's Story," 106.

[25] Schmitt, "Telling God's Story," 109.

society and make people happy. Friedrich Schleiermacher writes that religion cannot and should not conflict with "metaphysics and morals."[26] This means that according to him we should do everything with religion, not because of religion. In American culture, being a good member of society matters more than obeying specific religious practices. Mark Larrimore articulates this point further in "Religion and the Promise of Happiness" by saying,

> Religious and secular critics alike condemn communities that threaten public order; indeed, these do not deserve to be called religion at all, and are scorned as "cults" or "millennial movements" (even "new religious movements" are somehow not really religious). A similar movement is observable in those who distinguish themselves from "organized religion," are members of "nondenominational" communities, or describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." In all these cases, it is assumed that there is a pure core to religion, fragile and easily corrupted by contact with the world of power and knowledge.[27]

Disney thrives at their religious task, by being orderly and stimulating the economy, while remaining family friendly and genuinely making people feel good. Disney is often adopted by Americans as a religion because it subscribes to the rules that we have set on religious institutions according to MTD, that it is generally moral, and as previously stated, makes people happy. According to Williams James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* "If we were to ask the question: 'what is human life's chief concern?', one of the answers we would receive would be: 'It is happiness- How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness, is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do."[28] This thesis will elaborate on this argument further, by observing how American culture's celebration of Disney shows our obsession with finding and retaining happiness.

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[26] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers,* trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 110.

[27] Mark Larrimore, "Religion and the Promise of Happiness," *Social Research: The Johns Hopkins University Press* 77, no. 2 (2010): 573.

[28] Williams James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1982), 78

Current scholarship has also explored the importance of narrative, and how storytelling contributes to identity formation in individuals and in communities. In his essay, *The Narrative Quality of Experience,* Stephen Crites writes that our basic experience through time is in and of itself narrative. He emphasizes that even memory is storytelling, and all knowledge comes from recollection.[29] The way that a story is told has significant impact on both the teller and the hearer. "Narratives not only *express* experience but also can *form* experience in those who receive the story"[30] This thesis will contribute to the discussion by showing how Disney uses storytelling to form experiences in entertainment. As philosopher Susanne K. Langer writes, "Stories give substance to the form of experience because [experience] is itself an incipient story"[31] Disney takes this even further by combining story and experience, particularly in its theme parks where guests are invited into the story in a physical way.

The church does this as well, by not only sharing God's story in sermons and lessons but also by living it through worship and service to the neighbor. The church has used storytelling from the beginning. Fred B. Craddock comments on how Jesus himself was a storyteller in the form of parables. He writes, "However, anyone who has listened to Jesus' stories, the parables, knows that a story may be more than an ingredient of the sermon; it may be the message itself. As such, the story has the density, complexity, and realism of life."[32] In the church, narrative is an essential piece of proclaiming the gospel because God's involvement with his people is a

[29] Steven Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39, no. 3 (September 1971): 300

[30] Ronald J. Allen, "Theology Undergirding Narrative Preaching," in *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching? Essays in Honor of Eugene L. Lowry*, ed. Mike Graves and David J. Schlafer (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2012), 30.

[31] Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: Scribner, 1953), 292.

[32] Fred B Craddock, "Story, Narrative, and Metanarrative," in *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching*, 88.

historical story. Richard Lischer notes that "The point is not to tell bunches of substitute stories for their inspirational value or to recount meaningful experiences that are vaguely analogous to divine truths but to tell one story as creatively and powerfully as possible and to allow that one story to probe our world.[33] When God's story is told, it changes the world of the listener, and it changes how they view themselves and their own identity. In his essay, *Out of the Loop,* Thomas G. Long further iterates how storytelling impacts the church, "We are called to proclaim a narrative that people could not conjure up out of their own resources, the gospel narrative, and then to help people let that narrative become the story that shapes, guides, and clarifies their lives and gives them their primary identity."[34]

Disney also uses narrative to shape and guide the lives of their fans. Their stories have a clear message about a person's place in the world. They make a simple and clear claim that if an individual has optimism and is a "good person," all their dreams will come true. This thesis will take the question of how narrative is used today by observing the example of the Disney brand and how they have succeeded in creating lasting identity in the lives of their followers.

Current scholarship has explored the success of Disney, but there is still much to learn from this company's use of religious elements. This thesis will recognize the wisdom of Disney and determine how it can be used responsibly by the church. It will explore how companies like Disney use liturgical elements to influence their consumers, and provide information from Disney movies, commercials, theme parks, and other media to identify religious language and themes. This thesis will also explore how the church has used storytelling, finding examples in scripture, the historic church, and in current scholarship.

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[33] Richard Lischer, "The Interrupted Sermon," *Interpretation* 50, (1996): 178.

[34] Thomas G. Long, "Out of the Loop," in *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching*, 129.

The church could look to Disney as an example of how religious concepts are still effective in a postmodern age, and how people still desire the experience of childlike wonder. Reaching back to the early church, Augustine of Hippo stated in *The Confessions*, "How then am I to seek you, Lord? When I seek you, my God, what I am seeking is a life of happiness. Let me seek you that my soul may live, for as my body draws life from my soul, so does my soul draw its life from you.[35] The Christian story is the greatest ever told, and the church ought to continue to recognize how important narrative is for identity formation. Finally, the thesis will connect the first article wisdom displayed in the Walt Disney Company with practical application to the church.

The Methodological Procedure to Be Employed

The thesis will use an adaption of Richard Osmer's four tasks of Practical Theology, developed and adopted by the practical department at Concordia Seminary St. Louis. The framework contains four pillars. For "attending to self and the world," I will acknowledge my own biases towards the Walt Disney Company. I will also pay attention to what is currently going on at Disney, and how people are influenced by this brand. For "interpreting first article wisdom," I will focus on what Disney does, and why they are effective. I will specifically observe the ways in which they use narrative in the identity formation of their fans and employees. For "discerning theological wisdom," I will explore how the church has historically used the concepts of narrative and identity, and how we still utilize those wisdoms today. Lastly, for "implementing godly guidance and leadership," I will determine what the church can learn from Disney in a responsible and theological way. The Practical Theological Framework will be

[35] Augustine, *Confessions,* ed. David Vincent Meconi trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), 288–89.

used as a guideline for attending to questions of the church and society.

The Outcome(s) Anticipated

This thesis will contribute an understanding of the religious elements Disney has utilized, and how they have used these elements to gain and maintain a loyal fanbase. It will suggest ways in which the church can recognize anew the religious concepts of storytelling, liturgy, and language. For the followers of Disney, Disney stories act as a framework with which people can process the realities such as morality, death, and the enchanting aspects of everyday life. The church can also make use of the mystery and wonder of what it means to be a Christian. Disney is a reminder that humans still desire the incredible and the surprising. It can also be an example of how to balance making necessary changes while retaining tradition and history. Walt Disney himself said, "Disneyland will never be completed. It will continue to grow as long as there is imagination left in the world. It is something that will never be finished. Something that I can keep developing and adding to."[36] Like Disneyland, the church can look to the future without losing sight of our foundation, by keeping sacred what must be preserved.

While the church has much to learn from Disney, this must be done in a responsible way. Disney can help us to understand our members better and identify why they are being drawn away from Christian truths in favor of fairy tales and theme parks. Part of this could be that in the postmodern age of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, the ideals of Disney are more appealing than the ideals of the church. The official tagline for Disneyland is "The Happiest Place on Earth," which can be more attractive to Americans than a church that asks its members to take up

[36] Stan, "As Long as There Is Imagination Left in the World," The Imagineering Disney Blog (blog), May 31, 2013, http://www.imagineeringdisney.com/blog/2013/5/31/as-long-as-there-is-imagination-left-in-the-world-putting-th.html.

their cross and love their enemies. Christians need to be reminded that God does not exist to be a part of our story, instead he invites us into his. While there is certainly much the church can take in from Disney, this must always be done in a thoughtful way so that the church can be the church.

This thesis will focus specifically on the areas of narrative and identity formation and note what wisdom the church can take from the Walt Disney Company. It will contribute to the scholarly conversation on this topic by observing how effective Disney is at the formation of converts to its religion. Disney is incredibly successful at storytelling, and the brand invites its customers to find their identity in the story. The Christian church also has a story to tell, the amazing and true tale of God and his people. This thesis will seek to address the question of how the church can use Disney in a first article way, to better proclaim God's story to the world and form lasting identity in her members.

CHAPTER TWO

ATTENDING TO SELF AND WORLD

When hearing the term "religion," several images come to mind. Perhaps one pictures a church, temple, or other house of worship. Or maybe a spiritual practice such as yoga, or a position like priest or monk. Although many people still do participate in one of these traditional religious organizations, many have deviated and have identified new concepts of what it means to practice spirituality. It is necessary to carefully articulate a working definition of religion, and to comment on how postmodernism has influenced our understanding of worship.

Instead of asking, "what religion do you practice," one could substitute "what story do you subscribe to." Stories are the basis of most religions, instructing followers as to how to navigate the world, who they are, and how they ought to live. However, postmodernism and nihilism have changed the way we use narratives, by insisting that there is no ultimately true story. Philosophers have determined that our postmodern culture is a rejection of the metanarrative. People no longer use a larger grand story to learn about the world around them and to determine their identity. For example, in "Postmodern Condition" philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard defines postmodern as "incredulity toward metanarratives," stating that "The narrative function is losing its functors, it's great hero, it's great dangers, it's great voyages, it's great goal."[1] Similarly, A. T. Nuyen writes in the International Journal for Philosophy of Religion,

> Instead of grounding our understanding in a grand narrative, post-structuralism/postmodernism asserts that we need to pay attention to the context within the object of understanding situates itself. For an individual, it is not the story about some isolated thinking subject that provides an understanding of oneself, but the various "small narratives" about one's own situation, i.e. one's own history and community. Furthermore, no narrative about the self can be the foundation, in the way envisaged by Decartesm for knowledge about the rest of nature. The self is no

[1] A.T. Nuyen, "Postmodern Theology and Postmodern Philosophy," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion,* no. 2 (October 1991): 66.

> longer at the center of some grand unified story that contains the totality of knowledge, such as the Hegelian story. For post-structuralists, the self is "decentered."[2]

We are plagued by nihilism, where values are devalued and there is no ultimate truth, therefore we judge a story based on our own understanding, logic, desires, and ideals, not on whether or not we believe it to actually be true for everyone. When the aim is lacking and there is no true metanarrative, individuals are free to select whatever stories they wish in an attempt to form a sense of meaning in their lives. And more often than not, people will choose stories that they love. Disney stories, beloved by many, are used as subjective interpreters that allow people to choose their own identity.

In a postmodern world, humans are entitled to select whatever narrative they would like to be a part of. Even traditional religious rules can be adjusted to suit a particular lifestyle. Today, people select whatever aids one on the journey towards the pursuit of happiness and the good life. Stories are therefore not only used as ways of navigating the world, instead their purpose has also become to create a world. Once a worldview is fabricated and handpicked, religious practices follow. It is necessary for humans to acknowledge that they are influenced by the stories they are told, and oftentimes are involuntarily swept up in unexpected ideology. In "The Narrative Quality of Experience," Steven Crites argues that narratives are not only important for determining how we view the world, but also how we view ourselves. He writes that every sacred story is a creation story because it creates a world in which to orient oneself.[3] "I propose, with some misgivings, to call these fundamental narrative forms sacred stories, not so much because gods are commonly celebrated in them, but because men's sense of self and world is

[2] Nuyen, "Postmodern Theology and Postmodern Philosophy," 66.

[3] Crites, "Narrative Quality of Experience," 296

created through them...So I call them sacred stories, which in their secondary, written expressions may carry the authority of scripture for the people who understand their own stories in relation to them.[4] These sacred stories are not sacred because they are necessarily about classic "holy" things, but because they contain meaning and purpose for those who value them. Even if a particular story does not have the historical "religious" elements, it may still shape a person's actions and inevitably result in worship practices.

At times, worship practices are not used to attempt to interact with the divine, but instead to acquire a feeling of the good life. Similarly, stories are also used to explain what the good life means, and how we can acquire it. James K. A. Smith suggests, "A vision of the good life captures our hearts and imaginations not by providing a set of rules or ideas, but by painting a picture of what it looks like for us to flourish and live well. Such pictures are communicated most powerfully in stories, legends, myths, plays, novels and films rather than dissertations, messages, and monographs."[5] In our search for the good life, we seek out stories to validate our experience and provide meaning and purpose. In a world shaped by nihilism, we attempt to search for our own truth and allow whatever narratives we prefer to determine what is right for the individual. We are what we love, and there is perhaps no greater image of a lover than that of the modern fan.

Fan culture in the United States is complicated and diverse. From movies, to television, to sports teams, to music, to even politicians, most Americans consider themselves to be a fan of one thing or another. People show a religious-like devotion to their fandom, exhibiting engagement, zeal, and passion that is not always displayed in traditional houses of worship. Fan

[4] Crites, "Narrative Quality of Experience," 295

[5] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 53.

culture is often compared to folk culture and folklore, where myths are shared and retold again and again to new generations.[6] A modern example is when a parent shares a Disney film with their child, because they loved it when they were young. Humans have been fascinated by stories, both fictional and nonfictional, since our origins. However, in the seventeenth century, the term "lover" began being used by appreciators of great art. This term, along with the word "fan" implies more. It entails an emotional attachment, one that goes deeper than a mere interest in a subject.[7] Art, music, stories, and competitions are not just what we experience, they are what we love, and therefore who we are. Instead of being passive appreciators of art, fans consider themselves to be active participators, and they can become immensely emotionally connected to the subject.

Today, fan culture shows itself in a variety of forms. Being a fan of something is so much more than merely enjoying or appreciating it. According to Nicolle Lamerichs, "The media experience of fans is embodied and effective, which has consequences for their sense of identity. Fans interpret media experiences as an intense aesthetic experience that also differentiates them from others, both within the fan community and outside it."[8] A story is not merely a source of entertainment, it is a foundation on which to build a worldview, and even a moral code. "Among those for whom the story is alive there is a revival of ethical authority otherwise almost effaced in our society. For it establishes on a new basis the coherency of social and personal time. It makes it possible to recover a living past, to believe again in the future, to perform acts that have significance for the person who acts. By so doing it restores a human form of experience."[9] It can

[6] Nicolle Lamerichs, "Shared Narratives: Intermediality in Fandom," in *Productive Fandom* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 19.

[7] Lamerichs, "Shared Narratives: Intermediality in Fandom," 19.

[8] Lamerichs, "Shared Narratives: Intermediality in Fandom," 30.

[9] Crites, "Narrative Quality of Experience," 311.

be easy to dismiss the idea of fandoms and fan cultures as juvenile or doltish, but these are persons who are choosing to rely on a particular story as a means to shape their lives. Religion is being redefined, and although it may look different than what we have seen in the past, it is every bit as impactful to those on the inside.

In a postmodern age, many people's beliefs do not rely on the heavy weight of what is true. Fan culture gives fans the option to be a part of a community, and while it often provides a source text on which to gather around, fans are not obligated to be bound to the text. For example, there may only be seven books written about Harry Potter by the original author J. K. Rowling, but there are over 608,000 unofficial Harry Potter fan fictions entirely written by fans of the series.[10] Being active in a fandom means not only participating in a world, it means creating it. Therefore, to the fan it doesn't matter whether or not a story is true, what matters is how a story makes you feel, whether it be uplifting, comforting, nostalgic, or passionate. One can acquire the religious beliefs of the Harry Potter series, finding value in it with the full knowledge that these stories aren't technically "real." Having a new way of looking at religion becomes the best of both worlds for today's individual, it provides a person with meaning and purpose, while also being flexible enough to change with societies moods as needed.

The Walt Disney Company Values

"The mission of The Walt Disney Company is to entertain, inform and inspire people around the globe through the power of unparalleled storytelling, reflecting the iconic brands, creative minds and innovative technologies that make ours the world's premier entertainment

[10] Namera Tanjeem, "50 Must-Read Harry Potter Fan Fictions: The Best of the Best," BOOK RIOT, June 22, 2020, https://bookriot.com/harry-potter-fanfiction/.

company."[11] This statement crowns the top of the "about" section on the Walt Disney Company's website. Although this company certainly has many factors that contribute to their success, they credit "unparalleled storytelling" as the power behind what makes them effective. This storytelling permeates into every aspect of the company, from establishing brands and characters, to worldbuilding in theme parks, to advertising and merchandising.

Storytelling also has an exceptionally unique impact on the way Disney employees, called "cast members," are trained. Language plays an integral part in the formation of cast members and in creating experiences for visitors to the theme parks. Disney language tells the story of a show being put on for an audience, where there is an "onstage" that the average park goer experiences and a "backstage" that is seen only by employees. Uniforms are known as "costumes," a person's job or position in the company is their "role," and of course customers are known as "guests." These language changes are significant because they paint the picture of what Disney parks are about. These places are a show, a Disney movie come to life, a performance that a person can live in. The Disney language also influences the way employees view their jobs, by creating a respectful environment and taking the servanthood out of service related positions.[12] As the originator of the Disneyland cast orientation program once said, "At Disneyland, I wanted people to feel they were involved in something more important than parking cars, serving food, or sweeping up popcorn, that they would be creating happiness for others."[13] Language certainly plays a major role in adding dignity and honor to the position of theme park employee.

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[11]"Disney - Leadership, History, Corporate Social Responsibility," The Walt Disney Company, March 2, 2020, https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/about/.

[12] Doug Lipp, *Disney U: How the Disney University Develops the World's Most Engaged, Loyal, and Customer-Centric Employees* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2013), 145.

[13] Lipp, *Disney U,* 145.

Disney's key to forming guest experiences is reflected in what's known as their common goal. The goal is stated as such, "We create happiness by providing the finest in entertainment for people of all ages, everywhere."[14] Disney uses three key areas to create happiness, the first being the stories that are introduced in films, parks, and resorts, the second being immersive experiences that bring the stories to life, and the third being exceptional guest service that combines stories and experiences through personalized guest experiences.[15] All these things come together to initiate and develop an emotional connection with guests, which Disney calls *magic*. Many of these experiences, and what is known as the magic of Disney, are the direct result of cast members going the extra mile to create positive guest interactions, an act that would not happen without identity formation and training within the Disney parks system.

Identity formation in cast members begins before their first day on the job, during orientation. New cast members, from the top executive to the frontline ride operators and custodians, are all required to attend "Traditions," a class taught by "Disney University." The purpose of this class is to instruct new employees in the history and ways of the company. Cast members are not only given new policies and procedure to follow, they are given a new purpose. According to the former Executive Vice President of Operations at Walt Disney World, Lee

[14] "How Disney Encourages Employees to Deliver Exceptional Customer Service," Harvard Business Review, last modified February 28, 2018, https://hbr.org/sponsored/2018/02/how-disney-encourages-employees-to-deliver-exceptional-customer-service#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWe%20create%20happiness%20by%20providing,people%20of%20all%20ages%20everywhere.%E2%80%9D&text=When%20our%20Cast%20Members%20know,like%20to%20call%20magical%20moments

[15] Blake Morgan, "5 Lessons from Disney's Magical Customer Experience," Forbes (Forbes Magazine, February 18, 2021), https://www.forbes.com/sites/blakemorgan/2020/01/23/5-lessons-from-disneys-magical-customer-experience/?sh=336e80327555.

Cockerell, great employees are a direct result of leaders inspiring them with a sense of purpose.[16] He shares this story as an example,

> When a couple once told a restaurant server that they'd lost their child's pacifier and the hotel store was closed, the server tracked down the manager, got the keys to the store, and brought a brand-new pacifier to their room. Another time a merchandise Cast Member overheard a Guest tell his wife that he'd left his cell phone charger at home; she went to Wal-Mart the next day -her day off- and bought one for him. And when, on a rainy day in the Magic Kingdom, a Cast Member saw that a little girl had wet her pants and the family didn't have time to go to their room to change her clothes, he took them to a store, got them a voucher for a free replacement outfit, and provided them with a place to change her clothes. None of these cast members was required to do these things. They *wanted* to do them because they understood their purpose.[17]

This feeling of purpose doesn't come from a singular role or position; it comes from being a part of something bigger than oneself. Cast members are reminded of a famous quote from Walt Disney, "Here at Disneyland we meet our world public on a person to person basis for the first time. Your every action (and mine as well) is a direct reflection of our entire organization."[18]

This concept of responsibility and community has a religious notion to it. Working at Disney is not just a job, it is an identity, and it shapes and influences how one treats their neighbor. As Van France, founder of Disney University, once said, "[Throughout my career], I had found that most people want to be involved with something greater than just being paid for a job. My basic story is about the two men laying bricks. When asked what he is doing, one man says, 'I'm laying bricks.' The other man performing the same task says, 'I'm building a cathedral.'"[19]

Encouraging employees to feel as if their jobs have purpose is not original to Disney.

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[16] Lee Cockerell, *Creating Magic: 10 Common Sense Leadership Strategies from a Life at Disney* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 119.

[17] Cockerell, *Creating Magic,* 122.

[18] Cockerell, *Creating Magic,* 119

[19] Lipp, *Disney U,* 143.

However, this company has done an exceptional job of empowering their employees, and as a result Disney is known for distinctly superb customer service. Disney's Vision Statement, Essence Statement, and Mission Statement further define the company's values. The Vision Statement says "Walt Disney World will always be dedicated to making dreams come true. In this magical world, fantasy is real and reality is fantastic. A wonderful sense of community awaits where all are greeted as welcome Guests who become cherished friends. For all who work and play here, Walt Disney World will be a source of joy and inspiration."[20] Notice how it is not only the paying customers who are included in this magical world, but the cast members as well. All are welcome in the community of believers of the Walt Disney Company.

The Essence Statement reflects on the emotions and experiences that Disney hopes to impart upon its visitors. It says, "Walt Disney World is a magical passage into a world of fantasy and adventure. Here we can wish upon a star, experience the impossible and bring our dreams to life. Together, treasured friends discover a wonderland that dazzles, delights, and renews through all the seasons of a lifetime."[21]

The Mission Statement is even more specific, stating that

> Our mission is to honor our heritage and continually reinvent Walt Disney World …. By making dreams come true, creating magical memories and developing lifetime friendships with each Guest .... By valuing, respecting, and trusting each other as dream makers and honoring our individuality, ability, and contributions as Cast Members...By fostering a fun and enriching environment in which creativity, teamwork, openness, diversity, courage, balance and accountability are celebrated...By being innovative and embracing new ideas .... By eliminating bureaucracy and all the barriers that get in the way of operating simply, quickly, and efficiently ... By achieving the financially successes that will enable us to grow and fulfill our Vision.[22]

[20] Cockerell, *Creating Magic,* 121

[21] Cockerell, *Creating Magic,* 121

[22] Cockerell, *Creating Magic,* 121.

This Mission Statement provides a possible explanation for the enthusiasm of Disney's cast members. They are invited to be a part of an environment that is meant to be fun and enriching, at a company that values and respects them. This appeals to many, especially in comparison to other employment positions that seem purposeless and unmotivating. It also teaches employees how important they are to the overall success of the company, after all they are "making dreams come true."

Even though most cast members may not have these long statements memorized, they internalize the meaning of these words when they are treated with respect and trusted by their leaders. The language in these three statements implies that the needs of employees are taken seriously, and that the Disney company is a special and even fun place to work. Disney installs identity in their employees by encouraging them to see themselves as part of a larger story and teaching them that they have an important role in bringing, as it says in the Essence Statement, "dreams to life."

Disney has mastered the art of communicating with their employees and inculcating them in the values of the company and the high expectations for their workers. But how does Disney communicate with the general public? One way is through advertisements. Advertisements are crucial for brands as they are an opportunity for a company to tell the world about itself. While most Americans have already heard of Disney, and may even have preconceived notions or know stereotypes about the company, in an advertisement the brand makes an attempt to either reinforce or alter their audience's opinion. By observing advertisements, we can see examples of how a company wants to be known. We can also see how elements like nostalgia, narrative, and community are used by Disney to create and maintain a loyal fanbase.

At Christmastime in 2020, amidst the global pandemic, Disney released an advertisement

that many might consider to be of the same quality as a short film. Titled, “From our Family to Yours,” this advert tells the story of a grandmother from the Philippines and her young granddaughter. It begins with a scene from the 1940s, with the grandmother character as a young girl observing the beautiful paper stars that decorate the sky for Christmastime in her home country. Her father greets her and presents her with a Mickey Mouse stuffed animal, which has an iridescent glow around it. Next, we see the grandmother in 2005, in the United Kingdom, with her young granddaughter. She takes the now-worn Mickey toy off the shelf, and lovingly gives it to the child. She then shows her granddaughter how to make a paper star, and hangs it in her window while the little girl plays with Mickey.

As the advertisement continues, years pass and we see the girl get older and older, but always sharing in Christmas traditions with her grandmother, with Mickey present for it all. In one scene, we witness the family dog accidentally tearing one of Mickey’s ears. Finally, we see the granddaughter as a young woman, now declining her grandmother's offer to make paper stars with her. As she leaves the house and passes by the window, she sees her grandmother sadly holding the Mikey doll with the torn ear.

When the young woman returns home later in the evening, she gazes sentimentally at the family photos, and decides to surprise her grandmother by decorating the house with paper stars. When the grandmother comes down the stairs, she is amazed with the decorations. She is transported back to her childhood in the Philippines. The granddaughter reveals a red box which the grandmother opens, containing the Mickey toy, which she has affectionately repaired. The two embrace and hold the doll between them, and the screen fades with the words “Disney, from our family to yours.”[23] Viewers on YouTube are then prompted to click a link where they can

[23] Disney UK, “From Our Family to Yours | Disney Christmas Advert 2020 | Official Disney UK.” Youtube,

purchase the Mickey toy from the commercial.

This Christmas ad is an excellent example of how Disney uses emotional experiences to create what they call "magical moments." The commercial is packed full of emotional moments, from Christmas traditions, to a grandmother's love, to innocence and childhood, to the experience of missing home, to passing down an heirloom, to growing up, to giving or receiving a gift. Many have experienced these life moments and can identify with them, and Disney has made certain that Mickey Mouse is present in all of them. This character is the reminder of the beauty of the past and the connection and link between generations. In this Christmas commercial, we do not hear or see anything related to the birth of Christ Jesus, but the family is able to find meaning and togetherness through Disney. The message is clear, that although families may grow and change, Mickey will always be there to bring people together.

An Observation of Disney Fans

One unexpected role many Disney fans find themselves participating in is that of the custodian, cleaning up what they see to be the company's messes. In a fashion reminiscent of the Christian religion, the Disney religion has denominations with unwavering opinions on how the company should be run. There are even times when the values of these groups do not align with the Disney company, and movements are held to return Disney to its previously pure state. An example of this was in 2008, when Disney announced that it would be altering the iconic "It's A Small World" attraction to include movie characters.[24] This was seen as a disregard for the history and integrity of the attraction, and a blatant cash grab for Disney who merely wanted to

November 8, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tl57Gy5X_Kg

[24] Thibaut Clément, "Fans as the Researcher's Unwitting Collaborators: A Few Notes on Disney Theme Parks, Fandom, and Data Collection," *Journal of Festive Studies* 1, no 1 (Spring 2019): 61.

sell toys and promote their intellectual properties. Fans were increasingly frustrated, perceiving the modification of the classic ride to be the move of a greedy corporation who was sacrificing Walt Disney's original vision, and the memory of artist Mary Blair, the designer of "It's a Small World." Groups began protesting and voicing their opinions online, an example of what John Fiske refers to as "fan productivity," or "efforts by fans to influence the actual product" and "participate in the construction of the original text."[25]

Faced with this controversy, the Disney company decided to emphasize Walt's role as a "change agent," stating that he never wanted Disneyland to remain the same, but to always be adapting to the times. The company also pointed to the huge number of Imagineers involved in the project of updating "It's a Small World," making note of the talent, care, and love these people put into the attraction. Bloggers who agreed with the companies move criticized fans who attempted to "trot [Blair] out like a sacred cow" and give her "sole credit" for the attraction, when many other Imagineers deserve equal recognition for their creative input.[26]

Although the Disney corporation did get its way, and the ride was changed to include Disney characters, this story is an example of the vigor and passion of Disney fans. It also illustrates the division of Disney fans, from preservationists, to loyalists, to pragmatics, to those who see Disney as a business first. While some insist on the artistic attributes of Disney parks, others are quick to remember that Walt Disney himself was not afraid to sell out and use the parks for marketing and promotions. For example, Frontierland's "Casa De Fritos" restaurant that was sponsored by Frito-Lay,[27] or even the original "It's A Small World," which was

[25] Thibaut Clément, "Fans as the Researcher's Unwitting Collaborators: A Few Notes on Disney Theme Parks, Fandom, and Data Collection," *Journal of Festive Studies* 1, no 1 (Spring 2019): 62.

[26] Clément, "Researcher's Unwitting Collaborators," 64.

[27] Clément, "Researcher's Unwitting Collaborators," 64.

sponsored by Pepsi-Cola. In behaviors that are similar to those exhibited by many Christians, Disney fans can be found dialoguing to determine what was meant by the original text, or as they would put it, "what Walt would have wanted," and what doctrines should be upheld by the company today.

Cher Krause Knight described Disney World as a Garden of Eden, a place of safety where Walt could "revise America to fit his vision of a perfected nation, unified by God-fearing, hard-working, optimistic citizens laboring under the hot sun of Florida in pursuit of wholesome fun."[28] Certainly Walt's dream has come true for many fans who are willing to pay a hefty price to escape the ordinary.

It is impossible to discuss Disney without commenting on the cost. According to Mouse Savers, a website dedicated to helping plan Disney vacations, "Ticket prices essentially go up continuously. Disney has a rolling calendar going out roughly 16 months, and as new dates get added to the calendar, the prices for those dates are often a bit higher than the same dates in the previous year. Every once in a while a date will be slightly cheaper than it was in the previous year, depending on factors like how busy the date was in the past, where the holidays fall, and what school schedules look like."[29] However, despite cost increases over the years, attendance has also increased, making a Disney vacation more expensive and more crowded than ever. The left graph shows the rising attendance in Disney Parks around the world, while the right graph shows the specific attendance of the Magic Kingdom park in Walt Disney World in Florida[30]

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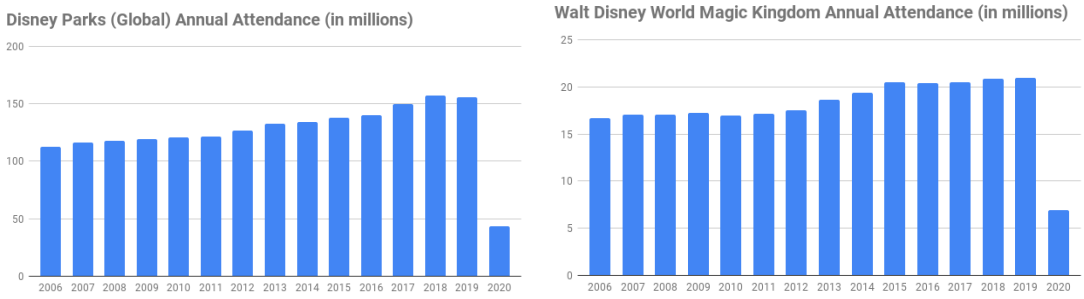
[28] Cher Krause Knight, "Adam and Eve … and Goofy: Walt Disney World as the Garden of Eden," *Visual Resources,* 14 (1999): 339.

[29] "Chart of Disney World Ticket Prices," MouseSavers.com, August 31, 2021, https://www.mousesavers.com/disney-world-magic-your-way-ticket-price-chart/.

[30] Craig Smith, "How Many People Visit Disney Parks Each Year?" Disney News, September 25, 2021, https://disneynews.us/disney-parks-attendance/.

Figure 2: Attendance Graphs



These graphs show that attendance has been steadily increasing over the years. The drop in attendance in 2020 was due to the parks being shut down due to the Coronavirus pandemic, and it's reopening to limited capacity. While costs have gone up, fans keep coming back, although some have claimed that each year they get less for their money. On October 19, 2021 Disney launched "Genie Plus," a service where guests can pay $15 in addition to their ticket to have shorter wait times. This system replaced the previously free "Fastpass" system.[31] "Genie Plus" is not available for every ride, and guests can pay additional fees a la carte for the most popular attractions. Another major change has been the cancellation of "Mickey's Not So Scary Halloween Party,"[32] a Halloween themed after hours event, and replacing it with "BOO Bash." The former event was significantly longer, allowing guests to enter at 4:00 PM, while the new event doesn't allow people to arrive until 7:00PM.[33] MNSSHP also included an exclusive parade and stage show, while the BOO Bash does not. Another staggering difference is the price. Tickets for BOO Bash start at $129 each on the cheapest nights and go up to $199 on the most

[31] "Disney Genie," Disney World, accessed Nov 21, 2021, https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/genie.

[32] Further abbreviated as MNSSHP

[33] Lydia Storks, "What's the Difference between Disney Boo Bash and Mickey's Not so Scary Halloween?," AllEars.Net, May 7, 2021, https://allears.net/2021/05/07/whats-the-difference-between-disney-boo-bash-and-mickeys-not-so-scary-halloween/.

expensive. MNSSHP tickets typically started at $79 and went up to $135.[34] It seems as if Disney fans are getting less for their money than ever before. However, the dedication of fans shines through, the first round of BOO Bash tickets completely sold out, and Disney had to add additional tickets to meet the high demand.[35]

The Appeal of Disney

There is something distinctly American about Disney. This is no accident as even Walt Disney himself admitted, "there's an American theme behind the whole park. I believe in emphasizing the story of what made America great and what will keep it great."[36] Walt Disney, along with many Americans in the 1960s, was a man of conservative values who trusted in industry and corporations. His parks were designed to keep out the negative aspects of the outside world and open up more imaginative and moral possibilities. For example, he never allowed alcohol on the premises of Disneyland, to keep the clean cut image of the park and to keep out undesirables. But this is not where his dream of creating a utopia ended. Walt Disney also envisioned a city designed entirely by his team, to be named EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow). The city would be an entirely modernized community complete with people, employment, shopping, restaurants, and corporate control. Everyone would be required to have a job and contribute in some way to the community, and technology would always be 25 years ahead of its time. According to Stephen F. Mills, Walt embodied a

[34] Lydia Storks, "How Different Are Disney World's Boo Bash and Mickey's Not-so-Scary Halloween Party?," AllEars.Net, August 12, 2021, https://allears.net/2021/08/12/how-different-are-disney-worlds-boo-bash-and-mickeys-not-so-scary-halloween-party/.

[35] Deni Sunderly, "Answering Boo Bash's Biggest Question: How Large Are the Crowds?," NewsBreak (NewsBreak, August 11, 2021), https://www.newsbreak.com/news/2337828581576/answering-boo-bash-s-biggest-question-how-large-are-the-crowds.

[36] Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 35.

"born again belief in the squeaky clean virtues of front-porch USA, and nostalgia for a supposedly uncomplicated, decent, hard-working, crime-free, rise up and salute the flag way of life."[37] Nearly a hundred years later, many Americans can sympathize with Disney's yearning for the past, and many relate to the desire for the sentimental America of their memories.

Perhaps one reason why Disney is so beloved by Americans is its ability to navigate a deep love and appreciation for the past, while also pursuing the technological achievements and modernism of the future. Author Nicholas Sammond proposes how this concept participates in the formation of American children. He states, "Disney was represented as an interceding between an ideal past and an unrealized ideal future, distilling the best impulses of that past into a digestible form that would reappear as the present corrected in that future."[38] Disneyland itself is a sort of reimagining of history. The morals of the past remain but with a new American idealism and optimism of the future that many held in the 50s and 60s.

One of the clearest examples of this comes from none other than Walt's favorite attraction, the "Carousel of Progress," which first made its debut at the 1964 New York World's Fair. The attraction follows an American family throughout history as they admire new technologies and exchange entertaining banter. The show is perfectly Disney; the technology changes but the ideals never do. The family travels throughout time, impressed by whatever cool invention suits the period, but never struggling with the difficulties or challenges of the changing social climate over the years. The family structure remains intact, and there is no mention of the Great Depression, World Wars, The Civil Rights Movement, the Suffrage Movement, or any other

[37] Stephen F. Mills, "Disney and the Promotion of Synthetic Worlds," *American Studies International*, vol 28, no 2 (October 1990): 73.

[38] Tracey Mollet, "With a Smile and a Song…: Walt Disney and the Birth of the American Fairy Tale," *Marvels & Tales* 27, no 1 (2013): 110

controversial historical event. This is Disney's America, and as the ride's theme song states, "there's a great big beautiful tomorrow shining at the end of every day, there's a great big beautiful tomorrow just a dream away."

Disney theme parks and movies can be used almost as a translator to understand the values of Americans at the time they were created. Disney's first feature length film, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" is especially helpful for understanding what it was like to live through the Great Depression. Many dismiss this classic animated film as mere escapist fluff, but as Andrew Bergman argues, one cannot escape to a place one does not identify with.[39] Snow White is a young female character who achieves the goal that every American seems to have and Disney profits off of, happiness. She doesn't achieve her happiness by displaying the characteristics we value today, but by embodying the ideal attributes of Depression Era America. She is kind, virtuous, and above all, patient. During the Depression, the general mood was that people accepted the situation, remained quiet, and patiently and faithfully waited for the difficult time to pass.[40]

These are not the only traits Snow White shared with the American people at the time of the film's release. "One of the most remarkable social features of the Depression is the extent to which the American public appeared to blame themselves for their plight and to take personal responsibility for their economic failure. Being unemployed appears to have been experienced more often as a weapon of humiliation and a matter of personal fault rather than the failure of an economic system.[41] Roosevelt tackled the burden felt by the public in his inaugural address, stating that the only thing the American public had to fear was "fear itself." This fear is also

[39] Mollet, "With a Smile and a Song," 113.

[40] Mollet, "With a Smile and a Song," 114.

[41] Mollet, "With a Smile and a Song," 115.

addressed and corrected within the narrative of Disney's Snow White. When faced with a dark wilderness full of trees that turn into monsters and the vicious river logs that turn into crocodiles, Snow White is terrified. But when the woodland creatures are revealed to be sweet and good, Snow White sighs, "You don't know what I've been through. And all because I was afraid. I'm so ashamed of the fuss I've made."[42]

When Disney was creating the character of Snow White, they were able to replicate the fears and feelings being experienced by Americans during the Depression. The story gave people something to identify with and relate to, making the film a huge success. This method is still used by Disney today in media creation and in theme parks. Just look at one of Disney's most popular recent characters, Elsa from the film "Frozen." She is a young woman having an identity crisis who experiences symptoms of anxiety and depression, but then is relieved of her pain after deciding to be herself. This character was successful because she exhibited the feelings of many young people in modern America, just as Snow White did for those in the 1930's.

The Walt Disney Company has been incredibly effective at capturing and appealing to the American identity. Observing Disney movies and theme parks can be helpful for those wanting to study and understand history, or discover what our values are today. The Americanness of Disney is also a major reason why Disney is so successful as a religion. Disney is relatable to our present, grounded to our past, and optimistic during a changing future. People may find comfort and even joy in this experience, and devotion often follows.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism has been called the new American religion. The term was

[42] Mollet, "With a Smile and a Song," 115.

coined by Christian Smith when he and his fellow researchers with the National Study of Youth and Religion at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill interviewed American teenagers, observing their faith lives and examining how seriously they took religious practices. The results surprised Smith, he found that instead of the teenagers stereotypically rebelling against their parents' religious beliefs, they seemed to be entirely indifferent to the idea. In his book, "Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers," he writes,

> To the extent that the teens we interviewed did manage to articulate what they understood and believed religiously, it became clear that most religious teenagers either do not really comprehend what their own religious traditions say they are supposed to believe, or they do understand it and simply do not care to believe it. Either way, it is apparent that most religiously affiliated U.S. teens are not particularly interested in espousing and upholding the beliefs of their faith traditions, or that their communities of faith are failing in attempts to educate their youth, or both.[43]

Smith summarized his findings in the term "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," which seems to be the dominant religion in America today, for both the young and old. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, or MTD, has a creed with five specific traits. These beliefs, held by many, fit into the Disney religion well. The first is that "A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth."[44] Although most Disney movies do not name a specific creator, many do contain strong religious themes. "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" has perhaps the most obvious Christian imagery, with Snow White kneeling by her bed and praying that God bless the little men that she's staying with. However, Christianity is not the only religion represented in Disney movies. In the movie "Pocahontas," the title character is told by a mystical tree to "let the spirits of the Earth guide you." "The Lion King" also contains rich worldbuilding centered around the purpose and meaning of life. When Simba is frightened away

[43] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 113-114.

[44] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162.

from his rightful place as king, he receives a visit from the spirit of his father, instructing him to "remember who you are" and to take his place in the great "Circle of Life." These films certainly perpetuate the idea that some sort of spiritual realm exists outside of what we can see, and we are being watched over in this life. The Fairy Godmother in Cinderella and the Blue Fairy in Pinocchio take on the role of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism gods, keeping a close watch over their humans and being ready to help when needed while asking little in return.

The second trait of MTD is that "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions."[45] Anyone who has seen a Disney movie knows that there are heroes and villains, and having a pure heart is ultimately rewarded. These films operate with the understanding that people ought to do nice things and act fairly towards one another, and those who hurt others will be punished in some cosmic way. For example, in the recent Disney movie "Tangled," the hero Rapunzel is a loving and caring character who sees the good in everyone. She even convinces a gang of thugs to become her friends by singing a song about dreams. Her actions and personality are an antithesis to the evil Mother Gothel, who traps Rapunzel in a tower and tells her lies about the world. In the end Gothel is defeated when she trips and falls out a window to her death, at no fault of Rapunzel. It's a simple concept most children understand, good guys win and bad guys lose.

The third trait of MTD is perhaps the most clearly related to Disney. It states that "The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself."[46] Disneyland's official slogan is the "Happiest Place on Earth." Movie characters are often on some kind of journey to find happiness, and whether their joy ultimately comes from true love or self fulfillment, they always

[45] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162.

[46] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 163.

find satisfaction. Disney displays their happiness motif with pride in their firework show, fittingly titled "Happily Ever After." During the show, projections of Disney characters at the beginning of their movies are shown, followed by images of them at the end of their movies looking triumphant and successful. A chorus of victorious music booms, with the lyrics "The story comes alive, when we look inside. A new adventure, there in your eyes. It's just beginning, feel your heart beat faster. Reach out and find your happily ever after!" With these lyrics Disney sends a clear message that, just like their characters, you too can find happily ever after. Happiness is the ultimate goal, and all you have to do is reach for it.

The fourth trait of MTD is that "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem."[47] This trait can once again be seen in the Fairy Godmother and the Blue Fairy, who show up just in time to help the protagonist, despite not being present or having any sort of relationship with the protagonist previously. The magical elements and characters of the movies always appear just when the main character needs them, but they are not particularly involved in their lives when a there is not a problem to be solved.

The last trait of MTD is that "Good people go to heaven when they die."[48] Although Disney movies rarely depict what happens when you die ("Hercules" and "Coco" are two exceptions), there is a general feeling of positive things happening to good people in the beyond. In "The Princess and the Frog," the lightning bug Ray spends most of the film longing for his love, a star he calls Evangeline. Ray is tragically killed by the film's villain, but the heroes are delighted to look up to the sky to see a bright new star next to Evangeline, which they identify as Ray. Ray gets his dream, and in death he gets to live on with his love. This afterlife may not be a version

[47] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 163.

[48] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 163.

of heaven many are used to, but it is incredible storytelling that sends a message that good people are rewarded in the afterlife.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is particularly prevalent among young people and teenagers, who are in transitional periods where one takes on the responsibility of telling their own story. "The author self that develops in emerging adulthood is able to see connections between past self, present self, and future self in a way that tells a coherent story of who one was, who one is, and where one is going."[49] The formative time where one transforms from child to adult is one for looking back at one's past, and utilizing previous experiences as a sort of "origin story" for where one is presently. The future is also dependent on how one defines identity using narrative. A teenager might describe themselves as "a math person," "a people person," or "an artist," and make vocational decisions based on these signifiers. Many young people have encountered the question, "what do you want to be when you grow up" from well-meaning adults, and the answer is usually a direct reflection on how they see themselves and how they tell their story. As James K.A. Smith states,

> We act in the world more as characters in a drama than as soldiers dutifully following a command. We are acting out a script, improvising in an unfolding drama, taking on a character in a story that has captivated us at a level we might not even be aware of. We come to see ourselves in a certain way, not by introspection or reflection, but because we have absorbed a narrative that now functions as the background drama of our existence ... This is not an identity I have chosen; it is more like an orientation I have assumed—a model of comportment to the world that grows out of my implicit, tacit sense of who I am within an overarching story of the world.[50]

As young people begins identifying with a particular worldview, they often evaluate their religious worldviews as well. Or, as Christian Smith has theorized, religious beliefs are pushed to

[49] David Setran, "'Sowing the Story' Narrative Identity and Emerging Adult Formation," *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 17, no. 1 (2020): 95

[50] Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 127.

the side, so young people can focus on what matters more to them in the moment. School, friendships, relationships, career decisions, athletics, clubs, and social circles provide immediate benefits, while religious beliefs feel more abstract and distant. Tim Clydesdale suggests that teenagers place faith in a "lockbox" for the time being so they can devote their time to the things that matter to them presently.[51] Christian Smith states that while many adults view teenagers as rebellious and actively against religion, most teenagers are in actuality relatively apathetic to the idea.

> Most emerging adults have religious beliefs. They believe in God. They probably believe in an afterlife. They may even believe in Jesus. But those religious ideas are for the most part abstract agreements that have been mentally checked off and filed away. They are not what emerging adults organize their lives around. They do not particularly drive the majority's priorities, commitments, values, and goals. These have much more to do with jobs, friends, fun, and financial security.... Religious beliefs are cognitive assents, not live drivers. [52]

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is not a religion unto itself. Instead, it is a specific way of looking at the divine that fits into most major beliefs. The religion of Disney suits MTD, as they have many of the same ideals and values.[53] According to Disney, people should try to be good, the ideal is to be happy, and spiritual or magical beings can help you achieve your goals. Many Americans are already followers of MTD without even knowing it, and certainly this is one reason why Disney is so consistently appealing.

My Investment and Bias

As I contemplate the complexities of viewing Disney as not only a religion, but an

[51] David Setran, "Sowing the Story," 93.

[52] Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford, England: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009).

[53] Christian Smith has more recently coined the term "Personal Identity Accessory" to describe how many use their religion as a mere part of their larger sense of self. Like an accessory, one can put it on or take it off as needed.

incredibly successful one, I would like to take the time to acknowledge my own investment and biases with the company. Like many children in the 1990's, I grew up watching Disney movies, and even had the opportunity to visit Disney World several times on family vacations. As a teenager, I spent hours with my cousin planning make believe Disney trips, budgeting our imaginary vacations and deciding which hotels we would stay at, where we would eat, and what rides we would go on. Then as a college student, a coworker told me about the Disney College Program, or DCP. This program was created by Disney as a way for college students to take a semester off of regular classes for an "internship" with their company. These students would work full time at the theme park, in areas like merchandising, attractions, custodial, entertainment, and dining. College Program participants, or "CP's" would also be set up with housing by Disney, and assigned roommates that they would share space with during their time at the company. As a longtime fan of Disney, I decided to apply. After completing the application process, I was accepted into the program and hired to be what is known as a Photopass Photographer, one of the many photographers in the parks who take pictures of guests with icons such as Cinderella Castle and with characters such as Mickey Mouse.

In August 2017, I moved to Orlando, Florida, and began working for the Walt Disney Company at its theme parks. My relationship with the company shifted when one of my roommates began sharing her experience in the DCP on social media websites like Instagram and YouTube. She built a platform talking about Disney on these pages, and I was curious to see what kind of impact I could have by following in her footsteps and attempting to create some social media content on my own. I commenced in posting exclusively Disney content, switching my settings from "Private" to "Public," and officially entering the online Disney fan world. At the height of my popularity online, I grew to over 5,000 Instagram followers and 4,000 YouTube

Subscribers. These numbers may be small in comparison to other content creators, but they were large enough to give me a direct involvement in the Disney community.

I lived in Florida and worked for the Walt Disney Company for one year, going back home to Missouri in August 2018. My experience with Disney was overall a positive one. Working at one of the largest theme parks in the world was an opportunity to get out of my comfort zone and meet new and diverse people. It was a formative experience, being my first time living independently outside of college and working full time. I also gained confidence by posting online, while experiencing the challenges that comes with sharing one's thoughts and feelings with the world. It is undeniable that I have a particular bias towards this company, I have too much personal experience to be entirely indifferent. However, I believe my personal investment is an asset to understanding the religiosity of Disney, and the commitment and devotion of its fans. James K. A. Smith makes the distinction between "thick" and "thin" practices, with the thick being those that contribute to your identity and hold significant meaning, and the thin being the mundane practices that do not.[54] This definition is also helpful when observing fan practices. Someone can participate in something they enjoy, like Disney, without making it into a thick practice that shapes one's identity. While my personal relationship with the company has fluctuated over the years, I still consider myself to be a fan of the company, albeit a thin one. Still, in many ways I am still the same person I was in high school, fascinated by the company and engrossed in research.

[54] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 81.

CHAPTER THREE

INTERPRETING FIRST ARTICLE WISDOM

Narrative Identity

Storytelling can be used to shape and form identity, both individually and communally. One psychological theory is called "Narrative Identity," which states that our identities are formed when we integrate our life experiences into an internalized story. These stories not only tell us who we are, but also what our purpose in life is and how we fit into society. As defined by Dan P. McAdams and Kate C. McLean, "Narrative identity is a person's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose."[1] They go on to write that individuals who are faced with suffering or tragedy enjoy higher levels of mental health when they are able to find deeper meaning in their adversity through the construction of life stories.[2] These kinds of stories exist everywhere we look, from the conversations parents have with their young children, to what we watch on television, to ancient tales of folklore. In his commentary, "Narrative Identity: What is it? What does it do? How do you measure it?", Dan McAdams asks what an identity looks like. He proposes that if you could see an identity, it wouldn't look like a list of traits or qualifications or interests. Instead, if you could see an identity, it would look like a story.[3] This theory is easy enough to observe. Just ask anyone to tell you a little bit about themselves, and many people will go into story telling mode, starting with the beginning where they grew up, perhaps noting an

[1] Dan P. McAdams and Kate C. McLean, "Narrative Identity," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, no. 3 (June 2013): 233.

[2] McAdams and McLean, "Narrative Identity," 233.

[3] Dan P. McAdams, "Narrative Identity: What Is It? What Does It Do? How Do You Measure It?" *Imagination, Cognition and Personality: Consciousness in Theory, Research, and Clinical Practice* 37, no. 3 (2018): 361.

inciting incident, and drawing a conclusion as to where they are now. The stories we tell about who we are and what the world is like have deep psychological implications.

Changing the narrative of how you see yourself can have a direct effect on your actions, as Adam Grant and Jane Dutton found during their research in 2012. They asked people at a university who were responsible for cold calling potential donors if they would keep a diary for four days. Part of the group was to reflect on a time a colleague did something for them that made them feel thankful. Another group was to reflect about a time they helped someone else at work. The researchers discovered that the group who told a story about themselves helping someone else and being generous made 30 percent more calls to potential donors. Those who told stories about themselves being helped made the same number of calls as before the experiment.[45] This study proves a theory suggested by McAdams, that the stories we tell ourselves have an impact on how we define our identity. When people thought of themselves as generous, they were motivated to continue that generosity in raising money for their university.

Much of the conversation around Narrative Identity focuses on how a person tells a story about themselves having an effect on their personal identity. This obviously has huge implications for therapeutic purposes, and how to help people work through past traumas with a reshaping of a story. It can also have implications for our relationships with a career. Herminia Ibarra and Roxana Barbulescu write about how people will "story" job changes, with everything from major career changes to smaller alterations like promotions. This storytelling is done so that

[4] Emily Esfahani Smith, "The Two Kinds of Stories We Tell about Ourselves," ideas.ted.com, January 12, 2017, https://ideas.ted.com/the-two-kinds-of-stories-we-tell-about-ourselves/.

[5]Adam Grant and Jane Dutton, "Beneficiary or Benefactor: Are People More Prosocial When They Reflect on Receiving or Giving?" *Psychological Science* 23, no. 9 (September 2012): 1033–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612439424.

the individual might create a culturally appropriate version of self, amidst major shifts.[6]

However, it is not only actual life event stories that shape our identities. Myths and legends also have ways of teaching both adults and children lessons about the world and our place in it. Heroes and heroines' endeavors provide positive examples of problem-solving skills and are often role models for young people. Myths also strengthen ties to family relationships and the community. These stories build individual self-esteem and show who one can be in the world.[7] Oftentimes in classic or traditional "hero" stories, the hero receives some sort of help from an outside spiritual source, and the goal is reached by the hero overcoming some kind of inward or emotion-based obstacle. Even though these stories are told and heard with the understanding that they are not necessarily "real," the lessons and morals of the stories are taken seriously, and they impact the identities of the people who hear them. In a significant way, we are our stories.

In "The Act of Storytelling and the Self's Homecoming," Charles E. Winquist writes, "without a history or without a story, there is very little that we can say about ourselves."[8] He goes on to say that while our modern society has certainly not lost the desire and need for stories, we have lost the sense of the value of stories. We see stories as for entertainment purposes only, as means to distract ourselves from the pains of real life. However, storytelling is so much more than a temporary sedative.

> The inability to tell a story leaves an unintelligible residue in our lives that is too large. There are too many feelings that lie fallow because we are not able to connect them with the reality of the self. The story can be viewed as an integrating structure that organizes our feelings and forms a sense of continuous identity. To live without a

[6] Herminia Ibarra and Roxana Barbulescu, "Identity as Narrative: Prevalence, Effectiveness, and Consequences of Narrative Identity Work in Macro Work Role Transitions," *The Academy of Management Review* 35, no. 1 (January 2010): 136.

[7] Annabelle Nelson, "Chapter 10: Storytelling and Transformational Learning," *Counterpoints* 341 (2009): 215.

[8] Charles E Winquist, "The Act of Storytelling and the Self's Homecoming," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42, no. 1 (1974): 102.

> story is to be disconnected from our past and our future. Without a story we are bound to the immediacy of the moment, and we are forever losing our grip on the reality of our own identity with the passage of discrete moments.[9]

Storytelling and myth are intertwined, and even when a story is not presented as offering the meaning of life, it can still add meaning to life. As Dan McAdams writes,

> If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if *I* want to know *myself*, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story. I must come to see in all its particulars the narrative of the self-the personal myth-that I have tacitly, even unconsciously, composed over the course of my years...We are not telling ourselves lies. Rather, through our own personal myths, each of us discovers what is true and what is meaningful in life.[10]

Outside stories and personal myths work together to form identity and shape worldviews, and the narratives we believe have consequences for the imagination of our future.

The Role of Symbols in Narrative Communication

Storytelling is more than just words. Also important are the narratives communicated through symbols and rituals. So much of our communication happens nonverbally and indirectly, in ways we often are unaware of. Narratives and rituals are intertwined, with the rituals proclaiming the narratives, and the narratives translating the values of a particular culture. "Narrative rituals are the outward expression of myths, but they also reinforce the power of myths and even change them, depending on the circumstances."[11] Disney has its own rituals and symbols that it uses as means of storytelling and influencing consumers, particularly in its theme parks.

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[9] Winquist, "Act of Storytelling," 103.

[10] Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), 11.

[11] Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians: A Postmodern Critique* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 88.

In order to enter the Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World, a series of ritualistic steps must take place. The process involves driving through a gate onto Disney Property, a 27,000-acre area of Florida that is entirely separate from the rest of Orlando. This land is completely controlled and operated by the Walt Disney company. It contains its own hotels, gas stations, restaurants, and even a fire department. The road signs are the first indication that you have crossed into a unique territory. They are a cheerful purple instead of the ordinary green color used in the rest of the United States. If a guest intends to go to the Magic Kingdom theme park, they must journey to the main gate, a lengthy process that includes driving to the parking lot and parking one's car, taking a tram to the "Ticket and Transportation Center," or "TTC," and choosing between a monorail or ferry boat to ride to the Magic Kingdom. At the entrance, guests go through security checkpoints and scan either their ticket or a bracelet called a "Magic Band," and press their thumbprint to a device that sings a cheerful tune and lights up green, officially welcoming them into Disney World. This process is quite lengthy and becomes increasingly immersive as one pilgrimages towards the promised land of the Magic Kingdom.

The rituals continue within the park as well. A guest's first view of the park is that of a train station, a symbol of American history and a reminder of founder Walt's love of trains. Passing under the train station leads one to Main Street USA. This section of the park, unlike other "lands," is not optional for those attending Disney World. Every guest must go through Main Street USA in order to visit the rest of the park. While many associate Disney with fantasy in the realm of castles and fairy tales, Main Street USA offers a unique version of fantasy, an American fantasy. Main Street USA is the symbol of a small town. It is a nostalgic picturesque vision of America that many remember fondly but few have actually experienced. Music swells with old songs such as "Put On Your Sunday Clothes," "The Wells Fargo Wagon," and "Goodbye, My

Coney Island Baby." If the music is any indication, this street isn't just a 1910's view of America, it is the 1910's as seen by the 1960's. Upon turning a corner and walking upon Main Street USA, the moment finally arrives when guests can view the central icon of the park, Cinderella's Castle. Thanks to brilliantly achieved forced perspective, this sight isn't able to be seen until passing under the train station, a ritualistic moment that takes guests from the real world into a land of magic and story.

Continuing through Main Street USA, guests come upon the Plaza, an open grassy area where a statue of Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse stands at the center. From there, guests have a choice to make. They are invited to explore one of the Magic Kingdom's six lands, an experience through time and imagination.

> It is possible to analyze these quadrants in terms of binary symbolic oppositions. They are all journeys in mythical time, and each is in particular opposition to another. The early childhood fantasies of Fantasyland are contrasted in the opposite quadrant, Adventureland, to those of adolescent literature. The mythical American past of the founding fathers, presidents, ghosts, and the frontier is opposed directly by Tomorrowland, space travel and science fiction. In the vertical axis which bisects the circle, the Republican Main Street town is opposed by the royal palace (where visitors may dine in King Stefan's Banquet Hall).[12]

While each of these lands contain enormous aesthetic differences, they all symbolically allow the guest to participate in the Disney narrative. This narrative is especially effective because it utilizes powerful stories to connect one to the past and to the future. The Magic Kingdom is in of itself a gigantic symbol of the deconstruction of time, with its many historical inspired lands and the futuristic "Tomorrowland." A quote from Walt Disney that is displayed on a plaque at the entrance to the Magic Kingdom proves this intention, "Here you leave today and enter the world of yesterday, tomorrow, and fantasy."

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[12] Alexander Moore, "Walt Disney World: Bounded Ritual Space and the Playful Pilgrimage Center," *Anthropological Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (October 1980): 212.

The design of the park itself is not the only symbol used by Disney. Disney characters, especially Mickey Mouse, are used throughout the park as images of familiarity. They are consistently present in rides, merchandise, food, signage, and music. Of course, Disney also gives guests the opportunity to meet their favorite characters in person. Even the guests themselves are invited to participate in invoking their favorite character through purchasing and donning Mickey Mouse ears similar to those worn on the popular television program, "The Mickey Mouse Club." Fans can also show their devotion and representation in the Disney community by wearing T-shirts, hats, bags and even character pins that are tradable with cast members or other guests.

Symbols are a way to communicate meaning, sometimes in a way that evokes an emotional response. Disney, through immersive experiences and repetition, has created a world full of symbols. For most of human history the image of a circle topped by two smaller circles has been completely meaningless, but today most will recognize the symbol for Mickey Mouse. Disney expertly uses images and rituals as methods of communicating ideas and telling stories, from the morning "Let the Magic Begin" welcome show to the obligatory end of the night firework show.

Interpreting Disney's Narrative Teaching

When Disney is treated as a religion, certain teachings are consequently communicated to followers. Disney offers explanations for the realities of life, order, orientation, and experiences beyond the norm. Through narrative, Disney provides lessons in morality, death, community, pilgrimages, and reverence. Observing the messages delivered by Disney, and how they are received by the public, can be a helpful practice in understanding how people are formed to live religious lives without traditional religious institutions.

Morality is one area in which Disney is able to communicate an ideology. Religion and

morality seem to go hand in hand; every religion has some version of instructing its followers in the difference between right and wrong. For example, currently one strand of American culture has a version of morality, called "cancel culture," in which an individual is ostracized for going against the group. Merriam Webster's dictionary defines this as "the practice or tendency of engaging in mass canceling as a way of expressing disapproval and exerting social pressure."[13] Although everyone may not always agree in what the moral standard or rules are, certain unspoken or spoken ideals are always in place that people are expected to live up to. And like other religions, Disney offers its own concept of right and wrong.

Ancient religions, such as the Abrahamic religions, adopt a particular set of guidelines in order to dictate how one ought to live and how people ought to treat each other. The Ten Commandments famously state practical laws for what people should and should not do. However, Disney morality is less specific, and the vague idea of being a good person has more to do with who you are than your actions. An individual is considered "good" not because they follow a particular set of moral guidelines, but because they are pure of heart, and simply because they are the protagonist. Take for example, the title character in the 1992 Disney film "Aladdin." On paper, Aladdin does not always make moral decisions. When the audience meets him, he is in the process of stealing a loaf of bread from a businessman, and his effort to escape results in injuring not only the law enforcement officers, but also innocent bystanders. Aladdin is also proven to be a liar. He deceives the princess about who he really is, and he lies to the Genie by telling him he will free him as soon as he uses his first two wishes, which he delays doing because the Genie is still useful to him. Aladdin even wins an epic battle with villain Jafar

[13] "Cancel Culture Definition & Meaning," Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster), accessed December 4, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cancel%20culture.

through a lie, deceiving him by implying that Jafar should wish to be a genie, which results in his capture. However, despite all of these negative attributes, Aladdin is still seen as a hero. He is relatable to many because he is a character with flaws who is still considered to be a good person. This Disney version of morality is incredibly appealing to some individuals. Humans want to see themselves as good, even when they do things that they know to be wrong. People seem to instinctively know that they are unable to be perfect, so they may prefer Disney morality which teaches that you can be the hero of your own story despite your imperfections.

People tend to see their lives in terms of story, with themselves as the main character. In a Disney movie, the main character is usually given the most personality, complexity, and character development. They may not always make the best choices, but their actions are usually presented as justified, and the audience can understand why they make the decisions they do. The other characters in films are one dimensional, they are stereotyped as “the sidekick,” “the bad guy,” “the love interest,” or one of the many background characters. This is how many people see the world, as if they are the hero and everyone else has a smaller part to play. In Disney movies, the protagonist is sometimes flawed but is overall good, while others are entirely one thing or the other.

Another example of this concept comes from the 1991 film, Disney’s “Beauty and the Beast.” Like Aladdin, the Beast character may have broken every moral code in the book. He kidnapped and enslaved an elderly sickly man, and then agreed to take the man’s young attractive daughter in his place. The Beast behaved abusively towards his captive and his staff, frequently losing his temper, and becoming incredibly angry and hostile without a moment's notice. Even though the Beast possesses an abundance of evidently evil traits, he is still given redemption and a happy ending. On the contrast, the villain in the film, Gaston, is not given a

happy ending, simply because he is the "bad guy." Humans like to see the "bad guy" get what's coming to them and appreciate a concept of justice. People think of themselves as the main character, whose own actions can be forgiven. However, they see others as either good or evil, and evil people must be punished.

Through compelling stories, Disney is able to teach lessons about morality that are incredibly appealing. One should try in general to be a "hero" and not a "villain," but what truly matters is the vague contents of your heart. Life lessons may be taught, but if you are a main character, you are sure to get a happily ever after whether or not you necessarily deserve it. In a culture of self-absorption and Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, it is natural to think of oneself as a main character in a Disney movie who may not always do the right thing, but things should work out for them in the end.

Similar to other religions, Disney also has lessons in how to deal with one of the harshest and most difficult realities of life, death. Walt Disney himself had a complicated relationship with death. He often avoided funerals and refused to answer the questions of biographers, claiming that "biographies are only written about dead people."[14] Still, Disney was a man of contradictions, and the subject of death is featured prominently from his earliest films. The first of his Silly Symphonies created in 1929 was an animated short titled "The Skeleton Dance," which involved humorous depictions of skeletons, graveyards, and other images of death.[15] Although many thought the project to be too gruesome for a cartoon, it was a huge success, and Disney went on to depict intense dark themes in the Fantasia sequence "Night on Bald Mountain." Disney movies have not shied away from the topic since, and their stories have left

[14] Laderman, "Disney Way of Death," 35.

[15] Laderman, "Disney Way of Death," 33.

an impact on culture and how we grapple with loss of life. In the absence of traditional religion, Disney movies provide a framework to help people cope with difficult stages and things we do not understand.

It is not uncommon for a child's first encounter with the concept of death to be while watching a Disney movie. For many Americans, this was the 1942 film "Bambi," in which a young deer's mother is memorably murdered by a hunter. This inciting incident enables Bambi to grow into maturity, a storytelling device that is used in other Disney films as well. This film is remembered not only for its stunning visuals and charming characters, but also for introducing many young people to the idea that the ones they love could die. Disney movies "Frozen" and "The Lion King" also include the death of a parent as a turning point for the protagonist. But these films are not presented as depressing or hopeless, instead they encourage young people to carry on and keep the faith even when the ones they love are no longer with them. Death is a brutal reality, but witnessing the pain of death becomes a rite of passage that allows one to transition away from innocence and into adulthood.

The Disney Parks themselves also hint at the reality of death while entertaining the possibility of overcoming it. "The Haunted Mansion," one of the earliest Disneyland attractions, is centered around dark themes like death and the afterlife, but it is done in a playful way that implies that life after death can be both enjoyable and festive. It makes the afterlife appear to be so much fun that park guests have even gone so far as to scatter the ashes of their deceased loved ones inside the attraction.[16] Of course, this practice is not approved by Disney, but it does have some interesting implications as to people's devotion to the brand, so much so that they want

[16] Erich Schwartzel, "Disney World's Big Secret: It's a Favorite Spot to Scatter Family Ashes," The Wall Street Journal (Dow Jones & Company, October 24, 2018), https://www.wsj.com/articles/disney-worlds-big-secret-its-a-favorite-spot-to-scatter-family-ashes-1540390229.

their loved ones to exist in Disney Parks for all eternity. Over the years, “The Haunted Mansion,” which was built to contain a farcical imitation of a graveyard, has become a real one.

At the Disney theme parks, death seems to have halted entirely. The nostalgic ideas and locations of the past seem to live forever in Main Street USA, Frontierland, and Liberty Square. For those who have fond memories of vacationing at Disney Parks with their families as children, walking down those famous streets makes one feel like a kid again. In fact, experiencing childlike wonder is part of what makes Disney Parks so appealing to adults. One can take on the role of Peter Pan and choose to never grow up, and never grow old. While Disney certainly provides the tools one needs to cope with death, it also gives helpful distractions for avoiding it. The end of life is one of the most difficult truths one must face, and in the absence of traditional religion, Disney provides appealing alternatives for coping with or escaping unhappiness.

Disney also communicates particular messages about community and provides opportunities for its fans to share in community with one another. Humans have an intense innate desire to connect with one another, but unfortunately, as technology has advanced, our culture has become more isolating. In the past, religious organizations and shared beliefs brought people not only together in worship, but also in friendship, socializing, work, serving others, and reliance in times of need. Without these structured organizations, it is incredibly difficult for humans to find and live in community with one another. However, Disney has created its own community of believers, and it serves as a reminder for how desperately people still crave these kinds of relationships.

All community is grounded in shared narratives, and the Disney community is no exception. These narratives are communicated through common symbols and language. The

Disney lingo may be isolating to newcomers, but, when welcomed into the fold, it becomes a unification experience for those in the know. For example, Disney fans might use a phrase like "Pardon our Pixie Dust" (a saying posted on construction zones at the theme parks) as a synonym for "excuse me." Fans frequently use abbreviations for specific Disney rides and attractions and communicate using the "show" language taught by Disney to cast members. The average guest can also participate in the "magic" by calling a young girl in a Cinderella dress "princess." Disney is successful because they have created and facilitated an environment where people not only witness the good life, but they can also participate in it and share it with others.

With a company as large as Disney, many of the communities formed by fans are actually subcommunities centered around niche topics and interests. For example, many fans gather at Walt Disney World every year to participate in "Dapper Day." This event, created entirely by fans and not by the Disney company, is an opportunity for adults to get dressed up head to toe in vintage attire. Guests wear elaborate outfits reminiscent of years past, including options such as a vintage dress, a parasol, long gloves, a fascinator, heels, or a three-piece suit. According to the event's creator, the idea for Dapper Day came while looking at historic photos of Disneyland's guests, who were all dressed to the nines. She wished she could dress that way, without feeling like everyone was staring at her. She decided to encourage others to "step out in style" with her at the park, and Dapper Day was born.[17] Something that started as a simple concept, not wanting to look silly by oneself, has become a massive event where likeminded people can join together as a community and express themselves as a group.

Some fans take the idea even further by "Disneybounding," or dressing in colors inspired

[17] Justin J, "The Dapper Day Story," DAPPER DAY, accessed December 4, 2021, https://dapperday.com/pages/the-dapper-day-story.

by their favorite Disney characters. Dapper Day and Disneybounding show that loving Disney is more than something one does on their own, it is something that is shared, and something that provides community in a world where togetherness is scarce. Being a part of a community is a transformative experience, taking one from an individual identity into a group identity.

Many religious organizations have a concept of a sacred pilgrimage, a journey that one must take in order to fully participate in their belief system. For many, a beloved story becomes a promised land, a place separate from the mundane realities of the real world. As Roger C. Aden suggests,

> Whether we have recognized the constraints of habitus since our early years, have recently become aware of its limiting qualities, or implicitly understand its manifestations only on rare occasions, we yearn to travel from the comforts and constraints of our home/habitus to reach someplace special: a promised land. Lacking a clear sense of a single promised land in a culture where material conditions have all but erased traditional promised lands, we create our own symbolic promised lands…[18]

The Disney Parks offer the chance to take not only a symbolic pilgrimage, but a literal one. Many Americans see going to Disney as a rite of passage, something that every family must do at least once in their lifetime, or while the kids are still young. This is reminiscent of traditional religious traditions inspiring their followers to journey to places such as the Vatican City, Mecca, or Jerusalem. A pilgrimage isn't merely a fun trip or a vacation, it is a necessary step in religious participation. Disney encourages this narrative in its advertising, but Disney fans also motivate one another to take the journey to the place where dreams come true. It is a sacred event with a particular reverence around it. Families might save funds for years in order to afford it, but they are content knowing they provided their children with the significant American experience.

[18] Roger C. Aden, *Popular Stories and Promised Lands: Fan Cultures and Symbolic Pilgrimages* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 79.

Despite modern sensibilities, people still crave and seek out experiences that feel divine, and Disney has become a place that offers that possibility. The allure of an enchanted world calls to those who believe in the beauty of imaginative stories. Disney has done an outstanding job of retaining the reverence surrounding their brand. Whoever visits the theme parks, whether they be a child or an adult, is treated equally. Everyone is encouraged to participate in the show as if it was real. People of all ages can get "pixie dusted," are called "prince" or "princess," and actively participate in silly games or performances. This perhaps becomes the most obvious when an adult interacts with the live Disney characters in the theme parks. Characters treat adults and children the same, preserving the magic for all.

When Disney maintains the reverence surrounding its brand, it conserves its own significance and importance. Disney asks participants to take their experience seriously, and fans certainly answer the call. When so much of life seems pessimistic, ironic, and empty, Disney offers an alternative, a land flowing with milk and honey where the ordinary is left behind. The narrative of a promised land is enforced by Disney and maintained by its community of fans. The religious themes present in Disney movies and theme parks support the creation of a new perception of oneself, and as the Disney reality is continually insisted upon these teachings are further fortified in the fanbase.

The Disney Identity

Observing the beginnings of the Disney company can help determine what kind of identity they would prefer their customers to have. From his earliest years, Walt Disney seemed obsessed with creating a utopia. In the late 1930's and in the wake of the success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Walt Disney opened a brand-new animation studio in Burbank California. He

intended for this studio to be more than a simple workspace, it was to be a workers' paradise.[19] However, the 1941 animator's strike, a five week long strike over inadequacies of pay and privileges, seemed to prove that Walt was not as aware of his worker's needs as he had thought. While he did hire professional designers and architects to work on the new animation studio, Walt oversaw every detail and seemed determined to control every decision. He often felt as if he knew what was best for the people who worked for him. The new studio would have parks, animals, food, space, and common meals.[20] The only thing it lacked would be housing, but it wouldn't be long before Walt's interest in creating a utopian community would get closer to reality.

In the mid 1960s Walt began outlining an idea for what he called EPCOT, an acronym for "Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow." The original concept of EPCOT is not the same EPCOT theme park we know today. Instead, it would be a planned community complete with schools, hospitals, churches, businesses, transportation, and 20,000 residents. It would feature dramatic and new ideas and technology in planning, design, construction, and governance.[21] As the name implies, EPCOT would emphasize technology and innovation, an entirely new kind of city where people could live, work, and play under the Disney umbrella.

In his lifelong travels across America, Walt Disney had seen firsthand the problems that city living presented. He distrusted the government, and strongly believed it was incapable of solving the multitude of issues that were prevalent in society. Instead, he saw corporations as the future, finding that they were the ones who were doing the most good in providing for jobs,

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[19] Josef Chytry, "Disney's Design: Imagineering Main Street," *Boom: A Journal of California* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 35

[20] Chytry, "Disney's Design," 35

[21] Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 424.

improving education, and uplifting everyday life. All of his modernist ideas would come to fruition in EPCOT. The corporate structure would literally replace democracy, and the governing would be done by those who Walt believed knew best, the Disney Company.[22] Walt Disney, when describing the plans for EPCOT, stated, "It will be a planned, controlled community, a showcase for American industry and research, schools, cultural and educational opportunities. In EPCOT there will be no slum areas because we won't let them develop. There will be no landowners and therefore no voting control. People will rent houses instead of buying them…."[23] Despite years of planning, and momentous efforts towards making the utopia of EPCOT a reality, it would never come to be. Walt Disney would pass away on December 15, 1966, and the Disney Company decided that without Walt's vision and leadership, it would be impossible to move forward with the EPCOT project.

Walt's desire to create a perfect "City of Tomorrow" is an example of how from the beginning, the Disney company held a high standard of ideals, and even sought to create a perfect world. Like many of its famous characters, Disney has a disposition of optimism. It seems as if Disney's attempt to form a perfect society has not stopped with animated cartoons or even theme parks, this company has intentions of shaping the identities of people, including their consumers and employees. Through the use of the "show" narrative, individuals are placed into Disney's world. A person becomes more than a customer, they are a guest. An employee is not just a purposeless cog in the machine, they are a Cast Member.

Disney has certain ideals that it has encouraged its employees and customers to follow. For example, the original Disneyland had a strict no alcohol policy, and even though many of the

[22] Matthew C Arnold, "A Commodified Utopia," The Original E.P.C.O.T, 2002, https://sites.google.com/site/theoriginalepcot/essays/a-look-back?authuser=0.

[23] Arnold, "A Commodified Utopia,"

parks serve adult beverages today they are highly monitored, and guests are removed if they do not keep up a particular etiquette. Recently, Disney has also forbidden smoking in the theme parks. Ironically, Walt Disney was known for being an avid smoker and drinker. Cast Members are also expected to adhere to particular cleanliness and appearance standards. These guidelines, called "The Disney Look," instruct employees to be clean cut, hygienic, and kept up with. Of course, the parks themselves are in many ways a mini utopia, things are expected to run efficiently, and when something doesn't work it is either fixed or replaced.

Over the years, some of the expectations of the Disney company have changed with the cultural values. For example, "The Disney Look" now allows tattoos and longer hairstyles for men. On the Disney career website, it says, "The Disney Look is an inclusive set of guidelines that not only aligns with our brand, but empowers our cast members to more proudly be their authentic self. It is clean, polished and approachable, and is designed with our costumed and non-costumed cast members in mind."[24] The culture of Disney in the 1930's and 1950's is vastly different from today. In the past, the focus was on conformity to the group, with physical appearance as a significant feature. Today, customers want to see cast members express their individuality, and Disney has complied. Although the definition of perfection has changed, Disney still pursues the same utopic ideals, where everyone can be themselves while remaining approachable.

Disney has a particular set of values that they would like to see their customers and employees align themselves with, an identity they are forming. People are taught to follow their dreams, believe in themselves, and above all; be happy. If life is like a Disney movie, there may be some kind of struggle or obstacle in the present, but the future is sure to be bright. One can

[24] The Disney Look, accessed December 29, 2021, https://parksjobs.disneycareers.com/the-disney-look.

claim the Disney identity by believing themselves to be pure of heart, generally good, optimistic, and they must never give up on their dreams. A person can also look to Disney for the answers to life's most difficult questions, such as how to be a good person or how to cope with death. Disney has successfully taught happiness to be the ultimate goal, and then created a theme park where one might go to find that happiness. However, Disney did not invent this concept, instead they have opportunely grasped onto a cultural shift that has been taking place for generations. This company is worth observing because it reflects the mood and status of our civilization. People are looking to Disney to form identity, and as they do, they participate in a cultural movement that desires an MTD god that will help them achieve their dreams of pleasure and self-gratification.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCERNING THEOLOGICAL WISDOM

While Disney may be considered by many to be the modern-day masters of storytelling, they are certainly not the ones with the grandest story to tell. That honor belongs to the Christian church, whose people have been sharing the story of God with the world for centuries. Frederick Buechner defined Christians as "people who know some stories and tell them to others."[1] Part of the Christian identity is to take seriously the Great Commission given by Jesus to his disciples in Matt. 28:19–20, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."[2] Our stories, while certainly attention grabbing, were not created for entertainment purposes. Instead, we tell stories because the Creator of the universe was and is actively involved in his creation and has a story that demands to be told.

Narrative and the Christian Faith

The Christian narrative is one that is all encompassing. It includes the world's origins, a devastating fall and disgrace, a powerful redemption, and a new creation. God's story ought to be told in a way that captures its full majesty and wonder. As Richard Lischer said, "The point is not to tell bunches of substitute stories for their inspirational value or to recount meaningful experiences that are vaguely analogous to divine truths but to tell one story as creatively and

[1] Charles L. Rice, "A More-or-Less Historical Account of the Fairly Recent History of Narrative Preaching," in *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2012), 8.

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV translation. https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/copyright-page/

powerfully as possible and to allow that one story to probe our world."[3] It is a mistake to reduce God's story to be a series of "life lessons" that one may apply to their life or leave behind. The Christian story is meant to put everything in its rightful place, and it orients the believer toward who they are and whose they are. Our scriptures are a collection of a variety of genres, including stories, poems, songs, genealogies, and prayers, and they contain an account of the entire Christian narrative. This narrative is an incorporating one, and it includes all of us.

Humans are inexplicably drawn to narrative; we rely on it in order to communicate meaning to others and to ourselves. Narrative connects us to the past, reminds us of our purpose in the present, and encourages us to boldly pursue the vastness of the future. In today's America, many people suffer because they subscribe to the postmodern understanding of the absence of a metanarrative. In contrast, the Christian story inspires the building of a foundational metanarrative that translates meaning in all areas of life.

As Fred B. Craddock states in regard to narrative preaching, "The narrative sermon does not claim to offer a brief escape from reality, but claims to hold up a mirror to reality. How so? Because the sermon participates in, assumes, and reveals, a master narrative, a macro-narrative, a metanarrative. The narrative sermon bears witness to this metanarrative not only in its ultimate reality, the divine purpose, now seen, now not seen, which runs through beginning, middle, and ending."[4] The metanarrative is essential to identity formation. Understanding the importance of having a metanarrative is crucial to providing listeners with a full understanding of the Gospel. Christians are a part of something grander than the individual, an ultimate reality that requires

[3] Ronald J. Allen, "Theology Undergirding Narrative Preaching," in *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2012), 32.

[4] Fred B Craddock, "Story, Narrative, and Metanarrative," in *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2012), 89.

transformation to a new life. In contrast, Disney movies do not operate as a part of a grand metanarrative and does not ask its fans to do so. While the stories may contain similar themes and ideas, they often contradict one another. The expectation is for the audience to pick and choose what they like from each story, not to see themselves as a part of an all encompassing one.

It is impossible to deny the vast importance of establishing and teaching the Christian metanarrative, especially in a postmodern world. Craddock writes that the overarching narrative must explicitly be stated and repeated, and that Christians cannot simply assume strangers, or even their fellow believers, will innately understand it.[5] Many Christians still believe that Christendom in America is alive and well, and that most people they interact with will have a common understanding of the Gospel. However, today one cannot expect others in the United States to have grown up learning the pillars of the Christian faith. Nothing can be assumed, and even faithful Christians may require reminders of the overarching story of God, and their role in it.

Storytelling, on both the macro and the micro scale, has historically been used by Christians in order to proclaim God's word. Jesus himself used stories and parables as means to answer questions, inspire conversation, and teach about the Kingdom of God. A common misunderstanding of Jesus' parables is that they were merely simple anecdotes told so that everyone could easily understand. However, this is not the case, and in many instances, Jesus did not explain his parables. Even his disciples could not fully know what was meant by them.[6] When listening to or reading one of Jesus' parables, conscious thought and consideration were

[5] Craddock, "Story, Narrative, and Metanarrative," 95.

[6] Mike Graves, "Except in Parables: Preaching the Riddles of Jesus," in *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2012), 176.

necessary. By telling stories that require pondering, Jesus invited his hearers to participate in the story, allowing them to be a part of the sometimes uncomfortable, but ultimately contemplative, experience of mystery.

Jesus' parables are oftentimes bound to the mundane aspects of daily life. He uses physical, ordinary elements, and chooses characters from a variety of walks of life and even a variety of religious backgrounds. Jesus' stories were designed to create intrigue.[7] However, stories alone would be nothing without the Gospel message they communicate. Amos Wilder writes, "How Jesus and his followers spoke and wrote cannot be separated from *what* they communicated. It was the novelty of grace and the fundamental renewal of existence which brought forth a new fruit of the lips, new tongues and rhetorical patterns…"[8] The Gospel is a narrative that is so shocking and provocative it cannot be kept to oneself, and it continues on as it touches new lives through the Holy Spirit. It is deeply compelling, surprising, and transformative as it boldly asks its listeners to abandon their individual narratives in pursuit of a Christ-centered metanarrative.

The book of Acts is bursting with examples of early church leaders telling the story of God as a grand narrative. On the day of Pentecost, Peter gave a sermon that brilliantly ties together the familiar words of the Old Testament and the Good News of Christ Jesus' death and resurrection. Listeners are led to an understanding that the ancient scriptures of the past are not a separate story, but instead they are all a part of a larger story that points to ultimate redemption. Peter also gives instructions as a means for his listeners to enter into the story, saying, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Again, we see the story not as something

[7] Graves, "Except in Parables," 192.

[8] Rice, "More-or-Less Historical Account," 10.

to simply enjoy or to make one feel better about their life, but as something forever life-altering and inherently participatory. Many who received these words at Pentecost were indeed baptized, and they joined the ranks of believers that we can count ourselves among.

The Apostle Paul also takes on a narrative form of proclamation in his message in the midst of the Areopagus. His audience would have had little to no understanding of the Jewish faith. Paul begins where scripture does, in the beginning. He tells the men of Athens that he has the answer to the unknown, that there is a God who is ultimately a creator, not something that was created by human hands. Paul even quotes one of their own poets, saying, "For we are indeed his offspring" (Acts 17:28). The Apostle meets his listeners where they are, and uses words familiar to them as an introductory point towards the fullness of the Gospel. The message that he weaves ends with a call to repentance, a reminder that a good story insists that a person must not be the same after having heard it.

The Christian Church's creeds also serve as a witness to God's story. In a postmodern age, the ecumenical creeds take on a new importance, as a way of communicating what Christians believe and have always believed throughout history. "However some may wish to revise the picture of early Christianity, the creeds define historically the faith as Christians have confessed it from its earliest centuries on. They embody the constituent components of the church's confession of Christ."[9] Today, when someone describes themselves as a "Christian," one cannot assume they share the same story as described in the creeds. Therefore, the creeds can be utilized for explaining and enunciating the truths found in scripture, as proclaimed by believers from the early church on.

[9] Charles P. Arand, Robert Kolb, and James A. Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 15.

Along with defining the faith, the creeds can be used to teach the faith. The Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, while not being primarily narratives themselves, do contain elements of story.[10] When the creeds are enunciated, it is an expression of the entire story of the Bible, performed in a concisely summarized manner. "The creeds open the drama with God creating the heavens and the earth, move to a focus on Christ's surprising and tragic death followed with his unexpected resurrection, and conclude with the Spirit's breathing new life into creation with the resurrection of the body."[11] They act as an outline of scripture that when included in worship puts the entirety of the service into context. The Athanasian Creed also plays a role in sharing the story of the Gospel, taking its hearers to the final judgement. The creeds are reminders for Christians of who they are in God's story, and they can also be tools for inviting non-believers into the Christian faith. The average person may not have extensive theological training, but, if they know the creeds, they can communicate a basic understanding of the Christian story.

In order to have a metanarrative, one must adhere to a particular story with a beginning, middle, and ending. The Christian story has been passed down by witnesses through the generations. It provides the content for a metanarrative, and the foundation of identity formation. The story teaches Christians who the Creator is, what the world is like, and how they ought to treat their neighbor. It establishes a God-centered identity, and if one is to see themselves as a saved child of God, they must understand why they needed saving.

The Christian Narrative

The Christian story includes all of us, but it centers around our Creator, and how he got

[10] Charles P. Arand, Robert Kolb, and James A. Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord*, 51.

[11] Arand, et. al, *History and Theology of the Book of Concord*, 51.

involved in his creation. Therefore, it is fitting to begin telling the Christian story the way the scriptures do, with the story of God creating the universe. When God spoke the heavens and the earth into existence, he looked upon his creation and proclaimed it to be good. Then the Lord formed a man out of dust, a creature in his image who would help care for the earth and name the animals. God formed a woman from the rib of the man, to be his companion and helper. These first humans walked alongside God in perfect harmony, with instructions not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. However, there was an adversary in the garden, a serpent who told the woman if she ate from the tree she would be like God. The woman did as the serpent said; she ate from the tree and gave some of the fruit to her husband. In this act of defiance, the first humans rejected God and their identity as creatures, and then separated themselves from him. Together, they brought death to the world that God had made to be good. This saddened and angered God, and he expelled them from the garden. However, God was not finished with humankind, and he had a plan to make all things new.

God gave his promise of redemption to a man named Abraham, and he promised to make him into a great nation. He forms a special covenant with Abraham, telling him that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars, and that all nations would be blessed through him. He sets Abraham and his family apart to be his people, and commands that every man be circumcised. These people, the Israelites, became God's chosen people. Even though the Israelites consistently rejected God and did evil in his sight, God kept his promise and did indeed bless Abraham and his descendants. From this line came David, a great king who expanded the nation of Israel and was a man after God's own heart. The Lord promised the coming of a king who would be from David's line, who would do what is just and right. The genealogy in the book of Matthew leads to a man who was descended from Abraham and David, a man named Jesus.

A common storytelling devise is the plot twist, when something surprising happens which changes everything. Even though a Messiah had been promised by God, the person of Jesus was unlike anything that humans expected. While many anticipated a conquering king, like David, Jesus was instead a suffering servant. He indeed came to defeat enemies, but these enemies were sin, death, and the devil. Jesus was sent from the Creator to redeem creation. His mission was to restore the earth, and make the ultimate and just sacrifice for our sins. Despite many temptations, Jesus lived a perfect life. He ministered to individuals and to crowds of thousands, teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven and proclaiming Good News. Jesus both announces and inaugurates the reign of God.

Many did not like the things Jesus said. The chief priests and the teachers of the law thought Jesus was blasphemous because he performed miracles on the Sabbath and called himself the Son of God. They plotted to kill Jesus and had him arrested. This perfect man, the Lamb of God, was publicly humiliated, tortured, and put to death on a cross. Once again, humanity had rejected God Himself. However, through the cross Jesus is elevated, glorified, and exalted. Three days after his death, Jesus appeared to many, alive. He instructs his followers to spread the word of his ministry and he ascends into heaven. On the day of Pentecost, Jesus' disciples heard the sound of a great wind, and tongues of fire rested on their heads. Through the Holy Spirit, they spoke to large crowds in languages they didn't know before. Many of the disciples wrote accounts of what they witnessed at the feet of Jesus, and the Gospel narrative continues to be shared throughout the world to this day.

The Christian metanarrative is a redemption story. We were dead in our sins, but now alive in Christ. Through this story we know what kind of God our God is. He is one who is faithful to his creation, always keeping his promises. He promises to return in glory, and we will once again

walk with God as the first humans had. The Christian story also gives us a mission, the same mission that the disciples were given, to go out into the world and spread the message of the way, the truth, and the life.

Christian Identity Formation

The stories we surround ourselves with, and the things we love, have powerful and lasting impact on our identities. Without realizing it, our identities are shaped and molded by our experiences, surroundings, and culture. As Stephen Crites writes, "Even when it is largely implicit, not vividly self-conscious, our sense of ourselves is at every moment to some extent integrated into a single story"[12] If we daily use narrative as a means to navigate the world, it stands to reason that we will also use narrative as means to establish personal identity.

> 'Secular' liturgies[13] are fundamentally formative, and implicit in them is a vision of the kingdom that needs to be discerned and evaluated. From the perspective of Christian faith, these secular liturgies will often constitute a *mis*-formation of our desires—aiming our heart away from the Creator to some aspect of the creation as if it were God. Secular liturgies capture our hearts by capturing our imaginations and drawing us into ritual practices that 'teach' us to love something very different from the Kingdom of God.[14]

Having something that we love is the first step towards identity formation. It is crucial to look at one's own desires, where one spends their time, where one spends their money, and what entertains a person, in order to determine where their love is aimed.

The Christian narrative is meant to form a particular identity. Martin Luther's explanation of the first article of the Creed in the Large Catechism provides a helpful framework for contemplating what this narrative means for identity formation, particularly how to worship God

[12] Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," 302.

[13] Smith specifies that he uses the term "secular" loosely, and that all humans are liturgical beings.

[14] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 88.

as the center of one's life. He explains that defining God as a creator separates God from everything else in the world, since everything else is created. Oftentimes we recite the first article, but we do not stop to contemplate the implications of believing it. Luther writes, "For if we believed it with our whole heart, we would act accordingly, and not swagger about and boast and brag as if we had life, riches, power, honor, and such things of ourselves, as if we ourselves were to be feared and served."[15] When we try to create an identity for ourselves based on our love of our own perceived accomplishments or abilities, we create an idol out of them. Many times, one dedicates the whole heart to the things of this world, to the things that they love, instead of to the One who loved them first. That makes these things into idols, false gods.

As Luther says in the explanation of the first commandment, "a 'god' is a term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart."[16] Human beings often sinfully take things that are good, even given to us by God, and rely on those things in order to feel secure. Even entities that are meant to be enjoyable and seem innocent can become idols. It is tempting to get swept up in the things that we love, such as sports, popular culture, academia, and politics. While these institutions may appear to be harmless, it is important to remember where our devotion ought to be placed. "Our entire identity as Christians and everything that we are in our lives are implicated with Jesus Christ and him crucified. The "story of everything" calls us to put the rejection, suffering, and crucifixion of Christ-and also his resurrection on the third day-over against all of the questions and objections that might be put

[15] Large Catechism II.21 in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 433.

[16] LC I.2 in Kolb and Wengert, 386.

to us as Christians"[17]

There are many ways in which we foolishly take things that are good and create idols out of them. We can even go so far as to misinterpret who God is, and where we find his glory. Martin Luther used the terms "theology of the cross" and "theology of glory." The Christian story as told in scripture leads one to see the glory of God hidden in Christ crucified. The theologian of glory however, denies the hidden things of God, calling evil good and good evil. They look to their own definition of what is good, instead looking to God who is the ultimate good. To the theologian of glory, being a Christian means doing good works and all the glory that gives us. In the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther said, "Therefore the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and works are evil, for through the cross works are dethroned and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified."[18] In the light of the cross, we see that we can never redeem ourselves with works. To be a Christian is to be a theologian of the cross, we are transformed into a new identity where we live in Christ and in the crucifixion. This happens through entering into the story of Christ.

One manifestation of a theology of glory is Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, the dominate narrative in the culture. This way of thinking imagines a tame god that humans are more comfortable with. The MTD god is one that fits easily into our everyday lives while allowing us to gain the "benefits" of religion. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism promotes working within the boundaries of creation alone, by inviting people to only acknowledge a god that they can understand. It's third principle is that "the central goal is to be happy and feel good about

[17] Okamoto, "Word of the Cross," 64.

[18] Corey Mahler, "Heidelberg Disputation (1518)," *Book of Concord*, November 2, 2020, https://bookofconcord.org/sources-and-context/heidelberg-disputation/.

oneself."[19] This is reminiscent of the disposition of the Psychological Man described in Philip Rieff's "The Triumph of the Therapeutic" which states, "Religious man was born to be saved; Psychological man is born to be pleased."[20] We are living in the age of the Therapeutic, where the primary objective of life is to be happy. In this reality, religious beliefs are not ultimate truth, instead they are one path of many that one may use in order to find comfort and peace. People no longer ask, "How can I be saved?" Instead, they ask, "How can I feel good?" The theologian of the cross sees themselves as a part of God's story of eternal joy instead of trying to make God fit into our own story to create an earthly feeling of happiness.

Matthew 16:24 says, "Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." This statement sounds entirely different from what many in the world think religion is. In a culture in which the therapeutic reigns, Jesus' command to look to Calvary and take up one's own cross sounds wrong. The theologian of glory doesn't know God hidden in suffering. Many might prefer the "religion of Disney," where happiness is upheld as the highest value, and the ultimate goal is to acquire "happily ever after." However, when we use religion to gain happiness for ourselves, we lose the grand narrative of scripture. Christians believe that God comes down to us, not the other way around. We do not believe in God because he is simply the best option for coping with the harsh realities of the world. Our identity comes from recognizing God as the highest value, and as the ultimate truth whether or not we are able to fully comprehend his ways.

In the minds of many, the Christian religion may be a part of one's personal story, but it is not a grand metanarrative that actively transforms one's life or the world. When a shallow

[19] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 163.

[20] Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), 19.

version of Christianity is upheld, this perception gains strength. "When Christian faith is viewed in terms of "accepting Christ" or "praying a prayer" without a parallel call for true apprenticeship to Jesus, justification is separated from sanctification and spiritual formation is deemed an optional add on for advanced saints."[21] As Christians, we aspire to be who God created us to be, to live in conformity to what it means to be fully human, our Telos, or full potential. The use of narrative for Christian formation is an occasion to do this, the results being a worldview shift that asks believers to see themselves as a part of God's all-encompassing story.

Embracing God's Story

When we receive our identity from any place other than God's story, we deny ourselves the opportunity to embrace our creatureliness. To be a creature implies that one has a creator, who is to be worshiped and glorified, for he exists outside of creation. Since the fall of man, people have wanted to build themselves up to become like God, instead of recognizing and accepting their role as human creatures made in the image of God. People desire control, both over themselves and over their environment.[22] Faithful Christians seek to conform to God's design for the human, rather than trying to find completeness from the things of creation. This means that we receive our righteousness from God, and work with God to share righteousness with everyone.

Our relationship with God is what gives us our identity, and our activity is what we bring into the world. To be a human is to have two types of relationships, our passive Coram Deo[23] relationship with God and our active Coram Mundo[24] relationship with our fellow creatures.

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[21] Setran, "Sowing the Story," 93.

[22] Arand, "Back to the Beginning," 9.

[23] Coram Deo meaning "before God."

[24] Coram Mundo meaning "in the world with our fellow creatures."

Looking at one's life in the context of the entire story of God, as told through scriptures and by the church, shows who we are and how we ought to treat our fellow human beings. Because we have been loved, we love others and serve one another, acting as witnesses to new life. Jesus Christ came to restore creation, and that includes all of us. When we look to created things in order to establish personal identity, we are seeking to restore and glorify ourselves, instead of relying on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Instead, we are to first pursue the kingdom of God, and joyfully spread the good news throughout the world.

> People who hear the story and believe it are then incorporated into it as God's people through baptism. They will become those who will readily think, "Other people should hear this. If the end of the world is coming, and there is going to be judgment, I think I should share that." And for those who hear their witness and are stuck by the story, who wonder, "What should I do now?" the answer is straightforward-and comes straight from the story itself: Repent, be baptized, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, keep all he has commanded, look for him to return in glory.[25]

Our righteousness is not something that we earn, it is a freely given gift from God. Many rivers flow into what makes up our identities, including the Coram Mundo vocational responsibilities. As Christians, we embrace our humanity by putting on what Luther called the "Mask of God."[26] This means that although many may not recognize it, when we live vocational lives, God works through us to minister to others. Christians can do this by valuing and respecting our employment positions, loving our families, and serving our neighbors. Our work is not a mere occupation, it is a divine calling with great importance. We can also take care of God's creation, upholding the beauty of the land given to us by the Father. Through it all, God belongs in the center of our lives. Our identity as Christians is tied to a particular story as passed down through scriptures, a story that is forever changed by the death and resurrection of Jesus

[25] Okamoto, "The Word of the Cross," 61.

[26] Gene Edward Veith, "Masks of God," *The Lutheran Witness* (August 2005).

Christ.

While there are many dangers that come with worshiping creation over the creator, it is appropriate to look to creation to learn about our creator and his goodness. Likewise, our lives can be used as displays of how incredible our God is. Creation is a beautiful gift from God and participating in the goodness in the world is part of what is means to be a Christian.

> At times we may speak about the corruption of the world in ways that may obscure the goodness of God's world. Here article one of the Formula of Concord is particularly helpful. It maintains the goodness of God's work while rejecting the corruption that suffuses it. And because God valued it, he set out to reclaim it. The Son of God took on a human body. And Christ's saving work comes to us in elements of creation delivered by human creatures. God will finally raise up our bodies on the last day for life in a new creation.[27]

Respecting and understanding the Coram Deo relationship is the beginning of a fuller Coram Mundo relationship, where we can live as witnesses of Christ, sharing his Gospel and his story with a world that desperately needs it. As a Christian, it can be difficult to witness to the world that desperately seeks out stories that can never compare to the truth and power of the story of God and his people. While some may turn to other narratives in an attempt to acquire meaning, identity, and purpose, these stories are mere shadows of the fullness of the Christian story. The story of God and his people is one of beauty, redemption, and of divine goodness and mercy, and God wants us to be a part of it! He daily and richly provides for us in ways that are unimaginable and welcomes us into new life where we learn to love and serve one another, and all of creation.

[27] Arand, "Back to the Beginning," 142.

CHAPTER FIVE

IMPLEMENTING GODLY GUIDENCE AND LEADERSHIP

The Walt Disney Company is certainly one of the most successful brands of all time. It is the epitome of Americana, and it has captured the hearts and imaginations of many throughout the generations. This company also perpetuates certain religious elements, and there are many who are drawn to Disney as a means to orient life. Perhaps what Disney does best is it's storytelling. It's powerful tales of good vs. evil are utilized for identity formation and teaching who one ought to be. The church can learn much from Disney, and significant practical applications can be explored while observing a brand this influential. However, learning from Disney must be done responsibly and mindfully. The church is still the church, and it is essential to recognize that we have something more valuable than any company could ever provide, and that is the good news of the Gospel.

One could argue that Disney is particularly masterful at storytelling because they are able to successfully communicate human truths. Even when the characters in films are not human, they have human desires, emotions, and experiences that resonate with people. The stories found in scripture do the same thing, and we share them over and over again because they remain truthful throughout time. While they certainly communicate the grand narrative, they also contain smaller individual stories that are inspiring, informative, and relatable. Through these ancient texts, readers gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be human.

Our Christian narrative is absolutely essential to sharing the Gospel, but at times the story is told in a way that does not invite the hearer into participation. Disney has certainly found means to tell their stories in engaging ways that inspire an audience, and we can do the same without altering the message and contents of the Christian story. One way that Disney is able to

be so captivating is through the use of emotion. Their stories are powerful because the characters experience deep pain, heartbreak, longing, redemption, and the triumph of victory and fulfillment. These are big emotions that are faced every day by people around the world, and when one watches a character go through the same thing, it validates those experiences. Viewers find characters that they relate to, and they are led to feel what the characters feel.

The Disney Pixar film "Inside Out" takes this concept even further by actually personifying emotions. This movie tells the story of a young girl moving from the familiarity of a home in the Midwest to a foreign new life on the West Coast. Inside her head, the emotions of "Joy," "Sadness," "Disgust," "Fear," and "Anger" fight for control over how to navigate her new surroundings. While not everyone has experienced the exact circumstances of the main character in "Inside Out," everyone can identify with having a significant change in their life and not knowing how to process it. This film can be incredibly helpful for a young person who does not know how to communicate all of the dramatic and new feelings they are experiencing.

Just like "Inside Out," our Christian scriptures are packed full of emotions. When reading the Bible, one can find the joy of the disciples at the resurrection, the sadness of Mary at the death of her son, the disgust of Jonah when asked to go to Nineveh, the fear of Moses standing before the Pharoah, and the anger of the Pharisees in their encounters with Jesus. Too often we tell the Christian story in a dry and boring way, reading the Bible as if it were a school textbook that one must receive information from. While the scriptures certainly do contain important information, they are also immensely engaging and exciting! The Bible contains hundreds of thousands of examples of relatable and honest human emotions. To share the Christian story in a faithful way is to include the vast array of emotional experiences that are already present in the Bible, and to invite the stories to touch the hearts of those who can relate to them.

While Disney does have a character named "Joy," the Christian understanding of joy is even more powerful. Our joy is more than a momentary happy feeling; it is the everlasting fulfillment that comes from being in the presence of the Creator. It is a celebration that is initiated by the Father and spread to all people. One can catch a glimmer of the joy to be experienced throughout eternity when hearing the parable of the prodigal son. In the story, the son completely betrays the father, abandoning him and rejecting him. Eventually, the son realizes that he needs the father, and decides to return home, expecting to work as a servant in his father's house. To his surprise, the father welcomes him back with open arms, kissing him and declaring him to be alive again.[1] This beautiful picture of joy captures what humanity experiences as we are made alive once again in Christ, and brought into a relationship with our Father. The Christian sense of joy stems from the undeserved grace given to us by our Lord and Savior, and we get the opportunity to share that joy with the world.

The Christian narrative creates a new sense of joy, but it also forms a distinct relationship to tragedy. For the Christian, one is able to find joy even in the midst of unhappy circumstances. While Disney attempts to teach people how to cope with death, the church is able to share a unique, more hopeful message. While death is certainly a painful reality, Christians know that it is not without hope. As 1 Thess. 4:13–14 says, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep." As Christians, it is appropriate to recognize the pain death causes, but we do this with the understanding that this is not the ending of the story. We have faith in the blood of Christ Jesus, for whose sake we may be brought into the resurrection. This is

[1] Luke 15:11–32.

not a distraction from death or a therapeutic coping mechanism; instead, it is a life lived with the joy of the knowledge that death has already been overcome.

Emotion of all kinds are necessary for telling the Christian story. Disney stories are effective because they are able to capture real feelings that many people experience. When one hears a story that is packed with emotion, it invites them to step into the story themselves, and imagine what it might be like to be in that particular circumstance. It also calls a person to apply the story to their own lives. As they interact with a story, whether it be historical or fictional, they are struck by emotion which leads to application to one's personal story. When the Christian story is told with the emotion that is present in scripture, it encourages its readers and hearers to treat it seriously, with respect and severity. Being part of the Christian story is truly an emotional experience with many highs and lows, so it is necessary that the story be told in a way that captures those emotions and results in a life changed.

Making Use of Powerful Narrative

Observing Disney shows that in order to form identity, there must be a powerful narrative. Christians certainly already have a powerful narrative, and our task is to make use of this narrative through preaching and teaching. One way that we can do this is through reminding. We live in a time of forgetfulness and distractions. For today's American, every day is filled with notifications, scrolling, advertisements, and constant content. With advancements in technology and the internet, we are taking in more information every day than ever before. In order to function, it is necessary to forget much of what is taken in so that we do not become overwhelmed. However, the Christian story is worth remembering, and therefore it is necessary for the church to take up the responsibility of reminding.

The subject of remembering is tackled in a number of Disney movies, most notably in "The

Lion King." In a turning point of this feature film, the adult lion Simba has been living a carefree life full of immediate pleasures, comfort, and fun with friends. His world is transformed when his deceased father Mufasa appears to him in a cloud, berating him for his lifestyle, telling him that he has forgotten who he is, and therefore who his father is. Simba is greatly distressed by this message, and by what his father says next. Mufasa implores him to look inside himself and remember who he is. This moment in a Disney movie has intense Christian applications. As Christians, we often forget both who we are, and who our father is. We sometimes prefer to live as Simba did, in a "Hakuna Matata" way that requires no responsibilities. However, this is not who we were created to be, and we can remember who we are by remembering our Father. The church can take on the responsibility of reminding as well, so that Christians do not forget their place in God's story.

In "Preaching as Reminding," Jeffrey D. Arthurs outlines the ways storytelling and narrative can be used as reminders. The first way he lists is imagination and emotion. In order to engage an audience, it is important that a story be told well. This does not mean one must reinvent the wheel every time they tell a story. It simply means that imagination and emotion are tools that can be utilized in order to increase retention. People want to be taken on a journey that starts with a desire and a conflict and ends with a satisfying resolution.[2] This concept can be applied when sharing the Christian story. One may consider taking their time walking through the drama of the plot, instead of quickly rushing through to the "point" of the message.

Arthurs also points out that story can be utilized for clarifying knowledge.[3] Telling a story is one way that a person can communicate some kind of feeling or experience that is otherwise

[2] Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Preaching as Reminding: Stirring Memory in an Age of Forgetfulness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 88.

[3] Arthurs, *Preaching as Reminding*, 89.

difficult to articulate. Life is incredibly complicated, and it is often difficult to find the words to tell others what is meant by certain things. Story helps overcome this difficulty. By telling a story, you are inviting someone else to see things from a new point of view. For example, in the recent Disney movie "Encanto," a granddaughter is unable to understand her grandmother's attitude and perspective. When the grandmother shares the story of a traumatic event in her past, the two are able to relate to one another in a new way. Using a story to clarify knowledge can be used in preaching and teaching as well. "Through myth, an author enables us to peer around a curtain to see the drama or redemption taking place and how we can find our roles that play."[4] Our identities are formed by the stories we tell ourselves, and the stories that we listen to and share. Therefore, it can be helpful to use a story as a means of obtaining a vocabulary for the things we already know to be true.

Stories can also be used as a means for passing down the Christian faith. For example, in Paul's first letter to Timothy, he admires the faith of Timothy's grandmother Lois and mother Eunice, crediting them for sharing their faith with their family.[5] Martin Luther understood the value of instructing children in the faith, so much so that he wrote the Small Catechism for the purpose of training young people. Sharing God's story with children can be done in a variety of ways, like through rituals, direct instruction, or leading by example. When stories are taught through words and actions, identity is also formed and passed down through the generations.

Along with identity formation, stories are essential for community formation. Arthurs explains that the two go hand in hand, "story forms community, and community helps us remember or relearn our own stories."[6] This community formation is the responsibility and the

[4] Arthurs, *Preaching as Reminding*, 90.

[5] 1 Timothy 1:5

[6] Arthurs, *Preaching as Reminding*, 92.

role of the church. Everyone is a part of the Christian narrative, but many times people need to be reminded that the Christian story is their story as well. The reminding is not done on one's own, it is done as a group so that all may share in the growing and in a deeper understanding of who we are as the body of Christ. In Rom. 16, Paul mentions more than thirty names of people who were supporting his ministry and serving the church in a variety of ways. Paul did not share God's story on his own and in isolation, but as a part of a community of believers who were dedicated to proclaiming the word of God.

Indirection is the last use of storytelling presented by Arthurs. This is an especially useful tactic when presenting someone with the Law. He uses the example of David and Nathan in 2 Sam. 12. Nathan could have approached David bluntly, telling him exactly what he did wrong in a direct way. Instead, Nathan used a different method when approaching his king. He told a story. His story was so shocking to David, that he had no choice but to react to it and call for immediate action. When Nathan revealed that David himself was the main character in the story, it was much more impactful than if he had simply rebuked him.[7] As Christians, there are many times when we must deliver God's Law. Storytelling can be a means to which we can communicate those messages in ways that are easier for others to experience. Just like David, they may be impacted in ways they never expected.

Our human memories are often not as trustworthy as we may wish they were. We look back to our own experiences and are frequently at a loss for recalling even major life events. Moments of misremembering also cause one to be unaware that they are incorrect about a particular topic or subject. When Christians are not reminded of God's story, they are in danger of embracing other stories. We are incredibly influenced by our surroundings, and too often we

[7] Arthurs, *Preaching as Reminding*, 92.

listen to the culture's narratives and forget the truth of the church's teachings.

The Christian story has been told and retold for thousands of years. This familiarity can put pressure on the modern-day Christian storyteller. One might wonder, how can I keep the story fresh? How can I innovate or reimagine the story? While it is sometimes beneficial to think outside of the box, it may be worth considering that it is not always necessary. People still need to be reminded of the stories of the Bible, even if they have been told these stories over and over again. Even if a person has heard a story many times before, they may be struck by it differently on a particular day or time in their life. It is better to have these stories brought again into a person's memory, than have them be forgotten because a Christian feels as if they always must always be trying something new. "One of the most crucial functions preaching accomplishes, a function often neglected in homiletics textbooks, is the stirring of memory. We need not-indeed we should not-scurry about like a character in a video game searching for originality. That is not our calling."[8] Our calling is much greater. We are to offer up an invitation to not only understand, but to participate in God's great story.

The Character and Christian Identity

Stories have many uses. They can be told to form community, to transfer information, to teach about the world, to entertain, and to establish individual identity. Perhaps what makes a story especially interesting and engaging are the characters. The hero archetype in particular is especially popular in media. We love to see a hero defeat the odds, fight for what they believe in, and gain victory over evil. Hero stories are consistently found throughout cultures and throughout generations. The Disney movie "Sleeping Beauty" features a classic knightly hero,

[8] Arthurs, *Preaching as Reminding*, 4.

fighting a dragon with the "shield of virtue" and the "sword of truth." This moment is perhaps inspired by Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which tasks the reader to "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil" (Eph. 6:11). The fight of a hero in a movie may seem very different from what the average person experiences every day, but everyone knows the feeling of facing a battle. The Christian story certainly has much to say in regard to what makes a hero, and where we can find an ultimate hero in our Savior Christ Jesus.

People tend to express information about their lives in terms of stories, placing themselves in the role of the main character. However, living in the Christian narrative means recognizing that the story is not centered around you. Instead, you are a part of a good vs. evil story that has been taking place since the creation of the world. We have a true tale with villains; called sin, death, and the devil. But in the moment when it seemed like all was lost and the bad guys won, a hero was victorious. This hero lived a perfect life and died a perfect death so that all could be restored and redeemed. In this story, we are the baptized children of God, saint and sinner at the same time. Our role as characters is to worship the one who rescues and sustains us, and to teach others about his amazing love and saving work. This narrative helps us to better understand who we are and how we relate to the divine, the planet, and our neighbors.

As Christians, we can recognize the diversity of characters that we may interact with every day. God created each person in a unique way, with particular talents, abilities, and learning styles. In order for identity formation to take place, it is important to tell the Christian story in a variety of ways.[9] We are used to reading or hearing stories, but there are many other means of

[9] There are a variety of styles in which people learn, including visually, auditorily, and kinesthetically. Every person is unique, and no one learns with only one style. However, it is important to understand the variety of learning styles, in order to reach a diversity of learners.

communication that can also be effective. For example, one may engage someone visually by utilizing symbols and images in their places of worship. They might also recognize the importance of honoring certain traditions and rituals that communicate the story.[10] Or, one may consider preaching or teaching by having the listeners picture themselves in the body of the characters. They can try to imagine what they would see, hear, smell, taste, and touch in that moment, in order to help them connect better with the message.[11] We are all made differently, and we all have unique ways of seeing the world and retaining information.

The Apostle Paul refers to God's people as a body, the Body of Christ. He says in Rom. 12:4–5, "For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." God gave all people special gifts and abilities in order to serve his kingdom. By being aware of the ways we are different and learn differently, we can pursue how to instill identity formation in all people. In order to incorporate every character into the narrative, Christians can learn new ways to make the narrative accessible and understandable for everyone.

In order to teach identity, we must teach which character we are in the story. As characters, we are active and living parts of a story. One aspect of this means that instead of being an audience, we are a congregation. As a congregation, we stive to live, work, and support one another in a community. In our individualistic culture, it can be especially challenging to share fears, doubts, and worries with other members at church. To do so makes us vulnerable, and we take the chance of getting hurt or rejected. When we are a part of a congregation, we share in failures as well as successes and rely on each other in times of trouble. The early church in Acts

[10] Troeger and Everding, *So That All May Know*, 39.

[11] Troeger and Everding, *So That All May Know*, 37–38.

4:32–34 gives a clear example of this,

> Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

In order to transform from being an audience to being a congregation, it is necessary to become comfortable with being uncomfortable so that we may learn to lean on one another as fellow members the body of Christ.

The Christian identity also means going from being a reader, watcher, and listener to being an active participant. Of course, this does not mean ceasing continuous learning about God's story. Instead, it should challenge Christians to apply the story to their own lives and allow it to encourage our actions. We are so much more than a fandom; we are lovers of the one true God. Therefore, we go out boldly into this world and live as witnesses to the transformation Christ has done in our lives. We treat people with kindness and love and live as servants to our neighbors. Christians act vocationally, not because it makes us feel better about ourselves, but because we are the people of God and lights to this dark world. Our identity changes when we see ourselves as characters in the Christian narrative. The battle has already been won, so we get to joyfully share in the triumph of our champion.

Additional Practical Applications

A church may consider practically applying the first article wisdom of Disney in a multitude of ways. Disney is one of the most successful companies in the world, and part of their success has come from their legendary hospitality. They know how to treat people with respect and courtesy, and they serve as a reminder of how to be welcoming to newcomers without

forgetting those who have been around long term. It may be useful to acknowledge the ways this brand has been influential and consider what wisdom we can utilize to better serve our congregations and our communities. Without altering the narrative of the Christian story, we can seek out ways to reach people more effectively and encourage proper identity formation.

One of the most impressive accomplishments of Disney has been its ability to balance tradition with change. Many Lutheran congregations are currently struggling with the desire to hold on to the resources of the past, while not isolating new generations. The Disney theme parks are constantly being updated and transformed, attractions are always being added and even taken away. However, Disney does all this while still retaining the traditions of what made it special in the first place. The old Disney songs such as "When You Wish Upon A Star" play along new ones such as "How Far I'll Go." Perhaps the church can look to Disney as an example of how to incorporate new elements and stay updated, while retaining the history and even the nostalgia of the past.

Many congregations might also value how well Disney trains it's employees, and how they inspire the people who work with them to recognize their purpose. As Lutherans, we can encourage all people to see how crucial their vocational responsibilities are. Disney employees are trained to believe they are an essential part of the company, and that inspires them to go above and beyond for their customers. As a church, we can do the same, and remind our parishioners that they are serving the kingdom of God in whatever they do. Disney also has a clear mission statement, and they are constantly teaching that statement to employees at every level. The top C.E.O. and the lowest theme park employee all attend the same employee training seminar, and the information is reinforced again and again by the company. In today's world, it cannot be assumed that every church goer, or even every church worker, understands the basic

pillars of the faith. We may look to Disney as an example of how lessons might be taught to new members and strengthened for those who have been attending services for decades.

Disney has a particular language. They call their employees "cast members," their customers "guests," and their theme parks a "stage." This language may be confusing to those not in the know. However, once learned, the language actually promotes inclusivity. When a person learns to speak the Disney language, they feel as if they are a part of something bigger than themselves. At times in the church, we might be afraid to use our traditional religious language for fear of excluding those who do not understand what we mean. Disney shows us that we do not have to fear using words, liturgical elements, or concepts that some may not initially understand. However, this must be done with the intention to teach so that instead of isolating, it can be a means of embracing newcomers and inviting them into the fold.

The Disney theme parks are an incredibly welcoming environment. They have a reputation for being clean and well put together. Clear signs and markings show where one can find restrooms, drinking fountains, food, and other resources. Employees are available to speak a variety of languages. Things are made accessible for those with disabilities. Employees are trained to be friendly and helpful. Disney uses the term "guests" for their customers for a reason; it is a lesson in hospitality. When you have a guest in your home, you show them the greatest respect and courtesy. Churches should be encouraged to treat their members, potential new members, and even strangers the same way, as guests. We should always strive to be the most inviting, the most welcoming, the friendliest, the cleanest, and the most accessible environment possible.

The church worker may also consider how they could incorporate some of Disney's storytelling elements into their lessons. Disney characters are incredibly familiar, and many of

their stories are rooted in Christian elements and themes. For example, the Disney movies "Frozen," "The Lion King," "Hercules," and "Mulan" all have characters who sacrifice themselves for the sake of others, in a way that reminds us of the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ. There are times when a Christian could creatively adapt the culturally relevant Disney stories to become tools that teach the faith.

Part of what makes Disney successful is its willingness to embrace the "magic" of everyday life. It prides itself on being an enchanting experience and grown adults who visit the theme parks or watch the films are oftentimes surprised by how much they are emotionally affected by the wonderous things they see. Part of this could be that in today's life, it is difficult to find opportunities to allow oneself to be swept up in the excitement of the unknown and the mystifying. Many are taught modernist values that place importance in only what we can see and prove. Christians sometimes uphold these values, by using logic and reason to argue their religious beliefs intellectually, without considering the other ways the faith is taught through the work of the Holy Spirit. Disney is evidence that people still seek the enchantment of everyday life, and still value the power of the things they do not understand. This has enormous implications for the church. The church ought not to shy away from appreciating the wonderous and even mysterious aspects of our faith. We have a God who does incredible things and acts in ways that is incomprehensible to us, and we need to take advantage of the many opportunities to sit back and appreciate the magnitude and awesomeness of what he does in this world.

Perhaps the greatest lesson we might learn from Disney is how crucial narrative is for identity formation. Through Disney stories, people are able to draw conclusions about their role in the universe, the meaning of life, how to deal with death, and the difference between good and evil. The Christian church also has things to say about these topics, so it is essential to

contemplate how we can use narrative to inform and encourage. Disney does a fantastic job of telling its audience who they are, and what their role is in the story. The Christian church can do the same. By telling the story of God and his people, we provide a framework that teaches that God is at the center of everything. Our joy is found not in the happiness of the moment, but in service to the one who became a servant, Jesus Christ our savior.

When invoked, the name "Disney" inspires a variety of reactions. Some are filled with hatred over a bloated company that gets larger and larger every year. Some hold the name close to their hearts as they nostalgically and fondly remember special moments from childhood. Some look to the commercialism and greed of this brand and rebuke it for seemingly doing whatever it takes to make a profit. Many see Disney simply as children's entertainment. However, one might consider looking at this company as an opportunity to consider how desperately people still need something to believe in. While Disney is certainly not a traditional religion, it has acquired a following that is just as devoted. It has influenced many by using powerful narrative for identity formation. While some of the practices of this company should never be replicated, the church may be wise to consider some of the implications of the success of Disney. This beloved brand appears to fill a hole in the lives of many who are without a true God-centered identity. While Disney may lead to happiness for a moment, no created thing can ever compare to the fullness of life with the Creator. At the Disney theme parks, an architectural technique is used called "forced perspective," that allows buildings to appear taller than they really are. Disney, and anything we attempt to use to take the place of God, is like forced perspective. It may seem fantastical and magical from far away, but the closer one gets the more they see it for what it is, pretend. As Christians, we have something real to share, a God who loved us so much that he stepped down into creation in order to make all things new.

Final Thoughts

With their films, Disney captured the public's imagination. With their theme parks, Disney invites the public into their world, and welcomes them to be a part of something bigger than themselves. The brilliant storytelling of the films is brought to life in the theme parks, and when the first Disneyland opened its doors in 1955, they brought people closer to living inside of a movie than ever before. The sights, the sounds, the smells, the characters, the friendly staff, and all of the wonders beckon for a person to interact. One cannot go to a theme park and not get involved in one way or another. It is truly a story that you can be a part of, and it is a story that is participatory.

Jesus' parables are participatory as well. They ask that the audience engage in the story and take time to consider the meaning. Christians have been having conversations over the centuries about what they think the parables are about, and even non-Christians are astounded by the truths that are uncovered by listening to Jesus' teachings. A well told story will get people involved, and it moves the audience in a particular way. It will move one to change, and it encourages people to see themselves and their world differently.

God is doing the same thing with his story. He does not want his people to merely listen and learn lessons from it. He wants us to be a part of it! Our God did not come down into creation so that we could collect a book for our shelves, he got involved because he wants to have a relationship with us. God acts like the author of a great play, but instead of simply writing it and stepping to the side, he directs and engages with his creation. Even more than that, he wants us to actively engage with him as well. His story becomes our story, and we are more than an audience, we are sons and daughters of the one true King.

We are all influenced by the stories we hear, and the ones we tell ourselves. We live our lives according to story, which is why it is important to align oneself with the right one. Disney

promotes a story that reflects the values of our culture, which promotes the idea that everyone is supposed to be happy, and spiritual forces exist to help you achieve that happiness. The Christian story, however, is unlike any that has come before it. It is the radical true tale of a God who became involved in his creation in order to redeem his people. We live as children of God, who respect the Father's will and have faith that he knows what is good, even if we don't always understand. The Christian story ultimately guides one towards action, and towards a right relationship with the Father.

The church has been utilizing narrative for identity formation for thousands of years. It has always been appropriate to recognize the importance of story, but in today's world it is fundamentally significant. Disney is evidence that people are seeking ways of navigating the world and are looking for answers as to who they are. While there is certainly much we can learn from the Disney company, the church has a far greater story to share. We know that identity is formed every day, oftentimes subconsciously, by what we love and what we participate in. Because there are so many different elements that make up a person's sense of self, it is essential to consistently be reminded of God's narrative and our role in it. As Christians, we are a part of a beautiful story of redemption and love, where identity is found at the foot of the cross. We have so much more than "happily ever after," our story ends with the everlasting joy of abiding in the presence of the Author of Creation.

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