



Our Take on the Movie, “Tree of Life”

by Van Waddy with Cathy Shepherd

Terrence Malick’s recent movie, “The Tree of Life,” is an astonishing tale. He uses archetypal and symbolic images as well as soulful language to create a magnificent canvas on film depicting the life of our universe as we know it and Life as we address it in our own individual lives.

The film is so large and complex, many who do not think in this archetypal, symbolic way may come away from it confused—dazed perhaps—as to what they just witnessed. Indeed, we are bombarded with images that contrast the infinite with the finite, eternal with mortal, inner with outer, with what we Jungians term “as above, so below,” along with so many other of those familiar opposites we embrace as constituting that mystery we call wholeness.

We know we are on an archetypal journey when Malick begins his film with a quote from the story of Job, thereby placing the story of his fictionalized family from Waco, Texas, within God’s response to the baffled, long suffering Job: “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations? Tell me, since you are so informed.” (Job 38:4)

A young child speaks at the beginning of the film: “There are two ways through life, the way of nature and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you follow.” This theme of nature vs grace permeates the story and the message of the film. Malick’s use of the metaphor, the Tree of Life, serves as anchor and witness in this film, suggesting the Tree in the Gar-

den connecting heaven and earth, our family tree from which our own life springs, trees that dot our world and provide oxygen and shade.

If you are not comfortable with Mystery, this is not the film for you. Malik plays with the eternal and finite as if they constitute one reality. The characters move between both with considerable ease, erasing time and space as linear boundaries. Even the music is a connecting, unifying force in this film, spiritual yet embodied, visceral yet ethereal. The Big Bang as front and center, millions of years of gaseous energy and life-forms, the separation of land and sea, and emerging life forms herald the emergence of our own human species as this film unfolds.

Perhaps Malick is suggesting both our insignificance in the large realm of life and our exquisite presence in the midst of it all. “You will be grown before this tree is tall,” the mother in our story tells her young child. We are but a morsel of sand, the movie suggests, compared to the billions of years of life, yet we are present now to witness and experience the majesty of it all, to discover the holy, the sacred within the mundane minutia of daily living.

The story of our young family in 1950s Waco, Texas, emerges from this vast array of archetypal images, yet the multiple layered meanings never recede into the background. The theme of Nature vs Grace is embodied in the characters of the Father and Mother, with Father, played by Brad Pitt, embodying Nature, and Mother, played by Jessica Chastain, Grace.

Father, who longed to be a classical pianist, is an unrecognized, unappreciated genius with patents in his name, given to fits of anger and cruelty toward his three sons, crippled by his own sense of failure and determined his sons will succeed where he failed. Mother, on the other hand, is the patient, protective spiritual presence in the family, child-like at times, unanchored even by gravity.

The oldest son, Jack, played as an adult by Sean Penn, is the central character and the one who holds within himself the tension of the opposites in this story. Jack whispers, “Father, Mother, always you wrestle inside of me. Always.” We witness the child Jack struggle with anger and jealousy, cruel to his younger, more saintly brother, at times, yet longing to be more loving and loveable. The sepia scenes of the neighborhood in this small Texan town, with young boys scavenging to satisfy their angst and restlessness and the struggles we witness in the family play out the opposites of light and dark most prophetically.

We first meet this family when they learn of the death of the second, more saintly son, at 19 years old, a casualty of war. The house they now occupy is a far cry from their original small, rural house in Texas. The father has redeemed his failed career and has been redeemed himself. In flashbacks, we trace the father’s earlier career loss and subsequent suffering. Loss allows him to see his greatest treasure is his family and children, thus evoking the story of Job and redemption.

“Someday you will fall down and weep and you will understand all things,” the Father had told his children. This film is an attempt to raise our awareness of our smallness, our largeness, our capacity to create meaning out of the bits and pieces of our sometimes shattered lives. Like Job, we are reminded that the mystery is so large—our behavior and strivings neither rewarded nor punished by the Mystery—that the struggle to allow grace to enter our lives and have its way with us is blessing enough.

A multitude of symbols fill this magnificent canvas and add to the story: ladders, bridges, doors, the ebb and flow of the ocean, hallways, attics, stunning architecture, stars, erupting volcanoes, silent images of a spiritual presence, and so many more it is impossible to enumerate. Jack walks through the symbolic door at the end of the film into the eternal realm between earth and beyond earth, falling down on his knees. This seems to suggest he came to that “understanding” of which his father spoke.

Malik offers, throughout the film, whispered words and prayers addressed to the Mystery, or God, by each of our main characters—a glimpse, perhaps, into the mystery of the Self. “Who are you?” one whispers. “What are we to you?” another poses. “Guide our lives” the Mother pleads. “Where were you when . . . (that young child drowned)?” whispers Jack. We have to strain to hear the whispers in the film, as they are much too meaningful to miss.

Carl Jung tells us we are to find the middle way by holding the tension of the opposites without identifying with either one of them, thus allowing the transcendent function to work its magic in us. The Mother in this film tells her children, and us, “Unless you love, your life will flash by.” Each of us has to decipher in our own life what that means, how we do that, *why* we do that.

Some may say Malik made this film too long, took on too grand a subject, was too obtuse in trying to speak of something beyond mere telling. Courageous and stunning, in scope and creativity, come closer to the truth. How else does one capture on film the nature of the eternal and respond to what Mary Oliver asks of each of us: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with *your* one wild and precious life?”