

Reel Spirituality

Life is Beautiful...

By John VanSloten

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[CLIP 2 - Biking/full of love/life family scene - 51:00ff] This morning's film, *Life is Beautiful*, is a film about love. In particular, it's about one man's love for his wife and for his son. It's a love that starts out in a rather idyllic setting... in pre WW2 Italy. It's a time of peace... of beauty and simplicity... a time of '*amore!*' The first half of the movie offers us various portraits of this love in this context... Guido (Roberto Benigni) passionately, and often comically, pursues the woman of his dreams, an Italian woman named Dora; his _____; beautiful Princess! And then, once he has won her heart, they have son; a beautiful boy, Joshua. For the first half of the film we see his love lived out in an almost fable like setting. Life is beautiful. And love reigns 'supremo'.

But then the tone, the plot shifts. The problem with an idyllic pre-ww2 setting is the inevitability of WW2! The Nazis occupy their little town. Increasing pressure is placed on all Jews who reside there... all Jews including Guido and his son. First it was just a matter of verbal abuse and graffiti, but then evil starts to take over. Guido and his son are hoarded into a rail car with so many others and are shipped off to a concentration camp. Not willing to be separated from her family, Dora, an Italian, has the German commander stop the train to let her go as well. The last half of the movie is set in this horribly dark and heinous setting. But the light of Guido's love cannot be extinguished, even here.

When this movie first came out there were many angry sentiments regarding the placement of this love story in this specific context. I think

the comedic element of the film was especially upsetting. Guido's expressions of love were often communicated in a kind of comedic slapstick form. How could there be humour in a concentration camp? For that matter, how could you set a love story there? Those are tough questions to answer. And I'm not going to answer them here. I don't think anyone can speak for the sensibilities of others in these kinds of judgments. But one thing I do know is that the setting that the writer of this story chose was brilliant in one way; it provided a huge contrast for the extraordinary love of this father. The darkness of that camp made the light of his love shine so bright. The horrible evil of that place was a foil to the tremendous love that he exhibited. PAUSE....

I want to spend the rest of this message looking at the nature of that love. Examining what it was that made it so powerful. You see, when you watch a film like this, and see a love like this, there is something inside of you that says, I want to love like that. There was a superhuman kind of quality to the love that this father showed. As you watch it play out, you think, this is humanity at its best! This is what love is all about! We can learn some love lessons from this story! PAUSE

So what did this amazing father's love look like?... Probably one of the most predominant features was the way it **protected and shielded** his son. As you saw in that last clip, Joshua was only a little boy, maybe four or five years old. The thought of this youngster suffering the fear of a concentration camp was more than his father could bear! There was nothing he could do to remove him physically from the horrors of the camp. But he knew that perhaps he might be able to protect and shield him emotionally and psychologically. At least he might be able to shield him from the terrible fear of that place. And so what he does is make the entire experience a game! As they are being hoarded onto the rail car, he tells him that this is a special trip for his birthday, and that all trains

don't have seats. And then when they arrive at the camp he explains away their circumstances as all being part of the game. In this next scene we see an example of his protective efforts [CLIP 3 – 1:06ff....]

This was only the beginning of the games development. Throughout the rest of the film he continually comes up with creative, and comedic explanations for the terrible things that happen. The Nazis yelling is how they try to win the game. His Father's hard labour was for building the tank (which would be the prize for the winner of the game), etc... Each time he convinces his son that it's all part of the game. Each time he takes away the fear that his son might begin to feel. He takes it away, in part, with this little denial charade (which works well with a 4 year old) and he also take it away through his constant presence with his son.... He ever abiding voice of assurance. "I'm going to tell you why you don't have to be afraid, and I'm also going to be with you through this time. I'm not going to leave you." (Deut 6:4) His son need not fear evil for his dad was with him (Psalm 23).

As I watched his protective/shielding love play out, I thought, I want to be more like that. I want to love my children like that! Not necessarily live in denial like they did, that's a last resort methodology for a fable. But to have the kind of heart that would do anything to protect them... To live in a way so that I'm doing all that I can so they won't ever have to be afraid... there is something so right about that kind of love.

Another predominant feature of Guido's love was the way that it **breathed hope** into others. Obviously this happened a lot in his dealings with his son, but it was even more powerfully depicted in this love for Dora, his wife. As I mentioned earlier, she too, ended up in the same camp as they did, only she was segregated with all the other women. So she never saw Guido or Joshua. You can only imagine the fears that

ran through her head, not knowing how her husband and son were doing. She had no idea what their futures were... were they safe or not?... were they even still alive?

There was one profound moment in the movie where she is sorting through the clothes of people who have been gased. It was an ugly, ugly part of the death camp regimen. Knowing that people once wore these garments... and for Dora... wondering if she would come across a shirt from her husband, or the cap of her son...

Into this ugly, depressing, disheartening scene, Guido's love spoke hope.... **[CLIP # 4 – loudspeaker scene 1:20ff.....]** Did you see what that hopeful love brought? What a powerful gift it was for Dora. She could go on, knowing that all was well, even if just for the moment. Those few words gave her life.

I think true love does this... it breathes hope into the lives of others. It says, "Don't worry... we're still here..." and while the specific words of assurance were comforting, the sound of their voices were even more so. **[Whisper...]** "Don't worry, I'm still here..." And Guido gave her hope by not only telling her they were alive, but also by demonstrating that he still hoped. His words were filled with hope.... His love was filled with hope... His love would always hope... always persevere... and never fail. (1Cor 13:7) That kind of hope filled love communicated, breathes hope into others.

As I consider this facet of true love... I wonder, does my love breath hope into others? When people experience my words through this megaphone (mouth)... do they walk away stronger?... more hopeful?... able to go on? Oh how I want to love with this kind of hope imbuing love.

As the story of this film continues on the danger of the camp creeps ever closer to Guido and his family. Near the end of the film, and the

war, Guido desperately decides to take matters into his own hands. The Nazis have now realized that they have lost the war... and in a desperate attempt to cover their tracks they end up burning all their paperwork and removing all evidence of the atrocities. Guido figures that these acts will also include killing the remaining prisoners, so he decides to make a run for it. First he hides his son in a small metal storage box... and then he goes off looking for Dora. In doing this he takes a huge risk, running through a camp filled with scampering Nazis... and then he sadly gets caught. Watching the film, I found myself thinking, "Why did you run?" "Why didn't you just wait inside the barracks and maybe there would be no final holocaust?" He took this huge risk and now it looked like it would cost him his life. He could have just stayed safe and sound and tried to ride it out... but instead stepped out and took the risk.

But I guess I shouldn't have been so surprised. Throughout the film his love took risks. It seems every time he tried to protect, or shield, or comfort or breath hope, he was risking himself in the process. To me this pointed to another very integral part of his love; **a willingness to sacrifice!** Guido risked his life over and over and over again, so that others could live... as a demonstration of this love for them. His life was of little consequence when it came to saving those he loved. He puts the needs of others before himself.... And made himself nothing (Phil 2).

Guido would do anything to save those he loved... even die for them. And then even as he is about to die for them... protect them from fear... and leave them with hope... look at the love in this scene... he's been caught... and is being marched off for execution... and knowing he's walking by the metal box where his son is hiding he does this... **[CLIP #5 – Marching scene – 1:48ff.....]** about to die and still his love cares more for others than for himself! **(Christ on cross) What kind of amazing love is this?**

Shortly after this scene, Guido is executed... and the Nazis pack up and leave the camp. Slowly all the prisoners then come out from their barracks and leave the camp on foot. And then, only when the camp becomes completely silent, does Joshua come out from his hiding place. His life was saved though his father's sacrifice....

Then the movie ends with this hopeful and happy scene.... Where young Joshua realized that he has won the game... and that he wins first prize, a tank! **[CLIP #6 – tank scene/reunion with mother]**

It was a powerful film... with a powerful message... about a powerful love. A love that protected and shielded... a love that brought comfort and hope.... A love that would risk it all and sacrifice itself for others...

It's a picture of a love that we seldom see in our world today. It seems that this kind of selflessness just doesn't make the scene all that often. And yet it's the kind of love that is so admirable. There is something so right about a human being living it out the way Guido did. Deep down inside, I want to know that kind of love... I want to experience it... I want to demonstrate it. LONG PAUSE....

This story [BIBLE] tells me I can. PAUSE.... It's a story of love... only it's no fable... and it's written to a bunch of people who are stuck in the prisons of their own lives... yearning for liberation... yearning for freedom... yearning for hope. There must be more to this meager existence than just this! This story speaks of a love that brings this freedom... A love that says:

“Do not be terrified, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go... ‘I will be with you; I will never leave you or forsake you.’ ”

Joshua 1:9,5

Even if you are walking through the valley of the shadow of death you can say;

“I will fear no evil for you are with me...”

Psalm 23:4

We can know a love that the Apostle Paul defines like this...

“Love... always protects, always trust, always hopes, always perseveres”

1 Corinthians 13:7

You can know a love that came from the comfort and safety of heaven down here to earth. A love that was willing to risk it all for you... the love of God thru Christ...

“Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as man humbled himself, and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.”

Philippians 2:6-8

And then, even as he is dying on that cross... even as his execution is being played out, he thinks of others... and says of the people crucifying him...

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Luke 23:34

Then, the bible teaches, through his death and resurrection, through his sacrifice, we are set free. We can become God's children again. Thru Christ, we win!

**“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should
be called children of God! And that is what we are!”**

1John 3:1

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