

## **Supplemental Reading**

**May 17, 2009**

- 1. Things Unseen – Mark Buchanan**
- 2. Unspeakable – Os Guinness**

## Things Unseen – Mark Buchanan

[Published by Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2002; Mark Buchanan has authored, among other books: *Your God is Too Safe*; *Hidden in Plain View: The Secret of More*; *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring the Sabbath*; *The Holy Wild: Trusting in the Character of God*.]

### Introduction: The Big Fix

I'm dying.

Sometimes I forget that.

Don't misunderstand: I am not, at present, suffering from a terminal illness or a mortal wound. I have no virus breeding, thick and septic, in my bloodstream, no genetic disease swarming, swift and capricious, in my flesh. I am not, to my knowledge, dying soon.

But I am, as the apostle Paul puts it, "outwardly wasting away" (see 2 Corinthians 4:16). That's what I sometimes forget: my mortality, my frailty, my life's brevity, *I will be the exception*, I think, the one who evades death at each turn, slips its every snare, snatches hold of Elijah's chariot or Enoch's robe and, whisked into the wild blue yonder, remains unscathed by the grim reaper's scythe.

But that's laughable: I'm dying, and you're dying, and that's that.

Is there a way to remember this and not be consumed by it? Can I live life to the full when life is often not full – when it's many times broken, empty, scattered, pain-filled, when its beauties are so transitory, its pleasures so vaporous, its hard luck so tenacious? Must I, with all the trouble I'm already in, also remember that I'm dying?

Yes.

And no.

That's what this book is about: the yes and the no.

This book is about heaven, and yet not. It is about our longing for heaven, our instinct for it. It is about eternity in our hearts. It is about the groaning inside us that is both an acknowledgment of and a protest against death, and at the same time a cry for something else, for that which is beyond the grave, stronger and larger than it, more enduring. It is about our yearning for Things Unseen. It is about wanting heaven.

We groan waiting for it. Words cannot express these groans – that's why we groan – but I've set out to lay this yearning down in words anyway, to map the wild rough terrain of our everlasting desire and our desire for the everlasting. I've ventured to name the Things Unseen. And I've attempted to train us in skills for fixing our eyes on them – the unseen realities – so that we do not lose heart.

Not that I wish the groaning to cease. My hope, indeed, is that it deepens. My hope is that we learn to join our groaning, pitch for pitch and rhythm for rhythm, to the groaning of all creation – earth and sky, waterfall and water buffalo, chickadee and katydid, stone and tree – to all things as they wait for the sons of God to be revealed (see Romans 8:22). Groaning is creation’s song, the blues of the cosmos, and we’re to hum its melody and take up its chorus.

So this is a book not about heaven, but about heavenly-mindedness. It’s about how the *hope* of heaven inspires and sustains passion and purpose in this life and on this earth. And it’s about learning the biblical lexicon and discipline for bringing heaven near – for fixing our hearts and our minds on things above.

We’re heaven-bent. I mean by that a number of things: that our hearts have an inner tilt upward, that the grain of our souls leans heavenward, that in Christ we have a sure destination, which powers larger than ourselves carry us toward. I mean it in contrast to being hell-bent. But before any of that, I mean that we’re all cockeyed, bent out of shape, with missing heaven. And we miss it in both senses of the word: We wish for it, yet go astray of it. We have a hunger for things above, but our skill for filling that hunger has atrophied. We’re like a lap cat – still with the instinct for catching mice, but lacking the reflexes – whose pampered existence has made it slow and lazy, inept at stalking, clumsy at pouncing. It rarely catches its prey, if even it stirs to notice the prey in its midst. We’re like that with heaven: We long for it, but we’ve lost the tautness and alertness, the agility and quickness, to satisfy the longing. We’ve grown lethargic. We’ve become so earthly-minded we’re of no heavenly good.

So we need to relearn the skill of fixing our eyes on Things Unseen.

*Fixing.* The word in English has a playful ambiguity. It means to mend: to *fix* a leaky faucet. It means to fasten: to *fix* a bracket to a shelf. It means to rig, to tamper with, to prearrange: to fix the game. In the Greek, the verb *skope* – “to fix” – doesn’t carry this diversity of meanings. It simply connotes an intensity of gaze – a determined, attentive searching out. But the range of meanings in our own language is a happy accident, or a fugitive providence. When we fix our hearts and minds on things above, we practice all things at once. We mend – we *fix* – our wayward attention, our inbred distractedness, our myopia; we fasten – we *fix* – that attention to unseen realities; and we rig – we *fix* – things so that, more and more, we glimpse heaven in places and situations where before we saw only shadows and surfaces.

Heaven is meant to be our *fixation* – our Big Fix. It’s to be our deep secret, like being in love, where just the thought of it carries us through menial chores or imparts to us courage in the face of danger. We fix on it, and it fixes us.

This book is an attempt to help us in that fixation: to uncover eternity in our hearts, to recover the hope of forever, and to discover what makes us so heavenly-minded that we're of much earthly good.

May you ever after be heaven-bent, your eyes fixed on Things Unseen, and convinced of this:  
Even though I die, yet shall I live.

Shalom,

March Buchanan,

January 2002

## Unspeakable: Os Guinness

[Published 2005 by Harper Collins Publishers, Inc.; Guinness authored among other books: *The Case for Civility: And Why Our Future Depends on It*; *Entrepreneurs of Life*; *The Journey: Our Quest for Faith & Meaning*; *When No One Sees: The Importance of Character in an Age of Image*; *Prophetic Untimeliness: A Challenge to the Idol of Relevance*]

### CONCLUSION

#### BUT NOT THROUGH ME

Never again. . . never again. . . never again. . . never again. Like a lighthouse bell tolling through the fog, these words sounded out with monotonous regularity to keep us from the rocks through all the twentieth-century atrocities. No sacred liturgy has been intoned more solemnly. No impassioned warning has cried out more urgently. But no solemn embargo has been breached more routinely and so often.

"To Woodrow Wilson," wrote Henry Morgenthau confidently; dedicating his 1918 book on the Armenian genocide, "the exponent in America of the enlightened public opinion of the world, which has decreed that the rights of small nations shall be respected and that such crimes as are described in this book shall never again darken the pages of history."

But they did.

Out of the memory of the Holocaust, President Jimmy Carter declared in 1979, on receiving the final report of the President's Commission on the Holocaust, "We must forge an unshakable oath with all civilized people that never again will the world stand silent, never again will the world fail to act in time to prevent this terrible crime of genocide. "

But they did.

"Like you, I say in a forthright voice," said President Ronald Reagan to the International Convention of B'nai Brith in 1984, "never again."

But it still happened again.

Speaking "as a World War II veteran, as an American, and now as President of the United States," President George H. W. Bush told guests at the Simon Wiesenthal Dinner in Los Angeles in 1991 that his visit to Auschwitz had left him with "the determination, not just to remember, but to act."

But when the time came, those were only words.

"If the horrors of the Holocaust taught us anything," said William Jefferson Clinton, chiding President Bush over his Bosnia policy, "it is the high cost of remaining silent and paralyzed in the face of genocide."

But he remained silent and paralyzed during the Rwanda rage.

"Even as our fragmentary awareness of crimes grew into indisputable facts," President Bill Clinton said at the dedication of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993, "far too little was done. We must not permit that to happen again."

But the very next year he did far too little too.

"Is another Holocaust possible? I often asked my students that question," Elie Wiesel wrote in *A Jew Today*. "Most answered yes; I said no. By its dimension, its scope, the Holocaust was a unique event; it will remain so. I explained to them that the world has learned a lesson. . . . I was wrong. What happened could happen again."

"If there is one thing sure in this world, it is certainly this," wrote Primo Levi in *Survival in Auschwitz* in 1958. "That it will not happen to us a second time."

"It happened, therefore it can happen again," Primo Levi wrote in *The Drowned and the Saved* twenty-eight years later. "This is the core of what we have to say. It can happen, and it can happen anywhere."

Has there ever been a time when it was more urgent to face up to our human capacity for evil? With all the shameful record before us, no longer can we say we do not know. No longer are we living on the far side of ignorance and non-responsibility. Pleas of innocence have lost their grounds. Each time evil has surfaced, certainly since World War II, most of the world knew well enough what was going on and still turned away. The unimaginable and unbelievable has become believable and routine. With the few grand exceptions, we have all been bystanders, the liberals among us as well as the conservatives, our activist governments as well as our passive fellow citizens. More than 100 million human beings have been murdered, and most of us have "passed by on the other side of the road."

After twenty-five years in Soviet jails, an Estonian dissident was released into the care of his only surviving relative, his sister. Picking him up, she warned him that the family knew nothing of all he had experienced and that she did not want him to bring politics into their family affairs. Aghast, he ordered her to stop the car, got out, and said: "You don't know me and I don't know you. Good-bye."

"The struggle of man against power," the novelist Milan Kundera wrote, "is the struggle of memory against forgetting." But clearly our problem is more a moral issue than a matter of mental recall. One writer sardonically summed up the sorry parade of broken commitments and public indifference in the last century: "'Never again' might just as well be defined as 'Never again would Germans kill Jews in Europe in the 1940s.'"

Checks and Balances for a Reason

What lessons do we learn from this lamentable story? The very word *lesson* may sound grandiose when matched against the enormity of evil, for human answers are always beggared by evil itself – though once again, to find words is to begin to come to terms with the unspeakable.

One of the main lessons is to reconsider the significance of evil for our understanding of public and international life, though this topic would require a book in itself. I would simply argue here that living with our deepest differences is one of the world's critical problems and that one of the overlooked keys to solving it is to give religious liberty its due place in public life. People of different faiths – including secularism – might then relate to public life constructively and to each other civilly.

At the very least, we must shed Enlightenment prejudices about religion and consider the facts more objectively. We must reject the hoary myth that “religion is the problem,” as well as the fallacious idea that the answer is a public square denuded of all religion. As we have witnessed again and again, religion of one kind or another has provided a rationale for evil, but so also has its opposite. The quality and tone of public discussion would improve immeasurably if secularists were to acknowledge that their faith is one faith among others and talk openly of their own failures – on the one hand, directly inspiring utopian evil, and on the other, failing to provide humanistic values strong enough to resist modern evil.

As the global public square emerges, there are two particular errors we cannot afford. One is to replace the religious establishments of the past with a secularist establishment or semi-establishment. The other is to create a two-tier global public square in which the cosmopolitan liberal secularists form the top tier of the global elites and all religious believers are relegated to the second rank. In a truly diverse world, neither of these options for the public square is just and neither is workable.

Understanding the role of religion in world violence today is not an all-or-nothing or black-and-white issue. The peril of religion grows directly from its promise, just as the promise of secularism grows from the peril of religion – which is why both must be respected and harnessed wisely. No force on earth gives deeper and more personal ultimate answers to the human search for meaning and belonging than faith. Religion is truly the master key to history, both for nations and for individuals. “To be religious,” Albert Einstein said, “is to have found an answer to the question, ‘What is the meaning of life?’” “To believe in God,” Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote similarly “is to see that life has meaning.” “Religion,” said Lord Acton, “is the key of history.”

The very power and preciousness of faith in defining reality and ordering life is what can make religion a problem, as we see today in its inflammatory action in conflicts between Hindus and Buddhists in Sri Lanka, between Serbs and Croats in the former Yugoslavia, between Protestants and Catholics in

Northern Ireland, between Muslims and animists in Sudan, and between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East.

But this is only half the story, and we must remember that the world also owes to religion such towering masterworks as the Ten Commandments, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Chartres Cathedral, Bach's *Saint Matthew's Passion*, William Wilberforce and the abolition of slavery, Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, and Roger Williams' revolutionary writings on religious liberty for people of all faiths and for people with no faith.

This promise and peril make it all the more imperative to handle religion wisely in public life, but that is currently not the case in the United States or in much of the Western world. The time has come to say no decisively to both the "sacred" and the "naked" public squares and to embrace the challenges of forging a truly "civil" public square in which people of all faiths and none are free to enter and engage in public life within a shared agreement about the rights and responsibilities they are willing to accord to people of all other faiths.

Utopianism is unquestionably a great menace too, especially in its ideological and totalitarian forms, such as communism. And it is utopianism, not religion, that needs repudiating utterly. Are we on the verge of seeing secular liberalism provide a fertile breeding ground for evil because of its own ungrounded optimism? This could happen partly because of its nonchalance about the seriousness of evil – and therefore about the need for any ethical and cultural restraints – and partly because its own values, such as human rights, depend on traditional beliefs and have no sufficient foundation of their own.

Liberals in the Old World were disillusioned at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the end of World War I, Henry James wrote to a friend. "Black and hideous to me is the tragedy that gathers and I'm sick beyond cure to have lived to see it. You and I, the ornaments of our generation, should have been spared this wreck of our belief that through the long years we had seen civilization grow and the worst become impossible."

Will liberals in the New World soon experience a similar disillusionment a century later? In her memoir *Hope Against Hope*, Nadezhda Mandelstam pointed to the same flaw in modern liberalism that Auden had come up against: "We have seen the triumph of evil after the values of humanism have been vilified and trampled on. The reason these values succumbed was probably that they were based on nothing except boundless confidence in the human intellect."

### Executioner, Victim, and Spectator All at Once

But let me say more about three lessons on a personal level.

First, *we must come to grips with the nature of our own humanity and the evil evident in our hearts an din our world.* Those who do evil, from Auschwitz to Abu Ghraib, are the same species as we are, and an unavoidable lesson of the past century is that we cannot afford to entertain utopian views of human nature that ignore our human capacity for evil.

For all the glory of humanness, we human beings also have a problem. We do not always seek the good of our fellow human beings, all too often we have clear intent to do harm, and sometimes we must acknowledge an uncontrollable hate and even a shameful love of dominance and cruelty. What Nietzsche called “the festival of cruelty” is a feature of the human, not of the animal world.

Is the problem simply ignorance, or is it a matter of a faulty upbringing, an inadequate education, or imperfect political systems? Is it enough, as the postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty advises, just to “pick ourselves up and try again”? Or is the problem worse? And do we once again have to take a closer look at the great religious answers to what the philosopher Isaiah Berlin called the “crooked timber” of humanity?

In his *Two Memoirs*, John Maynard Keynes accused Bertrand Russell of comments about life that were “brittle” because he had “no solid diagnosis of human nature underlying them.” In other words, Russell was the victim of the unfounded optimism of the Enlightenment.

Shallow suburban views can be as utopian as the wildest political ideology. When the film of *The Diary of Anne Frank* was released in 1959, the last shot depicting Anne swaying in the fog in a concentration camp uniform was cut because it was “too tough in audience impact.” The real Anne had written, “I simply can’t build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death.” Her film counterpart said in conclusion – as the real Anne had written in her diary, but much earlier in her ordeal, “In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.”

Really good at heart? Dare we say that now, or are our hearts black and white like a zebra’s stripes? And if so, what is the blackness of our black stripes, and where does it come from? Is the evil in our hearts a matter of ignorance or of a neutral tendency mistakenly chosen? Or is the problem worse because there is such a thing as sin? Can we even claim to be serious about understanding human nature if we have not weighed the evidence of human evil?

One of the most remarkable claims of concentration camp survivors is that they became aware of the ubiquity of evil. Though surely this group above all would angrily reject any notion of moral equivalence between perpetrator and victim, this was not the case when it came to their view of humanity as a whole. As Solzhenitsyn came to realize, “The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of

every human being.” Or as Elie Wiesel reflected after Auschwitz, “Deep down . . . man is not only executioner, not only victim, not only spectator; he is all three at once.”

### Our Neighbor’s Neighbor

Second, *we must each consider our own response to the evil of our times*. Are we who live in the more developed parts of the world to retreat into a cocoon of privilege while the storm rages elsewhere – for the unfortunate people in Burma or the Sudan, for instance? Can we excuse ourselves with talk of compassion fatigue because we now see far more than we can do anything about? Are we to join those who flee the horror of what they know by taking refuge in apocalyptic fiction and fevered end-of-the-world speculations? Are we to live in idleness because we can rationalize our rejection of the failures of idealism and do-goodery?

Emmanuel Levinas looked back on the last century as a whole and asked a question of us all: “Is humanity, in its indifference, going to abandon the world to useless suffering, leaving it to the political fatality – or the drifting – of the blind forces which inflict misfortune on the weak and conquered, and which spare the conquerors, whom the weak must join?”

My own conviction as a follower of Christ is that we each walk the earth to fulfill God’s call. We are therefore entrepreneurs of our lives, and each and every one of us is responsible for making the most of our talents and resources, exercising our callings, engaging fully in making a difference in our spheres of influence, and doing our utmost to help our neighbors in their need – including relieving their suffering and taking a stand against the evil that oppresses them.

As such, within our definite limits we are each responsible. None of us can save the world, and to try to do so would be to flirt with despair. Our tiny circles of influence are limited, some less so than others, but for all of us that influence is significant. And when we each exercise our responsible significance, and the significance of each of our callings overlaps with those of others, the ripples we make together can spread far and wide.

So we can help more suffering people than just those we can help face to face. We can give to causes we could never visit. When we do not have the money to make such contributions, we can write letters, we can vote, and in a myriad of other ways we can influence events. And both first and last, we can pray for people and places we could never afford the time and money to visit and could never touch in any other way.

That is the only way I know to emulate the citizens of Le Chambon and be “always ready to help” and to follow Solzhenitsyn in daring to say, “But not through me.” That is the only way I know to measure up to Dostoyevsky’s challenging maxim: “We are all responsible for all, and for all men before all. And I more than all the others.” Whatever others do or do not do, whatever the opposition, whatever the cost, we can each make our own stand and declare in our own ways, “But not through me.”

### Wind and Fire

Third – and most importantly of all – *we must each decide for ourselves the faith by which we live, and the faith by which we understand and respond to evil and suffering.* Rarely has evil been so powerful, so blatant, and so destructive as in our modern world. And our language to describe evil and our ethical will to resist it have rarely been so uncertain and so confused. At a time when there has never been as much intellectual prejudice against an open discussion of the full range of possibilities for a truly “examined life,” Edmund Burke’s admonition remains timely: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

It is time and past time for a searching review of where modern thinking about evil has brought us. What does it mean that our technology and our inhumanity are reinforcing each other dangerously? Why have so many secularist answers proven even more ineffectual than the views they were touted to replace? Should the accumulated weight of failed answers and powerful intimations lead us to a fresh consideration of long-discarded answers?

One thought in closing: is it really the case that evil is “the rock of atheism,” as the unthinking mantra goes, and that, “after Auschwitz, there can be no God”?

Far from it. Many who make this claim were not in Auschwitz themselves, and the testimony of those who were there is different. In his last book, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*, Viktor Frankl wrote from firsthand experience that the opposite was the case: “The truth is that among those who actually went through the experience of Auschwitz, the number of those whose religious life was deepened – in spite, not to say because of this experience – by far exceeds the number of those who gave up their belief.”

Just as a weak flame is blown out easily by a small breeze, so a weak faith, Frankl observed, may be extinguished quickly when it encounters evil and suffering. But real faith is more like a strong flame – a storm only fans it into an inextinguishable blaze.

“The unexamined life is not worth living,” Socrates said famously. Or as Epictetus put it even more strenuously: “A life not put to the test is not worth living.” If ever it is our lot to come face to face with

evil and suffering, neither evil nor suffering need be the rock of atheism, but they will both be the supreme challenge to show whether we are living an examined life, and whether we are doing so by the power of a tested faith.

Is the unexamined life truly not worth living? Taken at face value, Socrates' claim would condemn many, and not surprisingly, he is quoted far more than followed. But what we can say is that only the unreflective and the uncaring can afford to lead unexamined and untested lives today. For a reflective person, life must be examined, and it is almost certain to be tested. Evil is neither one test among others nor one mystery among others. It is the supreme test and the profoundest mystery in light of which all other tests and mysteries will be judged.

Our challenge today is not to resort to faith as a crutch because reason has stumbled, but rather to acknowledge that reason, in its long, arduous search, has come up short and that where it has stopped it has pointed beyond itself to answers that only faith can fulfill. In the face of the horror of the unspeakable, only such faith can provide the best truths to come to terms with evil, the highest courage to resist evil, the deepest love to care for those caught in its toils, and the profoundest hope of the prospect of a world beyond evil, beyond hatred, beyond oppression, and even beyond tears.

As ever, the choice is ours, and so also will be the consequences.