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Forming Calluses: A Reflection on C.S. Lewis' The Great Divorce

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In C.S. Lewis' allegorical depiction of Heaven and Hell, the narrator begins by boarding a bus with a group of others, leaving the gloomy, grey sort of town where they have been, heading for the "other place" - Heaven. There is some debate amongst the travelers what the purpose of the trip is. Most seem to think that they are just visiting this place - they can't imagine how they could be allowed to stay. Upon leaving the bus and entering this new place, they find that they are transparent - like ghosts. They are soon greeted by a large group of "solid people," who are here to help these travelers on their journey, if they so choose.

The narrator observes many interactions between the Ghosts and the Solid Ones. The Ghosts soon learn that everyone can choose to stay here and never return to the grey town of shadows - but it's not as easy a choice as it might seem. For the Ghosts, it is hard and painful to be in a place where everything is so much more Solid than they are. Even just to walk across grass is a difficult endeavor. The Solid Ones try to help their Ghosts understand what they have to let go of in order to become Solid and able to reside more easily in this place.

Every interaction is different, but every Ghost has something holding them back from becoming Solid. Some are holding onto past grievances and conflict they had during their earthly lives. Some are clinging to their own achievements and ideas. Some can't seem to let go of the shame they feel for not yet being Solid.

The Solid Ones have also had to go through this same transition, and they try to help the Ghosts become acclimated to their new environment. In one interaction, a Solid One says to a Ghost they are trying to help, "Will you come with me to the mountains? It will hurt at first, until your feet are hardened. Reality is harsh to the feet of shadows. But will you come?"

That line struck me. Change is never easy. Even when we know that we are changing into something better, it can still be a harsh and painful experience to let go of whatever it is we have clung to for so long. But in Lewis' story, the Ghosts are never abandoned to try and go through this change on their own. The Solid Ones are there waiting for them offering to accompany and

assist them on this journey of transformation. But the Ghosts have to have the courage and vulnerability to accept their help, and make a choice to start this journey - and it's a choice no one can make for them.

In the end, Lewis' story is just that - a story. No one knows what sort of life we can expect after death. But it does remind us that all of us - from those who appear to be the model of perfection to those who seem to permanently reside in anger and negativity - are in need of and capable of change. We all have things we cling to that keep us from God and the life God intends for us. I believe that God's love and grace are powerful enough to surpass our human flaws and barriers. And yet, that does not mean that we are not called to change and grow together. Just because something is good and necessary does not mean the process of getting there will be easy. Asking for help - embracing vulnerability - can be painful. But eventually, the calluses on our feet will form, enabling us to walk in vulnerability and welcome change together, as we journey towards a new life of resurrection.

In Peace,
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