

LARGER THAN LIFE
Gilbert Chesterton: Out of Context
A Dialogue

Narrator: In 1936 a man died who was in many ways larger than life. A man able to write several books at the same time. A man brave enough to take on the British Empire in its heyday, over the Boer War – in print, that is! A man whom the local children admired for being able to catch buns in his mouth. A man so vast he could stand up in a bus and offer his seat to three ladies at the same time.

His chivalry knew no bounds. He once said, “Every gentleman should take off his head to a lady.” He took off his own head for thirty-five years to his beloved wife, Frances, whom he called a “discontented saint”. His name is Gilbert Chesterton – GKC to his many friends.

The house the Chestertons constructed in Beaconsfield, just outside London, had a spiral staircase built around a tree trunk and a stage for mounting dramatic productions, where Gilbert would entertain children and himself. The Chestertons could never have children of their own, so they tended to borrow other people’s.

Gilbert himself remained a child at heart to the very end, playing in the fairyland that is real life. But he was larger than life, a bit like the enormous figure of “Sunday”, the Chief of Police and President of Terrorists in his novel *The Man Who Was Thursday*. Sunday is described as a “great bouncing baby” with a face “so big, that one couldn’t focus on it or make it a face at all”.

When Chesterton died, they could not get him down the spiral stairs, so the wall had to come down. His funeral cortege wended its way through streets lined with the mourners of the town. It seemed the whole population had turned out to pay tribute. The local barber donated a chair in which Gilbert’s hair used to be cut, as a weird memorial. Of course, all this isn’t the usual fate of prophets, who tend to be stoned or otherwise unloved to death. But a prophet (of sorts) he undoubtedly was. In one respect, at least, he fitted the biblical mould. He has been without much honour in his native land. In Argentina, on the other hand, they want to make him a saint. Well, let’s stay out of *that* controversy. You don’t have to be a saint to be a prophet, and right now we have a shortage of prophets, so this is the reason I propose to call him back.

Chesterton! Chesterton old chap! Do come back. We need you!

[Pause. Deathly silence.]

Chesterton: Who calls?

Narrator: One who needs to speak with you.

Chesterton: In that case, I will oblige you by pretending to rise from the dead. If only to point out the *despicable foolishness* of conversing with spirits. Though why you should listen to me now, when you evidently failed to do so when I was alive, defeats me. Well, here I am, I suppose. Did I miss anything?

Narrator: Take a look around. I suspect you saw much of it coming.

Chesterton: [*Glancing around.*] You are right. I saw it coming. I do so wish I had seen it going. As I said in 1930: “The coming peril is the intellectual, educational, psychological and artistic overproduction, which, equally with economic overproduction, threatens the well-being of contemporary civilisation. People are inundated, blinded, deafened, and mentally paralysed by a flood of vulgar and tasteless externals, leaving them no time for leisure, thought, or creation from within themselves.” They are calling it “stress” these days, but they seem to be too busy to identify the cause. The cause is simple: civilization has run on ahead of the soul of man, and is producing faster than he can think and give thanks.

But I am impressed despite myself. I see that comforts that were rare in my day are now multiplied in factories and handed out wholesale. Provided one is prepared to go without clean air, space, quiet, decency and good manners, nobody need be without anything whatever that he wants – or at least a reasonably cheap imitation of it!

Narrator: [*Drily.*] That is, if the thing does not break or need to be upgraded long before the guarantee runs out. But look around again. Do you see *anything* that surprises you?

Chesterton: Personally, I agree with the Irishman who said he preferred to prophesy *after* the event. But I do recall even in 1926 describing the modern world as “a crowd of very rapid racing cars all brought to a standstill and stuck in a block of traffic”. How depressing it is to find that I was right about that little detail as well. I must console myself with the thought that none of this is real.

Narrator: Ah, but it is real. To us, here and now, it is real enough.

Chesterton: Not real to me, I meant. Any more than I am really real to you. You *are* an awful fool for trying to bring me back. You should know a taste for spirits is bad for the health. That’s exactly what cracked poor old Blake. Spiritualism is like gin. Agnosticism, by contrast, is clean cold water: an excellent thing, if you can get it. Most modern ethical and idealistic movements might be well represented by soda-water – a fuss about nothing. Socialist philosophy of Shaw’s kind is more like black coffee – it awakens but it does not really inspire. The fact is, I see more spiritualism around now than in my day, fewer socialists, and very few atheists. Somehow one can never manage to be an atheist. Atheism is such a sad simplification: I thought it wouldn’t last much longer, but there appear to be some still clinging on.

Narrator: Well, there is one fellow at Oxford, apparently, and one in London.

Chesterton: It remains a very convenient philosophy – until one comes to die.

Narrator: And we have had a lot of new cults since your time. Wasn’t it you who said: “If a man stops believing in God, he doesn’t believe in nothing; he believes in anything”?

Chesterton: There is some disagreement about whether I said that or not. I seem to think I did. But if I didn't say it then, I'm prepared to agree with it now. These are the days when the Christian is expected to praise every creed except his own. But Christianity isn't finished yet, you know! It's like Father Christmas, always dying, never dead. Somehow it ends up outlasting everything else.

Narrator: You didn't answer my question. Does *anything* you see here surprise you?

Chesterton: *Everything always* surprises me!

It starts in the family. Our mother and father lie in wait and leap out on us, like brigands from a bush. Our aunt is a bolt from the blue. When we step into the family, by the very act of being born, we step into a world which is incalculable, a world which has its own strange laws, a world which could do without us, a world which we *have not made*. Death is certainly a surprise (it was even to me!), but even so it can hardly be more astonishing than birth.

As for what happens between the one and the other, between birth and the grave, the most surprising thing is undoubtedly romance. Romance is the deepest thing in life; romance is deeper even than reality. For even if reality could be proved to be misleading, it still could not be proved to be unimportant or unimpressive. Even if the facts are false, they are still very strange.

As for me, I am therefore *continually* surprised. Why should anything exist at all? There is at the back of everything an abyss of light, more blinding and unfathomable than any abyss of darkness. It is the abyss of actuality, of existence, of the fact that things truly are, and that we ourselves are incredibly and almost incredulously real. We don't give thanks as we should, every day, in every moment of every day.

Narrator: That's all very uplifting, I'm sure, very "spiritual", but hang on a minute, our whole civilization is in crisis! Mysticism isn't going to save millions of babies from being aborted. It isn't going to stop genetic engineering or global warming. Even the family you praise so much is a dying institution – or else it has changed so much we hardly recognize it anymore.

Chesterton: Ah, the family, now! If you wish to preserve the family you must *revolutionize the nation*. It is true that I am of an older fashion; much that I love has been destroyed or sent into exile. (I am beginning to sound like Professor Tolkien, a recent acquaintance of mine!) But even a century ago that revolution of the nation was necessary, and it is never too late to start one. That will be up to you, not to me. The position you have now reached is this: starting from the State, you try to remedy the failures of all the families, all the nurseries, all the schools, all the workshops, all the secondary institutions that once had some authority of their own, but in the wrong way. Everything is being brought into the Law Courts. It has become a matter of litigation, of rights – or rather of competing appetites. *Why not stop the leak at the other end?*

Narrator: I don't quite follow you.

Chesterton: Well, not enough people ever did. What I mean is this. The traditional

philosophy, which we called Distributism in my day, does *start at the other end*. It begins with the person in his own home and his own back yard – or, if he isn't yet fortunate enough to have a home, at least standing on his own two feet. Man is free, and none of this modern paraphernalia has any power, except over the people who choose to submit to it. Your wonderful capitalist democracy is tumbling around your ears. I have nothing against capitalism as such, but there are simply not enough capitalists. The State is protecting big business against the little shops, the little economies and the free man. Wouldn't it be better if the position were reversed? The State should defend the little shops, not the big ones – they can look out for themselves.

I have heard that people speak of "Democratic Capitalism" as a solution to all human ills. But as for democracy, that political creed is as fragile as the belief in God that lay behind it. Even the *American Declaration of Independence* dogmatically bases all rights on the fact that God created all men equal; and it is right; for if they were not created equal, they were certainly *evolved unequal*.

I would say that there is no permanent basis for democracy except in a dogma about the divine origin of man. In my day I saw Fascism arise, but I did not live to see it overthrown. Now I fear you may live to see something much worse. The issues are clear. The battle is between Light and Darkness, as I stated clearly on my deathbed, and everyone must choose his side. But if you are not at heart a *mystic*, in the best and most concrete sense of that misty word, you will inevitably choose the wrong side.

Narrator: Since we are talking of words and definitions... you are not an Anarchist, I suppose? Sometimes you almost appear so.

Chesterton: I am not. All government is an ugly necessity, but it *is* a necessity. There are only two kinds of social structure conceivable – personal government and impersonal government. If my anarchic friends will not have rules, they will find they have rulers. Preferring personal government, with all its possibilities of its tact and flexibility, is called Royalism. Preferring impersonal government, with its necessary dogmas and definitions, is called Republicanism. But objecting broadmindedly both to kings *and* creeds is called Bosh.

Narrator: I deduce your sympathies lie with Royalism, then?

Chesterton: I, sir, am a Democrat. But I wish to give a vote to that most obscure of all classes: our ancestors. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely *happen to be walking about*. All democrats object to the votes of men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death. Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our servant; tradition asks us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our father.

Narrator: I have you now. You are a Conservative!

Chesterton: [*In mock anger.*] Because I want almost anything that doesn't yet exist; because I want to turn a silent people into a singing people; because I would rejoice if a

wineless country could be a wine-growing country; because I would change a world of wage-slaves into a world of freeholders; because I would have healthy employment instead of hideous unemployment; because I wish folk, now ruled by other people's fads, to be ruled by their own laws and liberties; because I hate the established dirt and hate more the established cleanliness; because, in short, I want to alter nearly everything there is, a cursed, haughty, high-souled, well-informed, world-worrying, sky-scraping, hair-splitting, head-splitting, academic animal of a common quill-driving social reformer gets up and calls me a *Conservative*! Excuse me!

Narrator: [*Pauses, looking downcast*] I do beg your pardon.

Chesterton: I should certainly hope so! I see that the whole modern world has divided itself into Conservatives and Progressives. The business of Progressives is to go on making mistakes. The business of the Conservatives is to prevent the mistakes from being corrected. In short, I am no Conservative. I wish to change almost *everything*. The suburbs ought to be either glorified by romance and religion or else destroyed by fire from heaven, or even by firebrands from the earth. The whole structural system of the modern suburban civilization is based on the case for having bathrooms and the case against having babies. I hold there are better things on which to base a civilization, and having babies is most certainly one of them. Bathrooms you may have, too, if you want, but babies come first.

Narrator: Do you see any hope for us, then?

Chesterton: Paint me not as a man without hope! I *hope* all things. I hope especially in a sudden return to intelligent religion. Perhaps I and others did far less than we should have done to explain all that balance of subtlety and sanity which is meant by a Christian religion. Our thanks are due to those who have so generously helped us by giving a glimpse of what might be meant by a *pagan civilization*. For what has evidently been lost in this society that I see around me is not so much religion as reason; the ordinary common daylight of intellectual instinct that has guided the children of men. I did not believe that rationalists were so utterly mad – that the mere denial of Christian dogmas could end in such dehumanized and demented anarchy. But the result of all this waste of life and beauty must surely be that man will take to himself again his own weapons – will and worship and reason and the vision of the plan in things. Then all the shadows will flee at the rising of the sun, and we are once more in the morning of the world.

END

The words of Chesterton were almost all taken from his published works. Adapted into dialogue form by Stratford Caldecott.