

*SAGA*  
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# SAGA JOURNAL

An academic *Star Wars* fan journal

The *Saga Journal* is a monthly on-line academic review dedicated to the in-depth study of the *Star Wars* saga as presented in George Lucas's six-film series. Our goal is to deliver one of the best collections of scholarly essays on the subject that the internet has to offer.

Here at the *Saga Journal*, we believe *Star Wars* is more than just an enjoyable space opera set in a galaxy far, far away. We recognize it as a modern myth, a cultural phenomenon all its own. We want to encourage the literary exploration of all aspects of the story as presented in the Prequel and Original Trilogy films.

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# “For what shall it profit a man?” – The Conflict between the Physical and the Spiritual in *Star Wars* by Matril

It has often been observed that the *Star Wars* films present a sort of amalgamated religion, drawing on multiple traditions to formulate a generic system of beliefs and ideals that most any religious person can relate to. Lucas has stated that, “I wanted it to have a strong moral basis designed to teach young people and give them a perspective” (Galaxy, 190), as well as acknowledging, “I’ve always been curious, academically, about organized religion” (ibid). The result of this infusion of shared religious notions is that *Star Wars* can be viewed through the lens of many religions, with illuminating results. In this essay I intend to explore a certain aspect of the saga which is common to multiple faiths, via a verse found in the Christian scripture of the New Testament. The particular notion is part of Christian doctrine, but may be familiar to any number of traditions.

The verse I have chosen declares, in the words of Jesus of Nazareth, “He that findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it” (Matthew 10:39, NT). At first glance it may appear self-contradictory, but the key to understanding this declaration is a realization that there are two meanings of “life” at use here. Simply speaking, the first refers to the physical, literal life that ends upon death; the second refers to the spiritual, intangible aspects of life that, in Christian belief and others, cannot be lost through death or other traumas. What, then, is Jesus saying? It would appear that any attempt to hold desperately to life and its physical trappings, while neglecting the more lasting spiritual gains, will result in an ironic loss of everything desired or important. On the other hand, the ability to let go of worldly desires and gains will allow the attainment of that which is far more valuable. A similar sentiment is expressed eloquently in another statement by Jesus: “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36, NT) The pain of such a loss is evident in the mournful tone of this question.

This curious apparent paradox is not at all an uncommon theme in other religions; as one example, the second-century teacher, Rabbi Jacob, summed up the contradiction thusly: “One hour of repentance and good deeds in this life is better than the whole life of the World to Come but one hour of spiritual bliss in the World to Come is better than the whole of this life” (Jewish 232-3). Side-by-side we see the conflicting physical and spiritual life, and the lasting consequences on focusing on one or the other. In another religion, the words of Krishna explain that upon death a “person frees himself from these limbs just as a mango, or a fig, or a berry, releases itself from its bond; and he hastens again, according to the entrance a place of origin, back to life,” however, as Joseph Campbell goes on to explain, “the power to make a full transit back through the epochs of emanation depends on the character of the man when he was alive” (Campbell 366-7). Thus, true life does not end with physical death, but it must be achieved by a certain level of spirituality.

This theme plays out intriguingly in the *Star Wars* saga, as multiple characters struggle with the pulls of ephemeral physical pursuits and desires on the one hand, and the quest for spiritual betterment on the other. Perhaps the most compelling examples are seen in the father and son pair of Anakin and Luke Skywalker. A comparison and contrast of their struggles will be presented in light of this verse, exploring Anakin’s fall, Luke’s triumph over the temptation to follow a similar path, and the subsequent redemption of his father.

At the beginning of the saga, we are introduced to the character of Anakin as a child. He is practically the epitome of good-natured innocence and a guileless desire to help others. The party from Naboo enters Watto's shop as complete strangers to him, and yet he greets them in a friendly manner, offers them shelter, and ultimately provides the means to repair their ship and continue their mission, at great risk to himself (though it could be argued that his love of flying at high-speeds renders his service not entirely selfless). This is not to claim that Anakin is presented as a perfect human; he has his flaws and fears. His plaintive words to his mother, "I don't want things to change," quietly hint at the troubles he will have later. However, in terms of his relationship to the physical and spiritual spheres, his childhood is largely spent in giving of himself, helping others, and taking little consideration for selfish concerns. Perhaps a large reason for this attitude is the way his mother has raised him, for Anakin reminds her at one point, "You say the biggest problem in this universe is nobody helps each other." Thanks to Shmi's upbringing, Anakin has a reflexive reaction to serve others and try to put things right. This is often the case with children, but it is worth noting where Anakin's journey begins.

Ten years later, during which Anakin has spent his adolescence receiving Jedi training from Obi-Wan, we begin to note the widening conflict of physical versus spiritual. It is interesting to note that for Anakin, his ties to the non-spiritual have little to do with actual possessions, riches or literal physical acquisitions. After all, he has never had the opportunity to gain a taste for such things, either as a slave or as an ascetically trained Jedi. Instead, Anakin's hold on the physical world is concerned with his relationships with those he loves. As mentioned earlier, the first sense of "life," the physical, is that of something which can be lost and ultimately ends with death. And it is clear that Anakin has come to think of the death of loved ones as a dire and dreaded event, perhaps worse than anything else. "I don't want things to change," can be translated to "I don't want anyone close to me to die." This drive is strikingly illustrated during Anakin's search for his mother on Tatooine, while he rides at breakneck speed against the backdrop of the setting suns, as if in a desperate attempt to deny his mother's declaration, "You can't stop the change, anymore than you can stop the suns from setting." Unfortunately for Anakin, it is his mother's words that are proven right, as she slips into death just moments after Anakin finds her. Shmi, in contrast to her son, does not view the death that separates them as the bitter end of everything good. "Now I am complete," she whispers calmly. Anakin's refusal to accept this peace results in a violent massacre that will put his very soul in jeopardy.

I'll take a moment here, before exploring Anakin's relationship with Padmé, to clarify that oneness with the spiritual world, and letting go of the physical, does not preclude the capacity to love, as the Jedi Order seems to claim. The Jedi recognize the danger of allowing attachments to lead to the dark side, and so forbid them entirely, but this need not be the case. Shmi loves her son; Luke loves his father as will be discussed later, and yet they do not inevitably lose their souls. There is something else at work here.

The flaw in Anakin that will lead to his downfall is not his desire to love; on the contrary, love is an attribute of the spiritual world that ultimately saves him. Rather, it is Anakin's tendency to color his love with a certain selfishness. His declaration to Padmé at the lakeside resort is no doubt sincere, and very compelling, but there are moments that warn us of the seeds of his fall. He speaks of his own suffering, "*I'm in agony...I can't breathe...my heart is beating...*" (emphasis added) It is to fulfill his own longing that he wishes to receive Padmé's love. That is not to say that he would not give his own life to save Padmé's. The self-sacrificing tendencies of his childhood are still very much a part of him. However, because he views Padmé as something he longs to possess, he would also view her as something he would be in danger of losing. He is too much caught up in the physical world, believing that death is the end, the ultimate loss. He expresses this in terms that are well-nigh melodramatic after helping in the murder of Mace Windu, an act that goes against his every sensibility in terms of the spiritual life. In a

desperate attempt to justify what he has done, he states, “Just help me save Padmé’s life. I can’t live without her.” This is his justification, his clinging to that which cannot last no matter how he tries, and his abandonment of that which would last eternally. Palpatine, diabolically clever, exploits this misconception to great effect. Anakin’s soul is lost, and, in a bitter irony fitting with our theme, so is everything that he fought to hold.

Anakin’s son Luke begins in a position not too far removed from his father. Though he is on the verge of adulthood rather than a child, Luke is likewise idealistic, giving, willing to devote himself to the cause of the Rebellion at great cost to his own safety. Evidently he, too, has been brought up by caring people – his aunt and uncle – who have taught him the value of looking out for others. In contrast to his father, however, Luke seems to possess the ability to deal with loss to a certain extent. When his surrogate parents are brutally murdered, Luke mourns them, but then moves on to join Obi-Wan Kenobi’s quest, stating simply that “there’s nothing for me here now.” It could be argued that he seeks out the Rebellion at that point as a means to avenge his aunt and uncle’s deaths, but since there is little of the vengeful in his demeanor, that does not seem to be the case. Interestingly, it is the death of Obi-Wan, his mentor of only a few days, that pushes Luke closer to the edge. Upon seeing Vader strike down the Jedi, Luke is rendered immobile from shock, crying out his horrified denial of what has just taken place. Fortunately, his comrades – along with the mysterious encouragement of Ben’s voice – are able to bring him enough to his senses so that he can make his way to safety.

A key difference in Luke and Anakin’s situations, and hence their resulting reactions, lies in the losses they must deal with. Anakin’s behavior stems largely from the *fear* of prospective losses that may or may not occur. There is the aftermath of his mother’s death, of course, but he has been dreading such an occurrence since their separation, and it has been coloring his development for many years. His fear of Padmé’s possible death motivates much of his behavior during his fall to the dark side; her actual death occurs only after his fall has already, by and large, taken place. Luke, on the other hand, has already lost several loved ones before the events of *The Empire Strikes Back* – his aunt and uncle and his mentor – and his parents have died, to his knowledge, too long ago for him to remember them. So Luke deals largely with the *grief* of realized loss. What does this mean for his struggle between physical and spiritual? For Luke, it is not a question of using any means necessary, including the selling of his own soul, to prevent the deaths of loved ones. It is, instead, the question of whether to surrender restraint and goodness so as to enact vengeance on the one responsible for his losses, Darth Vader. This temptation is just as much tied with the worldly, limited perspective of the physical as Anakin’s, in that it is based on the assumption that the death of the offender will make everything right. Again, death is considered the end, the ultimate destruction.

Luke is particularly susceptible to this notion as he journeys from Dagobah to Cloud City. Although he goes there in the hopes of rescuing his friends, it is clear that a confrontation with Ben’s killer – and, as he believes, his father’s – is something he anticipates, perhaps even seeks out. Yoda has warned him that if he follows through with his plans, he would “destroy all for which they [his friends] have fought and suffered,” perhaps another way of saying that by attempting to save physical lives he will lose the spiritual. Indeed, this is very nearly the result of Luke’s rash encounter with Vader – not only does he come close to literally losing his life, but he is confronted with offers to sell his soul that would have to present some temptation in the face of impending death. However, Luke is able to choose the spiritual path of self-sacrifice rather than self-preservation, and he falls willingly to a possible death rather than concede to Vader.

But something has heightened the stakes in Luke’s struggle. He has been told the truth about his father, and must come to terms with his unexpected relationship with Vader. Vengeance, before this revelation,

would have been dangerous enough, but now that Luke knows it is his own father who has wronged him, vengeance would be a personal and deeply perilous action, a fundamentally selfish act that throws awry all the principles of the spiritual life. And yet, ironically, his own mentors encourage him to commit this very act. Yoda tells him that he “must confront Vader” in order to become a true Jedi, and Obi-Wan, in response to Luke’s protests that he cannot kill his own father, replies sadly that, if that is his decision, “the Emperor has already won.” It would seem that both Jedi Masters, though they have long fostered a close relationship with the spiritual world – Obi-Wan could not otherwise have surrendered to death and retained his identity even after his life ended, and Yoda likewise (although it is possible that by “confront” he does not mean for Luke to kill) – both maintain a certain blind spot where the Sith are concerned. Perhaps this is understandable since they have witnessed firsthand the destruction wrought upon the galaxy by the Sith, but it is unfortunate nonetheless, and things would have turned out poorly indeed if Luke had heeded their advice.

Instead, Luke seems to have achieved an unprecedented understanding of the spiritual life by the time he is brought to Vader. He has come to understand that it is not Vader’s life or death that matters, but rather Anakin’s soul. Therefore he responds to Vader with compassion, with a plea to return to what he once was, and most of all with love. It is a love that surpasses what Anakin had, because it is not dependent on the rules of the physical life and stands fearless in the face of death. For a time, Luke does succumb to worldly fears and stands at the brink of losing his own soul. Interestingly, it is not his sister’s death that Vader uses to bring out Luke’s wrath, but rather the possibility of losing Leia to darkness. Even here Luke’s attunement with the spiritual is accentuated. But at the last, Luke pulls back from the brink and refuses to heed the physical law of vengeance through life-taking. “I’ll never turn to the dark side,” he proclaims triumphantly, throwing aside his weapon. “I am a Jedi, like my father before me.”

There are many who criticize Luke as foolhardy for dropping his weapon, especially since we have learned from *Attack of the Clones* that a lightsaber can repel Force-generated lightning. But I would argue that they are missing the point entirely. The battle aboard the second Death Star was never for Luke’s life. It was for his soul. Dropping his weapon was a token of his release of all physical drives and fears. Death does not present the ultimate end for Luke; whether he lives or dies, he has already won. The spiritual has triumphed over the physical, and now, more even than Yoda or Obi-Wan, he has become a true Jedi. If this were the extent of his triumph, if Palpatine had then killed him and all were destroyed as the Death Star exploded, the saga would have had a moderately satisfying ending, though tragic to a certain extent. But Luke’s choice leads to another triumph, one that few might have expected, but which is fitting to the theme of the conflict between the worldly life and the eternal. Anakin, stirred by his son’s utterly selfless love and sacrifice, finds the strength within himself to do the same. No longer is he chained by a misguided obsession with physical laws, with the fear of death and loss. He understands that the only way to gain a lasting life is to let go of the ephemeral and vain things that he has clung to so futilely. It is not that he kills the Emperor, for as we have seen, perceiving death as the end solution is not a behavior in tune with the spiritual life. Instead, it is that he saves his son without thought for himself, since he must realize that attacking the Emperor in this state is tantamount to suicide. This is an action that can only be accomplished by strict adherence to the spiritual.

**At last Anakin knows what is really worth saving; that it means nothing to gain the world if the cost is his own soul.**

Anakin’s last moments show us that he has truly overcome the physical. When Luke, grief-stricken, protests that he wants to save Anakin, his father replies, “You already have.” At last Anakin knows what is really worth saving; that it means nothing to gain the world if the cost is his own soul. Perhaps recalling the pain he has caused Luke by his taunt about Leia, he whispers, “Tell your sister...you were right,” as if to acknowledge that her

soul is just as precious. Then death claims him, and yet it is, in fact, not the end. He retains his identity alongside Obi-Wan and Yoda, and we might assume that, if only in a metaphorical sense, Anakin is also reunited with all his lost dear ones, Shmi and Padmé, for he knows now that truly selfless love transcends all barriers, even death.

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## Discovering *Star Wars*

### Steve Richards

How I came into contact with *Star Wars* – I was nine-years-old when my dad took me to see the original (THE original) 1977 film. I remember leaving the cinema and saying to him that it was the best film I had ever seen (I think the only other films I had seen at the cinema up to then were *Dumbo* and *Escape from Witch Mountain*). So in 1977 my life changed forever...the start of a (too large) collection of memorabilia, attempts to make my own animated version of *The Empire Strikes Back* and hours upon hours of watching those first three films...My God, now that was a long time ago in a life far, far away!

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