

# ALL THINGS BUFFY

by

Jim Checkley

When Buffy the Vampire Slayer ended its seven year run this past May, I knew I would make it the subject of a service. My first thought was to call it “Requiem for a Slayer.” But I quickly realized that Buffy did not need a mass for the dead, but rather a proclamation for the living. Because while Buffy the Vampire Slayer is ostensibly a show about the supernatural battle between good and evil, at its heart, it is really an exploration of all things human, a celebration of the best that we can be.

I’ve seen all the episodes of the series—some more than once. I saw most of them on Tuesday nights with my daughter Kathleen, who earlier sang for you the love ballad from the musical episode “Once More With Feeling.” She and I had a standing date for a number of years and watched the show together as she passed through her teen years. The show acted as a wonderful catalyst for our relationship during those years. Subjects like high school, dating, peer pressure, drugs, sex, friends, or lack thereof, rejection, personal responsibility, moral choices, loyalty, love, all these and more were explored on Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

Now I know it’s just a TV show, but Buffy the Vampire Slayer was special. And you don’t have to take my word for it. BTVS, as it’s known on the Internet, has generated over 2000 Internet sites, many of them devoted to the deeper aspects of the show. There are two scholarly books I am aware of: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy* and *Fighting the Forces: What’s at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Both are collections of essays by noted academics on subjects like philosophy, ethics, sociology and religion. I had a nice e-mail correspondence with one of the authors, a professor of philosophy, regarding issues of love and friendship on Buffy the Vampire Slayer and William James’ philosophy, in particular his “will to believe.” There’s even an Internet site called [slayage.com](http://slayage.com) where papers that didn’t make the books are posted for reading and comment—and more are posted all the time.

During the months leading to the series finale, people were coming out of the woodwork to praise BTVS. The Sunday Times had a spread written by a woman who did the TV beat for a Boston paper similar in spirit to our Austin Chronicle. I had to laugh—there probably wasn’t anybody at the blue-blood NY Times who knew enough about Buffy to write the piece. The Austin American Statesman also did a wrap-up piece, one that featured where the best parties were in town. That is where I copied the handout you received today. Buffy is the best show that wasn’t accepted by the mainstream—at least not until its demise.

Let’s face it, the name of the show does not inspire confidence and series creator Joss Whedon admits that the studio begged him to change the name, but he refused. Plus, Buffy the TV series was spawned from a rather mediocre 1992 movie of the same name. Joss Whedon wrote that movie too, but did not care for how it turned out. So when 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox gave Whedon the opportunity to do Buffy on TV, he jumped at the chance.

And the difference was remarkable: the dialogue was hip, crisp, and articulate. Hillary, who has now seen two episodes and is a convert, asked me to emphasize the humor. There is humor, lots of humor, but the show took itself seriously enough that all the supernatural aspects were played straight up. That is, BTVS is not a spoof. This combination of wildly creative, supernatural material explored in an honest, straight forward way produced a marvelous canvas upon which to explore what it means to be human, and how to best live one's life in the company of others. Amidst the demons and the vampires, the deep humanity of the show shined like a beacon. I have always said that science fiction and fantasy provide the best opportunity to explore our humanity. Buffy the Vampire Slayer proved the point with style and aplomb.

BTVS is a show primarily about teenagers as they moved through high school and college, but it was not just a teen show. The teen years are an intense time in our lives and during those years we make choices and experience events that set our path for much of the rest of our lives. And I frankly don't get it when people reject out of hand shows or movies that focus on teens or the teen years. While it is obviously possible to portray the vapid, hormone driven side of teen life, and a lot of Hollywood producers do just that, it is also possible to use the teen years and the choices they present as a rich canvas to explore life and the struggle we all face to become the persons we want to be. In this sense Buffy is very real and taps into the deep emotions of growing into adulthood.

And here's a surprise. We may fool ourselves into thinking that we only get or need to make fundamental choices once. But I don't think that's true. Chronologically at least, I am a middle-aged man, and yet I found myself time and again identifying with those teenagers and the choices that confronted them about how to live their lives. It turns out that I looked around to discover that my children are grown and my needs, goals, and hopes for the future were very, very different from when I was a teenager, or even in my thirties. I realized while watching Buffy that I too have fundamental choices to make about how I live the *second* half of life. This resonance with the teens on the show was often quite powerful and helped me to "think outside the box" about the rest of my life.

I have brought a prop with me today. Some assembly is required so give me a moment. Here, larger than life, is Buffy the Vampire Slayer—or at least her cardboard cutout. I don't know if I should tell you this, but she was given to me by my son for Father's Day. Now, of course, this a picture of Sara Michelle Gellar, the young woman who played Buffy. Pretty cute, huh? It's easy to see why some people might assume that Buffy the Vampire Slayer is just another show about a scantily clad young thing and thus dismiss it. It also explains why I got so much grief from my colleagues and friends, and why my son, TJ, told me I was taking a risk doing this service.

But anybody who gets stuck on Buffy's appearance is missing the entire point of the show. For underneath her Vogue and Maybelline exterior lies the heart and soul of a super hero. The whole point is that Buffy is not what she appears to be. The whole point is to get beyond stereotypes and superficial appearances and discovery what lies beneath. As I will

discuss throughout the rest of this talk, what matters is who we are inside—our strength as a person—and the choices we make when confronted with the challenges of the world.

British psychologist Cynthia McVey says Buffy's appeal as a character is that while looking frail and girlish, she is deeply powerful. In this respect, Buffy has a lot in common with that celebrated British teenager, Harry Potter. Nobody would suspect that beneath those round glasses and slight build is a great wizard. Therein lies, I think, much of the appeal of Buffy and Harry with young people: those young people are hoping against hope that inside of them there is something or someone special, just like Buffy and Harry.

As a female super hero, Buffy belongs to the recent pop cultural movement that is entwined with the empowerment of women. We can start with Diana Rigg, who, as Mrs. Peel, was partners in the spy game with John Steed in the 1960s British TV series *The Avengers* (recently reprised by Uma Thurman), and more recently recall the likes of Wonder Woman, Ripley, Xena: Warrior Princess, La Femme Nikita, Charmed, Witchblade, Electra, Lara Croft, Dark Angel, Birds of Prey, the PowerPuff Girls, Charlie's Angels, and Sidney Bristow of *Alias*. Our culture is currently flooded with images of outwardly powerful women.

And yes, Buffy the Vampire Slayer blows the lid off female stereotypes and the message is clear: women are as powerful and independent as men and deserve to be treated with just as much respect. But Buffy is not just an adolescent boy's dream on steroids, someone who can fly through the air on wires and never get her make-up mussed, like some of the images out in our culture today, those that I call the "adolescent empowerment of women." Buffy represents an "adult empowerment of women," one that empowers on the inside as well as the outside and comes complete with responsibility, moral dilemmas, and a real person.

In adult empowerment, the power I am talking about goes beyond physical strength and magical abilities, although these are fun and admirable. Buffy—and several of her friends—are powerful in this way, of course, but the power I am talking about is the power inside, the power of the heart and the will. Buffy, many times with the help of her friends, overcomes obstacles that would crush most of us. And often it is not Buffy's supernatural powers that save the day. They are a mere instrumentality. What saves the day is Buffy's dedication and indomitable will.

For example, at the end of the first season, Buffy discovers that an infallible prophecy says that the Master Vampire will kill her on Prom Night. Her initial reaction is to want to run away, of course, and she asks her mother if they can go away for the weekend. But after her fiend Willow discovers some boys at the high school who have been horribly killed by the gathering vampires, Buffy changes her mind. Willow, shaken, and lying in bed, tells Buffy:

I'm not OK. I can't imagine what it's like to be okay. I knew those guys. I go to that room every day. And when I walked in

there, it was ... it wasn't our world anymore. They made it theirs. And they had fun. What are we going to do?

Buffy answers simply: "What we have to." In that moment, Buffy decides to confront the Master even knowing that it will mean she is going to die. Those moments of courage and responsibility go beyond any external strength or beauty. She then confronts the Master and is killed. Only this is TV, and so she drowns, and, as luck would have it, is revived by one of her friends who knows CPR, and comes back stronger than ever to ultimately defeat the Master.

You see, while the Buffyverse is supernatural, the lessons are not. The lessons touch us in the most real ways possible. This is one of the great truths about how we interact with our stories, whether they are from the Bible, other scriptures, mythology, or, yes, even television. We will translate the lessons to our lives and to our hearts, if those lessons—even if they are in a supernatural setting, an unreal setting, an impossible setting—if those lessons touch our souls.

Moreover, the lessons from Buffy are positive lessons, including self-reliance, self-knowledge, and self-exploration. Let me give you one example, my favorite example, among many. At the end of Season Two, in the two part season finale I think is Buffy's best, Buffy loses everything she cares about in her life as a consequence of her battle against evil. She is kicked out of school, kicked out of her home by her mother who cannot accept her calling as the Slayer, she loses her friends, is accused of murder, and must, in the final analysis, literally send the man she loves to hell in order to save the world.

At the absolute nadir of the episode, when all seems lost, the evil vampire Angelus approaches a fallen and apparently beaten Buffy and says: "So that's everything, huh? No weapons, no friends, no hope. Take all that away and what's left?" "Me," says Buffy as she catches his sword just before it would have killed her. What's left is me. Self-reliance. Self-confidence. Self-esteem. No Ophelia Complex here. From that point, Buffy battles back, and at great cost to herself, does what is right, what needs to be done. For seven years Buffy always battled back, always had the will and resolve to do what was right, always did what needed to be done. I can't think of a more positive lesson whether you are a man or a woman. I can't think of a more positive empowerment for a human being.

I only have a few minutes left and there are any number of things I could talk about, but let me talk about an overarching theme: the power of choice. Because in a world where beings are defined by what they are—demon, human, slayer, vampire—it turns out that the most important aspect of life is the power to choose.

Although Buffy's weekly fight against evil as embodied by demons and vampires is the foundational archetype upon which the show is based, it is by no means the most interesting. Because far from a cookie-cutter black and white world, the world of Buffy the Vampire Slayer is a world cast mostly in multiple shades of grey. We discover, for example,

that there are benign demons, creatures who want to get along, just like the rest of us. One cannot judge them by their appearance any more than we can judge a person by appearance, any more than we can judge Buffy by her appearance. In our world—the real world—the issues are racial, gender, and ethnic. In BTVS the issue runs across species and is highlighted by the supernatural.

What the series ultimately teaches us is that it is the choices we make that define who we are rather than what we are or what skills we have, no matter how great or marginal they may be. While recognizing that the Slayer is different from everybody else, that vampires have certain qualities that are inherent in their being, Buffy still teaches that no matter what you are or what your status is or what skills you possess, the measure of your humanity—your worth as a being—will ultimately be the legacy of the choices you make in your life. Two examples will make the point.

According to the Buffyverse, there is supposed to be only one slayer at a time. When one Slayer dies, another is immediately chosen. As I mentioned earlier, Buffy died at the end of the first season, albeit just for a minute or two before she was revived. Thus, a second slayer was called, and, for the rest of the series, there were in fact not one, but two slayers.

Faith the Vampire Slayer was introduced in the third season. She is pictured at the bottom of the handout. Faith is a hip, sexy, bad girl of a slayer and eventually, through a series of bad choices initiated by a mistake, choices driven by her own human weaknesses, she succumbs to the “dark side of the force,” if I can mix my metaphors, and ends up being Buffy’s mortal enemy. Thus, Faith, someone chosen to be a Vampire Slayer by the Powers that Be (what supernatural powers for good are called in BTVS), ends up on the side of evil. Eventually, after spending three years in prison, Faith has the chance to redeem herself, and she does, thus coming full circle and emerging as a good slayer, having transformed through her own choices and the effort of will it took to make those choices happen.

On the other side of the coin, the show presents us with not just one, but two vampires who have souls, although I only have time to talk about one. This is a wonderful concept and provides much insight into being human. Angel is a vampire who for a hundred years went on a legendary killing spree in Europe until he was cursed by gypsies. The curse was that he was given back his soul, his conscience, and thus was tormented by the memories of what he had done and the reality of what he had become. But Angel—his soul anyway—overcomes what he is—a vampire—and chooses to do good. Angel’s life is a daily struggle against what he is—a vampire—and who he is—a human soul trapped inside a demon body. He represents the struggle we all face—for we all have choices to make for good and ill in our lives.

There are people in our world who still believe in concepts like predestination and use those beliefs to classify themselves and others as saved and damned. There are still people who think that the color of your skin or the pronunciation of your last name or the country of your origin or your religious preference or your sexual preference define you as good or bad, human or demon. Those people need to watch Buffy, they really do. They need to

understand that we all have personalities and styles, we all have gifts, both greater and lesser, but we all get to make choices about how we are going to behave. And it is those acts, those choices, more than being a slayer, more than being a vampire, more than being a woman, more than being a man, more than being gay, more than being black or white or green or blue, it is those choices that define who we are.

Which brings me to my final point: when we make our choices, we do so within a framework of beliefs about what is right and what is wrong. Ethical and moral frameworks are both *de jure*—the Ten Commandments, for example—and *de facto*—our own personal beliefs about the world and how it ought to work. BTVS is packed with moral dilemmas. That is one of the most fun things about the show: making the journey with the characters as they wind their way through all the choices they have to make in their lives, choices about what’s right and wrong, what’s important and what’s not, choices about how to live. In this regard, Buffy herself is more Unitarian than anything else: she is often guided by her own lights rather than the dictates of others, including her Watcher, the Watchers’ Council, and even the Powers that Be.

Buffy’s ethics are, for the most part, the ethics of caring, also known as feminist ethics. One of the chapters of the book *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy* is devoted to a study of feminist ethics in BTVS. I don’t have the time to do justice to the subject, but unlike traditional (Kantian) ethics which strive to be completely neutral—justice is blind—the ethics of caring allow for the feelings of the person making the decisions to come into play by placing caring personal relationships into the mix of the justice equation. Buffy claims that her emotions give her power and that they are “total assets.” She is often *not* blind to the fate of her friends and their needs when out fighting evil as the protector of the ordinary people.

For example, Buffy put the fate of the entire world at risk when she protected her sister, who turned out to be the key to the unleashing of hell on earth, against those who were trying to stop Glory, an evil goddess, from unleashing said hell. Logic and utilitarianism said that the needs of the many outweighed the needs of the one, even if that one was Buffy’s sister, but Buffy protected her sister at all costs, indeed, even at the cost of her own life. Similarly, after the rogue slayer Faith has accidentally killed an innocent man, she and Buffy have this exchange:

Buffy: We help people! It doesn’t mean we can do whatever we want.

Faith: ... People need us to survive. In the balance, nobody’s gonna cry  
over some random bystander who got caught in the crossfire.

Buffy: I am.

Here we see that Buffy again rejects the utilitarian calculus that would allow Faith to hide her crime and allow her to go free, much to the benefit of others who she would save. Buffy insists on justice for the killed innocent man. Thus, whether protecting her sister or insisting on singular justice, she does not follow any universal rules nor does she seek to maximize gain in any economic sense. Instead, she is true to herself and both her intellect and emotions.

Of course, one can immediately criticize Buffy as being unfair and biased in her chosen role as the Slayer. We certainly don't want judges treat their friends differently than they treat us, and there are rules for judges to remove themselves from cases when they feel their objectivity may be compromised. Buffy can't recuse herself from her calling, and thus, her moral choices and her ethical system were tested weekly—much to our good fortune. Additionally, some feminists question whether the inclusion of “caring relationships” within feminist ethics is really feminine at all, or is merely an artifact of the way women have been treated over the centuries. That is, is “caring” a feminine trait or is it simply what women have been relegated to caring roles in an otherwise patriarchal society? This criticism raises issues of autonomy that I cannot go into here—thank the Powers that Be.

So there it is. I will miss spending my Tuesday evenings with my daughter Kathleen sharing the adventures of Buffy and the Scoobie Gang, as her friends called themselves. There was a certain magic to the experience, it was fun, and we both learned a lot. And yet, I feel like I have only really scratched the surface of the Buffyverse. Joss Whedon and his team of writers have tapped into a gold mine for exploring the human soul with all its trappings, including philosophy, psychology, love, religion, relationships, and growing up. I intend to spend a lot of time exploring that gold mine, not only because it is so rich, but also because it is so much fun. So I say thank-you Joss Whedon and everyone else associated with Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Because even though Buffy is gone from my television, she will remain in my heart.

Presented August 3, 2003  
First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin  
Austin, Texas  
Revised For Print

Copyright © 2003 by Jim Checkley