

My Spielberg Story

A reflection on *The Fabelmans* (2022)

Steven Spielberg's "*The Fabelmans*" (2022) was a privilege and joy to watch: it is about his struggle with his family (his parents divorced) and US society (he was abused as a Jew in school), and his first few years as a filmmaker that made him wealthy and world famous. It is a privilege to watch this coming-of-age story about the master filmmaker himself: I personally related to it in profound ways.

Spielberg told us that he had always wanted to make a movie about his parents, Leah Adler and Arnold Spielberg, who died in 2017 and 2020, respectively. His sister, Anne, had written a book about their family, entitled *I'll Be Home*, probably as early as the 80s. Steven wanted to make a movie of it for a long time, but he feared that they would think it as an insult to them, and "won't share my loving yet critical point of view about what it was like to grow up with them." (NY Times profile Feb 1999).

At age 12, Spielberg made his first home movie: a train wreck involving his toy Lionel trains. In 1958, he became a Boy Scout and won the photography merit badge by making a 9-minute 8-mm film titled *The Last Gunfight*. He eventually became an Eagle Scout.

Spielberg used his father's movie camera to make amateur features, and began taking the camera along on every Scout trip. At age 13, Spielberg made a 40-minute war film, titled *Escape to Nowhere*, with a cast of his schoolmates. The film won first prize in a statewide competition. Throughout his early teens, and after entering high school, Spielberg made about 15 to 20 8-mm "adventure" films.¹

The movie

"*The Fabelmans*" was a joy to watch because it is more than just about Spielberg. "Fabel" is German for "fable," a word that Spielberg liked. His was a story which could be a fable (with a moral) for many of us. It was certainly so for me.

The lead role of Sammy Fabelman, based on Spielberg himself, was played by Gabriel LaBelle. Mitzi, inspired by Spielberg's mother, Leah Adler, was starred by Michelle Williams, and Burt, based on his father, Arnold, by Paul Dano. Seth Rogen played Bernie Loewy, based on Bernie Adler, "the favourite uncle of young Spielberg," the family friend who married Leah (thus divorcing Arnold Spielberg).

In the *People* magazine (5 Nov 2022) interview, Spielberg said that "there was only one story I really wanted to tell ... My life with my mom and dad taught me a lesson, which I hope this film in a small way imparts ... Which is, when does a young person in a family start to see his parents as human beings? In my case, because of what

¹ Joseph McBride, *Steven Spielberg: A biography*, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997:77 f, 81-84. James Robert Parish, *Steven Spielberg Filmmaker*, NY: Ferguson, 2004:11 f, 16.

happened between the ages of 7 and 18, I started to appreciate my mom and dad not as parents but as real people.”

The 2 trainings

Having watched “The Fabelmans,” I’m reminded of my own life as a Buddhist. In a profound sense, renouncing as a Theravāda monk from ages 20 to 40, was effectively a divorce from my family (my parents, my brother and my sister). Although they would always be biologically connected with me, I began to see them more than that: as human beings, with their own struggles and sacrifices. They accepted that I had a greater love in Buddha Dhamma, and to live the life I chose. This alone is an amazing gift.

As a young Buddhist, I was raised by 2 ethnic traditions: the Sinhalese and the Thai. The Thai monastic training was salutary: I learned the Vinaya (how to live as a monk, especially the 5-year tutelage or *nissaya*) and the Buddha Dhamma (basically Pali and the suttas). This training is instrumental in keeping me a Buddhist to this day.

In important ways, my Thai training was Vinaya-based, which sadly clashed with my training with the Sinhalese ethnic tradition under 2 Chief High Priests (*mahā, nayaka*) in Malaysia and Singapore. They were the Chief High Priests from different Nikayas (caste-based sects), that is, the Siyam Nikaya and the Amarapura Nikaya, who were missionizing in Malaysia and Singapore.

As modern Sinhalese monks, neither of them kept to the Vinaya: they did not attend any fortnightly Pātimokkha conclave. One of them did not meditate at all; the other, taught meditation to only the wealthy, and taught dancing to local Temple children. In Sri Lanka, he was called “the dancing monk (*nadagam himi*).”²

Understandably, as a young monk, I found myself caught in between the 2 ethnic Buddhisms. The Siyam Nikaya Chief actually called me up and reprimanded me for teaching Vinaya to the novices during the Novitiate Programme. This was the beginning of my banishment from the Chief’s Temple, which, in the end, led to my resigning from the Theravada order, and giving up Buddhism, just as Spielberg distanced himself from Judaism.

Spielberg’s second wife, Kate Capshaw, insisted on converting fully into Judaism before marrying him. This was what brought him back into Judaism. “This shiksa goddess has made a better Jew than my own parents”—just as my wife, Ratna, the jewel of my life, made me a better Buddhist than any monastic or teacher.

The 2 supports

During those difficult lonely years, Ratna Lim (whom I married 2 years after leaving the sangha), supported me all the way. Then, a few old students of mine from

² See SD 7.9 (4.4.1.1).

Singapore invited our family to move to Singapore. We turned down the offer for a year. When the elder of our 2 children reached 5 years, we decided that it would be better for them if we moved to Singapore.

Once my presence in Singapore was known, I was almost immediately invited to give talks, especially run weekly sutta classes at the National University of Singapore Buddhist Society, and then the Buddhist fellowship the following year. The enthusiasm of the local Buddhists moved me. It inspired the beginning of our full-time Sutta Discovery translation work (2002). Once again, we have an extended Buddhist family, and doing what I love most—like the ending of “The Fabelmans.”

In the *Entertainment Weekly* (11 Sep 2022), Spielberg expressed how personal the film was to him, saying that “This film is, for me, a way of bringing my mom and dad back. And it also brought my sisters, Annie, Susie, and Nancy, closer to me than I ever thought possible. And that was worth making the film.” And it is a movie well worth watching: it is a story we can profoundly relate to.

Spielberg himself cried during production of the movie, recalling his childhood. I cried while watching it, too, understanding how he must have felt. But I smiled knowing it was true for me in my own way, but it all had passed. Thanks to the light of the Buddha Dhamma.

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