

Meeting Patch Again For the First Time: Purity and Compassion in
Marcus Borg, The Gospel of Mark, and Patch Adams

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In December 1998 Universal Pictures released the Tom Shadyac directed film, Patch Adams, a screenplay written by Steve Oedekerk and based on the life story of Hunter Adams (played by Robin Williams), a medical doctor and the founder of the alternative healthcare facility, The Gesundheit Institute.¹

Although the movie did fairly well at the box office, garnering the top position in gross receipts in its first two weeks and staying in the top ten for a month and a half, reviews of the film were mixed. Some found the plot overly pedantic and the tone of film syrupy sweet. James Berardinelli's review is typical of the critical reviews during its first few weeks out: "Failed efforts [at melodrama] like Patch Adams spend too much time trying to reduce the audience to tears through a series of cheap, transparent ploys Patch Adams is the kind of film that will work for an audience that's just interested in having an emotional experience (with a happy ending) without caring how obviously or clumsily they are manipulated."² Other reviewers, however, were kinder. For example, Steven Scheer wrote "Indeed, all those reviews of the movie that pan Patch on the grounds that they want serious doctors rather than clowns, overlook not only the whole point of the movie, but also the fact that Patch is not simply a clown but a serious

¹ A description of the Institute can be found at The Gesundheit Institute.

² Berardinelli, "Patch Adams."

and highly competent doctor-to-be”³

Despite the mixed reviews, I have used the film in undergraduate New Testament classes numerous times over the past few years. In this setting, I have discovered that a more thoughtful and complex reading of the film is produced when it is viewed in the intertextual framework of Marcus Borg’s Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time and the gospel of Mark. As I shall show below, all three of these texts deal in significant ways with the “politics of purity and compassion.”⁴ Both Patch Adams and the gospel of Mark also explicitly address the dangers involved with crossing purity boundaries in the name of compassion. And finally, these two narratives — one ancient, and one modern — offer an implicit critique of Borg’s compassionate Jesus who apparently can “challenge” and “attack” a purity system without endangering his own life or the lives of his followers.⁵

Like the gospel of Mark, Patch Adams opens by evoking the metaphor of life as a journey. We see Hunter Adams on a bleak, midwinter bus ride and hear his musing voice-over: “All of life is a coming home ... all the restless hearts of the world, trying to find a way home”⁶ (cf. Mark 1:2-3; 6:8; 10:32, 52; 11:8; 12:14). Then Hunter, still musing, quotes a dictionary definition of home. Home is both “a place of origin, and a goal; a destination,” he says (cf. Mark 10:28-30).

³ Scheer, “Patch Adams.”

⁴ Borg, Meeting Jesus Again, 53, 58.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 53-58. I have written elsewhere of Borg’s non-threatening Jesus. See my Reading with a Passion, 122-127. It is quite remarkable how carefully Borg skirts the historical and political issues related to Jesus’ death. The only explicit references to his crucifixion are found in footnotes (cf. Borg, Meeting Jesus Again, 31; 89 n. 3; 140 nn. 24, 25).

⁶ All transcriptions from the movie are my own.

Borg rightly argues that the journey motif is central to both Judaism and Christianity,⁷ and as Steven Scheer reminds us in his review of Patch Adams, the film's opening "recalls the Odyssey, the ultimate or archetypal coming home story in classical literature."⁸ But Hunter Adams's words clearly express something more than a literal return home. They also reflect the idea of searching and finding one's true place in the world, for a few sentences later Hunter invokes the opening words of Dante's Inferno: "In the middle of the journey of my life I had lost the right path" — a path which he was to find eventually "in the most unlikely place."⁹

Like the gospel of Mark which tells us virtually nothing about the early life of Jesus and opens with an adult Jesus being baptized by John, the film Patch Adams introduces us to an adult Hunter Adams who tells us little about his life before his "call." In Hunter's own words, "My father died when I was nine. He was in the army. He wasn't home much ... I moved seven times in the last year. I've had several jobs. Nothing seemed to fit. I don't seem to fit." But through a series of humorous circumstances "in a most unlikely place" (the Psychiatric Ward of Fairfax Hospital), Hunter Adams finds that he is able to help patients on the road to wholeness. His epiphany — or "baptism," if you will (cf. Mark 1:9-11) — comes through the insight of a wild-eyed genius and philanthropist, Arthur Mendelson, who, like Hunter, is a self-committed psychiatric patient. Arthur encourages Hunter to look beyond the ordinary and "see what no one else sees. See what everyone else chooses not to see. See the whole world anew, each day" (cf. Mark 8:22-25; 10:46-52). And when Hunter puts a sticker over a hole in Arthur's leaky paper

⁷ Borg, Meeting Jesus Again, 133-136.

⁸ Scheer, "Patch Adams."

⁹ Adams's given name, "Hunter," is certainly no less fortuitous than "Patch," the nickname Arthur Mendelson later gives him (cf. Mark 2:21); for Hunter is on a personal quest to find his life calling (cf. Mark 1:17).

cup,¹⁰ Arthur gives him a new name: “You fixed my cup. I’ll see you around ... Patch” (cf. Mark 2:21).¹¹ “Patch” leaves with Arthur Mendelson’s words echoing in his ears: “I fancy you are well on your way.”

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The rest of Hunter “Patch” Adams’s life will be spent literally patching up broken people — making them well — for he soon checks out of the mental hospital and enrolls in Virginia Medical University. The remainder of the film deals with Patch’s years of schooling, his purity system-shattering pranks that challenge those authority figures whose goal is to “train the humanity out” of first year students, his romance with fellow medical student Carin Fisher, his dreams of starting an alternative hospital, and his eventual graduation.

In the process of tracing Patch Adams’s journey toward “home” and wholeness, the film focuses on the rigorous “purity codes” (as Marcus Borg would call them) of four American institutions. These are the mental institution, the university, the food industry (meatpacking), and

¹⁰ Scheer notes that “It is also interesting ... that Patch gets his new name when he repairs a leaking paper cup with a piece of self-adhesive strip that was originally meant for another purpose” (“Patch Adams”).

¹¹ As in Mark 9:41; 10:38-39; and 14:23, 36, cups play a metaphorical role in Patch Adams. For example, during Hunter’s initial interview in the mental hospital, Dr. Prack’s preoccupation with stirring his coffee makes Hunter conscious of the fact that the doctor is not listening to Hunter’s explanation of his failure to “fit in.” Not coincidentally, it is when Hunter fixes Arthur Mendelson’s leaky cup that he catches a vision of the way the world could be and learns that “not fitting in” could also be viewed as a gift: a gift of seeing “what no one else sees.” Later on, while drinking a cup of coffee with Truman Schiff in the University Diner, Patch has his vision of a “free hospital,” and echoes Arthur Mendelson’s words to “look beyond the objects”

the hospital. Curiously — and most helpfully for its use with undergraduate students — religious purity codes only rarely intrude in the film’s story line.¹² Finally, toward the end of the film a fifth “institution” makes its appearance — the counter-cultural, alternative, “anti-institution” of Patch Adams’s Gesundheit Institute — a healing community without boundaries, rules, or apparent purity codes. Ironically, it is precisely because of the Institute’s lack of boundaries that Carin, Patch’s soul mate and lover, is brutally murdered.

The term “purity code” was not invented by Marcus Borg, although he uses the term in a helpful way to describe how Jesus fits into — or better does not fit into — the socio-political world of Second Temple Judaism. Quoting Jerome Neyrey¹³ — who in turn summarizes the work of Mary Douglas,¹⁴ Borg argues that

a purity system “is a cultural map which indicates ‘a place for everything and everything in its place.’” Things that are okay in one place are impure or dirty in another, where they are out of place. Slightly more narrowly, and put very simply, a purity system is a social system organized around the contrasts or polarities of pure and impure, clean and unclean. The polarities of pure and impure establish a spectrum or “purity map” ranging from pure on the one end through varying degrees of purity to impure (or “off the purity map”) at the other. These polarities

¹² Toward the end of the film when Patch is contemplating suicide after Carin’s death, he speaks accusingly to God (Patch’s address is always to “you” — he never uses the word “God”) and evokes the Sabbath command. “You rested on the seventh day,” Patch complains, “Maybe you should have spent that day on compassion.”

¹³ “The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts,” 275.

¹⁴ Borg, Meeting Jesus Again, 51.

apply to persons, places, things, times, and social groups.¹⁵

In Borg's analysis, Jesus practiced a "politics of compassion" rather than a "politics of purity," and thus he consciously and consistently challenged the boundaries of the Jewish map of purity. For Borg, Jesus' actions "shatter[ed] the purity boundaries of his social world."¹⁶ While Borg's cultural depiction may appear oversimplified to a serious anthropologist, his borrowing of Mary Douglas's purity polarities is useful in that it provides Bible readers and interpreters of ancient cultural artifacts a framework for quickly classifying biblical behavior and social phenomena.

For example, Borg writes "Purity was political because it structured society into a purity system."¹⁷ And later on, "Purity systems are found in many cultures."¹⁸ Both of these statements can be easily misconstrued if the reader were to surmise from them that purity is not necessarily political today, and that there are cultures lacking purity systems. However, both of these latter construals would be wrong. Thus, in reworking Borg's book for my undergraduate students, I tell them to write in their copies of Meeting Jesus Again: "Purity is always political because it structures societies into purity systems," and "Purity systems are found in all cultures."

One can only begin to appreciate Mark's dangerous story of Jesus in all its richness when

¹⁵ Ibid., 50.

¹⁶ Ibid., 55, 56, 60.

¹⁷ Ibid., 50.

¹⁸ Ibid. As Borg is quick to note, he is heavily dependent upon Jerome Neyrey's essay, "The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts." However, Neyrey writes much more inclusively than does Borg, saying "All people have a sense of what is 'pure' and what is 'polluted,' although just what constitutes 'purity' and 'pollution' changes from culture to culture" ("The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts," 274, my emphasis).

one becomes conscious of the purity codes in one's own culture and the political ramifications of challenging their pervasive power. And by reading the gospel of Mark intertextually, against the background of Marcus Borg's work and Patch Adams, a number of significant purity code connections begin to appear. First, it becomes readily apparent that the four central institutions of American purity and conventional wisdom¹⁹ which Patch challenges (the mental hospital, the university, the meatpackers' convention, and the medical hospital) also appear at the beginning of Mark's gospel — albeit in different form. These purity codes are evident in the challenges to authority raised by Jesus' exorcisms (3:20-30), his teaching (1:21-22, 27; cf. 11:27-33), his eating with "sinners" (2:15-17; cf. 7:1-14), and his healing the sick (1:40-45; 2:1-12). Secondly, both Patch Adams and Mark's gospel closely link masculinity and racial/ethnic identity with purity and hierarchical power. In Mark, the male scribes, priests, Pharisees, and Jesus' twelve disciples are part of the traditional locus of Jewish power and conventional wisdom. They are the ones who most often challenge Jesus' claim to authority (cf. 1:42; 2:6, 16; 3:6, 13-19; cf. 10:35-40). So also in the film, each of the four authoritative institutions puts males in positions of power, speaking in the language of conventional wisdom.

In the film, the code of purity with its attendant authoritative wisdom figures is symbolized by white men wearing white jackets (cf. Mk 9:3; 16:5). Dr. Prack, the psychiatrist in the mental hospital, Deans Walcott and Anderson — both in the classroom and in the hospital —

¹⁹ Borg describes "conventional wisdom" as "the dominant consciousness of any culture" which "provides guidance about how to live"; is "intrinsically based upon the dynamic of rewards and punishments"; and "creates a world of hierarchies and boundaries" (Borg, Meeting Jesus Again, 75-76; see also 69-70, 75-77). There is an obvious connection between a culture's "conventional wisdom" and its "purity codes." For example, Borg discusses social hierarchies and boundaries under the subheadings of both "purity system" and "conventional wisdom" (ibid., 51-52, 75-76).

and the meatpackers, all wear white coats. The only other people to wear white are the multi-racial/multi-ethnic staff at the Fairfax Hospital Psychiatric Ward and the multi-ethnic/multi-racial nurses in the teaching hospital, who are all clearly on a lower level than the doctors.

However, Patch and Carin also wear white tee shirts on significant occasions. Patch wears white on the day he decides to leave the mental institution to pursue a career in medicine, and Carin wears white the day she risks her life for Patch's vision of compassionate healing. Furthermore, Patch and his first disciple, Truman Schiff, are only able to transgress the boundary of the hospital's purity codes by donning meatpackers' white smocks and covering the meatpucker insignias or "patches" with their hands. Finally, Carin confesses her desire for the conventional code of purity and wisdom when she says to Patch, "I want the white coat. I want for people to call me doctor more than anything" This perspective is reiterated by Patch when he defends himself before the State Medical Board: "You can keep me from getting the title and the white coat," he proclaims, "but you can't control my spirit."

But like Jesus and the women of Mark's gospel, Patch's new community — his "free hospital" — challenges the hierarchical social constructions and the conventional wisdom symbolized by the white coats. Patch shares his vision with Carin halfway through the film. There will be " ... no titles, no bosses; people will come from all over the world ... [it will be] a community where joy is a way of life; where love is the ultimate good" (cf. Mark 9:33-37; 10:17-22, 31, 35-45). Significantly, Carin's response is more apropos to Mark than to Borg's Meeting Jesus Again: "I'm scared to death," she whispers prophetically. "Breaking the rules, people get hurt" (cf. Mark 8:31-36).

It is not surprising to find concerns of trust closely related to this attack on hierarchical (male) power in both Mark and Patch Adams. The word "trust" or "faith" (pistis/pisteuein) is

richly evocative from the very beginning of Mark's gospel (cf. 1:15; 2:5; 4:40; 5:34, 36; 9:23-24, 42; 10:52; 11:22-24, 31; 13:21; 15:32), and in Patch Adams the theme is the focus of Dean Walcott's inaugural lecture to Patch Adams's entering class of medical students. Here issues of authority, trust, and children are clustered together in much the same way as they are in Mark's gospel.

"First, do no harm," intones Dean Walcott, quoting the Hippocratic Oath.

But "What is implicit in this simple precept?" he asks.

"An awesome power. The power to do harm.

"Who gives you this power?"

"The patient. A patient will come to you at his moment of greatest dread and will say, 'Cut me open.'

"Why? Because he trusts you. He trusts you the way a child trusts. He trusts you to do no harm. The sad fact is, human beings are not worthy of trust No rational patient would put his trust in a human being."

Dean Walcott's words will prove to be prophetically true, when later on, Carin finally puts her whole trust in Patch's ideals and goes off into the night to answer Larry Silvers's cry for help. Tragically, Carin is murdered by the one she goes to help. As a result of her risk-taking trust, she becomes the film's paradigm of fear, anxiety, and costly faith — sort of a composite of all the unnamed women of Mark's gospel (5:25-35; 7:24-30; 12:41-44; 14:3-9; 15:40-41, 47; 16:1-8). The night before Carin dies, she confides in Patch the reason why she finds it so difficult to trust any man — even Patch, the film's Christ figure. It is due to her lifelong sexual abuse at the hands of men. Ironically, the only explicit quotation of Scripture occurs the morning after

Carin has been murdered, when Patch recites “O, ye of little faith” to Truman (Matthew 8:26; cf. Mark 4:40).²⁰

Images of spiritual rebirth abound in the film the evening before Carin is murdered, when she is finally able to put her faith wholly in Patch. With Van Morrison’s song, “Into the Mystic,” playing in the background²¹ and torches burning in the night breeze, Carin reveals her tortured past to Patch with a story of how she would “look out [her] bedroom window at the caterpillars” when she was a little girl, envying them. Because “no matter what they were before, no matter what happened to them, they could just hide away and turn into these beautiful creatures that could fly away completely untouched.” The camera then fades out with Patch and Carin embracing. When it refocuses it is morning, and we are looking at Carin from Patch’s perspective as he watches her sleeping, wrapped in white sheets. A stained glass butterfly hangs by a thread in the window above Carin’s bed as sunlight washes the room.

The butterfly, of course, is a well-known symbol of hope and new life, and in the Christian tradition it represents the resurrection. So the symbolism is not to be missed when a few days after Carin’s murder, Patch himself faces his ultimate test on a mountaintop (Mark 9:1-13). As he contemplates suicide,²² a butterfly suddenly lands on his leather doctor’s satchel, his heart, and his finger. Symbolically Patch’s passion, his hands, and his vocation are renewed by this divine visitation.

²⁰ The only other explicit allusions to the Bible are when Patch says to the hospital nurses, “Hi! I’m John the Baptist. Any calls?” (cf. Mark 6:25-28); and when Patch tells Dean Walcott that the only rule that applies to him is the “Golden Rule” (cf. Mark 12:33).

²¹ The first line of the song goes: “We were born before the wind ...”

²² The film opens with Patch committing himself to a mental institution due to his suicidal tendencies.

All three texts under consideration — the gospel of Mark, Borg’s Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, and Patch Adams — focus on purity codes and the alternative politics of compassion. But the film and the gospel of Mark reflect a more realistic picture of the dangers involved when crossing purity boundaries in the name of compassion. Patch makes this perfectly clear as he mourns Carin’s death with the words, “I taught her the medicine that killed her.” And of course Mark’s Jesus is pursued and eventually crucified in part because of his challenges to the core symbols of Jewish purity (Mark 3:6; 11:15-19; 13:1-3; 14:58).

Although Patch himself does not physically die as a result of his compassionate boundary-busting behavior, it is obvious that Carin’s death figuratively represents his own. This is seen most clearly when he contemplates suicide after her murder and in his recitation of Pablo Neruda’s “Sonnet 17”²³ — a recitation that brackets Carin’s death. Patch begins the poem at a surprise birthday party he throws for her, then continues the poem the morning of the day she is murdered, as she lies in bed with the stained glass butterfly hanging above her. Patch finally finishes the poem a few days later, after Carin’s funeral, reading the closing lines over her coffin:

so I love you because I know no other way
than this: where I does not exist, nor you,
so close that your hand on my chest is my hand,
so close that your eyes close as I fall asleep.

Thus, Patch, whose life is totally bound up with Carin’s life, “dies” when she dies,²⁴ and is “resurrected” when the butterfly (her spirit? a holy spirit?) lands on his doctor’s satchel. The theological significance of Patch’s passion narrative — his “death and resurrection” — is also

²³ 100 Love Sonnets.

²⁴ Patch is shown sleeping on a porch swing the morning after Carin has been murdered, thus reflecting the closing lines of Neruda’s poem: “so close that your eyes close as I fall asleep.”

emphasized by a sudden appearance of God language in the film. For sandwiched between Patch's final fragmentary recitations of Neruda's sonnet are four apparently insignificant, but crucial divine interjections: 1) the night before Carin dies she says, "God, Patch, it's amazing just what you've done with this place..."; 2) the next morning Truman exclaims exasperatingly to Patch, "We don't even have any gauze, for God's sake"; and then, 3) the following morning when Dean Anderson is forced to tell Patch of Carin's murder, he says "Christ, Patch, I'm sorry." 4) The fourth use of God language comes just when Patch has decided to abandon his free hospital. Truman vehemently reacts to Patch's leaving with, "God, you're so self-indulgent!"

These four "kyriosities" as I call them,²⁵ mark out Patch as a Jesus-like savior figure in much the same way that Mark's characters use the word kurie (cf. 7:28; 10:51; 11:3; 12:9) to overdetermine the reader's association of the word kurios with Jesus.²⁶ The Markan reader is never quite sure if the word kurie means "sir," "master," or "Lord" — or all three, when Jesus is the addressee. But regardless of how the word should be understood, it is still closely connected

²⁵ By my careful reckoning there are only three other passing references to God in the film. The first is a divine interjection made by Patch close to the beginning of the film, and the final two occur in Patch's defense speech before the State Medical Board. The only reference to Christ in the film occurs when Dean Anderson tells Patch of Carin's murder. And the only time Patch is called "son" is during his "trial" before the State Medical Board (cf. Mk 14:61-62).

²⁶ This rhetorical device, which I have termed a "kyriosity," is most evident in the film The Matrix, where all the divine interjections of the film are directed at "Neo" who turns out to be "The One" who saves humanity. The same phenomenon occurs in other recent Hollywood films as well.

to Jesus. So also with the cinematic kyriologies ringing in the viewers' ears: they should not go unnoticed, for Patch later speaks in phrases reminiscent of Jesus in Mark 10:43-45. During his final defense speech before the State Medical Board, Patch concludes by saying, "I want to become a doctor so I can serve others. And because of that I've lost everything. But I have also gained everything." Patch's "death" and "resurrection," like that of Jesus in Mark's gospel, is thus mysteriously redemptive. It will also prove to be renewing and empowering for the host of people who pack the balconies at the State Medical Board proceedings and who will follow in his wake (cf. Mark 13:9-13; 16:7).

In Borg's terms, Patch, like Jesus, practices a politics of compassion that is nurtured by an alternative wisdom tradition. The difference, of course, is that the primary source and mode of Patch's alternative wisdom and compassion is his own wacky sense of humor, whereas Jesus' alternative wisdom and compassion seems to be nurtured by the ancient Hebrew prophets and his own profound sense of God's presence.²⁷ Usually Patch claims no special authority for his actions, but at times he can argue that the AMA lends supports to his outrageous behavior.²⁸ Likewise Mark's Jesus occasionally claims that Scripture supports his boundary-breaking activity and his challenging metaphors (2:25-28; 10:2-9; 12:18-27, 35-37). However, most often the authority of Mark's Jesus is simply rooted in his own voice and deeds (2:10, 28; 7:14-15; 10:10-12, 23-27).

Unlike the gospel of Mark, not all the purity codes that Patch flaunts are transgressions in the name of compassion. Patch Adams is a comedy; and some of Patch's words and deeds are intended simply to elicit belly-laughs from the audience. For example, Adams spends most of a

²⁷ Borg, Meeting Jesus Again, 31-36, 47-49.

²⁸ For the most part, Patch Adams and the gospel of Mark both share a common distrust of doctors (Mark 2:17; 5:26).

psychiatric ward “sharing time” making crude jokes about the possible meanings of the catatonic patient “Beanie’s” upraised arm. Patch mocks the eating rituals of the meatpackers’ convention with outrageous jokes and a ridiculous speech. And the giant papier-mâché spread legs that he builds for the “medical seminar/retreat for the Fellowship of the American College of Gynecologists” is little more than a sophomoric prank. Like a lot of humor, this physical joke challenges cultural purity codes, but offers no serious critique of the medical profession.

Some of the more obvious places where Patch challenges cultural purity codes are at the points of status transformation — those rituals related to entering and exiting the four institutions represented in the film.²⁹ For example, Patch transgresses the status transformation rituals of entering and exiting the psychiatric ward by committing himself to psychiatric care and then simply leaving when he deems he is “cured.” He desacralizes the holy moment of the initiatory psychiatric interview with his rude sexual jokes that Dr. Prack totally misses. Dr. Prack, the “ritual elder” ostensibly in charge of Hunter Adams’s status transformation, thus will have no control over the change that occurs in Patch’s life while he is on the psychiatric ward.

Furthermore, one of the symbolic objects of Patch’s ritual separation — a simple, metal-frame bed — is misused as a bunker to protect him and his roommate Rudy from an attack of invisible squirrels. Through this unsanctioned “therapy” session, Rudy is strangely “cured”; and so is Patch, who discovers from this experience the healing power that comes from helping others. Patch’s lack of respect for transformation rituals runs through to the conclusion of the film where, during the graduation ceremony of his medical school, he moons the dean and the crowd.

²⁹ Mark McVann, following Victor Turner, defines “the elements of a status transformation ritual” as involving “(a) the initiands, who undergo the change of role and status, (b) the ritual elders, who preside over the ritual, and (c) the symbols (or sacra) of the world which the initiands learn during the ritual” (“Rituals of Status Transformation in Luke-Acts,” 336).

The gospel of Mark does not flaunt status transformation rituals the way that Patch Adams does. Instead, Mark simply omits from his narrative the normal Jewish transformation rituals and their attendant symbols of purity. For example, in contrast to the gospel of Luke, Mark does not list Jesus' genealogy, mention his circumcision, or name his father. In contrast to the gospel of Matthew, there is no naming ceremony for Jesus. And in contrast to the gospel of John, at the end of Jesus' life, no one properly prepares Jesus' body for burial.

Patch's blatant disregard for transformation rituals and their underlying purity codes has no direct parallel in the gospel of Mark. However, his crazy antics in the hospital's oncology ward do raise issues of critique and compassion that are closely allied with Mark.³⁰ While there are virtually no dangers associated with Patch's crossing of boundaries in the meatpackers' convention or in the psychiatric ward, Patch's boundary-busting compassion in the teaching hospital constantly gets him into serious trouble with the "authorities" (Dean Anderson and Dean Walcott). For example, he crosses the purity boundaries of time and place by being in the wrong place (the hospital) at the wrong time (before his third year of medical school). Patch does the wrong things (he talks to patients about everyday concerns and pretends to be a clown) and misuses "sacred" things (he uses enema bulbs for noses, bed pans for shoes and hats, and hospital beds as bucking broncos). All this in the name of compassionate healing.³¹ Similarly Jesus, in the gospel of Mark, crosses the purity boundaries of time and place (Sabbath, 2:23-3:6;

³⁰ After he has been caught one last time trespassing in the children's oncology ward, Patch lectures Dean Walcott on the medicinal importance of humor. And when he is called into the Dean's office the next day, Walcott accuses Patch of thinking "the rules [don't] apply to you." Patch replies, "Not all the rules, sir. But the Golden Rule — I think that applies to everyone — don't you?" Tellingly, all the hospital children shown in the film were actual "Make a Wish Foundation" children suffering from various types of cancer.

temple, 11:15-17), things and actions (7:1-23), and persons and groups (1:40-44; 2:15-17; 5:21-43). All in the name of divine compassion.

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The “Special Edition” videocassette of Patch Adams includes a twelve minute postscript entitled The Medicinal Value of Laughter which introduces the viewer to the real Hunter Adams, Tom Shadyac (the film’s director), and Mike Farrell (the film’s primary producer). In the threefold reading framework that I have proposed above, the short documentary becomes an important addition to the intertextual weave of Borg’s book and the gospel of Mark. As with Borg’s reconstruction of the “pre-Easter Jesus”³² the viewer discovers that there are significant differences between the film version of Patch Adams and Hunter Adams’s actual life story. For example, Robin Williams’s Patch Adams character is much older when he enters medical school than the real Hunter Adams was. But Mike Farrell argues, “the film is based on a true story. The facts as they are laid out in the story — most of them are based in Patch’s reality. Some of them are extrapolations, some happened at different times; some of them happened with different people; some of the people are compilations” And Tom Shadyac adds, “The movie is really an ‘inspired by’ story. It’s not exactly Patch’s life, but just about everything that happens in the movie happened to Patch — just over a longer period of time” Using Shadyac’s phrase, Borg would probably argue that the gospel of Mark — and all the gospels — are “inspired by” stories

³¹ Patch argues before the State Medical Board, “If we’re going to fight a disease, let’s fight one of the most terrible diseases of all — indifference You treat a disease, you win, you lose. You treat a person, I guarantee you, you always win, no matter what the outcome The professors you respect, the ones who aren’t dead from the heart up, share their compassion. Let that be contagious.”

³² Borg, Meeting Jesus Again, 15-16, 28-31.

which condense, exaggerate, and build composite characters and scenes, all in the name of the spirit of its central character, Jesus. And just as Marcus Borg struggles to separate out the “pre-Easter Jesus” from the “post-Easter Jesus” and tries to balance the requisite truth claims of the historian and the theologian, so also the producer, the director, and the ‘pre-Easter’ Patch Adams wrestle with the truth claims of their narrative reconstruction. The Medicinal Value of Laughter, directed by J.M. Kenny, functions as a delightful and helpful intertextual aid for engaging readers of Mark and Marcus Borg in questions of the relationship between “historical” truth and narrative truth.

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In conclusion, viewing Patch Adams intertextually with Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time can help people see the pervasive and persuasive powers of purity codes in contemporary American culture. Viewing Patch Adams intertextually with Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time and the gospel of Mark also helps people move beyond surface-level critiques of the film that merely focus on its storytelling devices and its emotional tone. Patch Adams is not just an entertaining movie with a curious alternative vision of medicine. Now the film can be viewed as a narrative that raises challenging moral questions about the relationship between compassion and purity in contemporary culture. Like the gospel of Mark, it presents its viewers with an alternative vision of life that challenges traditional cultural values: a subversive wisdom; a politics of compassion. On a theological level, viewing Patch Adams against the backdrop of Meeting Jesus Again and the gospel of Mark raises crucial questions about the lack of political threat and danger in Borg’s Jesus. Is it really possible for a person of compassion to challenge the politics of purity in any age or culture without getting hurt? Patch Adams and the gospel of Mark seem to say no. Borg seems to equivocate.

Finally, reading the gospel of Mark alongside Patch Adams can be a deeply enriching experience. The film's explicit juxtapositioning of four contemporary American institutions of purity gives viewers a new way to understand the political challenge of Mark's Jesus. It helps viewers to see the cost that compassion poses apart from any explicit ideological motif of "God's grand design" (e.g. Mark 8:31; 9:30-31; 10:32-34) and the ultimate joy one can find in following "the right path."