

LAVA: A STORY OF LOVE AND HOPE

Carla Alvarez on the Deeper Themes
within the Pixar Short

The world is looking for hope. We want to believe that whatever is going on, circumstances can change . . . things will get better. Pixar's 2015 short film, *Lava*, is based on the idea of hope that perseveres. Written and directed by James Ford Murphy, *Lava* tells the story of a volcano, alone in the sea, searching for love.

While the story could have been placed in any tropical island setting, its references are all Hawaiian. Murphy had always felt a special connection to the song *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* as performed by Israel Kamakawiwo'Ole, also known as the "Voice of Hawaii."¹ The inspiration

¹ Renee Montagne, "Israel Kamakawiwo'ole: The Voice of Hawaii" (*NPR*, April 4, 2011), accessed December 1, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2010/12/06/131812500/israel-kamakawiwo-ole-the-voice-of-hawaii>.

for *Lava* came to Murphy after visiting Hawaii on a family vacation. He was fascinated by the geological history of the Big Island, which is made up of five volcanoes that have joined together over time. He was particularly intrigued by a diorama of the island depicting “Lo’ihi,” an underwater volcano that will, over time, join the other five volcanoes that make up the Big Island.²

The inspiration of the submerged volcano percolated together with his love for Hawaii for several years until his sister’s wedding. Marrying for the first time at 43, he saw her joy in marrying her love that she had waited for for so long and it brought to his mind Lo’ihi, the submerged volcano waiting to be joined.³ This was the seed of the song *Lava* and the short animated film based upon it.

In the opening scene of the film, we see a male volcano alone in the middle of the sea, surrounded by and supporting animal and marine life . . . all in pairs. He sees the love around him and begins his song reminiscent of the opening lines of Martin

² Lauren Davis, “The Real Geology Behind Pixar’s Short Film *Lava*,” accessed December 1, 2015, <http://io9.com/the-real-geology-behind-pixars-short-film-lava-1713976956>.

³ “5 Questions with Disney/Pixar’s *LAVA* director James Ford Murphy,” (Khon2, November 3, 2014), accessed December 1, 2015, <http://khon2.com/2014/11/03/5-questions-with-disneypixars-lava-director-james-ford-murphy/>.

Luther King, Jr.'s famous speech as well as the lyrics of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*:

*I have a dream I hope will come true
That you're here with me and I'm here with you
I wish that the earth, sea, the sky up above-a
Will send me someone to lava*

Time passes and he keeps singing, holding on to hope. With no evidence or sign that his words are being heard or that there is any point to his song at all, he keeps singing. As the Scriptures say, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick."⁴ The volcano's deferred hope causes his lava to cool and harden until at last he is submerged beneath the sea. It seemed that his story was over and that his song was sung in vain.

Unbeknownst to the male volcano, his song is heard by a female volcano under the sea. She listens to and longs for his song, "knowing it was for her,"⁵ until the time her lava erupts and she rises above the ocean surface . . . at just the moment he sinks behind her. Not seeing him and not knowing what has happened, she picks up his song where he left

⁴ Proverbs 13:12.

⁵ *Lava*, dir. by James Ford Murphy (Pixar Animation Studios, 2014).

off and begins to sing. When he hears her singing, his lava is built up again until he erupts above the sea and joins with her.

There are many parallels to the Christian faith. The male volcano had faith that just as all other creatures had a mate, that there must be one for him. As he saw goodness, love, and companionship in all and for all other things, there must be the same for him. He looked for something for which he had no evidence. There was no mate for him in site and he had never seen another of his type. The male volcano had, as the writer of Hebrew explains it, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”⁶

The volcano’s faith in the coming of an unseen mate echoes God’s instruction throughout the Old Testament to be “strong and courageous” and in the New to “stand firm.” Even when there is no indication to believe otherwise, we are to hold on to the promises of God. In this seven minute film, there is no mention of God; however, the volcano had a belief that there is someone who could and would answer. Just as he was formed, that another like him could be as well.

⁶ Hebrews 11:1.

Lava also illustrates 1 Corinthians 13:8 which states “love never fails.” It could also be a parable with a picture of Hebrews chapter 10 to keep an unwavering hope in God who will be faithful (vs 23) and not to grow faint-hearted but to keep our confident hope (vs 35.) So strong was the volcano’s belief in love and goodness that he continued singing his song to the very end.

But the most powerful illustration is that even when it seems all hope is gone, love wins through the faithfulness of God. The end of the volcano’s story seemed to be one of disappointment, of unfulfilled hope. He believed and sang, but yet he sank alone. Whatever would come seemed to be too late. This is the picture of Abraham and Sarah who, although their bodies were as good as dead⁷, they still believed God would fulfill his promise. It is the story of Esther and Mordecai who put their trust in God even when it seemed like there was no hope to turn the decree of Xerxes. It is the story of the resurrection, where life comes from death and victory from defeat. In each case it seemed the situation was beyond hope, that there was no way, but as with the story of the volcano, there was a

⁷ Romans 4:19, Hebrews 11:12.

new beginning born from what seemed to be the end.

Watching the film for the first time, as the male volcano sank just as the one he was waiting for emerged, my Jewish friend said pessimistically, “That’s just like life.” When he emerged again to join his love I thought, “That’s just like God.”

Bibliography

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