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When do I stop being me?

I have joined the bionic brigade, and it's making me wonder who I am.

You remember the "Six Million Dollar Man", don't you? There was this military guy, you see, horribly maimed by an accident. But with the unlimited resources of the U.S. government, his vital parts were replaced with machinery and computers.

Realistic, it wasn't. To convey the impression that the bionic man – and later, the bionic woman – could move at blistering speeds, the TV series showed him in slow motion.

I've tried it. It doesn't work. Slow motion merely makes me look old, a pale parody of Tim Conway on the Carl Burnett show.

Back in the 1970s, the bionic man seemed like science-fiction fantasy. Today, almost everyone over a certain age is bionic. We wear corrective lenses, hearing aids, and pacemakers. At the very least, we have amalgam fillings and gold crowns in our mouths. More and more of my friends have artificial hips or knees.

I myself am still alive thanks to three cardiac stents.

And now I have a bionic elbow too. Its titanium joints will stay shiny and flexible for hundreds of years after the rest of my body has returned to dust.

So am I still me?

Futurist Ray Kurzweil has been beating this drum for years. At what point, he asks (I'm paraphrasing for brevity), does the Six Million Dollar Man cease to be himself?

Obviously, replacing an elbow does not affect my personality – although I have to admit that it has not always improved my disposition. Learning new skills, or compensating for old skills lost, can be trying.

But replacing mechanical parts is only the beginning. Transplants that we consider relatively common -- heart, kidneys, liver, lungs, pancreas, bones, tendons, corneas, skin, heart valves and arteries – didn't exist before my lifetime.

In the same period, computers have gone from room-sized behemoths to tiny chips. What happens when we can replace a failing part of a human brain with computer chip? Don't say that it can't happen – look how much has already happened, that we would have considered inconceivable less than a century ago. Kurzweil claims that at the present rate of change, some kind of bionic brain transplant will happen within the next 30 years.

When it happens, will that person still be me?

Agreed, we human beings are more than the sum of our physical parts. If that's all we were, my "sum" probably increased with the addition of improved parts.

But I'm leery about assuming that "more than the sum" refers to some kind of disembodied "soul" that we cannot define. That approach feels like a "God of the gaps" theology – that God must be whatever's left over that science cannot test for.

Inevitably, that reduces God to an ever-smaller sphere.

I think it's more important to identify God in what we do know about, rather than what we don't know about.

Similarly, I want to locate my personality – my soul, if you will – in the complex interaction of my body parts, and the ways my personality then interacts with yours.

In other words, am I enhanced by a bionic elbow? Or shrunk?

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YOUR TURN

I can't possibly thank all of you individually for your letters of comfort and support. I will take seriously your suggestions about speech recognition software (to save me from one-finger typing), various kinds of physiotherapy and healing touch, and simply learning not to push myself too hard.

Aside from the sheer inconvenience of not being able to use my dominant arm, I'm not in any pain.

Oddly, it feels like a kind of birth. I find myself (in unexpected ways) quite helpless, dependent upon others. And I'm delighted learn again – how could I have forgotten? – how genuinely good-hearted people can be, when they're given a chance.

Life is good. Thanks be to God!

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I looked up the RCL psalm for this coming Sunday -- Psalm 30 – and the paraphrase I had done for it almost 20 years ago. I almost fell over in shock. It was as if the words I had written years ago were intended for me to read right now, this week of my recovery....

I know what it's like to be down and out;
I know all about doubt and depression.
5 But these things are like a cloud passing over the sun;
they pale into distant memory when the sun comes out.

6 When things were going well, I took all the credit.
I said, "I did it myself. I am a success!"
7 When things went wrong, I fell apart.
I blamed myself for my failure.
8 I blamed God for punishing me.
I feared my misery might last forever.
I asked God, "Does it make you feel good to make me feel bad?"
9 Would you rather have me praise you or curse you?
Who else will people listen to--the dust or the wind?
10 Give me another chance!"

11 It worked!
I started feeling better.
I looked for the goodness around me, instead of the harm;
I quit moping and started dancing.
12 Now I know I owe my good fortune to God,
And I thank God every chance I get.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,

Ralph Milton

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
