

Wednesday October 30, 2013

## Who would I be if I wasn't me?

When I was about ten, my mother told me that my father had almost married someone else. He had studied theology with the intention of going to India as a missionary. His parents had been missionaries there. He had been born there. He loved the country and its people.

But when he asked the woman if she would marry him, she said, in effect, "Not if I have to live in India."

Faced with a choice between two loves, my father chose India. Where he met my mother. And where, several years later, I was born.

I remember, when my mother told me about this, wondering who I would have been if Dad had chosen to stay in Canada to marry the woman he first proposed to.

I might even (imagine the horror felt by a small boy) have been a girl!

At ten, it didn't occur to me that I – whatever I am – would not have been anything at all. They might not have had any children. And even if they had children, that small boy born in India would not have been one of them.

But at ten, I thought of myself as somehow existing separately from the body I happened to inhabit.

## Chance encounters

Of course, at the time I knew nothing of sperm and ova, let alone of DNA. I simply sensed that I was there, and had presumably always been there, hovering somewhere in space waiting for the right physical body to come along for me.

I realize now that there was no me, no pre-existing "I", who guided a particular sperm cell to penetrate a particular ovum. Until that fertilization happened, "I" didn't exist at all.

Meaningful life can emerge from chance.

Indeed, even after fertilization, the "I" that I know today didn't exist. Today's "I" took 77 years to become whatever it is -- 77 years of joys, 77 years of tragedies, 77 years of love, 77 years of loss.... Change any experience in those 77 years, and I would not be the "I" that I am.

But having come to that conclusion, I am forced into another. When my time runs out, when my flesh and blood gives up its in-born struggle to survive, so will my "I". If there was no pre-existent "I" before that chance amalgamation of two batches of human DNA, I see no logical reason why a post-existent "I" should continue after my physical death.

Oh, I know, there are lots of arguments for a continuing soul. Some are scriptural, some cultural, some anecdotal. I don't dispute them. They're based on the reasoning of other humans, based in turn on their understanding of what still other humans said or believed. I'm not claiming they're wrong. Only that their reasoning doesn't match mine.

Yes, I will live on in memories. People who knew me personally, people who have read my writings, will remember me. But those will be *their* memories, not mine. My own memories will be erased with my biological body.

And you know something? I'm okay with that.

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## YOUR TURN

Okay, wisdom does not consist entirely of saying No. If it did, nothing would ever get accomplished. But Isabel Gibson suggested there might be alternatives to a flat No: “Maybe if we can't quite say ‘No’ to opportunities, we could try saying ‘Not yet.’ Or for temptations, ‘Not today.’ Or for our lesser impulses, ‘Not now.’

“What does the Lord's Prayer say? ‘Give us this day...’ I think AA has it right -- one day at a time.”

Margaret Carr confessed, “I guess I am a long way from the beginning of Wisdom. I find it very hard to say NO especially in Church related things. If I am asked to do something I usually say Yes, or if they ask for volunteers and there is that long wait for someone to speak up I find I can't stand that long wait and my arm goes up or my mouth opens and I find I have volunteered for something I really don't want to do. Oh how I wish I could ‘Just say NO’.”

Peggy Whiteley thought the column “made me think of my Dad, who was a teacher. A few years before he retired he was offered a chance to move from principal of an elementary school where he still did a fair bit of in-class teaching to the position of principal at a newly-combined elementary and junior high school where he would have had higher pay and no classroom teaching at all. He chose to move instead to a different elementary school.. and was never sorry that he turned down the promotion in favour of remaining a teacher, and in so doing taught his three kids a valuable lesson. It's important to be doing something you love, and if you love doing it chances are you're pretty good at it.”

James Russell challenged my response to him, in last week's letters: “I can't resist: ‘I don't think that Canada has blood-linked tribes any more...’. Doesn't your Canada include aboriginals?”

Oops...

James's letter also provoked Christa Bedwin to this response: “Regarding modern tribes, the Mormons and the Jews really get it. They help each other out and care for each other and keep an eye on each other's behaviour. WASPs have lost it.”

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

Oh dear, here comes Psalm 119 again. At least it's a different set of verses: 137-144.

137 It is hard to serve you, God.

I cannot live up to your level of perfection.

138 Your standards are too high for me.

141a I am only a frail and fallible human.

139 I do my best -- but often I feel like an outcast, an oddball;

Few of my fellow humans recognize what I hope to measure up to.

140 I'm not asking for lower standards;

I know you are right.

Generations and generations have proved your rightness.

141b I cannot ignore their insights.

- 142 For you do not waver with the winds;  
Popularity polls have no impact upon you.  
Your values are eternal.
- 143 Although troubles swirl around me like autumn leaves,  
your wisdom still shows me the way.
- 144 Your example is as dependable as a lighthouse in the darkness--  
I can safely set my course by it.

For paraphrases of other psalms, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications,  
[info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com).

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#### 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](mailto: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

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto: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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

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