

Be Who You Are

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This is the second in a three part series of sermons considering the words to live by of the late Dr. Forrest Church of All Souls in New York. Last week we explored the phrase “want what you have,” and next week we will plumb the depths of “do what you can.” Today, I want to consider the advice “be who you are.”

I am bothered by the resemblance of this phrase to the advice Polonius gives his son Laertes in Hamlet:

“This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man. “

The reason it bothers me is that I, like generations of English students, was taught that this advice is satire. Shakespeare is setting up Polonius as a pompous blowhard, and the advice to Laertes is full of the most obvious kind of conventional wisdom, capped by this truism.

I can remember the teacher who explained all this to me, though I can’t remember his name. It was on a summer prep school program of six weeks’ duration in Reading, England in 1964. I can remember his ruddy, craggy face and his bow ties and tweed jackets – he seemed to represent a line of authentic critical wisdom, and he tried to tease out of us the notion that this was satire by the Socratic method, but none of us got it, and he finally just had to tell us the “right answer.”

In the time since then, people have often quoted Polonius’ advice to me as if to take it seriously, and I have had to restrain myself from saying “but it’s satire, Shakespeare didn’t mean for us to take it seriously.” Now clearly Forrest Church does not offer his formulation as satire. Why should we take “be who you are” seriously when the virtually identical “to thine own self be true” is a send-up?

One answer to this is you take it as it strikes you. One person’s pompous blowhard will be another person’s savant. The same words on one occasion may roll off your mind and leave no impression, but at another moment may strike you as the key to everything.

Another answer is that Forrest Church is speaking out of Unitarian history which occurred between our time and Shakespeare’s. Integrity is a classic Unitarian virtue – not that Unitarians invented it, it was also a great virtue to the Greeks and Romans. But our Nineteenth Century Unitarian ancestors embraced integrity for they believed in salvation

by character. Originally, this meant following Jesus as an ethical example in life, but it came to mean inculcating virtues such as frugality and hard work and living a life of integrity. If one was born into bad circumstances, one could still build character and triumph. In fact, bad fortune was seen as a test of character. Hawthorne was a typical Unitarian of his day, and Hester Prynne, his heroine in *The Scarlet Letter* shows us how character can triumph over hypocrisy and meanness. Though others change and become more oppressive throughout the novel, she remains true to who she is.

We see the virtue of integrity at work in the present day, in our insistence that we stand on the side of love. If you are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, you probably already know quite vividly what it is to live as someone you are not, for there was probably a substantial portion of your life spent in the closet. And for those of us who are straight, when we ask ourselves why we care so much about society's acceptance for our G/L/B/T friends, it is so they will have the freedom to be who they are. We don't want to live a lie, and we don't want anyone else to. As I try to envision the Beloved Community, I think society is richer and fairer when people have the ability to be who they are. It is a matter of integrity.

So one difference between Forrest Church and Polonius is that Church can draw on the historical Unitarian virtue of integrity. Be who you are is a statement of integrity.

It is also a statement of authenticity. Forrest Church was almost exactly my age when he died, and like me he came of age in the turbulent Sixties. In fact, back then his father, Sen. Frank Church, was one of my heroes as an early critic of the Vietnam War. A great movie of the Sixties was "The Graduate," starring Dustin Hoffman as a young lost soul newly graduated from college who is not able to connect to his parent's generations until he finally connects in a corrupt way with Mrs. Robinson. At a pool party early in the movie a friend of his parents comes up to him with a word of advice that is at least as pompous as that Polonius gives: he says, "Benjamin. I have only one word to say to you – 'plastics.'"

For my generation that word became the synonym for everything phony. From the perspective of what we called the counterculture, the world we knew was rapidly disappearing under a wave of plastic. Nothing was real anymore, everything was ersatz. The world was becoming a theme park or a movie set.

Of course we had all read "A Catcher in the Rye" in high school. In *Catcher in the Rye*, the teenage narrator Holden Caulfield is on a quixotic quest for authenticity amid the phoniness of prep school society on Christmas break in Manhattan. He inveighs ferociously against phoniness, but the reader can see what Holden cannot: that his finding phoniness everywhere is a projection of his own fears that he himself is a phony.

My life since the Sixties has been a quest for authenticity, though it is suffused with the same irony as Holden Caulfield's screed against phoniness. I did not go back to the land, but I

did buy a wood stove and even replaced my plastic toilet seats with wooden ones. I took up older forms of folk music as my preferred genre because it sounded more real than electric rock, though my parents listened to church music, classical and pop standards. I got a fondness for blue jeans, the uniform of the common folk, but also for the tweed jackets and bow ties of my prep school professors. I smoked a pipe.

To me, these two streams, the classic Unitarian embrace of integrity, and the post-Sixties quest for authenticity, give Forrest Church's prescription to "be who you are" a depth which is lacking in Polonius' advice to Laertes. But there are other problems with Church's prescription.

One set of problems I would call the logical. "Be who you are." Logic tells us that this is a classic tautology. Of course you have to be who you are. You are who you are. You aren't anyone else. I have to be Edmund Robinson. I was born Edmund Robinson and I'll die Edmund Robinson. I may want to be Forrest Church or William Sloane Coffin or John Lennon, but I can't.

A second logical objection is that, as with the first phrase, want what you have, this phrase starts with a verb in the imperative voice. Can you really tell anyone to be? Being is existing, and while God Almighty in the first creation story in Genesis speaks the world into being, nobody since has been able to duplicate this feat. We can't tell any person or thing to be, or not to be, for that matter. In the real world, as opposed to the world of the mind, a person or a thing's existence is not logically dependent on anyone telling it to be so.

You can use the imperative voice to order someone to do something: get me my overcoat, stop talking. These orders relate to actions: the speaker is telling another person to do or refrain from doing something. A speaker cannot, logically, tell a person or anything to be anything, because either it is that thing or it isn't.

But logic is kind of a coarse tool, and while we may demolish the phrase with logic, we are left with the sense that to do so may be to throw out a valuable baby with the bathwater. After all, there is a whole class of sayings which defy logic but which are used as a means to open up insight into deeper truths. They are called koans in the Zen Buddhist tradition – the sound of one hand clapping, etc. Some of the parable of Jesus resemble koans. Koans remind us that there are ultimate realities which are beyond logic and even language. As an old Jefferson Airplane song put it, "small things like reasons are put in a jar."

A deeper set of problems are philosophical and arise from an assumption which lies behind the phrase "be who you are," and that is that there is any "who you are," any enduring person, for you to be.

About the time I was born, Eric Erikson came up with the term identity crisis, by which he meant a perceived disruption in the continuity of identity we feel. Identity crises are particularly acute among young adults, but they could happen to any of us. But the whole

notion of continuity of identity has come under fire.

Stanley Kunitz' great summing up poem is called "The Layers" and it opens this way,
"I have walked through many lives,
Some of them my own,
And I am not who I once was
Though some core of being
Abides, from which I struggle not to stray."

Kunitz is here positing that the person changes, but there is some core of being which is constant. There are many in our society today who would not even admit that core.

I alluded last week to the Buddhist doctrine of annata or non-self. Annata holds that the idea of the self is a delusion, and a harmful one. The idea that you are one person is a cause of suffering, for it is something to which you will cling. The reality is that you are a bundle of qualities, and that those qualities come to the fore or recede as you face different circumstances. You put on your personality as you put on your clothes every morning, but that is a choice you make. I take spiritual direction from a Buddhist teacher, and he is always counseling me to realize that the destructive patterns of my life are things I have, not things I am. You are not your desires or concepts or the brick wall you keep beating your head against, and when you realize this, it frees you to stop ramming your head into it.

The rag bag of concepts we call postmodernism might agree that the self does not exist, but for a different reason. Since the time of Plato, Western philosophy has been caught up in the question of essences. Essences are ideal projections of things which are realer, in Plato's thought, than the things themselves. From a Platonic perspective, you have an essential self, the core that Kunitz talks about, or you might say a soul.

But it is a characteristic of postmodern thought that it rejects essences, rejects Platonic essential thinking. There is no there there. From a postmodern perspective, we use false ideas like soul and self to further our political agendas, to maintain our dominance.

To me this postmodern critique goes too far. In my experience, that our personalities do change, but there are certain patterns that get set. People who have known you for a long time will be able to point to regularities in how you react to situations which remain more or less constant over time. I will never forget in 1994, when I was in the throes of the decision to go into the ministry, I came up to Cambridge to check out Harvard Divinity School at an open house, and looking in the paper found that a woman I had dated briefly in college was giving a poetry reading in Cambridge, so I attended and at the reception afterwards I introduced myself and she remembered me well, though we had not kept in touch over the intervening twenty years. When I told her I was considering getting out of law practice to enter the ministry, she gave me a Seinfeld line which was very popular at the time: "why am I not surprised?"

Evidently she thought this move was in character though she had not seen me in two decades. Some core of being abides from which I struggle not to stray.

There is a third perspective which questions whether there is a self, and that is evolution. Evolution teaches that species evolve over the course of many generations as adaptations to environment. But many neurologists now believe that the brain goes through a similar process over a person's lifetime, mutating and creating new neural circuits in response to the interaction between the person and the environment. When you change environment, a new set of neuronal circuits will be become active. If you have moved to the Cape from New Jersey, and left your former occupation for retirement, you have become a different person in response to these changes in life.

In sum, we have three different perspectives – Buddhism, postmodernism and evolution – all of which demand, at a minimum, that the “who you are” in the phrase we are considering, be taken as dynamic, not static. They go beyond this of course, to question whether there is any “who you are” at all, or whether you are just a big void. Some will say yes you are a void and that is terrible. Others would say, embrace the void; Buddhism in particular, has a long tradition of extolling emptiness.

But Forrest Church doesn't embrace the void; he does, however, embrace the idea of a moving self. In a moving passage in a 2007 sermon, reprinted in his book *Love and Death*, he remembered his father, the late Sen. Frank Church¹:

“Being who we are means embracing our God-given nature and talents. I, for instance, loved my father. I still love my father. I honor and admire him. Once, however, I wanted, more than anything, to borrow his ladder to the stars. I had more confidence in him than I did in myself. I wanted to be like him, not like me. Then the moment of reckoning arrived. Half way through my doctoral work, I was handed a political career on a platter... I might very well have done this, but my father interceded. He called me a quitter. Finish your doctorate, he said. Then go ahead and do whatever you wish with your life. So I persevered. And, in persevering, I found my calling. Two years later, I was installed as the ninth minister of All Souls. For thirty years I have been privileged to serve this congregation, fulfilling not my destiny—I don't believe in destinies—but answering a call that was mine, not someone else's. To envy another's skills, looks, or gifts rather than embracing your own nature and call is to fail in two respects. In failing to be who we aren't, we fail to become who we are.”

“In failing to be who we aren't, we fail to become who we are.” This is a negative way

¹“Words to Live By”

<http://www.allsoulsnyc.org/publications/sermons/fcsermons/words-to-live-by.html>

of expressing it. Church says he doesn't believe in destiny, he wouldn't say who we are is who we were meant to be. But there is some sense here of growing into who you are, of fulfilling some promise.

What do we take away from this? I think the lesson is that, whatever your answer to the question of who you are, it will not fit unless it takes into account how we grow and change over time. There may be some core that persists, but there is also vast change. As the world changes, as society changes, as the economy changes, we have to change. Be who you are is not a static charge.

Which brings us back to Stanley Kunitz and his great poem; he used to introduced it by saying that he had heard a phrase in a dream and wrote the poem to try to figure out what it meant; in the poem, the voice tells him to "live on the layers, not on the litter." The poet says he doesn't know what it means, but he reaffirms that he is going to go on changing:

"Though I lack the art

to decipher it,

no doubt the next chapter

in my book of transformations

is already written,

I am not done with my changes."

May you not be done with yours. Be who you are and become who you will be Amen.

Readings

Hamlet I, iii, 59-80 Polonius' advice to his son Laertes as Laertes prepares to depart for Paris

Give thy thoughts no tongue,

Nor any unproportioned thought his act.

Be thou familiar,

but by no means vulgar.

Those friends thou hast,

and their adoption tried,

Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel;

But do not dull thy palm with entertainment

Of each new-hatch'd, unfledged comrade.

Beware Of entrance to a quarrel, but being in,

Bear't that the opposed may beware of thee.
Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment.
Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
But not express'd in fancy; rich, not gaudy;
For the apparel oft proclaims the man,
And they in France of the best rank and station
Are of a most select and generous chief in that.
Neither a borrower nor a lender be;
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.
This above all: to thine ownself be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

The Layers by Stanley Kunitz

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle not to stray.
When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.
Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!

How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?
In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.
yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.
In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:
"Live in the layers,
not on the litter."
Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written,
I am not done with my changes.