

Honors 320

Pieces of the Same Puzzle? A Meditation on the Value of an Integrated Life

The crickets were chirping in the background of a lazy August night when I read the line that changed everything: “His was the perfect example of a purpose-driven life.” It was the week before the first semester of senior year, and I was reading the obituary section of a Utah newspaper in the backyard. (I guess you could call it a history major’s pastime.) I had pondered often over the summer about my roller-coaster ride of a college career, and whether I had done enough—enough, that is, to get into a top graduate program in history. Now the phrase “purpose-driven life” threw my complacently self-satisfied appraisal to pieces. My resume might leave an admissions officer to consider me a “well-rounded” student—and that, only a few moments ago, had seemed like enough—but I would characterize my involvement in a scattered hodge-podge of clubs and classes a slightly different way: directionless.

Or maybe the problem was that I had pursued too many directions, changing course so often that I ended up going in circles. From economics to English to history majors, from Libertarian party activist to Democratic party donor, from President of Quiz Bowl Club to Activities Director of the English Society, from traditional Mormon to co-founder of a feminist blog (and back again), a critical eye might see ambition as the unifying theme of my time in Provo, the kind of academic “trophy hunting” the Rhodes Scholarship selection committee disdains.¹ The reality is both better and worse than that: it’s true that I never managed to find one

¹ “Should I Apply? A Q&A with the American Secretary of the Rhodes Trust,” http://www.rhodesscholar.org/assets/uploads/2016_FAQ_4_20_16.pdf

club, cause, or project good enough to devote myself toward for more than a full academic year. There was good reason for this, however. My endless ideological migrations had left me wary of zealotry and absolute truth claims, and my academic peregrinations skeptical of attempts to prioritize any one topic or lense as more important or valid than any other.

Most times, I was fine with my studied intellectual agnosticism. It set me apart. I was, in my more pretentious moments, *post-ideological*. Now, it seemed, the question I thought I had laid to rest forever resurfaced as a rising tide, threatening to sweep me away. Would anyone write of me that I had lived a *purpose-driven* life? At first I wanted to believe it didn't matter. What does it mean to measure a life, anyway? I asked. Why did I even need to attach my subjectivity to something "greater than myself"? Wasn't it enough just to live ethically day by day? Why did I feel such a strong urge to make a mark in the world? Wasn't that just, in a way, an attempt to defer the moment—or worse, to embalm it—to transcend time by contributing to a project that will outlast me?

Still, no matter how much I protested, the question raised by the obituary nagged at me. How would I sum up my own existence? Would anyone else understand the choice I had made to avoid attaching myself to any identifiable cause? Was there some trait—competence, kindness, passion—I could maybe use to substitute for the lack of a unifying them to my life's deeds? I had been through all of these arguments before, but now the chasm of a dis-integrated life reopened, threatening to swallow me into a void of non-meaning.

At this point I began to wonder if I could ever truly put this desire to "make something" of my life to rest. Like the medieval monk St. Francis of Assisi's experience repressing his sex drive by rolling in a bed of thorns, was I trying in vain to "conquer" innate, unyielding

yearnings?² What, I wondered, is the *origin* of this desire to live one's life as an integrated whole, as a project? Is it simply biologically determined? Are we somehow cognitively wired to view the varied events and developments of life as puzzle pieces – or, more accurately, as pieces *of the same* puzzle? Or is 'purpose' culturally constructed? or perhaps the result of a manipulation of psychological needs by cultural processes?

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I've been living with this question of whether and how to make something of myself my whole life, and it has had everything to do with religion for me. If I could extricate from the primordial mist of early childhood memories a single formative moment, it would be the 1983 Christmas special of Sesame Street. In the show, a 4,000-year-old Egyptian boy prince named Sahu, who lives (for some reason) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is soon to have his life judged by Osiris, the Egyptian god of the dead. His heart will be placed on a scale, opposite a feather. If his heart weighs more than the feather, he will be condemned; if it weighs less, he can pass on to eternal life. Initially, he fails the test. As Osiris turns to leave, Big Bird speaks up for the prince, arguing that his profound loneliness over the years is what caused him to fail. After he and Snuffleupagus profess their love for Sahu, Sahu hugs Big Bird; as he does so, his heart lightens and the scale reverses.³

What struck me most about this story as a child is that the boy does nothing—performs no deed—to merit an improved post-mortal fate. He merely changes his attitude through a Muppet-induced epiphany; this, apparently, is enough. Partly because my mother used many Christian evangelical materials to teach us the gospel (although, as what I might call ultra-Orthodox Mormons, we were not strictly Christian evangelicals ourselves), I had at that point a

² On Assisi, see “A Rose without Thorns in Assisi,” <http://www.caftours.com/magazine/rose-thorns/>

³ *Don't Eat the Pictures: Sesame Street at the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ktnG_2-VXA0

very traditional, deeds-oriented view of the final judgment. This view was vividly illustrated by the “life movie” metaphor employed in one of my mother’s favorite films, *Defending Your Life*: the protagonist’s spirit is literally shown scenes of his life in a place called “Judgment City.” So I was confused at the presentation of a different model—one that found no difference in merit between the life of a small boy and that of, say, a US president.

The memory of that *Sesame Street* special remained deeply buried in my psyche until recently. The obituary brought it back, as it did so many other things. Now I sit here wondering: what if, instead of languishing as an obscure footnote, that model of *being over doing* had become the template of my childhood and adolescence? Alas, I tended toward the view of *Defending Your Life* instead.⁴ I imagined repentance was like a magical VHS player (this was the 90s / early 2000s, after all) that recorded over all of life’s shameful episodes, a whitewashing of errors, a balm of absolution. Still, you had to have mostly good scenes—great deeds—if you want to make the movie worth God watching in the first place. And most importantly, the story has to make some sense. It has to be logical progression in which conclusions follow from premises and the most important events are foreshadowed in early childhood and condensed to the length of an obituary.

Myths help us make sense of the world and our place in it. But they also reflect certain social beliefs and realities, and in describing a certain view of things inevitably prescribes a corresponding approach to life for those who subscribe to the myth. Take the Osiris example. For the longest time, I couldn’t imagine why the myth of Osiris was featured in a *Sesame Street* special. But I think now I know the answer. Although culturally alien to the show’s American audience, the myth’s presentation of post-mortal judgment holds a unique appeal to young

⁴ Disclaimer: I never saw *Defending Your Life* as a child. As a matter of fact, as of this writing, I still haven’t. But the “life movie” idea of final judgment predominated in my mind nonetheless.

children, who are more concerned about mood and character than deeds and achievement (and for whom a heavy heart can be resolved by a simple hug). Thus, although no one in the modern world *literally* believes that Osiris will judge their spirits, the myth is told because it fits in well with a certain modern view of child psychology. Adults, by contrast, are keen on dealing with regret for past deeds and with preventing future mischievous deeds by their peers. The idea of a final reckoning accomplishes both ends: on the individual level providing a way to overcome past deviances; on an individual and societal level, channeling behavior into socially beneficent ends for fear of eternal punishment.

This explanation cannot be entirely satisfactory, however, for not all versions of the judgment give place for repentance—not a repentance one can be assured of, at any rate. About a hundred years ago, German sociologist Max Weber famously postulated a different theory for how the final judgment influenced different sects of Christians in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The medieval Catholic, Weber argued, has so many second chances and backup plans, from Confession and Penance to Last Rites in this world to Purgatory in the next, that he feels little obligation to live a life of great deeds. He will almost certainly go to heaven no matter what he does (or doesn't do). The Calvinist, by contrast, as a consequence of his belief in predestination, has to find some evidence of God's grace in the form of blessings – and this anxiety to know that he is saved impels him to a life of productive activity (where he can manufacture his own blessings):

The [Catholic] priest was a magician who performed the miracle of transubstantiation, and who held the key to eternal life in his hand. One could turn to him in grief and penitence. He dispensed atonement, hope of grace, certainty of forgiveness, and thereby granted release from that tremendous tension to which the Calvinist was doomed by an

inexorable fate, admitting of no mitigation. For him such friendly and human comforts did not exist. He could not hope to atone for hours of weakness or of thoughtlessness by increased good will at other times, as the Catholic or even the Lutheran could. The God of Calvinism demanded of his believers not single good works, but *a life of good works combined into a unified system*. ... The moral conduct of the average man was thus deprived of its planless and unsystematic character and subjected to a consistent method for conduct as a whole.⁵

Because the Calvinist cannot be sure of forgiveness (the will of God in relation to sinners being both inscrutable and unalterable), he becomes, in effect, his own judge. He is not merely the actor in his own life's movie, making sure there are some high quality scenes; he is, in a great sense, writer to God's director, ensuring that all the devices of plot, from recurring motifs to climactic moments, are represented, giving sense and cohesion to the mortal project. In another metaphor, the Calvinist makes of his life a monument to God's glory.

As I reflect on my own intellectual inheritance, it appears the myth of final judgment, even divorced of predestination, has a particularly potent ability to shape our view of life as an integrated whole. I think this is because it teaches us that our deeds are what matter, in the sense that they are what endure: they are what life is *reduced to*, at the end of the day. Just take these examples from different religious texts. From the Bible: "I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done" (Revelation 20:11-12). The Qu'ran is even more straightforward: "And those who believe and *do good deeds*, they are dwellers of Paradise, they dwell therein forever" (2:82).

⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: HarperCollins, 1930), 117 (emphasis added).

Mormon scripture gives its own twist, in an ambiguous but comforting nod toward the possibility that character is more important than deeds, and that the two don't always correspond: "For I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts" (Doctrine and Covenants 137:9). But most importantly, all of these texts present the notion that *there is a life to be judged and evaluated as a continuous whole*, and to have a single, usually up-down verdict passed upon it. Is it any wonder then that inheritors of the Western tradition feel the need to fashion their mortal existence into a continuous narrative, a *life story*?

Later on in the *Protestant Ethic*, Weber states that after Calvinism had helped create capitalism in Northern Europe, it faded as a religious movement—but the capitalist way of life remained, having become entrenched in society and taken on new, secular justifications. In a similar way, although traditional religion is fading in the Western world, I think the effects of the final judgment are still with us in the broader, secular culture. Although we've largely discarded the external moral law on which the judgment myth depends, our current ideal of the autonomous self, pursuing his or her own version of happiness, is, if anything, more compatible with the idea of life as summative project and projection of individual moral and social influence.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge at this point the presence of a thread in Christian thought that fights against the "monument" view of life, best illustrated by Henry Van Dyke's popular short story "The Mansion," written in 1887. In the story, a rich businessman, John Weightman, makes shrewd investments in various charities with the goal of boosting his company's brand and his family's social prestige. Every cause to which he donates bears his name, from an endowed university chair to a local hospital wing. His son Harold disapproves, wishing to transcend his father's calculated desire for recognition: "sometimes I feel as if I'd like

to do some good in the world, if father only wouldn't insist upon God's putting it into the ledger.”⁶ But then John visits a heavenly city of mansions in a dream. As he watches many of the humble, unimportant people he knows being led to rich and opulent palaces, he reflects on what he imagines is in store for him:

If they were sure, each one, of finding a mansion there, could not he be far more sure?

His life had been more fruitful than theirs. He had been a leader, a founder of new enterprises, a pillar of Church and State, a prince of the House of Israel. Ten talents had been given him, and he had made them twenty. His reward would be proportionate.

When John's mansion turns out to be but a small hovel, his angel guide explains that he'd already received recognition for his good deeds on earth. “Would you be paid twice?” he asks. Nevertheless, the narrator implies that all of John's neighbors received their mansions on the basis of their devotion, albeit unheralded, to charitable causes similar to John's. Thus, although strict Christianity insists on not receiving temporal recognition for one's deeds, *they are still recognized* (by God), and they are still the basis for biographical (and autobiographical) evaluation.

Although I was often exposed to this story as child in Christmas sermons and the like, it was only in researching it for this paper that I noticed for the first time the role of the son Harold's rebellion in provoking John's *Christmas Carol*-like vision. As John sits pondering the fate of his business and charitable empire after his death in light of Harold's threat to refuse his inheritance, John thinks to himself (in the narrator's voice), “there would [still] be much to live for; the fortunes of the family would be secure. But the zest of it all would be gone if John Weightman had to give up the assurance of perpetuating his name and his principles in his son.” John wanted to establish a lasting business empire, and he wanted to be remembered. More

⁶ “The Mansion,” Henry Van Dyke.

importantly, though, he also wanted his son to take on his own principles and values; he wanted to both his brand and his way of life to outlast his physical existence, to secure him a type of immortality. Although he ranks his son above his empire in importance, each serves an analogous, even complementary, role in relation to the other. Is it possible they have their origin in the same procreative impulse? Is his business, in other words, a second child?

In order to find out, I decided to take a closer look at biology. Our fundamental instincts as human animals revolve around survival and reproduction. From an evolutionary point of view, that's all there is.⁷ This is how whole species guarantee their continued existence: through the primal impulses of each individual member thereof toward self-preservation and self-perpetuation. We're all familiar with the image of the mother bear going to extreme lengths to protect her children, what Richard Dawkins describes as "parental altruism."⁸ As humans, we are not outside of the circle of nature—the instincts toward survival and reproduction dominate and shape our lives just as well, for better or for worse.

What sets us apart from animals, ultimately, is our ability to think and communicate symbolically. Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb illustrate this through a thought experiment involving Robinson Crusoe's stay on a desert island. They ask their readers to imagine that Mr. Crusoe had trained the parrots on that island to say a set of English words. Furthermore, the parrots actually knew what the words—among them "fruit," "veg," "grain," "water," and "coconut milk"—referred to. Although they had the rudiments of language, however, the parrots could not be said to possess the ability to communicate in symbols, because they could not string them together in any meaningful way.⁹

⁷ Lawrence Rifkin, "Is the Meaning of Your Life to Make Babies?" 24 March 2013, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/is-the-meaning-of-your-life-to-make-babies/>

⁸ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford UP), 115.

⁹ Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb, *Evolution in Four Dimensions* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 189-190.

A human child, by contrast, would quickly learn to use words in different contexts, applying the verb *give* to any number of desired objects, for example. This fluidity is an important marker of symbolic thinking, and allows us to transform the objects of our physical environment into elements of any number of meaningful systems. These systems only survive, however, because we are able to transmit them to subsequent generations through written language and pictorial representation.¹⁰ Take the example of Christianity. An interrelated group of symbols, from the cross to the Four Gospels, transmit and communicate meaning created back in the first century A.D. by a select group of individuals. Even if members of another species were to acquire the ability to understand symbols, without writing, they certainly wouldn't be able to transmit them to the extent that humans can. However, the potential for longevity in our symbolic systems is deceptive, for it can give rise to the belief that one's contribution to a particular culture's symbolic repertoire can last "forever," transcending the metaphysical reality of death—when, in reality, these systems end with nearly as much frequency as civilizations. For example, while we have record of the Syrian-influenced late-Roman symbol of the unconquered sun god, or Sol Invictus, it holds no meaning to us; many more symbols have perished without trace through the attrition of the centuries.

Put another way, could it be that these symbolic structures allow us to project the primal need for individual and familial survival on a scale impossible to animals, who think at most in terms of three generations (their own, their children's, and, in some cases, their grandchildren's)?¹¹ I certainly think so. Noted environmental author David Abram traces the conception of linear time to the development of written language in his landmark book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Traditional (oral) cultures, as he describes them, believed in the cyclical nature

¹⁰ Ibid., 198-199.

¹¹ For grandchildren specifically, see Judith Shulevitz, "Why Do Grandmothers Exist?" *The New Republic*, 28 Jan. 2013, <https://newrepublic.com/article/112199/genetics-grandmothers-why-they-exist>

of events. Hunting, harvesting, sex, religious ritual – each individual who participates in these is merely enacting a timeless, archetypical experience. Even myths are ways of describing the particular features and attributes of a tribe’s immediate ecological environs. As myths and other transformational stories are written down, however, they become “itemizable”—part of a “slowly accreting sequence” of unrepeatable events.¹² Thus, we might extrapolate, human ambition is transferred from wanting to participate in these eternal, cyclical practices to wanting to make one’s mark in the record of unique, transformational occurrences. This, finally, enables one’s life to become a project, an exercise in transcendence of one’s particular time and place.

Benjamin Franklin understood this well. In an edition of *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, the Good Doctor wrote the following couplets:

If you wou’d not be forgotten
 As soon as you are dead and rotten,
 Either write things worth reading,
 or do things worth the writing.¹³

Franklin himself is remembered for both his great deeds and his clever writing, but either one would have sufficed. We remember the Roman historian Livy as well as the Carthaginian general Hannibal whose crossing of the Alps the former so memorably describes.¹⁴ But in both cases it is language that enables both the writer (who “writes things worth reading”) and his subject (who “do[es] things worth writing”) to be remembered long after their deaths. Put differently, is the desire to perform great deeds merely a glorified form of death-denial—reproduction and parenting writ large? In a spin on the Calvinist Man, are we making, instead of

¹² David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (Pantheon: New York, 1996), 187-188.

¹³ Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard, An Almanack For the Year of Christ 1738, Being the Second after Leap Year (Poor Richard’s Almanac)*, Month: May, Column: 2

¹⁴ Livy, *The History of Rome*, 21.56.

a monument, a work of art out of our lives? Something so beautiful that it theoretically secures us a place in the hearts and minds of our descendants?

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November 7, 2000. I'm curled up in front of the TV in footie pajamas, watching a gray map of the United States acquire blue and red hues. I understand vaguely that an election is going on, a battle between the colors that would determine the next president of the United States. "Daddy, which color do we want to win again?" "Red, honey," came the gentle but, in retrospect, distracted reply. How do you explain the two-party system to a six-year-old? For reasons I didn't understand at the time, the outcome wasn't decided that night, but once it was, I knew an important step had been taken toward the perfection of American society. Maybe Jesus hadn't come that year, but it was hard to be disappointed with the direction of the new millennium: center-right democracy and capitalism were overspreading the earth, laying the foundation for the missionaries and temples that would follow.

I was born in 1994, three years after the end of the Cold War, and six years before the putative return of Jesus Christ to the earth. Everything around me, it seemed, from the presence of LDS missionaries in Russia to the burgeoning health food movement, bespoke America's and the Mormon Church's confident march toward ultimate triumph, even global hegemony. And it was my generation, our Sunday School teachers taught, who would be the ones to bring us over the Millennial threshold. As they recounted the Book of Mormon story of the resurrected Christ's visit to the Americas, eyes shining, they would tell us how lucky we were to be youngsters so near the Second Coming. Maybe, if Jesus would hurry up, we could be taken up in a cloud of fire just like the Nephite children of old.

Time went on. Like much of the rest of America, my family settled in to the general malaise of the 2000s. After the invasion of Iraq, my parents pretty much gave up on “W.” I lamented my baptism at age eight and went kicking and screaming into adolescence: both developments meant I was moving further away from the innocence I had wanted to preserve up to the millennium, which remained elusively just out of reach. From the near-defeat of Proposition 8 to the election of Barack Obama, the post-Cold War moral and political order was collapsing around us; surely, the end was near. A part of me feared I would give in to the temptations of adolescence and lose place in Christ’s kingdom. Still, I hadn’t given up on the world-perfecting project: I would frequently imagine myself preaching from the rooftops of skyscrapers in big cities that I, as a child of the Mountain West, had never seen. A modern-day Noah, I would warn my heedless audiences of the dangers of excessive materialism and processed foods.

Until I was exposed to French theorist Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, I didn’t understand or know how to describe these forces that shaped me so profoundly. Lyotard would call them “grand narratives,” sweeping stories about the cosmos and the trajectory of human society that help us to make sense of history and to find our place in it.¹⁵ Grand narratives underlie most religions, although there’s no shortage of secular narratives. They include the millenarian and political expectations of my early childhood, as well as historical beliefs like “Manifest Destiny” in the case of America’s westward expansion and the so-called “White Man’s Burden” in the case of European colonization. Biologists would point out that these narratives are a function—and an inevitable byproduct, perhaps?—of our ability to think

¹⁵ Jean François-Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984),

symbolically.¹⁶ Most importantly, they provide what we might call a “regime of recognition” that make individual life narratives socially intelligible. For example, serving an LDS mission is a way of contributing to a broader Christianization *project* that’s been going on since the time of Christ’s original twelve apostles, to whom he commanded, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel unto every creature” (Mark 16:15).

Participating in the project provides a concrete way of measuring one’s success at life—at least in communities that subscribe to some version of that particular grand narrative. (In the Mormon missionary example, evangelical Christians often recognize, if sometimes grudgingly, the value of these missions even while not subscribing to the full theological justifications of their practitioners.) In pursuing this type of culturally-defined trajectory, one always runs the risk of future generations finding your sacrifices unintelligible. For example, it is difficult today to find many admirers of Confederate soldiers, to say nothing of Nazis.¹⁷ Nevertheless, if one’s goal *is* to assure a kind of immortality, attaching yourself to a popular cause—“betting” on its survival, as it were—is a better strategy than pursuing one’s own idiosyncratic desires. Furthermore, if everybody’s attaching themselves to one or more of these causes, then one would naturally feel some pressure to do the same. And in fact, political and religious leaders frequently invoke these grand narratives in a coercive way, demanding that every life bend itself to the purposes of the state, or to God’s glory.

If I hadn’t lived beyond about age thirteen, this might have seemed like a plausible explanation for why we seek integrated, quantifiable lives—but then high school happened, and I learned that ditching my childhood assumptions about the inevitability of Christian American

¹⁶ Lamb and Jablonka, *Evolution in Four Dimensions*, 199.

¹⁷ Of course, many have tried to justify devotion to *any* cause, however misguided by “modern standards,” in an effort to redeem vicariously the majority of humanity, including Nazis and CSA soldiers. It is precisely this effort which leaves me ambivalent about the concept of a “purpose-driven life.”

triumph didn't change anything about my desire for self-transcendence. At some point during the series of heady philosophical debates I would have with my friends, my worst childhood fears came true: I lost my faith in religion. Yet, somehow, the drive to make a difference of world-historical importance stuck with me; if anything, it was amplified. I yearned to impact every conceivable area of human knowledge and action. In a way, I wanted to see my name printed in as many future high school textbooks as possible. Unfortunately, the number of fields where I saw the need for drastic intervention quickly grew to overwhelm me. How could I possibly be the physicist who came up with the quantum-classical unifying theory, the politician who ended the welfare state, the digital pamphleteer who healed America's racial divide, and still have time left over for Netflix and piano practice? I wondered. This, I believe, is what happens when one gives up on the help of grand narratives for self-definition: one's quest for transcendence becomes unanchored from any particular cause and instead becomes embodied in one's own name.¹⁸

Even so, no matter how large the list of as-yet unrealized achievements attributed to my name grew, it never seemed to be enough. When a speaker at the funeral of a friend spoke of the boy's enormous *potential*, I realized I was trapped in a terrible paradox: there simply was no combination of achievements that could ever outweigh the powerful mystique of potential. At the same time, however, since all youth theoretically have the same amount of it, dying young, with that potential still out there to compensate for unrealized deeds, wouldn't cut it either. Not if I wanted to be remembered.

¹⁸ In a way it is reminiscent of our friend John Weightman, who, more than wanting to ensure the survival of his business empire or charitable endeavors wanted to see his *name* recognized and remembered. This helps explain why he was violating Christian norms even as he thought he was fulfilling them perfectly: because none of the worthy causes he furthered mattered to him *personally*—only as part of a self-aggrandizing project.

After puzzling through this dilemma for some time, I hatched a scheme: to pack a lifetime of earth-shattering accomplishments into my first thirty-four years, and then to die voluntarily—preferably by assassination, as I mounted my bid to become the youngest president ever; if not, then by jumping into the Grand Canyon with a few close friends by my side (they agreed to the plan, with a mixture of bemusement and incredulity). That way, posterity would acknowledge me as a transformative figure in my own right while also holding me up as a symbol of the way things might have been—the same way many historians both acknowledge John F. Kennedy’s actual accomplishments (like winning a Pulitzer for his book *Profiles in Courage*¹⁹ and defusing the Cuban Missile Crisis) and romanticize the hypothetical administration of JFK beyond the 1000 days: a world where the nightmares of Vietnam and social upheaval supposedly never happened.

I think French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir would have understood my teenage self’s dilemma. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she wrote about the importance of potential to man’s goal-directed existence. The future, de Beauvoir argues, provides the horizon of action without which the range of rational action would cease to exist. In her phrasing, “the future is the meaning and the substance of all action.”²⁰ In the most practical sense, we wouldn’t plant seeds in the spring if we knew the world was going to end by autumn. Thus, we “seek in the future a guarantee of [our] success [and] a negation of [our] failures.”²¹ However, de Beauvoir points out, the continual projection of future accomplishments to redeem the past and assert the reality of our being eventually runs up, in our imagination as well as in reality, against death—one day, we all run out of tomorrows—resulting in an anxiety akin to what I experienced in adolescence.

¹⁹ Quite unjustly, in my opinion.

²⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), 127.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

De Beauvoir discusses two principal methods of coping with this. The first is represented by the medieval festival, and is born of the realization that existence “must be asserted *in the present* if one does not want all life to be defined as an escape toward nothingness.”²² Through any type of deliberate excess—drunkenness, partying, impulse purchases—we escape from the cycle of goal-setting, making time stop, if only for a moment. Unfortunately, reality eventually settles in, and the festival is exposed as a metaphysical farce, for “one can never possess the present.”

This is where the artist comes in. His or her role is to concretize the atmosphere of the festival in music, dance, theater, novels, etc. Crucially, de Beauvoir points out that the role of storytelling is to set the bounds of one of these goal-defined episodes of a culture (think grand narratives again) or a single individual—to give it “its beginning and its end.”²³ I wonder if she wasn’t too narrow in her conception of the artist, however, for her description recalls the Calvinist self-fashioner. What if we are all artists in the de Beauvoirean sense? What if the desire to live and to represent one’s life as a work of art stems from the desire to hold on to time—to be able to recall past achievements as if they were present?

It certainly helps explain my bizarre freshman year of college. Discouraged by the unexpected academic and social difficulties of college life, I sought for a single realization—a single goal I could fulfill—which would provide a lasting sense of satisfaction. I found my project in a semi-fictionalized autobiography that would be a projection of my greatness, speak to the “Mormon moment” (this was early 2012, as Mitt Romney was poised to become the first Mormon nominee of a major party), and garner me a Pulitzer Prize to boot. Maybe that could be enough, I thought at the time, to guarantee my place in history; then I could go back to a life of

²² Ibid., 125.

²³ Ibid., 69, 127.

bourgeois complacency. I realize now that I was trying to capture that singular feeling of accomplishment in a form that would never die, ending the anxiety that relentlessly impels one toward goal-directed action.

Anthropologists offer some support to this explanation. Stanton Wortham of the University of Pennsylvania in particular criticizes a traditional psychological view of the autobiographical narrative as merely descriptive. Instead, he speculates that the personal narrative is an essential element in constituting our sense of self. “A self emerges when a person repeatedly adopts characteristic positions, with respect to others and within recognizable cultural patterns, in everyday social action.”²⁴ In other words, I am defined by the stories I tell about myself. This raises the question: can we really understand life outside of narrative? How do we avoid the summative tendency of the obituary? Even if we define our life’s work more by the attributes we’ve developed and exercised than by our achievements, how do we avoid the demand that our self-presentation fit within “recognizable cultural patterns”?

It was in the rubble of that school year’s aftermath that I finally understood my intoxicating daydreams of transcendence to be a form of escapism: a substitute for, not an impetus toward, short-term success. Maybe it was time to get off my high horse, to accept the moment, to live life one day at a time. After a wrenching spiritual rebirth that had everything to do with surrendering my reservation to a spot at the table of the world’s “greats,” I embarked on an LDS mission, zealous to check any instance of self-aggrandizement in myself or others.

Unfortunately for this effort, I was called to Brazil, where, regardless of some occasional, tentative steps by Church leadership to move in a new direction, self-branding through baptisms is everything among the 18, 19, and 20-year-old young men who comprise the bulk of the

²⁴ Stanton Wortham, “The Heterogeneously Distributed Self,” *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 12.2 (1999), 170.

Church's missionary force. Guys I knew really believed that their entire two-year ministry depended on—and could be summed up by—how many people they had baptized. Here I thought I had abandoned the grubby pursuit of individual achievements only to find it reincarnated in one of its more perverse forms. The funny thing is, after wrestling with this warped moral economy for years, I don't really blame my church for it. (As I said, they do make some efforts to counter the baptism mentality.) I think now that it had more to do with human nature in general, and specifically good old-fashioned male competitiveness.

Radical feminist Pat Mainardi would certainly agree with me. In her groundbreaking article of the women's movement, "The Politics of Housework," she argues that men have been trained by thousands of years of cultural ideals and practice to see repetitive work that yields no clear result—which, in the context of an LDS mission, would be things like spiritually nurturing those taught—as "women's work" or "slave's work."

A great many American men are not accustomed to doing monotonous, repetitive work which never issues in any lasting, let alone important, achievement. This is why they would rather repair a cabinet than wash dishes. If human endeavors are like a pyramid with man's highest achievements at the top, then keeping oneself alive is at the bottom. Men have always had servants (us) to take care of this bottom stratum of life while they have confined their efforts to the rarefied upper regions. It is thus ironic when they ask of women—Where are your great painters, statesmen, etc.? Mme. Matisse ran a military shop so he could paint. Mrs. Martin Luther King kept his house and raised his babies.²⁵ It seems unlikely that women are impervious to the great man ideal, but in my own experience, they certainly place more value on character than men, for whom accomplishment reigns supreme, atoning for minor foibles like family neglect or sexual infidelity in the final evaluation of one's life. Furthermore, Mainardi's thesis suggests that if we change our ideal for human life

²⁵ Pat Mainardi, "The Politics of Housework," (New York: Redstockings, 1970).

to a blend of traditional men's and women's roles, encouraging a mixture of self-transcending achievements and cyclical, mundane work, we may be less likely to view life itself as a series of transcendent achievements and instead see it as serving a more local role, in terms of both time and space.

* * *

As encouraging as Mainardi's article is to me, in a way it only leads to a broadening of "purpose," adding the noble performance of passing tasks into the evaluative criteria of final judgment. Indeed, the more I continue to grapple with the desire to represent life as a consistent whole I've realized that, regardless of whether its origin is more rooted in biology or culture, I can never escape from it. In fact, throughout this essay I've managed to tell a narrative of how I tried to transcend narrative! Will that be the story of *my* life? Or will I one day find a definitive answer and move on, as I have so many times before, to another question?

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