

Soul-Making, or Is There Life Before Death

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his not existing is despicable.” Such was the outcry of a man who came to the painful realization that he was so immersed in and absorbed by a field of forces and influences that if to exist means to come from oneself, to pro-act rather than merely react, then indeed he has ceased to exist. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he had not yet achieved that state of being which is referred to as the fullness of life.

Of course, every man is alive, but Christ chose to announce his own mission by making it clear that there are varying intensities of life. That they might have it more abundantly was his own way of stating his purpose. Iranaeus, one of the early Church fathers, was responding to this sense of Christ’s mission when he suggested that, “the glory of God is a man fully alive.” God glories in life, in the fullness of it. And he glories in the process of enabling others to achieve it.

This not existing *is* despicable, and it is painful. Who is there among us who cannot to some extent identify with Eliot’s plaintive lament, “Where is the Life we have lost in living?” (1963, 147) Such a question gives effective expression to a nagging sense that somehow an essential dimension to our being has withdrawn from active participation in life. We can experience a kind of frenetic passivity. Outwardly we are hurried and harried. Inwardly, we slumber. Our on-the-surface busy-ness is not matched by in-the-depth awareness.

Let us give attention to some of the images employed by those who endeavor to bring us to a realization of this living death. Henry David Thoreau joined the chorus of voices which has accused man of being asleep. “Why is it,” he asks, “that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering? The millions are awake enough for physical labor, but only

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one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion; only one in a hundred million to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never met a man who is quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?" (1978, 74)

The entire work of Colin Wilson, a British writer, could be viewed as an effort to bring this root malady to our attention. "We are," he maintains, "only minimally free." For the most part, we are in the grip of what he refers to as the robot, or if you will, the physical dimension of our being.

Our challenge is to gain freedom from the robot. It is almost impossible to overestimate the importance of this recognition. Nothing is more difficult than for human beings to grasp the extent to which their powers are held in captivity by the robot. It is as if we had been injected with some drug that keeps us in a state of paralysis and just as a man who had spent his whole life in an iron lung could have no conception of what it feels like to be a champion athlete, so we chronic invalids have no idea of what it means to be free and healthy or of the powers possessed by a healthy person.

A simple experiment will underline the point. Put down this book for a moment and stare at the wall, allowing your mind to go blank. In this state, the 'real you' has abdicated. Your body ticks on like an enormous clock. Your brain continues to register images. Perhaps there is even a tune running in your head. Yet all of this is purely mechanical. You have ceased to be a person and become little more than a mirror reflecting the reality around you. Yet as far as other people are concerned, you are still there — sitting in the chair looking solid and real. If some accident to your brain caused you to live out your life in this state, you would still be able to function perfectly adequately and few people would notice the difference. They would not notice that "you" had disappeared. If someone asks you a question while your mind is blank, note how little effort it costs you to respond. Your robot does most of the work for you. And so it is with almost everything you do within your waking hours. You inhabit a machine which does most of your "living" for you. (1978, 74)

While serving in the Austrian army during World War I, Wittgenstein wrote a letter to a friend, Paul Engelmann, in which he responded to a question regarding our changeable moods. "About your changeable mood, it is like this. We are asleep. Our life is like a dream. But in our better hours we wake up just enough to realize that we are dreaming. Most of the time, though, we are fast asleep. I cannot waken myself. I am trying hard. My dream body moves, but my real one does not stir. This, alas, is how it is."

Ralph Waldo Emerson suggested that most men resemble a nest of Indian boxes. That is, if you strip away all that which is exterior, if you take away from a man his coach (we would say his car), his manner of dress, his position in society, his manner of speaking — if you strip away all of that behind which man tends to hide and finally get to the self, you would find it to be a poor, distorted, imperceptible, crippled thing. (Bridges 1971, 29)

That which should give our lives substance, that which should be the source of our identity is stunted and covered over. Paul and Alma come to mind as being representative of the scriptural voices which have been effective in portraying this universal, human condition. Harvey Cox is one who sees Paul as being relentless. Paul wants to rub our faces in what for him is a fact of human existence: a kind of death infects the whole of it. A careful reading of his entire epistle to the Romans is very instructive.

Paul labored long enough to know that there is nothing more futile than offering a solution to someone who is unaware of a problem. Consequently, he endeavors to bring us to that awareness which would impell us to join our voices with his in asking the anguished question: "Who will deliver me from the bondage of this death?" (Rom. 7:24)

Alma is no less compelling as he speaks of our "deep sleep" and of our soul being "encircled about" with what he calls "the bands of death and the chains of hell." Alma is not timid. He contends that our lives testify against us, as we are guilty of what he calls "all manner of wickedness." However, like Paul or Benjamin or any of the great prophetic voices, Alma is no hellfire and damnation doomsayer. His vivid portrayal of the problem only makes the solution, about which he speaks with equal fervor, the more compelling. Incidentally, Alma does all of this in what I regard to be one of the most important sermons ever recorded. It is found in the fifth chapter of Alma.

Now because these ringing declarations can be muted by familiarity, we must pause here and be reminded that truth is never trite. If terms begin to sound overly familiar, perhaps we are losing our grasp of them. To be specific, we miss Paul's point in suggesting that death pervades life if we suppose we are being asked to face the inevitability of physical death. Paul, Alma, and all others who testify of the mission of Christ know that physical death is not the problem. Physical mortality only becomes a problem to the extent that one's mortal existence has been bereft of life. The facts of the matter are that we cannot cease to be, but we can fail to be fully alive. So Paul and Alma ask us to join the ranks of those who take existence after death for granted but who lament the loss of life before death.

One other caution. We must avoid the temptation to indulge in a kind of smugness which upon hearing Alma speak of our wickedness, encourages us to remind ourselves that we are not guilty of any so-called major sins. To so indulge ourselves would be to miss Alma's point — that our souls can be so encircled about with trivia as to make impossible that audaciously creative righteousness to which we are called. It should also be noted that these men are not merely calling us to repentance, not in the sense that they ask us to blow on our hands, grit our teeth, and repent. What they understand is that even our efforts to repent can be twisted and distorted into self-deception unless such efforts are preceded by an awakening or quickening of that part of us which can provide the vantage point from which we finally open ourselves to life-enhancing truth. Only thus will we cease to twist truth to support our limited awareness. To follow Alma in this matter we could say that first the soul is awakened and set free and then it is enabled to experience or manifest (Alma said "sing") redeeming love.

The witnesses we have consulted are disturbingly consistent: that which makes us human has been forgotten and covered over. The images they employ combine to suggest that this essential dimension of our being has become so embedded in the snarl of the forces which act upon it that, in a sense, it has died; or, in a manner of speaking, it slumbers. Consequently, that which we call our lives is a kind of fitful sleep or stumbling sleepwalking. The few who

have the courage and persistence to become aware of this condition find it difficult to improve upon Paul's question, "Who shall deliver us from the bondage of this death?" (Rom. 7:24)

The answer is, of course, Christ. Alma speaks of awakening out of a deep sleep and awakening unto God. The point of his message is that Christ is the catalyst by which this wakening is experienced. However, the specifics of Christ's role in this process of awakening will not be treated here. That is the subject for another time. The point of this presentation can be further elaborated by focusing on such questions as: "What is that dimension of our being which slumbers and has been forgotten? What is its function? What mode of being can issue from its awakening?"

I choose to label this forgotten, embedded, slumbering but essential part of us the sovereign self. We could call it the self or the soul, but I choose to call it the sovereign self because such terms are descriptive of what I hope to convey as to its importance and function. I believe it was the sovereign self which Tennyson had in mind when he referred to what he called "the true and real part of us" (Needleman 1982, 71).

By the use of the term *sovereign* I mean to claim autonomy and invincibility for a dimension of our being. I mean to suggest that the forces which impinge upon man need not become efficient or material causal forces which encounter no predicating or answering response. I mean to suggest that with the awakening of the sovereign self, which I believe few of us have experienced, we cease to be a product or — what is the same thing — a victim. While it is true that we always find ourselves within a conditioning context which either impoverishes or enriches, such a context does not determine. Neither enriching nor impoverishing influences nullify our capacity to come from ourselves, or if you will, to come from our Self. It is this capacity within us — the sovereign self — awaiting our discovery, which sets us apart from other forms of life. The quest for each of us is to come to and live from this sovereign self.

We become fully human only when we find that place within our own being which allows us to choose to obey voluntarily the laws which govern our growth. For us, the cosmic laws of life enhancement are presented as moral choices, while the commands presented to other forms of life are vital or instinctual.

It should by now be obvious that I do not believe that determinism need be the last word about human beings. However, I fear that such a theory is an all-too-accurate description of the present condition of most humans. With all of our emphasis upon free will, we should not be too quick to dismiss theories of determinism because such theories represent efforts to make sense of our own experienced bondage. With Paul, we are led to exclaim, "For the good that I would, I do not. But the evil which I would not, that I do" (Rom. 7:19). In our theological and psychological discourse, let us be precise enough and honest enough to acknowledge that autonomy or sovereignty is a potential which in fact few realize.

The mode of being which issues from coming to and living from the sovereign self is the state of being fully alive. It is the abundant life. I choose to

conceptualize such a mode of being by labeling its major constituents as sovereignty, serenity, and passion.

Let us pursue thoughts designed to bring each of these into sharper focus. Sovereignty is the secure base upon which serenity and passion can be experienced. Needleman has alluded to Kant's view that there are "influences which can raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height, awakening in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of impinging forces" (1982, 189). This growing sense of the faculty of resistance is part of what I mean by sovereignty.

Camus spoke of discovering in the midst of winter that there was in him an invincible summer. That part of us which is invincible is, for my purposes, the sovereign self.

On one occasion when asked how he felt, LeGrand Richards reportedly answered, "I lost one leg. I can't see out of one eye. I'm almost deaf. But LeGrand Richards is fine." LeGrand Richards had discovered the sovereign self.

Emerson, suffering the loss of a young son and then of his wife (their deaths came very close together), wrote in his journal that in the midst of this trial he discovered that the "power of the soul was equal to its needs, all the evidence to the contrary notwithstanding" (Marshall 1975, 46). Emerson had discovered the sovereign self. Those who provided the evidence to the contrary had not. "Awake my soul," cried Nephi. "No longer droop in sin. Rejoice." (2 Ne. 4:16-35). Nephi was engaging in the discipline of awakening the sovereign self.

There is the Oriental story of ten fools, who, after crossing a river, wanted to make certain all had crossed safely. One of them started counting the others but in doing so left himself out and therefore counted only up to nine. "We are only nine," he declared. "One of us must have been drowned in the river." "Are you sure you counted right?" asked another fool. But he, too, omitted himself and no matter how many times the ten fools tried to count themselves, the result was always nine. They began to weep because they were convinced that one among them had been drowned but they could not think which. A passerby asked them what was happening, and they explained. In seeing all ten before him, the man realized their mistake and he started to count them by touching each one in turn. As each one was touched, he was to call a successive number. "One," said the first. "Two," said the second, and so on, until they came to the last fool, who said, "Ten." The fools, astonished, thanked the wayfarer and rejoiced that one of their number had not been drowned (Ferrucci 1982, 65). The story illustrates the confusion to be experienced as we fail to count ourself, the sovereign self, as we take note of, or if you will, count the forces which make up the context of our lives.

We are getting now to the very heart of the problem. We tend to identify ourselves with the forces which impinge upon us and therefore we see ourselves as reducible to those forces, be they external or internal. Thus we fall prey to the master lie of the master liar. Believing ourselves to be puppets of such forces

which constitute the context of our lives, we succumb to sloth. Adam-like, we blame it on Eve; and Eve-like, we blame it on the snake.

What single question could be more compelling: "Is there some place, some force within the human soul which can transcend the pulls and shocks of human existence?" All of the major religious traditions answer yes, but I believe Mormon theology presents a unique and exciting foundation for an affirmative response to such a question. The implications of possessing within ourselves a primal, uncreated, co-eternal-with-God intelligence, can begin to etch themselves more deeply into our sense of self. I believe the intelligence, the uncreated core within each of us, is the sovereign self. Etymologically, *self* means "the same," suggesting an unchangeable invincibility. The purpose of existence is for that self to be added upon, that it might enhance its power and range of involvement. The tragedy of existence is that we allow this self to become embedded in those forces which were intended to be the context of its enhancement.

There is another fascinating source of support for those who are inclined to reject the reductionism which has been so pervasive since the time of Freud. I speak of the growing number of scientists who are waging an attack on the long-reigning materialism which would reduce us to biological robots. Sir John Eccles, Nobel Prize-winning neurobiologist in a book with the interesting title, *The Wonder of Being Human: Our Brain and Our Minds*, contends "that the moral point of view begins with man's awareness of the fact of his own transcendence, a recognition that human persons are different from and rise above those utterly material events comprised in the physical cosmos. Where this recognition has been blocked or distorted, life has been less than fully human. In its absence, there may be animal pleasures but not human happiness. Radical materialism," continues Eccles, "should have a prominent place in the history of human silliness." (Eccles and Robinson 1984, vii)

The essential feature of Eccles's position is that the brain and what he refers to as the mind are independent entities. Wilder Penfield, world-famous brain surgeon, just before his death at age eighty-four, made clear his support of this position. He did so with these words: "The mind seems to act independently of the brain in the same sense that a programmer acts independently of his computer. I am forced to choose the proposition that our being is to be explained on the basis of two fundamental elements." (1975, 75) Roger Sperry, Nobel Prize-winning psychobiologist, put it this way: "The causal potency of an ideal or an idea becomes just as real as that of a molecule, a cell, or a nerve impulse" (1983, 36). This is both encouraging and frightening because, to quote Eccles and his colleague, "the actions and goals of people are very much influenced by the sort of being they think they are" (1984, 2). Indeed, those thoughts create a range from the German concentration camp to the loving, respectful care of the elderly, the terminally ill, or the crippled, from the sense of human beings as being reducible to their physical state to a sense of the unrepeatable preciousness of the individual.

To extract and enhance the sovereign self — that is our challenge. I have a body, but do I experience a presence, a vantage point, which is independent

of the condition of that body? I assume various roles in life, but do I enjoy a sense of identity which transcends those roles? I will always enjoy approval more than disapproval, but do I experience a sense of worth which persists through both? Can I fail and not perceive myself to be a failure? Do I experience that energizing hope which is reserved for those who know that, in sinning, the self is not tainted or pock-marked but forgotten? Can we say with Paul that that within which tends toward sin is not the real self? (See Rom. 7–9.)

With the enhancement of the sovereign self, there comes serenity. The basic component of serenity is the feeling that one is safe or secure. The relationship between a sense of sovereignty and a sense of safety should by now be obvious. I believe we are mistaken in our tendency to disparage the search for security or safety. Our lives are not our own until the legitimate source of safety has been discovered. The pain of feeling unsafe is acute, and so many of our commonly experienced human ills result from misguided responses to such pain. Consider the driven businessman, the dependent housewife, the drug addict, or the approval addict. All of these lifestyles are manifestations of this unfulfilled need for a legitimate sense of safety. The search for such a feeling of security manifests a deep wisdom. It is the soul's effort to claim its birthright. Such a search only becomes inimical to life as we become careless and too easily satisfied.

In the face of the very real threats, dangers, and risks of life, Christ calls out to us to "fear not." And he offers us what he calls his peace. Surely this is not an invitation towards pollyanna-ish denial but an announcement of a stunning fact: there is a dimension of our being which is not at risk. A whole demonic pack of dreads and fears are exorcised by an awareness of this truth. Such an exorcism may be considered a necessary prelude to one's capacity to be truly ethical and humane. Love does not issue from a fearful, burdened mind. Anxiety and fear are the seedbed of domination and exploitation.

Christ's mission was to enable human beings to exist as free persons. Without such freedom there is no exaltation because there is no secure base from which to freely choose. In a very real sense, the freedom he sought to confer was freedom from fear. The capacity to come from oneself is finally released as we experience the serenity born of an awakening to the sovereign self.

The manifestation of this capacity to come from oneself I call *passion*. I recall a period of time in my life when I found myself working with a man who had been described to me as a man of passion. I discovered that he was a very busy and involved man. However, the longer I worked with him, the more convinced I became that he was, in fact, a desperate and frightened man. To labor compulsively, to strive to elicit a particular response from others, to seek desperately for external validation in whatever form — all of these strivings may be accompanied by strong emotion and great effort, but they do not manifest passion in the sense that I use the word here. They cannot, because passion issues from the secure base of sovereignty and serenity. Passion is the surging of the life within me in response to those aspects of reality which are found to be intrinsically satisfying.

I ask you not to contaminate what I have attempted to describe as the sovereign self by calling it the enemy of involvement. By sovereignty I do not mean detachment. It is a feeling of total vulnerability which keeps the self ensconced within its own being. It is when I feel basically or metaphysically secure that passion begins to surge from my depths because life begins to take on a different hue. Reality ceases to be that against which I defend myself. The true vocation of the soul is to move forward into reality with passion, to enjoy a fascinated engagement with images of possibility. The sovereign self does not withhold itself because it does not feel itself trapped by commitment, defined by failure, or threatened by disapproval or unrequited love. It can open itself to persuasions of others while retaining the sacred right of private judgment. While it feels with and for others, it acts from itself.

I suggest that boredom, which we are told we are experiencing in epidemic proportions, is borne of fear. Boredom constitutes an effort to turn the volume down. If I look out upon reality and see fearful burdens and threats to my very being, my defense is to convince myself that I do not care. Boredom is one of the defenses against vulnerability.

It was said of Daniel, "The Lord hath loved thee because thou art a man of desire" (Dan. 9:21, Douay). To so live is to find the process of life its own reward.

It is man's tendency to become absorbed in the harried pursuit of ends which do not spring from the sovereign self, which give rise to Eliot's question, "Where is the Life we have lost in the living?"

In conclusion, we might say, "And now abideth sovereignty, serenity, passion, these three. But the greatest of these is—" who can say? It is only for purposes of discussion that we can tease them apart. The work and glory of God—the purpose of existence—is to enable each individual to become a locus of sovereignty, serenity, and passion.

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