

Playing Chess With Pigeons Service

One of the more thought provoking movies in cinema history, *The Seventh Seal* by Ingmar Bergman, portrays a man playing a game of chess with Death. It very creatively sums up the central conundrum of life. We are given the remarkable gift of life with the knowledge that it will be taken from us in a bewilderingly random fashion. We have a maddening lack of control over when our journey will end. But we do have some control over the narrative of our journey before we lose that game of chess. We must take care not to cede control of our journey to anyone with a metaphorical chess board.

Chess as a metaphor. Never play chess with someone wearing a hooded robe and carrying a scythe, but also beware of playing chess with pigeons.

Spoken Meditation: David Whyte

Loaves and Fishes

This is not
the age of information.

This is not
the age of information.

Forget the news,
and the radio,
and the blurred screen.

This is the time
of loaves
and fishes.

People are hungry
and one good word is bread
for a thousand.

Reading: by Nina Strohminger

A classic philosophical thought experiment poses the following paradox. Imagine a ship, let's call it the Nina, whose planks are replaced, one by one, as they age. Eventually every original part is changed, resulting in a boat made of entirely new materials. Our intuition that this is the same ship becomes problematic when the builders reassemble all the Nina's original parts into a second ship. The Nina's identity is tied up inextricably with her physicality.

Personal identity does not work this way. As Nina-the-person ages, almost all the cells of her body get replaced, in some cases many times over. Yet we have no trouble seeing present-day Nina as the same person. Even radical physical transformations – puberty, surgery, infirmity, some future world where her consciousness is preserved on a hard drive – will not obliterate the Nina we know. The personal identity detector is not concerned with continuity of matter, but continuity of mind.

For Nina-the-ship, no part of the vessel is especially Nina-like; her identity is distributed evenly across every atom. We might wonder whether the same applies to people – does their continued identity depend only on the total number of cognitive planks replaced? Or are some parts of the mind particularly essential to the self?

Playing Chess With Pigeons

Humans are the storytelling animal. The human brain thrives on narrative. It seems to be hard wired into our cognitive apparatus. Storytelling is perhaps the fundamental human quality, the thing that has, in many ways, defined us throughout humanity's short history. Other animals live life. We live life and tell stories to each other about the experience. Storytelling is so much a part of us that we even tell spontaneous stories in our dreams each night. For approximately one third of our lives our brain tells us fantastic, often absurd, often revealing stories as we sleep. But our brain also spontaneously tells us stories when we are awake. And here is the story we tell ourselves each day of our life: I am a moral human being. We do this even when the evidence is a little shaky. We like to see a moral human being in the mirror.

The conventional wisdom regarding what makes us, us, is that we are the sum total of our experiences in life. We are what we have experienced in this corporeal shell. Let's examine this conventional wisdom. Does what we see in the mirror as our true self arise from our experiences?

I was reading the newspaper one morning, as I do every morning, indeed as I have done every morning of my life since I was quite young.

On this morning, perusing the news of the world magically brought to my iPad, I came across an article about the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature.

Imagine. I'm sitting on my porch enjoying the quiet of the morning, sipping my tea, listening to birds chirp, the sound of squirrels playing in the tree in front of my house. There on the screen in front of me I receive news from the other side of the world about a person winning an award for putting pen to paper and telling a story. Do you find this as magical as I do? Humans are a confounding species, regularly given to doing horrible things, but some of our accomplishments make the heart sing. And what could make the heart sing more than reading a story about a man a world away getting recognized for being the best story teller in the world? And now I'm telling you a story about it. Man, the storytelling animal.

Ron Grossman, who wrote the Tribune article, was not initially impressed with the Nobel Prize winning book he wrote about. He thought it was pretentious. But as he delved deeper into the book "Dora Bruder" by Patrick Modiano, he began to realize, as the Nobel committee had, that the book contained great insights into the paradoxes of

human life. In the book, the author runs across an old newspaper ad seeking a young woman named Dora Bruner, who had gone missing. He began to search governmental records to learn about the girl, trying to reconstruct her past. Grossman writes: "While looking for the records office, Modiano recalls a similarly fruitless experience: searching a hospital labyrinth for his estranged father. As the book goes on, twin stories unfold: a quest to discover Dora's fate and Modiano's struggle with his own biography. "This guy, says Grossman, has got something to say: The past is at the core of our being, but it's tough to get ahold of through either memories or public records, ... Traces remain in registers, and you don't know where they are hidden and who guards them, and if they will show them to you."

First the author Modiano was intrigued by a paradox, then Tribune writer Grossman, and now me. Why did this strike a chord in me? As it happens I somehow recently found myself stumbling onto clues about my past and who I am, just as Modiano had.

In my old age I have become a theater nut. As a high school student. I recall being pressured to be in a school play, a courtroom drama, and almost hyperventilating with fear, swearing never to go on stage again. This is part of my personal mythology, that of paralyzing stage fright and a vow to never to appear in another play after that first dreadful experience. Except that my mom gave me an old box of photos and newspaper clippings, and one clipping from the local paper showed me and a friend dressed in river boat gambler's costumes. The article was about a play we were performing at school, a totally different one than the one I remember. There I was in the picture, dressed like a dandy, and still my memory wasn't jarred. I had been in more than one play and had absolutely no memory of it.

So how important are your experiences in defining what makes you you if you can't even get your own experiences straight? Memory is an odd thing indeed.

Modiano, stumbled across the article about dora Bruder in 1988, and thus had a limited number of registers to explore the past. We now have the ultimate register, the internet. Not long ago, marveling at how the world wide web has changed our lives so dramatically, I had a thought. As I have illustrated, my experiential memory is faulty to extremes. It occurred to me that, with the endless resources of the internet, I might be able to reconstruct some memories that had failed me.

I have always been a music fan and when I was younger, spent an inordinate time of going to concerts. My first concert was Grand Funk Railroad, then Alice Cooper, and I

saw Yes, and Styx, and Todd Rundgren, Emerson Lake and Palmer, and Pink Floyd, and countless others. But the memories were ephemeral. They were little more than a mental list. One of the greatest concerts I ever saw was the Who. At least my memory says so. But there are a decided lack of details to that memory. It seemed like I saw them in St Louis, and maybe it was at an auditorium. I did remember that the opening band was Leonard Skynnard, a band I learned to actively dislike.

Imagine the endless 30 minute live version of Free Bird Lynnard Skyward played while I waited impatiently for the Who.

The imagine hell.

But I repeat myself.

Given that many of the famous bands now have online resources that list their concert history, I thought that I might be able to figure out when and where I saw the Who. I was inordinately excited by this. I would be able to precisely place where I was in a moment in time in my life. The register that is the internet would fill in the details of my past. Except that, after a long search, I discovered that the Who did not have such a list of concerts anywhere on the web. So I was not going to be able to use the Who concert to pinpoint myself in space and time.

Soon after this search, I was in a book store looking for a music CD. I wanted to ask a clerk where I might find this CD, but he was busy helping someone else. As I waited for him I noticed a book on the counter, I absent mindedly picked it up and examined it's cover. Here is the title that stared back at me: The Complete Concert History of the Who. I almost levitated from shock. It defied statistical probability that I would cross paths with such a book, especially so soon after my search. I opened it and found a chronological list of every concert the Who ever played, with notes on the backup band, the set list and other miscellany about the concert. As I looked through the book I noticed the clerk, still engaged with the other customer, repeatedly diverting his attention to me as I looked at the Who concert book. I went through the book and there on November 23rd, 1973, was an entry on a concert at Keil Auditorium in St. Louis. It noted that this was the only tour that their backup band was Lynnard Skynnard. Triumph. I knew where I was and what I was doing on November 23rd, 1973. I existed. I had a past.

The clerk finally came over and asked me why I was so interested in the book. I briefly told him of my quest and how I wanted to know that date and place of when I saw the Who and Lynnard Skynnard in St. Louis. Without pause he said, "Keil Auditorium, November 23rd, 1973." OK. This had suddenly turned spooky. "How", I asked, "is it possible that you knew this precise date?" He replied: "I was there, and I wrote that book."

Cue the twilight zone music.

Like Modiano, I had found a register of my past. My story made the author and bookstore clerk almost as happy as I was. I bought the book.

The consensus is that our experiences are what makes us what we see as us, yet, as I've illustrated, our memories are erratic to a fault.

But perhaps what we see as us in the mirror isn't a register of our experiences.

Let me tell you another story.

When I was an undergrad, studying psychology, I had to take a class called experimental psychology. The professor wanted us to do surgery on a lab rat, destroying part of the rat's brain with electrodes, then observing how the damage to the rats brain affected it's behavior. I had to have this class to graduate, yet I wanted nothing to do with crippling a rat. If we had been doing research on the rat's brain that might have led to a breakthrough that would have improved the world in some fashion I could have dealt with the cruelty to the rat. But we were replicating research that was now common knowledge. I viewed this as torture, not learning. My task was to destroy a part of the brain that would lead to Parkinson's disease. We knew that before hand. I could not in good conscience cripple a rat when I already knew the outcome. I went to the professor and explained my dilemma. To his everlasting credit he told me that I could watch someone else do it and write up a report and he would give me a C. None of the other students joined me in this little protest. At this level of coursework a C was bad news, but I preferred to look in the mirror and like what I saw. Man, the story telling animal, tells a story every time we look in a mirror. I wanted the story reflecting back from the mirror to be: "This person is a moral being". I could not tell that story to the mirror had I crippled and killed an animal to replicate research.

Which leads me to a piece of research I recently read about. Researchers Nina Strohminger and Shaun Nichols wanted to discover what confers identity on a person, what makes them, them. The Reading about the ship Nina was by Ms. Strohminger.

One of their experiments asked subjects which of many traits a person would most likely take with him if their soul moved to a new body. They discovered that one type of trait was much more likely to survive a theoretical body swap than other types of trait, mental or physical. As you might guess, it was moral traits. Interestingly, certain types of memories – those involving people – were deemed fairly likely to survive the transfer. But generic episodic memories, typical day to day experiences, say theatrical performances, and rock and roll concerts, were not. They discovered that people are not so much concerned with memory as with memory's ability to connect us to others and our capacity for social action.

In another experiment, subjects were exposed to information about a patient who experiences one of a variety of cognitive impairments, including amnesia for his past life, losing the ability to recognize objects, his desires, and his moral compass. Most people responded that the patient was the least like himself after losing his moral faculties.

With these and other studies the authors came to the conclusion that it is not experiences that give us our sense of self, but rather our sense of our moral identity.

This hit home for me because I am given to pondering morality. I had recently been pondering a handful of times in my life when I was accused of behavior that I considered immoral, utterly contrary to my belief system. I was once accused of shop lifting, which at first seemed silly as I wouldn't and hadn't, but quickly became horrifying when I realized I was not casually being accused. The accuser, a store manager, was absolutely certain that I had stolen something and called the police. It was a nightmarish situation, that they obviously couldn't prove, but persisted in holding me and badgering me on how I had managed to conceal it, threatening me with arrest all the while. When they finally had to admit they couldn't hold me without evidence, the last words I heard were not an apology, but "we know you did it." I had done nothing wrong but I was mortified.

I further learned about the identity providing nature of moral absolutes when someone I cared for was certain I had violated an important moral absolute. It rattled me to my core. Even if you know you have not betrayed your ideals, it is upsetting to have

someone think you have. This seems to be an indicator of how powerfully our sense of personal morality defines us.

I'm reminded of the old story about a older man who is mentoring a younger man. "Sincerity", the older man says, "Is the most important quality a person can have. And once you learn to fake that, you can really go places".

This is funny, of course, because it so completely subverts the fundamental importance of a sense of morality and ethics. Abandon your most heartfelt beliefs and you can't be who you are. This man's suggestion that amorality is the key to success is so absurd you can only laugh.

One of the great tragedies of a post Fox News/Limbaugh reality is that opinions are now passing for moral certainties. Many people today view their opinions as indicators of their moral character. Having an opinion about a moral issue requires zero psychic calories. Behavior is required for moral character to be defined. Too many people today simply express an opinion that requires no effort aside from an internal declaration, and that declaration allows the owner to look in the mirror and see a spectacularly righteous person. It's what I like to call zero calorie righteousness, an effortless way to feel superior to people with contrary opinions. This is smugness, not morality.

Let's not forget that the title of this sermon is Playing Chess with Pigeons and yet there has been no mention of chess or pigeons since the opening words. I have noted before how hard it is to come up with a title many weeks before a sermon is given. A sermon usually ends up following a different trail than the one planned. But fate has been kind this Sunday. A gentleman reviewing a book on Amazon, a book filled with extremist conservative opinions masquerading as certainties struck a chord when he wrote that debating people with conservative ideological certainties is like playing chess with a pigeon. He struts around knocking over pieces, craps on the board, and flies off to his flock to brag that he won.

Such is the life of a person who confuses opinions with righteousness. They are simply crapping on the playing board. They are not pursuing a moral path, they are pursuing moral superiority. These are decidedly not the same.

Experiences are part of life's journey, but life's collective experiences are not me. My moral ideals, my moral behavior are me. I am not going to compromise what makes me, me for money or opinions or vengeance or success or superiority. Come judgment day,

whatever form it takes, these things will carry no weight. When my flesh goes the way of all flesh, the only light of my life left will be emitted by the ideals I lived by.

We are the story telling animal and the most important story we tell is the one we tell to the mirror. And when we look in the mirror, we must make sure that what is looking back at us is the moral person we want to be, not a strutting, preening, pigeon.

Closing Words:

Let's allow three of our greatest story tellers to have the last words. This is William Shakespeare, speaking through Hamlet:

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

And this from the Buddha:

"He who spits at the heavens soils no one but himself."

And finally, from Kurt Vonnegut

"People don't come to church for preachments, of course, but to daydream about God."

I hope you've been able to daydream a bit this morning, and found it helpful.
