

Unfolding
Becoming Who You Always Have Been
By
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Physicists tell us the entire Universe was once smaller than a proton. Today the observable Universe is more than 27 billion light years across, which is an area but the size of a quantum particle compared to all that's left. Within this miniscule, 27-billion-light-year long speck, are more than a trillion galaxies, each containing hundreds of billions of stars. Yet, somehow, everything in the entire Universe, known and unknown, all the energy and matter that exists today, was also here at the beginning, when it was no bigger than a single proton.

We were here from the beginning too, at least the stuff we are made of was, and each one of us may be like our Universe, born with everything we are to become already packed tightly within us. This isn't to say that everything about us is predetermined, or that we aren't also shaped by our individual experiences, but when it comes to the nature vs. nurture controversy, this notion is decidedly on the side of nature. It suggests we manage to become who we are despite all the obstacles in our way, despite all the suffering and sorrows we experience, not because of them.

The example I often give is the lone clump of grass that's managed its way up through a crack in the hard sidewalk. Its blades may be shorter and thicker than most grasses, and its sheen not as bright because it has less water and fewer nutrients, but, no matter its hardships and stunted appearance, it is still a clump of grass. Through it all, it has fulfilled the destiny written deep within its genetic code. It has become what it was born to be, what it was meant to be.

Today, I would argue, we live in a somewhat cynical epoch of subjectivity and existentialism, meaning we think everyone has the right to their own truth and are free to become whatever the will. Obviously, there is lots of evidence to the contrary, but I would further argue fundamentalist extremism, which argues it has discovered ultimate truth and strives to force it upon everyone through authoritarian means; or some of the New Thought philosophies out there that look to the stars and other signs as proof we are being guided by some overarching destiny, are attempts to counter the cynicism of our age that insists all truths are equal and there is nothing about any of us that is special or unique.

This mindset, social psychologist Erich Fromm once said, has led us "to the acceptance of [humanity's] ultimate powerlessness and insignificance."¹ If this is so, it may explain why so many in our world today gravitate toward extremist beliefs and authoritarian leaders,

¹ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, An Owl Book, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY, 1947, p. 5.

because they are, ultimately, seeking something solid to cling to, something that will give their lives meaning, something that will connect them to the ultimate truth, connect them with others, to something or someone who will tell them who they are supposed to be, and might liberate them from the cynicism of our age by making them feel powerful and significant. For some of us, believing in something, even if it's wrong, is better than believing in nothing at all; being told who we must be, even if it's not authentic, is better than not knowing who we are; and going along with the crowd, even if it means losing ourselves, is better than feeling left out and alone.

I don't know which is worse, pretending we've found that which cannot be found, ultimate truth, and losing ourselves in the process, or the cynical feeling that there is no truth or self to be found. Perhaps this division, deep down, is the basis of the political divide in our own nation, and, increasingly, in much of the world today—a divide between those who cannot bear to feel powerless, insignificant, and alone, and those who say we should be free to think and do what we will, for there is nothing holding us back, yet, sadly, nothing transcendent calling us forward either.

Yet, our very biology proves we are destined, at least, in part, to become something very specific. We may bear the scars of our difficulties, seen and unseen, physical and emotional, but our genetics dictate that, through it all, we must become human beings. Like the clump of grass growing through cement, its difficulties do not cause it to become something else entirely, like a cactus or a daisy. Through it all, it becomes that which its genes predestined it to be. Likewise, each of us may get a little bent out of shape in the process of living, some may become twisted, and some may behave inhumanely, yet, it is not possible for us to be so stunted that we revert to being pre-human. We don't say, "Oops, that one must have fallen on hard times, he grew up to be a fish," or, "Hey, look at her, poor thing grew into a ring-tailed lemur."

Obviously we are not completely free to become whatever we want, at least not physically. Our genetics predetermine the kind of animal we are. The question is, how far does this principle go? Is this destiny purely genetic and, therefore, only physical? Or does it apply to some of the invisible aspects of being, to our psyche or soul? And just as each of us is genetically destined to have a specific look, a specific hair, skin, and eye color, and a certain height, and body shape, and so on, is there something about our personalities that are also predetermined the moment we are born?

I first began pondering these questions and considering the possibilities soon after becoming a parent and realizing, as Fromm puts it, "[We are] not a blank sheet of paper on which culture can write its text."² Each of us, rather, comes into this world with something uniquely individual to offer. My guess, if you're a parent, you understand what I mean. Or, if you've

² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

ever had a parent, you also probably know what I mean. Some of our worst difficulties are rooted in having parents, and others in our lives, who tried to force us into becoming someone we're not, into someone who is more manly or more ladylike, more submissive or more competitive, an engineer not a schoolteacher, an electrician not a philosopher, a professional not an artist, straight not gay, and so on it goes. The wiser parent, on the other hand, understands, as Kahlil Gibran says, "Your children are not your own. They are the sons and daughters of life's long for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with you yet they belong not to you."³ Aristotle and philosophers like him got it wrong, we are not born a *tabula rasa*, but come into this world with a mind of our own.

It wasn't until 1996, the year my second child was born, that I found someone who gave serious expression to this notion that our personalities are as much a part of our original nature as our hair and eye color are. In his book, *The Soul's Code*, published that same year, Jungian psychologist, James Hillman introduces us to what he calls the *acorn theory*, "which holds," in his words, "that each person bears a uniqueness that asks to be lived and that is already present before it can be lived."⁴ Hillman provides many anecdotal examples in support of his theory that each of us, as the acorn becomes an oak, has everything within us necessary for becoming who we are meant to be.

"Consider this event," he writes:

Amateur Night at Harlem Opera House. A skinny, awkward sixteen-year-old goes fearfully onstage. She is announced to the crowd: "The next contestant is a young lady named Ella Fitzgerald... Miss Fitzgerald here is gonna dance for us... Hold it, hold it. Now what's your problem, honey? ...Correction, folks. Miss Fitzgerald has changed her mind. She's not gonna dance, she's gonna sing..."⁵

Despite her initial intention to dance, something within urged her to sing at the last second instead, going on to give "three encores and win first prize." "Was it chance that suddenly changed her mind?" Hillman asks, "Did a singing gene suddenly kick in? Or might that moment have been an annunciation, calling Ella Fitzgerald to her particular fate?"⁶

Hillman is attempting to explain one of those common experiences in life that seems inexplicable, and, thus, unreasonable to believe. As a parent, I can't explain why my children were born with personality traits that have remained with them since the beginning, since before they learned to walk or talk, yet my experience of them tells me this is so. But we don't usually see this pattern at work until we've had time reflect upon our own pasts, to consider

³ Gibran, Kahlil, *The Prophet*,

⁴ Hillman, James, *The Soul's Code*, Random House, Inc., New York, NY, 1996, p. 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10f.

where we've come from. "Reading life backward," Hillman says, "enables you to see how early obsessions are the sketchy preformation of behaviors now."⁷

In looking back, this seems to be the best explanation for the course my own life has taken. As I've shared before, at about age 5 I started saying I want to grow up to become a minister—a strange inclination given that my family was unchurched and not very religious. When my mother, who was particularly hostile toward religion, told me I'd change my mind a thousand times before then, I became so distraught that I often prayed to the giant tree-bodied, galaxy-headed god I envisioned floating about in the heavens, to not let me lose my calling. Yet even when, by age 11, I stopped thinking about it, nor considered it again even after I became a Christian at age 14, the circumstances of my life kept moving me in that direction, preparing me for the task, even as I was pursuing other interests and vocations. In retrospect, it does seem like an inner calling, as invisible as the genes causing my hair to slowly recede, yet equally as persistent.

Is ministry part of my acorn, the sunlight that urges me to push through the crack in the cement to achieve my fullest potential? Was becoming a teacher the only true vocation for my wife, Peggy, who didn't begin her career in education until she was 41, years after, instead of following her dream, her father pressured her to become an engineer instead, but was willing to settle for a business degree. But the business world wasn't for her, neither was being a stay home mother, good as she was at it. Peggy has a teacher's soul and she wouldn't ever be truly fulfilled until she took up her calling.

I wonder how many of you here had to push your way up through some cement, some hard times, before at last feeling the warmth of your own light, the inner light calling you forward. I wonder how many feel unfulfilled because you're still struggling to reach your own inner light, to be the one person you have an unceasing feeling you're meant to be. I wonder how many in our society struggle to push through the hard surfaces, superficial as they might be, sometimes because of the choices they've made, succumbing to the pressure to fit in, losing themselves in the process, and sometimes because society itself is so oppressive it refuses to let their light shine, to let them find meaning in their own way, to let them live authentic lives, to think, feel, and act in ways that are truly their own.

The feelings of dissatisfaction being continuously pushed down and held back can compel us to seek something more meaningful. We look to the second-hand religions passed our way, or to the self-help isles at the bookstores and libraries, or take up hobbies, or seek thrills and entertainments to distract us from these feelings, to fill the void, to quiet the pained inner voice pleading, "Let me be. Let me become," or we simply find authoritarian figures, be they powerful politicians or enlightened gurus and teachers, to tell us what to do and who to be,

⁷ Hillman, *ibid.*, p. 7.

anyone or anything else that will finally help us become someone else, someone with another life, another mind, another way of being.

Yet what I am proposing here is that we don't have to become someone else to become fulfilled. Transformation isn't about becoming somebody new, it's about becoming who we always have been. It's about stripping away all the trappings, the artificialities and superficialities, we've been accumulating since birth. It's not about taking on more stuff, about stuffing our lives with more insight and more activities, but about chipping it all away, like a stonecutter, to find the image hidden beneath the hard surfaces. For, "The soul of each of us," Hillman says, "is given a unique daimon before we are born, and it has selected an image or pattern that we live on earth."⁸ This daimon, as he calls it, has also been called one's inner guide, one's guardian angel, one's true or original Self, the Atman, the Silent Witness, but whatever we call it, Hillman says, "This soul-companion... guides us here... [it] remembers what is in your image and belongs to your pattern, and therefore [it] is the carrier of your destiny."⁹

I recognize such talk of guardian angels and destiny may be a bit too esoteric for some of us, including myself, but I have no problem translating these principles into a frame that's easier to accept. We can simply think of it as the unique personality traits each of us seem to be born with and that remain with us throughout our lives, and that frustrate us when they must be suppressed for us to fit in and do what others expect of us. As the great psychoanalyst, Alice Miller once said, breakthroughs can't happen until, in her words, a "disturbed patient comes to the emotional insight that all the love he has captured with so much effort and self-denial was not meant for him as he really was."¹⁰ In other words, we have issues because, somewhere along the line, we stopped pushing through the barriers, toward our own inner light, in order to obtain the love and acceptance we think will make us complete. But such love and acceptance is ultimately meaningless because it doesn't really belong to us, not to who we truly are, not when we are loved only because we meet the expectations of others at our own expense.

"In analysis," Miller says, "the small and lonely child that is hidden behind [one's] achievements wakes up and asks: 'What would have happened if I had appeared before you, bad, ugly, angry, jealous, lazy, dirty, smelly? Where would your love have been then? And I was all these things as well. Does this mean that it was not really me whom you loved, but only what I pretended to be? The well-behaved, reliable, empathic, understanding, and convenient child, who in fact was never a child at all? What became of my childhood? Have I not been cheated out of it?'"¹¹ When we get to the point we can ask such questions, then the breakthroughs can start happening, breaking through the cracks in the cement we thought

⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Miller, Alice, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Basic Books, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 1981, p. 15

¹¹ Ibid.

was helping us hold it all together, breaking apart the hard edges and surfaces to discover our own authentic image beneath it all.

Erich Fromm once said Humanity, “does not exist ‘in general’”¹² by which he meant we are not human beings simply by nature, simply because we have been born with a different genetic makeup than a fish or a lemur or some other creature. Being born, for Fromm, was only the beginning of what it takes to become fully human. For, “[One] differs by [one’s] particular blending of character, temperament, talents, dispositions, just as [one] differs at [one’s] fingertips,”¹³ he said. For Fromm, the expression of such uniqueness is what gives our lives meaning. “The duty to be alive is the same as the duty to become oneself,” he said, “to develop into the individual one potentially is.”¹⁴

Fromm also believed it tragic that this process is never complete, that we never achieve our full potential, that, in his words, “Man always dies before he is fully born.”¹⁵ But I don’t find it tragic in the least. On the contrary, it’s what makes life so invigorating. It’s what makes life, life. It’s why this message is meant for people of all ages, at every stage of life, for the very young looking forward to the long winding path ahead, wondering who they are to become; for those who have already been on it long enough to realize it’s time for a break and a breakthrough; and for those in the twilight of their lives looking back and seeing the patterns that have been with them, guiding them, all along. For why should our lives work any differently than the Universe we have always been part of, a Universe that is also forever unfolding, endlessly transforming itself into all it ever has been.

¹² Fromm, *ibid.*, p. 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.