

Becoming Human
The Animal that Never Stops Growing
By
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Before she started kindergarten, our daughter took to giving herself a new name every day, sometimes more than one a day—Brittney, Alexa, Madison, we never knew who she was going to be next. Even those who already knew her name enjoyed asking just to see what she'd say. "Who are you today?" they'd ask. Cassidy, which is the name we put on her birth certificate, and the one she eventually grew accustomed to, still doesn't like being put into a box. She enjoys her freedom, being who she wants to be, and the challenge of continuing to discover who she will become.

"Thinking outside the box," has become a familiar phrase in recent years, but how many of us are capable of really doing so? How many even really want to? How many dread the very idea of going beyond the boundaries others have set for us or that we have set for ourselves? How many want to venture outside the boxes we believe define who we are? And there are so many of them, like the identity box that says, "I'm the person certified at my birth, the person my parents named, the person they raised me to be." There's also the belief box that holds everything we think we know, need to know, and want to know. It's been tightly sealed to prevent anything new from getting in, so it only contains old beliefs passed down to us from others. We keep it in the attic of our minds, right next to the cultural box that restricts most of what we think, say, and do to the expectations of others. Since it was presented to us as a gift package, however, we think it belongs to us, and that the expectations inside it are our own. We've been given a lot of other boxes too, gender boxes, sexuality boxes, race boxes, religion boxes, language boxes, political boxes, vocational boxes, friend boxes, all sorts of boxes others put us into, yet often end up defining who we believe ourselves to be.

There's a story in the Hebrew scriptures in which Moses is wandering through the mountains when he sees a burning bush. "This is amazing," he says, "why isn't this bush burning up?"¹ When he approaches to get a better look, the burning bush starts talking to him. Then, as is written in Exodus 3:4, he says, "Man, I've got to lay off the sour goat milk." Okay, maybe he didn't say that, but you know he was thinking it! As the story does go, Burning Bush introduces itself as God and asks Moses to go back and, "Tell my people I've seen their suffering and am going to deliver them from slavery in Egypt."

"That's great," Moses says, "but they're going to want to know your name. They'll never believe me if I can't tell them who you are." The response Burning Bush gives is usually translated into English to mean, *I Am that I Am*, "You tell them, 'I Am that I Am, has sent you.'" But every Bible student learns this translation doesn't really get at the meaning of Burning Bush's reply. My Old Testament professor, whose own name, coincidentally, was Dr. Bush, said a better translation would be, "I will be who I will be. 'You tell them, 'I-will-be-who-I-will-be has sent you.'" In his book, *The Art of Loving*, psychologist Erich Fromm translates it

¹ Exodus 3:3

to mean, "I am becoming what I am becoming, the most adequate translation of the sentence would be: tell them that 'may name is nameless.'"² In other words Burning Bush says, "Tell them I don't have a name, that I keep changing, that they aren't ever going to put me in a box." This is the same principle behind the commandment against "taking the Lord's name in vain," and why the Jewish Kabbalah says, "Every definition of God leads to heresy; definition is spiritual idolatry."³ It's why, when reading the Torah, modern Jews simply say, *HaShem*, "the Name," or, *Adonai*, "My Lord," when they come across the four consonants we add vowels to in English to get either *Jehovah* or *Yahweh*.

Unlike Christianity's appropriated version of the Jewish god, which not only considers I-will-be-who-I-will-be a person whose mind and will is easily known, and whose attributes—omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience—are well defined, Jewish mythology first introduces this ungraspable being to us as a dancing flame, as fire, the very symbol of Heraclitus' ancient philosophy of constant change. For the Hebrews, HaShem is never the same river twice. Thus, in the story of their Exodus, this nameless being guides them through the wilderness as an everchanging ball of fire by night, and as a nebulous cloud by day, symbols of impermanence and uncertainty. As the *Tao te Ching* says, "The Way that can be spoken of is not the real Way. The name that can be named is not the real Name...⁴ The Way ...is nebulous and blurred."⁵ Like fog, or fire, or water, Hinduism tells us, "[It] is ungraspable, for [it] cannot be grasped."⁶

Erich Fromm says Burning Bush only reluctantly provides a name to "satisfy the Jew's quest for certainty."⁷ For, he explains, "they had become slaves, their faith was that of slaves and rooted in submission to power..."⁸ which is why they needed something concrete to believe in, and why Moses further asked for the power to perform miracles to convince them I-will-be-who-I-will-be can deliver the goods. "[T]hey could be impressed only by another magic," he says, "not different from but only stronger than the one the Egyptians used."⁹ So, being the products of an authoritarian mindset, the Hebrews wanted a name for their god for the same reasons any of us need to name things, our children, our pets, our ideas, so we can own and control them. As Thomas Friedman, author of *The World is Flat*, said in an article a few years ago, "In the world of ideas, to name something is to own it. If you can name an issue, you can own it."¹⁰

If it is true, as the 20th century American theologian, Frederick Buechner, says, that "All theology... is at its heart autobiography,"¹¹ then this conflict illustrated in the story of Moses and the burning bush, representing the conflict between allowing others to define us or being

² Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, A Bantam Book, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, 58.

³ Matt, Daniel C., *The Essential Kabbalah*, Quality Paper Back Book Club, New York, NY, 1995, p. 32.

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⁶ Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 4.5.15.

⁷ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY, 1947, p. 203.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Friedman, Thomas, "The Power of Green," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 15, 2007.

¹¹ Buechner, Frederick, *The Sacred Journey*, (Harper SanFrancisco, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1991) p. 1.

free to be ourselves, to change, to become, is also part of our individual stories, reflecting the near constant tension we face between freedom and belonging.

So today I want to explore the possibility that each of us should, like Burning Bush, also consider our name reluctantly, only as a way of gaining credibility and authority among others, but not to epitomize the extent of all we are and can become. Psychologist, Carl Jung compared this person we present to the world, this named person, this person others began putting into a box the moment we were born, to the masks worn by actors in ancient Greek plays. "What we see of the individual," he says, "is the persona. We are all shells here, only surfaces, and we have very dim ideas of what we are inside."¹² Unfortunately, going about our everyday lives, he says, "most people believe that they are their masks, and thus they become neurotic,"¹³ but, "As soon as I say that I am only playing a role for the time being to please you, I am all right."¹⁴ In other words, don't mistake the face you have to put on for others for the iceberg you are beneath the surface. Like Burning Bush, we must realize our name is made up, and that our real name, the thing that defines us, remains a mystery because we-will-be-who-we-will-be, because we aren't finished yet, because we are still becoming, still unfolding.

This idea that we are like nebulous clouds and dancing flames isn't just a bit of theological spin. It's rooted in the biological uniqueness that most makes us human. As a species, it's what makes us special. Biologists call it neoteny, a word meaning "new," which refers to the tendency in some animals to retain juvenile characteristics throughout their entire lives. Axolotl (or Mexican) salamanders, for instance, remain in a larval stage their entire lives, retaining their gills and, at best, growing underdeveloped limbs and digits, yet they are perfectly capable of reproducing at 18 to 24 months. Dogs are, likewise, neotenous kinds of wolves. Unlike their fully developed progenitors, however, dogs are wolves that have been bred over time to remain puppy-like long after they mature. They are generally smaller, have flatter snouts, and remain more playful than adult wolves, though they become sexually mature within just a few months of birth.

Human beings, though, are, by far, the most neotenous creatures ever! As some may have heard me say before, even at birth, as biologist Stephen Jay Gould says, it is clear that a human baby is "still an embryo."¹⁵ Human beings, in short, are born with the remarkable ability to continue gestating outside the womb because we are all born premature. At birth, our bones haven't fully hardened and our skulls aren't yet completely closed; our spines remain attached to the base of our skulls, where they begin with all primates, but, otherwise move upward toward the top of the skull during fetal development. Our limbs remain too weak for us to swing from branches like other apes, our teeth erupt only after we're born, we remain

¹² Jung, C.G., *Seminar on Dream Analysis*, Bollingen Series XCIX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1984, p. 74.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Gould, Stephen Jay, *Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History*, from the chapter *Human Babies as Embryos*, Penguin, 1977.

mostly hairless, lack opposable toes, and retain the same flat faces and oversized heads other primates are born with but eventually outgrow. John Gribbin and Jeremy Cherfas suggest neoteny may explain why humans look so different from other apes despite the overwhelming similarities in our DNA. “Neoteny resolves the problem,” they say, “The one-and-a-bit difference could easily reside in the genes that control the rate of development, making human beings a form of infant ape that has learned to reproduce without reaching physical maturity.”¹⁶

At some point in our evolutionary history, premature birth seems to have become advantageous to the survival of our species, likely because our brains could continue growing outside the womb, making us smarter, and able to adapt instantly, as individual organisms, to some of the unexpected changes in our environments. The brains of chimps and gorillas, for example, are 70 percent of their final size at birth, a milestone not reached by humans until their second year. Humans, in fact, are born with brains only a quarter of their eventual size, which isn’t reached until their third decade, but even then, retains neuroplasticity, the ability change, throughout one’s entire life. In short, human beings never stop growing up. We can evolve and change for as long as we live.

Psychology further informs us that we never stop developing inwardly either, or, at least, have the potential to continue growing for as long as we live. Various developmentalists present us with slightly differing stages, but most say essentially the same thing, that early in life we are dualistic, or black and white in our thinking, as well as authoritarian and punitive in our morality. Once we start to socialize with others, however, we tend more toward group think and our morality becomes based on law and order, of playing fair so that everyone is included in the game, gets a turn, and has a chance to win. Next, if society doesn’t prevent us from exploring beliefs and values outside those of the common interests, which isn’t always the case, we become more openminded with less need for certainty, less need for strict rules to keep us in line, and our behavior is guided, instead, by universal principles like compassion, justice, peace, and equality—principles considered superior to the decrees of authoritarian leaders or the laws, norms, and mores society holds in common. If we’re allowed to develop without much interference, without getting put in too many boxes, we can reach the higher stages somewhere between our late twenties and early forties, though, for some it takes longer, and some never get there at all.

But even if we do achieve the highest stages of moral and cognitive development, few of us stay there all the time. Where we’re at isn’t even determined by where we’re at most the time, but on how we’re most likely to respond under pressure. The Fundamentalist mindset, for example, remains fixated or stuck at the earliest stages of development as indicated by its black and white, authoritarian, and punitive thinking. As developmental psychologist Robert Kegan says, “many people who are chronologically adult are psychologically adolescent...”¹⁷

¹⁶ Gribbin, John, & Cherfas, Jeremy, *The First Chimpanzee*, 2001, Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2003, US p. 177.

¹⁷ Kegan, Robert, *The Evolving Self*, Harvard University Press, Boston, MA, 1982p. 211.

But if we don't have a lot of anxiety, especially early in our lives, we may get stuck in the mid-levels of development because it feels secure. Those who have achieved security, success, and, perhaps, power, are often perfectly comfortable staying at the conventional levels of development by obeying the rules and upholding the status quo. It's not a bad place to be so long as you're one of the lucky ones, born the right caste, the right class, the right color, or gender, or what have you, who can actually benefit from society's conventions. But, for the sake of those who aren't born so fortunate, for those who get left out because when they were born they got pushed into a box marked "unacceptable," we all need grow beyond convention in order to embrace the universal principles of compassion, equality, and justice for all, without regard for the color, caste, class, or other boxes people are arbitrarily forced into.

And even if we do achieve developmental maturity, indicated by our ability to respond with compassion, justice, and fairness when the going gets tough, there's still room to grow, to discover, to transcend who we are by becoming more than we are. *Transcend* means to, "go beyond," and to live a transcendent life is to go beyond our own limitations, beyond the definitions of self we are given or give ourselves, to learn new ideas, or new skills, while also letting go of beliefs and behaviors that are no longer worth keeping. And because getting there, becoming-who-we-will-become, is ongoing, Fromm says we always die before any of us is ever, "fully born."¹⁸ This is why he also says the whole meaning of life is to "develop into the individual one potentially is."¹⁹ "The duty to be alive," he says, "is the same as the duty to become oneself."²⁰

And this duty to "become" oneself is not the same as the duty to "be" oneself. Since we're never fully born, since we're born again, and again, and again, the duty is in the becoming, in the endless process, the transcending, in bursting out of the protective cocoons we've wrapped around ourselves, from behind the masks we've been hiding behind, getting out of the boxes we got stuck into. The translators got it wrong, our name doesn't begin with, "I Am," but with, "I am becoming." We aren't human beings, we are human becomings becoming human. We are burning bushes who can't give our real name because even we don't know what it is yet.

So next time someone asks your name, tell them, "I'll have to get back with you on that." Or tell them yesterday I was Cassidy, or Peggy, or Dan, or Mary Lou, or Bill, or Todd, but today I think I'll be Jack—Jack out-of-the-box. Today I am like a burning bush, like the amorphous clouds, like the flowing river—ungraspable, ever changing, ever becoming.

¹⁸ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY, 1947, p. 91.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*