

Unfolding Ourselves

How to Become Human

By

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May 21, 2023

I am dumfounded by those claiming to be against abortion because they claim to value life, yet are also against sex education, contraception, and planning for parenthood. They also tend to be against gun control measures, even though we see stories in the news almost weekly about another mass shooting, often involving the innocent children they claim to care so much about. Women don't have a right to choose whether or not they'll remain pregnant, but we can't possibly take away the rights of men to own military style assault weapons that are made for nothing other than mass murder, no matter how many people they keep killing. Compared to "gun rights," it turns out, life has little value.

The disconnect here is between life and quality of life. Jesus is reported to have said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."¹ We cannot claim we care about the unborn while not caring even more about what happens to them after they've been born, by which I don't mean merely that their hearts keep beating, but that they have a reasonable quality of life in which they can find happiness and achieve their fullest potential. Fully unfolding is a drive in most of us, but it is easily constrained in societies that don't value quality of life.

We are not here to merely occupy space, consume resources, and breathe air after we're born. Nor merely to get a job and eke out a measly living so a handful of others can become wealthy beyond measure. We are here to fully unfold as individuals by achieving our fullest potential, which usually requires us to have a certain quality of life. We need, as Maslow showed, to have our basic physiological needs met, along with our needs for safety and security, and love and belonging, before we can find the freedom to concentrate on self-actualizing by becoming all that we can be. Social psychologist Erich Fromm says, the whole meaning of life is to "develop into the individual one potentially is,"² and that, "The duty to be alive is the same as the duty to become oneself."³

This is a strange juxtaposition of terms. How can one ever be other than oneself? The answer is that we grow and change. There's a line John Denver's song, *Some Days are Diamonds, Somedays are Stones*, that says, "Now the face that I see in my mirror, more and more is a stranger to me." But we don't only grow older, we also evolve and change, as do our values and beliefs, sometimes becoming far different people than we once were.

"More and more I can see there's a danger in becoming what I never thought I'd be," the song continues. But the real danger is not becoming the best person we can be by having reached our fullest potential. In his book, *The Soul's Code*, Psychologist, James Hillman says the Greeks believed that "The soul of each of us is given a unique daimon before we are born, and it has selected an image or pattern that we live on earth."⁴ In this sense, he says, "your daimon is the carrier of your destiny."⁵ The Latin word for this daimon, is "genius," which shares the same root as gene, genetics, and genesis. Genuis means, "attendant spirit present from one's birth." It was originally thought of as the small inner voice, the guiding spirit, our calling that is always reminding us of who we are supposed to become.

We have genes that determine what we will look like, our coloring, our height, and maybe even some inherited personality traits. It seems reasonable there might also be something unique about each of us that determines our skills and passions. Hillman says these drives often become apparent from the start of our lives, even in childhood. Just as all that is needed to become a mighty oak is already contained within the tiny acorn, each of us comes into this world fully packed. Hillman says the Acorn Theory “holds that each person bears a uniqueness that asks to be lived and that is already present before it can be lived.”⁶

Amateur Night at the 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 ...” Ella Fitzgerald gave three encores and won first prize. However, ‘she had meant to dance.’⁷

“Was it chance that suddenly changed her mind? Did a singing gene suddenly kick in? Or might that moment have been an annunciation, calling Ella Fitzgerald to her particular fate?”⁸ Sometimes we resist our calling because, as fulfilling as it will ultimately be, it will lead to a difficult life, perhaps even to a short life.

Delicate and sickly, having almost died of pneumonia when he was two, little Manuel was interested only in painting and reading. He stayed so much indoors and clung so tightly to his mother’s apron strings that his sisters and other children used to tease him. Around his hometown, he was known as “a thin, melancholy boy who wandered around the streets after school lost in thought. He rarely joined other boys’ games of soccer or playing at bullfighting.”⁹

But at age eleven something switched in Manuel, and suddenly “nothing else mattered much except the bulls.”¹⁰ Manuel Laureano Rodríguez Sánchez went on to become Manolete, one of Spain’s greatest bullfighters. “Was a dim knowledge of the call there all along?” Hillman asks.

Then of course little boy Manolete was afraid and clung to his mother. (Were her “apron strings” a metaphor, or was he already using her apron, her skirt, as a cape?) Of course he kept away from torero games in the street, taking shelter in the kitchen. How could this nine-year-old boy stand up to his destiny? In his acorn were thousand-pound black bulls with razor-sharpened horns thundering toward him, among them Islero, the one that gored him through groin and belly and gave him death at age thirty and the largest funeral ever witnessed in Spain?¹¹

If Hillman’s Acorn Theory is correct, and I believe it is, having considered its implications in my own life, and the lives of those I’ve observed, Manolete’s life may have been short, but it was fulfilling because he eventually left the safety of the kitchen to fulfill his calling. But it is not easy, even for those of us who hopefully won’t have to fight bulls or otherwise risk our lives to find fulfillment. It’s difficult because society tends to encourage conformity, not to foster individual self-actualization and fulfillment. Again, as Hillman so succinctly says, “I believe we have been robbed of our true biography—that destiny written into the acorn—and we go to therapy to recover it.”¹²

Unfortunately, most of us don’t go into therapy with even enough understanding of this phenomenon to say, “Hey, I’m not fulfilling my potential,” and few therapists recognize that the major cause of human unhappiness, discontentment, and depression is our inability to fully unfold. Yet Erich Fromm was one who understood, again, that the purpose of life is to “develop into the

individual one potentially is”¹³ and if not, he says, we are not “fully born.”¹⁴ That’s the other thing anti-abortionists don’t get, that if we truly care about the unborn, then we need to care as much about the born, because all of us are still being born throughout our lives.

The 17th century Danish existentialist, Søren Kierkegaard believed that if we aren’t able to truly be ourselves or are unwilling to be ourselves due to fear or social pressure, we will live in a state of despair, which he called “sickness unto death.” Fromm says something similar, that if we don’t achieve our full potential, we live a life of boredom. “If I were to imagine Hell,” he said, “it would be the place where you were continually bored.”¹⁵ He doesn’t mean feeling occasionally bored, but chronically dissatisfied with life because we are unfulfilled.

So how do we achieve such a state? How do we fully unfold? How do we become fully human by unlocking our fullest human potential? Since few if any of us are ever fully born while we’re alive, meaning we are always growing and becoming, these are important questions to keep on asking ourselves, as is knowing how to answer them. In my own journey I have found several catalysts I consider essential in the process of fulfilling our potential.

I believe the most crucial catalyst is character. Character is something we develop that eventually becomes the essence of who we are, and we develop it by learning to distinguish between what is right and wrong. Philosophically, that’s a tall order given that nobody can ever truly know the difference between right and wrong. There are three schools of thought, rule-based ethics, that says we should always do the right thing no matter the outcome, outcome-based ethics that says whatever we do ought to result in a good outcome, and virtue ethics that say we should always live by certain principles that must be upheld in every situation.

I have come to consider myself a virtue ethicist who lives by Enlightenment philosopher Emmanuel Kant’s categorical imperative, that *nobody should be a means to someone else’s ends, but should be considered an end within themselves*. This is also known as the Humanist Ethic, explained by Fromm as, “*the sole criterion of ethical value being [human] welfare*”¹⁶ and “*that the unfolding and growth of every person [should be] the aim of all social and political activities.*”¹⁷

But, again, to develop character, it is really up to you to learn about ethics, wrestle with its perennial problems, and determine the basis of your ethics so that, no matter what situation you find yourself in, your moral choices will be consistent. You will have moral integrity because of your ethical character, your ethical constant. Remember, the very word, *ethics*, comes from the Greek word meaning “character,” and character is the quality about us that is the same no matter the circumstances we are in. It is the quality that allows us to be ourselves no matter the situation, to fully unfold as ourselves no matter the difficulties we face and no matter whether the outcome is to our benefit or not. So don’t mistake knowing the difference between right and wrong with your passing emotions or situational instincts. To fully unfold, to become fully human, you must develop character by becoming an ethical being who knows what right and wrong means for you.

This goes along with another catalyst for unfolding, becoming emotionally intelligent. We are emotional beings, but our emotions can easily get the best of us and mislead both our thoughts and actions. Becoming emotionally mature means we are aware of our emotional states so we can maintain emotional control and express our feelings in healthy and productive ways. It means

learning to shift our emotional states to something more productive when necessary. And, no matter how we're feeling, it means remaining empathetic toward others and having good social skills. Self-awareness, self-control, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills are the marks of an emotionally intelligent person, which is vital to achieving our full human potential.

So is intellectual integrity. Emotional thinkers tend to rationalize rather than reason, yet believe, because they have thoughts justifying their emotionally driven desires, that they are being perfectly reasonable. Hang out with emotional thinkers long enough, however, and you find that they lack intellectual integrity, meaning their beliefs are often inconsistent and contradictory. Intellectual integrity is marked by critical thinking skills, consistency over time, and, above all, the ability to see and accept the flaws in one's own thinking. Emotional thinkers are desperate to convince everyone else they are right. Intellectual integrity wants us most of all to be honest with ourselves.

Another catalyst for fully unfolding is developing a philosophy of life. How many of us go through life without seriously having thought about what we believe about the nature of reality, truth, and meaning? Our answers to these perennial questions can and should change as we gain new insights and experiences, but, even then, we should understand what has changed about them and why they have changed. My own ethics have changed a lot over time, from being outcome based to value based. I am more of a materialist and empiricist today than ever before. I'm more optimistic about humanity and the future than ever before. Psychologically speaking, today I'm more of a Frommian and Freudian than the Jungian I once was. And today, despite the tremendous challenges I've faced these past few years as one of the most despised figures in the religion I love and serve, I am more fulfilled now than ever. I won't go into all the reasons why I've made these shifts because we don't have time. The point here is that I have changed my mind and beliefs over time, that I'm aware of those changes, and I know the reasons why I have chosen to change. It is not enough to believe what we believe. We ought to know why we believe the things we do, and our reasons should be sound.

Let me begin to conclude by addressing the biggest question of them all, the one that leaves many troubled even if they agree with all I have just said: *How do I know what my purpose is?* A lot of people tell me they don't know what their calling is, that they don't feel driven toward or passionate about anything specific, let alone toward a particular career. Firstly, I am not suggesting that we are destined to have specific careers, only that the thing that makes us who we are should create the kind of life, including one's work, that satisfies us. Someone who is passionate about caring for others may go into medicine, social work, counseling, custodial work, education, or many other options. Someone who is innately physical may become an athlete, a construction worker, a firefighter, a park ranger, and so on. Someone who is a thinker may become a professor, a philosopher, a scientist, a researcher, a writer, and the like. I'm not talking about destiny here; I'm talking about gravitating toward circumstances that are fulfilling.

With this in mind, the best process for determining our calling that I know of is the Japanese philosophy of *Ikigai*, which means something like, "a passion that gives value and joy to life." It requires us to answer four questions for ourselves. *What do you love? What are you good at? What does the world need?* And, being the pragmatists the Japanese are known for, *What can you be paid*

for? Many will say only the first three of these questions are the most important, that if you do what you love, the money will follow, or at least it won't seem as important. Whether you try to answer three or all four, know that it is at the intersection of where your answers meet that you will find your Ikigai, your source of fulfillment. It's a rewarding exercise to undertake wherever you're at in your life, to sit down with a piece of paper and answer these questions, *What do you love? What are you good at? What does the world need?* And, if you're so inclined, *What can you get paid for?*

It's a relatively easy exercise, but achieving our fullest human potential isn't. Developing character and a consistent ethic, becoming emotionally mature, having intellectual integrity, understanding our philosophy of life, and discovering what will be most fulfilling for us to do with our lives, is hard work and a continuing effort, because we always have room to grow, at any age. And, at any age, life is relatively short. It would be a waste not to use our brief time here to fully unfold as individuals and as human beings.

¹ John 10:10

² Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY, 1947, p. 20.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hillman, James, *The Soul's Code*, Random House, New York, NY, 1996, p. 8.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Hillman, James. *The Soul's Code*, Kindle Edition, p. 6.

⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

⁸ Ibid., p. 10f.

⁹ Ibid., p. 15f.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 16

¹² Ibid., p. 5.

¹³ Fromm, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 91

¹⁵ Fromm, Erich, *The Dogma of Christ*, A Fawcett Premier Book, Greenwich, CT, 1955, 1963, p. 104.

¹⁶ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 229.