Becoming Fully Human: Some Assembly Required

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

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I looked into the etymology of the word "becoming" in preparation for today's sermon and *became* fascinated by what I learned. In modern English, we use it when referring to something that is in a state of changing into something different or into something more. My daughter is studying to *become* a nurse. My son recently *became* a monument restorationist. My country is *becoming* increasingly authoritarian. But it's Old English meaning, from *becumen*, simply referred to someone who has arrived or to something that has come about. It was more like saying, "the plane has arrived" or "Jane is here." Originally, it referred to a state of completion, rather than, as it does today, a "state of transition."

This has been its usage since the Middle English Period. Although that's when it was also often used to describe someone's appearance or behavior; "That's very *becoming* of you," or "That outfit is not very *becoming*." It didn't mean an outfit was changing or that a person was metamorphosizing before our very eyes, but that something about them was already complete. But today we mostly use it in reference to some "state of transition" or to the completion of that transition, "one is becoming" a nurse or "has become" a monument restorationist, and so on.

I'll return to its etymology momentarily, because there's something else about its evolution that is pertinent to this discussion. But first, let me say more about my rather discordant use of the term in my title, "Becoming Fully Human." Although we don't always act like it, if there is anything we seem sure of in western society, it is that a human is a human. As the U.S. Constitution puts it, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Speaking of etymological shifts, the word *men* or *man* in such writings were derivatives of the word "human" and referred to both males and females. The notion that "man" exclusively means "male" is a very recent shift. For example, the open of the original 1960's *Star Trek* explained the crew of both males and females was on a mission to go "where no *man* has gone before," referring to humans in general. When *Star Trek: The Next Generation* aired in 1987, less than three decades later, it was changed to "where no *one* has gone before." So don't get hung up on the terms when reading anything older than just a few years or you might miss some valuable insights whatever your gender.

What we should get hung up on, however, is that despite this eloquent statement in the U.S. Constitution, the very same document defined enslaved persons as "three-fifths human," it would take more than a century for women to gain the right to vote, even longer for Civil

Rights to pass, and it wasn't until just a few years ago that gays and lesbians were protected from being fired from their jobs, evicted from their homes, and free to marry each other. Right now, our nation is treating immigrants as less than human—not only by violently removing them from our country, but by doing so in ways that are cruel and unusual, sending them to dangerous nations they aren't even from, and, according to a report this week, detaining them in ICE warehouses that are intentionally meant to make them suffer. It's not very "becoming" of a nation that claims, "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." Again, that's "all men," not "only males," and certainly not "only Americans," or "only Republicans," or "only those who think and look like us."

So "Becoming Fully Human," as awkward as it may at first sound, isn't so strange in this light and is suggestive of two important needs. Obviously, there is a need for all of us to better recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Immigrants, gays and lesbians, women, liberals, foreigners, the homeless, and the list goes on—anyone who thinks, looks, or act differently than us—must *become* fully human in our eyes, and must be treated as such.

But it also means that each one of us is in the process of becoming more fully human as an individual, and that it is up to us to strive to do so. For years in our country, those on the political Right have fought against abortion rights because they believe life begins with conception. It wasn't so long ago, under President George W. Bush's administration, that they successfully blocked valuable stem cell research because they worried it would destroy human embryos. For decades they were even against birth control, the mere prevention of pregnancy. For them, human life begins with conception and, therefore, must be protected at all costs. If only they cared as much for human life after it is born; what a wonderful world it would be. Of course, it goes with their common theology, that we are all innocent until we are born in sin, then we deserve whatever miseries befall us.

This reflects a flaw in the thinking of many—that we are already complete human beings once we are born. True, we are human infants, yet we still have a lot of growing to do; a lot of becoming left before us, physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Dutch anatomist, Louis Bolk once described the human species as "a primate foetus that has become sexually mature."[1] In other words, none of us is ever fully grown. We remain in a biological state of *neoteny*—a word that means "newness"—meaning we're one of those rare species that retain juvenile physical characteristics throughout our entire lives.

Renowned biologist Stephen Jay Gould once said it is clear that a human baby is "still an embryo."[2] Yet our premature birth is what has allowed us to become so intelligent, by allowing our unfinished and open skulls to keep growing outside the womb. Because of this, we are born with brains only a quarter of their eventual size, compared to our chimpanzee and gorilla cousins whose brains are already 70 percent of their final size at birth, a milestone humans don't reach until our second year. Our brains also retain their neuroplasticity throughout our entire lives, meaning they can continue to change, and we can continue to grow for as long as we live. So, when I say we are still becoming fully human, I'm not speaking metaphorically. I mean it. We are physically and neurologically capable of growing— transitioning—for a very long time. And if we really care about human life, even while it is still developing, then our care must continue throughout its entire lifespan, not just until a person is born, but ongoing, as they are born again and again.

Just as importantly, we must care and take responsibility for our own continuing development, our process of becoming more fully human. To put it another way, human maturation is as much a psychological process as it is a physical one. As Harvard developmental psychologist Robert Kegan says, "many people who are chronologically adult are psychologically adolescent."[3] Psychologist Carl Jung said similarly, "In the final analysis, we count for something only because of the essential we embody, and if we do not embody that, life is wasted."[4] And my favorite among them, social psychologist Erich Fromm, said, "We would best decline to fix a day or an hour for 'the birth' of an individual, and speak rather of a *process* in the course of which a person comes into existence."[5]

That's an astonishing statement given how most of us think about human life and our individual beginnings; this suggestion that we can go our entire lives without becoming fully human. Yet this is exactly what Fromm meant. "It is part of the tragedy of the human situation that the development of the self is never completed," he said, "even under the best conditions only part of man's potential is realized. Man always dies before he is fully born."[6]

This, again, is why the antiabortionists get it so wrong, because too many act as if life begins with conception and ends with birth. Imagine what the world would be like if they had the same passion for treating every person as if they are being born right up to the end of their lives. As I've said, what a wonderful world it would be if more of us cared about the entire lifespan of others, no matter who they are or where they are from. We must develop our capacity for others to become more fully human in our eyes.

Yet we also have a moral obligation to become more fully human throughout our own lives. "The duty to be alive," Fromm said, "is the same as the duty to become oneself, to develop into the individual one potentially is."[7]

Again, this is a strange way of looking at ourselves in light of our current cultural paradigms about when our lives begin and what it means to be human. For it suggests that our lives never begin but are, instead, always becoming and that we are never fully human because we are always becoming more human, or, at least, always have the obligation and opportunity to become more fully human—right up to the end.

Now let me return to the interesting etymology of *become*. Before 1100, the Middle English Period, when *becumen* simply meant someone or something has arrived, the word used to describe the state of transition, as we use it now, was instead the Old English verb *weorðan* (pronounced, WER-than), which meant something like "to happen, turn into, or come to pass." The Old English noun for something that has gone through such a transition was *wyrd*, or, as we say today, *weird*. Humans still don't like change, but our ancestors considered it weird in a spooky kind of way. *Wyrd*, for them, referred to what we might call fate, destiny, strange, odd, uncanny. It was part of the name Shakespeare gave three witches in *Macbeth*, the Weird Sisters who could foresee, even control, fate.

I think this negative attitude toward change, toward being in an uncomfortable state of transition, a state of becoming, remains with us today. Change, transition, becoming is weird in a frightening kind of way. This makes sense. The virtual representation of reality our human senses have constructed for us makes everything seem separate and solid and therefore comprehensible, even the things we can see that are always in a state of flux, like clouds, smoke, and water. This is why we think they were profound and remember to this day the words of Heraclitus, that, "we can't step twice into the same river." We think it wise, and something to try to keep in mind, because our own minds don't naturally see it. We give our rivers names and see them as constant, even though they are always becoming, always in a state of transition.

But the wisdom of Heraclitus applies to everything. As quantum science informs us, everything is made up of an endless and constant stream of ever-shifting and ever-changing particles of energy; everything, the world and ourselves. We are, at best, patterns of energy that continuously repeat themselves, making us look and feel like constants, even though we aren't and can never be. The natural response to Heraclitus's metaphysic, that everything is always changing—if we want to be in better touch with reality—is to learn to go with the flow, not resist it. Yet, many, probably most of us, struggle to keep things the same, our lives, our habits, our ideas, the other people around us, most of the time. No wonder so many of us think our commitment to others ends once they are born. Then they

are on their own. And no wonder so many of us fear transitioning into something else by changing our minds or having a change of heart; and think there's something wrong with those who do.

I've been reading a book of sermons by a recently deceased colleague, *Thus Sayeth Doug*, by Rev. Douglas Reisner. He begins his sermon, "On the Question," explaining, "To one degree or another, all of us are engaged in a search for ultimate truths. For some people, the search is lifelong, and they continually seek to improve their vision of the good and the true. Other people quickly grasp an easy, convenient, or a partial truth and build their life on such a perspective."[8] Rev. Reisner explains these approaches without prejudice, but I think he would agree that the lifelong search for truth is the better path. Not only is it more rewarding and meaningful, but it is also aligned with the changing reality around us, even if we can't always recognize it.

If I'm right, that we are always becoming and, therefore, ought to be open to transitioning and growing throughout our lives, how do we go about doing so? How do we become fully human. First, as I have said, realize the process is never done. We'll never get there. As Fromm says, "Man always dies before he is fully born." Yet, paradoxically, he also says it is our duty "to develop into the individual one potentially is." Otherwise, as Jung said, "life is wasted." We never become because we are always becoming. We are the ever-changing river. So keep flowing. Keep growing. Keep becoming more fully human.

So the question is how do we go about the business of living, the business of becoming? First embrace the reality of our lives and of who we are by embracing change. Change is scary and weird, but it is also the only real choice before us. It is the nature of the adventure we call living, truly living. To remain rigid in our ideas and ways is a kind of living death, like a piece of driftwood trapped in the rocks that is slowly replaced with a stream of passing minerals until it, too, becomes a rock—petrified wood that still looks like a living thing. The secret to living, rather, is to remain lively. Growing. Changing. Becoming.

Even if we can't fully arrive, fully become, can we get close? Yes. Because of the nature of change, some of us will get closer than others. Then how do we know we're heading in the right direction? I believe that no matter how different our individual passions and the various efforts they lead us to engage in are, when they more fully reflect our capacity to love, the more fully human we are becoming. Fromm considered love to be our greatest human power, not the warm fuzzy feelings we sometimes confuse for love, but the actions born of our recognition that we must truly care for one another. "This kind of love," he said, "is the kind of love the Bible speaks of when it says: love thy neighbor as thyself. Brotherly love is love for all human beings; it is characterized by its lack of exclusiveness. If I have developed the capacity for love, then I cannot help loving [everyone]."[9]

And here's the best part; you don't have to like everyone or anyone to love them, precisely because love is about how we treat others, not how we feel about them. In his book, *The Art of Loving*, Fromm said, "Love is the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love … By this I mean the sense of responsibility, care, respect, knowledge of any other human being, the wish to further his life."[10] This is why I often say, *you don't have to like anyone, but you must love everyone*. Sometimes liking is harder than hell. But loving is easy, because it transcends our emotions. Love dwells only in our actions—actions, as Fromm has said, that reflect, care, respect, knowledge of, and the desire to help further the lives of others; family, friend, foe, or stranger.

So, if you're not so afraid to change that you have become petrified; if you want to grow and evolve and continuously become, then set your sights on this kind of love, the kind the represents our greatest human power—care, respect, knowledge of, and furthering our own lives and the lives of others. Keep getting better at that, and you'll know that your life isn't being wasted, that you're going with the flow, and though you'll never fully arrive that you're always in the process of becoming fully human.

[1] Gribbin, John, & Cherfas, Jeremy, *The First Chimpanzee*, 2001, Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2003, US, p. 178.

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

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

[4]Jung, C.G., *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffé, trans. Richard and Clara Winston, Vintage Books, New York, NY, 1989, p. 325.

[5] Fromm, Erich, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, A Fawcett Publications, Greenwich, CT, 1973, p. 250.

[6] Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY, 1947, p. 91.

[7] Ibid., p. 20.

[8] Reisner, Douglas B., *Thus Sayeth Doug*.

[9] Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, A Bantam Book, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, p. 39.

[10] Fromm, Erich. The Art of Loving (p. 37). Open Road Media. Kindle Edition.