

## WHO AM I TO BE SOMEBODY?

Old theological problems never die. They just keep getting recycled, decked out in fresh garb for each new generation. And human nature doesn't change that much, either. That's why it can be rewarding to acquaint ourselves with the past. The struggles of our spiritual forebears sometimes seem remote. But if we look more closely, we begin to see that their inner dramas and demons were not so different from our own.

Take the phrase "justification by faith," for example. You may have a dim memory of where it comes from. It was the battle cry of Martin Luther, the founder of the Protestant Reformation, who broke away from the Roman Catholic Church over the question of how we are "saved." By grace or through works? Talk of salvation and justification has an outmoded ring for many modern ears. We're more accustomed to define well-being in psychological terms. Mental health is the holy grail of our times. But while times change, some things remain the same: the challenges of growing up, the desire to love and be loved, the frailties and insecurities that go with being human. And that's why, although he was born over five hundred years ago, Martin Luther remains worthy of our attention. Though he never would have used such language, it's fair to say that one of the underlying issues he was grappling with was where to find self-esteem.

Luther has been psychoanalyzed rather thoroughly, because he had such disturbing childhood. Yet the home he grew up in was not uncommon. His father and mother had high expectations for their son, and could be harsh when he failed to live up to their standards. "My father once whipped me so that I ran away and felt ugly toward him until he was at pains to win me back." "My mother caned me for stealing a nut until the blood came," Luther later remembered. He also recalled a nursery rhyme his mother sang to him as a child:

If folk don't like you and me,  
The fault with us is like to be.

His father Hans had come from a line of miners and farmers, but he was determined that his son would go to law school, make a good marriage, and support his parents in their old age. Under intense pressure from his family, the youthful Luther did well in school, entering university at the age of seventeen. Within a few years, he had graduated with honors and stood poised to fulfill his

parent's dreams, but to Luther, his academic achievements and the life before him seemed strangely hollow. Though a seemingly bright future beamed, he was depressed. In the midst of a thunderstorm, in his twenty-third year, Martin abandoned all his worldly plans and legal training and, much to his father's disliking, vowed to take on the simple life of a monk.

What was the young man looking for? What does anyone look for when they enter a monastery? Did he hope to find inner peace? A sense of meaning, belonging, community? In part Martin Luther may have been trying to escape his parents. Though he was always respectful, and said in extenuation that his mother and father did mean well, he also said it was the strict discipline he experienced at home that drove him to become a monk. By devoting his life to God, he may have been seeking a loving Parent could offer the unconditional acceptance and support he never found at home. But if Martin was looking for validation, he failed to find it in the rituals of the church. Instead, he was made even more keenly his own unworthiness and inadequacy. "Who am I," he asked, "that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine Majesty?" In other words, who am I to be Somebody? As he had once sought to please his parents, now he went to work with redoubled determination to win God's approval. "I was a good monk," he said, "and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I." But no amount of fasting or prayer could overcome his own internal sense of failure and his melancholy grew ever deeper.

Maybe some of you can identify with Martin's predicament. What happens when nothing you ever do seems quite good enough? When you seem to be your own worst critic? When you're the kind of person who has a hard time taking pride or pleasure in your own accomplishments? Who ends up sad a good deal of the time because you're not sure that you deserve to be happy? Where do you turn to find a source of self-confidence, personal power, inward assurance? Martin spent most of his early life trying to please others, convinced that if he could only live up to the expectations of home or school or church, he would finally be acceptable as a human being. He would be able to justify his own existence, without feeling he somehow had to apologize or make amends for his own being.

There's that word, "justify." There are still some who believe that "justification" is by works, not by grace. The columnist Charles Krauthammer falls into this category, writing that "real self-esteem does not come from what

you are, but from what you do. It comes not from reciting ‘I am somebody,’ but from having done something: learning a skill, mastering a discipline, doing a job--in short, making something of and in and for the world.” Mr. Krauthammer does have a point. Try telling a girl who feels weak and incapable that she is strong and competent and she’s unlikely to believe you, even if it’s true. Giving her a mantra is unlikely to work any lasting transformation. Offering a pep talk is liable to leave her feeling bad that she doesn’t have much pep. But put her in a ropes course or enroll her in Outward Bound, show her that she can nail a board with a hammer or break a board with a roundhouse kick, and how she feels about herself may start to change. Self-esteem, Krauthammer says, is an achievement, not something quickly and easily given, but something slowly and painfully earned. The point he is making, in theological terms, is that there is no “cheap” grace. Feeling good about yourself and learning how to be comfortable in your own skin is a difficult attainment, not the result of any quick fix. Martin Luther would probably agree.

But he would disagree, I think, when Krauthammer goes on to suggest that “there is no glory in flipping hamburgers, but there is self-respect in holding a job. Any kid who has had a job knows that getting behind a counter, passing the sign that says ‘authorized personnel only,’ give you the feeling that you may really, after all, be somebody.” If prayer and fasting weren’t able to make Martin Luther feel good inside, I doubt if flipping burgers for minimum wage would have done the trick. Luther had already gained his advanced degrees. He’d deferred his gratification. He had high earning potential. He’d even taken on holy orders, to become the most authorized of authorized personnel. He’d spent his entire life being an overachiever. Like many of us, he had tried most of the approved routes to attaining status and prestige. But regardless of his outstanding performance and the outward appearance of success, he remained impoverished on the inside. And finally he realized that trying harder was not necessarily the gateway to heaven or happiness. However hard he worked at being a dutiful son or a good monk, he remained trapped in a sense of sin.

Sin is another of those words, like grace and justification, that leaves many of us mystified and slightly uncomfortable, the remnant of a bygone era. Traditionally, it implied alienation from God, a disconnection from the real source of life and healing. And most orthodox definitions identified the archetypal sin as pride, an inveterate tendency in human nature to self-love at the expense of one’s neighbors. Sin in the form of an inflated self-image, an exaggerated sense of

one's own importance, was said to creep into even our most contrite and selfless moments, as in the famous joke about the rabbi:

*One day a rabbi, in a frenzy of religious passion, rushed in before the ark, fell to his knees, and started beating his breast, crying, "I'm nobody! I'm nobody!"*

*The cantor of the synagogue, impressed by this example of spiritual humility, joined the rabbi on his knees. "I'm nobody. I'm nobody."*

*The "shamus" (custodian), watching from the corner, couldn't restrain himself either. He joined the other two on his knees, calling out, "I'm nobody! I'm nobody!"*

*At which point the rabbi, nudging the cantor with his elbow, pointed at the custodian and said, "Look who thinks he's nobody!"*

The recommended response to such excessive pride, in both Judaism and Christianity, was to cultivate an attitude of meekness, self-sacrifice, abasement and denial.

But the definition of sin as selfishness or the will-to-power ignores an important part of human experience. As the theologian Valerie Saiving pointed out long ago, it especially ignores women's experience, many of whom are already far too well trained to be docile, compliant, and non-assertive in relation to their own needs. For many women (and some men) Saiving noted, the great temptation is not thinking too much of themselves, but thinking too little. For them, the problem is not dominating the conversation, but remaining silent when they should have spoken. Their crippling flaw is not considering themselves superior to others, but feeling inferior and paralyzed by self-doubt.

There are thousands of teenage girls, for instance, whose selves have somehow gotten lost in the maze of adolescence. Therapist Mary Pipher, the author of *Reviving Ophelia*, has worked with dozens of them. She sees young girls who are energetic, ambitious and ready to conquer the world become increasingly listless and self-destructive as they come to childhood's end. Girls who seemed sure of their own abilities become obsessed with appearance or apparel. Those who were independent come to rely on boys or glamour magazines to tell them who they are. The question "Who Am I?" says Pipher, is the most important that can be asked. But too many of the young women she sees are incapable of answering. Being able to say what I want, as opposed to what my parents want, or what I like, as opposed to what my peer group or the

popular set tell me I should like, finding one's own voice instead of repeating what others say, is the task every would-be adult faces.

That may be especially true for women, but it's also the case for men. And the same holds whether we're discussing the twenty-first or the fifteenth century. Martin Luther, for example, finally found his voice, a voice that would ultimately resound all across Europe. When Luther nailed his 95 theses on a church door in Wittenberg, when he was told by the Pope to recant his position and take back his words, Luther's response, "Here I stand, I can do no other" was a proclamation that he had learned to stand on his own two feet and follow his own deep convictions wherever they might lead. If there was a guiding principle which grew out of the Protestant Reformation whose quinticentennial we celebrate this coming year, it was that each individual has to discover his or her own moral compass, her own core of personal integrity his own inward confidence and authenticity. For the faith that saves us is a profoundly individual matter. No one else can give you the assurance that your life matters. When asked the question, "What must I do to be saved?" the answer Luther finally arrived at was "nothing." He understood that he already had all he needed. And this is what he meant by his famous formulation of redemption by grace, not works. There is no task to perform, no one to appease, no judging parent in the sky demanding either slavish obedience or unattainable perfection. Love, by its very nature, comes as a gift, unconditional, with no strings attached.

But this doesn't mean it comes effortlessly or easily. Luther did at last come to a new understanding of both who he was and who God might be, but not without turmoil and tribulation on the way. He wrote, "I did not learn my theology all at once, but I had to search deeper for it, where my temptations took me." A theologian, he said, "is born by living, nay by dying and being damned, not by thinking, reading or speculating." Luther did not think his way into religious living as live his way into religious thinking. He earned his sense of selfhood, not through monkish good works or superhuman deeds of piety, but by coping with hard times and enduring hard knocks. He would finally be able to say that "I, who have hitherto spent my life in mourning and sadness, now seek and accept joy whenever I can find it." He found satisfaction especially in the pleasures of family life, the companionship of his wife and in the laughter of their children. Though it was long in coming—the former monk finally married at the age of forty-five—he finally found the warmth and nurture he craved. Sometimes Luther felt he was wrestling with God and sometimes with the Devil, and he considered

**God far the more formidable antagonist. But like Jacob, who vied with an angel, he drew blessings from the contest.**

**To sum up, your living small serves no one, Martin might say to us across these many centuries. Your insecurities are no excuse for living on the sidelines. Your inadequacies are boring. Get into the fight. Give it all you've got. Forgive your parents, and forget your crummy childhood. Don't spend a lot of time in misgivings or regrets or examining your little sins. Instead, find out what ignites you to joy and action and do it. Don't be hesitant. Live boldly and don't be afraid of your mistakes. They are part of the show. Love Creation with all your heart, and all your mind, and all your strength. Because you are a child of the infinite. You deserve to be here. Act like it, and it shall be true.**

Now I become myself. It's taken  
Time, many years and places;  
I have been dissolved and shaken,  
Worn other people's faces,  
Run madly, as if Time were there,  
Terribly old, crying a warning,  
"Hurry, you will be dead before--"  
(What? Before you reach the morning?  
Or the end of the poem is clear?  
Or love safe in the walled city?)  
Now to stand still, to be here,  
Feel my own weight and density!  
All fuses now, falls into place  
From wish to action, word to silence,  
My work, my love, my time, my face  
Gathered into one intense  
Gesture of growing like a plant.  
As slowly as the ripening fruit  
Fertile, detached, and always spent,  
Falls but does not exhaust the root,  
So all the poem is, can give,  
Grows in me to become the song,  
Made so and rooted by love.  
Now there is time and Time is young.  
O, in this single hour I live  
All of myself and do not move.  
I, the pursued, who madly ran,  
Stand still, stand still, and stop the sun!

**“To go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God.” There are time when, like Martin Luther, each of us must take a stand.**

**I felt that way two weeks ago when I saw the images of peaceful, unarmed protesters at Standing Rock being blasted by water cannons in sub-freezing weather, shot by rubber bullets, and bombarded with concussion grenades. A thirteen year old girl was shot in the face by heavily militarized police. Sophia Wilansky, a twenty-one year old Water Protector from New York, remains in serious condition after a grenade exploded against her arm.**

**Tomorrow is the birthday of General George Armstrong Custer. It's is also the deadline when demonstrators on the Cannonball River have been warned they must vacate their camps and relocate to prescribed “free speech zones” or face criminal penalties. Meanwhile, 2000 United States military veterans are on their way to North Dakota to serve as human shields interposing themselves between the native Sioux people and law enforcement.**

**This is a battle between unequal forces. Between an Indian reservation with a poverty rate triple the national average and a 3.8 billion dollar pipeline backed by some of the wealthiest corporations on the planet. It's an assortment of clergy, do-gooders and environmentalists versus a battalion of armored vehicles, drones, pepper spray, attack dogs, tasers and baton-wielding troopers. It's a battle between fracked oil traveling eleven hundred miles to enrich far away shareholders and people who have actually lived for generations on the land being threatened.**

**When and where will you take a stand?**

**In my hometown of Santa Fe, I am organizing a boycott of Phillips 66/Conoco, one of the biggest companies behind the project. I'll be picketing outside a Phillips station tomorrow, encouraging motorists to fill their tanks elsewhere, to send a message at the pump, saying no to police brutality, no to trampling on indigenous rights, yes to a greener energy future, yes to the courageous Water Protectors who are seeking a better way at Standing Rock.**

**I invite you to join me in this boycott, to encourage your friends to do the same, and perhaps even to picket and write letters to the editor here in Taos. If you disagree with the tactics, I respect your right to differ. No doubt there are many**

**thoughtful opinions present in this room. Do what you can, say what you must.  
But remember, to go against conscience is neither safe nor right.**