

SERMON “One and Many”

Last month I attended the memorial service for a long-standing member of our Edinburgh congregation, known to several Glasgow members – in fact, a few Glasgow members also attended the service commemorating the life and values of Dr June Bell. The first reading and two of our hymns today were also in that service. I won't be speaking further about June today, but my personal reflections at and after her memorial have informed much of what I have to say today.

Death is a part, an integral part, of life – not something separate from it (in spite of the words in the last verse of our first hymn!). I have come to value celebrations of life in our churches and have also noticed that such celebrations in other religious communities are more personal than they were 20 years ago, to the point that it may be questionable how unique our services in this regard actually are. While language and traditions vary, common threads across a range of faiths include (1) to affirm a larger life process in the community than our own mortal span; (2) to attempt to build and maintain a larger awareness of one's connections in this life; and (3) to value what those who have gone before have valued.

So the sermon title today, *One and Many*, may be seen as an attempt to summarise a slightly heightened sense of death with a heightened sense of the importance of co-operatively based values over competitively based values. Not in a black/white, either/or, sense, but complex judgements that are informed by awareness of unseen links that bind us together.

A Greek riddle proposed by Aristotle may help here: A merchant loads up a waggon with goods for trade and departs on a months-long voyage. In the course of the difficult journey he has to replace all the wheels and axels, the horses, and eventually every plank in the waggon's body before he returns home with his profit and a different cargo of exotic goods to sell at the local market. Aristotle asked his students, is the waggon that returned the same waggon that departed? If yes, explain how this can be, when every bit had been replaced. If not, explain just when it ceased to be the original.

As a child I was taught that every atom in my body got exchanged with another atom over a period of about seven years. So the calcium atoms in my teeth and bones exchanged with the calcium atoms in the milk I drank, sodium atoms exchanged with the salt in food I ate, etc. Given that our bodies are some 90-95 % water in chemical composition, these

molecules of hydrogen and oxygen are in a constant state of flux. And given that our bodies have about 10 trillion cells [that's 1 followed by 13 zeroes], each with millions of atoms, that's a lot of dynamic process that has to be accomplished in seven years.

I spoke briefly in May about how scientists are using advanced techniques and instruments to examine our human bodies – remember how I reported that the tiny bacteria that live in the crevices between our little finger and ring finger are slightly different to the bacteria between our index and middle fingers of the same hand and all these bacteria are important for healthy skin. We probably all know that we need bacteria in our gut to properly digest food and that these bacteria need time to replenish themselves after a medical course of anti-biotics. As our second reading showed, scientific awareness of bodily complexity is constantly growing.

One has to be careful about extrapolating from the molecular or cellular level to the social level, but scientists are now developing models of our social dynamics based on observations combined with evolutionary theory.

In industrialised society, life-long village existence is increasingly rare and many of us hardly speak to our neighbours except at surface level, but our human need for connection has not disappeared as close neighbours disappear. We seem to have evolved as creatures that flourish better under conditions of cooperation and trust than we do under conditions of suspicion and attack and interestingly, this may also have had an effect on the tools we use to build our sense of morality.

Quoting again from another issue of the NY Times last month, from a report on 22 July: ["The Moral Naturalists" by David Brooks]

"Where does our sense of right and wrong come from? Most people think it is a gift from God, who revealed His laws and elevates us with His love. A smaller number think that we figure the rules out for ourselves, using our capacity to reason and choosing a philosophical system to live by.

"Moral naturalists, on the other hand, believe that we have moral sentiments that have emerged from a long history of relationships....

" for moral naturalists the story of our morality begins back in the evolutionary past. It begins with the way insects, rats and monkeys learned to

cooperate.

By the time humans came around, evolution had forged a pretty firm foundation for a moral sense. Jonathan Haidt of the University of Virginia argues that this moral sense is like our sense of taste. We have natural receptors that help us pick up sweetness and saltiness. In the same way, we have natural receptors that help us recognize fairness and cruelty. Just as a few universal tastes can grow into many different cuisines, a few moral senses can grow into many different moral cultures.” [end quote]

What some scientists are now saying is that they can observe positive or negative reactions in very young babies and these reactions illustrate basic in-built tools as real as our senses of taste or sight. The notion of *tabula rasa*, the blank slate, is harder to maintain today than it was in Aristotle’s or Thomas Aquinas’s day.

To continue the quote from the 22nd of July:

“Paul Bloom of Yale noted that this moral sense can be observed early in life. Bloom and his colleagues conducted an experiment in which they showed babies a scene featuring one figure struggling to climb a hill, another figure trying to help it, and a third trying to hinder it.

“At as early as six months, the babies showed a preference for the helper over the hinderer. In some plays, there is a second act. The hindering figure is either punished or rewarded. In this case, 8-month-olds preferred a character who was punishing the hinderer over ones being nice to it.

“This illustrates, Bloom says, that people have a rudimentary sense of justice from a very early age. This doesn’t make people naturally good. If you give a 3-year-old two pieces of candy and ask him if he wants to share one of them, he will almost certainly say no. It’s not until age 7 or 8 that even half the children are willing to share. But it does mean that social norms fall upon prepared ground. We come equipped to learn fairness and other virtues.” [end quote]

This gives quite a bit of depth to a quote Barbara and I came upon at the Quaker Tapestry Exhibition in Kendal last week. It comes from the Quaker handbook, *Advice*, and says, “Watch with Christian tenderness over the opening minds of your children. Through example and training

help them to recognise the voice of God in their hearts.”

Quakers speak of the inner light in each of us and of the inner voice of God in our hearts. These are powerful images that have affected many non-Quakers, including many Unitarians – a recognition that Something binds us together, so while our dominant ego-driven perceptions are of our individuality and independence, deeper reflection presents us perceptions of our selves as parts of a whole, a node in a streaming process that extends outward from us in all directions, including past and future.

What is this “I”, this “self” that makes judgments, moral and practical? We are learning that we cannot even take our own skin as a boundary, that we are part of a process that extends back in time millions of years and in distance thousands of millions of light-years, and that whole communities of independently functioning organisms inhabit our bodies like we humans inhabit the Earth. We are learning that our very atoms once danced in different bodies, that processes inside our bodies of which we are completely un-conscious are necessary for our health and life, that we carry around in our subconscious minds a whole team of powerful images that shape our decisions in non-rational ways.

My mother used to say about decisions (and much useful life-long wisdom comes from our mothers and fathers), and I paraphrase: will it make a difference in 10 years time? If so, then put real effort into it. If not, do your best and learn to let go. To whom will it make a difference in 10 years? If only to yourself, limit your effort appropriately. If to a larger circle, expand your effort appropriately.

Rational religion does not necessarily result in rational individuals. Life is too complex for that, try as we might. And liberal religion, in our case, Unitarianism, attempts to be both rational and sensitive to others, attempts to build communities of open sharing without preconditions, attempts to bring scientific insights thoroughly into our frameworks for dealing with life and death, with morality and accountability, with personal and social justice. This Unitarianism has to operate not as an abstract process but operate through us, people-in-community – fallible, selfish, egotistical, vulnerable, loving, sensitive, and open to change, the curse and salvation of life as we know it on this, the only planet that we experience.

We are individuals, not as billiard balls bouncing off each other, but as collective communities with individual signatures and processes. One

AND Many, we operate best when we learn when to let go of our egos, when we learn the detachment from results that the Buddha spoke of as leading to the reduction in suffering. Hanging on to our egos, our desires, our attachments to perceived goals is in fact a denial of who we really are.

There are many images in religious and secular language which attempt to help clarify this link, this glue, that brings together the One And the Many. My favourite and the one I keep coming back to is Khalil Gibran's: "When you love, say not that God is in your heart, but that you are in the heart of God". We need to see ourselves as part of, nay, in the centre of, the unifying process that flows through life.

A community's many needs can only be met well when co-operation rather than competition characterises its processes and this is as true in the national political sphere as it is at congregational level. The lesson of both science and religion is that this is closer to our true Reality.

Amen

Rev John Clifford
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