

Who Am I?

Is there anyone alive who hasn't asked that question -- in anguish, in curiosity, in prayer, or in self-assessment?

The question has led to the sufferings of Job, to the delight of children, to the quirks of celebrities, to the arrogance of dictators, to the insecurities of teen-agers – to the whole huge range of experiences in the world as we make up answers to it.

No matter how many answers we make up, and the possibilities are infinite, there is also one universal answer, true in all cases: I am the person making up the answers.

What we are making up is what makes life interesting, diverse, problematic, conflicted, easy, funny, challenging, overwhelming, unbearable, delightful. What we are making up is our life experience at any moment we are engaged in our personal drama. What we are making up makes each of us unique from all the others in every moment of our lives.

That we are making it up is what makes life connected, profound, spiritual, mysterious. That we are making it up is our life experience at any moment we are enraptured by the energy of creativity. That we are making it up makes each of us exactly like all the others in every moment of our lives.

As a teenaged friend is fond of saying, “Well, duh! Tell me something I didn't know!”

The above statements are pretty plain and self-evident. We have in common that we are all making up the story of our own lives all the time. We differ in that we are all making up different stories all the time – different from each other, and different for ourselves.

“Different from each other” is straightforward.

Of course, if you and I each attend a meeting and you see yourself as an enthusiastic participant who plays a role in the outcome and I see myself as a reluctant attendee who has no interest in the outcome, we will have a totally different experience of that meeting. And we would answer the question, “Who am I?” completely differently during the meeting.

Of course, if you and I each own adjacent property on a certain undeveloped tract, and you see yourself building your dream home on that property and sending your children out to play in the front yard and I see myself building a truck stop on that property and living far away while collecting the income, we will have conflicting views of what the

zoning should be. And we would answer the question, “Who am I?” completely differently at a public hearing on land use.

Of course, if you belong to a political organization that espouses government by a sacred leader who serves by virtue of sanctity, and I belong to a political organization that espouses government by elected officials who serve at the will of the public, we would have conflicting views of how to respond to authority and power. And we would answer the question, “Who am I?” differently when defending our citizenship in the debate halls or on the battlefields of doctrine.

Of course, if you and I both know that we are making it up, we’re much less likely to end up on a battlefield over it. Why fight over the ephemeral products of our own imagination? Why not use our gift of imagination together to make up something we both appreciate, or use our gift of appreciation to leave each other alone making up our own stories of life?

This first dawned on me in geography class in eighth grade. It was a stunning moment. The teacher brought in four different maps of a continent, from four different periods of history. “If you were alive in the 1400’s, she said, pointing to an area on the map, you might have died on this soil, since it was contested by people who lived over here and there were brutal wars fought over it. If you were alive in the 1500’s, you would have been safe right there because there were no more wars being fought over that land. If you were alive ...” For the first time, I realized that people fought and died over land and then they stopped and other people fought and died over other land and so on and so on. For the first time, I realized that what people were willing to die for in the 1400’s, no one worried about in the 1500’s. For the first time, I got an inkling that geopolitical realities are figments of the imaginations of the powerful at the time, having nothing to do with any sort of truth or constant reality. The only constant reality seemed to be that the land is beneath the feet of those who traverse it, till it, or shed blood on it. (Later, when I studied geology, I learned that that isn’t a constant reality, either. The land beneath our feet today may well have been beneath an ocean or embedded deep in the crust of the earth in a geological yesterday.)

It would be a pretty sure predictor of inevitable strife and conflict that we are making up lives completely different from each other, if it were not for the second half of the statement: “and different for ourselves.” The second half sets us free from predictability.

We are not stuck in any story we make up. We can change with a single new thought, and when the thought changes, the reality we call our life changes, too.

We do that all day long, all the time. I plan to wear my red suit, but I notice a spot on it and throw it in the dry-cleaning bag and pull out the navy suit. Instead of being “the lady in red” all day that day, I am “the lady in blue.” You said you’d stop at the coffee shop on

the way to work to pick up coffee and rolls for your staff meeting, but it's closed for repairs. You don't have time for a detour, so you decide against the goodies. Instead of being "Mr. Coffee" for the morning, you're "Mr. On Time and Empty-Handed." In trivial life matters, we change our minds and our experience all the time and never notice or care. Our life script is a constant work in progress.

If we follow certain thoughts down to the rockpile of strife and conflict, we don't have to keep stumbling on those thoughts. If we follow certain thoughts into the quicksand of disappointment and sadness, we don't have to keep sinking in those thoughts. If we follow certain thoughts into the rut of self-doubt and old habits, we don't have to keep churning in those thoughts. The rockpile and the quicksand and the rut are not real. They are what we are making up at the time. They appear real, until we let ourselves make up something else and leave them behind. And then something else appears real. Every experience of reality is transitory, and the time we spend hanging on to it or letting it pass is something we are making up, too. I can hold a grudge for a lifetime, or I can have a nasty thought and let it go, never to think it again. I can bring thoughts to mind that lead me to cry for a week, or I can shed a tear or two and dab my eye and see what comes to mind next.

The other day, I was working with a colleague who said off-handedly, in explanation for why she was having trouble thinking straight, "I went through a pretty stressful experience a few weeks ago. It takes me a long time to get over things. I'm depressed a lot because of it, and I don't sleep well, but – that's my life. I can't just bounce back like some people can."

"Why not?" I asked.

"That's who I am," she said. "I am a person who doesn't get over things easily."

The conversation moved on to other matters. Afterwards, though, I wondered if it had ever occurred to her that she is in the habit of making up the idea of not getting over things, and that's the one and only reason why she thinks that's who she is. Whenever she's making it up, it seems that way.

What if she looked in the other direction, to the very fact of making things up, and saw herself as a person who makes up ideas about getting over things? Could she make up new ideas and be someone different?

When we are enraptured by the energy of creativity, whatever we've made up in the past is not nearly as enticing to us as the knowledge that we could be making up something new, right now.

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