

The Burden of Agency

I think a lot about agency and responsibility: I ask myself, what am I able to make happen and what can I be blamed for? What changes can I make in the world, and what should I be changing?

Perhaps you don't use the language of agency and responsibility but I would guess that many people, if not all, think about issues related to these questions at some point in time. For those who are parents: Do you think about the ways in which you influence your children and how you will affect the path of their lives? For those of you who have parents? Do you ever think about how they affected you and the path of your life?

What causes our lives to go one way and not another? How much of our lives is determined by our choices and hard work? How much is determined by random circumstances we find ourselves in? How much is determined by the systems and structures we live in?

I know that not everyone is drawn to reflecting on the mechanisms of biology and causation, but I would argue that these questions are quite practical and are related to many of the things we hear and discuss when we gather as a church every week. When we come together as people who follow Jesus, when we come on Sunday mornings or on Tuesday evenings or whenever, we come expecting to hear and do things that might change us for the better.

One of the underlying assumptions of participating in the community of Jesus followers is that we are able to change. We are able to learn things and imitate things, so that we might live good lives. I myself have tried to convince, and encourage, people to live differently, to live lives that work for justice and the peace of all things. This is essentially one of the oldest and most basic questions asked by Christians, and people everywhere: what can do we to change our lives? What can we do to change the world?

This seems simple enough, but I need to admit that I am not sure how able I am to change myself. I am not sure how much I am able to change the world I live in. I want to live a good life, but I am not always sure how to do it, especially considering that I am busy. I need to work. I need to support my family with my partner. How do I change my life considering all the things that I need to do? I feel limited in my ability to control my own life. Perhaps you can relate. Perhaps sometimes you, like me, listen to encouragements to change that you hear on Sunday morning or in your Bible reading and you think, 'well that's good, but how do I do that, along with all the other things I am supposed to be doing and changing.'

Limitations and Influences

When I was a teenager, living in sleepy little Fergus Ontario, I wanted to be an astronaut. I am not sure where this desire came from. I can't recall a specific moment in time when I first realized that this what I wanted, but I can recall with great clarity the many days and weeks when I read, imagined and talked about space travel, NASA, the mercury, gemini, and apollo missions, Roberta Bondar, Julie Payette and other early Canadian astronauts. I was obsessed, fascinated, in love with outer space. When I was 16 or 17 I got my own bedroom downstairs in our little bungalow and began to paint a wall-sized mural, copying a photograph of the earth

from space taken by an apollo astronaut. Around grade 10 or so, while a student at Centre Wellington District High School I talked to a guidance counselor about my interest in space and he helped me write to NASA and asked about how I might become an astronaut. NASA recommended that I start by getting a degree in something like engineering and start following in the path of other Canadian astronauts. So I did. I started university in the fall of 1999 studying aerospace engineering.

I am not an astronaut. My life has taken a different path, one I did not plan as a teenager. I have done many things, gone many places and become someone that I could never have imagined in my parents' basement circa 1997. And I am not exactly sure how my path has come about, and why it is that I no longer have the same love for space that I once did. I can produce an answer but I am not sure if it would take into account all of the things that actually played a role in how things went. For better and for worse my life has taken a shape that was not completely directed by me.

Hidden Systems & Structures

Do you ever think about your life? How you came to be where you are today? Do you ever think about the different forces and causes that contributed to the path you have ended up taking? This is something that I have thought about a lot. When I recall my story of growing from astronaut-wannabe to pastor to scientist, I see a mix of times when I worked hard to accomplish certain goals, along with times when beneficial circumstances came my way. And also now that I am a little bit older, I also see how some of the systems and structures I have lived in and around - things I did not choose but was born into - have also played a role in the path of my life.

I see now how my story includes things that were formerly invisible to me. It's easy for me to see my choice to start work on a phd and recall the late nights and early mornings spent on preparing experiments and analyzing data, but it's a little harder to see things like the fact that I was born into a country and a time where I was able to pursue these interests without threat of war and with access to resources to fund my work. I have benefitted from systems, such as socialized health-care, government support for post-secondary education, even publicly subsidized mass transit. Sometimes it's hard to see how these systems have played into my life because my focus tends to be on my own actions, and not on everything that has made it possible for me to have these opportunities.

Perhaps it is useful, as the psalmist says, to think about your life as being like a tree, planted by the rivers of water. If our lives grow like a tree then we can look at them and see how the shape of our lives are influenced by multiple factors, by the wind of our physical environments, the rain of our culture, and by the roots of our character our choices. I have looked at my roots a little, but until recently I have mostly missed considering the wind and rain, and certainly I have missed the particular nutrients that are provided by the soil I am planted in; I have been mostly blind to the benefits I have received via the microscopic particles of my socio-economic privileges.

The Good Life

I am sure it goes without saying that I am aware of the fact that the bible includes many references on how to live well, how to live a good and just life. I have read the bible, and I have paid particular attention to the life of Jesus, and things that he said, things like this:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Do I need to admit that I have not done as Jesus commanded? I mean, we are told elsewhere to confess our sins to each other, so perhaps it is right for me to do so here and state for the record that I *do* worry about my life. I worry about tomorrow. So when I say that I want to live a good life, and that I am not sure how, it is not because I have no idea of what a good life might look like.

Let me say as simply and clearly as I can my most basic dilemma, the problem that I need help with: I know better than I act. I have heard the words of Jesus and have not followed them, and I do not think that this is simply because I don’t trust in the spirit enough or pray enough or ‘let go and let God enough. And if it is not enough to be exhorted to not worry, there is more. Jesus seems to suggest that what we own might impair our ability to live well.

Then someone came to him and said, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man said to him, “I have kept all these; what do I still lack?” Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Anxiety

I have to say, there is a sense of relief almost in admitting that I have heard this and other commands of Jesus many times before and yet have not followed them. I have not sold all my possessions. It feels good to be honest. Of course my honesty just reinforces the difficulty of the problem: if we think it is good to follow Jesus, how do we change our lives? I am embedded in systems, commitments, obligations and patterns. I want to live a good life, but I don't know how much control I have myself or anything else. I didn't become an astronaut, and more and more it seems like I have far less ability to make the radical changes that I think are necessary.

Here are some more of my problems: I am worried that the culture I live in will cause me to live in ways that are not healthy, whole and just. I worry that if I do not actively pursue a life that is good - I will end up pursuing things that appear to be good but are not. I am worried because I do not think I can sell all my possessions and give the money to the poor.

Perhaps you can see why I think about agency and responsibility a lot. Jesus is pretty clear about what I am responsible for, and I am not sure if I am able to do what I need to do. Suffice it to say that I have a lot of worries, and have come to realize that I also have anxiety, anxiety about the future of the planet, anxiety about my children, anxiety about my ability to do anything to make things better.

Support

My therapist is a woman in her late 50s. She exudes warmth, safety, and empathy, but because she is my therapist and because I know that in therapy just about anything might come out of me, whenever I look at her face I see disaster. Her quiet confident listening demeanor is hidden behind my own fear about what I might say.

I have long been a proponent of counselling as a means to be better, healthier versions of ourselves. I have personally encouraged many friends and familiar to take a small step into the world of psychology and talk therapy. Too often therapy is seen only as a mechanism of intervention, to be used when the mind is broken, but it is also a means of help prior to crisis, something to be used as a way of dealing with chronic illness instead of just acute care.

I am glad to finally be seeing a therapist. As a parent of three young children, to have a conversation with someone for an hour, someone who is intensely and completely focused on me is a balm in itself. Just being able to expunge, to exhale for a length of time, uninterrupted, and without the need to reciprocate emotionally and conversationally is therapeutic independent of ideas and emotions discussed. I sit in a lovely chair, in a tidy and calm room, with no agenda and no obligations. And I talk. About myself. What's not to love?

My reasons for seeking therapy are still being discovered, but there are a few things that I do know. I have anxiety and I have different ways of trying to control, or prevent, or eliminate my anxiety. Sometime my methods for controlling the circumstances of my life are sometimes helpful but sometimes not, and the long term effect of some of these ways of staying in control is unhealth.

Connections

There are some important connections between my ongoing anxiety, my worries about how to change my life, and scriptural exhortations such as the ones I just mentioned. One of the most simple and obvious is that many people, myself included, have experienced teaching in the church that has led to great anxiety and shame. It is sometimes the case that church teaching, while perhaps done with the best intentions, has led to feelings of guilt causing all sorts of negative side effects. Sometimes the anxiety we have about our things we think we need to change in our lives is simply due to unhealthy ideas propagated from positions of power and authority, and it is important for people to hear from the front of the church acknowledgements of the un-health in the community that is caused by unhealthy teaching. I believe that it can be very freeing for the people who identify with the church to be told that some of their mental distress, guilt and shame is due to things they have heard from the pulpit. This is true for me and it is certainly true for my LGBTQ friends.

Here is another connection between all these things - scripture, my anxiety and thoughts on agency: behind much of my thinking are assumptions about what it means to be a person, assumptions that are so deep within me that I have a hard time seeing them, assumptions that are not universal truths.

I have presented a problem, a problem that I believe we have in common. It is the problem that we want to live as God has directed us through Jesus to live, but that we find ourselves incapable for the most part of doing so. I ask myself, how can I change my life? What control do I have? Inside these questions and at the heart of my problem is a basic assumption about the centrality of the individual. There is an assumption that my agency, my ability to direct my life, is something that exists primarily in me apart from other people.

I have been coming to see that this assumption is a product of the influence of systems & structures that I live in, micro-elements of my environment that have come up through my roots and into me. My way of viewing myself and the mechanisms of my behaviour is the product of a particular philosophical and theological framework that understands people, agency and autonomy in particular ways. People in other parts of the world, or in different circumstances, often have very different ideas about agency, individuality and control. The internal pressure I feel to understand how to make changes as an individual person against the forces that lie outside of me, this internal pressure is not shared by everyone in the world in the same way. And it might be the case, I am coming to see, that not only is this internal pressure detrimental to my mental health, it is not a necessary part of what it takes to change my life.

Genesis

We are told in the creation narrative of Genesis that the world God created was and is good. God makes good things. And so when we ask ourselves, 'what is good', 'how do we know what good looks like,' it only makes sense that we should look to God's creation for an answer.

One of the most important books I read this past year was "Watershed Discipleship", which is a collection of articles all arguing that the life of faith is situated in particular biological contexts,

whether we realize it or not, and that we cannot live faithful just lives without living in awareness and response to the interconnectedness of all things. We cannot live justly, without exploiting other people and places, if we live above and on top of the world. Our lives are deeply woven together with each other and the physical world, despite our best efforts to forget this fact.

This is what we see when we look to God's good creation of which we are a part: nothing exists outside of relational interdependencies. No life exists outside of an ecological web, not even ours. The language of scripture is often a reminder of this fact. Our connection to each other and to God is that of growing, spreading vine:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower... Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches."

Community & Growth

There are people and places that inspire me to think that it is possible to live differently. There are people and places that inspire me that it is possible to live free from the burden of self-centred agency, properly interconnected with others and place. I do not believe that community in and of itself is a panacea. There are many communities, even Christian communities, that are unhealthy and dysfunctional. But there are many that are not. What are the common factors of these communities that heal and help its members? Where have you found people that have come together and live lives of welcome and generosity, lives of healing and of rest, lives of justice and of peace?

When I look for people who live like Jesus exhorted us to live, I find people that are often poor and living together because they deeply need each other. In fact I wonder if there isn't a connection between my inability to change, my anxiety about agency, and the fact that I have enough personal resources that I am able to not depend on other people.

L'Arche is one of the places I have found people like this. Jean Vanier is the founder of L'Arche and these are some of his words about how it began and what L'Arche is:

"Then in 1964 I went to visit a holy priest - man of God. He was chaplain for a small institution for people with intellectual disabilities. It was there I discovered the plight of men and women who had been put aside, looked down upon, sometimes laughed at or scorned. They were seen as misfits of nature, not as human beings.

Touched and hurt by the way some of them were treated, I was able to buy a little house in a village north of Paris and to welcome two men with disabilities from a sad and violent institution. Philippe Seux and Raphael Simi had each had a viral disease when they were children. The result of their illnesses had left them with significant disabilities. They never went to school, and when their parents died they were put into this dismal asylum.

And so the first L'Arche community was born. Today, forty-four years later, there are 134 such communities in thirty-five different countries. In these communities men and women with disabilities can develop in a spirit of freedom. We live together - those with disabilities and those who wish to have a deep and sometimes lasting relationship with them. We laugh and cry and sometimes fight with one another; we work, we celebrate life, and we pray together.

Believe it or not, it has been this life together that has helped me become more human. Those I have lived with have helped me to recognize and accept my own weaknesses and vulnerability. I no longer have to pretend I am strong or clever or better than others. I am like everybody else, with my fragilities and my gifts.”

To become myself, I need people and I need to live with them such that I depend on them. I am not able to be fully myself when I live detached from the messiness of life in community. When I am able to live without vulnerability I can pretend that I am someone who I am not, someone who can live apart from physical dependency on land, water, and relationships, someone who is clever and independent. This is not a healthy way to live, and living this way likely makes it impossible to live the good, whole, and just life shown to us in Jesus.

References

Watershed Discipleship, edited by Ched Myers. You can look inside the first few pages of the book and order it from:

<https://www.amazon.ca/Watershed-Discipleship-Reinhabiting-Bioregional-Practice/dp/1498280765>

Becoming Human by Jean Vanier. You can listen to the Massey Lectures by Jean Vanier, which is the source material for the book here: <http://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2398918623>

You can order the book here: <https://www.amazon.ca/dp/0887848095/#>

I am also happy to loan my copies of both of these books.