

Paul Tillich and Me

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When I was 35, I decided to depart from the life I was living and embark on a different life. I had come to realize, at least implicitly, that I didn't know where my own self resided. I couldn't feel myself. I was on a quest to discover what it means to be true to yourself. I believed that I would thus be led to find a vocation and a meaningful life.

While we all have moments of recognizing that we are conforming too much to our surroundings, the net of conformity was particularly far reaching and efficient in my life.

I was born into a power, and in many ways admirable, spiritual movement where my grandparents were highly regarded figures and my parents were devoting all their time. The group saw its goal as global transformation through vibrant spiritual transformation of people. Therefore, to put it simply, but **not** conforming one might be threatening the future of the world. This was the way I understood things as a child growing up in the movement.

The ethos of self-sacrifice for the greater good caused me to abandon plans for university, suppress long-held secret hopes to be a doctor, and to work for the organization. As an adult I worked for them on four continents until I departed for university in Boston.

I am now writing a book about this – about the departure, the life before and the life after, and the meaning of all this. I joined the Tillich class and volunteered for this presentation today as a way to push me forward in grappling with the story. So I want to share some reflections about all this with you as a way to discuss what Tillich is saying to us.

1. Loyalty

I was of course in a serious bind because I felt so strongly the need to defend my parents in the choices they had made and to make up for some of the deficits their life seemed to have imposed on them; while, at the same time I, as an emerging adult, needed, for my own maturation, some way to reject them or throw them off. I thought this exquisite dilemma was mine alone, but in fact this was/is a magnified expression of the most human of experiences. It is essential to true adulthood. Freud's way of describing it is that we all have a need to kill our

parents... and that once we have done that metaphorically, if they survive, we will be better placed to have an adult relationship with ourselves and with our parents.

A milder way of expressing this dynamic is that the first lesson in being true to ourselves is that it will involve betraying others.

In this regard, the first thing I did, about three years before my departure, was to embark on flute lessons, knowing that I would be committing time for something involving my own enjoyment and not the advance of the cause. This was like a harmless foray, testing the ground for later self-assertion.

2. Nature of the quest

Now that I was out in the world, how did I understand my quest? I thought I was looking for a fulfilling vocation, having concluded that my previous life was not my vocation. I tried many things. I investigated studying medicine but backed away. I studied journalism and wrote a few stories for the Middlesex News, and then abandoned the track. I studied history and went on to study at a prestigious school of International Relations. Not liking it greatly I applied and got into Harvard's History of American Civilization program to do a Ph.D. The work involved seemed just too great and I backed out. I stayed with International Relations and got a Ph.D. I then taught in a school of International Relations for eight years, and then continued in the same place part time. I studied psychotherapy. I met a number of men with whom I did not have long-lasting relationships. I did a certain amount of writing and published a few things but less than would be expected.

One of my professors, in the course of my selecting a topic for my doctoral dissertation, said with exasperation that I kept getting close to a decision, then backed off. I knew it was true, but I didn't know any other way to be true to myself.

By my mid-sixties I had accumulated a good many life experiences but couldn't point to a clear track that I had adopted. I believed I was a failure because of this, or at very least, that life had let me down.

But more can be said about this. Surely what we are all doing in life is looking for something that allows the pieces to fit together, that strikes chords of satisfaction that touch us deeply. As we stagger through life trying one thing and then another, we get disillusioned with this vision of, or hope for, perfection. Gradually we learn to commit ourselves to imperfect endeavors and stop searching for the immaculate fit.

In my own case, the original environment had been so rarefied that the counterweight I sought also needed to feel remarkable. But nothing quite so remarkable turned up. I maintained that search for a long time before concluding that, in fact, there was no idealized "calling" waiting for me.

A book written in the 1970s by Sheldon Kopp – If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him – expresses this quite well. If you think you have found the solution, the guru, the vocation laid upon you from on high, stop right now and do something to cut that solution down to size. It may well be a good thing, but – to use a word of Bob's – don't allow yourself to be enraptured by it.

I needed to lower my expectations of myself and of life. This was hard because the world I was born into had high expectations. Winnicott speaks of our need to be disappointed and destroyed by the disappointment and survive this destruction to develop into a mature adult. Through such a process we begin to savor a kind of equilibrium where the frenetic search for "the path" calms down and the joy of living in the present gets more space; where defense of the ego is less and less necessary, because a Self has emerged that operates like a reliable bottom shelf of the inner life.

3. Risk taking and anxiety

Along the way risk taking is germane to the process. Rollo May describes child development as testing new experiences and thereby discovering how much anxiety those experiences create, returning to the mother, and thereby learning to tolerate more and more anxiety. This is the growth process that leads us to being able to take risk. Like any truth, this one can be distorted by those who get high on risk, but for most of us, risk taking has been our path to a life of greater depth.

4. Who was I then, Who am I now?

As a 35 year old I was more like a typical 18 year old in the sense that I was untapped, anxious, inclined towards depression. I was privileged to be trained in various ways, to get a variety of kinds of exposure, and all the life experiences I had had were valuable grist for the mill.

But what made the difference? Connecting with people who were willing to go beyond the constraints that social and institutional norms set up in order to keep the relentless searchers like me manageable. A therapist who wept because of something I said. Bob's quality of care for us as individuals makes a stronger statement to us than his concern about self-protection.

5. How does Tillich speak to me in all this?

What do I make of Tillich and the courage to be? The book captures a dialectic between our sense of self as participant and our sense of self as a person alone. Tillich would say we can live existentially or not in either of these states.

The courage to be a healthy participant requires a balancing between pushing forward to offer what we have and taking care not to drown out others. I see it clearly when I think of committees I've served on where some have the capacity to be team players and others do

not. Those who do not are probably feeling a different balance between the personal and group need.

But I see the courage to be as oneself to be the more fundamental of the two ends of this tension, because it is very hard to survive in a group if one has not developed the kernel of a self to begin with. In this sense there is a developmental foundation to all that we are discussing, and that development moves toward some level of reliable sense of self. It will grow through life, but it is the sine qua non.

A curious problem arises with many religious groups – and Tillich points this out – which is that the doctrine supports the development of the courage to be as oneself but the group nature of the religion undermines this through pressure to conform. This can result in what has come to be known as “spiritual bypass” – which is that problem that arises when a person engages in apparently worth group endeavors but skips over the dialectical step of experiencing their aloneness. In such a case, the person is denied the real experience of discovering the courage necessary to face the void, which is the beginning of discovering the courage to be.

This aloneness can be evoked by a moment when our precious ideas about ourselves get challenged and disintegrate. I experienced it when I realized I wasn’t going to get a success story out of this odyssey of mine. At that point, I had to start thanking God for the dilemma I was in, for the blinkered, blinded series of missteps and occasional good works and moments of love that had gotten me to where I was, and to settle in with what I had.