



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

“It is impossible to step in the same river twice”

Clay Nelson © 27 February 2022

I have been musing this week on a quote by Heraclitus that has long intrigued me: “It is impossible to step in the same river twice.” It has brought to mind an attractive, fresh-faced, twenty-something woman with a huge smile who visited me at St Matthew-in-the-city. At the time a list MP, Jacinda was laying the groundwork to contest the seat in the church’s electorate. You would be justified in wondering how I made the 26-century leap from a Persian philosopher to our prime minister.

There are a lot of ways to approach Heraclitus’ quote about how everything is constantly in flux, but I’ve been thinking about it in terms of our identities. Since I first met her, Jacinda has fallen in love, had a child, had a wedding cancelled by a pandemic, comforted the Muslim community after the Christchurch tragedy, been a progressive international icon for compassionate leadership, dealt with a lethal volcanic eruption on Whakaari/White Island and the Kaikoura earthquake, and for over two years has dealt with a pandemic that has infected over 430 million globally and resulted in at least six million deaths, while keeping our numbers infinitesimal. She has gone from a landslide re-election in 2020 to being chased by protestors calling her a traitor and demanding her execution by hanging while camping out on Parliament’s lawn. And this is only the tip of the iceberg she has had to deal with since moving from Deputy Opposition Leader, to Opposition Leader to Prime Minister practically overnight in 2017.

Aside from the fact that nothing could induce me to take her job, I wonder what our previous conversation would be like today? Is she the same person now that she was then, teeming with optimism and positivity, or have her triumphs and tragedies formed someone new? I don’t know, but I expect that when she can find time she asks herself the same question. We don’t have to be Prime Minister to ask the universal existential question that repeatedly demands an answer throughout our life, “Who am I?”

We might think we’re one and the same person all our life. Think again — our true identity only settles after our last breath.

“Who are you?” Instinctively you’d probably answer that question stating your name, age, background, hobbies and job. Explaining who you truly are is no topic for small talk. And there’s no shame in that. Your true identity is an inherently complex phenomenon. You are you — but how exactly is “you” defined?

Imagine I rewind the tape of your life. Your trophies and certificates are pulled off the walls, unframed, and returned. Your children grow smaller, then vanish. You too become smaller. Your adult teeth retract, your baby teeth return, and your traits and eccentricities fade away. I keep rewinding still, until I’m halving a colony of cells and then halving them again, finally arriving at that amazing singularity that will become you.

The question, of course, is what happens when we press “play” again. Are your talents, traits, and insecurities so deeply embedded in your genes that they’re basically inevitable? Or could things go rather differently with just a few tiny nudges? In other words, we essentially originate from our genes, but how much of your fate do you allot to your genes, versus your experiences, versus chance?

“Your identity is who you are, your inner you. That’s more than just the sum of your characteristics,” says psychologist and professor Gerty Lensevelt-Mulders. *“Your identity is fuelled by others. Take me as an example: I am a mother of three and grandmother of seven. Although these children are part of my identity, they don’t play a role in my characteristics. My appearances — psychologist, woman, professor, mother — define my identity. I give meaning to those appearances based on my characteristics.”*

The development of your identity starts with the name you are given, your own family, your parents and possibly brothers and sisters. After that it’s the schools you attend, the friends you make, the clubs you join, the sports you play and so on. But how exactly does that correlate? First off, you’re born with a natural aptitude for certain character traits.

Lensevelt-Mulders continues, *“All your life you’re exposed to situations that strengthen or weaken your natural aptitudes. This way your identity develops. Parents play a big part in this development. Let’s say you’re curious by nature. With anxious parents, your curiosity will weaken. That’s because every time you hear your mother say ‘watch out, don’t do that,’ your aptitude for curiosity is reduced.*

“On the other hand, when your parents allow you to do whatever you like, your curiosity is strengthened. You can imagine someone with a strong aptitude for curiosity choosing to study journalism more easily than others. Choosing such a study then weighs in on the development of your identity as well — producing a snowball-like effect.

“Your work does not determine your identity,” says Lensvelt-Mulders. Instead, “... it starts with choosing your line of work. Where and who you work with both play a part in the development of your identity and the way you think about yourself. We all know unintended unemployment has a big impact on how you see your identity. When people lose their jobs, they generally go through a grieving process and reinvent themselves.”

Peak times in our identity-development are unique moments throughout our life. When you reach puberty you start to blossom into a young adult, questioning your true self. Reaching the age of 30, or 40, are other unique moments when your identity can start to waver, leading to a mid-life crisis. Our identity keeps changing, even after you retire and spend the rest of your life working in the garden and staring through a window. I mean, you can't stop the world from turning. People die, things happen. And again you question yourself who you truly are...

Our identity is formed more than just by our stages of life. *“A person's identity,”* Amin Maalouf wrote as he contemplated what he so poetically called the genes of the soul, *“is like a pattern drawn on a tightly stretched parchment. Touch just one part of it, just one allegiance, and the whole person will react, the whole drum will sound.”* And yet we are constantly pressured to parcel ourselves out in various social contexts, lacerating the parchment of our identity in the process. As Courtney Martin observed in her insightful conversation with Parker Palmer and Krista Tippett, *“It's never been more asked of us to show up as only slices of ourselves in different places.”* In his *“Song of Myself,”* Unitarian Walt Whitman observed:

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well
Then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

Today, as Whitman's multitudes no longer compose an inner wholeness but are being torn out of us fragment by fragment, again the question arises, who are you?

It turns out not everyone agrees with Heraclitus. *"I am not a religious man,"* the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said to a friend, *"but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view."* These problems that he claims to see from a religious point of view tend to be technical matters of logic and language. Wittgenstein trained as an engineer before he turned to philosophy. I've had close friends who were engineers. Who knew they could be philosophers?

When he does respond to philosophers who set their sights on higher mysteries, Wittgenstein can be stubbornly dismissive. Consider: *"The man who said one cannot step into the same river twice was wrong; one can step into the same river twice."* He argues that rivers by definition are constantly in flux. So, no matter how many times you step into the river nothing has changed. It is the same river.

Our lives too are always in flux. It is an existential reality, but who we are remains the same. Life may make us smarter, wiser, happier, sadder, but the you who is you is simply on a journey. Sometimes our life meanders lazily through plains and sometimes it crashes on rocks like rapids in a narrow gorge. Sometimes a drought turns it into a rivulet and other times it overflows its banks. And yet, it is the same you. The problem is it may take a lifetime to sort it out. It helps to be part of a community as you go about the task.

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

What have you come to know about who you are?