

Some Assembly Required: On Becoming A Self

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Like many folks nowadays, I find email blasts each morning in my inbox from the company *Groupon*, offering me discounts to everything from Mexican meals to pedicures to monogrammed Ipod cases. Just yesterday, as if on cue (and reading my sermon writing mind), Groupon enticed me with “10 deals to mend broken resolutions” – oh dear, and its only January 9th!).

The offer included odorless e-cigarettes, online meal planning from Keto Now, Rockin Body workout sessions, luggage (hmm- a resolution to travel? OK!), and my absolute favorite, Zaggota weight loss hot pants. I demurred. Yet, having bought Groupons in the past, I know that the fine print often includes a standard form (with spaces for name, address, age, and such) and the following instructions --“*Must be completed prior to redemption.*”

OK, I’m a sermonator and this request has struck me as unintentionally amusing and even, profound, because I’ve detected a theological suggestion in that coupon caveat --“*must be completed prior to redemption*” and found myself debating the truth of it in my head. Are we ever truly complete? Are we meant to be complete? How complete do we have to be for redemption, according to our own standards or society’s?

And, ultimately, how might we reframe our inherent incompleteness as a blessing rather than a deficit and in doing so, embrace the process of spiritual growth as one of assembling and reassembling ourselves, rather than one of pursuing perfection?

If we begin with Shel Silverstein’s story, “The Missing Piece,” we find that completeness or wholeness may not be what we had presumed – that stereotypical perfect package where all the components fit snugly and effortlessly together. In the fable for all ages masquerading as a children’s book, we roll along with our little Pac-Man pilgrim as it pursues the elusive missing piece that it presumes will offer a kind of redemption.

The little minimalist minstrel sings it’s catchy, little ditty as it rolls along -- Oh, I’m lookin for my missin’ piece; I’m lookin for my missin’ piece. Hi-dee-ho, here I go. Lookin’ for my missin’ piece.” Okay, it is hard to imagine us rolling along so merrily when we feel broken or incomplete or uncomfortably flawed or weary from

a 21 month pandemic. Hi-de-ho here we go! Not likely. I 'd reckon it's far more likely that we may already in the grips of "Can I keep my New Year's Resolution?" angst.

Perhaps we're anxious because we believe, or have been led to believe, that we need to be one or more of the following: perfect, accomplished, or Oprah-ized to our best selves, we seek redemption through often unattainable and self-defeating resolutions. Absurdly ambitious but essentially worthwhile promises spring from our lips (and/or our hearts) as Ryan Seacrest bellows out the countdown in Time Square – "I'm never going to get angry at my spouse, children, friends, or fellow congregants again." Or, "I will exercise every day for the rest of my life without fail" I'll be fluent in Swahili by Easter," "No more carbs for me, ever!"

Or, the most open-ended and amorphous resolution of all (the easiest to keep and the easiest to break) --"I will be a better person." We've been conditioned to believe that we do, in fact, need to be "completed" prior to redemption – regardless of whether that redemption comes in the form of relational love, societal acclaim, or theological salvation.

In "The Missing Piece," we learn, along with Silverstein's zen-like creation, that we are only complete or whole as human beings when something is missing; for it is then that we allow a space that can be infused with the unexpected moments of holiness and the lessons of an imperfect life.

For the purposes of this sermon, I ask that we consider the word "holiness" with all the splendid homonyms that present themselves – hole with an "h," and whole with a "w." When we understand holiness as some impossible standard of perfection, we miss the point. I like the idea of highlighting the "hole" in holiness – a space for searching and growing and assembling and reassembling our beliefs and values and character and ideals. Holiness understood as an opening for grace and self-acceptance and even, appropriate resolve.

Too often, though, we want to fill up that space in a misguided quest for wholeness that masks a creeping, underlying drive for perfection. The psychoanalyst Otto Rank calls this the "disease" of perfection and explains how a quest for what we commonly understand as perfection is really a quest of the ego, the smallest part of the self, and not the deeply spiritual quest of our higher selves.

Simply put – perfection relates to the ego; wholeness relates to the soul. Which would you rather nurture? Rank suggests that this tyrannizing drive for perfection has been passed on from each generation to the other in our culture, that this need becomes life-threatening, sick-making and self-abusive.

In my view, the pursuit of wholeness (that is, with and without the "w") is about process and about integration, not about completion or perfection. If we cling to the notion that holiness is perfection and not wholeness, we fall prey to shame

or guilt or self-loathing when our resolutions head south.

On a personal and social level, on a physical and spiritual level, we miss the whole point of what our personal and communal pilgrimages are all about. It's helpful to remember that pilgrimage, in the most classic sense, has always been a challenge that takes the pilgrim in directions he or she didn't expect to go.

For instance, in China fifteen hundred years ago, it meant walking long distances in straw sandals, depending on alms for food, visiting teachers, and trying to settle what's known as the "great matter": "What is this? Who am I? How do I live a life that is impermanent? Given that life is impermanent, how do I live? What is this?"

These are urgent questions when we come to have a strong sense of our own existence in the world; when our mind is somehow turned from its preoccupation with acquiring material goods, acquiring knowledge—being one who knows. Getting. Improving. Exhausting!

As Stephen Batchelor argues in his book, *Alone with Others*, this horizontal dimension of having or getting just goes on and on; it's insatiable. (I touched on this last week) There's never enough. But sometime, something will turn or transform our attention to the deeper dimensions of being and holiness, where we'll ask: What is it to be human – imperfect and incomplete? What is this life? How shall I resolve to live now and also to seek? This becomes the "great matter" in a real, imperfect, ever-evolving world.

As we often discover, despite Groupon's relative success in selling the prospect of achievable perfection, such an outcome doesn't hold up so well in the harsh light of reality. Life involves us humans who are by definition flawed. Yet we're not alone. I wonder: Have you ever seen a perfect tree, entirely symmetrical with no flaws or brown leaves or deformities of any kind? Have you ever seen a perfect rock or beach or dog? (please, don't tell my dog I said that!) As a society, we are prone to lionize our leaders, cast them as mythic exemplars, and then, understandably, we don't feel worthy to emulate them. Or, they fail miserably as an kind of exemplar and we are bewildered.

African American scholars like Cornel West have argued, for example, that Martin Luther King, a complex, flesh and blood, flawed human man, is harmed by his superhuman status. West writes that "if you leave the impression that the only worthwhile changes are by those who were perfect, you cultivate the status quo by suggesting that those with human failings are unqualified, and this can dissuade everyone. West goes on to reflect that King's life and work is a powerful testament to what imperfect mortals can aspire to and achieve.

A mentor of mine once quipped that "a minister without a therapist needs to have their head examined." True that. I've had a variety of therapists over the

years, none more effective and memorable than my last one, in Pittsburgh and then remotely from here. Her name is Betsy and she's retired now (Alas!), but the impact of our time together has been lasting and healing.

Betsy's modality is called Internal Family Systems (IFS, for short) and I suspect one of the reasons it is so effective is that it speaks to something so fundamental about us humans – we are composed of parts. Not personalities, mind you, but parts that make up the whole (with or without that w). These parts take on important and specific roles in our functioning, even if we are unaware of them, especially in assessing and processing the difficult bits – the traumas and losses and places we are stuck. They can show up in healthy ways and in unhealthy ways.

All of these parts have shown up for me – the manager, the firefighter, the mother, the wounded child, and the exile. I make it sound simple, but like anything related to understanding the self, it is not. The goal of this therapy is to align one's parts in a healthy alliance to forge Self leadership. Betsy would say: "Let's call a town meeting of your parts and let them speak." It was transformative. Try it sometimes and listen for some truth telling, some joy, some pain.

At times, during these sessions, my life resembled Robert Fulghum's funky clock (from the reading earlier) that's all "cuck" and no "oo." It didn't seem fair, because I thought I had all of those simulated wood pieces fairly well assembled, and the darn thing should work, shouldn't it??? And eventually, it did.

Perhaps, for many of us, from an early age, a belief may become embedded in us to get things just right, not aligned or healthy – but, right. "We want there to be no loose strands, no rough edges. Sometimes we come pretty close to such perfection and have been surprised to feel our disappointment in the product, Something is missing, We've tamed the life out of it." (Clarke Wells)

We could be talking here about Silverstein's character who discovers after finding it's missing piece that it can no longer roll slowly enough to enjoy the company of a worm or butterfly; and in the end, realizes that perfection is boring, and that fulfillment comes from gently putting the piece down, and continuing its bumpy journey.

I'm guessing that many of us have had the experience of interacting with (or living with) a perfectionist – someone who is deathly afraid of making mistakes or acknowledging incompleteness, and who judges themselves and others harshly when the inevitable mistakes occur. It may be somebody in your family, somebody you work with; somebody you serve on a committee with; maybe it's you.

I wince now at the memory of how I charged through a self-defeating, perfectionistic forced march in my 30's. What I've discovered is that this type of operating in the world and in relationships is destructive, futile and causes only misery. It certainly will never lead to any form of redemption or transcendent

harmony. At this point, for me, the goal is not an A+ life...if I can sustain a solid B (or, even a passing grade) from day to day, well, that's good enough for me. If I can align my parts with a self compassion and integrity that leads to self leadership, then, that's my redemption.

I believe that when we cultivate honesty about ourselves, forgive ourselves, resolve appropriately, and allow ourselves to grapple with our imperfection and incompleteness, our lives actually improve. Our self-esteem may be strengthened. Our relationships will most definitely benefit.

So, I ask you to join me in resolving today to create an opening for holiness and authenticity and for living in the messy moment. As we do this, individually and together in beloved community, we will discover things about ourselves --about our inner resilience, our sense of humor, our integrity, genuine convictions, and faith -for good or for ill. We bring our parts into a supportive alliance with one another.

Let's not waste those moments when the clock only goes "oo" by glossing over, denying, avoiding, or neglecting their message. Many jagged or smooth or misshapen pieces may become lodged in that space we've left faithfully and courageously open -- illness, divorce, loss, boredom, joy, success, uncertainty, amazement, fear, loneliness, and wonder.

Mistakes will be made. The imperfect life is inevitable. Growth is optional. Knowing that, are you willing to keep on rolling with a dynamic hope, come what may? Are you ready to bid farewell to rigid resolutions and allow yourself to be surprised by meanderings? If so, venture forth. Be incomplete and utterly redeemable through your kindness and authenticity, rather than because of your accomplishments or possessions. Pursue improvement without illusions.

Remember that joy and sorrow, success and failure are ever woven fine. Keep your inner toolbox at the ready for assembling and reassembling your parts with humility and humor; stow those extra pieces in your catch-all drawer.

Sing your soul out (Hi-dee-ho) or laugh it up the wind. Cultivate curiosity. Chat with a butterfly. Ask: Who am I? What is it to be human? How shall I manifest this one wild and precious life right now? There are only 356 days remaining, you know, until the ball drops, and the yearly resolution reflex twitches again.

In the meantime, skip the Groupon hotpants, and create an intention (as best you can) to be moderate in all things. All things, that is, but compassion for your self and for those precious pilgrims who roll along beside you, missing pieces and all.

So may it be. Blessed be, Blessed we, and Amen.

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