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Becoming Part of a Story

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[What follows is a slightly revised version of a story that Ted Estess read at the ceremony honoring his retirement after thirty-one years from the position of Dean of the Honors College at the University of Houston. The story, as he explained to those assembled, was written some years ago in Colorado, where he spent time most summers with his wife, Sybil, and his son, Barrett.]

I

Late in the day my thirteen-year-old son Barrett and I row down to the deep water at the end of Sun Valley Lake. He wants to try a new lure called a *Mepps*. To his amazement, the *Mepps* no more than touches the water when a big Rainbow hits it.

We move around the lake for a couple more hours and Barrett tosses that *Mepps* out another two hundred times, but he never gets another strike. He is puzzled. How is it that he catches a trout on the first cast and never touches another the rest of the day?

To a considerable extent, it is a fortuitous matter, this catching a fish. The task of the fisherman is limited merely to doing what he can to encourage good fortune to come his way. At a bare minimum, he doesn't want to get in the way.

All this reminds me of the series of events that led me to being hooked by the University of Houston several decades ago. It began when my phone rang in March of 1976 in Missoula, Montana, where I was visiting professor at the university there. The voice said, "This is Donald Lutz from the University of Houston." I had never heard of Lutz, never thought of the University of Houston.

"I'm calling to invite you to be a consultant for us. Gerald Hinkle recommended you."

I started to ask, "What's a consultant?" And I didn't tell Lutz I wouldn't have known Gerald Hinkle if he walked in the door.

Later, I recalled that I had met Hinkle at a meeting of the National Collegiate Honors Council in October of 1973 in Williamsburg, Virginia. Hinkle, Sam Schuman—who is my distinguished and long-time friend in honors education—and I ended up going out to dinner together. I wanted to try the peanut soup at Aunt Sally's Tavern.

I've met lots of people at lots of meetings, but this one time in Virginia I meet Hinkle. The following year Hinkle meets Lutz at an honors meeting in Arkansas; and then over a year after that Lutz calls me in Montana, thereby setting in motion a series of events that led to Sybil's and my moving to Texas in January of 1977. My intersecting Hinkle in Virginia and then his intersecting Lutz in Arkansas were at least as improbable as the first cast of Barrett's Mepps landing right on top of that trout in the deep water of Sun Valley Lake.

Had I decided to eat a hamburger alone instead of going with Hinkle for some of that god-awful peanut soup at Aunt Sally's Tavern, my life in Houston, Texas, never would have happened. Thirty-one years of life in Houston would have been . . . well, it would have been nothing. Not a thing.

Now somebody might say, "That's just the way life is, Estess. What's the big deal?"

Well, to Estess, it *is* a big deal. It's my life I'm talking about, and I don't like thinking that my life, *as I have lived it*, might never have been. If it might never have been, it somehow seems flimsy, shadowy, inconsequential. I've heard that song about life being but a vapor in mid-summer's day and all that, but somehow I want *my* life to be more substantial, more solid. If it's not, the game doesn't seem worth the candle, and why do I spend so much time thinking about it?

A book arrived in yesterday's mail, a gift from my friend John Smith. The inscription says: "Ted & Barrett, drop everything & read this book." I tend to do what friends tell me to do, so last night I started reading *All the Pretty Horses* by Cormac McCarthy. I came quickly to like John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins, two young cowboys living around San Angelo, Texas. One night John Grady and Rawlins lie down in the middle of a blacktop road to watch the stars:

Rawlins propped the heel of one boot atop the top of the other. As if to pace off the heavens. My daddy run off from home when he was fifteen. Otherwise I'd been born in Alabama.

You wouldnt of been born at all.

What makes you say that?

Cause your mama's from San Angelo and he never would of met her.

He'd of met somebody.

So would she.

So?

So you wouldnt of been born.

I dont see why you say that. I'd of been born somewheres.

How?

Well why not?

If your mama had a baby with her other husband and your daddy had one with his other wife which one would you be?

I wouldnt be neither one of em.

That's right.

Rawlins lay watching the stars. After a while he said: I could still be born. I might look different or somethin. If God wanted me to be born I'd been born.

And if He didnt you wouldnt.

You're makin my goddamn head hurt.

Some years ago, I made *my* goddamn head hurt trying to get through Jean Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Like most folks who tried, I never made it, but I read enough to catch the drift. Sartre uses the French phrase *de trop* to capture something of what John Grady Cole is talking about. An occurrence—like Lacey Rawlins' getting born in Texas—is *de trop* if it has this accidental, fortuitous quality about it. *Contingent* is another word philosophers use to talk about the same thing. An occurrence is contingent if it may just as well have happened as not.

An occurrence—indeed, a life—that depends so thoroughly on the unlikely intersection of Estess and Hinkle at an honors meeting in Virginia and on the subsequent intersection of Hinkle and Lutz at another honors meeting in Arkansas is thoroughly contingent. It is *de trop*. Thinking about that makes my goddamn head hurt.

Now some folks are different from me. When they see how chancy life is, they're ready to have a go at it. They enjoy taking chances as long as they have a chance to take chances.

Others are like Jean Paul Sartre. They bravely face up to the contingency and even to the absurdity of their choices such as my choice to try the peanut soup at Aunt Sally's Tavern.

But for the life of me, I've never been able to respond like that, and I tell you why: I wasn't reared that way. It's in the rearing, that's what it is.

Now philosophers may scoff at this, but it's the only refutation—if I may use the word—to Sartre I've ever come up with. When he says that my life is thoroughly contingent, he implies that my life is as insubstantial as vapor floating off a lake. Again, against such a view, I have to say: I wasn't reared that way.

But I have to confess that my life felt mighty vaporous, mighty *de troppy* in the months after I moved to Texas to direct the nigh-moribund University of Houston Honors Program. I felt that I might as well be—or not be—somewhere else. It was as though I was somewhere I wasn't supposed to be, living a life I wasn't supposed to be living.

"That's why," I said to Michael one day, "I feel so bad." Michael was a therapist-friend who helped me quite a bit during those first months in Texas.

"What's why?" Michael asked.

"Why I feel so bad moving to Houston."

"Last week you told me you didn't think you would ever figure out why you feel so bad, and here you are this week still trying to figure it out."

"That was last week," I said.

“Well?”

“I feel bad because it’s all an accident, my even being in Houston, Texas, directing an honors program that really doesn’t exist. It might just as well not have happened. None of it.”

“That’s curious,” he said, and then he started laughing. I don’t know why, but his laughing got me to giggling, too. Before I had a chance to say anything else, Michael said, “Our time is up for today. But, Ted, there’s another possibility.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Instead of feeling bad you could feel good.”

I said, “I doubt it.”

II

Out here in Colorado this summer I’ve taken to rereading some old books. This week I’m rereading Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It*. I know it’s only a coincidence, but my friend John Smith sent this book to me fifteen years ago, and here this week he sends me another, the one by McCarthy. Talking about growing up in Missoula, Montana, Norman Maclean writes:

By the middle of that summer when I was seventeen I had yet to see myself become part of a story. I had as yet no notion that life every now and then becomes literature—not for long, of course, but long enough to be what we best remember, and often enough so that what we eventually come to mean by life are those moments when life, instead of going sideways, backwards, forward, or nowhere at all, lines out straight, tense and inevitable, with a complication, climax, and, given some luck, a purgation, as if life had been made and not [just] happened.

To tell the truth, that’s the way I was reared to think of life. The Baptists did it to me. Good-hearted preachers and widow women told me that Good God Almighty had nothing better to do than make a plan for my life. I thus came to expect my life to line out “straight, tense and inevitable” and for all the parts of it to go together like parts of a well-made story.

At the same time, other good folks were saying, “Young man, you are an American: you can do anything you want to do, be anything you want to be.” In other words, I was free to make up my life any old way I wanted to. But while I was trying to make it up, it felt like my life was going “sideways, backwards, forwards, or nowhere at all.”

Now this is a strange, even contradictory situation for a young man to be in: to be hearing, on the one hand, that somehow your life is planned even before you begin living it and, on the other, that your life is up for grabs. The first places you before one great Necessity; the other places you before an infinite number of possibilities.

To some extent what the Baptists said about life made me feel pretty good. After all, it was rather invigorating to think that Good God Almighty had a plan for little old Teddy Estess way down there in Tylertown, Mississippi. That view made things pretty simple: all you have to do is figure out the plan and get on it. But if you don't, you are, as we say, up a creek without a paddle.

The problem, of course, arose in the middle of life when I saw that something so momentous as moving to the fair city of Houston, Texas, and taking on a leadership role in honors at the University of Houston turned on so fragile a matter as a cup of peanut soup. I didn't seem to be living a life that had been made by any Great Maker or Planner.

Nor did I seem to be living a life of my own making. It wasn't clear what story, if any, I was in; but it was clear that whatever was happening wasn't altogether of my own making. It was as though my life was being constructed out of fortuitous happenings and tortured choices, happenings and choices that could just as well have been otherwise or not been at all. Mine seemed a tenuous little life with no foundation.

"Michael," I said the next week, "I feel like I'm walking on thin air."

"That's the way I felt when I decided not to be a priest anymore."

"*What?*" I said. "You were a priest? I didn't know that."

"For eighteen years. I even taught theology in Rome for a while. Studied there, too."

"Then you know what I'm talking about?"

"Maybe," he said. "Perhaps you feel like you are walking on thin air because of a discrepancy. It's the discrepancy between a picture you have of life and the life you're living."

"How's that?"

"Well, the life you are living seems more fluid, risky and chancy than your picture of life allows, that's all. It's a common thing. Just change your picture of life and you remove the discrepancy. Maybe then you wouldn't feel so bad."

"But, Michael," I said, "don't you think there's something to what the Baptists said about—"

"Ted," he said, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but our time is up for today."

What I was getting ready to say when Michael called time on me was that maybe the old Baptist widow women weren't complete idiots in suggesting that one might live life as though it is made—and before made, planned. Maybe one can see one's life that way.

And wouldn't it be something to have both things at once: at the same time to acknowledge the fluidity and contingency in one's life, even to enjoy that, *and* to have the solidity and firmness that come from living a life that, in some sense, is made, where all the parts seem to fit.

The next week, I said, "Michael, I want both."

"Both what?"

"I want the old picture I had of life *and* to be truthful about feeling that my life turns on chance."

"*That's* curious," he said. "I thought we decided last week that the discrepancy is painful. To remove the pain you have to remove the discrepancy, which means, Ted, that you have to give up that old picture of your life as being planned before you live it. You just have to give that up."

I said, "I don't want to give that up."

"That's not surprising," he said. "You were reared that way. Still . . ." And here Michael's sentence trailed off and silence took over for a while. After a minute or two, I asked, "Well, what are you thinking?"

"It's a possibility," he said.

"Really?"

"Really. But I still think you're making a mistake."

"What's that?"

"You want prospectively what you can only have retrospectively."

I wasn't sure I was understanding a thing the man was saying, so it made sense to ask, "What are you saying?"

"Just what I said," he said. "I mean that retrospectively—when, one day in the future, you find yourself looking back, say, after thirty years—life might acquire the kind of stability and firmness your old picture promised you. Seen retrospectively, the story of your life may acquire a degree of stability and firmness, but I think you will have to wait a while for it."

"Wait for what?" I asked.

"Wait before you can acquire a deep-down sense that your life could not have been—nor would you have wanted it to be—any other way."

"But you said that I'm making a mistake. What's the mistake?"

"Ted, it's what I said. The mistake is to expect prospectively what you can only have retrospectively. Prospectively, your life will continue to be fluid, chancy."

“That’s bad,” I said.

“There’s another possibility.”

I said, “I doubt it.”

He said, “You could find it interesting or fun. You would have to practice, but you could.”

“Could what?”

“Ted, aren’t you listening? I’m saying that you could, or may, find the chanciness of life interesting or just plain fun.”

I said, “I doubt it.”

“As I said, *you* would have to practice a long time.”

“But, Michael,” I asked, “what about that old Baptist picture?”

“That’s not just Baptist, you know,” he said. And then he took off talking about St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. I almost interrupted to tell him that I was paying for me to talk to him, not to listen to him talk to me. He went on to say that, when Saint Augustine was forty-five years old, he wrote the story about how he got to be who he was. By that point, his life had acquired a kind of inevitability about it. That’s what gave him authority as a teacher. He felt as though his life could have been no other way, that his life was as it was from the very beginning.

I wanted to say, “That’s what I want, Michael, and that’s what I don’t have and don’t expect to have.” But I didn’t.

Then Michael said, “Whenever I taught Augustine to the seminarians, I asked them to memorize one line from *The Confessions*. The line goes like this: *sic curas unumquemque nostrum tamquam solum cures, et sic omnes tamquam singulos.*”

“Michael,” I said, “Baptists don’t do Latin.”

“Oh,” he said, “I forgot.” Then he went off talking again, this time explaining that when Augustine wrote that line he was at a sufficient remove from certain events of his life that he could see how things fit together, even the random details. By that point in his life, Augustine saw that he had become part of a story.

“Michael,” I said, “what does the Latin mean?”

“Oh,” he said, “it means, ‘He cares for every one of us as though he had no other for whom to care. He cares for all as he cares for each.’”

“That’s very curious,” I said.

“Yes,” he said, “it is.”

Over the years I’ve thought a good deal about what my friend said that day. In many ways, he was right: I was making a mistake. I sometimes still

make it. The mistake is to expect always for life to unfold as it ought to unfold, as it has to unfold. To want too quickly for the pieces of life to cohere as in a well-wrought story.

I've tried to give it up, but I sometimes catch myself making the same mistake. Only now, I don't call it a mistake. I call it *my way of getting on*.

But at times you may see a pattern in life and see life lining out straight, tense, and inevitable. You may see your life becoming part of a story. And the story of your life may seem so stable that it feels as though it might well have been made in advance of your living it. Even those things that presented themselves as so much sand blowing in the wind may seem, retrospectively, somehow inevitable. Without each one of them, you would have missed part of the story and every part somehow seems necessary—even good—for the whole life to be what it is. At some point, somehow the parts seem mysteriously to fit together and form a whole grander and more satisfying than anything you ever could have imagined.

III

As I leave the deanship of the Honors College after these thirty-one years, I am inclined to think of my life in honors education in something of the same kind of way: things could not have been, nor would I want them to be, any way other than the way they were.

But once you get past fifty or sixty years old, you've had world and time enough to see why Saint Augustine would also confess that "the soul is a great abyss." This great explorer of the interior abyss hereby fesses up to a deep-down and abiding ignorance about himself. Only in the shadow of a confession of abysmal ignorance about the deepest things of himself could he venture something so audacious, something so comically exuberant, as, "He cares for every one of us as though He had no other for whom to care. He cares for all as he cares for each."

Would that it were so. May we do our part to make it so.

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