

My Life in Thirds

On Monday, I will turn 27. This is significant only because it allows my life to be divided almost nearly into thirds. From the time I was born till I was nine, I was living with or shuffling between parents who shouldn't have been together; I lived in and out of foster homes, missions, soup lines, and constantly on the move because of a parent who couldn't or wouldn't pay her rent. From the time I was nine till I was eighteen, I lived in a Children's Home, which was basically a group home for children whose parents couldn't take care of them. For the first time, though, my life had some stability. At eighteen, I left the Children's Home because I no longer believed Jesus was the Son of God (the home was fundamentalist Baptist) and because I wanted intellectual freedom. From the time I was eighteen till now, I have mostly been in school getting my bachelor's degree and then in graduate school working on my Ph.D. At this point when my life is almost neatly divided into thirds, I have started to wonder: Which third of my life has had the greatest influence in determining who I am? Am I still that poor kid seeking security, the Children's Home kid who wanted to prove that he could compete with anyone else, or the college educated adult struggling to master what he needs to know to contribute to his chosen profession?

Today I was talking with an acquaintance and she wondered aloud if her lack of inclination to get remarried stemmed from losing both her parents when she was a teenager. I have a brother who has fresh grudges and scars from his years in the Children's Home, and still has fresh emotional wounds from what our guardians did a decade-and-a-half ago. Many times, I find myself defending some action or thought by saying, "I have always been that way, felt that, thought that." For instance, as long as I can remember, I have enjoyed reading science books, been insecure about my appearance, and, while I appeared self-confident, over-full of self-doubt.

The truth, I think, is that I have been and am determined by my past to the extent that I have not confronted it. For many issues, I am who I am because of conscious choices. Contrary to those religious folk who think otherwise, I am an atheist because I rationally examined the evidence and concluded that it did not warrant the belief in a deity. I am a cognitive neuroscientist because that is what gives me the greatest pleasure in studying, not because of any discernable event in my childhood. I like to read books, not because I always have, but because I find that again and again, I want to read.

For many other issues, I have been and still am a product of my past. I am not only a product of what happened, but also of how the child-Christopher was able to interpret the events around me. For example, as I wrote earlier, until I started thinking about it, my financial life was a direct reflection of my mother's. Also, I too easily, and unemotionally, dismiss people from my life; I think that this is because I have had too many people promise to always be there only to have them leave without explanation. Because I felt that I had to in order to psychologically survive, and because the Children's Home was fundamentalist Baptist, I also have a great tendency to be dichotomous; my world has been filled with saints and sinners, acontextual rights and wrongs.

Who am I? Right now, I am both a mixture of numerous unconscious integrations I made as a child and of those integrations I have made consciously as an adult. In my effort to live consciously, I have started taking responsibility for who I am, what I think,

and what I feel; I am no longer pawning off my identity on distant memories. Anyone who wants to can justify failure, but I know that it is my responsibility to continue molding myself into the man that I want to be.

Perhaps the best way to sum up this reflective chapter of my life is with lines from George Michael's "Waiting (Reprise)":

All those insecurities
That have held me down for so long
I can't say that I've found a cure for these
But at least I know them
So they're not so strong

You look for your dreams in heaven
But what the hell are you supposed to do
When they come true?

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