



## Strange and Glorious Amphibians

Anyone who is both honest and paying attention cannot fail to recognize that we humans are strange creatures, often mysteries to ourselves and to others. There is something unfathomable about each of us, a depth which we find difficult, even impossible, to plumb. The generally kind and loving mother loses herself in a fit of verbal outrage. The generally selfish adolescent male does some act of manly service for a younger sibling or a stranger. The always confident leader loses himself in a wave of self-doubt, insecurity and narcissistic self-preoccupation. The entrepreneurial manager, so consistently sure of where he is going and how he is going to get there, awakens one morning wondering why he is taking the trip at all. The millennial teacher heroically gives to a group of struggling students, offering a depth of love which heretofore had lain unrecognized and dormant. We frequently are a surprise to ourselves. In a moment of need and distress, we respond with such preternatural grace that it leaves us wondering "who was that masked person?" Or, in a flash, faster than consciousness, we find ourselves in a highly distressed brain state, and from unwanted depths there arises the dreaded beast within.

We can recognize self as possessing a more or less definite character, to which we generally conform, and which generally adheres to certain community norms. But, what of the ways we act out of character, at times more virtuously than expected and at times uncharacteristically vicious? And what of those quiet, inner, even spiritual promptings which suggest that some of our personal and community norms are somehow off the mark? At times we find ourselves asking of self: Who is that man, that woman? What did I just do, and why did I just do it? In good and in ill, we find people to be mysteries, and none more mysterious than self. Walker Percy begins *Lost in the Cosmos*, with an engaging reflection on the manners and psyche of modern man, with the following questions:

Why is it that of all the billions and billions of strange objects in the cosmos—novas, quasars, pulsars, black holes—you are beyond doubt the strangest? Why is it possible to learn more in ten minutes about the Crab Nebula in Taurus, which is 6,000 light years away, than you presently know about yourself, even though you've been stuck with yourself all your life?<sup>1</sup>

While Percy's questions are offered tongue-in-cheek, they point to the sacred truth that we humans are a profound mystery. It is this mystery of persons that makes history, literature, drama, poetry, art, music, philosophy, all of the humane letters to be so very interesting. Yet, if education is something more than communicating factoids of history or skills in mathematics, if as we believe, education is, among other things, the formation of character, then the educator, parent or teacher must have a clear understanding of why persons do what they do. Only then can the educator understand how to support growth.

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<sup>1</sup>Percy, Walker. *Lost in the Cosmos*. New York, New York: Picador, 1983.

To understand why persons do what they do, we must have some understanding of what persons are. To understand what persons are, we must come to some conclusion regarding the relationship between matter and spirit, body and soul, brain and mind. Over the course of the last 2,500 years, the western tradition has proposed three basic models for understanding the relationship between body and soul. Perhaps, humans are mere matter, only a body, mind a mere epiphenomenon of brain. Or, perhaps there are distinct material and spiritual realities, humans are a body with a soul, and mind drives the body, like one might drive a car, the brain being the steering wheel. Finally, perhaps there is one reality that is both material and spiritual. Perhaps, like amphibians who inhabit both water and land, humans inhabit the one material-spiritual reality, as a body-spirit unity possessing a mind that is coextensive with both brain and spirit.

That humans are mere matter, only a body, is an idea as old as the ancient Greek atomist, Democritus (460-370 BC), and as modern as the twenty-first century's "four horsemen of atheism."<sup>2</sup> Adherents of this view believe that humans, like all components of the cosmos, are the product of a complex web of natural cause and effect that can be explained by the equations of physics. Humans are nothing more than a complex machine that can be understood and programmed like a computer. Such is the dominant view among secular scientists, including social scientists (which includes faculty in education departments). So, it is not surprising that much of contemporary educational practice is built upon materialist assumptions. Design the right educational inputs and one will get the right educational outputs. So, the materialist educator believes. Pity the children so seemingly educated. We forget that as he treats a child like a material thing, he begins to feel himself a material thing, and then he begins to act like a material thing.

The belief that matter and spirit, body and soul are distinct realities is at least as old as the earliest major Christian heresy, Gnosticism. Originating in the first century AD, Gnostics held that matter and spirit were radically different substances. Gnostics distinguished between a supreme, hidden God of spirit and a malevolent lesser divinity (sometimes associated with the Yahweh of the Old Testament) who created matter. Material realities were understood as evil. Spiritual realities were understood as good. For two thousand years, gnostic ways of thinking have been a temptation to Christians. Matter and body have too frequently been seen as the source of evil, while mind, soul and spirit have been seen as the source of good. The body has been rejected and the self overly spiritualized. Rather than seeing the body as integral to all spiritual pursuits, it has been seen at best as irrelevant and at worst as a hindrance. There is a reason that St. Paul exhorts the church at Rome "by the mercies of God, to present **[their] bodies** as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God."<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, there is no formation of character apart from an embodied transformation.

Although he considered himself to be a devout Catholic, the 17th century French philosopher and mathematician Rene Descartes, like the ancient Gnostics, was a dualist. He conceived of matter and spirit, body and soul, brain and mind as being radically different substances. British philosopher Gilbert Ryle described Descartes's view as the "ghost in the machine." Man's soul or mind was understood to direct the body through the pineal gland, a tiny structure in the brain. If, as Descartes suggests, the ghost drives the machine—autonomous mind directs the body—then one can think himself and will himself into right action. But Descartes was wrong. While it is an alluring fantasy, no human can think and will himself into right acting. We all have our perduring sins, those sin patterns that have troubled us for years, if not decades. We know the sin to be wrong, and will ourselves to be different, but like St. Paul we cry out, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do

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<sup>2</sup> On 30 September 2007, four prominent atheists (Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett) met at Hitchens' residence in Washington, D.C., for a private two-hour unmoderated discussion. The event was videotaped and titled "The Four Horsemen".

<sup>3</sup> Romans 12:1 (NRSV)

the very thing I hate ... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."<sup>4</sup> We cannot think and will ourselves to right acting.

Descartes's error can best be illustrated by the story of Phineas Gage. On September 13, 1848, Gage was leading a work crew who were blasting rock while preparing the roadbed for the Rutland & Burlington Railroad south of the town of Cavendish, Vermont. Setting a blast involved boring a hole deep into an outcropping of rock; adding blasting powder, a fuse and sand; then, compacting this charge into the hole using a tamping iron. Gage was doing this when the iron sparked against the rock and the powder exploded. Rocketing from the hole, the tamping iron (three feet seven inches long and 1 1/4 inches in diameter) entered on the left side of Gage's face, passing back of the left eye and out at the top of the head. After Gage's accident, his employers considered the change in his mind so drastic that they could not give him his job back. It was said of Phineas Gage that:

The equilibrium or balance, so to speak, between his intellectual faculties and animal propensities, seems to have been destroyed. He is fitful, irreverent, indulging at times in the grossest profanity (which was not previously his custom), manifesting but little deference for his fellows, impatient of restraint or advice when it conflicts with his desires, at times pertinaciously obstinate, yet capricious and vacillating, devising many plans of future operations, which are no sooner arranged than they are abandoned in turn for others appearing more feasible. A child in his intellectual capacity and manifestations, he has the animal passions of a strong man. Previous to his injury, although untrained in the schools, he possessed a well-balanced mind, and was looked upon by those who knew him as a shrewd, smart businessman, very energetic and persistent in executing all his plans of operation. In this regard his mind was radically changed, so decidedly that his friends and acquaintances said he was "no longer Gage."<sup>5</sup>

Suffering from traumatic brain injury, he was, to his friends, no longer Gage. Damage to his brain meant significant damage to his mind. Since then, 150 years of neuroscience has revealed how intimate the connection between mind and brain is. The adult brain has an estimated 100 billion neurons, each with an average of 10,000 connections directly linked to other neurons, but at birth, the brain is the most disorganized of all the structures of the human body. Any human change requires a brain change. Any human change results in a brain change. The development of a child's mind is coexistent with the development of the child's brain. All human thinking, desiring and acting is mediated through the brain. All education and all character formation require brain change. The human brain is the biological anchor of all our mental and psychological experience, but it is not the sole determinant of our psychological experience.

One might ask, what does all this have to do with education? The answer: it is fundamental. Contrary to both the materialist and the dualist and in accord with modern neuroscience, we join Charlotte Mason in echoing a New Testament understanding of human nature. Persons are not just bodies, nor are persons a body with a soul. Persons are a body-soul unity.

**We take Children as Persons.** In the first place, we take children seriously as persons like ourselves, only more so; the first question that comes before us is—what do we understand by a person? We believe the thinking, invisible soul and acting, visible body to be one in so intimate a union that "nor soul helps flesh more now than flesh helps soul."

If the doctrine of the Resurrection had not been revealed to us, it would be a necessity, in however unimagined a form, to our conception of a person. The countenance of our friend with the thousand delicate changes which express every nuance of feeling; the refinement, purpose, perception, power, revealed in his hand, the dear familiar carriage, these are all inseparable from our conception of the person. Whatever is advanced by the

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 7:15-19 (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup> Harlow, John M. "Recovery from the Passage of an Iron Bar Through the Head" in *Publications of the Massachusetts Medical Society*, v. 2 n. 3 (1868).

physiologist and the rational psychologist as to the functions of that most marvelous brain cortex, the seat of consciousness, as furnishing us with images and impulses, of the motor nerves as originating action, of the brain as the seat of habit; of the possibility of educating a child in all becoming habits of act, in all sweet habits of thought, by taking measures to secure that these habits become, as it were, a memory of the brain to be awakened by due stimuli, all these things we believe and receive; and we believe further that the possibility of a rational education rests upon this physiological basis, only fully discovered to us within the present generation.

For the rest, we believe the person wills and thinks and feels; is always present, though not always aware of himself; is without parts or faculties; whatever he does, he does, all of him, whether he take a walk or write a book. It is so much the habit to think of the person as a dual being, flesh and spirit, when he is, in truth, one, that it is necessary to clear our minds on this subject. The person is one and not several, and he is no more compact of ideas on the one hand than he is of nervous and muscular tissues on the other. That he requires nutriment of two kinds is no proof that he is two individuals. Pleasant and well-cooked food makes man of a cheerful countenance, and wine gladdens the heart of man, and we all know the spiritual refreshment of a needed meal. On the other hand, we all know the lack-luster eye and pallid countenance of the well-fed who receive none of that other nutriment which we call ideas; quick and living thought is as necessary for the full and happy development of the body as it is for that of the soul.<sup>6</sup>

When we think of our bodies and of the wonderful powers they possess, we say, under our breath, "Great and marvelous are Thy works, Lord God Almighty." Now, let us consider that still more wonderful Self which we cannot see and touch as we can our bodies, but which thinks and loves and prays to God, which is happy or sad, good or not good. This inner self is, as we have said, like a vast country much of which is not yet explored, or like a great house, built as a maze, in which you cannot find your way about. People usually talk of 'Ourselves' as made up of Body, Mind, Heart and Soul; and we will do the same, because it is a convenient way to describe us ... Everybody appears to know about his own heart and soul and mind; though, perhaps, the truth is that there is no division into parts, but that the whole of each of us has many different powers and does many different things at different times.<sup>7</sup>

We persons are amphibians, material-spiritual, body-soul, brain-mind unities, wonderfully made, often strange and mysterious even to ourselves but glorious.

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<sup>6</sup> Mason, Charlotte. *School Education*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989. 63-65.

<sup>7</sup> Mason, Charlotte. *Ourselves*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989. 33, 34.