



Reflections for My Student-Aged Self

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Deuteronomy 30: 11–20 Ephesians 3: 14–end

It's a great pleasure to be back in Cambridge and particularly here in Trinity – a place to be loved for many reasons but not least because it was George Herbert's college and also Tennyson's. I always touch base with Tennyson as I come into this chapel. The cunning sculptor has put a tobacco pipe and pouch of tobacco leaves just behind him and that's a habit that I share with him.

I've been asked to think about what I would do if I could, as it were, travel backwards in time and go back to my student self and give my student self some presumably earnest advice based on the gravitas and wisdom of the years. Well, I think there are various problems with that, but one of them is I would simply have to ask the question, to which of my student selves would I be speaking? I came up there bursting with all kinds of possibilities. It was that protean, shape shifting time of one's life, those intense three years when the whole thing was to try out, to discover, to become the other, to have some sense of how one might go and how we all, I think, changed, developed and grew. So I could try and identify which of the different selves there were and what advice I would give.

There was the bewildered, astonished and slightly insecure fresher, coming up like everybody else with a sense of imposter syndrome and desperately trying to fit in. The thing for everyone at that time and certainly for me was that I came up and I was astonished by this place because it is, frankly, astonishing. I loved the poet Edmund Spenser and I was going to be in a college that Edmund Spenser had been in. I cared for Coleridge: I could walk down the same streets. I was in awe. But the first thing I discovered when I came up was that that wasn't the way to behave. The thing was to be completely cool. To be bored and slightly blasé about everything, and you had to learn to do this in about the first three hours at Cambridge when you were in fact bursting with excitement! The thing in my day was that you had to act with a sort of worldly ennui to suggest that you had already seen through a whole series of things that in fact you hadn't seen at all. If I could whisper in my younger ear I'd say, forget it, you love this place and you're not going to be able to keep this up!

It didn't help that we Freshers were not the only ones who were pretending in some sense and shielding ourselves from the sheer astonishment of being here. There were a number of dons then (and I don't know if this would be the case now) who had a sort of air of distant irony about everything. They seemed to be wreathed in so many layers of irony that they couldn't remember what they were being ironic about in the first place. So there was a sense of us all in this extraordinary place and we were covering ourselves in a sort of disguise because enthusiasm is also vulnerability. It was an unnecessary gauze and that needed to be removed.

Let me look a little more at the particular. I can think of three of my undergraduate selves that I was either simultaneously or moved through and then in my final year a surprising fourth. There was, as you would imagine, the would-be poet who'd chosen Pembroke because of Spenser and was delighted to discover Kit Smart had been there too, and Ted Hughes. There was the poet who was constantly reading, definitely wanting to be a poet, but writing really awful gushy, sub-Keatsian pastiche. For a long time I was reading aloud the *Ode to a Nightingale* like the kid at the back of an Eric Clapton concert with the air guitar: I was trying to make that sound but with absolutely no idea how to do it. Well, to the would-be poet I would say keep going – it is going to happen in the end. Don't give up the five-finger exercises and keep reading. But I would say to the poet, don't be embarrassed about falling in love and being deeply under the influence of one poet. Yes, you're going to have a now slightly embarrassing Hopkins phase, when everything is breathless and hyphenated, and you will have your Larkin phase when you pretend everything is bleaker, but don't worry because you will learn from every one of those poets. It's difficult and complicated in terms of our human loves to have more than one lover at a time or even a succession of lovers in a row. But in the literary world, in terms of the feeding of your imagination, you can do that to your heart's content and you'll be all the better for it and there are no heart breaks or break-ups at the end: the poets are still there on your shelves and still there for others as well. So to the poet I'd say, keep going: it'll come right in the end.

I wouldn't be saying that to the next self that was alongside the poet self and that was of course the ardent lover, the person who had been very much influenced by Shelley and the romantic notion of loving everybody equally. A series of polyamorous *menages* were on the horizon. My ardent, emotional and erotic life was something like Shelley and Byron with a touch of Woodstock. And of course that was in some ways a disastrous and messy and difficult way of living and led to hurts and heartaches that one never intended. One had to learn and grow through those. Now if I turned up to the ardent lover now he would pay no attention to me as he would have better things to do but I suppose I would want to say, you may not always get the desire of your heart but, as Augustine said, you may one day find the heart of your desire – you may one day find, as you read in that odd little piece that you wrote for the English moralists paper and as Socrates said through Aristophanes, that love is the desire and the pursuit of the whole. All that you are doing now is desiring and pursuing fragments, fragments of yourself and fragments of others, but you will one day desire and pursue the whole.

So there was the would-be poet and the ardent lover. My third figure in those first couple of years was the sometime atheist now becoming more and more openly agnostic. And actually it was the poet and the lover who had started to undermine the hard-core atheism of the atheist. I came up trying to believe a very reductive view of the world – an entirely imminent frame, material account of the world. We didn't have Dawkins in those days but we did have B.F. Skinner and a few others of that behavioural type and partly because I'd had a religious upbringing and I wanted to take revenge on it and remove God entirely from the equation I went for this completely material account. Unfortunately, discovering Keats also meant discovering extraordinary aching beauty and discovering that at its most intense the poem seemed to bring you beyond even itself, that somewhere at the back of this apparently secular poem about being ill and listening to a nightingale were magic casements opening on perilous seas in fairly lands forlorn and something beyond the world was coming into the world, something transcendent for which the finite set of the words or the finite set of the neurons could not fully account. Whatever else was happening when I read the *Ode to a Nightingale* it wasn't just the unwinding of a selfish gene. So I had begun to open to the possibility of the transcendent, the possibility of the divine. Fortunately, because I wanted

to study medieval and renaissance literature in particular I was told that there were certain things that I ought to read and one of them was St Augustine's *Confessions*. That book was one of the most astonishing and it made me realise what I would also say to my atheist-opening-to-agnostic self if I went back – be prepared for change. You are only at the beginning of a discovery: there is more to know.

When I read Augustine's *Confessions* in this little Penguin Classics paperback I was reminded of the great West Door at Ely Cathedral, which is huge but with a tiny little door inside it. There was this astonishing experience of opening this tiny door, walking through it and coming into this vast, beautiful, sculpted, suggestive, glorious place, built over many generations by many hands, which is the largest space you've ever been in. That was my experience of opening up St Augustine. I had acquired from somewhere what C.S. Lewis calls chronological snobbery: the presumption that we are all somehow better and wiser and more thoughtful and more intellectually capable than the previous generations and that was why we had been able to make digital watches. But once you get into the mind of Augustine, you realise how great a mind can be: a mind which is far more spacious, far more beautifully furnished, and far more full of awe and wonder than yours has ever been up to this point. It took away for ever my sense that either we as a society or I as a person had outgrown Christianity. I had to reckon with the fact that becoming a Christian was not necessarily intellectual suicide: on the contrary, it might be the beginning of an extraordinary intellectual adventure – and so it turned out to be for me.

So, in fact, I did get to that point where I had an experience very close to the one that Augustine speaks of when he says:

Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you!
Lo, you were within,
but I outside, seeking there for you,
and upon the shapely things that you have made
I rushed headlong [*that was mainly me as the ardent lover!*] – I misshapen.
You were with me, but I was not with you.
They held me back far from you, those things ...
but you called, you shouted, you broke through my deafness,
you flared, blazed, banished my blindness;
you lavished your fragrance, I gasped; and now I pant for you.

I did have that extraordinary sense, suddenly, that the God I had been seeking out there was really in here and could flow in and through and back and forth in everything, which is more or less what our text from Deuteronomy says.

So I became a Christian: I showed up to my college Chaplain's room, I took some confirmation classes, I was confirmed in February 1980 at a university confirmation service in Christ's College. So, lastly, what would I say to that fourth student self – the newbie young Christian? I would say very loudly that that was the person of all of them who needed most advice! For goodness sake, don't think you know it all. Don't go running around correcting everyone else, don't go wagging your finger, don't go saying that you've found the truth. Remember that your beloved Augustine said *credo ut intelligam*: I believe in order to understand. You've only just begun to understand: you are at the beginning of an extraordinary imaginative and intellectual adventure. Wait until you grow a bit. So I guess Paul in Ephesians would come into that student and say: be rooted and grounded in the love of Christ, then we can take a few years to get the length, the breadth, the height, the depth. And, if I were going back to say that, as I am now, I would still be somebody still growing.

So the last thing I want to say is this. Perhaps, since we can't really go back and intervene in our student lives without causing some awful time loop in a *Back to the Future*-esque way, let's consider what could happen and that's this: my student self, every one of them – the lunatic, the lover and the poet – are all in here, somewhere. We grow like trees; all the rings are there. Wordsworth says the child is father to the man. It might be pertinent for me to ask, what advice would my ardent student self have to give to this 60 year-old smiling public man, as Yeats did (except I am older than he was and less public)? I think my student self would come and say: Don't conform. Don't live up to the expectations. Be as courageous, be as bold, as ready to grow and change your mind as ever you were when you were an undergraduate in the 70s. Don't settle down. I think that young student self would say to me, remember that chilling line of Philip Larkin's when he's looking at people growing middle aged, and says, Something is pushing them to the side of their own lives. Don't let that happen: stay in the centre. Dare to be different, *courage!* Keep growing, keep being amazed. I hope I can still sometimes hear that student self saying just that to me. May it be so. Amen.