

My Story

Tony Turnbull

I was born in North Tyneside, into a Roman Catholic middle-class family with strong working-class values and principles handed down from a Scottish and Irish ancestry. I was one of five children and my parents were hard working, loved us, and always wanted the best for us. We did not identify with any particular social class; 'working middle class with intention to do better' would be the best description of our family culture.

My earliest 'learnings' were to work hard, respect and obey authority, look good, and gain other people's respect. It was very important not to look stupid, to avoid making a fool of myself (even when having fun), and not be embarrassed. Making mistakes, particularly in public, was something to be avoided at all cost as this would reduce or risk damaging the reputation we desired.,

This philosophy was of course strongly reinforced by the Roman Catholic religion. You are instructed at an early age that you are not worthy of much as a human being, except as a creation of God who created you in his image albeit in a state of sin! Mistakes are, in the main, treated as sins for which you need to seek forgiveness from those with authority, acting on behalf of a supreme being: "Forgive me father for I have sinned, and I am not worthy to receive you" repeated three times before being permitted to receive the Eucharist. No mention of 'mistakes' anywhere in the rituals and prayers of the Catholic religion.

So, by the time I was in my early teens I viewed myself as someone who wasn't particularly talented, but able to work really hard, who followed the rules and didn't expose my weaknesses, and stood a good chance of having a good life and being relatively successful.

Although I have become more conscious of this perspective much later in my life, at that time and for most of my working life I lived unconsciously in this philosophy, often struggling in it and never ever questioning it but rather reinforcing it. Indeed, all my successful results and decisions, of which there were many, I attributed unquestioningly to this approach, never

acknowledging that it might also be significantly limiting my continued growth and transformation as a human being.

Although I sometimes attempted with great resolve in times of disappointment, failure, and letting myself and others down, to adopt a new attitude and behavior, I see now that all these genuine attempts for 'character change' were still shaped and anchored in what I believed was the 'Real Me'. I became very accomplished at this.

I built a reputation for being wise, having sound morals, being a great coach, intelligent, and in general an upright citizen who was respected. I relished this reputation and constantly took care to ensure it remained intact and unsullied. In those moments when I risked losing it by losing my temper, being nasty, putting others down and failing, I became accomplished at humbly apologising in a genuine way, and those who knew and loved me were quick to acknowledge that this was not the real me. I even believed that myself, which in a weird way allowed me to feel genuine and honest inside (but at a deeper level still believing I was someone who was not talented at most things but, by working hard at everything, was still worthy).

In summary I was an imperfect being trying to be and look perfect and not seeing the limiting grip of this approach. The risk of losing my reputation was always the senior consideration over the risk of being and behaving differently.

This way of being guided me successfully if not perfectly through a wonderful marriage to an extraordinarily loving, successful and beautiful woman, and raising three equally beautiful and successful children. I had a successful if not perfect, twenty-five-year career in Procter & Gamble and then embarked on a successful, if not perfect twenty-five year career in building a consulting company which became known around the world and uniquely valued (ironically, but maybe not surprisingly, in the field of Human relationships, culture change and transformational leadership), working with the top global multinationals at all levels, from factory and office to Boardrooms.

The starting point and success, if not perfect, of my consulting career I owe to an extraordinary human being; Charlie Smith. I benefitted majorly from his help in my career and work in P&G, and then in developing my

competency as a consultant. The biggest acknowledgement that I make to Charlie, although I didn't see it at the time, is that he started me on the road that would eventually have me see with unfiltered awareness, the limiting nature of my character, in all of its great and 'not good' manifestations. They are all still present and often at work, but I now have a conscious choice and freedom to be and act outside of these - what he would call my "Island of Sanity" or my "Overview Effect" - two great viewing points!

In everyday speak, I have not changed my 'Character' but rather, I can now choose to free myself from all my hitherto unconscious and automatic characteristics. Of course, the process of building more unconscious characteristics continues daily, even moment-to-moment. I guess that is the magic, mystery, wonder and puzzle of being human; the parallel process of building permanence into your identity and freeing yourself from it.

Do I regret taking seventy-five years to see this? Yes and No!

In my unconscious way I would say yes, but I worked hard to get there so I deserve it! My conscious way would say No - what a journey, and there's more to come, but more importantly I'm way more relaxed and energised than ever.

Do I think I've finally found the answer to being a perfect human being? Yes & No.

My unconscious way would say maybe, but if I work hard on it possibly I will finally get it! My conscious way says, "Who knows, who cares" - the journey is one of awareness, moment-to-moment being free to choose with integrity and beauty for my heartfelt intentions in whatever the matter at hand.

Interestingly my relationship with my catholicism (the small 'c' is significant, i.e. catholic as universal, not Catholic as The Religion), is in a great shape. I make mistakes and do my best to clean them up, learn from them, and wherever possible correct them and not use them as supporting evidence for my unworthiness and lack of talent. I leave the word 'sin' to those who find a value in that concept.

My relationship and viewing point with a supreme being, God, is that if one exists (I believe in God as a viewing point for my life - my definition of faith is acting as though something is so, rather than an indisputable fact to be

pushed onto others), then I am fully part of his/her creation and therefore don't have to prove or earn my worthiness on his/her behalf. All I need to do is engage with myself and other human beings as worthy and be true, or better said, be conscious, aware and free to choose how I engage and love them. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr expresses this most eloquently.

I still go to mass most Sundays and even read the lessons, but from a different point of view - fully embracing them and their intent without adding the Religious controlling interpretations. After all, didn't JC spend most of his time attacking the Organised Religions of his day? God knows what he would have to say about The Religion and other World Organisations of today.

PS. As I reread the above I'm struck by how my two ways of being, although distinct from each other are inextricably woven into my thinking and writing. It has me wonder whether the human being is essentially a sentient and spiritual being that is required to manifest itself in a structural and physical world and therefore can never perfectly represent itself.

Maybe embracing rather than struggling with this dilemma is the most complete way to engage with self and others. It's when we try to resolve or deny this paradox that we lose our way and limit possibility, for ourselves and others.

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