

Chapter One - Being

There is little certainty in life.

Possessions can be lost in an instant,
conditions may change overnight.

A dream could be shattered by an utterance,
and passions turn to ashes when alight.

Your mind can be influenced by others,
until your thoughts are no more your own.

But set against all these variables,

There is one constant:

Your being. Who you are.

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The question is: who are you? Who do you think you are? A person's identity is often shrouded in myth, starting from the moment we are born. The birth myth is the story you've been told about conditions surrounding your birth.

It stands to reason that it makes a difference if you were born after three days of protracted labour, so

agonising that your mother vowed never to bear another child, and never did...

Or if you were the long-awaited heir hailed as a gift from heaven, whose birth was celebrated in floods of champagne; or the unwanted fruit of a shameful incident, born after a failed termination, to your mother's bitter grief.

Or perhaps you were the seventh out of ten, who slipped into the world almost unnoticed? So insignificant, even your family can't recall much about it. Or a weakling saved against the odds amidst much tears and anguish: a triumph of life over affliction?

Often it is nothing but a myth; sometimes quite unfounded. But it still reveals a lot about your own self-image.

To find our essence, it may be necessary to go all the way back, revisit our childhood landscape, and then trace the maze of paths leading up to the person we developed into, identifying and dismissing any false indicators as we go along.

In the words of T.S. Eliot: "The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

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Just as important as knowing who you are is to establish who you are not. Even free-thinking, independent individuals, well able to rise above old-fashioned dictates, such as class, convention or religion, are to some extent swayed by views of mass media or the lofty ideals of political correctness. Few of us are impervious to the lure of fashion, advertisers or other influencers, and expectations from employers, colleagues, family and friends are impossible to ignore.

Comfort can be derived from hiding behind a protective guise, especially one that brings admiration and approval. This has become particularly tempting with the rise of social networks. But relying on an image that is not a genuine representation of yourself can be precarious, as you can never be sure that the mask won't slip to reveal what is behind it: whatever you've taken great care to conceal.

Even more dangerous is to create your own mythical persona, based on what and who you think you

ought to be; to nurture it in the mistaken belief that it is all you have, all you will ever amount to. As long as everyone else buys into the myth, all is well. But any threat to it will cause great distress, perhaps irreparable damage. There are even those who find that they can't survive without it.

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A beautiful birch on our land had toppled over in a storm. It was a pathetic sight: this tree that had stood, tall and majestic, spreading its magnificent crown of rich green foliage, suddenly reduced to a piece of debris.

The reason was plain to see: its roots, torn from the earth and exposed to the light of day, had been far too shallow to support the extravagant growth above ground.

It made me think about roots: the tendency of some to cling to theirs to the point of suffocation, rather than engage in the perilous task of cutting their own furrow; while others triumphantly flee the nest, up, out and away, never to look back, going as far as to deny their

origins for a chance to live life entirely on their own terms; and then, how both these extremes restrict personal freedom. In order to keep developing, we must grow above our roots, but at the same time we need them in order to realise our full potential.

For if we expand too far, without first tending to the part that connects us to the earth, making sure it's stable and secure and deep enough to provide an anchorage, we risk ending up like the beautiful birch: felled to the ground by a storm.

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“How did you manage it?” asked a young friend, who had been suffering from depression. “What did you do to become so...” He wavered, as if searching for a word that wasn't part of his normal vocabulary. “You always seem so much at ease.”

I had to stop and think. Years of anything but ease flashed by: loneliness, anxiety, terror. How did I manage it? It took me a few days to find the answer.

When I did, I rang him up and said: “I got rid of my baggage. Put it down and walked away. Not an easy thing to do, but I had discovered that the stuff I was lugging around wasn’t really mine, it was debris left over from other people’s travels. They had piled it on to me, but I had no use for it.

“For a while I felt naked – vulnerable, exposed. Much of my identity had been stuffed into those bags. Briefly I feared that I would not be able to manage life without them.

“But then – for want of other options – I took a deep breath and listened. And from the hidden depths of my own being came another note, another truth: A conviction never to be challenged. A sense of belonging extending beyond all limits.

Complete security needing no affirmation beyond the wonder of my own existence.”

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Even with the best intentions, it is easy, only too easy, to be misled by our emotions, in particular those we

don't know we have. They are the cause of rash, impulsive acts; they drive us to be erratic, distort our sense of judgement.

We apply different techniques to come to terms with feelings that are painful or unworthy. Rationalising them is always tempting but it usually leads us off course. Suppression has an awful lot to answer for in terms of devastation.

Does that mean the other extreme is more healthy? Emotions erupting at short notice, making us scream and shout, laugh or cry, with little or no restraint?

One thing is certain: the more easily a feeling manifests itself, the closer to the surface it is. Using moods to let off steam, indulge ourselves, or even manipulate others, is a means to an end not altogether honourable.

Emotional responses need not affect our conduct. Like spoilt children, they crave attention, but once we acknowledge them, they settle down, leaving us free to accept them as being there, somewhere in the background, though no more important to our life than the twinge you register when a needle pricks your finger.

The purest, most sacred feelings are those we encounter deep inside ourselves in moments of solitude and peace. Such feelings crave no tribute, answer to no needs. They are, in themselves, what we consist of.

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It's an illusion that we can get by without difficulty. If it were possible, we'd end up stunted. Adversity gives our character a chance to expand, just as conflict makes it grow. The resilience to cope with exigencies is not a natural ability we are born with. It has to be acquired, earned, fostered.

We instinctively protect our equilibrium by ignoring past suffering. What could possibly be gained from dwelling on scars from wounds inflicted in the past? Surely it's healthier to look forward, with faith and hope and optimism, to better days ahead?

But pain buried deep inside does not go away. It festers, like a foul abscess, spreading its poison, causing no less damage because you choose to neglect it. Wounds need light and air to heal. And they'll never do so unless they are brought to the surface.

In amongst all that is unsettling and beyond our control, one thing we can learn to master is our own responses, even when it comes to traumatic events. Our will, judgement and values remain for ever within our power, and as long as we hold on to what we consider right, nothing and no one can really hurt us.

Faced with trials and setbacks, we have to remember that there is nothing stable in human affairs. Like time flowing inexorably, our conditions are in a constant state of flux.

Good or bad, adapting to them is how we progress, in a mastery of character over events.

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When, after an absence of over twenty years, I returned for a spell in London, I was surprised to find old friends there living much as they had when we last met. By comparison, I felt I had packed in a life-time of experience in the interim two decades.

It occurred to me that life in a big city might not be most conducive to personal development. With so much stimulus available at your fingertips and your

attention claimed by the sheer logistics of everyday routines, there is little room for peaceful contemplation. Any attempt to reach into the deeper layers of your self is soon interrupted by social obligations, the draw of entertainment or commercial activity.

I had to settle in a remote homestead on the west coast of Ireland to discover that the best conduit for inner expansion is isolation, the absence of distractions, down to the sound of my own voice. Impressions, real or virtual, even the most pleasurable, tend to lead us astray. Diversions, even as an escape from troubling thoughts, do not provide lasting relief.

While loneliness is often seen as a form of deprivation, solitude is all the more enriching. Like its two companions, stillness and silence, it asks for nothing in return, has no expectations, exerts no pressure. It won't let you down, never interferes, will always be there for you; allow you like no other to exist simply as yourself, in a state from which you will always emerge stronger.

What's more, no matter how stressful your surroundings, you can always escape to this exquisite state, revisit it time and again; if only in your head.

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So – life is a journey, a hazardous voyage of discovery; and we must negotiate our passage past adversity and trauma, undaunted like a stream rippled by jagged rocks on its steady descent to the sea.

But it's easy to lose heart; especially when you are caught in the bewildering limbo between the death of the old and the birth of the new.

That's when we have to remember Phoenix, who rose, time and again, from the ashes of the past. Take comfort from the knowledge that we have bypassed the greatest peril of all: that of stagnation.

The ancients looked on each crisis as a blessing: a liberation, the enforced breaking of new ground. Favourable to them was anything that helped our progress from darkness to light.

There are even those who claim that extraordinary afflictions are not the punishment for extraordinary sins but the trial of extraordinary graces bestowed on a favoured few.

Looking back, you may well agree that your most painful experiences did in fact lead on to something better.

Relish the shadows you leave behind. They add depth and definition. For expansion, though, look forward: into the dazzling new dimension of the as yet unknown.

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