

The Vintage Voice

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I Choose, Therefore I Am

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Who am I to take on Descartes, the French philosopher who famously elevated the intellect to the source of personhood with his succinct declaration, “I think therefore I am”? (Even more impressive in its Latin brevity, “*Cogito ergo sum.*”) It isn’t really I who dissents, it is those wise and anonymous tale-tellers who put together the early chapters of Genesis. The story in Chapter 3 has it right: it is choice that makes us human. Until we ate that apple, all was tranquil in the creation: God’s will prevailed in every corner; perfection pervaded the cosmos. A song of unblemished obedience rose from God’s handiwork; not a breath of disharmony, not a hint of resistance. But, of course, not a trace of love.

James Weldon Johnson puts it movingly in a poem called “The Creation.” He depicts God strolling about after he has made everything but mankind, looking at the splendor of sun and moon and stars, the forests and the waters of the earth, all teeming with movement and life. “And God said,” in Johnson’s poem, “I’m lonely still.” Lonely because there is no love, only obedience. No love in Eden because love is a choice. There can be no love without freedom: we can give love only if we are free to withhold it; we can accept love only if we are free to refuse it. Freedom and love enter the human experience together. To be human, to be God’s child, to be capable of love, I must be free. So God offered us a choice, there in that garden: “Come, move up, move on — a higher life beckons you: you will be like me, knowing good and evil.” Just the opposite of a fall, that decision was our critical advance, our step up, up to the beckoning reality of freedom, of love, of humanity, of destiny.

Then, knowing that his immediate presence would be overwhelming and intimidating, God walks us graciously to the borders of Eden, makes us garments against the cold, and sends us into the world to find our way to love, to joy, to hope, to him — in freedom. No longer do we walk with God in the garden in the cool of the day. Just so, later in the story, Moses cries out to God for unambiguous certitude, and God replies, “My face you cannot see.” We know him only by faith, and faith is a choice. I choose, therefore I am.

Discovering freedom in encountering a choice affirms THAT I am; exercising freedom in making a choice defines WHO I am. A person is more than a “that;” a person is a “who.” A person is a character, a history, a center of relationships, a complex of feelings, an observer, an evaluator, a learner, a responder, an initiator. It may be that the self is born in the child the first time the child says “No!” to a parent. Perhaps that early experience of choice gives birth to the sense of self. The early experience that I am not helplessly adrift in a sequence of events but that I can respond, I can reply, I can shape the reality around me by my behavior — that dawning awareness is surely a key event in the shaping of personhood. I choose, therefore I am. In that experience, one is standing apart from his environment, able to choose a response to an event instead of feeling helpless beneath its weight. “I can say ‘no’. That means I can say ‘yes’, or ‘maybe’, or ‘not yet’, or ‘never’. I can shape my life instead of being pushed — I can push back! I can be me!” So personhood takes shape in the individual, and my soul is the sum of what I have done with my freedom.

Our choices fashion us, but they do not tyrannize us. In one sense, we cannot change the past; the moment is gone. Ah, but the future lies open to us. And in that future we can build a new person and hence a new past. We can make new choices; each day is filled with opportunities — that is the essence of being human. Call it exile if you must, but we cannot be human unless we are free. And that creative freedom is the image of God in which we are made.

Albert Camus once observed: “To live as if our decisions make any real difference in the long run may be the act of a fool; but to live as if they do not, that is the act of a coward.” In his gift of freedom, God summons us to engage life — apathy is the enemy of personhood. Remember honestly, forgive unsparingly, act bravely, change humbly. I choose, therefore I am.



Edward and Elizabeth Sims have enjoyed twenty years of retirement in Rockport, Massachusetts, with children and grandchildren nearby, in-laws and nephews not far. Praise be to God for the extraordinary stewardship of the Church Pension Fund.