

Are We One In the Spirit?

By David Chandler

[This originated as a chapel talk at Webb School in Southern California. It began as a whimsical, speculative piece, but it has found a permanent place at least at the fringes of my thinking.]

A few months ago I had an interesting thought. (This happens to me every now and then!) I thought, wouldn't it be interesting if I could change places with another person? What would it be like to actually be that other person with all that person's physical, mental, and emotional traits; all of his or her experiences and personal background except it would be I who looked out through that person's eyes? This sounds like science fiction. As a matter of fact the very last TV episode of Star Trek dealt with a similar theme. I seem to be locked into one particular body and look out on the world from this unique perspective. I know myself inwardly. Everyone else is just sort of "out there." None of you seem anywhere near as real to me as I seem to myself. (Sorry about that!)

But what if I could trade places and be a different person? What would it feel like being you instead of me? The nearest I can come to such an experience is to remember what I felt like at about four years old. The materials in my body have been recycled many times since then; my experiences have given me a vastly different perspective on the world; you might say I am a different person now. But the experience of my inner self is the same now as in my earliest memories. Granted, there is genetic continuity between the cells that made up my body as a four-year-old and the cells I call "me" today. But is there not also genetic continuity from one generation to the next?

Then a strange thought hit me. Perhaps being a different person would be no different from being myself. Perhaps even though my outward experiences would be radically different, my inward perception of myself (as you) would be identical to my perception of myself (as me)! In other words, when I look out at another person perhaps that person is not just like me, perhaps he or she actually is me in a different form. Perhaps at the inward level we are not separate spirits inhabiting separate bodies. Perhaps we are all manifestations of a single spirit. Pantheists talk about us all being a part of God. Everybody and everything we see is God in one form or another. I would not identify my inward spirit as God. I am not God, and I know you are not God! My sense of isolation and limitation convinces me that I am not the ultimate spiritual reality. Instead, how about calling our common spirit the spirit of humanity. I experience the human spirit as me and you experience the same human spirit as you.

I have been using the word "perhaps" a lot. After all, this is pure speculation and perhaps shouldn't be taken too seriously. Still, the idea is rather intriguing. There are a lot of interesting implications to thinking in this way. Try thinking of people you meet as you in different forms--you in a parallel life. Look around. What is it like to see yourself in a different setting, given different physical and mental abilities, different experiences, different choices, different chance of birth, different color, different level of opportunity, different upbringing, different sense of values, different sex? What happens to our sense of superiority or inferiority? What happens to our role in life when we realize that if anyone is going to make a difference it is going to be you, and me, in one form or another.

It is interesting to see religious teaching in this light. I am called to love my neighbor as myself and to do unto others as I would have them do unto me. Why? It would make perfect sense if that neighbor actually *is* me. In any case the Golden Rule seems to be saying to act as though that neighbor *is* me. What would it do to the way I live if I recognized myself in the other person? Perhaps God knows something we don't know!

Jesus may have been expressing this concept when he said, "I am the vine and you are the branches." He didn't say, "I am the root and you are the branches" or "I am the stalk and you are the branches." To the extent that we see ourselves as separate individuals, detached from one another and competing with one another, we are branches. But to the extent that we see that we are essentially one, and that our separateness is an illusion, we are Christ for each other and we see Christ in each other. Christ is the whole vine. As we become conscious of, and live out, our fundamental oneness, we become the body of Christ. Isn't this the fundamental meaning of the Eucharist?

There are biological reasons to see ourselves as one. What does your identity or sense of self actually encompass? Do you feel as though you are a single whole person? If you cut off an arm you would be handicapped, but would your sense of self be diminished? As a matter of fact your personhood spans over a virtual civilization of life forms and is not specifically attached to any one of them. The cells in your body are living beings in their own right, except they have learned to specialize and cooperate to such an extent that they are totally interdependent. The white blood cell you interpret as merely a part of you is almost indistinguishable, to the untrained eye, from an amoeba, which we interpret as not part of anything, but a separate living creature with its own identity. If our personhood spans across the boundaries of small organisms, is it inconceivable that it might span across the boundaries of larger organisms such as ourselves?

Or look at another example. When an amoeba splits in two, which part is the parent and which is the child? Which half carries the continued identity of the original and how does the new separate identity of the other come into being? Are they not, rather, two separate expressions of the same "spirit of *amoebahood*"? Our own coming into being is somewhat more complex, but is there not something similar in the continuity from parent to child? An overly individualistic view of life leaves many unresolved questions. What is the spiritual status of Siamese twins? What organs must they share to be considered a single person? When does a person become a vegetable? Is a vegetable fully human? What about that heavily debated life form, the fetus? Is a pregnant woman one person or two? At what point does the separate spirit of the fetus pop into existence, and where does it come from? These issues are less problematic if life is seen as a continuum.

If the reason we see ourselves as isolated individuals is simply our blindness to the larger reality, perhaps that blindness will one-day be removed. That is one vision of what heaven will be like. Perhaps in that great day we will meet others and experience their lives, not as in the telling of a story but directly as our own. We will meet those we have loved and those we have hated; those we have admired and those we have despised; those who have suffered greatly and those who have imposed great suffering on others. We will internalize the experiences of all humanity as our own. In truly meeting others we will come to know ourselves fully for the first time. Perhaps this is merely science fiction. Perhaps not.