

Are We Actors or Authors?

Rev. Mark Hayes

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Reading: Fragment of an imagined, but unwritten, novel

[Paul Ledbetter is a high school guidance counselor about to meet with a very promising young student to discuss possibilities for his future.]

As Paul strolled back to his office he allowed his imagination to wander. He pictured Marty Haywood successively as President of the United States, as a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, and as a Pulitzer prize-winning author. Oh yes, the sky was the limit, if indeed there were any limit at all.

Before he had a chance to get settled down in his office, Paul was answering the knock on his door, behind which stood the eagerly awaited Marty Haywood.

“Marty! Come on in,” said Paul, guiding the youngster to the chair beside his desk. “How are things going?”

“Oh, pretty good, Mr. Ledbetter,” replied Marty. “I’m keeping fairly busy, what with my classes here and the computer science class I’m taking nights over at the college.”

“Ah, computers; now there’s a field with fine opportunities for good young minds,” said Paul, craftily shifting the conversation onto the main topic of this meeting.

“Well, I don’t know,” answered Marty tentatively. “I really just see computers as a hobby, for my spare time.”

“Oh, really,” said a slightly deflated Mr. Ledbetter. “Well, what do you think you might want to do with your life?”

Marty’s eyes lit up, and a smile flickered across his face, as he calmly replied, “I would like to be a character in a novel.”

“Oh, really,” said Paul in a near whisper, fighting to maintain control of himself. “I’m not sure I understand you. Do you mean you want to be an actor, or a novelist?” he asked hopefully.

“No; I mean I want to be a real character in a real novel – I want to ‘live’ a novel.”

As he heard this, Paul asked himself, “What kind of psychosis have we failed to diagnose in this young man?” Aloud, he asked, “And why, exactly, do you think you want to be a character in a novel?”

“Well,” responded Marty, “I think it’s because every person I’ve ever looked up to, or considered worth emulating, has been a character in a novel.”

“I see,” said the befuddled counselor. “But don’t you think it might be wise to try a short story first, to make sure that’s really what you want?”

“You know, you may be right,” Marty thought aloud. “That might help me to know for sure what kind of character I wanted to be. Do you think maybe you could help me find a short story to be in, Mr. Ledbetter?”

Paul mused over this request briefly, his eyebrows knit in concentration, and finally he spoke. “Hmm, I’m not really sure, but why don’t you give me a few days to think about this, and maybe I can come up with something.”

“All right!” exclaimed and enthused Marty. “You know, Mr. Ledbetter, you’re about the first person I’ve talked to who hasn’t treated me like I was crazy or something. Why do you think that is?”

“That’s hard to say,” said Paul, with some degree of dismay. “I guess it’s because I’m either a much better, or a much worse judge of such things than most other people.”

Sermon

Ric Masten, according to a website devoted to his life and work,

is a stand-up poet, a teller of tales. His humorous anecdotes, pointed stories and accurate observations speak to the human condition. In performance, Masten is funny and poignant by turn and his material is always improvised, which makes every program different and gives each audience a sense of being engaged in a relevant conversation rather than witnessing a one-man show.

Since 1966, Ric Masten has traveled across the United States, Canada and England speaking to and performing for hundreds [of audiences]. He has been called a “serious humorist,” an “after-dinner philosopher,” a “motivational lyricist” – likened to such notables as Will Rogers and Ogden Nash.

Some additional tidbits about Ric Masten: he’s in his late seventies, he’s been fighting prostate cancer for nearly ten years, and he is a devoted Unitarian Universalist. In fact he wrote the hymn “Let It Be a Dance,” which we sing occasionally, including at my Service of Installation here seven years ago.

So why all this about Ric Masten? Well, there are actually a few connections between him and this service this morning. First, I’m told that it was this very sermon title – “Are We Actors or Authors” – that caught his attention and first got him through the doors of a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Second, his improvisational style is relevant to what I’ll have to say in the second part of this message. And finally, while we won’t be singing “Let It Be A Dance” today, I would like to share another of Ric’s poems, which touches closely on today’s theme. It’s called “The Escape Artist.”

if freedom
is nothing more
than being able
to choose
your own cage
as I suggest it is
then perhaps
the fun comes
in being
an escape artist

in recognizing
the cage you are in
deciding how long

you will settle for it
and then
when you want out
seeing how clever
you are at slipping
through a space
in the wire

perhaps
the good life
the full life
is nothing more
than every once
in a while
pulling yourself
through a hole
in the roof
standing triumphantly
looking down
with a “hot damn!”
and then around
with a frustrated
“oh no, not again!”

This morning we consider a basic issue of freedom. Not freedom “from” but freedom “to”. That is, to what extent are the direction and details of our lives products of our own free will, and to what extent are they constrained and determined by forces external to us? And further, what might be the nature of those external forces? Are they akin to an author, who has written the novel in which we are characters? Or are they more like the director of the play in which we are mere actors? Or do they play the more modest role of simply creating the context, the environment, within which we are free to act and respond as *we* choose?

I’m pretty sure that virtually all of us have struggled with these questions to some degree. After all, the “free will versus determinism” debate has been a cornerstone of philosophy and religion for centuries, even millennia. And it is a messy debate, filled with paradox and contradiction.

Consider the internal conflict between the Judeo-Christian concept of a God who is omniscient, and the notion of free will. If God is all-knowing, that must include knowledge of what is to come, of how things will play out, including all of our actions and choices. That implies that our choices are already determined. So where is there any room for free will – free choice?

The Greek philosopher Aristotle posed a similar quandary, in non-theistic terms, with the problem of the sea battle.

Consider these two propositions:

1. There will be a sea-battle tomorrow
2. There will not be a sea-battle tomorrow

It seems that exactly one of these must be true and the other false. But if (1) is *now* true, then there *must* be a sea-battle tomorrow, and there *cannot* fail to be a sea-battle tomorrow. The result, according to this puzzle, is that nothing is possible except what actually happens: there are no unactualized possibilities.[*The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*]

The questions of free-will versus determinism are not merely curiosities of ancient philosophy and religion. They also arise in various forms in modern science. One of the most heated debates in biology is that of “nature versus nurture,” concerning the relative importance of genetics and biology as compared to culture and environment in determining human behavior. But of course that debate is primarily about the sources of determinism, and still leaves open the question of where free will fits into the equation.

One genetic argument that could be made is that we are biologically wired with the illusion of having free will. That is, not only are our behaviors determined by our biology, but so is our illusory perception that we are making free choices with our own will. It’s all very confusing.

What are we to conclude? Are we merely characters in the great cosmic novel, our every thought and action determined by some great cosmic author? Are we merely actors in a play reciting lines from a script not of our own making, played out according to the direction of our genetic, or environmental, or theological destiny?

And if our lives and our behavior are fully determined, with no contribution of our free choice and will, what about moral responsibility? How can one be held responsible for actions beyond the scope of free choice?

One approach to use – and I think it’s probably as good as any – is to agree that we cannot answer the ultimate question, but to further agree that we will willingly (or deterministically?) succumb to the illusion of free will.

The concept of “emergence”, about which I spoke here a couple of years ago, actually has something to say on this point. According to some schools of philosophy and psychology,

. . . free will is assumed not to exist. However, an illusion of free will is created, within this theoretical context, due to the generation of infinite or computationally complex behavior from the interaction of a finite set of rules and parameters. Thus, the unpredictability of the emerging behavior from deterministic processes leads to a perception of free will, even though free will as an ontological entity is assumed not to exist. In this picture, even if the behavior could, in principle, be computed ahead of time, no way of doing so will be simpler than just observing the outcome of the brain’s own computations.

In other words, even if the detailed future of the universe is fully determined by its present state, that fact has no practical value, and so we may as well let go of it. It seems to me that I’m on fairly solid ground in embracing the existence of free will. After all, either I’m right,

or else I have no choice in the matter anyway because that conviction is rigidly determined by forces outside my control.

Now that we've settled that, let's take a little break, and enjoy some music before I add a little bit of nuance to my understanding of free will.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE (*with improvisation*)

As I mentioned up front, one of Ric Masten's connections with this morning's theme is his improvisational style of performance. I'd like to thank Ron Smith for agreeing, with very little arm twisting, to provide us with a little bit of improvisation on one of Frederic Chopin's preludes this morning. It has provided a nice segue for me to reflect a little bit on the idea of life as improvisation.

Thinking in those terms fits nicely into the complex issue of free will and determinism by firmly staking out some middle ground that I find compelling. Improvisation, in one sense means to create, on the fly, with no preparation. In that sense, it seems that freedom, in the form of creativity, is supreme. However, as understood in music and in acting, improvisation does not exactly come out of nowhere. Rather there is some pre-existing structure or context, upon which one can creatively and playfully elaborate. What results is something not necessarily totally new and original, but rather something familiar, but with some creative, innovative touches.

One blogger (Scott Sieger) reflected on-line as follows:

A thought occurred, as they often do, whilst I was singing whilst taking a shower.

"Is freewill, in the main an act of improvisation?" I thought as I sung total gibberish to the sound of cascading water.

Do we take every moment and improvise in that moment? Is life a continuous state of ad lib?

When I listen to a Jazz or Blues singer and their improvisation over a structure . . . I see certain parallels to life in general. Determinable structure of our lives which we improvise "over the top" with.

It has often been the subject of much poetry and philosophy that everyone lives to their own tune and their own rhythm. Is this just showing us that we are constantly improvising on the structure provided?

Returning to the metaphor of actors and authors, I'm reminded of the saying that "Life is *not* a dress rehearsal. This *is* the main event." Not only is there no dress rehearsal; there are seemingly no rehearsals at all. We're thrust into the midst of the action with no adequate preparation, and seemingly no script (other than that which may be embedded in our genetically determined brain). And so we, along with everyone else, are left to improvise our way through.

We are provided with the stage, and with all of our fellow actors. We may have picked up a few pointers along the way, as well as some rules to follow. But beyond that, it really seems as if we're on our own, to make up our own lines and our own actions. In that sense, I guess we are both actor *and* author. Of course we make up only our own lines, not those of our fellow actors. And so we and they improvise, taking what we're given and doing our best to make something worthwhile of it.

The author of a novel, or a story, or a play is something like an omnipotent God, with complete control to determine all details of setting, characters, and action. As actors and authors of our lives, we are more like co-authors, working in collaboration with our fellow actors and whatever cosmic author or authors may be responsible for the setting and historical context.

I'd like to leave you with one last thought about improvisational acting. Often considered the primary rule of Improv is that you are not allowed to negate other people's statements. Instead, add on to them. When you abruptly change direction by refusing to follow the lead of another actor, by answering "no" to a suggestion, you're likely to instantly kill the scene. But if you respond with "Yes, and . . .", you have added on to the scene, and helped develop a place for the scene to go.

And so you might think of approaching life something like that. That is, by looking for opportunities to say "yes, and . . .". To say "yes" to life, to truth, to love. To say yes to opportunities to collaborate with your fellow actors and authors in ways that will create a common life story for which you can all be grateful and proud, worthy of your own Oscar or Pulitzer.

So may it be.