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My Many Selves

Wayne C. Booth

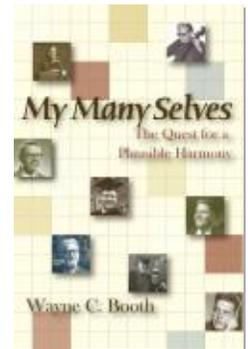
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Preface

Why, then, should I be concerned for human readers to hear my confessions? . . . What edification do they hope to gain by this . . . ? They will take heart from my good traits, and sigh with sadness at my bad ones.

—Bill Clinton, *My Life*

Every autobiographer faces problems that no novelist faces: as I write, my actual story still runs on. How can any first-person memoir present anything like a completed plot? It simply can't, and I thus have chosen what might even be labeled an anthology format: a sequence of quarrels among my conflicting Selves.

One major problem is that so much of what *I* find interesting, even exciting, about my diverse, often warring Selves would leave many readers snoring. Even the “laundry-list” stuff that burdens my files reveals something interesting *to me* about my life. Why did I ever buy *that* expensive paper-weight (violating Skinflint-Booth), or why did I save *this* lousy eleven-page draft of an essay (surrendering to my Vain Self)? Why on earth did I take X to dinner, when I've always been annoyed by him? (Well, Vain-Booth was hoping the nonfriend might do a review of my new book.)

But why would anyone else ever want to read about that?

Some critics do claim that even the driest records of “meaningless” facts—the sections I find myself skipping when reading almost every other *LIFE*¹—are meaningful. They even feel, as I *sometimes* do after reading Wittgenstein and other “ordinary-ists,” that the ordinary stuff is more important than the extraordinary.

Here, however, I promise you that I will not record the list of the items my wife Phyllis handed me yesterday as I left for the grocery store. Nor the two items I forgot to purchase. Nor a list of my stack of unpublished, mostly uncompleted essays and books.

But even as I reject the laundry lists, you and I will face throughout this book the fact that the actual life I'm reporting, if viewed as a mere chronology, is quite ordinary, uncolorful, undramatic—not quite the grabber that Hillary

1. By using the terms *LIFE* and *LIVES* rather than autobiography or autobiographies, I have shortened this book by about twenty pages.

and Bill Clinton's stories have turned out to be. The boring fact is that I've never been physically abused, or awarded an Oscar, or had a spouse who cheated and was almost impeached. I've never been charged with rape or murder, or even with theft or cheating—fairly or unfairly. I lost no relatives in the Holocaust.² Though I was in WWII as a “clerk-rifleman,” I endured no combat and have only one cheap medal, for being an accurate rifleman *in training*. I've never been president of *anything*, except the Modern Language Association for one year.

Should I feel regret, as I absolutely do not, that (unlike what Gore Vidal boasts about in his *Palimpsest*) I've never screwed or been screwed by celebrities? Should I spend time lamenting that my only connection with prominent politicians was bumping into Jimmy Carter in an airport lounge, long after his presidency was over? Is there any way to turn fifty-nine years of a happy marriage into a page-turner? Not on your life.

Even the death of our son at age eighteen—for us the most shattering of all events—is of the “everyday” kind shared this minute by millions around the world: *ordinary*, though devastating. Besides, that was thirty-six years ago and provides no narrative climax.

A recent ad for a new biography, *The Scarlet Professor*, tries to seduce readers with “Extraordinary *LIVES* make great reading.” Right. But what's extraordinary about mine? A straightforward chronological account would read like too many of my boyhood journal entries:

August 25, 1935 (age 14½)

Got up at 5:00 and delivered papers. Had breakfast, then went to Sunday School. Passed the Sacrement.³ Came home and had dinner. Great Grandmother Hawkins ate with us. After dinner played with Kip [Young], Junior [Halliday,] and Curtis [Chipman—a cousin]. Had supper, then went to church.

Just think of the difference between what I face here and what world-famous philosopher Bertrand Russell faced as he began his own three-volume *LIFE*. He and his publishers knew from word one that thousands, perhaps millions, of readers would welcome the books, even if, like me, they found themselves doing a lot of skipping. The work is full of his encounters with

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2. I do have a son-in-law, David Izakowitz, whose parents experienced the horrors inflicted by Hitler and Stalin. His children, my grandchildren, would probably find a *LIFE* about those lost ones more dramatic than mine.
 3. I've abandoned using “*sic*” for the boy's errors, though my computer keeps trying to correct them without my approval. All bracketed entries are insertions; parentheses within the quotes are always the diarist's.

celebrities we want to know more about. What reader would not want to hear about his conversations with D. H. Lawrence, revealing how much contempt Russell felt for him, or with T. S. Eliot, revealing how miserable the poet was feeling that day?

So it is clear that this *LIFE* presents interesting problems both for you readers and for me. My *nonplot*—the quest for a plausible harmony among a crazy mixture of competitive selves—cannot rival such *LIVES* as Ved Mehta’s wonderful story, *The Stolen Light*, about how he coped with being blind or Stephen Kuusisto’s *Planet of the Blind*, a deeply moving account of having been half-blind from childhood on while pretending to have normal vision. What do I have that’s as shocking—and thus gripping—as Martin Amis’s account, in *Experience: A Memoir*, of how it felt to inform his two sons, ages ten and eleven, about meeting for the first time a daughter he had “absent-mindedly” fathered eighteen years earlier?

Though Amis’s life is full of wonderful encounters with scores of celebrities and is loaded with dramatic moments, he still has to face the major problem I began with here: the nonplot threat endured by all *LIFERS*. As he writes his account of how his life relates to the life of his even more famous father, Kingsley, he puts that problem well:

My life, it seems to me, is ridiculously shapeless. I know what makes a good narrative, and [actual] lives don’t have much of that—pattern and balance, form, completion, commensurateness. It is often the case that a Life, at least to start with, will resemble a success story; but . . .⁴

And he then probes the “buts.”

My hope for this *LIFE* is that, by revealing how my quite ordinary Selves have confronted—sometimes even battled with—one another, I can show how *all* lives, even the least colorful, not to mention *yours*, can be seen as dramatic in a sense quite different from the usual plot expectations. That hope tempted me at one point to include several chapters of speculation about the writing of *LIVES*—stuff actually more appropriate to an academic book theorizing *about* autobiography. I’ve cut a good deal of those intrusions by the Self I’ll call Thinker-Booth, fearing that they sounded too much like a feeble echo of Henry Adams’s wonderful *The Education of Henry Adams*.

In short, instead of tracing my life chronologically from an undramatic birth in 1921 to my scores of undramatic experiences yesterday (two of them blissful, the rest dull), I hope to engage you into thinking hard about how my conflicts of “Selves,” of “Personae,” of “Voices”—my “Splits” both deep

4. Martin Amis, *Experience: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2001), 361.

and shallow—create another kind of drama: the quest for a harmony, or chorus, among those splits. (I don't know of any other *LIFE*, VainB whispers, echoing one enthusiastic manuscript reader, that has as vigorously reported such everyday splits and then pursued such an elusive but finally plausible harmony.)

Suddenly Moral-Booth, whom you'll meet throughout, snarls, "Cut that boastful sentence! It's silly, and it exhibits the egocentrism that you so often claim to have escaped." But then, after a moment's thought, MoralB adds, "I do have to admit that it's honest."

As you can see, then, you and I will face the tricky problem not just of who "I" am, behind the many Selves, but of who you are, as reader here:

- Are you a devout Mormon or a non-Mormon or an anti-Mormon or, like me, a fringer, still often feeling guilty about not being more active in the Church? Or does the very notion of reading about Mormonism turn you away?
- Are you a lover of teaching and scholarship, like me, or one of the thousands who these days spend their time attacking the academy as corrupt—or at least attacking this or that corner, especially English departments?
- Do you know, as a few do, so much about my bibliography already that you'll find any reference to my work redundant and annoying? (VainB again intrudes, "Put that as 'my fantastically impressive and sadly neglected bibliography,'" and then quarrels with Ambition-Booth, who argues, "No, it's a disappointingly short list of finally disappointing works! You could have and should have written much better works.")
- Are you in your twenties, never having heard the expression "If he fell in the shit, he'd come up smelling of violets," or in your eighties, remembering vividly how it felt to see your first airplane flying overhead at age ten?
- Will you condemn as banal, as many postmodernists will, my claim that our Selves are often divided and that it's fun and profitable to play with their rivalries? Or do you find offensive any hint that your Soul may be disunited? Or are you among those extremists who, combating the destructive excesses of individualism, are certain that we are by nature inherently divided, not to say torn apart, and the quest for a harmony is absurd?⁵

5. My own transformation from "individualism" in the Mormon sense, with a soul unified from *the beginning* on, to a warm embrace of what might be called "we-ism" underlies

And so on. No matter who you are, or *think* you are, you'll find yourself differing with some of those possible "audiences." So as you read along, don't be surprised when you find yourself saying, "Enough of that—that chapter is for somebody else, not me."

In short, I cannot offer a page-turner, a mystery *LIFE*. Whenever you feel cast out, I suggest that you do what we all do when reading anthologies: skip forward to a title that suggests one of your own Self-splits.

Obviously, if you are still here, you haven't yet flung the book aside. So I ask you to please keep thinking about whether there is some true center of *your* multiple Selves and how *that* center resembles or contrasts with the "plausible" one I meander towards here.

None of us can ever expect any achieved harmonious revelation to be permanent: the next blow from circumstance tears us apart again. We don't need psychological theorists to tell us that those who have rejoiced in finding a full truce within—a harmonious core—often lose it quickly. Far too often the collapse ends in tragic civil war: irresolvable, sometimes even suicidal or murderous conflicts among the diverse voices. Facing bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or whatnot, thousands of our brothers and sisters struggle daily to transcend the warfare, choosing among the flood of rival therapies: scores of medicines like Prozac and alternatives, along with a wildly chancy selection from the flood of new self-help books.⁶

Only those who happen to die in a moment of sheer bliss—like the murdered hero in the movie *American Beauty* or devout Christians blessed on their deathbeds—escape the miseries that circumstances impose, as "life" tricks us with a tornado, a car crash, a terrorist attack, or strong evidence of approaching senility.

Yet some of us, old or young, some of the time—part of each day, part of each season, part of each year—discover, by conducting our internal disputes

much of what I report in chapter 1. Years ago, after embracing the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, I put it like this: "We come into consciousness speaking a language already permeated with many voices—a social, not a private language. From the beginning, we are 'polyglot,' already in process of mastering a variety of social dialects derived from parents, clan, class, religion, country. . . . Finally we achieve, if we are lucky, a kind of individuality, but it is never a private or autonomous individuality in the western sense. . . . Anyone [who has not become a dogmatic individualist] respects the fact that each of us is a 'we,' not an 'I.' Polyphony, the miracle of our 'dialogical' lives together, is thus both a fact of life and, in its higher reaches, a value to be pursued endlessly." That Introduction to Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minn. Press, 1984) reads to me now as almost a summary of what has continued to go on in my life and in this book.

6. A quick survey revealed that in the years 2000–2002 several hundred new self-help books were added to the forty-eight feet of bookstore shelving that I reported in *For the Love of It*. Last time I was in Borders, I measured *eighty* feet of self-helpers!

openly, the sheer fun of signing a treaty among the rival Selves or even settling on a genuine federal union of the rival states. Actually, by the end, as I've already hinted several times, I go even further toward harmony. My discovery, as a Mormon missionary, of what I now call rhetorology has granted me—or so VainB boasts—a splendid tool for conducting dialogue among the split Selves.

My hope is that as you read along, or even skip along, you will discover how, by confronting the rivalry in your Voices, the quest can finally prove to be worth it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

How many thousands of names should be listed in the acknowledgments to any *LIFE*? Every friend, every enemy, every teacher, every student, every family member contributed to this *LIFE*. Even to the *writing* there are too many contributors to be listed.

So I'll now cut to an unfairly short list.

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