



On Joining the Human Race

by Fe Anam Avis

“...the glory of God is a human being fully alive!”

Irenaeus 2nd Century

Much of my spiritual practice these days is spent reflecting on the finalist stage of life, and the developmental process that will assist me in my Transition. Since I am a Christian, I naturally think of Jesus as the pattern I find most compelling for this process.

Recently, I have been struck by how important it is in our finalist stage to make sure we have joined the human race. This pattern of Jesus, of course, is the beginning of our confession, that he was born of the Virgin Mary, and “became man.” This was no illusion or cosmetic fabrication. Hebrews says that Jesus was “made like [us], fully human in *every way*.”

It may seem silly to ask a 70-year-old if they have joined the human race, so perhaps it would be helpful to frame the question in this way: “As you reflect on your life, have you, like Jesus, embraced yourself as fully human in every way?”

So much suffering can be traced to our struggle to accept that we are fully human, and to appreciate the ways that our human experiences connect us to one another. Trauma specialist, Dr. Linda Karlovec, says that trauma is the experience of something excruciatingly painful, combined with feeling alone, confused, and powerless. The denial of our full human experience inevitably isolates us, confuses us as to why certain things are happening, and renders us powerless to change the unchangeable.

Three years ago, I lost a son to a drug overdose. I have a choice in how I view this. If I have not joined the human race, then I think of it in isolation, as if it has only happened to me. I feel alone. Check. Then I wonder why this has happened. I seek an explanation. I demand an answer to “why.” I feel confused. Check. When I think about what I might do to change the situation, I realize there is nothing I can do. I feel powerless. Check. All three of Karlovec’s conditions for trauma have been met, and the lifelong set of emotional, relational, and medical impacts can take root from that trauma.

There is another way I can view his death. Throughout history, billions of parents have lost children. Walk through any 19th century, pre-antibiotic cemetery with me, and we will note how many children died before they were five years old. In our own time, and in this country alone, tens of thousands of parents have tragically lost their children to drug overdoses. If I, like Jesus, am human in every way, then I am not alone. Nor am I confused about why I have been singled out for this sorrow—because I haven’t been. Nor am I powerless over my suffering. I have the power to allow the working of the Spirit to turn my sorrow into compassion as I reach out to other suffering souls. It is the resistance to suffering that makes suffering unbearable, not the suffering itself. Whether I choose to resist or release is a choice fully within my power.

When Jesus joined the human race, he became human in every way, that is, he did so unconditionally. He opened himself to all the experiences of being human, the joys and the sorrows as well as the privileges and the injustices. He knew the heartwarming experience of gratitude among those he healed, and the heartbreak of being maligned among his critics. He was crucified between two robbers, but buried in a rich man's tomb. This is the human experience.

One of the signs that we have not yet joined the human race is when we think of ourselves as special, that we, or the people we care about, should magically escape the sorrows that visit us all. I have seen people "lose their faith" and die in bitterness over circumstances that are so common globally as to escape our daily attention. Yet the shock of it rocks the foundations of their faith. It is for this reason that I Peter warns us "*...not [to] be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*"

Birth into the human race, and death upon our exit from it, are the great levelers of human status. Without exception we enter the world as pure potential; we leave it as pure experience. All that elevates us above others collapses, along with all the pain of inferiority we bear in our comparison with others from jealousy. If we, like God, were to remember that we are dust, it would ease much of our psychic suffering. "Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming," says the Proverb, "but who can stand before jealousy?" But even jealousy must ultimately yield in defeat to the finalist stage of life.

Part of our development in this stage is a review of the places we have not yet joined the human race, but have hoped to somehow hover above it. We will recognize those pockets within our memories as places where we still feel alone, bitter, sad at our perceived inferiority, or, alternatively, sad that the strengths which propelled our accomplishments is slowly ebbing away. We might also identify those places by the guilt or regret that doggedly persists as a consequence of our failures, as if we might have somehow escaped these sorrows by living a perfect, unhuman life. Jesus puts the lie to that belief. A perfect life did not save him from sorrow, and neither would it have saved us. Joining the human race liberates us from this illusion, and from the guilt and regret that sticks to it.

Because the Christian faith is a deeply embodied faith, joining the human race cannot be a simple abstraction or assent to a metaphysical concept. It involves joining flesh and blood individuals, not in what Martin Buber calls "I/It" relationships which can be held at a distance, but through "I/Thou" relationships where we mutually discover what can only be known through personal disclosure. It is only in those risky conversations that we can truly join the human race, and be freed from the nebular sorrows of concepts where the rubber meets the sky.

My wife and I were recently in conversation with a friend, different from me in many ways, but sharing this common experience: we had each spent more than a decade living in oppressive religious systems from which we eventually extricated ourselves. As a result, we each had experienced the penalties of exile, shaming, and financial ruin exacted upon us by our respective communities. I spoke about the experience at a level of detail I had with few others. I spoke about the abuse, the fear, the secrecy, and the feelings of cowardice at watching others be emotionally abused without objection.

Through that and other similar experiences, I join the human race. The isolation breaks like a spiritual fever. Not everyone has surrendered their will to religious systems in such a damaging way, but most human beings have, for fear of consequences, capitulated, appeased, and watched, when, in their hearts, they knew they were shrinking back from what needed to be done. But it is the specific

connection to another's story that is often required to serve as the portal to the larger arena of human experiences.

By definition, every person in the finalist stage of life is a survivor. Like Jesus at age two, who was exposed to the slaughter of fellows his age, we live knowing that others have not: students who fell victim to accidents or self-harm, family members gone before us, friends taken by war or medical pestilence. We grieve these losses, but spiritually, that is not enough. We must ask the question: why have we been spared? Surely part of the answer must be that we have been granted this necessary season of grace to work through what remains in the way of our Transition, possessed by the peace that passes understanding. Joining the human race is certainly one aspect of that process, for many of us, one bud on the stem yet to bloom.

In Philippians we are urged to "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." Christianity is not shy about its paradoxes, and one of the most profound is this: in order to ascend in Divinity, we must first descend fully into Humanity, where our souls are scrubbed of illusions, and our hands are joined with brothers and sisters who will walk us upwardly home.