

How We Came to Be
By
Daniel E. White September 29, 2025

David McCullough, in the Author's Note at the start of *Mornings on Horseback*, wrote, "My intention was not to write a biography of him [Theodore Roosevelt]. What intrigued me was how he came to be. [*My emphasis*] Having written about the creation of two of the most conspicuous inanimate wonders of his era, the Brooklyn Bridge and the Panama Canal, and having acquired as a result great appreciation for the simple idea that such things don't just happen, I was interested in knowing what was involved in the metamorphosis of this most conspicuous animate wonder."

McCullough posed an intriguing question for any of us who take time to think about the unfolding stories of our lives. How did you and I come to be what we are? As McCullough wrote, such things "don't just happen."

Roosevelt was born into financial privilege and prominent social standing in New York City. His father, the first Theodore Roosevelt, shared in the ownership of a prosperous business founded by the elder Roosevelt's father, and both Teddy's father and grandfather had made safe and lucrative investments, particularly in real estate, greatly increasing the family fortune. Physically, Teddy was unimpressive when compared to others in his family and social circle. But he came from privilege.

McCullough spent considerable time detailing the recurring bouts of asthma attacks Teddy suffered, and the author explained how much the medical community now views asthma as much a mental condition as a physical one. From early days, then, Teddy might have felt an urgency to be as active as possible whenever **not** suffering asthma attacks. From his teens onward, the frenetic pace of Teddy's life reflected a similar urgency.

His dad was the pillar of integrity, highly respected as a man of principle in New York social circles, and his mother, born and raised in Georgia and never apologetic for her support of the Confederacy, was full of the charm and grace befitting the wife of a prominent citizen. She, like Roosevelt Senior, was committed to contributing to social causes in New York that focused on those in need. Teddy inherited those same senses of duty, loyalty, commitment to principle, and a social conscience.

McCullough debunked myths about Teddy, criticizing what he called the "Parson Weems" tendencies of some of TR's contemporaries. (Weems created the myths about George Washington.) For example, TR never did win a boxing championship at Harvard. Yet what McCullough did identify as true about Teddy constituted an impressive array of accomplishment before TR became a national figure.

What you are and have done with your life didn't "just happen." Trying to assess one's own life exploring possible explanations for what happened might be time poorly spent unless you are far more able to be impartially analytical about yourself than most of us. It is

unlikely, too, that any historian, let alone one of the stature of McCullough, will undertake to write a book about how we came to be what we are.

But it could be fun to ask yourself a few questions. For example, Judy spent much of the first nine years of her life on her grandparents' farm. She recalls spending hours on the land in her own company, essentially unsupervised. There were times that her grandmother, a teacher with a special interest in Biology, took her around the farm teaching her the scientific names of many of the plants. Her grandmother delighted in having Judy (at five and six years old) recite some of those names to adults in their social orbit.

The roots of how many character traits might be discovered in those few facts about her early childhood?

Recently, we saw the movie *Let's Not Go to the Dogs Tonight*, an adaptation of Alexandra Fuller's accounting of her early life growing up in Rhodesia as it was transitioning into Zimbabwe. She, too, had free rein to explore during the day across territory where the Europeans slept with their automatic weapons, so fearful were they of an attack by Africans bent on reclaiming their ancestral lands.

She also experienced life amid her mother's alcoholism and seemingly irrational determination to prevent their loss of the farm. The movie ended with the family moving to Zambia. Out of her experiences, Fuller has created an impressive literary output, one which might be her way to cope with a childhood filled with uncertainty and trauma.

Surely such a childhood offers multiple possible answers to "how did she come to be."

Our lamentable 24/7 news cycle is filled with stories of scoundrels and saints, dangerous partisans and committed peacemakers, narcissists demanding all the credit, and the folks who really get things done who don't care who gets the credit. Moral teaching notwithstanding, we all likely make judgments about people based upon what we see, read, or hear. Isn't that human nature?

Might there be any reason for us to reflect a moment on how this person or that came to be what they are because things don't "just happen?"

By no means is the question intended to excuse or condone dishonesty, cruelty, or any other form of evil action. And maybe there really is no point in trying to understand why a bad dude is bad.

I do believe, though, that things don't just happen.

Click here to email your comments to dan: danwhitehi@gmail.com