

Life Questions
By
Daniel E. White April 7, 2025

Elna Conroy abandoned her husband, a daughter and a son to serve the poor through missionary work in India. Those who had known her well speculated that the Dutch House, bought by Mr. Conroy as a surprise for his wife, had crushed her spirit. She hated the house and made clear that she felt herself a prisoner in it.

She said later that it was a house for a rich person, and she wasn't one. This, despite the fact that Conroy had turned his real estate management business into substantial net worth, sufficient to buy the house for her as a present because he thought she would like it. Elna went on to say that she had all those people waiting on her, even doing the cooking, which she said was the only thing she liked doing and did best.

So, to save her own sanity and her own sense of self, she left. When the reader sees her again, she is still serving others. The bulk of the novel, *The Dutch House*, by Ann Patchett, lays out the consequences of her leaving.

Everybody expects Larry Darrell, in Somerset Maugham's, *The Razor's Edge*, when he returns from World War I to marry Sophie, settle into a waiting life in the business community, and take his place in the social scene of Chicago. Once home, Larry delays any talk of engagement and marriage. The pause is, at first, temporary. Then it becomes obvious to everyone involved in Larry's life that he will **never** become the husband, father, and businessperson everyone expects him to be.

The Razor's Edge then, is the tale of a man who wanders the world trying to find that which will satisfy himself, whether or not that matches with the expectations of his family and friends.

A stirring moment in the musical *Les Miz* comes when the hero proclaims in a crescendo of tenor voice, "who am I? 24601!"

Recall the story. A man is caught stealing a loaf of bread for his starving family and sentenced to 20 years at hard labor. Such convicts, when paroled, always had to carry their parole papers thereby marking them for a life of struggle and deprivation. Our hero, in despair, steals valuable candle sticks from a church and is caught again.

But the priest of the church lies to the authorities, saying that the candlesticks were a gift, then admonishing Jean Valjean to make something of his life. Valjean changes his name, abandons the parole papers, and ends up the respectable mayor of a distant village.

Javert, the lawman, takes note of the new crime, abandoning the parole papers, and begins a relentless pursuit of Valjean. When a villager falls victim to an overturned cart, Valjean is quick to lift the cart off the man, saving his life, a feat of great strength. Javert sees this and declared that only one man had the physical strength to do such a thing—Valjean. One thing leads to another, and Valjean has to decide who he really is. He is, of course, Jean Valjean and the mayor but by a different name, and the ex-convict pursued by Javert.

That's when Valjean answers the question he poses to himself musically—who am I? 24601.

There's more to the story, of course. But Victor Hugo, Somerset Maugham, and Ann Patchett and, I would surmise, scores of other good writers have posed fundamental questions: what is my nature? Who am I?

In *Lamb*, author Christopher Moore, tells the story of Joshua, the name he gives to the Biblical Jesus of Nazareth. Joshua knows that he is The Messiah. So, there is no question such as the ones posed by Patchett, Maugham, and Hugo. He knows exactly who he is. But Joshua asks his buddy, Biff, what does a Messiah do? The book is about Joshua's attempt to figure that out.

People of a Certain Age, who am I? what is my nature? deep existential questions. Believers, no matter the faith tradition, are provided some answers, usually expressed as a relationship with whatever deity, orthodoxy, or dogma they believe.

Some people have answers provided by their parents in the form of expectations: i.e. taking up the family business, pursuing the occupation which the family prefer, marrying the person the family thinks is best for you.

Like Elna and Larry, some people live with a series of expectations about what they should want without being asked their own ideas. How many times have well-meaning people burdened someone else with such expectations?

Without an instruction manual, most of us find ourselves in trial-and-error mode, trying to figure out our natures and coming to grips with who we are. Or, like Joshua, we have a clear idea but don't know what all that entails.

Maybe those existential questions aren't the right questions. What if the question that mattered was "what do I hope people will say, when I am gone, that I did with my life?"

For Elna, service to others was an answer. For Larry, it was seeking and learning. For Valjean, it was living a life graced by love and self-sacrifice,

Joshua would have found all of these useful in his desire to "do" Messiah well.

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