

Becoming Yourself (Roddy O'Neil Cleary)

In the 1960's, Harvey Cox's book The Secular City made quite a stir. It seemed to connect with a lot of people's experience. Much of what he wrote I believe holds true for our own time. Especially the two things that he maintained characterized the life of people living in the secular city: mobility and anonymity.

Take mobility in our time, it's the rare person who hasn't moved several times at least during their lives. How many of you have moved five times or more? I mean not just for the summer but year round.

Anonymity can be a consequence of mobility Cox suggests. I remember vividly how I felt moving from Ft. Lee, NJ to Hyattsville, MD. It's like you have to tell people all over again who you are. And then you begin to wonder if you really know. I felt validated by one author who compared this experience to an identity crisis.

Still, self-identity isn't easily come by, even after living in VT for 30 years. I subscribe (resonate) with the thought of Norman Maclean who wrote, "The problem of self-identity is not just a problem for the young. It's a problem for all time. Perhaps the problem. It should haunt old age..." Not that this is anything new. You might say that the idea of self-identity being a problem for all time is like wisdom being ever ancient, ever new. "Know thyself" is a famous Greek saying that is attributed to numerous Greek philosophers among them Socrates, who according to Apollo's Oracle of Delphi was the wisest of them all. The ancient historian Plutarch tells us that "Know thyself" was the admonition originally inscribed on the sun god Apollo's temple in Greece.

It's clear that self-knowledge is a work in progress. It keeps life interesting to think that each of us is an unfolding mystery. In his essay on the Over-Soul, Emerson says, "We do not yet possess ourselves, and we know at the same time that we are much more." In another essay he writes, "Every person supposes him/herself not to be fully understood; and if there is any truth in him, if he rests at last on the divine soul, I see not how it could be otherwise. The last chamber, the last closet, he must feel was never opened; there is always a residue unknown, un-analyzable. That is, every person believes that they have greater possibility."

A common belief among the Transcendentalists was that within each of us there is a divine seed, today we would say a divine spark. In his essay on "Self-Reliance," Emerson attests to this belief when he writes, "We but half express ourselves and we are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents."

How do we become ourselves, cultivate that seed, fan that spark, pry open that inner chamber? Why should it be so complicated, so difficult, so tantalizing? The poet Andrew Krivak suggests one reason when he says that identity emerges through work. He asks the rhetorical question, "How does identity emerge if not through work?"

How often does a parent express their concern about a son or daughter who seems to be adrift by saying, "If only they could find themselves..." Anyone familiar with the life of Helen Keller remembers how distraught her devoted parents felt given their daughter's inability to see or hear. They could never have dreamt that she would triumph over such odds and live to write these words, "I thank God for my handicaps, for through them, I have found myself, my work, and my God."

Helen Keller's words remind me of another woman who overcame incredible tragedy in her own life to become during the early 20th century one of the most famous women in America, known to her enemies as the most dangerous woman in America.

Mother Jones didn't find God through tragedy but she did find herself and her work. Some would say she found a religious vocation. Even though she "professed agnosticism and scoffed at clergy men, descriptions of her were filled with religious allusions and language." It was said that she bore labor's cross for more than a quarter of a century. Her vocation was to become the soul of the modern American labor movement, it was to encourage the workers to action and to enrage the powerful.

A curious thing about this woman, she lied about her age, not to make herself younger. She exaggerated her age so she could live to be 100. She claimed that she was born in 1830 instead of 1837. The deception worked so well that on May Day 1930, on her 100th birthday, "congratulations poured in from all over the world, from labor unions, from friends and acquaintances, even from John D. Rockefeller, Jr... she made a vigorous speech for the talking-picture cameras." Six months later, Nov 30, she died. According to one biographer, "she just wore out."

The work that wore her out, through which Mary Harris Jones became herself, was labor organizing. At age 50 she became a full-time union organizer. Her early years prepared her for a life of hardship and a strong connection to the disinherited. Born in Cork, her father Richard Harris came to America and found work with railway construction crews. He sent for his family, so Mother Jones, then Mary Harris was brought up as the child of an American citizen, an identity of which she was always proud.

At the same time that she went to school to become a teacher, she also became a proficient dressmaker. She found that she preferred sewing to "bossing little children." She opened her own dress-making establishment in Chicago. But eventually went back to teaching in Memphis TN, where she met and married an iron moulder in 1861. Her husband was a staunch member of the Iron Moulder's Union.

In 1867, a yellow fever epidemic swept Memphis. Its victims were mainly among the poor and the workers. The rich and the well-to-do fled the city. Schools and churches were closed. People were not permitted to enter the house of a yellow fever victim without permits. The poor could not afford nurses. Just across the street from Mary Jones ten persons died from the plague. She was surrounded by death. Bodies had to be buried quickly at night, without ceremony. She could hear all around her house weeping and cries of delirium.

In her own words Mother Jones writes: "one by one, my four little children sickened and died. I washed their little bodies and got them ready for burial. My husband caught the fever and died. I sat alone through nights of grief. No one came to me. No one could. Other homes were as stricken as mine. All day long, all night long, I heard the grating of the wheels of the death cart."

Her husband's burial was taken care of by the union. After which Mary received permission to nurse the sufferers. Once the plague was over she returned to Chicago and the dress-making business.

Four years later, in October 1871, tragedy struck again. Mary and her partner's establishment was totally destroyed by the Great Chicago Fire. Thousands were left homeless by the fire. They camped out on the lakefront without food all night and the next day.

Mary found refuge in a church where she stayed until she could find a place. She used to spend her evenings near by in a fire scorched tumbled down building where the Knights of Labor met. This is where she became acquainted with the labor movement by listening to powerful speakers. This is where she learned that at the end of the Civil War in 1865, men came from the North and the South to Louisville, KY. Blues and greys together who only a year or two earlier had been fighting each other over the issue of slavery. The time had come they decided to find a way to combat another inhuman form of slavery – industrial slavery. This is how the Knights of Labor was born.

Mother Jones dates her own involvement in the labor movement from the time of the Chicago fire. She became passionately committed to better the conditions under which people worked and lived, all the while becoming a legend in her own time. Even though no one person could live up to all the stories told about her, still this woman came by her moral authority honestly.

Elliot Gorn, her biographer, testifies to her wholehearted identification with those for whom she fought. He quotes William James, in his Varieties of Religious Experience. James observes that in America, "We have lost the power even of imagining what the ancient idealization of poverty could have meant: the liberation from material attachments, the unbribed soul."

Gorn goes on to say, "Mary Jones had not lost that power of imagining, nor had her admirers. Her life of self-denial was a rebuke to frivolity and materialism. Even her black dresses invoked solemnity and mourning, sacrifice and suffering. Above all, in a nation that increasingly worshipped goods and measured status by material possessions indeed, a nation that came to identify womanhood itself with consumption, Mother Jones' ascetic life in the name of the poor gave her moral power that echoed the long religious tradition honoring martyrs and saints."

Despite and possibly because of the high regard in which this "miners' angel" was held, her prominence in the labor movement made her all the more vulnerable to slurs against her character. In 1904 when the coal miners' strike in West Virginia was growing uglier, a spectacular story appeared in an anti-labor magazine known as Polly Pry. The title was the pseudonym for a journalist known for her colorful reporting.

The scandal sheet claimed to reveal a darker side of Mary Harris' life, her secret history. According to this magazine, "Mother Harris" dating back to 1889 "was well-known in the red-light districts of Denver, Omaha, Kansas City, Chicago and San Francisco." Besides the fact that there was no independent corroboration of the story, there were a number of internal problems with it. In 1889, Mother Jones was 52 years old, a rather advanced age for a prostitute. Then again, it was hard to take Polly Pry seriously given the magazine's anti-labor bias and absurd coverage of the strike. It was not uncommon for women activists to be labeled as promiscuous and indecent.

The only outside evidence for the charge against this woman activist is that Mary Jones did sew for prostitutes. Years later Upton Sinclair, her friend asked Mother Jones about

the accusations. This is his account: "It appears that in those early days she was a sewing woman; she earned a precarious living and felt herself justified in working for anyone who would pay her. She did some sewing for a girl of the streets, and this girl died of tuberculosis, and the Catholic Church refused her a burial service, and Mother Jones wrote to a newspaper to protest against this action – her first appearance in public life, her first utterance of radicalism. And this had been remembered all these years, it was brought up against her in one labor struggle after another; only they made her the "madam" of the house where the poor girl of the streets lived."

In the late nineteenth century dressmaking was a business closely associated with prostitution, which helped to keep the story alive. Once Mother Jones discussed the charges against her with Duncan MacDonald, the United Mine Workers organizer. According to his unpublished autobiography written years later she told him, "Don't you think whatever my past might have been that I have more than made up for it?"

Because so little is known about this woman between 1871 and 1894, the mystery remains to this day. Whatever her past she made history in the exposure of disturbing truths about labor, poverty, and classism in America, a country where 150 years after she first spoke out almost a fifth of the children still live in poverty.

This woman's voice seemed to get stronger with age. Once when she was introduced as a great humanitarian, she snapped, "Get it straight, I'm not a humanitarian, I'm a hell-raiser." She never hesitated to speak her mind. On May 23, 1914, an article appeared in the NY Times, "500 Women Cheer for Mother Jones." She had just been released from Huerfano Country jail. Prominent woman writers, artists, suffragists, and philanthropists gave a dinner in her honor.

After being introduced as "the biggest woman in the world," she proceeded to shock her audience by putting down the Suffrage movement. Her reason being that even though Colorado woman could vote, they crippled the miners' cause by their support of pro-business politicians. She declared, "I have no vote and I've raised hell all over this country." She went on for almost two hours, concluding with these words, "Never mind if you are not lady-like, you are woman-like. God almighty made the woman and the Rockefeller gang of thieves made the ladies." She criticized the wives of industrialists and middle-class career women for being out of touch with the needs and aspirations of working people.

Mother Jones is the kind of person Betty Friedan would have sought out to interview for her book, The Fountain of Age which came out in the early 90s. In this well-researched and fascinating work she shows how ageism in our culture has inhibited the ongoing development of people in their 70s and 80s just as sexism inhibited the growth and development of women in our patriarchal culture. A culture in which the wisdom and strengths of older people and women are valued, is an enlightened culture. Friedan quotes Carl Jung who believed that "the greatest potential for growth and self-realization exists in the second half of life."

Certainly this was true in the life of the most dangerous woman in America. Through her vital involvement in the lives of the dispossessed, the disinherited, she was like some of the older men and women Betty Friedan interviewed whose "nerve to tell the truth regardless of the consequences" seemed to have quickened with age, men and women

who were regarded as "trouble makers" because they had the nerve to "ask out loud" questions not asked before about "conventional" wisdom, about the status quo accepted by those in power, who were well served by the system.

This "nerve to tell the truth", to question the status quo is a strength once looked to from the young, who are at times called the conscience of the country. It comes as a surprise Friedan's research suggests that it may well be a strength, instead (or also) of those along in years, who stay vitally involved, who continue to grow in self-knowledge, who believe that they have greater possibility, who continue to cultivate the divine seed, the spark, and who as Emerson said are not ashamed of that divine idea that each of us represents. Personally I'm grateful for whatever time I have left to become myself, to pry open another closet. Or as one person put it, "I just hope I can grow up before I die."