



Mary and Bob often find themselves sharing common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry. When approaching ministerial concerns from different angles, He Said - She Said is a venue to share differing perspectives.

Definition versus Composition

Bob's Perspective:

As a rule, I usually pay very little (if any) attention to television commercials. This is for a variety of reasons, the most prevalent being that, in the vast majority of the time, I don't even know what they're selling. Many of them seem to be soundbites and catch phrases that in themselves make no sense. This has never been more obvious to me than as in the context of a breakfast meeting I had today with Mary.

I was telling her about a particular commercial of which I took notice. I was troubled with the commercial's message – but I was more torn about the reason for my concern. The tag line of the commercial is “It's OK to not be OK.” The tension for me was that I can understand the urgency and direness of that statement when dealing with someone who may be suicidal. It's obvious that the first priority is to save the life – so we say or do whatever it takes to make that rescue happen – and deal with the rest later. Mary then informed me that the commercial isn't about suicide prevention. Rather it's about seeking treatment and possibly taking a particular medication. That blew me away. That wasn't the message I heard at all – and I'm sure there are many in my camp. In this case, the tag line is all wrong. It sends the wrong message. It should be more like “It's NOT OK to just be not OK.” The original tag line is saying that it's ok if you're messed up. The second tag line says that if you're messed up, here's some help to become better.

All of that being said, the truth is that it's NOT “OK to not be OK,” if we do nothing to strive for OKness(?). (*I really need to stop reading Lewis Carroll.*) In other words, we don't just give a pass to not being OK – there needs to be some attempt or resolve in one's life to become OK. We hear this quite clearly in the Act of Contrition:

“I firmly resolve with the help of thy grace to sin no more...etc.”

Firm resolution doesn't mean that we're not going to drop the ball now and then. However, it does that mean that we're really going to give it the old college try. Conversely, if we express



sorrow, but are unwilling to at least attempt to change our life or behavior, then the apology is insincere. As my Pappy used to say, “Words are cheap...just show me.”

This brings me around to our topic, “Definition versus Composition.” Every now and then, I think it’s interesting to throw a topic out there which may spark a little philosophical debate. So here we go! Which is better: (1) we define ourselves based on that of which we’re made, or (2) we compose ourselves in order to create the desired self-definition?

My vote is for the second premise.

The first premise allows for “It’s OK to not be OK” as an excuse. It seems to me that this person would have the inclination to allow, and even accept, flaws as integral parts of their self-definition. This definition would then be in danger of becoming (if not already being) stagnant. “These are my flaws, and that’s just the way it is.” The second premise doesn’t make the same allowance. This person’s composition changes as they define and attack their shortcomings. Although they’ll most likely never reach perfection (none of us do), in this case, “It’s OK to not be OK” is OK! The resolve is to keep moving forward and being better, not just shrugging one’s shoulder and saying “Oh well...that’s how I am.”

This is the danger of the soundbite world in which we live today. The aforementioned television commercial really sends mixed messages. Without a doubt, we need to always care for those who are in immediate distress. Addictions and suicidal tendencies are nothing to be joked about our trivialized. However, on the same plain, we need to strive for moving forward, not accepting the status quo in our lives for its own sake.

It’s NOT OK to JUST BE not OK!

Mary’s Perspective:

I don’t know about you, but I found myself reading Bob’s perspective slowly and repeatedly! To fill in a bit of background, here’s where the conversation started...

We know several people who have various ailments or are somehow compromised. For example, we know folks with anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, epilepsy, asthma, and arthritis (note: not all the same person!). We were discussing the difference between



“the arthritic friend” versus “the friend with arthritis”. It may seem to be a game of semantics, but the arthritic friend (or asthmatic friend, or anxious friend, or hypertensive friend) defines the person by the ailment. It focuses the attention on a single condition, perhaps to the exclusion of other qualities. The same friend with arthritis is also an awesome musician – but if I refer to that person as the arthritic one, it detracts from the musical skills, the compassion, the joyfulness, and the other wonderful qualities that person has, besides their arthritis.

Referring to the friend with arthritis/asthma/anxiety/hypertension defines the person without placing precedence on the label or stigma of the condition. It acknowledges and values their humanity first, and then perhaps identifies a challenge. One such friend has said to me, “yes, I have anxiety, but it doesn’t define me.”

Even in Bob’s example, I would suggest he consider the one in immediate distress to be a person with suicidal ideations, not a suicidal person. It’s a small shift in words but represents a larger shift in thinking. And we have all observed that words make a difference.

I dare suggest we all have some disorders, to one degree or another. They don’t define us, but they are part of the picture. I may be short, but I have many other qualities – some good and some not so good. If I’m only known as the short one, the other valuable characteristics aren’t appreciated in the same way. And for the record, being short isn’t always a negative – it enables me to drive a very cute little car that gets over 40 miles to the gallon, which is particularly desirable as gas prices keep climbing! But I digress...

Back to the commercial that Bob was describing. I am aware that it is an ad encouraging talk therapy, and an attempt to shine a positive light on the act of seeking better mental health. My assumption is that it is also for a drug, as often the most effective approaches to improving mental health include a combination of talk therapy and appropriate medicines and/or supplements. The bottom line I suggested to Bob is to follow the money.

Who benefits from paying for advertising? The company paying for the ad. Do I think some consortium of mental health professionals pooled their money to run an ad encouraging therapy, simply for the possible good of those who might hear the ad? Perhaps, but not likely. Companies pay thousands for commercial advertising because they anticipate financial return on their investment. That commercial, in particular, I am wary of, because it is not obvious what it is selling. I perceive it as slippery to not spell out more specifically



what they are selling – and I suspect it is financed by a company promoting a pharmacological solution to improved mental health. It makes me want to read the fine print. In an economically driven industry, it's not likely to me that a commercial is run just for the good of people. Who else is deriving profit?

So, what does this have to do with composition and definition? I think we would all like to say that we are not defined by our shortcomings or our challenges. How many feel-good stories have you read – or folks you know in your life – who faced unthinkable challenges at an early point in their lives, who went on to leverage that for the greater good? For example, consider one who has faced childhood cancer, and then gone on to find a new treatment or cure for the disease. I know of someone who developed juvenile diabetes, who went on to be a researcher and pharmacist seeking better treatment options for kids with diabetes. Her struggles at an early age motivated her to improve the lives of many. I have a friend who faced the unthinkable grief of losing a child at a young age – and went on to open a grief counseling and bereavement center that has literally transformed lives. I know a person who was unjustly incarcerated, and later exonerated, who used this negative experience to elicit several positive outcomes: he championed revisions of the prosecutorial process to hopefully close some loopholes that allowed him to be unfairly jailed; he has shared his own conversion story in a way that has impacted the faith development of many; and he has given witness to the power of forgiveness that has made him a peaceful, faith-filled man. Not one of these folks were defined by their challenge, but the challenge was an important part of their development into the people they have become.

From a Catholic perspective, we are all sinful people. But our sins don't define us – our Savior does. We are Christian people who sometimes mess up, over and over again.

Today's food for thought? What defines you? What makes you who you are? Any changes you'd like to make, to either perspective? Now's a great time to start! You've already taken the first step – you've thought about where you are, and where you'd like to be. What's the next step?