

What I Didn't Learn In Biology Class

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Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

I love the story that tells of some graffiti that was found on a school desk somewhere in some high school in America. In one set of handwriting was written the question – Where will you spend eternity? Below it was written – By the looks of it now, Biology 101. I wouldn't have been clever enough to think of that answer – but it most certainly speaks for me. I did not do well in Biology. I hate to admit it – but anything that smelled of math and science made me quiver in high school and college. I just didn't have a brain for it. I guess I'm still looking for what I have a brain for. Part of it I think is that in biology what you get introduced to is this incredibly deep and complex world of the human physiological system. Organs and muscles and bones and cells and genes and a whole bunch of other things that make up this thing we call the human body – before I could scratch the surface of all that goes on inside the human body I already knew that I was in over my head. Too much information for this too little brain. And so what I did not learn in Biology class is what my friends Lee and Larry and Randy and Dave, all of whom became doctors, were learning – which is that the body is this nearly incomprehensible and miraculous collection of systems held in this mysterious balance of life that somehow and often despite what we do to it – continues to function every moment of every day. The lungs keep breathing, the heart keeps pumping, the brain keeps computing, the kidneys keep purifying, the appendix keep appendixing (and now you can tell I am already beyond what I know) – this system of flesh and blood and electrical current – over the course of thousands of years of science – we are still attempting to learn and we discovered that what we don't know about the human body is more still than what we know. All this is within your possession. All this is you. Each of us in possession of 206 bones, over 600 muscles, on average 100,000 hairs –

some of you I can tell lowered that average a bit, 100 trillion cells with 25 million cells being added to your body every second, five million receptors just in your nose, arteries, veins and capillaries that if you put them end to end would reach 60,000 miles – all this is inside you. There is enough nuclear energy, so I'm told, in you to light up the city of Los Angeles. All these things I did not learn in Biology Class. I know just enough to make me a dangerous preacher.

And what I also did not learn in Biology class is the answer to the question why? Why all this? Why such an organism? What's all the fanfare for? Why all the wiring? Why the 100 trillion cells? Why are you and I walking around with a nervous system that makes us able to walk around? What is the purpose behind all this? It is, of course, one of the fundamental questions of human existence. It's not the first time you've heard it and it won't be the last time you'll wonder about it. The bookstore is full of authors who want to take up sides on the question and it is not my intention to engage in that debate. As I said I am a preacher that knows enough to make me dangerous. And in some circles it may be a dangerous thing to affirm that the purpose and the reason behind all this chemistry and wiring and flesh and blood – is that, in the words of the Psalmist, we were fearfully and wonderfully made. That this creation had a creator. That this marvelously intricate system had a programmer. That we were knit together in our mother's womb by a knitter. That before we were the gleam in our father's eye we were the gleam in our father's eye. That we began as a good idea. That we came together for a reason, for a purpose. That before we were even formed, in the words of Jeremiah, we were known, we were consecrated, we were appointed.

Now I know that for you and for me that is a huge leap of faith. By grace you and I have been given the gift to believe that this gathering this morning is not some random collision of cell masses – but that you and I were placed here in this world for good reason. That all this wiring, all this intricate web of muscle, artery and bone, all these neurons of pulsating life – all of it came together inside you and me and was sparked by divinity. And if you are sparked by divinity – well that means then that there has to be some kind of meaning for your life. If God means to make something, then that means that there is a meaning for you.

Dorothy Sayers in her great book *The Mind of the Maker* suggests that the divine creative process take a Trinitarian form – in which God begins with an Idea – that you and I are a God idea – and then God puts forth the energy to make us into who we are – that we were knit together – formed at the hands of the potter – but then creation is not complete – until it is beheld. Until the Spirit uses us as a channel to touch the life of another. Not unlike an author of a book. First the author thinks of an idea ... then the author pens the words to page – but none of that matters until someone reads the book. You and I find our greatest meaning when we understand that we are the idea of God --- formed of God’s hand – for the purposes of another.

Jeremiah starts out his great prophecy by saying – God knew me before I was formed ... I was a good idea of the divine – and then God formed me out of the dust of the earth – and now I wonder if God has use for me? And God says, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.” You see the creation is not complete until the idea is formed and expressed. The book is not a book until it is written and read.

Abraham Joshua Heschel said it this way, “Man is man because something divine is at stake in his existence. He is not an innocent bystander in the cosmic drama. There is in us more kinship with the divine than we are able to believe.”

Can you imagine with me the possibility that something divine is at stake within you. That not only are you a walking, talking marvel of divinely constructed flesh and blood – but that there is great purpose for your life. That you are here on this earth to somehow make a difference in the lives of one, two, ten, a hundred, a thousand, a million people? That the creation of God is not complete until you embrace and live into your purpose. That’s its not enough for you to be a book closed on the table, but that your purpose is to be opened and read by another. You see behind every person - behind every mass of cells and organs and flesh and blood - there is a purpose. Behind every person there is a purpose. Behind every purpose there is a person.

I read just a few years ago the obituary of John S. Barry. Do you know who John S. Barry is? John S. Barry is the reason why four out of every five households has in its possession a little blue and yellow can of something called WD-40. WD-40 that stuff that sort of fixes everything. John S. Barry took this invention of Dr. Norm Larsen – another name you didn't know – and turned it from something only a few aeronautical engineers knew about – to something 80% of Americans know about – this oily, greasy substance that has just the right level of water displacement to take the squeak and the creak out of just about everything – except our knees and hips. Miracle material. And do you know why it's called WD-40? Because it took 40 tries to get the water displacement (WD) just right. WD-40. Behind that blue and yellow can there was a person with purpose.

I buried a gentleman several years ago and as I was talking with his sons about their father preparing for the eulogy I asked them if there was anything I should know about their father. One of them held up a pencil. I said, OK, a pencil. He said, Do you see this metal ring that goes around the top of the pencil that holds the eraser? I said yes. Our father invented that. Behind that little strip of metal that I had never given thought to – there was a person. A person with a purpose.

Now here's the thing – thank God we're not all called to be inventors – or I would be so out of luck. Thank God we're all not called to be famous – because famous isn't what it is cracked up to be. But the truth is – if there is any shred of goodness in this world, any glimpse of God, any encounter with grace – what's behind it is a Creator who formed a person...a person with a purpose – to express a gift, a glimpse of the goodness and grace of God.

Most mornings when I walk into the coffee shop (and believe me most mornings I do walk into the coffee shop) behind the cash register is a man named Ken. Ken is a good Episcopalian. And every morning when I step up to the counter Ken says to me before I order my coffee, "The Lord be with you." And I say back, "And with your spirit." That's how I start my day – the first person outside my home says, "The Lord be with you." And that makes the day for me a good day. Goodness has poured into my life. And behind the goodness is a person – who has lived out the purpose of his protoplasm by bolstering my spirit and reminding me that this is the day the Lord has made and we

should rejoice and be glad in it. The creative force of God has found its completion in the joy received with a cup of coffee.

David Bailey was a young man I knew. His father, Ken Bailey, is one of the great Biblical scholars within the Presbyterian Church – and his son David had started out a career in corporate America but at an early age was diagnosed with a terminal form of brain cancer. And not knowing how long he had to live, he quit his job and took up his passion. Singing and playing guitar. And he was good at it. It seemed that all the wiring, all the bones and muscles and the 100 trillion cells – were there in his body to play the six strings and to sing. And so he decided he was going to sing songs of hope and joy and grace and love to those well and to those who were sick. He expected he had six months to do this. So he toured the country, he circled the globe, he wandered hospital oncology wings and he sang. He recorded. He played concerts. He would keep singing until the cancer told him he couldn't. Six months turned into fourteen years. And what he discovered, he told me once, was that the very thing that was trying to take his life, was actually giving it to him. Because he found the secret – that behind every goodness there has to be a person. And why shouldn't he be the person? And in one of his letters to his friends he listed the lessons he learned and they were these:

God is real.

Hope is worth it.

Family comes first.

Kindness has no conditions.

Strength is subjective.

Music, smiles and coffee can cross any border.

Children deserve you.

Friends and angels are often the same thing.

Prayer matters.

Peace has many faces.

Do you hear all the goodness delivered by a man dying of brain cancer whose biology was not cooperating? Behind every purpose there is a person.

So the prophet wonders what could God do through him – and here we speak of him 2500 years later. And what might happen if we wondered the same thing? What might God do with this mysterious and miraculous body of flesh and blood, cells and current, heart and soul? If it's true that the creator is adding to us 25 million more cells a second might that be a sign that God ain't through with us yet.

I love the words on the old Yorkshire tombstone:

God give me work

Till my life shall end

And life

Till my work is done.

What might God have left to do through me to finish his creation? No waiting necessary. No patent required. No degree in biology expected. For the greatest question is not how, but why. And each of us has a why. Each of us has a why. And the why waits for us. As soon as these words are through, the why waits for us. Who will we bless? What joy will we bring? What love will we share? What grace will we extend? This is the why. And if there is anything for which to be thankful in this week of Thanksgiving – it's that. The good idea of God waiting in you for its completion. The Lord be with you...and with your spirit.