

To be or not to be*

Ella Smith Simmons

General Vice President, General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church,
Silver Spring, MD, USA

Introduction

“Be” is a fascinating word. It more than captures the attention and rigorously stimulates the imagination. It is everything to everyone all the time, yet poses a formidable challenge to be harnessed and presented in a meaningful way. The word “be” is most often coupled with “to” usually in a passive form. However, great implications result when the action verb form of “be” is used. This has to do with a conscious identity of active being. The Biblical text, Micah 6:8, “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (NIV), clearly emphasises the active form of “be”.

We sometimes hear stories of individuals experiencing a loss of identity and how they struggled to recapture their own essence—their being. On the humorous side, there is a report that the actor Peter Sellers played so many different movie roles that he sometimes forgot his own identity. When asked once by a fan, “Are you Peter Sellers?” he briskly answered, “not today!” and moved on (Today in the Word, 1993). Did he just brush the fan off? Was he suffering from amnesia? Was he suffering from something even more serious—the illusion of life he created in his acting? In the book *The empire of illusion: The end of literacy and the triumph of spectacle* (Hedges, 2009), the author examines the illusion of literacy, the illusion of love, the illusion of wisdom, the illusion of happiness, and the illusion of society that characterise life today. Is this what we as individuals have become; is this our state of being? Is it true that all the world’s a stage, and we—all the people—merely players?

Exposition and analysis

Mulholland (2000) declares, “We all have deeply ingrained perceptual frameworks that shape our lives in the world: Structures of habit, attitude, perspective, relational dynamics, and response mechanisms” (p. 33). These, he says, shape people’s understanding of God, their understanding of themselves, and their understanding of others.

In the Micah 6:8 realm individuals’ everyday lives show the perceptual frameworks shaping their interactions in all three of these relational realms of life. These frameworks—our worldview and ideology—“condition the way we respond and react to life situations” (Mulholland, 2000, p. 3). Jesus was working on shaping these three in the Beatitudes—the BE-attitudes (Matthew 5:1–11).

In this context, whether one is a student of Shakespeare or not, thoughts go to the famous “to be, or not to be” soliloquy from *Hamlet*. The theatrical soliloquy was, and even now, is often used to reveal the innermost thoughts of a character to public view. It is an act of bearing the soul. Hamlet says:

To be, or not to be—that is the question:
Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them
(Hamlet, Act III, Scene I).

Hamlet’s soliloquy has become the focus of many analytical exercises. For example, one analysis characterises the passage as “a deliberation on the conflict between reason and passion” (Bugliani, 1995, p. 11). Another portrays the soliloquy as universal in perspective, that is, as the dilemma applied to the universal man/woman—sort of everything to everyone—the all in all decision. The writer asserts, “Hamlet, no less than Augustine, is working out a theorem, which is of general application based on a fundamental question—perhaps *the* fundamental question—concerning human life, the desirability of having it at all” (Jenkins, 1991, p. 13). This question—to be, or not to be—is that which comes at the juncture of freedom and bondage for every human being, because the only real freedom we have is the freedom of choice—to be, or not to be.

A more contemporary writer, Ross Douthat, appears to address these same issues in his book, *Privilege: Harvard and the education of the ruling class* (Privilege: Honour—to self, pleasure, source of pride, license), in which he reports in great detail on his transformation in his undergraduate experience at Harvard University. The theme of this Harvard post-graduation address, “privilege”, has both a noun

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* Graduation Service Address; given on 11 December, 2011, at Avondale College of Higher Education; adapted, with permission, for a wider audience and publication in *TEACH*.

and verb form; yet, the discourse makes clear that in the Harvard educational process “privilege” is an action verb.

The title of Douthat’s book reveals the content, as with Hamlet—an analysis of ‘having it all’. The content depicts Harvard as a culture of privilege, of ambition and entitlement, as a stepping stone to high salaries and coveted social networks; the very best in intellectual, human and social capital—the act of privileging. On his graduation day and in his later reflections, Douthat says in what could be regarded as his definitive soliloquy, “the pull of privilege is too strong, my efforts to escape it too weak, too halfhearted. I seek the approval of men far more than the favour of God” (Douthat, 2005). These, his innermost thoughts now made public, reveal who he has become. Douthat says he entered Harvard seeking an education for the purpose of changing the world, with the idealistic aim of making the world a better place for all people and by advocating for those in need and distress. However, when faced with the fundamental question—to be, or not to be—he responded in the negative. He chose *not to be*.

Harvard held its 360th Commencement this past May. According to one of its released statements, it “was the public celebration of thousands of personal success stories, and a launching into brilliant futures” (Harvard Gazette, 2007); the final act of privileging. Harvard has produced eight presidents of the United States and more than 40 Nobel laureates, including the current president. Yes, these are they who know success, as measured by the world’s standard.

Analysis of success: an application

Among Jesus’ disciples, Judas was the one stunning success, by worldly standards. By the same standards, Peter was a groveling failure. Judas was successful both financially and politically and was well connected. He was a man of ambition and entitlement—a privileged man. He cleverly arranged to control the funds of the apostolic team and skillfully manipulated the political forces of the day to accomplish his goals.

On the other hand, Peter was a crude, impulsive failure. He was socially unskilled, brash and lacked true courage. He could not manage anything or lead others, for he could not control his own tongue or predict his own behaviour in a given situation. He did not think before he acted. Yet Peter demonstrated what Winston Churchill learned, “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue—the courage to be—that counts” (Goodreads, 2007). Time has reversed judgments on these two disciples. Now, even by worldly standards, Judas is a villain and Peter a saint. It all has to do with the ultimate choice—to be, or not to be.

One would think this is a lesson learned; however, the world—and often Christians as well as the Church—continues to chase after the Judas success of financial wealth and political power. The paradox is that humans have learned how to make a living, but not how to make a life. People do not know *what* and *how* “to be”.

Many students who graduate this year will define themselves by what they do in search of worldly fame and fortune, and will judge themselves and others by the degree to which they achieve fame and accumulate fortune through what they do. Albert

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Ella Smith
Simmons
delivering the
2011 Avondale
College of
Higher Education
Graduation
Service Address

[Photography:
Ann Stafford]

“**External religious practice or make-believe humility, role-play integrity cannot be a substitute for internal character and obedience**”

Einstein once warned that we should not seek to be successful, but rather should seek to be of value (Quotationspage, 2007). This implies relationship. True success is using one's educational attainments, power, position, connections—all one's gifts, talents, and resources—to make a positive difference in the world. This requires a person to remember *who* they are and *whose* they are. It also requires a daily positive response to the definitive question, to be, or not to be.

Every graduate has an education with the knowledge and skills to go out into the world to make their mark. They must accept neither the world's definition of success nor its acquiescence to evil. They must make a difference for good. They must not only make, but *be* the sacrifice that aims to make the world a better place. For a world that is spinning out of control, they must be stability. For societies terrorised by violence and strife, they must be peace and harmony. For communities imprisoned by dogma, they must be change. For people shackled by injustice, they must be integrity. For the dislocated and disillusioned, they must be hope. For the disenfranchised and silenced, they must be voice. For those lost in sinful darkness, they must be a light of deliverance.

It is clear that knowledge becomes relevant only when it is translated into action—action that is the public expression of the individual's inner being. For true success, knowledge must become wise action; theory must become correct practice; and theology must become life. That is the lesson taken from Micah 6:8. The paraphrase of this verse in *The Message* reads:

But he's already made it plain how to live, what to do, what GOD is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbour, be compassionate and loyal in your love, And don't take yourself too seriously—take God seriously (Peterson, 2002).

This conclusion comes after a most interesting soliloquy. The people of God who had gone astray again, each in his or her own voice, sought God in 'soliloquious' fashion in the verses that precede this verse. They revealed their inner longings to restore their relationship with God. Each one speaks for him/herself: How can I stand up before God? *What shall I do?* With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings? (Dybdahl, 2010; Nichol, 2002).

But they are confused, thinking that they can purchase or barter favour with God. Notice how the 'price' grows progressively higher. The customs

expressed in this soliloquy seem to be based on the idea that the value Heaven placed upon an offering was calculated according to its cost. In spite of their declared relationship with God, the influence of heathenism prevailed in their minds. The questions raised here—the innermost thoughts made public—as with Hamlet, demand a negative answer.

They found, as all must find, that external religious practice or make-believe humility, role-play integrity cannot be a substitute for internal character and obedience. God did not desire their substance—material things or religious rituals, but rather required their essence—their being; not just their worship, but their will—their being; not just their service, but their soul—their being.

Romans 12: 1 and 2 make it clear that it is by the renewing of the mind that a person comes to be what God wants. The text says:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognise what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you (Peterson, 2002).

Once we understand this and allow God to break through human cultures and traditions, disrupting these ways, He will then "call us to find our true identity, values, and purpose in life" (Mulholland, 2000, p. 74).

Conclusion and challenge

Hamlet's answer, when he speaks of his own individual plight and gives vent to his personal feelings, is most often negative. It is the choice of 'not to be'; yet this negative answer is not the play's final answer. In the end Hamlet comes to accept his purpose and the fact that guilt must be atoned for. The play "finally offers a hero who, in a world where good and evil inseparably mingle, is tempted to shun his lot in life, but comes to embrace it, choosing finally 'to be'" (Jenkins, 1991, p. 23).

While each person's purpose in life is vastly different from Hamlet's, they must also come to grips with the same inner parameters of *who they are*, and then choose to be. As graduates are about to enter a new phase in their lives, they stand at the crossroads of freedom and bondage. The question put, is answered only by the action chosen. Isaiah 61:1–3 calls for choosing to:

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preach good tidings to the poor; ...heal the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, to open the prison for *those who are* bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that the Lord may be glorified (Andrews Study Bible, 2010).

This is what it looks like to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. So, which is it: To be, or not to be? That is the question; the question of whether one will suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or take up arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them. To be, or not to be. Choose **to be**. **TEACH**

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