

THE FOUR ANXIETIES

Not three or five. Exactly four. That is, at the moment I surmise I can tuck every one of our multitude of human anxieties in one or another of these four boxes. At least I think the exercise worthwhile, & hope you will.

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RELATIONSHIP ANXIETY

I am I but who are you? am I to be in relationship with you? if so, what, & how, & for how long? Our life-history is a journey of peaks & valleys in this anxious self-questioning, puberty being the most dramatic peak. I hasten beyond this anxiety box, pausing only to note (1) that sometimes the question is coming at us, not going from us (ie, the question is dialectical, a process in which each is self-discovering while discovering the other), & (2) that the interlocutors include God, who's on both the giving & the receiving end of the question.

But lest this Thinksheet seem to be accentuating the negative: is there anything one can do to reduce another's relationship anxiety? Yes, one can make relating easier for the other. The Greeks had a word for it, φιλοξενία (*philo-xenia*), "love [of] strange[rs]," in early Christian literature, including the NT, almost always translated "hospitality." On this virtue highly valued in the early church, a teacher of mine wrote a brilliant article (D.W.Riddle, "Early Christian Hospitality," JBL 57/'38). And Henri Nouwen wrote a popular book on it (REACHING OUT, Doubleday/75, a year after he sat for a day on a Scarsdale rug with five of us to test his grasp of & slant on the idea; one was Larry LeShan, who got all excited because of its congruity with his experience in working with cancer patients). As you can see from this on p.51, a key metaphor here for Henri was space-making: Hospitality is "the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy....not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place....not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines....to offer a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment....not an educated intimidation...but the liberation of fearful hearts so that words can find roots....The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free...to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances...leave and follow their own vocations."....An early Christian letter refers to the "bishops and greeters," as though the space-makers were as important as the rulers! Maybe even more important. What happens to a stranger who walks into your church is a litmus test of the quality of your congregational life....Ohio has a town named "Hospitality" (by another Greek word for it, "Xenia"). In 1937 I studied with a former professor of Xenia Seminary, which later merged into Pittsburg-Xenia Seminary (Presbyterian)....You know another Greek word on this stem, "xenophobia," stranger-fear (primarily the fear one has of strangers, secondarily the fear strangers have). And then there's a rarer word, "xenomisia," stranger-hate, which right now, in a half dozen places on earth, is piling up corpses.

TIME ANXIETY

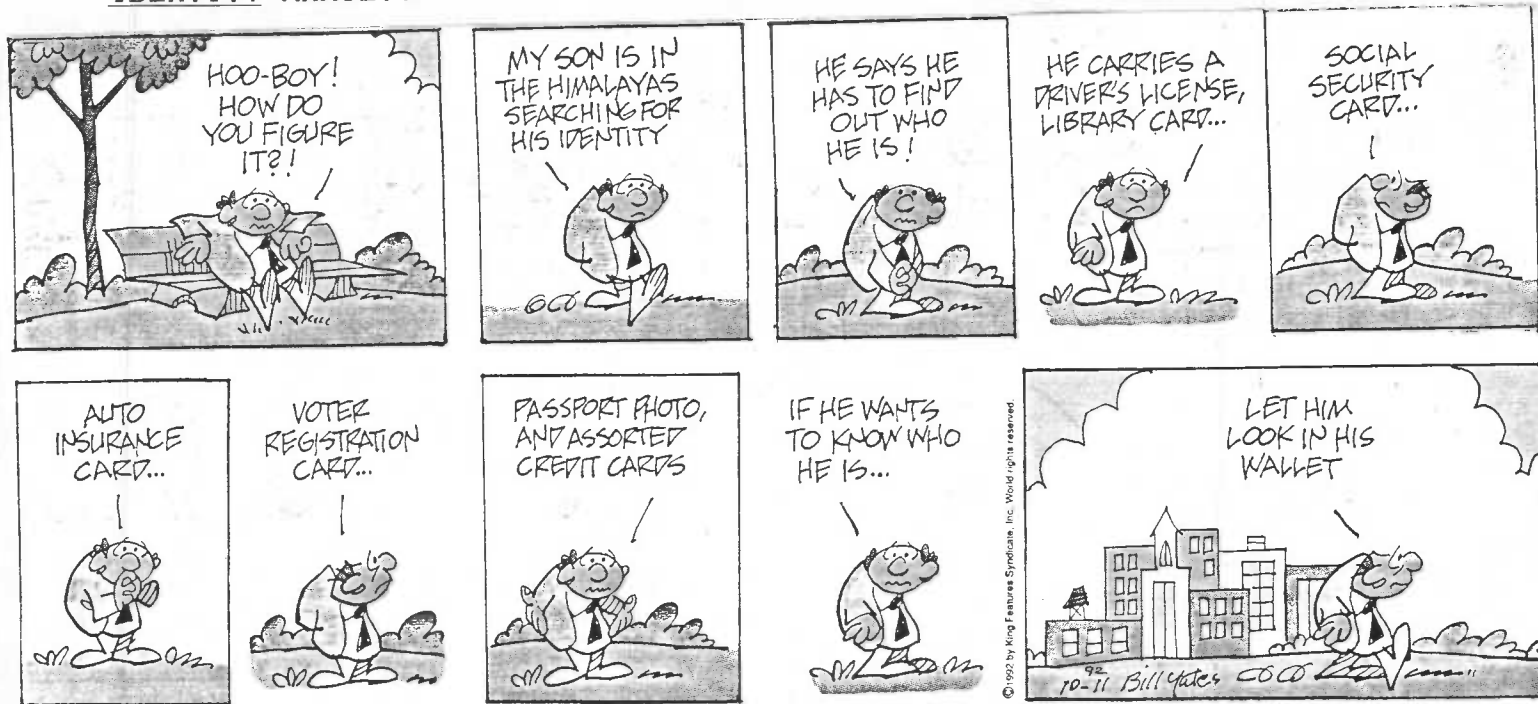
Today's NEWSWEEK cover sticks this anxiety in your eye. The silent footsteps of time have always given human beings passing through life's stages grief over the old stage & worry about the new, but (as the article details) their reaching the half-century mark is extra hard on the baby boomers....Fifty. 50! My generation contributed atomic heebiejeebies to theirs. Five days ago the surviving creators of "the Bomb" met where it all began with the first chain reaction on what NPR called "the squash court" under the U. of Chicago Stagg Field bleachers--my rainy-day tennis court, which (one day when



I went to play) I found chained off with a "Manhattan Project" (whatever that was) sign dangling from the chain. (Wednesday they conceded they'd had a big Bad Idea, which seemed good at the time....but Iraq almost had it, Pakistan just got it, & Iran is near having it.)....Says a boomer in the article (p.50!), "Aging sucks. It's filled with all those D words--decay, decrepitude, degeneration, dying." Their midlife malaise is gloomed over with an exaggerated foreboding partly attributable to the fact that they've 30 more years to go than my generation had. And the 1980s seemed to promise breakthroughs that now seem to be walls; the '90s demand acceptance of limitations economic as well as physical (so, as a boomer put it in jargon, one must pay more attention to "one's internal self-esteem system"). To the question "Is that all there is?" the boomers are tempted to reply "Yes" & need to be challenged to reply, with nonmaterial values in mind, "No."

What best "renews our inner nature day by day" as "our outer nature is wasting away" (2Cor.4.16 NRSV)? It's our central imperishable activity, praising God. Composer Anton Bruckner said that was his central motive in all his work, that in the praise of God his music be "like birds singing in the morning." Time anxiety overwhelmed by timeless doxology. (So, again, I didn't leave you on a negative note, did I?)

IDENTITY ANXIETY



In this Brickman's "Small Society," the father has what Kierkegaard called a "trivial" identity, & the boomer son's off on a Hindu inner-narcissistic trip (both senses). Both have missed the West's spiritual offering, viz identity-in-God-in-community-in-creation--identity through repentance, self-denial (anti-identity!), praise, & service.

ABYSS ANXIETY

"The final terror of self-consciousness is the knowledge of one's own death.... Death is man's peculiar and greatest anxiety."--Ernest Becker, *THE DENIAL OF DEATH*, p.70.

Viktor Frankl's "existential anxiety," Ernest Becker's "thanatophobia" (death-fear), *NEWSWEEK*'s "the ultimate D word" (p.3; the only additional reference to death is the claim that men chase women "because they fear death"). If God is the first, middle(-age), & last word, biodeath, while abyss for the flesh (*sarx*), is "the Everlasting Arms" for the self awaiting "the resurrection of the body" (*soma*). "Strength to live and strength to die in peace and in joy" is what Tolstoy found in some Christians he knew, & he mentioned them as the cause of his conversion. And Horace Bushnell so joined duty & joy that, as a friend said, "even his dying was play to him."