

## “Act As If” for Lent

Common wisdom says that people behave as they do on the basis of their emotions. When we feel angry, troublesome words and actions may emerge. When we feel fearful, we may limit our behaviours to those by which we feel most safe. When we are happy and confident, we may exhibit some of our most generous social interaction and service. You get the point.

I too see the way all that works. In addition, though, I’ve also seen and experienced just the opposite cause-and-effect at work. It’s entirely possible for me (and you) to act in such a way that particular emotions and states-of-mind follow from our behaviours. Here are two stories to illustrate this.

It’s told that in his early life John Wesley came to the southern United States as a missionary. This was before he developed the approach and organization of ministry that we know as Methodism, one of the founding denominations of our United Church of Canada. Wesley was a complete failure at his missionary venture, and fled back to England. On the ship home, he noticed a group of Moravian Christians who seemed to have great peace and calm even in the face of severe storms and terrible conditions on the ship. Later, in England, he met a Moravian missionary and talked with him about his discouragement and decision to leave ministry altogether. The Moravian said to him, “Preach faith until you have it, and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.” In effect, Wesley was told to act a certain way and then he would come to feel just that way.

In my own past, when depression was overwhelming my capacity to function in the municipal work in which I was then engaged, I found myself dreading the beginning of each workday. Later I recognized one way I successfully dealt with this, at least for a time. Coming in to my workplace from the parking lot, I found myself simply whistling a meaningless tune on my way up the stairs to my second-floor office. By the time I reached the office door, I would feel in a good enough mood to engage the work and the people in a reasonably positive manner. I could behave my way into feeling OK. It worked for some weeks.

It’s the “act as if” principle. We can “act as if” we feel a certain way or have a certain mind-set, and soon enough we can find that we DO feel that way, or DO see the world in that manner. It works well enough, and often enough, to be well worth giving it a try.

The same principle has applied throughout my journey toward faith and, later, toward ministry. Connected to a local United Church only because it let me enjoy singing in its choir, I chose to “act as if” I had faith and believed in God, even when neither of those were essentially true. For some years Susan had despaired that I would never really find my own belief and faith. Over time, and with some important life experiences to bolster its growth, I discovered – much to my amazement – that I actually had built a solid belief in the presence and agency of God, along with a developing faith to go along with that. My understanding and my faith had followed from my behaviour.

Sometimes a troubled couple will tell me they have come to a place where they find less enjoyment, less connection and less affection within their relationship, and ask me for help. One concrete possibility for healing that I can offer is to ask them to think about all the little and big things they did with and for each other in earlier times to show how much they cared and appreciated each other. Then I ask them to go and do the same sorts of things for a few weeks and see what happens. It's not my own original idea, but I've certainly seen its effect. It's amazing how the couple seems to develop new (or at least renewed) affection and love and enjoyment of each other's company.

Perhaps we all can find a life-lesson in this idea of our spirit and feelings being grown or at least modified through our behaviour. Lent may be a good chance to practice for a few weeks. What might happen – for you and those around you – if you consciously found ways to act caringly, kindly, compassionately and generously through the next 40 days? Is it possible that acting out the call of Jesus, the call of your faith, more intentionally every day might end up actually renewing your spirit and strengthening your faith?

Give it a try. You never know who you might become!



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