

“Who Am I?”
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Maybe you’ve seen them in person, in a parade or maybe just photos of them in some foreign land looking slightly out of place in their formal military attire. The French Foreign Legion has been a source of intrigue and mystery throughout its nearly 175 year history. Not only because of the trademark uniforms, with a white hat that looks like a round box and a blue sash around their waists, or with red hats in blue uniforms with high collars and red epaulets on the shoulders, or their combat uniform, including a beret with the Legion emblem on it, but because of their mercenary-like status. They have a reputation of strength, discipline and loyalty that often goes well beyond that of other military forces.

King Louis Philippe of France created the Legion in 1831 in an effort to strengthen his waning ruling authority and as an attempt to augment the existing French forces fighting in Algeria. King Louis Philippe originally recruited for the Legion not only from France but also, Spain, Italy and Switzerland. Composed exclusively of volunteers aged between 18 and 40, the Legion was immediately involved in the conquest of Algeria before passing under Spanish control in 1835.

A second Legion was then created which fought in Algeria, in Crimea (1855), in Italy (1859) and in Mexico (1863). In Mexico, it won one of its greatest claims to fame: on April 30, 1863, at the Camerone Hacienda near Puebla, 3 officers and 62 legionnaires resisted 2,000 Mexicans. After a day of heroic fighting the last five survivors fixed bayonets and charged. This battle, whose name adorns every Legion flag, remains the symbol of a mission carried out to the bitter end.

Historically the Legion is known for accepting all who desired to enlist. At any one time there are 90 to 100 different nationalities represented in the Legion forces. Officially, however, there are no Frenchmen in the Foreign Legion (apart from the officers). Any French men who joined have their identity changed along with their nationality to one of French Canadian or French Swiss. They are also historically infamous for overlooking past criminal behavior in those who sought to escape legal punishment for their crimes. The Legion has since established a lengthy and thorough interview process during which one's background is methodically reviewed, though a criminal record does not necessarily preclude one from acceptance.

Upon entering the training period which lasts approximately three to four months, one must relinquish all belongs, but necessary toiletries: a watch, cigarettes if you smoke, a wallet with no more than 200 francs, and an address book with personal contacts. Though like many other military establishments contact with the outside world during training is strictly limited to an emergency basis only.

Though the physical requirements for enlistment are not as arduous as other military outfits might be (though one must prove one's fitness) the psychological and mental wherewithal necessary for Legion life is substantial. But the most intriguing characteristic, and possibly unique to the Legion, is the ability of the enlisted to take on a new name and nationality.

“From the moment you join,” writes Simon James in his text *The French Foreign Legion*, “the Legion is your home and from then on it is your family. The Legion motto – “Legio Patria Nostra” means exactly that – The Legion is our home.” The Legion

becomes everything to the recruits. In fact, they do not even hire outside civilians to do the domestic or menial work necessary in their camps and bases. The newer Legionnaires share in the responsibility of caring for the physical plant as well as kitchen and cleaning duty. Their lives are given over to the Legion completely with no questions asked. A trainee has up to three months to decide to withdraw from the Legion, though the Legion may choose at any time to dismiss a member for medical or psychological reasons otherwise there is a minimum five year contract signed in which one gives absolute authority over one's life and liberty to the Legion.

This is the part what catches so many people's eye. It is in part the reason the Legion was so attractive to criminals in the past, one could come to the Legion and take on a new identity, with new legal documents that cannot prove who you may have been prior to joining the Legion. All personal belongings become property of the Legion until the end of the contract, and after three years of service a Legionnaire is permitted to become a French citizen under the name he took in joining. Essentially one could become another person, leaving their past behind and taking on a new life. We may think this peculiar or dishonest, but the Legion can offer the hope that in adhering to Legionnaire's life, which is strict and difficult, one can transform oneself into a new man. At least that is the fantasy.

But it is not unusual for members of the military, regardless of nationality, to give themselves over to the rule and law of the armed services they have joined. New recruits in our own military cleanse themselves of much of their individuality as a part of the training process. Mainly this is done so that they stop thinking as individuals and take on

the identity of the whole, which is necessary in life-threatening situations. Not that all personality or sense of self is abolished from the recruit, but instead the instilling of a trust of those whose job it is to see the whole picture and to guide the individual in the task of achieving the common goal.

There are those of us who reject this as a sensible or even healthy thing, this denying of the self in service to a military force. And yet, for some, being a part of something bigger than oneself, serving an organization that helps bring stability and freedom to the world, is not only a comfort, but a way in which we can live what we believe is the best of human nature; the ensuring of rights for all people.

I am not portraying all military action as necessary or prudent, but I do believe that there are some circumstances in our world for which it is called for. And we must admire those who give of themselves in profound ways to answer that call to defend the rights and lives of others.

And I wonder if there is some lesson, some power in the act of surrendering oneself to something greater than the individual that these men of the French Foreign Legion and others in military service can reveal. What does it mean to give up your immediate personal desires to follow the need and hope of a larger entity? What does it mean to give up, to a great extent, your individuality to belong to something larger? What does it mean to submit to another willingly, to allow another to determine the course of your life?

Soldiers are not the only people in the world to do such a thing; priests, nuns and monks of all traditions are essentially doing the same. In fact, many times they too take

on new names, acknowledging their change in status, the removing of their identity. It is an act of recognition that the life they once lived is no longer and that they have committed to something higher than themselves.

In situations in which members of the military or religious orders change their names or leave behind their selves symbolically, are they truly turning away from who they have been or are they turning toward whom they really are? Part of the issue is who are we to begin with? Are we formed by experience or by identity? Do we create who we are, or is it determined by the experiences we have? Can we in fact, dissolve the self completely and take on a new one?

In Buddhism and monastic Christianity that is just what the goal is. Buddhism is centered on the working toward ridding oneself of the identity of self. Monastic Christians work toward being solely servants to God's will. In both traditions the hope is to seek out something larger, namely God or Brahman and to allow for that being of divinity to guide oneself to communion with it. For Buddhists, only in the surrendering of oneself to the Ultimate Oneness, you can achieve peace, contentment and an end to suffering. For Christians, only in surrendering to God can your life be filled with joy and satisfaction. It is by submitting oneself to the larger entity that one attains happiness. "Whoever desires to be given everything, must first give everything away." Wrote Meister Eckhart.

"One day, when Nasrudin was working in his garden, he became very warm. He sat down in the shade of a walnut tree, and, making sure that no one was about, he

slipped off his turban to cool his bald head. As he relaxed, he meditated upon the beauty of nature.

Observing a fine pumpkin in the garden, he smiled to himself, ‘Allah, your ways are great indeed,’ he mused out loud, ‘but there are a few things that I would have done differently were I in charge. See the proud pumpkin growing on a spindly vine, and then consider the walnut, a tiny, inconsequential nut upon a great and lordly tree. Well, if I had been planning things, I would have reversed it. I’d have hung those pumpkins in all of their glory from this magnificent tree, and let the tiny walnuts cling to the spindly vines on the ground.’ So musing, he closed his eyes to dream of other things he might do differently. A gentle breeze stirred the branches above him.

Suddenly a walnut fell from the tree and landed with a thud on the top of Nasrudin’s baldhead. As the pain spread, he rubbed the lump that had begun to swell on his scalp. Then an understanding smile spread over his face and he bowed down.

‘Oh, Allah,’ he murmured, ‘forgive me. Thy wisdom is great indeed. Suppose I had been arranging matters? I should have just now been hit upon the head by a pumpkin.’”

Surrendering means that we don’t know all things or what is best in all matters. In surrendering, maybe we give up the illusion that we hold all answers or that all things can be or are clear to us. It means that we voluntarily give up our individual, personal needs, desires and hopes to be a part of the hopes and desires of something greater. It means that through this larger entity our personal desires may be achieved. Though in participating in the larger community or in following God’s will, we may be asked to

sacrifice something of our selves, something of our freedom. In the French Foreign Legion you cannot simply head out to the movies one night because you want to, there are rules and procedures, guidelines on when and how personal desires can be and will be accommodated.

But in military service, it is not just your Saturday night plans that are likely to be sacrificed, but your life. Is this any different than working as a part of a cause that brings with it physical danger, but in which you believe passionately? Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. may not have submitted his whole identity to the civil rights movement (though some may argue that is just what he did), but he gave his life for the larger effort of equality for all people. Are his actions and his sacrifice of life any less or more honorable than those who choose military service? I am not sure they are not alike. Is it not necessary to sacrifice something of oneself, if only minimally, when submitting to a larger cause or group or even God?

Even belonging here, in the church community, we cannot live out only what we personally wish, but we must continually negotiate our individual wants and needs with all others in the congregation. That is part of what it means to belong.

All of these questions of submitting oneself to that which is greater begs the question: who is in power? Is the person or deity in charge the one with power or does the person who surrenders retain power by way of submitting? If we look to the reading this morning who is it that has the power: the wife, who can pick up and move her husband any which way she wishes or who could at any moment do away with him altogether, or the husband who by not reacting any time his wife was near forced her to do all the work

of interacting, who by not reacting to her pleas gave her no indication of the future of their relationship? Both had power, in different ways and at different times. When we require someone to come to us, to do the work of being in relationship with us with no encouragement or discouragement from us, we hold a great power. And yet, if we make all the decisions and determine the future for another, we too hold power.

In the novel, *The Man in My Basement*, by Walter Mosely, one of the central characters, Anniston Bennet, a middle-aged bald white man, comes to Charles Blakey, a young black man, to rent Charles' basement. Though confused and bewildered why anyone would wish to rent his basement, Charles agrees, mainly because Anniston is offering an enormous amount of money in exchange for the rental of the basement. The relationship that builds between Charles and Anniston is one similar to warden and prisoner. Anniston has essentially imprisoned himself in the basement and demands Charles to be his keeper. Charles has complete control over when and what Anniston eats, whether or not the lights are on, and whether or not they engage in conversation. There is nothing of Anniston's physical world that Charles does not control, but what becomes clear is that it is Anniston who has absolute power over his inner self in his submission to the care and keeping of his physical self to Charles. In the end it is Anniston who wields the power, not only over himself, but also to some degree over Charles as well. I won't give away anything further, because it is well written, if slightly creepy tale.

What is surprising is that Anniston, in the midst of having no control, no say over his future or his life, finds that it is only he who has control over himself after all. He may

not be able to leave when he wishes, or even eat when he wishes, but within those constraints he discovers a truer freedom of the self than he had believed possible.

Maybe that is what it means to surrender, to give up control in order to find a truer self, a truer path to happiness and hope. Maybe by submitting our physical selves to something greater than us, maybe even submitting to something spiritually greater, we discover real freedom. Maybe in that act of acquiescence we learn that the control we have is only that of our actions and words and it then becomes our choice in what manner to use them and the power that they hold.

We cannot know what will happen in the next moment, day, or year. And maybe the surrender we are all called to offer is to that which we cannot know and cannot control. We may not wish to submit ourselves so directly to the will of others as do those in military service or in monastic religious life. But in our small ways we must surrender to the mystery of life, we must submit ourselves to that which is greater than us whether nature or God; and in that act of surrender may we discover the power we hold in offering of ourselves and the true freedom of self that awaits.