

It was one of those sunsets. Pink and red and turquoise waves washing over a rocky shore of candy floss clouds. Probably it was caused by dust blown in from the Sahara or a volcanic eruption somewhere in the Indian Ocean or the meltdown of a nuclear reactor somewhere in the Soviet Union. Whatever the unromantic cause, there it was: summer 1987 and God was in a Jackson Pollock mood, turning the skies of a nondescript suburb of Leicester into one big Tate Modern Turbine Room. Forgive my prolix prose. It was one of those sunsets.

It is the only sunset out of about 19,000 that I remember, just one in 51 point something years of sun up, chariot race across the sky, sun down and sleep. The drama of God's gloaming paintbox that evening is not what superglued itself in my memory, rather the effect that particular solar sinking had on the five-year old boy told he must come in from the garden now and get ready to go to bed. I don't remember the boy's name. I remember the name of his uncle I was visiting that long-gone summer, but that's another depressing coming of age story. Let's call the boy Joshua: if it's good enough for God's son, it's good enough for this story.

Back to the garden in Leicester.

'Joshua, come in. It's time for your bed'

'I don't want to go to bed: I want to watch the amazing sunset' As you can imagine, it was a lot whinier than that, but there's the gist.

'There will be other sunsets, Josh, just as good.'

'But they won't be the same sunset'

"Josh. In. Now."

Exit in tears, stage left, pursued by a grandmother.

Grandma, of course, was right. There would be other sunsets. And so was Josh. There would never be the same sunset. Never, ever again.

Because nothing is ever the same.

For most of us, life seems to be pretty much the same, day after day after wearily repeatedly endlessly repetitive day. Wake. Breakfast. Today's Tory travesty on the news. School run. Daily commute. Work/School/Whatever it is retired people get up to (gardening? laying the table for the next meal? knitting? going to the GP?). Lunch. More Work/School/Whatever it is retired people get up to in the afternoon (sleeping, garden centre, Countdown); hometime school run / commute; dinner; TV; bath. Bed. Wake. Breakfast. Today's Tory travesty... It seems to be the same. But in ain't. We don't see it, partly because we're too up close to it: the laws of physics

means we're incapable of stepping back and taking the long view, but if we could we would see not repetition but change. It's like a piece of minimalist music (though slightly less tedious)- endless repetition with imperceptible change-. We cannot see the change happening as it happens, only when we look back a long way and compare. Did I really used to look like that? So our time bound perspective is part of the explanation but only part. Because even if we could step outside of time we would not see the changes in the repetition that we normally cannot perceive, we would not see the subtle mandelbrot difference of each repetition. To do *that* we would have to recognise, that nothing-is-ever-the-same-again, includes us.

Obviously we know that externally we change. We know we don't weigh 9 pounds any more. We may be mildly surprised when it happens, but we can see the grey hairs and know they weren't there before and they aren't there after when we return the tweezers to the drawer or, a little older, when we've added the hair colour. We can see the superficial change. Even if we sometimes want to hide it, if pushed, we are ready to acknowledge that it happens. On the surface, we change. But we do fondly imagine that somewhere deep inside each of us, from the moment we emerge protesting from the twinkle in our father's eye to the day we return to the dust underfoot, every moment on this earth, we do fondly imagine there is deep inside of each of us a true self, a unique psychic homunculus, a tiny, if you like nugget of individuality that is the true 'me', always there yesterday, today and forever. Serious money has been and continues to be made by people who suggest that they can help us get in touch with this 'inner self', this 'real self' because it is only there that the cure for the ills of modern life and true happiness can be found.

If we leave aside mindfulness that all sounds reasonable enough. Except. It probably isn't true. Almost certainly not in the way we think it is.

Now I don't wish to suggest that there is nothing inside, that, dig down to the depths of ourselves and we are the insides of a chocolate easter egg minus the tiny bag of sweets. I wish to suggest that the notion that we all share, the way we conceive of ourselves as 'a thing' is not really true. By a thing, I mean something like a book or a chair: you can reach out, pick it up and say 'this is it'. We are not a 'thing', we are a process, a dynamic event in space and time, we are a journey on a train perhaps or the storm that causes the angry red spot on Jupiter. Just less long lived and a lot madder. If we were a work of art- and of course we all are- we are less an oil painting and more a symphony, something which only ever exists in time. If somebody pulls the plug early and the process abruptly ends we will feel cheated, wronged, bereaved. If we are fortunate we get to play the piece right to the end. And then, of course, the music stops.

Which may be why we are so wedded to the idea of ourselves as 'things.' Because 'things' are substantial, material, solid, there. They don't, like a train journey, just stop one day and blink out of existence, they keep right on being that thing they have always been.

Alas, for us, when the music stops, the thing that we have mistaken for ourselves starts changing, corrupting: it is no longer ourselves. Whether nature takes its course or we speed up the process, eventually it will be gone.

However, although this particular set of musicians has stopped playing, the notes are not forgotten; we were an instrument in the orchestra of creation and now we are a part in the song of heaven. The conductor and the composer of this ravishing euphony, of course, is God.

So. It will never be the same sunset again. It can't be. That's not a reason to refuse to move and then run in crying. It's a good thing, it has to be that way, because music without change is not music, it is silence. You are not a thing, you are a symphony. So listen for the melody of your life: listen attentively. Then look again at the score and you will see God's hand writing those notes.