

When the mirror is a gateway

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OFFERINGS

On a summer evening in 1971 I walked out of Yorkton, Saskatchewan's Tower theatre, crossed the street and disappeared into myself. I re-emerged a conjugate of Joe Cocker and Leon Russell and for months to come inhabited that blended persona. To this day, in spite of myself, I still carry the ghost of that warm summer evening.

Not that I mimic the spasms of a young Joe Cocker (although I've tried this) or imitate the hazy-glare-under-hooded-lids of a Leon Russell (although, rather comically, I've done this as well). Instead, I inhabit something of the message and intent of all those physical and mental mannerisms.

The impression that *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* had upon me was so strong that to this day I catch myself dreaming of its seedy glamour, its skewering of domesticity and its seemingly wild and free flight for the sake of music and life. Right. Well, I was impressionable, at an impressionable age, living just a wink past Woodstock. I was a follower and I had about me the sponginess of youth.

But I've grown up. The eager mimicry of my late adolescence now behind me, I see myself as in control of what impresses me and able to choose what I will imitate — or rather, incorporate. Yet, at particular moments, almost always while in the presence of someone close to me, I sense that I've left nothing of this behind.

I mean, I'm still impressionable, still a follower, still a sponge. In other words, while much of this happens beneath the surface of my awareness, and while my "imitating" has about it a certain sophistication, I'm nevertheless still dependent on receiving myself through the reception or rejection of others. And now I discover that all of this has a basis in biology.

A mere decade ago a team of neuroscientists at the University of Parma, Italy, were studying premotor neuron dynamics. They

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had run electrodes into a few individual neurons in a monkey's premotor cortex (in humans, known centres for pain, empathy, language) to monitor neural activity as the monkey reached for different objects. The eureka moment came when one of the scientists walked into the room where the monkey was and reached out and picked up a raisin.

As the monkey watched, its premotor neurons fired just as they had when the monkey had picked up the raisin. They were astonished because it had always been held that these neurons fired only in action. What they had witnessed was a sort of sympathetic, observation-driven firing of neurons. They realized, after much replicating, that they had discovered something new. They had discovered mirror neurons.

Researchers — now using brain imaging rather than electrodes — have found human mirror-neuron systems more robust and numerous than those of monkeys, and not only localized in the premotor cortex.

It turns out that in that theatre as I sat gazing up, groups of mirror neurons were brightly firing inside my brain, allowing me not only to image and imitate the physical gyrations, but also to ingest the complexity of intent, motives, goals — in other words, to mentalize the state of mind of my subject.

For this ability that we take for granted, there should be inexhaustible wonder. For good or bad, mirror neurons are the "welcoming gateway (James Alison)" through which your "I" is reproduced within me and



Leon Russell album

through which my "self" is constituted by you. This is, in fact, how social units and cultures are begotten.

Of course saints, poets and mystics have always known that the autonomous self is a phantom, that the line between body and soul, biology and spirit, is an abstraction and that beneath the skim of the observable lies a schema, a web, a "cosmic soul," that ties us all together in ways that precede reason and our very "selves."

And while this "universal soul" is obviously in need of redemption, the beauty of all this is that we work its redemption, by undergoing our own reconstitution.

Jesus' words, "follow me," recorded no less than 21 times throughout the gospels, present us with this possibility of becoming what we were meant to be. Jesus urges our reconstitution by offering himself as the gateway. Our immersion into his words clears a broad space for the peace he offers. Our imitation of those who imitate him grows us into peaceful brothers and sisters. In Jesus' "follow me," lies our salvation.

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