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# On The Quickening

October 10, 2017 By [dearperegrinus](#)

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Dear Peregrinus (4:22 PM):

Thank you for your letter and for passing along to me the kind words spoken to you about the study trip to Oxford University that Steve

(and Thanne) and I led during the last week of August and into the first couple of days of September.

Have you ever wondered why “September” (meaning the “seventh” month) is actually the *ninth* month of the year?[1]

September is the month of my dad’s birth (born at the equinox), I hear my dad’s voice (he loved to sing) singing the most famous song from the musical, *The Fantastiks* (1960)[2], sung originally by Jerry Orbach (of *Law and Order*, and also the voice of Lumiere in *Beauty and the Beast* by Disney) some of whose lyrics are:

“ *Try to remember the kind of September  
When you were a young and a callow fellow.  
Try to remember, and if you remember,  
Then follow, follow, follow, oh-oh.*

*Try to remember when life was so tender,  
That no one wept except the willow.  
Try to remember when life was so tender  
That dreams were kept beside your pillow.*

I have been feeling this week, in the midst of a string of perfectly luminous Autumn days, how much my soul is a child of Autumn. I

*respond* to Autumn, feeling simultaneously *at home* and *longing for home* in this season. (How can I *be* at home and yet *long* for it at the same time?)

Have you ever noticed whether your soul is also attuned to one of the four seasons? And if you have, then have you ever wondered why it is? The annual experience of the “autumn-ness” of my soul has directed my thinking in the following way.

Years ago, when at my first working through all of the sub-disciplines of Theology (1981-1984), I remember what seemed to me an obscure point in Moral Theology concerning the “quickenings” of a human embryo. We had explained to us that a human child is not merely the “product” of human action and genetic material, but also a new *creation*.<sup>[3]</sup> Put succinctly, a human couple may *conceive*, but only God can make it *live*. “Quickenings” is the (poetic) word that names the moment when a child becomes *alive*. And sometimes (always?) a mother can feel the “quickenings”- when her *it* suddenly has become a living being. <sup>[4]</sup>

“ **Genesis 2:** <sup>7</sup> *then the Lord God formed the man* <sup>\*</sup> *out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.* <sup>d [5]</sup>

The “quickenings,” we were taught, is God infusing a soul into what now has become a little one desired to exist by God Himself and entrusted with a specific identity and hiddenly carrying a mysterious purpose – the *reason* (its *logos*) given that child by the divine Trinity but through the Holy Spirit.

“ **Romans 5: 5** *and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us.*<sup>d [6]</sup>

What a wonder we contemplated, which my young theological mind thought was only an obscure point! Such a profound thing it is to wonder about God’s power to make *alive*, and in doing that, to make someone alive *for a reason*.

Anyway, Peregrinus, I am convinced that I know, and with evidence, that my soul was infused in me very close to the time of my conception (which happened around mid-September in Omaha, Nebraska). My evidence is the feeling I have of the “autumn-ness” of my soul experienced each year between the 15<sup>th</sup> of September and the 15<sup>th</sup> of October. My “quickenings” or “ensoulment” happened, for poetic reasons (and God is an exceptionally good Poet) at the full Moon, which happened on the twenty-third night of that September 1953. Or so it seems to me ... and that seeming pleases me.

I was given by God to remember the moment when He made me alive, giving me my identity as a boy-child, a boy deliberately sent by Him into the world at this point in space and time and carrying hiddenly His purpose. I love being able to contemplate the time of my Awakening!

*“ Ezekiel 37: <sup>3</sup> He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” <sup>4</sup> Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. <sup>5</sup> Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath<sup>a</sup> to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup> I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath<sup>b</sup> in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.” [7]*

I want you to be able to feel the same thing, old friend, and to wonder about it if you have felt the “season” of your soul. Would you write to me, telling me whether any of this makes sense to you?

Remember me in your good prayers, Peregrinus. Sometimes my feet feel heavy when always on the pilgrim’s road, and now always longing to come home.

With greatest respect and in friendship, I am yours,

Rick, SJ

[1] The *Oxford English Dictionary* briefly summarizes how this came to be: “The ancient Roman calendar (dating from around the mid 8th cent. BCE) had ten months; c713 BCE. January and February were added to the end. In 153 BCE, the beginning of the year was moved to 1 January, when the Roman consuls were elected. This new ordering of the months remained when the Julian calendar was introduced in 45 BCE and in the Gregorian calendar widely used today.”

[2] Listen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycPoxZiNPBY>.

*Wikipedia* notes: “‘Try to Remember’ is a song from the musical comedy *The Fantasticks*. It is the first song sung in the show, to get the audience to imagine what the sparse set suggests. Its lyrics, written by Tom Jones, famously rhyme “remember” with “September”, “so tender”, “ember”, and “December”, and repeat the sequence -llow throughout the song: verse 1 contains “mellow”, “yellow”, and “callow fellow”; verse 2 contains “willow”, “pillow”, “bellow”; verse 3 contains “follow”, “hollow”, “mellow”; and all verses end with “follow”. Harvey Schmidt composed the music.”

[3] I find it helpful to consider the distinction that humans are given

the capacity to *make*, but only God has the capacity to *create*.

[4] A more explanatory word for “quickenings” (a poetic word sourced in a mother’s experience of feeling for the first time that her child is alive or awake within her) is *ensoulment*. Consider Luke 1:44 (NABRE) – “For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy.” It concerns *when* is the moment that God *infuses* a soul (a poetic word for a profound mystery) into the genetic material, making it alive (rather than inert) and active towards becoming a human baby ready to be born into our world – “the seed growing secretly” (cf. Mark 4:26-29). The real point, I would propose, about “quickenings” or “ensoulment” is an essentially contemplative one – about us being caught up in wonder at the sheer wonder of aliveness, and of God’s ability to make matter alive.

Human beings have no capacity to *make alive* matter. We only know how to kill what God makes alive, unless we are taught from our youth to become knowledgeable and skillful stewards of all that God makes alive, caring for all living things as if given us by God Himself to look after. A particularly powerful, searching, theologically compelling account of this was recently written and published (24 May 2015) as an encyclical letter by Pope Francis I with the name *Laudato si*.

\* God is portrayed as a potter molding the human body out of earth.

There is a play on words in Hebrew between *'adam* (“human being,” “man”) and *'adama* (“ground”). **It is not enough to make the body from earth; God must also breathe into the man’s nostrils.** A similar picture of divine breath imparted to human beings in order for them to live is found in Ez 37:5, 9–10; Jn 20:22. The Israelites did not think in the (Greek) categories of body and soul.

<sup>d</sup> Gn 3:19; 18:27; Tb 8:6; Jb 34:15; Ps 103:14; 104:29; Eccl 3:20; 12:7; Wis 7:1; Sir 33:10; 1 Cor 15:45.

<sup>[5]</sup> *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ge 2:7.

<sup>d</sup> 8:14–16; Ps 22:5–6; 25:20.

<sup>[6]</sup> *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ro 5:5.

<sup>a</sup> Or *spirit*

<sup>b</sup> Or *spirit*

<sup>[7]</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Eze 37:3–6.