

**LEADING TO THE "ELVIS STORY"**

*by Peter O. Whitmer, Ph.D.*

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In the summer of 1928, Thornton Wilder addressed a packed auditorium at the University of Michigan. The occasion was a whistle-stop lecture tour across the country after winning the Pulitzer Prize for his second novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. In speaking to the audience, he discussed the thought behind his creation of a character, Esteban, and casting him as a twinless twin. A member of the audience was intrigued, and asked the origin of such an unusual individual. "I was myself a twin brother, though only for a few hours," he told the gathering, referring to his twin, Theophilus, who died shortly after birth. "The realization has remained with me merely in the realm of amused and affectionate speculation as to what it would be like to have an identical self going about the world with one, writing perhaps, collaborating, perhaps. But before I knew it, these tranquil speculations turned out in the book to be more and more serious. But for me, the real thing I was interested in throughout that chapter [Esteban] was the suffering of inarticulate people." Thornton Wilder was one of five twinless twins whose twin died at or very near birth, who became successful creative artists in the 20th century. In addition to Elvis Presley and Wilder, they include the science fiction writer, Philip K. Dick, from whose works the movies *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall* were made, the Mexican Muralist, Diego Rivera, and the only other twinless twin with whom Elvis Presley ever discussed his plight, Liberace.

Each of these artists and also many twinless twins whose loss comes as an adult have demonstrated an unusual ability and drive - the twinning motif. Their careers are dominated by a compulsion to bring together different strands of creativity, and render something completely new. By doing this, they are attempting - for a lifetime - to seek a more fuller understanding of why they lived while their twin died. It is their attempt to replicate, in life, what can only be accomplished in death. Ultimately their life's most profound driving force is toward becoming re-united with their dead twin.

One of the first articles to ever address the strange compulsion of a twinless twin was written in 1981 by George Engle, a physician at the University of Rochester. He used himself and his late brother as a case study. Engel reviewed the parallels in both personal and professional lives the two had shared, noting that only after completing medical school did they go separate ways. Unknowingly, they emulated each other's career. Both combined previously unrelated areas of medical specialty into one. He said, "Note that both of us held dual, or twin, professorships, unusual in those days, and that both created new academic entities, virtually simultaneously at that. Just as I at one moment could be a psychiatrist and at another an internist, so, too, could [my brother] Frank be a physiologist and then an internist. Each of us was preoccupied with fusing two disciplines into a single entity. Such "twinning" behavior is significant: The drive is always to be two, yet be unique from all others."

For Thornton Wilder, nearly every piece of his literature or drama dealt with the attempt to bring together two fundamentally different themes: the praise of life, and the possibilities and fascination with death. Repeatedly, in Wilder's works one finds the theme of death, trying to understand death from the point of view of the dead, and communication with the dead. From *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, through the play *Our Town* to his autobiographical novel, completed at age seventy five, Wilder compared, contrasted and investigated the fragile quality of human life that, he felt, could only hold meaning when braided together like rope with themes of death.

At the core of his novels and plays was the core of Wilder himself; he spent a lifetime searching for the part of him that was missing, and always came up empty handed. His emotional reactions to his successes were pure guilt: after winning his first Pulitzer Prize, he felt "a glib and graceful hypocrisy" begin to emerge within him. He retreated to his mother to be 'cured' and said of his sense of loneliness in the world, "I don't belong."

In his journals, begun at age fifteen, he ruminated incessantly on the theme of his twin as a driving force in his creative life.

When only a few years older than Elvis at the time of his move to Memphis, Wilder wrote his mother about his high energy level and zest for life. He told her the reason for his personality: "because I am a twin, and by his death an outlet for my affection was closed." In mid-life, he struck up an intense relationship with another twin, Montgomery Clift; they developed a magnetic rapport when the two discovered both were twins. Clift was cast in both of Wilder's Pulitzer Prizewinning plays, *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Clift's twin sister was alive, but the relationship tormented the man, leaving him debilitated when apart from her and "mystically close" when together. Clift told Wilder he "experienced uncertainty as to which twin he was." Wilder counseled him, saying, "All twins suffer from identity crises."

And in his life, Wilder would constantly seek out people to continue this investigation: he visited Sigmund Freud twice, once in Vienna, later in England. He spent time with the occult philosopher Gurdjieff in Fountainsbleu, France; with the existentialist Jean Paul Sartre in Paris; with Carl Jung in Zurich and with Albert Schweitzer in Aspen, Colorado. He was relentless in his "seeking."

Twins are everywhere in his works. In his most important works a twin is always cast as a character, but often subordinated to his main theme of investigating aspects of death: its randomness; its commonness; its comfort and magic. His last work *Theophilus North*, took its title from his dead twin's name. In the book the twin lives, and goes through life as a problem solver and a healer, patching together people and problems that have been ripped apart. In his play, *Our Town*, one day in the existence of a small village, twins are born on that day; the third act takes place in a graveyard and explores how another character, Emily, fits in with the village dead after she has died in childbirth. *The Bridge of San Louis Rey* is about an investigation by a Catholic Monsignor into the reason for the deaths of five particular people when a bridge collapses in the Andes. In the first draft of the work, the bridge collapsed on Wilder's birthday.

His autobiographical portrayal of one of the dead, the twinless twin, Esteban, was so convincingly effective that, in 1928, a reader wrote him the following:

Dear Mr. Wilder,

*I'm a woman fifty-five years old. My twin sister died three months ago. My husband is a good husband, but he does not understand. I even think he has always been jealous of my love for her and now gets cross with me for I can't always hide my grief. My children, too, although they are grown up and have children, do not understand. But from what you write about twins in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, I know you do. How do you know? Please send me a few words in your own hand....*

*The other twinless twins' creative efforts differ in nature from Elvis Presley's, with the exception of Liberace's fusion of classical and pop music, done in an iconoclastic and exotically flamboyant style. But all of the successfully creative twinless twins made a life's work of devising a new art form by entwining different components.*

*For Diego Rivera, it was the fusion of art and politics. He created a democratized mural form for everyone; too large for the museums, it had to be publicly displayed, He felt a life-long sense of loneliness and failure, would work himself to exhaustion, loved the "shock appeal" of his murals, and called his style of frenzied effort while painting "sheer animal joy."*

*His works held a potent, unavoidable message of social consciousness and the need for societal reform that drew international attention to him. He became a lightning rod of cultural redirection, if not revolution. In 1933 when his mural in New York City's RCA Building, commissioned by John D. Rockefeller, was found to contain a small portrait of Lenin, guards blocked off the mural and mounted police restrained the public from viewing it. The mural was demolished.*

*For Philip K. Dick, the death of twin sister Jane, at age five weeks, was the single driving force of his life. His own identity was so impacted by her death that he suffered from attacks of panic all his life, fearing that he might suddenly cease to exist. At the same age as Elvis Presley when he left Tupelo, Dick wrote that for him, "the real fear is that you yourself - which at one time did not exist - may again not exist; fear inside you, flooding over you in wave after wave of panic." Nine years before his death, established as a science fiction writer, he wrote about a failed suicide attempt brought on by his difficulty in forming an identity as an individual. "I am desperately trying to find a center for/to my life," he wrote, "but I am failing. I am still 'stateless'." (*State of going Twinless, Ed.*)*

His writings were about attempts to resolve dualist dilemmas: science fiction versus mainstream writing; human versus android existence; fake versus real life. At the center of his drive was this sister, she was everything to him.

All of the successful twinless twins, and all of those who were part of the author's Twinless Twin Study Program show a remarkably clear-cut behavioral paradigm that, as the individual grows older, plays an increasingly predominate role in their lives. As an adult, the power of this paradigm is tyrannical and the psychological pain nearly unbearable; the suicide rate among twinless twins is seven times that of the general population.

The twinless twin: it would be decades before research would illuminate the impact of this phenomenon. No one in the Presley family had an objective understanding of the life forces that had been unleashed, but Elvis and his parents knew of its powers

instinctively. His entire life had its taproot in this rare, but psychologically seminal event. To be born a twinless twin is a potent birthright that spins one's life off in a certain direction, like being born with musical or mathematical genius, or growing quickly to a height of seven feet.

The hallmarks of the twinless twin are clear. Those who have lost a twin at or near birth share reactions that forge the personality in strikingly similar ways. Both the surviving twin and his family show the imprint. The impact and its lifelong psychological repercussions mold these individuals with a common, defining character. In early life, the pressures stemming from this initial loss are felt as identity confusion and an aura of strangeness.\*

The sensations of alienation and isolation 'from others crystallize as the person ages. There is a psychic pain that not only endures for life, but also becomes more severe as time passes. To deal with an adult twinless twin is to experience a person suffering the extreme inner torment of unresolved grief

Some aspects of the twinless twin paradigm involve the entire family system. Some involve just ` the surviving twin. But always the bond between mother and child becomes electric. After the simultaneous birth and death, the parents continue to think of themselves as parents of twins but often the father is put at an emotional distance. He is made a pariah while the mother and the surviving twin develop a relationship that is unusually close, enmeshed and of an abnormal intensity. Such mothers usually think of the survivor twin not as an individual, but as a twin; in some sense both children are always present. Having had the ineffable experience of going through a birth and a death at the same time, survivor's mothers' become suffocatingly protective. They do more than just worry the way normal mothers do; they obsess over issues of safety and health. Fears of injury and death permeate the remaining child's world. Survivors internalize these concerns, which, often emerge late in the form of sleep disorders and nightmares.

There are other aspects of the mother-survivor relationship that can seem even more bizarre to the uninitiated. Mother and surviving twin will routinely discuss the dead twin. Together, they will "converse" with the dead twin, often looking for the deceased's response in myriad superstitious ways. The relationship between the three can be occult, like some strange theological trinity. In the best sense, this sort of communication can be seen as a form of natural therapy to ease the loss and allow grief to be expressed. Carried to extremes, of course, the negative impact clearly outweighs the positive benefits. Under any circumstances, to outsiders, such behavior can appear odd and preternatural. Consequently, mother and child keep it a secret, thus tightening their bond even further.

As youngsters, twin survivors are aware of an uneasy, poorly articulated, yet pervasive emotional sense of 'feeling different' from others in their age group.

When informed they once had a twin, these feelings suddenly make sense and crystallize as part of their identity. With this intellectual awareness, their sense of "feeling different" is validated at which point, two opposing forces emerge. The tension created by this inner psychological conflict is driving compelling, relentless, often more personal than public, and painful in the extreme. The twinless twin wants to prove his uniqueness, to stand as an individual. Yet he is also powerfully pulled toward being re-united with the dead twin.

The over arching mythical nature of the twinless twin's predicament is particularly ironic and unresolvable. To win the mother's love, they must grieve for the dead twin. Yet at the same time, to establish self-love and their own security, they must compete with the very person they are compelled to mourn. The compulsion to be unique defines a life-long attempt to prove that they are a separate and whole person. Surviving twins constantly strive to demonstrate their autonomy and completeness. They look to others around them for indications of their success in this. Simultaneously, the opposing force, the tug to be re-united with their lost twin, surfaces, to be powered by survivor guilt. Twinless twins blame themselves for their sibling's death. They reproach themselves for having deprived their mother and father of the special status that is attributed to parents of twins.

Thus begins an emotional pendulum swing. At the mercy of complex and conflicting motivations, the twin strives to assert his uniqueness through behavior designed to demonstrate to others just how special he is. The more successful he becomes in achieving attention and recognition from those around him, the more guilty he feels. Deep down, he is convinced he should be sharing the wealth because he does not deserve to succeed. He believes he should be condemned rather than commended for having reached such levels of achievement. Gradually, this pendulum of emotions swings out of control - farther and farther in each frustratingly contradictory direction.

These two forces - to prove one's individuality, and to become re-united with the other twin yet always in view of the mother - make it extremely difficult for twinless twins to develop normal relationships with others because they are already intimately involved. Self-imposed alienation is the normal. Yet by definition, the relationship with the dead twin is incomplete and never fully satisfying. Real human closeness is almost impossible, and the sense of pain and isolation becomes intense.

Another characteristic of the twinless twin is an unusually high energy level. The playwright Thornton Wilder wrote his mother about this when he was twenty years old. Saying, "I suppose that everyone feels that his nature cries out hourly for it knows not what, but I like to believe that mine raises an exceedingly great voice because I am a twin, and by his death an outlet for my affection was closed. It is not affection alone, but energy, and in it I live and because of it I believe I seem to see my life as more vivid, electric, and marvelous than others ... I am perpetually enthusiastic." The science fiction writer, Philip K. Dick, was tormented, driven and inspired by his sister's loss for his entire life. He spoke of her powers over him, saying "She (Jane) fights for my life & for hers, eternally ... My sister is everything to me. I am damned always to be separated from her/& with her, in an oscillation."

In the summer of 1956, the performer Liberace first met and discussed with Elvis his feelings due to having lost his twin at birth. He felt this had fueled his compulsion to perform. Further, he described what he called his need "to work in a frenzy." In the process, he gave Presley the first of numerous lessons about how to flaunt his uniqueness, especially through style and dress. Liberace called it "showmanship." Both called it success.

Early in Elvis' career, Gladys spoke of her son's source of talent, drive and energy. She pointed to his birth and his twin's, Jesse', death as the crucible which forged Presley's "destiny to do great things. He is living for two people," She proclaimed. "He has the power of two people." Elvis himself would refer to his dead twin as his "original bodyguard." He sought communion and re-union with the twin, sensing that the dead brother was a spiritual guide who directed him to search for meaning in life.

He did this through meditation, numerology, compulsive study of both the Bible and numerous other spiritual tracts and, ultimately, through drug use.

Twinless twins can live a lifetime with most of the people in the world completely unaware of their operative core dynamic. They inhabit, in a sense, the ultimate private world. One speaks with, seeks guidance from, and feels constantly in some form of contact not just with an invisible being - but with a genetic carbon copy of one's self, in fact, who occupies an almost God-like position in this twisted but profoundly spiritual mental relationship. This is not the kind of stuff suitable for open discussion.

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\*This confusion and aura of strangeness of which Dr. Whitmer writes has been evidenced to me in the hundreds of interviews conducted and letters received by me.