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From Womb to Tomb: Learning to Live with Documents

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In a lot of old TV shows, like *Little House on the Prairie* and *Anne of Green Gables*, the children just show up for school and they start learning things, right? But you can't do that today, I mean the part about "just showing up." About a month before your first day in a new school, your Mom has to drive down to the school office and present your birth certificate to the lady at the front desk. But that's not all – she has to show your immunization records, too: Measles, Mumps, Rubella, Diphtheria, Tetanus, Pertussis, Polio... The good people at the Center for Disease Control have this thing called the Surveillance Resource Center and they like to keep informed about these things. Don't worry, though, it's probably not as ominous as it sounds.

But wait, there's more! The School has to know where you live, too, because it might ruin *everything* if you got educated in the wrong district. They accept various forms of proof for your residence, like the electric bill for your house. That's because The School knows the Electric Company, and they trust each other. They know from experience that the Electric Company doesn't go around giving away its kilowatts to people at the wrong address.

But it all starts with your birth certificate, or at least, that *used to be* the first document that strangers tried to create about you. But now a lot of people have a document that pre-dates that moment when they came into this world: their ultra-sound image. Like most grandparents in the twenty-first century, I have several of those images on my refrigerator, and they are cute—very, very cute. I used to wonder who paid for them, but then I remembered how many medical professionals there are who take an interest in the health of the mother *and* the child, even before the baby is born. Well, actually, they seem to be *more* interested in you if you can prove that you have insurance coverage. "Did you bring your card with you today, ma'am?"

Most people get their medical insurance through their place of employment. Only, before you can really apply for a job, you are going to need some other documentation, too. Your Social Security Card is a *sine qua non* (which is Latin for "without which, *not*"). So don't leave home without it. But usually that's not enough by itself. You will have to prove that you went to school somewhere, and you will need your official transcripts for that. And as you no doubt remember, to pay the bills for your college education, you had to fill out applications for grants and loans. Oh, my friends, the joy of documents!

OK, so you've been on the job now for a while, and I know you're looking forward to payday. But just think—behind the scenes, **THEY** are generating more documents about you, The Wage Earner. **THEY** like to know how much money you are making every month, because **THEY** have a tax bracket for everyone and **THEY** don't you want to feel left out. Every spring **THEY** print millions of 1040's so all of the Wage Earners can staple their W-4s to them. **THEY** are very

generous that way. And like it says on their form, please don't forget to sign your check.

Before I go any further, there's an important question I neglected to ask you earlier. How are you going to *get* to work every morning? If you want to drive, you're going to need several documents. Your driver's license is just the beginning, followed by title, tag, and proof of insurance. Don't get caught without those, or an officer of the law might have to write you a citation, and believe me, life is just sweeter if you don't have a police record following you around everywhere you go. There's a Mr. Foucault who says the state has the power to label you as "a dangerous individual" if you make them mad enough. Don't let *that* happen to *you*.

Now, if you had your choice, you would probably rather live in a house than in an apartment, am I right? I thought so. Now that you can drive to work every day, you'll be able to make payments on a house. Down at the bank they have people who will help you get the paperwork started. Eventually, they might even let you see the deed. Oops! I left out a crucial step. The bank will need to examine your credit record before you can get approved. If you've never thought about compiling one before, don't worry, other people have been diligently contributing the necessary information for some time now. In fact, you might think of your credit record as a document made up chiefly of many other documents – detailed records of all the financial transactions you've ever made, with little asterisks next to those that you *didn't* make, or when you sent your payments in late, etc.

Tell me, have you got a sweetheart, a special someone that you want to share that house and that car with? There is such a thing as a marriage license – they do still make them—and you and your beloved can fill out one of those down at the courthouse. Married people are happier and healthier, according to statistics provided by The Census Bureau, and if your Uncle Sam doesn't know about Vital Records, who does?

Someday, the two of you might want to travel to another country, which reminds me—have you ever seen that old movie, *Casablanca*, with Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman? Rick is the disillusioned owner of a café and he is stunned one night when his old flame Ilsa walks in her with husband, Victor Laszlo. What do they want? They want what every refugee in Casablanca wants: the "letters of transit" that will allow them to cross all kinds of borders and checkpoints so they can escape from the Nazis. If they can just get on that plane to Lisbon, from there they can travel anywhere in the Free World. Those documents set the whole story in motion, and without them the narrative world of *Casablanca* would simply fall apart.

Well, I was just about to say that the US State Department is serious when it comes to passports. Just like Ilsa and Victor, you have to show your passport

before you can get on a plane or a ship headed to another country. To enter the Kingdom of God, you *might* be required to show your baptismal certificate, but to enter another country, no, that certainly won't get the job done. In fact, one of the *worst* things you can be in the United States is an undocumented alien. In God's eyes undocumented aliens are just people, like you and like me, but as the newspapers are always telling us, our politicians take a very different view of the matter.

To help you plan that dream vacation, you might want to check out a couple of books from the library. I've known a few librarians and they are some of the friendliest, most helpful people in the world. Most of them have a strong commitment to democracy, too. They don't care what color you are, or whether you are rich or poor, and this isn't just empty talk. They really do want to share their books with you. But your ticket to all those good things is your library card. So, Citizen, make the most of your First Amendment rights! Keep that library card with you at all times!

There are many other kinds of documents that we don't give much thought to. I can't list them all here, but the next time you are getting dressed, take a minute to inspect the clothes hanging in your closet. Pay special attention to the labels sewn into in the collar of your shirts. What do they say? Made in China, or Vietnam, or Bangladesh, or Mexico... Those shirts used to be made right here in North and South Carolina, but like Bruce Springsteen says in *My Hometown*, "Foreman says these jobs are going boys, and they ain't coming back." I'm not trying to stir up anger in anybody's heart, because the workers in those other countries are fathers and mothers with little children, too, and life is always changing, as we know from the fossil record, yeah? All I'm saying is that there is some history, some sociology woven into that garment you're wearing. The labels in those shirts are little documents in themselves, made possible in part by much bigger documents—international trade agreements—like NAFTA and GATT.

Now look at your Smart phone and the list of calls you've made recently. Yep, that list has already been turned into a document, and it is constantly being revised and updated. Plus, you'll never be able to remember all the cell phone towers you passed as you were driving along, but if the authorities need an account of your whereabouts, they won't have to take your word for it. They can just follow the trail of pings you left behind. And don't forget all those text messages that you and your friends have been sending to each other. Lawyers and judges love to subpoena those records so they can be read out loud to the world in open court. In the Gospel of Luke it says, "Therefore whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops." Try to remember that before you hit the "Send" button, OK?

Well, we're just about to wrap things up here, but before we do, I want to mention two more documents. One of them is a document that no one ever sees, or at least it would be surprising if you saw it, maybe even unnerving, and that is your own death certificate. Now, before you do pass over into the Great Beyond, it will be a comfort to your family if you have written a Last Will and Testament. It's a document that can save a lot of hurt feelings among your descendants by setting some limits on what they can argue about when you are no longer there to keep the peace between them. If you've ever seen a family fighting with each other over an estate where there was no will, you know what I'm talking about. "Let brotherly love continue" is what the Bible says (Hebrews 13:1), and you can help them do that with a legal document that divides up your possessions fairly among the people you are leaving behind.

To bring this little talk about the wonderful world of documents to a close, let me draw your attention to a French poet who lived in the nineteenth century by the name of Charles Baudelaire. Do you know what Baudelaire said? "Human beings dwell in a forest of symbols." I don't think he was wrong about that exactly, but wouldn't it be more accurate now to say instead that "Human beings dwell in a forest of documents"?