

Identity - Who are You?

"When I discover who I am, I'll be free"

- Ralph Ellison

"Identification" or "identity" is one way we use to define who we are. Either historically, or in the present moment, we come to view ourselves in some way, shape or form that identify "who I am." Identity can take the form of an image, an impression, an emotion or feeling, or a body sensation and make it one of the many building blocks that define "me." Forms of identity that we took on early in life or create in the present moment might include: I am a strong man; I am an optimist; I am an extrovert; I am a spiritual person; I am a happy person; I am a fearful person; I am a worrier; I am a manager; I am a parent, etc.

When we speak about "identity" what we are saying is that I AM this quality or image, even if I am not consciously aware of this quality or image in the moment, even if I am not speaking this to myself in the moment. It's a "given". This quality or image is part of the fabric of who I take myself to be, i.e., who I am. We believe it is True - with a capital T.

For example, let's use how we might identify with an emotion, anger. If I am identified with my anger (I am an angry person...quietly angry, usually seething, or overtly angry, usually very vocal in my anger...as a general way of being), then my response to a person, event or circumstance that I am experiencing says in some way, "I want to be angry," or "I need to be angry", or "I can justify my anger" or "I have a right to be angry", etc. and then proceed to act out on my anger. I identify with my anger. My anger is who I am.

If I am not identified with my anger, that is, seeing that I do get angry from time to time, but not being identified with my anger, I can witness the same person, event or circumstance and feel or sense my anger and say, "OK, so I feel some anger. It's here and it'll subside. I'll just be with it, observe it in me and allow it to dissipate" without having to "do" anything about it, i.e., act it out, or "get" angry.

Identification means we define ourselves by something. - I AM that something - that image, that emotion, that feeling. Who I believe I am is not separate from that quality or image.

Identification also means that I am invested in that quality. I have a conscious wanting or needing to be that quality or image.

So, one clue as to whether we are identified to a particular quality is look at how we respond to an event in the moment.

When we are identified by a quality, or an image (of who I am), we are taken over by that quality or image when we experience an event. It's a pull, like an addiction. We live much of our life addicted to having an identity, not wanting to be free of that identity and are continually creating that identity. I am....(fill in the blank).

As we go through life, we take on, and shed, various identities.

We take on identities related to our work or career, identities related to being a man or woman, identities related to sports, education, spirituality, to our beauty, our nationality, to being a happy child or an abused child, the being the black sheep of the family - all identities which we want everyone to know. The deal is that we then believe that if we let go of our identity, we will be no one, we will lose our sense of "who I am" - we become disconnected from our True and Real self.

The point?

When we came into the world we came in without any "identity" so to speak; we were a "tabula rasa", a clean slate. In that state, we were free, light, natural, easy, relaxed, simple (in the positive sense). This state, called presence, is still within us, still accessible. In a state of presence, we need no mental operations to create "who I am", i.e., we need no identifications. We just are. I am!

In this state of presence we have no need to "identify". We have a sense of confidence, groundedness and surety. However, when we let go of this state, when in the throes of stress, conflict, overwhelm, or confusion, we forget who we are and then sense the need to grasp on to an "identity" to make me feel safe.

When we don't trust our True and Real self, when we stray from the Essence of who we were when we came into this existence, our reactive inclination is to grab on to an image or identity of "who I am" and then shove this identity on to others to show them "I am (this or that)" - a need to be seen as this or that. In this place, we are not being, we are not authentic, and we are not trusting of our Essential nature.

How to disidentify

When we see that we are caught up in an identity, we can begin the process of letting go of it, not by efforting, not by "working" on it, but simply by becoming aware of it, noticing it, seeing it for what it is. As you become aware of the identity, observe it, watch it and witness it, it will begin to dissolve over time. If you are not willing to be free of your identification, then, yes, you are deeply identified. If you are willing to become free of your identification, slowly it will fall away.

Finally, you are not "bad" or "wrong" for having identifications. It's part of the developmental process of life. But it's not part of who we have to be. That's the choice.

When we are able to disassociate from our identities, then we can be more real, and more authentic in our everyday experiences - at work, at home, at play and in relationship.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- What identifications define you?
- Who are you?
- What reactions, attitudes, preferences, desires and attachments can help you recognize how you are identified?
- How do you feel about your identifications?
- Do your identifications constrain you in your everyday life experiences? How so?
- When do you feel most free of identifications?
- Who would you be and how would you feel if you were not (fill in with one of your identifications - an image, an emotion...)?
- If you asked your best friend what s/he saw as your identifications, what would s/he say? Would you agree?
- Why do you choose your identities? What do they "get" you?
- Can you visualize having no identifications? What does that feel like?
- How did you come to have the identifications you have?

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