

JMID  
JONATHAN M. PHAM  
JMID

Q2-2025 EDITION

**Self Identity**



## PREFACE



**Why am I me, and not someone else?**

Nemo, *Mr. Nobody* (2009)

Image source: [Pinterest](#)

## A LETTER FROM JONATHAN

Good day, my friend!

Welcome to the Q2-2025 edition of my blog's newsletter series! I am delighted to continue the journey with you.

As you may have seen in the previous page, I decided to start the edition with a memorable quote from the movie *Mr. Nobody* (if you haven't watched the film, I highly recommend you do it):

*"Why am I me, and not someone else?"*

Have you ever asked yourself something similar? Like, *"Why this body, these eyes? Why am I here? Who am I?"*

Do these questions sound a little 'dumb'? Like, why bother? Any chance to make a living out of tackling them?

And yet, don't you think there's something really... humane in doing so?

I remember as a kid pondering these existential questions - long before any philosophical terms entered my vocabulary. Just out of pure curiosity. Even though I could not come up with any satisfactory answers, I felt quite content reflecting on them.

This inquiry into one's **self-identity**, I believe, lies at the heart of what it means to live a conscious, meaningful life. It's less about finding a neat, static definition to put on a shelf, and more about engaging with an ongoing process of being & becoming - a theme I would like to explore within the pages of this edition.

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The concept of "self" may, indeed, feel abstract, almost metaphysical. Who is this "I" that perceives, feels, and navigates the world? How much of it is an enduring core, and how much is an ever-evolving story shaped by one's experiences, choices, connections, and the very air one breathes?

I do not aim to present definitive pronouncements within this edition. If anything, my own journey has taught me the value of finding a certain comfort in the not-knowing - and of trusting the deeply personal process of discovery.

So, what can you expect as you turn these pages?

- We'll begin by **unveiling the 'I'** - what this thing called "self-identity" means, as well as its impact on one's life.
- From there, we'll examine **the Self's nature** - how different schools of thought across fields tackle with its various aspects, **the challenges** one may face on the path towards self-realization, and **the essential qualities** to persevere despite these roadblocks.
- Then, we will go over a **collection of practices** designed to help one consciously define and cultivate **an identity that feels authentic and aligned**.
- Finally, we'll finish the exploration by reflecting on a few thoughtful voices in the fields of psychology & philosophy - plus some inspirational stories & words to 'light the fire within'.

My deepest hope for this edition is not to provide you with answers about who you are, but rather to **offer companionship**,

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**perspectives, and perhaps a few well-placed signposts on your own path of self-discovery. The true exploration, the most meaningful insights, will always arise from within your own heart and experience!**

**Let us turn the page and embark on this shared inquiry with open minds and curious spirits, shall we?**

**All the best!**

**Jonathan M. Pham**

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# THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY



**Knowing yourself is the  
beginning of all wisdom.**

Aristotle

## 1.1. WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED 'I'?

**When the phrase 'self-identity' comes up, what springs to your mind?**

For many of us, the immediate answers might be our name, our profession, the roles we play like “parent” or “friend,” perhaps our prominent personality traits – “I’m an [introvert](#),” “I’m ambitious,” or even our hobbies, “I love hiking.”

These are, undoubtedly, parts of how we describe ourselves to the world, and to ourselves. But do these labels truly capture the entirety of who you are?

Is your identity merely a collection of roles, characteristics, and preferences, or is there something more profound, something deeper at its core that these descriptors only hint at?

### **Definition & related concepts**

Let’s start with a preliminary idea: **Self-identity is the dyna-**

**mic and evolving understanding of who we perceive ourselves to be.** It’s far more than a static list of qualities; it’s a living process shaped by our innermost experiences, our personal history, the web of our relationships, and the world that surrounds and interacts with us. Think of it as both an internal compass that guides our [choices](#) and the unfolding story we continuously author about who we are and are becoming.

The concept of “self-identity” is closely related to, yet distinct from, a few other psychological terms that are helpful to know:

- **Self-concept** often refers to the more descriptive and evaluative picture we hold of our own abilities, attributes, and characteristics. It’s the “who I think I am” inventory.
- **Self-image** is a component of this, specifically how we see ourselves, which is un-

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der the influence of many factors.

- **Self-esteem**, then, is the emotional charge on that self-concept – how we feel about who we perceive ourselves to be, the value we place on it.

Sometimes, you may hear people referring to “self identity” with terms such as “personal identity”, the “sense of self”, or simply the “self”. From an academic perspective, these terms are not quite the same. However, here, we will consider them as pointing to the same phenomenon and use them somewhat interchangeably to refer to **that complex, multifaceted experience of individuality, personal existence, and our ongoing inquiry into “who I am.”**

### Unpacking “Self” through different windows

To truly appreciate what self identity might encompass, it’s

enriching to peer through various “windows” – different fields of human inquiry that each offer unique tools and insights into this complex phenomenon.



### A. The psychological lens: The ‘mechanics’ of self

Psychology provides us with practical, empirically grounded, insights into how our sense of self develops, how we experience it, and how it functions in our lives. It helps us grasp some of the tangible aspects of who we are. Key concepts include:

- **Identity formation:** The journey, especially prominent in adolescence but truly lifelong, of forging a

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coherent and consistent sense of who we are.

- **Self concept & self esteem:** These form the content and evaluation of our self-perception.
- **Personality traits:** Those relatively enduring patterns in our thinking, feeling, and behaving that contribute to our uniqueness.
- **Memory:** The thread that weaves together past experiences, present awareness, and projections of a future self, creating a sense of continuity.

Psychology also illuminates how the self is, in many ways, “intersubjective.” It exists not just in our private consciousness, but also in how we imagine others perceive us, and in the interplay between the “I” (the subjective experiencer) and the “me” (the self as an object of our & others’ reflection). Our interactions and interpretations of how others see us cons-

tantly shape this sense of “me.”

### **B. The sociological lens: The self in society**

Sociology broadens the view, highlighting how profoundly our identity is shaped by the social structures and cultural contexts we inhabit. It reminds us that we are not formed in a vacuum.

Our social roles (as a parent, an employee, a citizen, a friend), group affiliations (based on culture, nationality, or even shared interests), and the overarching narratives of our society all contribute significantly to defining who we believe ourselves to be and how we fit into the world.

### **C. The neuroscientific glimpse: The brain and self**

A newer, yet rapidly advancing, perspective comes from neuroscience. While the mystery is far from fully solved, neuroscience

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is beginning to map how the workings of our brain activity contribute to our continuous sense of being a distinct individual, self-awareness, and even memories. It's a complex and evolving field, offering fascinating glimpses into the biological underpinnings of our subjective experience of self.

[Recent research](#) is revealing that self-awareness isn't tied to a single brain spot but involves widespread brain networks. Crucial areas, like parts of the prefrontal cortex, [help weave our memories together](#) to form a consistent sense of who we are over time, and damage here can indeed impact our identity.

What's intriguing is that, practices like mindfulness have been shown to change brain activity related to [how we process and experience our 'self'](#), potentially contributing to a healthier, more adaptable self perception.

### **D. The philosophical quest: Questions of being**

Philosophy, for millennia, has been the arena for grappling with the most fundamental questions about the nature of the self and existence. It invites us into deeper introspection and critical thinking.

Some core philosophical inquiries relevant to identity include:

- **The nature of the self:** What constitutes the "I" that thinks, feels, and experiences? Is it a soul, a mind, a process, or something else entirely?
- **Personal continuity:** What makes you the same person across time, despite all the physical & psychological changes? This involves age-old questions, sometimes explored through thought experiments, about how we remain recognizably "us" through

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the flow of change.

- **Consciousness:** What is the role of conscious experience in defining who we are? Is it central to our identity?
- **Existentialism:** Briefly, this branch of philosophy emphasizes our freedom and responsibility in creating our own meaning and, by extension, our own self, in a world that may not offer inherent purpose.

It's worth noting here that much of Western philosophical thought, historically, has placed a strong emphasis on the idea of a core self that demonstrates sameness and continuity over time.

### Cultural perspectives of the "Self"

The challenge of defining self-identity is magnified when we consider the vast diversity of philosophical and cultural viewpoints around the world.

- Western cultures have often emphasized concepts of personal independence, individual achievement, and a view of the self as a **distinct, autonomous, and continuous entity**.
- In contrast, many non-Western cultures (including Indigenous, Asian, and African traditions) promote a more **interdependent view of the self**. Accordingly, identity is understood through its connections to family, community, nature, and social roles. Concepts like the Buddhist notion of anatta (no-self/ non essential self) highlight impermanence rather than enduring sameness; while Confucian thought emphasizes relational identity, where the self is defined through its harmonious participation in social relationships.

Given these perspectives - the contrasting emphasis on endur-

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ing “sameness” versus inherent “impermanence” or “relationality,” crafting a single definition of self-identity is challenging, if not impossible.



### Toward a more inclusive view

Perhaps instead of a definitive answer, let's think of identity as our **ongoing engagement with the questions of who we are**. It's about what it means to be *you* – how you connect with your past, envision your future, what makes you distinct from others. This includes:

- Your subjective feeling of being a continuous person, that inner sense of “I-ness” that experiences life.

- Your physical presence, your body as a vehicle of experience in the world.
- Your psychological make-up, encompassing your memories, personality patterns, beliefs & values.
- Your roles and relationships, which connect you to others and to society.
- And crucially, the stories and narratives you weave about your life to make sense of it all.

As you may see, the idea here is to cultivate a more inclusive, “transcendent” view that:

- Focuses on the **universal human “concern”** or the “**questions**” about identity, rather than presupposing a single, fixed answer.
- Embraces **multiple dimensions** – the felt sense, the physical, the psychological, the social & the narrative – knowing that identity isn't just one thing.

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- Acknowledges the **“felt sense” of continuity** as a common human experience, which is a starting point for discussions, without making it the sole, absolute criterion for identity.
- **Avoids locking into one specific metaphysical basis** for identity (e.g. does not insist that identity is only a soul, the body, or psychological states).
- Allows for the **dynamic & evolving nature of identity**, acknowledging that who we are may change and develop later.

psychological continuity, relational roles, or the impermanence of all things, the questions and experiences related to identity remain profoundly central to the human condition.

And even if we accept that our identity is subject to change, the practical need to recognize individuals over time for social, moral & legal reasons remains.

Most philosophies and societal structures, even those emphasizing impermanence, offer ways to understand this perceived continuity in daily life.



Whether one's personal conviction or cultural background prioritizes an enduring core self,

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So far, we've affirmed there is something significant to this concept of "self" or "individuality"; something that warrants our sustained curiosity, honest introspection, and dedicated reflection. It's not just an abstract puzzle for thinkers; the nature of who we perceive ourselves to be touches every aspect of our lives.

But why is understanding it so crucial? What real difference does it make to embark on this journey of self-discovery?

### 1. Akin to knowing one's "true name"

Have you encountered stories where knowing something's – or someone's – "[true name](#)" grants a special kind of insight or power?

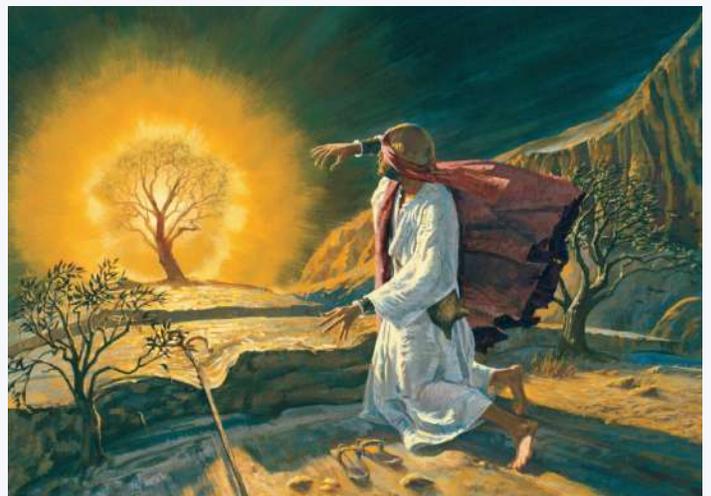
Across cultures and throughout history, names have often been considered far more than mere labels. They're seen to carry

deep meaning, reflecting lineage, destiny, even the very essence of one's personality.

A "true name," in this almost mythical sense, is imagined as the very core of a person's being, their authentic self.

This yearning to grasp one's fundamental being echoes in ancient scriptures. The Book of Exodus recounts the encounter of the prophet Moses with God on Mount Sinai. As he was about to be sent on a mission to liberate the Israelites, Moses asked God what his name was, to which he received the reply:

***I AM WHO I AM.***



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As human beings, we all wish to not just have an identity, but to realize & affirm our own unique existence and nature. From this self-knowledge, our sense of place in relation to others & the world itself begins to clarify.

The concept of a “true name” holding deep significance is a recurring motif in humanity’s collective storytelling, from philosophical dialogues to epic adventures and modern tales.

- In Plato’s *Cratylus*, Socrates explores if names are conventional sounds or if they can possess a “natural correctness,” reflecting the true essence of the thing named.
- In Ursula K. Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the magic of the world is intrinsically tied to knowing the true names of things and beings. Learning these names grants power, and the protagonist Ged’s journey is largely about mastering this responsibility, including the perilous path to knowing his own true name.
- Similarly, in Christopher Paolini’s *Eragon*, the true name of any being holds immense power; discovering one’s own is a pivotal moment of [self understanding](#) and central to a character’s destiny.
- In *Kung Fu Panda 2*, the protagonist Po’s plaintive question, “Who am I?” drives his entire arc. While not explicitly about a magical “true name”, Po’s concern was about the truth of his origins & being, the discovery (and acceptance) of which is key to unlocking his inner power.
- Rey’s journey in the *Star Wars* saga also echoes this, as she grapples with questions of lineage, belonging, and her place in a galaxy-spanning conflict, seeking

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to comprehend the forces that shape her identity.

- Hayao Miyazaki's masterpiece, *Spirited Away*, portrays the peril of losing one's name and identity. When Chihiro enters the spirit world, the witch Yubaba steals her name to control her. Another character, Haku, also has his name stolen, trapping him in servitude. Their liberation hinges on remembering and reclaiming these true names.
- In the world of *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, the plot revolves around the Nameless Pharaoh, Atem, whose quest to recover his forgotten name is linked to restoring his memories, his identity, and fulfilling his destiny.

While these tales may involve elements of fantasy or mysticism, they all share a theme: **the "true name," or true self it represents, holds power.** Know-

ing it is key to gaining power over oneself. This isn't necessarily about external control, but an inner, psychological, and existential empowerment.



While the 'true names' in the above-mentioned narratives typically carry a whisper of magic or myth, their enduring appeal lies in a deeper truth they mirror about our own lives. Specifically, the journey to understand our self-identity – to connect with that very core of our being – is an endeavor of profound and practical importance. It points towards a more centered, insightful, and potent way of navigating existence.

With this understanding of why

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such self-knowledge is likened to discovering a powerful ‘true name,’ let us now delve into the specific ways a clearer sense of self may benefit us.

### 2. The bridge to belonging, meaning, and authentic living

*The value of identity of course is that so often with it comes purpose.*

*Richard Grant*

The desires for [meaning](#), [purpose](#), and belonging – things that make life more than mere existence – are not superficial wants but deeply ingrained human needs. Sociology has long underscored our intrinsic need for social integration, not just for support, but to find our unique place and derive meaning within a collective context. If these needs go unmet, one is likely to feel adrift, a sense of something vital missing from their life.

Beyond these drives, there exists a quiet yet powerful human intuition: the sense that our individual existence, in its unique manifestation, should somehow matter. The psychologist Erik Erikson once articulated this when he wrote:

*We all dimly feel that our transient historical identity is the only chance in all eternity to be alive as a somebody in a here & now.*

What does this deep-seated urge to be a ‘somebody’ truly signify for us?

Erikson’s insight points towards the role **our felt sense of individual identity** plays in imbuing our fleeting lives with personal meaning and resonance. It highlights the **unique configuration of awareness and experience** that each of us embodies – the specific lens through which we, and only we, encounter the world.

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This isn't about a yearning for public acclaim or extraordinary status, but rather about the intimate, **subjective conviction that *this particular stream of consciousness, this life that is 'mine,'* possesses a distinct quality and offers an unrepeatable perspective on existence,** regardless of how outwardly modest our circumstances might be.

When we connect with & articulate this personal self-identity, we transform what might otherwise feel like mere biological duration into a **vividly lived experience of being a particular individual** – someone with a unique narrative-in-progress, a distinct viewpoint that contributes to the human mosaic, and an irreplaceable presence in the here and now. The feeling of 'mattering' as this specific 'somebody' is one of the most powerful wellsprings of meaning we tap into, fueling our engagement with life.

So, how does knowing who we are connect to these fundamental aspirations and affirm this vital sense of being a significant 'somebody'?

- **Finding your 'place'**

Knowing yourself – including your core values, passions, inherent strengths, and perspectives – is like possessing an internal map, guiding you towards your "place": a state of authentic alignment in the broader world, within your communities, and in your relationships.

This isn't about contorting yourself to fit in or conforming to external pressures. A clearer self-identity empowers you to seek out and cultivate environments, roles, and connections where your authentic self does not just survive, but can truly thrive. It lessens the feeling of being overwhelmed by infinite choices and provides a coherent sense of direction, which in

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turn fosters a healthy sense of personal agency and perceived control over your life's journey.

- **An internal compass**

Self-knowledge makes it easier to resist distractions or influences not aligned with your core identity and goals. As such, you become better equipped to prioritize your actions, energies, and commitments. The friction between your desires, actions, and core beliefs is lessened. This alignment is the heart of what it means to live authentically – when your external life begins to more closely mirror the truth of your inner world, instead of being swayed by external expectations, societal scripts, or a “false self” constructed primarily to please others or avoid disapproval.

- **Cultivating true belonging**

When you understand your core identity, you become better

equipped to discern what kind of relationships and communities will be genuinely nourishing and supportive. You begin to recognize ‘your tribe’ – those individuals who resonate with your values/ passions, and accept you for who you truly are, fostering an environment of mutual growth.

This stands in stark contrast to attempts to belong made without self-awareness, which only give rise to superficial connections, a lingering sense of alienation even amidst a crowd, or the exhausting charade of maintaining a false persona.

A clear self-identity allows you to show up as you are, paving the way for deeper, more meaningful bonds.

Consider, for example, someone who discovers through self-reflection that empathy and collaborative problem-solving are central to their being. This

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realization not only steers them towards a career path that feels inherently meaningful (perhaps in mediation, community development, or a leadership style that fosters teamwork) but also guides them towards friendships and groups where these qualities are cherished and reciprocated. The result is, most of the time, a powerful synergy of purpose and belonging.

At the same time, it's also crucial to recognize the courage of aligned non-belonging. A strong sense of self provides the clarity and fortitude to disengage from groups, relationships, or situations that compromise your core values or authentic self.

This discernment is vital; sometimes, true belonging to oneself and to what matters most means first acknowledging where you don't belong, thereby freeing you to find or create spaces where genuine connection truly is possible.



### 3. Better equipped to deal with life's transitions & disruptions

Life, in its essence, is a dynamic unfolding, rarely a straight or predictable path. It is marked by constant transitions – career shifts, the evolution of relationships, the natural process of aging, moving to new places – and punctuated by unforeseen disruptions like loss, illness, or sudden setbacks. No one is exempt from navigating these currents of change.

While these periods may be challenging, unsettling, and even disorienting, how we weather these storms is significantly influenced by the clarity

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and resilience of our internal sense of self.

Unfortunately, many succumb to a “fragile sense of self” – one that is:

- **Overly reliant on external validations:** Perhaps your sense of worth is almost entirely tied to your job title, your social status, a relationship, or constant approval from others.
- **Vaguely defined or poorly understood:** You might have a hazy notion of who you are, lacking clarity on your core values, beliefs, or intrinsic strengths.
- **Rigid and unable to adapt:** Your self-concept might be so fixed that any experience challenging that definition feels like a threat, making integration of new realities difficult.
- **Not rooted in intrinsic values or a stable inner foundation:** Your identity

might be built more on shifting external factors than on deeply held, internal principles.

When an identity is such fragile, even predictable transitions, let alone sudden disruptions, can lead to personal crises – i.e., feeling lost, overwhelmed, or as if one’s entire world is shattering because the supports that propped up that identity have changed or disappeared. In fact, many life problems – such as chronic indecision, a persistent fear of commitment, pervasive dissatisfaction despite outward success, or difficulty coping with loss – are frequently rooted in unresolved questions, insecurities, or a lack of clarity about one’s identity.

*Below the level of the problem situation about which the individual is complaining – behind the trouble with studies, or wife, or employer, or with*

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*his own uncontrollable or bizarre behavior, or with his frightening feelings, lies one central search. It seems to me that at bottom each person is asking, 'Who am I, really? How can I get in touch with this real self, underlying all my surface behavior? How can I become myself?'*

*Carl R. Rogers*

So, how does a developed, flexible, and well-understood self-identity help us navigate these challenging waters?

- **Continuity & coherence**

A strong sense of self offers a stable thread of “me-ness” that persists even when external roles or circumstances change dramatically. It’s the feeling of, “Even though X has changed in my life, I know who I am at my core, and I am able to navigate from that center.”

- **Framework for interpretation**

When disruptions occur, a clear identity, rooted in your values and life narrative, allows you to make sense of these events in a way that aligns with who you are. Instead of feeling purely chaotic or like a passive victim of circumstance, you have the capacity to frame the experience within your broader understanding of your life’s journey. For instance, a difficult career change might be framed not as a personal failure, but as an unexpected detour that opened new avenues for self-discovery.

- **Adaptive responses**

Knowing your core values & priorities helps you make choices during transitions that are conducive to your long-term well-being (e.g. addressing a conflict calmly rather than reactively, based on awareness of your value for respectful communi-

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cation). This prevents reactive, fear-based, or self-defeating decisions springing from confusion/ a threatened ego.

- **Reduces self-sabotage**

While not a magic shield against distress, a strong internal compass makes one less prone to prolonged despair/ extreme withdrawal (like the phenomenon of *hikikomori*, where one isolates themselves completely – a response that highlights the dangers of a fractured connection to self & society). A grounded identity provides an internal source of worth and meaning less dependent on fluctuating external conditions.



## 4. Fulfilling social interactions

*In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity.*

*Erik Erikson*

A robust self-identity is far from a self-absorbed or isolating pursuit. Instead, it is a vital ingredient for enriching one's social lives and deepening human connections.

The journey inward to know our own depths doesn't just change how we see ourselves; it fundamentally reshapes our perception of and engagement with everyone around us.

- **Authenticity invites authenticity**

With self-knowledge comes self-acceptance, and with self-acceptance comes the ability to present one's genuine self.

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There's less need for pretense, less fear of vulnerability. As such, it creates an atmosphere of safety, encouraging others to lower their own defenses and be more genuine in return.

- **More transparent communication**

A clearer sense of self inherently facilitates more articulate and honest communication of our own needs, boundaries, values, and feelings. When we know what feels “right” for us, we can express it more directly and constructively. Simultaneously, this inner clarity reduces the tendency to project our own unresolved issues, insecurities, biases, or assumptions onto others – leading to interactions based more on present reality than past baggage.

- **Seeing beyond the superficial facades**

Being aware of our own compli-

cated nature sensitizes us to that in others. It allows us to look past the immediate roles, labels, and surface-level presentations that often dominate social interactions. We start to see the person behind the ‘difficult colleague’ label, recognizing their unseen struggles, their own hidden complexities, or appreciating the unique individuality of a family member beyond our ingrained familial roles and expectations.

In other words, there is now a conscious effort to move beyond snap judgments and societal stereotypes, seeking the human being beneath the exterior. When conflicts arise, those involved are better equipped to navigate them constructively with a greater capacity for understanding and repair, because they recognize their shared complexities.

It is through such authentic engagement, grounded in a clear

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sense of self, that we truly ‘feel alive’ in our connections with others, moving beyond the ‘social jungle’ into a space of more meaningful human interaction.

*Without understanding yourself, what is the use of trying to understand the world?*

*Ramana Maharshi*

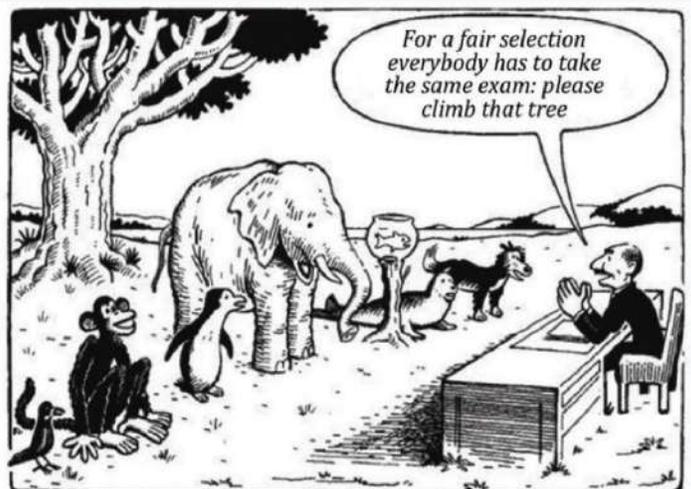
### 5. Enriching one’s life

There’s a popular saying, often attributed to Albert Einstein (though its precise origin is debated), that resonates deeply when we consider the importance of realizing our nature:

*Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.*

Indeed, our sense of self is pro-

foundly shaped by how we understand our intrinsic nature and how that nature is perceived or judged – both by ourselves and by the world around us. When individuals are primarily seen, or come to see themselves, through a lens that does not match their inherent capabilities and inner landscape, the almost inevitable result is a distorted self-image, diminished self-worth, and a life lived with a nagging sense of inadequacy, frustration, or simply feeling “miscast.”



### Our Education System

*“Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.”*

*- Albert Einstein*

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History offers glimpses of this. Those like Einstein himself, or Edison, are known for their unconventional ways of thinking and learning – aspects of their identity – that initially clashed with the rigid educational or societal systems of their time, leading to them being misunderstood or undervalued. Their eventual flourishing often coincided with finding or creating environments where their unique, innate abilities could finally be expressed. They found their “water,” so to speak.

At our core, most of us are engaged in a quiet, often unconscious, quest for [happiness](#), contentment, and [a life that feels genuinely worthwhile](#). Many of our actions, from the grand to the mundane, are, in some way, aimed at moving us closer to these states of inner well-being.

If we genuinely seek to enrich our lives – to move beyond mere existence into a state of

joyful participation – then reflecting on our self identity becomes not a peripheral pursuit, but an absolutely essential one. It’s about discovering our inherent strengths, our unique qualities, and pinpointing what truly makes us feel alive and aligned.

*How self-identity is the fountainhead of a more abundant life:*

- **A source of peace**

The journey of self-discovery helps clarify our core values, motivations, innate talents, and even our recurring emotional and [behavioral patterns](#). When you know the “why” behind your feelings and actions, much of the inner turmoil born from confusion or self-judgment begins to dissipate, leading to greater peace and contentment. On the other hand, a clear and internally harmonious self concept acts as a buffer against negativity and promotes a more resilient outlook on life.

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- **A path to joy**

When our actions align with our inner truth, it results in a powerful source of deep-seated joy and inner harmony. The constant, draining friction of living in a way that feels “off” lessens, making space for a more resonant, satisfying life experience.

- **Unlocking potential & redefining “success”**

Connecting back to the fish example, when you understand your “element” – the environments, activities, and ways of being that align with your core identity – you naturally gravitate towards paths where you not only perform well but also experience genuine engagement, flow, and a sense of purpose.

This is where true enrichment lies. “Success,” in this light, is less about conventional material accumulation or external ac-

colades, and more about personal fulfillment, a sense of contribution, and spiritual well being.



*Example: Someone who realizes through self-reflection that their core identity thrives on nurturing and guiding others might find profound happiness in roles like teaching, [coaching](#), [mentoring](#), or community care, regardless of the external prestige attached.*

*Another one, whose identity is interwoven with intellectual curiosity and problem solving, discovers a joyful life through continuous learning and tackling complex challenges, perhaps in unconventional fields.*

## 1.2. WHY CARE ABOUT IDENTITY?

### 6. The foundation for transformation & transcendence

*It is not the accumulation of extraneous knowledge, but the realization of the self within, that constitutes true progress.*

*Okakura Kakuzo*



Do you recognize the enigmatic figure of No-Face (Kaonashi) from Studio Ghibli's animated masterpiece, *Spirited Away*? His story offers a powerful illustration of the search for identity and the potential for change.

Initially, Kaonashi is a silent, shadowy being, seemingly without a distinct identity of his

own. When he enters the spirit world, he discovers that he can gain attention and apparent acceptance by producing gold. However, this path leads him to become increasingly monstrous, consuming others and absorbing their negative traits – their greed, their voices, their superficial desires. Without a stable inner core, he becomes a distorted mirror of his environment's dysfunctions, his shape and behavior alarmingly fluid and reactive.

Yet, Kaonashi's story doesn't end there. The turning point comes through his interaction with Chihiro, the anime's protagonist. Her genuine kindness, her refusal to be swayed by his material offerings, and her simple acceptance of him, even in his monstrous state, offer a different kind of reflection – one not based on greed or fear.

This marks the beginning of Kaonashi's transformation.

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Eventually, he finds a measure of peace and contentment in a simpler existence with the witch Zeniba.



Kaonashi's story, I believe, is a potent allegory for the human search for identity: **without a robust core self, we are highly susceptible to external influences, societal pressures, and the hollowness of chasing validation.** Yet, it also hints at our innate potential for transformation when we are touched by authenticity and begin the work of cultivating our own.

In today's world, the emphasis is so heavily skewed towards external markers of success – career achievements, material

wealth, social status – that the crucial, often quieter, work of inner self-understanding is completely overshadowed. When [personal development](#) is pursued primarily as a means to external ends, without a foundation, many find themselves chasing goals that don't align with their deepest nature. The result? A pervasive sense of “facelessness” – a feeling of being adrift despite apparent success, unfulfilled even amidst accomplishments, or constantly wearing a mask that doesn't quite fit. Such a state may manifest as burnout, chronic dissatisfaction, an existential vacuum, or a susceptibility to adopting fleeting personas in a desperate search for something real.

A clearly understood self identity, however, is not a static achievement to be displayed. Instead, it serves as a dynamic and essential launchpad for more profound levels of human experience:

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- **Genuine transformation (beyond mere coping)**

True personal transformation isn't just about changing habits or coping more effectively with stress. It involves a lasting, fundamental shift in our perspective, character, and our way of being in the world. **It's an evolution of the self at a deep level.**

Knowing your core identity – your deeply held values, beliefs, ingrained emotional & behavioral patterns (both helpful and hindering), and most heartfelt aspirations – provides the foundation to consciously engage in this transformative work. It allows you to realize what parts of you may need healing or integration (e.g. a deep-seated fear of intimacy), what latent potentials need cultivating (e.g. a long-dormant passion for art), and what path you must forge towards becoming a more whole and integrated version of yourself.

- **Path to self-actualization**

Humanistic psychology, particularly through thinkers like Abraham Maslow, introduced the concept of self-actualization – which refers to the intrinsic human drive to realize one's unique potential, to become everything one is capable of.

A clear and evolving self identity acts as the indispensable compass on this journey. It helps illuminate what those unique potentials are for you. Without knowing who you are at your core – your distinct talents, passions, and way of seeing the world – the quest to 'actualize' that self remains an abstract ideal, unguided and often out of reach.

- **Opening to transcendence**

Beyond even self-actualization, a robust self-identity serves as the gateway to self transcendence. This involves experiences/

## 1.2. WHY CARE ABOUT IDENTITY?

states of consciousness where we move beyond a narrow focus on our individual ego/ personal story to feel connected to something larger – be it humanity as a whole, nature, universal principles of love and compassion, or what one might perceive as a spiritual dimension.

Does that sound a little counter-intuitive? As paradoxical as it may seem, a well-integrated and secure sense of self is actually the firmest launching pad for such experiences.

When the ego is not fragile, constantly seeking validation, or terrified of losing its perceived boundaries (because identity is relatively stable and authentic), it is more ready to ‘let go’ and expand into these larger connections without the fear of annihilation or fragmentation. This isn’t about losing a self you never truly knew, but about a **mature, grounded self finding its place and connection within**

**a vaster context.**

Have you ever been through moments of profound awe in nature, a deep altruistic love that moves one to selfless service, peak experiences of creative flow where the sense of a separate self dissolves, or the sense of unity often described in many contemplative/ meditative practices?

I believe that most of us have, at least once in life. Just recall them, and you should be able to understand.

These moments of transcendence are not fleeting curiosities; they can be profoundly meaningful, bringing with them a sense of expansive joy, inner peace, and a powerful feeling of connection that enriches our self understanding and inter-connection with the larger current of life. They offer a glimpse beyond our everyday worries and limitations.

## 1.2. WHY CARE ABOUT IDENTITY?

# Why Self-identity Matters



Akin to knowing one's "true name"



The bridge to meaning & belonging



Better equipped against changes



More fulfilling social interactions



Enriching one's life



The foundation for transcendence



The journey into self-identity, as we've begun to see, is therefore far more than a mere intellectual pastime or a dive into abstract philosophy; it is an exploration central to the human experience. Embracing the quest to know ourselves is fundamental to living more purposefully and harmoniously.

# A CLOSER LOOK AT THE SELF



**If I could wake up in a different place, at a different time, could I wake up as a different person?**

Chuck Palahniuk

## 2.1. WHAT DEFINES WHO WE ARE?

- What truly determines our self-identity?
- What are the components that define who we are?
- How is our sense of self built and structured?

These questions, while seemingly direct, have no simple, single answer. Indeed, the enigma of identity has captivated thinkers and seekers across various fields for centuries.

### Philosophical inquiry

For millennia, philosophy has been the primary arena where humanity has wrestled with what it truly means to be a self, to exist as a distinct “I” in this vast universe.

One of the most enduring puzzles philosophers explore is **personal identity over time**: what makes you, the person reading this, the same individual who existed yesterday, or as a child in an old photograph, des-

pite all the changes you have undergone?

Early on, thinkers proposed several core ideas about this enduring “you”:

- **The Soul view** (also called the “Simple view”): Many ancient thinkers, like Plato and Socrates, and later philosophers like René Descartes (with his famous “*I think, therefore I am*”), suggested that our essence lies in an **immaterial soul** or a **thinking mind** – a core that remains constant even as the body changes.
- **The Bodily view**: Others have tied identity closely to our physical being – specifically, the continuity of our body, or perhaps primarily our brain.
- **The Psychological view**: Philosophers like John Locke argued that identity is found in psychological continuity – an unbroken

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chain of consciousness and memory. You are “you” because you remember being you in the past.

These foundational ideas, each with their own complexities (e.g. what happens if memories are lost, or if consciousness could theoretically be duplicated?), open up a wider philosophical dialogue about the self.

### ◆ The nature of our perceived Self: Fixed core/ flowing river?

Do we have a stable, unchanging core, or is the “self” more like a shifting current?

Is the self **something to be found**, or something always in process, **always redefined by experience**?

While the idea of psychological continuity, as championed by Locke, gives us a strong sense of a continuous self through our linked memories and aware-

ness, other thinkers have pushed further. For instance, Immanuel Kant argued that for us to even experience our lives coherently as our own, there must be an underlying “**unity of consciousness**”. He wasn’t necessarily saying what this self is made of, but that **our mind actively structures our perceptions to create a unified experience of being an “I”** through all the flux of sensations and thoughts.

In contrast, philosophers like David Hume declared he could find no such single, stable self – only a fleeting “bundle of perceptions,” a continuous parade of thoughts, feelings, and sensations. From his viewpoint, the “I” we feel so sure of might be more of a useful illusion, **a story we tell ourselves**, rather than a fixed entity.

From an Eastern perspective, Lao Tzu claimed that the true self is found not in a rigid, ego-

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defined identity, but in harmony with the Tao – the natural, flowing Way of the universe. For this, one needs to let go of fixed notions of “me” and instead embrace simplicity and spontaneity, aligning with this cosmic current.



More recently, Derek Parfit argued for a “reductionist” view: what truly matters for our ongoing existence are varying degrees of psychological connection to past and future selves, rather than a deep, indivisible, all-or-nothing “identity.”

### ◆ Identity through creation, choice, and connection

Regardless of whether there’s a

fixed core or constant flux, various thinkers emphasize our active role in shaping who we become through our choices and relationships.

- **Self-creation & becoming**

Friedrich Nietzsche urged people to “become what you are.” For him, identity isn’t about passively discovering a pre packaged self, but an active, often challenging, process of **self creation** and **self-overcoming**. It involves questioning societal norms, forging one’s values, and embracing the fullness of life to realize one’s potential.

Existentialist philosophers took the idea of self-creation further. Jean-Paul Sartre argued that “**existence precedes essence**” – meaning we are born into the world without a predetermined purpose or identity. We simply exist, and then, **through our choices and actions**, we define who we are. Self-identity, for

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Sartre, is a continuous project of self-making, carrying with it immense freedom and responsibility.

Albert Camus, similarly, explored how we can forge meaning and define ourselves through a conscious “revolt” against a seemingly absurd or meaningless universe, by embracing all life has to offer and the dignity of our personal struggle.

- **The Relational Self**

Certain schools of thought highlight that “who I am” is deeply formed by “who I am WITH.” Confucius taught that the self is not an isolated entity but is realized through our **social roles, responsibilities, and the quality of our harmonious relationships** with family, community, and society.

Martin Buber shared the same perspective in his concept of the “**I-Thou**” relationship. He

believed that the “I” comes into being and finds its authentic expression not by treating others as objects (“I-It”) for our own purposes, but through genuine, mutual, and present encounters with another “Thou.” Our identity is awakened in the space of authentic connection.

Hegel suggested that our identity is shaped by our understanding of what we are NOT, through our dynamic relationship with “otherness” or “**non-identity.**” We define ourselves, in part, by distinguishing ourselves from the world and others around us. Without this “non-identity,” the notion of “identity” itself would become meaningless, as there would be nothing from which to distinguish it. At the same time, Hegel also argued that things are inherently self contradictory and constantly changing. For instance, a seed is a seed, but it also contains the potential to become a plant; in a sense, it is both “seed” and “not-seed”

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(plant) simultaneously in its potentiality and process of becoming.

...

As you may see, this quick journey through diverse philosophical landscapes might initially seem to offer more questions than answers about self identity. And perhaps that is philosophy's greatest gift to one's self-discovery journey.

It doesn't hand us a neat definition, but equips us with critical thinking tools to assess our own assumptions about who we are. It challenges us to look beyond superficial appearances and societal pronouncements.

*Engaging with these ideas and reflecting on how they resonate with our own experience provide a powerful way to live a more conscious, examined, and ultimately, self-aware life.*

### Religious & spiritual traditions

Beyond philosophy, humanity's diverse religious and spiritual traditions offer another set of lenses through which to explore the nature of identity. These ancient paths, often rooted in sacred narratives, personal faith, mystical experiences, and communal practices, provide rich frameworks for realizing who we are in relation to the divine, the cosmos, and our deepest human purpose.

#### ◆ Your essential nature: Soul, spirit, and innate potential

Many traditions point towards a deeper, often enduring, core of being – an essential self that lies beneath the surface of our everyday personality.

- In the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), there's a shared belief in the existence of an inner essence termed the

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“soul”. It is generally considered the seat of our consciousness, moral awareness, and is widely held to endure beyond physical life. Our identity, from this perspective, is intrinsically linked to this soul, our connection to God, and the idea of being created in a divine “image,” suggesting an inherent worth and spiritual potential.

- Hinduism proposes the concept of *Atman* – the individual soul, **the true Self**, or the innermost essence of a living being, distinct from the fleeting ego. A central quest is to understand the *Atman*’s relationship to *Brahman*, the ultimate, all-pervading Reality or Universal Consciousness. Some schools teach the ultimate identity of *Atman* and *Brahman* (“You are That”), implying our truest Self is one with the Absolute.

- Across various spiritual insights, there’s a sense of an **innate pure potential** or “divine spark” within each person – something intrinsically good, wise, or capable of awakening, waiting to be uncovered & realized.

### ◆ Seeing through illusions: The Self as process & the path to freedom

Contrasting with views of an eternal soul, some traditions invite us to see through the illusion of a fixed, independent self as a path to liberation. For example, Buddhism is known for its teaching of *Anatta* (**no-self/non-essential self**). This does not mean we do not exist, but rather that there’s no permanent, unchanging, independent “I” or soul at our core. What we conventionally call our “self” is understood as a **dynamic, ever-changing** process, a temporary coming-together of five “aggregates”: our physical form, feel-

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ings, perceptions, mental formations (e.g. our thoughts/ intentions), and consciousness. This “self” is characterized by traits such as **impermanence** and **interdependence**.

The deep insight into *anatta* is not a denial of our lived experience but a way to free ourselves from suffering, which arises from clinging to the idea of a solid, separate, and permanent ego. While we DO use a “conventional identity” (our name, roles) to navigate the world, true wisdom lies in recognizing its constructed and transient nature.

### ◆ Identity in communion: The Self defined by connection

Many spiritual worldviews emphasize that self-identity isn't found in isolation but is realized and finds its meaning through our connections – to the Divine, to our community, to nature, and to all of existence.

- In Abrahamic faiths, identity is shaped by one's covenant and relationship with God, and also by belonging to a community of faith that shares rituals, values, and a sacred history.
- Many Indigenous spiritual perspectives promote a sense of self **interwoven with family, community, ancestors, the natural environment, and the spirit world**. Here, identity is less about solitary autonomy and more about one's place, roles and responsibilities within this vast web of relationships.
- In Hinduism, the concept of *dharma* (one's righteous duty, ethical path, intrinsic role) shapes the individual's place within the cosmic and social order, guiding the *Atman's* journey.
- The mystical currents within many religions (Sufism in Islam, Christian mysticism, Kabbalah in Judaism,

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and various Yogic paths) describe the spiritual journey as a **quest for union** – a merging of the individual self with the Divine/ Universal Consciousness, transcending the illusion of separateness. For this purpose, **direct experience** is key – and practices such as meditation, contemplative prayer, deep introspection, and ethical cultivation may come in handy.

*Who am I? Not the body, because it is decaying; not the mind, because the brain will decay with the body; not the personality, nor the emotions, for these also will vanish with death.*

*Ramana Maharshi*

While the beliefs, languages, and practices of religious and spiritual traditions vary, they share a universal thread: a recognition of **the importance of**

**realizing the nature of the self.** More than just definitions of identity, they provide pathways and supportive communities that guide individuals not only to understand who they are, but also to **TRANSFORM** or **TRANSCEND** limited, ego-bound notions of self.

In doing so, they help us align with a deeper sense of [spiritual purpose](#), meaning, and our connection to a reality far vaster than our individual experience.



### Psychological science

Unlike philosophy and spiritual traditions, psychology offers an empirical lens on self-identity, aiming at its structure, develop-

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ment, and how it functions in our lives. Rather than focusing on what makes us the same entity across decades (numerical identity), psychology typically explores our qualitative identity: the evolving content of our self-concept, personality, and social place. It asks:

*What key characteristics, roles, beliefs, relationships, and group memberships (as we'll see below) make up our perceived sense of 'who I am' right now, and how do these elements interact to shape our experience?*

From a psychological viewpoint, our sense of self isn't a single, monolithic entity but is understood to be comprised of various intersecting aspects that together contribute to our overall identity.

- **Personal characteristics:** Our enduring personality traits (like introversion or

conscientiousness), unique abilities, and learned skills.

- **Social & demographic categories:** Our age, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, nationality, and cultural background.
- **Roles & relationships:** The parts we play in our families, friendships, professional lives, and communities.
- **Beliefs & values:** Our guiding principles, moral frameworks, spiritual or philosophical outlooks.
- **Interests & lifestyle:** Our passions, hobbies, and how we [choose to live](#).
- **Socioeconomic status:** Our social class and economic standing, which can influence opportunities and self-perception.

Over the years, various frameworks have been proposed to shed light on how these facets come together.

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### ◆ The inner world: From unconscious stirrings to authentic expression

Psychologists have long been fascinated by the layers of the self, including those beneath our immediate awareness, and our innate drive towards feeling real and authentic.

- Early psychoanalytic thought, pioneered by Sigmund Freud, while not using our modern term “self-identity,” laid crucial groundwork by highlighting the influence of the unconscious mind and early experiences in shaping our inner self and personality, often through internal conflicts that we navigate.
- Carl Jung expanded this exploration with concepts like the **Persona** (our social mask) and the **Shadow** (our repressed/ disowned aspects). He saw the journey of **individuation** as a

lifelong process of integrating these parts to become a more whole, unique, and authentic Self – the regulating center of our psyche striving for wholeness (which is sometimes referred to as the “inner God”).

- Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott proposed the need to distinguish between the **True Self** and the **False Self**. The former, Winnicott suggested emerges from our spontaneous, genuine experiences and our innate sense of aliveness. On the other hand, the latter develops as an adaptive (and sometimes overly rigid) shield, a way to comply with external demands, which may lead to a painful disconnect from our core sense of reality and authenticity. The quest for identity, from his view, involves allowing more space for that True Self to express itself.

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### ◆ The journey of becoming: How identity develops and takes shape

Psychological studies have demonstrated that our sense of self isn't static; rather, it constantly evolves through distinct life stages and processes.

- Erik Erikson's model of psychosocial development highlights **Identity vs. Role Confusion** as a critical stage, especially during adolescence. This is a period of intense exploration where individuals grapple with "Who am I?" by trying out different values, beliefs, and roles to forge a cohesive and stable sense of self that integrates personal characteristics with social & cultural realities.
- Building on this, James Marcia described different **identity statuses** (like identity achievement or moratorium), illustrating

the varied paths individuals take in exploring possibilities and making commitments. As such, identity formation is an active, not always linear, process.

### ◆ The conscious "I": Our perceptions, aspirations, and the drive to grow

Beyond developmental stages, psychology also examines how our conscious experience, self-perception, and inherent desire for growth contribute to our identity.

- William James distinguished between **the "I"** – the active, experiencing subject, the sense of being a conscious agent – and **the "Me"** – the self as it can be known and reflected upon, comprising our material, social & spiritual aspects. His theory highlights both our awareness and the content of that awareness

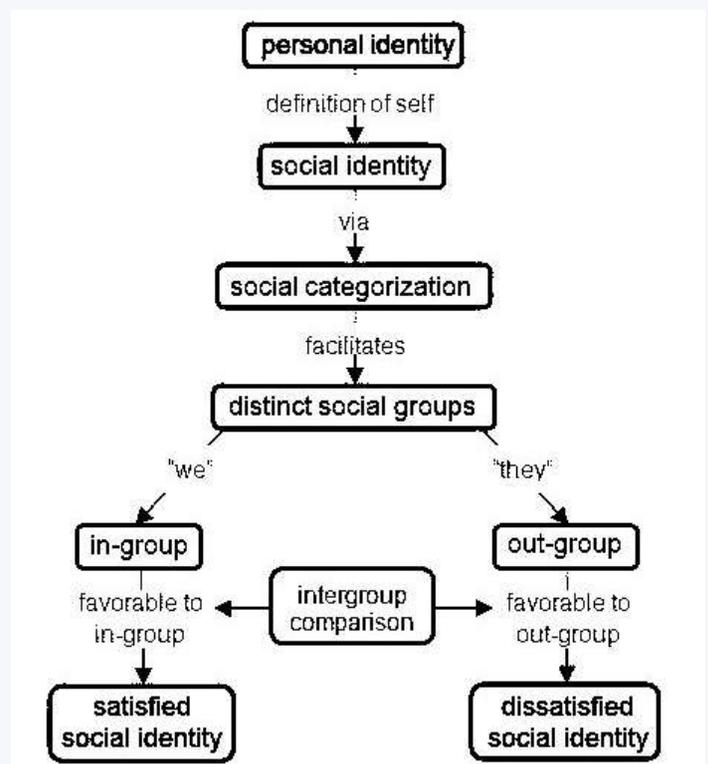
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- in forming our identity.
- Humanistic psychologists like Carl Rogers emphasized the self-concept (our organized perceptions and beliefs about ourselves) and the importance of congruence. When our ideal self (who we'd like to be), perceived self (how we see ourselves), and actual experiences align, we experience greater authenticity & psychological well-being.
- Abraham Maslow, with his Hierarchy of Needs, viewed self-actualization as our highest drive: **the ongoing unfolding of our unique potentials**. This journey is deeply tied to knowing and living from an authentic identity, as it requires us to understand our genuine capacities & inner callings.

### ◆ Social connections and life's interacting domains

Psychology also underscores

that identity is significantly shaped by our social context. The **Social Identity Theory** by Henri Tajfel and John Turner illuminates how our membership in social groups (based on nationality, profession, shared interests, etc.) becomes a fundamental part of “who I am.” It explores the psychological processes by which we categorize ourselves and others into “in-groups” and “out-groups,” and how this social identification influences our self-esteem, attitudes, and behaviors.



## 2.1. WHAT DEFINES WHO WE ARE?

So far, what psychological science reveals with increasing clarity is that our self-identity is an **incredibly complex construct**. It is continuously shaped by an ongoing interplay of the inner world – our thoughts, emotions, memories, and even our biology – and the outer world, including our social interactions, cultural upbringing, and major life experiences. While the self is intricate, it is also, to a significant degree, **knowable and capable of growth**.

### Other academic lenses

Our exploration of how identity is defined wouldn't be complete without considering the perspectives from fields like sociology and cultural studies. Many modern theories encourage us to see our self-identity not just as an internal psychological construct, but as something dynamically shaped by, and in turn shaping, the world around us (i.e. our broader social and

cultural contexts). Specifically, many aspects of who we believe we are – from certain personal characteristics to the roles we inhabit – are influenced by the cultural “blueprints” we are born into.

### Examples:

- *In many societies, the ‘blueprint’ for success might emphasize certain professions like medicine or law, subtly guiding young people towards these paths, sometimes irrespective of their innate passions.*
- *Similarly, cultural norms – like whether it’s ‘acceptable’ for men to show vulnerability or for women to express anger – can influence which emotions we acknowledge as part of our identity & which we learn to hide, even from ourselves.*

Furthermore, much contemporary academic thought suggests

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that we might embody different facets of ourselves in different contexts – and that our understanding of who we are is open to ongoing reinterpretation throughout our lives.

### *What does it mean?*

- You might have observed this in your own life: perhaps a more assertive, professional facet of you emerges at work, while a more playful, relaxed one with close friends. These aren't necessarily contradictions or inauthentic masks, but rather valid expressions of a complex self adapting and responding to changing situations.
- An identity largely defined by a specific career in one phase of life can definitely be redefined later. Think of someone who, for decades, identified primarily as a 'corporate manager.' Later in life, perhaps through

discovering a passion for pottery (a 'new passion'), becoming a grandparent (a 'new role'), or gaining profound perspective from overcoming an illness (a 'new insight'), their primary sense of self might shift authentically to something like 'artist,' 'nurturing elder,' or 'advocate for mindful living.'

By adopting such a fluid view, we are free from the pressure of having to find or adhere to one single "true self", and instead encouraged to embrace humanity's complexity and capacity for growth.



## 2.2. CHARACTERISTICS OF IDENTITY

The quest to understand who we are, as we have explored previously, certainly admits many approaches. Empirical avenues, drawing from psychology, neuroscience, and sociology, offer valuable data, illuminating patterns, cognitive mechanisms, and the societal currents that shape us. Simultaneously, subjective pathways, typically walked by philosophers, spiritual seekers, and anyone engaged in deep self reflection, invite us into the inner landscape of consciousness, personal meaning, and the immediate, felt sense of being.

While both of these lenses present crucial insights, our focus here will be more on the **subjective character** of self-identity. My own conviction, guiding this choice, is that for the deep work of self-discovery and fostering genuine personal transformation, an accumulation of external facts or theories, while helpful, can only take us so far.

There's an old piece of wisdom that says, **'You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.'** Lasting changes often spring from that internal 'drinking' – the direct engagement with, and felt realization of, the nature of our own self.

With this spirit, let us consider some of the self's key characteristics, shall we?

### 1. Multifaceted

Do you ever feel like you are more than just one single, consistent "you"? Like, there are different versions of yourself that emerge in different situations, or even coexist within you simultaneously?

This sense of inner multiplicity is a common human experience (this is what I feel about myself – it has baffled me from time to time), and it points to a characteristic of our identity: its **multifaceted** nature.

## 2.2. CHARACTERISTICS OF IDENTITY

In the anime *Yu-Gi-Oh!* (one of my favorites), the main character, Yugi Mutou, shares his body and consciousness with the spirit of an ancient Pharaoh, Atem. Yugi is depicted as timid & kind, while Atem is remarkably confident, strategic, and imbued with a powerful sense of justice.

Even though the story depicts them as two separate entities, many people have pointed out that the relationship between Yugi and Atem can be interpreted metaphorically. Specifically, they represent two potent, sometimes contrasting, aspects or ‘faces’ of a single individual. They are like:

- **Two sides of the same coin:** Distinctive, yet complementary facets that form a more complete being.
- **Manifestations of a persona:** Different aspects emerging in response to varying circumstances or our own developmental needs –

one representing hidden potential, the other growing empathy.

- **A collaborative whole:** The two are interdependent – they learn from each other, compensate for initial limitations, and together contribute to a more integrated self.



This notion of holding multiple aspects within a single being is not just the stuff of fantasy; indeed, [studies have shown](#) that it is an undeniable part of many people’s sense of self.

From a subjective viewpoint, our self-identity rarely feels like a monolithic block, unchanging and simple. Instead, it’s more

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like a rich composition – formed from our various roles (as a parent, a professional, a friend, a student), passions (the artist, the activist, the quiet observer within us), relationships, treasury of memories, evolving beliefs and values, and so on.

*Identity is never singular but is multiply constructed across intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions.*

*Stuart Hall*

### ◆ Many facets, one lived experience?

As mentioned previously, philosophers and scientists have long debated the ultimate nature and existence of a singular, unified ‘Self.’ Some theories point to an enduring core entity; others describe a bundle of processes; and some even question the existence of any fixed metaphysical self at all.

For our self-discovery journey, perhaps a more immediate and resonant question isn’t whether a single, ultimate ‘Self’ with a capital ‘S’ exists in one particular metaphysical sense, but rather: **How do we experience and integrate our undeniably real and impactful sense of having multiple facets, roles, and even seemingly different ‘selves’ within us?**

When I was doing research on the topic, I came across an [interesting online discussion](#) that I would like to share here:

***Q: What defines a person's identity? Who are we really?***

*If I asked people I know to describe themselves they would likely reply with things like "cowboys fan", or "construction worker", or generic traits like honest or hardworking. But none of these really make up a person's identity, those are just your interests, occupation, or aspects of your behavior. Is a true self im-*

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*possible to define? Does it even exist? Are we just desperate to have an identity so we use all these external things we interact with to construct an identity for ourselves?*

*A: This is a huge and complex topic. There are multiple angles to approach this with emphasis on different aspects of self and personal identity.*

*If you ask two philosophers X and Y the question: "Does the self exist?", X may answer "yes" and Y may answer "no". But at the same time, X and Y may not be taking incompatible positions.*

*X may elaborate that "yes, self exists as a narrative center of gravity", whereas Y may say "no, self as a metaphysical unity and center of agency and identification does not exist". But there can be a narrative center (a bunch of processes constructing a narrative/ fiction) without any*

*literal metaphysical unity and center (a soul) of agency and identification (personal ownership). As such, X's and Y's positions need not to be incompatible.*

*Similarly, Z may say "yes there is a self or a person, where the person is a 4-dimensional entity extending through spacetime and it has its temporal parts which are temporal instances of the psycho-physical processes involved in the mind-body complex" (again, Z is taking a whole different framework here).*

*So when trying to explore the philosophical cluster surrounding person, self, and related topics with family resemblances, it is useful to be careful in understanding from which framework one is talking about it. We don't necessarily have to choose a "single framework" as the "True Framework", but simply appreciate the multifaceted nature of the topic.*

## 2.2. CHARACTERISTICS OF IDENTITY

As you see, different frameworks describe the ‘self’ in ways that seem contradictory – one might speak of a ‘narrative center,’ another might define a person as a ‘four-dimensional spacetime entity,’ while another might deny any ‘metaphysical unity.’ Yet, as the discussant pointed out, these descriptions aren’t necessarily incompatible. They might simply be highlighting **different aspects or levels** of analysis of our complex being, much like how describing a mountain from its base, peak, or geological composition offers different, yet all valid, facets of the same mountain.

Just reflect on your own life: you might embody a playful, spontaneous self with your children, a focused and analytical self in your professional work, and a quiet, reflective self in moments of solitude. These aren’t necessarily separate “people”, but different valid facets of your identity that come

to the fore, each with its own way of feeling, behaving, and relating to the world.

### ◆ Navigating our many (sometimes conflicting) sides

Now, I’m not quite sure if this applies to you, but I myself can relate strongly to this internal experience of multiplicity. Many times, I find myself:

- Thinking or feeling things that seem contradictory at the same time.
- Behaving quite differently depending on who I’m with or what a situation demands (e.g. being an assertive manager at work but a more reserved listener in a new social group).
- Having an ‘inner critic’ voice that seems to be in constant debate with an ‘inner encourager’ or a more compassionate self.

How about you?

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Have you ever been through a situation in which your deeply held values came into conflict with each other? When life presented you with difficult choices, and picking whichever would mean honoring one cherished value at the cost of another? (e.g. the tension between a desire for personal freedom and adventure – which is one facet of self – and the longing for deep, committed relationships and stability – which is another facet)

When our personal values pull us in varying directions, some may question if it is a sign of a flawed or incoherent identity. However, I myself believe that it is a direct manifestation of our multifaceted richness.

Realizing that these tensions arise from the diverse and valid parts of who we are will enable us to approach difficult choices with more self-compassion, curiosity, and thoughtful delibera-

tion, rather than self-criticism or a feeling of being fundamentally ‘wrong.’

### ◆ The beauty of imperfection

Part of recognizing this characteristic of the self is to embrace the idea that not all our facets will be ‘perfect’ or universally admired by ourselves or others. Just as a rose, often celebrated for its beauty and fragrance, also possesses thorns, our identity encompasses a whole spectrum of qualities.

It includes our strengths and vulnerabilities, the aspects that shine brightly (our ‘light’) and those that we might prefer to keep hidden (our ‘shadow,’ as Carl Jung termed it).

It includes moments of expansive kindness – plus flashes of impatience or frustration.

A truly integrated identity comes not from striving to be

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one-dimensionally ‘good’ or ‘ideal,’ but from acknowledging and working with the full, complex, and sometimes seemingly contradictory collection of who we are.



### 2. Experiential & ineffable

I remember once coming across the following story, when I was still a teenager:

*The disciples were absorbed in a discussion of Lao Tzu’s dictum: ‘Those who know, do not say; Those who say, do not know.’*

*When the master entered, they asked him what the words meant.*

*Said the master, ‘Which of you knows the fragrance of a rose?’*

*All of them indicated that they knew.*

*Then he said, ‘Put it into words.’*

*All of them were silent.*

*Anthony De Mello, ‘One Minute Wisdom’*

I didn’t quite get it at that time, but now, it makes more sense to me (even though I still have trouble grasping its message). As you may see, the parable speaks to the limits of language when it comes to conveying direct, lived experience – a theme absolutely central to understanding the often ineffable aspect of our own self-identity.

Just as the rose’s unique fragrance is directly known yet defies complete verbal capture,

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there seems to be a core sense of our “self” – a fundamental awareness, an “I-ness” – that is intimately experienced but cannot be fully encapsulated by our external descriptions, the roles we play, or even the detailed narratives we construct about our lives. As demonstrated by certain philosophical and spiritual ideas, there is a pure subject of experience – a fundamental ground of being that underlies all our changing characteristics, a knowing that is pre-verbal.

We tend to build much of our conscious knowledge of identity through the stories we tell about our lives and the labels we (and others). For example:

“I am a parent.”

“I am an artist.”

“I am resilient.”

While these narratives are vital for making sense of our journey

and connecting with others, they don’t encompass the totality of our being. A holistic understanding of “who I am” does not arise solely from analytical thought or meticulous introspection that aims for a perfect verbal definition.

Think of it this way: you could write a detailed autobiography, listing every significant event, role, and relationship. Yet, the lived texture of those experiences – the subtle cascade of emotions, the particular quality of your consciousness in different moments, the sheer, unadorned feeling of having been that person in those moments – is far richer, more nuanced, and more alive than any description can fully convey.

You might read a lot of books on personality theory, fill out numerous self-assessment questionnaires, or spend hours in intellectual reflection about your traits. These are, indeed, valua-

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ble exercises. Yet, they won't help without those moments of genuine self-realization – those intuitive flashes of the mind, often feeling like a direct 'seeing' or an immediate 'experiencing' that goes beyond conceptual frameworks.

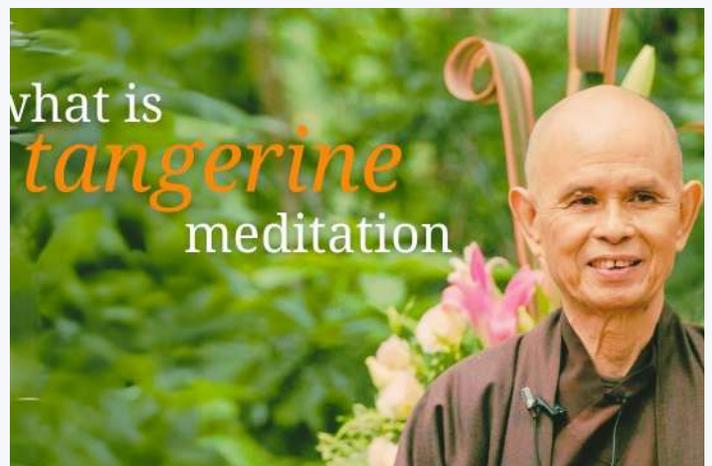
It's akin to the difference between studying a map of a forest (conceptual knowledge) and actually walking its shaded paths, breathing its unique air, and feeling the earth beneath your feet (direct experience).

To better internalize this self's characteristic, let us reflect on the following analogy by the Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh:

*If there is a person who has never eaten a tangerine or a durian fruit, however many images or metaphors you give him, you cannot describe to him the reality of those fruits. You can only do one thing: give him a*

***direct experience. You can not say: "Well, the durian is a little bit like the jackfruit or like a papaya." You cannot say anything that will describe the experience of a durian fruit. The durian fruit goes beyond all ideas and notions.***

*The same is true of a tangerine. If you have never eaten a tangerine, however much the other person loves you and wants to help you understand what a tangerine tastes like, they will never succeed by describing it. The reality of the tangerine goes beyond ideas.*



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Just as the true taste of a fruit may only be known through the act of eating it, the essential nature of your self-identity, in its most authentic sense, can only be known through the direct, lived experience of being you.

While we can try to articulate aspects of our identity, the core “who” of who we are is not a static list of attributes or a concept to be pinned down with words alone, like a butterfly specimen in a display case. It is, in large part, a dynamic, unfolding experience; something to be lived, felt, and reflected on with a sense of openness, wonder, and acceptance, not just analyzed once and for all.

It’s an ongoing exploration through the very acts of living, feeling, and simply being.

*Something that can be seen, yet cannot be seen.*

*Yugi Mutou, ‘Yugioh’*

### 3. Impermanent

*No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man.*

*Heraclitus*

I assume that many of you are familiar with this saying, which introduces a fundamental characteristic of self-identity: **it is not a static monument, but a flowing current.**

The multifaceted, felt self we’ve been exploring is constantly being shaped & reshaped by our ongoing experiences, growth, learning, the new insights we gather, and the ever-shifting circumstances of our lives.

Just think about your own life. Consider the ‘you’ before and after a significant loss, a moment of heartfelt joy, or a life-altering decision that set you on an entirely new path. While a

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thread of continuity undoubtedly connects these different versions of yourself, the inner landscape – your perspectives, feelings, even some core beliefs – can be deeply altered. In other words, **we change**.

Many of us, at different times, ponder whether the ‘me’ of the past, the ‘me’ of this present moment, and the ‘me’ we imagine in the future are truly, entirely the same person. While philosophers have long debated the precise nature of personal persistence, from the standpoint of our direct, lived experience, a valuable shift occurs when we begin to acknowledge and embrace the inherently **impermanent nature of our perceived identity**.

This awareness isn’t about denying the continuity we feel or the threads that connect our life’s chapters. Rather, it’s about recognizing that our identity – the collection of our roles, be-

liefs, memories, and self-perceptions, quite distinct from any unchanging essential ‘Self’ that some spiritual traditions posit – is more like an **evolving narrative** than a static script etched in stone. It’s a dynamic sum of our memories, the imprint of our relationships, the influence of our culture, and the unique, ever-unfolding way we journey through the world.

### Examples of how self-identity is subject to fluctuation:

- A major career change doesn’t just alter your routine; it can reshape your sense of competence, purpose, and social standing. For instance, an engineer who transitions to becoming a full-time artist may find their entire social circle, self-perception of creativity, and even their daily rhythm transformed.
- Moving to a new culture can fundamentally alter

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your view of social norms and even deeply held aspects of your own cultural identity. Imagine someone from a highly individualistic Western society moving to a more collectivist culture like Japan; their understanding of 'self' might profoundly shift as they navigate new norms of group harmony, indirect communication, and interdependent identity.

- Recovering from a serious illness might imbue you with a new appreciation for life and a completely different set of priorities, leading you to feel like a whole new person. It might shift your primary life focus from relentless career ambition to cherishing relationships, simple joys, and mindful living.

*I have a photograph of myself when I was a boy of sixteen. Is it a photograph of*

*me? I am not really sure. Who is this boy in the photograph? Is it the same person as me or is it another person?*

*If that boy is the same as I am, why does he look so different? Is that boy still alive or has he died? He is not the same as I am and he is also not different.*

[...]

*The body of the boy in the photograph is not the same as my body, now that I am in my seventies. The feelings are different, and the perceptions are very different. It is just as if I am a completely different person from that boy, but if the boy in the photograph did not exist, then I would not exist either.*

*I am a continuation like the rain is the continuation of*

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*the cloud. When you look deeply into the photograph, you can see me already as an old man. You do not have to wait fifty-five years.*

*When the lemon tree is in flower, you may not see any fruit, but if you look deeply you can see that the fruit is already there. You just need one more condition to bring forth the lemons: time.*

*Lemons are already there in the lemon tree.*

*Thich Nhat Hanh, 'No Death, No Fear'*



At this point, some may wonder: if our experienced identity is constantly evolving, what does it mean to be “authentic”?

Indeed, the idea of an impermanent self may feel unsettling if our notion of authenticity is tied to a fixed, unchanging entity. However, perhaps it's better to reframe it in a way that embraces life's natural flux:

- **Alignment with core principles, not fixed self-images**

We can think of authenticity as living in accordance with enduring virtues like compassion, wisdom, integrity, and ethical conduct. These principles provide a moral compass even as our specific self-conceptions, roles, or circumstances change.

- **Presence and congruence with current experience**

In other words, it means being

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true to your felt experience *in the present moment*, without rigidly clinging to outdated self-images from the past or forcing yourself to fit future expectations that no longer resonate.

- **Sincere intention in action**

Authenticity can be found in acting from a place of genuine, wholesome intentions – motivated by a desire to contribute positively – rather than by ego-driven needs to maintain a specific, unchanging persona or to always be “right.”

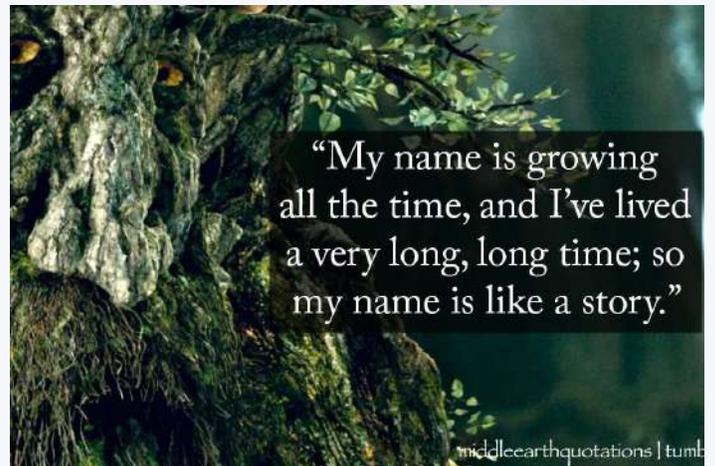
At the end of the day, choosing to embrace the impermanent nature of the self is an incredibly liberating decision. It lessens our fear of change, anxiety about uncertainty, resistance to natural endings, and even our apprehension about mortality.

It fosters a deeper capacity to live fully in the present – and to welcome new experiences with

an open heart, knowing that we, too, are part of life’s constant flow.

In Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, Treebeard, an ancient, sentient tree-like being, one of the oldest creatures in Middle-earth, speaks of himself as follows:

*My name is growing all the time, and I’ve lived a very long, long time; so my name is like a story. Real names tell you the story of things they belong to.*



Like Treebeard’s ever-growing name, our identity is an ever-expanding story. It changes, it evolves, it deepens with each new chapter, with every experi-

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ence encountered and integrated. Yet, through all its transformations, it remains *our story*.

Embracing its impermanence allows us to live more fully in the “here and now,” appreciating the continuous, beautiful unfolding that is the essence of being alive.

*Every breath I take is a new me.*

*Buddha*

### 4. Interbeing

*No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine.*

*John 15:4*

In today’s world, driven by individualism and capitalism, we tend to talk about identity as something separate, using phrases like “standing out from the crowd”, “be all you can be”,

“best of the best”, etc. However, the truth is far from that: like a branch, our individual self, for all its unique qualities, **cannot truly exist or flourish in isolation**. It is intrinsically, vitally connected to a larger whole.

While we often find ourselves distinguishing between our ‘personal identity’ (our unique mix of traits and experiences) and ‘social identity’ (our roles and group memberships), the two are, in fact, deeply interwoven. Our sense of self arises, breathes, and takes shape **in relation** – to other people, to the culture that envelops us, to the natural environment that sustains us.

Just think about it. So many of our thoughts, choices, and emotions are shaped by, or are direct responses to, others around us.

The very language we use to articulate our identity, to think

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about “who I am,” is a social inheritance.

Our core beliefs often echo those of our family, our community, or our culture.

And even our most ‘private’ aspirations are frequently influenced by societal values, the stories we’ve been told about what a good life looks like, or our innate desire for connection & belonging.



Now, how about a moment of reflection? Think about a career path you might feel you ‘personally’ chose. How much of that choice was shaped by parental hopes, societal definitions of success, or the opportunities

available in your environment?

Given these undeniable facts, do you truly believe that there is a self existing in a vacuum?

If there were truly only one human being in the entire world, would the very concept of ‘personal identity’ as we know it – with all its distinctions, comparisons, and roles – even arise in the same way?

Psychological and sociological frameworks have consistently affirmed that our personal and social identities are not just parallel tracks; rather, they are co-created, constantly informing and sustaining each other. The psychiatrist & researcher Alfred Adler, for instance, is known for his concept of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* (typically translated as either “community feeling” or “social interest”), which he posited as a fundamental aspect of psychological health.

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**PHILOSOPHER:** *Ever since the hunter-gatherer age, we have lived in groups and cooperated with our comrades in hunting animals and raising children. It isn't that we wanted to cooperate with each other. It is that we were weak, so desperately weak, that we could not live separately.*

*Put the other way around, nothing is scarier to humans than isolation. Isolated people have not only their physical security threatened, but their mental security as well. Because, instinctively, we are well aware that we can not live alone. As a consequence, we are always longing for a strong connection with other people. Do you understand what this fact means?*

**YOUTH:** *No, what does it mean?*

**PHILOSOPHER:** *All people have community feeling inside them inherently. And it is something that is deeply linked to human identity.*

[...]

*Just as one would not imagine a turtle without its shell, or a giraffe with a short neck, there is no such thing as a human being who is completely cut off from other people. Community feeling is not something that is attained, but something that one digs up from within oneself, which is why it can be shared as a feeling.*

*Ichiro Kishimi, 'The Courage to Be Happy'*

Nothing exists independently, in and of itself. Our perceived "self" is actually composed of countless "non-self" elements –

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our ancestors whose lives led to ours, the food we eat, the air we breathe, the ideas and knowledge we encounter, the love and care (or lack thereof) from the people around us.

From this vantage point, to see ourselves as truly separate, autonomous entities is to overlook the vast network of conditions and relationships that make our existence possible.

*A flower, like everything else, is made entirely of non-flower elements. The whole cosmos has come together in order to help the flower manifest herself. The flower is full of everything except one thing: a separate self. The flower cannot be by herself alone. The flower has to inter-be with the sunshine, the cloud and everything in the cosmos.*

*If we understand being in*

*terms of inter-being, then we are much closer to the truth. Inter-being is not being and it is not non-being. Inter-being means being empty of a separate identity, empty of a separate self.*

*Thich Nhat Hanh*

When we truly understand and practice living from Interbeing, our life journey will turn to a completely new page:

- **The quest for self-identity becomes a “We” quest**

If our very being is interwoven with all else, authentic self discovery cannot be a purely solitary pursuit focused solely on an isolated “I.” It naturally expands to include an awareness of our relationships, impact on others, and connection to the wider web of life. The question “Who am I?” evolves to include “Who are we?” and “How do I

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best contribute to, and live harmoniously within, this interconnected whole?”

In other words, we are equipped to move beyond [self limiting habits](#) like [excessive ego inflation](#), the constant need to [take individual credit](#), or resisting necessary personal change solely to preserve a rigid sense of “me.” Our focus is naturally shifted from competition to cooperation and contribution.

- **From “I”-centeredness to a wider embrace (a mark of maturity)**

There’s a natural human developmental arc from an initial, necessary self-centeredness (like a baby whose world revolves around its immediate needs for survival) to a more mature awareness of our interdependence. True self-reliance, paradoxically, often flourish most fully within the recognition of this larger whole – when the “I”

learns to see itself as an integral part of a “we.”

This view of relational identity is reflected in various cultural philosophies – e.g. Ubuntu in Southern Africa (“I am because we are”) or Wa/ Nagomi in Japan (which emphasize harmony, cooperation, and the importance of the collective).

- **Cultivating compassion & overcoming fear**

When we deeply grasp our interconnectedness, empathy and compassion naturally arise. Seeing others not as wholly separate and alien “others,” but as interconnected parts of the same human family (and the same larger ecosystem), allows their joys and sorrows to touch us more deeply. Fear, which so often arises from a sense of a fragile, isolated self needing to defend its boundaries, is now lessened – as we realize our security and well-being are inti-

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mately tied to the security and well-being of all.

Indeed, most conflicts, whether personal or societal, are typically fueled by an “us vs. them” mentality, a failure to see the “other” as part of oneself. But the truth is far from that. Even between apparent opposites, like the left and right wings in politics, interdependence still exists.

***Political parties of the right and the left are immortal; they cannot be removed. As long as there is a right wing, there will be a left wing. Therefore those on the left of the political spectrum should desire the eternal presence of those on the right. If we remove the right, we have to remove the left at the same time.***

***The Buddha said: “This is because that is. This mani-***

***ifests because that has manifested.” This is the Buddha’s teaching concerning the creation of the world. It is called the teaching on co-arising. The flame is there because the matches are there. If the matches were not there, the flame would not be there.***

*Thich Nhat Hanh*

A perspective of interbeing in any conflict would, therefore, seek understanding, common ground, and solutions that acknowledge this mutual dependence, rather than aiming to vanquish the “other” out of fear or narrow self-interest.

Now, it’s critical to clarify that embracing interbeing is not about losing one’s individuality, becoming a mere undifferentiated part of a collective, or blindly conforming to societal expectations. Rather, it’s about reali-

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zing the truth of our interconnectedness. This realization, far from erasing individuality, allows for a more authentic, expansive, and responsible individuality to emerge – one that takes into account its context, impact, and inherent place within the whole.

When we genuinely feel our interconnectedness, the relentless need to measure ourselves against others diminishes. This, in turn, frees us to engage in genuine learning – about ourselves, about others, and about how to live more harmoniously, compassionately, and lovingly in our shared world.

***Most people think that learning is encouraged through comparison, whereas the contrary is the fact. Comparison brings about frustration and merely encourages envy, which is called competition. Like other forms of***

***persuasion, comparison prevents learning and breeds FEAR.***

*Jiddu Krishnamurti*



***The world is neither black nor white; it's about balance***

### 5. Double-edged

By now, we should be aware that our sense of self is a cornerstone of human experience. It provides a source of meaning, a clear sense of direction, and an anchor that gives us feelings of stability and coherence in the face of life's challenges. However, if we are not careful, it may turn out to be more of a "curse" than a blessing.

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On one hand, our core values, beliefs, aspirations, and titles may serve as powerful engines that drive us towards our goals and imbue us with strength and conviction. Yet, these same elements, if clung to with excessive rigidity or left unexamined, can transform into chains that bind us – making us inflexible and fearful of challenges.

A deeply held value for ‘loyalty,’ for instance, is the bedrock of strong, [trusting](#) relationships. But if that loyalty becomes absolute and unthinking, it might lead one to condone or participate in harmful actions, all in the name of upholding that aspect of their identity.

### ◆ The pitfalls of a rigid “Ego”

Many spiritual traditions and psychological frameworks have consistently discussed the problematic aspects of the “ego” – that constructed sense of self that seeks to [preserve itself at](#)

[all costs](#). Under its influence, people become heavily identified with particular outcomes, images, or beliefs. And the consequences of such a choice are not to be underestimated:

- **Breeds suffering**

Many of us cling desperately to a specific self-image (e.g., “I am the successful executive,” “I am always the helpful one, never in need of myself”), a cherished role, or an unshakeable set of beliefs. When life inevitably brings changes that challenge these fixed notions – a core aspect of its impermanent nature, as discussed above – we experience suffering, because our cherished, static identity feels threatened with annihilation.

- **Fosters conflict & division**

An inflexible self-identity is sure to result in an “us vs. them” mentality. If “who I am” is primarily defined by being “right,”

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“superior,” or belonging to an exclusive group, it becomes incredibly difficult to empathize with, genuinely understand, or collaborate with those who hold different views or embody different identities. Over time, it will inevitably lead to interpersonal friction and wider social division.

- **Stifles growth**

An identity terrified of being perceived as “wrong,” “inadequate,” or “less than” will naturally shut down curiosity and the willingness to learn from new experiences or, crucially, from mistakes. This fear of challenging the known self gives rise to stagnation, preventing the evolution that life invites.

- ◆ **Beyond fixed frameworks**

This double-edged quality of identity means that our journey of self-discovery involves not just “learning” who we are, but

also developing the crucial capacity to “unlearn” and consciously evolve. As demonstrated in stories like the [Buddha’s Raft Parable](#), teachings, frameworks, and even our current self-definitions are just like a raft – essential for crossing a river (navigating a particular stage of life). However, once the other shore is reached, a wise person doesn’t continue to carry the raft on their back as an unnecessary burden.

Similarly, aspects of our identity, beliefs, or roles that once served us well must sometimes be lovingly let go of or adapted to allow for our continued growth and passage to new shores of wisdom.

In [Japanese philosophies](#), there is a concept called Shuhari (守破離), which is widely adopted in martial arts and other disciplines. Accordingly, one’s development is comprised of three stages:

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- **Shu (守 – Protect/Obey):** Initially, in any learning process, including forming aspects of our identity, we need to adopt certain frameworks, values, or ways of being, learning the fundamentals by following established models.
  - **Ha (破 – Detach/Break):** With growing experience and inner reflection, we begin to question, adapt, and break free from rigid adherence. We start to personalize our understanding and experiment with different expressions of self.
  - **Ri (離 – Leave/Separate):** Ideally, we move towards a more fluid, integrated, and authentic expression of self, no longer strictly bound by the original forms but acting from a deeper, internalized source of wisdom.
- “Shu” stage, clinging tenaciously to our first identity constructs without allowing for evolution, we risk becoming like a “robot” – operating on programmed rules, beliefs, or self-images without genuine presence, adaptability, or compassion. This may manifest in various unhelpful ways, namely:
- **Spiritual bypassing:** Using spiritual labels or an adopted “enlightened” identity to avoid facing difficult emotions or engaging with real-world ethical complexities.
  - **Intellectual arrogance or dogmatism:** Becoming convinced that one’s current identity or belief system represents the absolute and final truth, thereby closing off all further learning or dialogue.
  - **Fear of vulnerability and change:** An intense, almost desperate, need to protect a static and often idealized

If we remain stuck in the initial

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self-image from any perceived threat.

- **Lack of empathy:** Rigidly applying one's own identity standards/ moral codes to others, leading to [judgment](#), a failure to empathize with different perspectives, and a painful disconnect from shared humanity. This ultimately generates more suffering for oneself and those around.

### ◆ Not a call for relativism

The call for flexibility, for the willingness to “unlearn” and adapt aspects of our self identity, might sound to some like it's promoting a kind of “anything goes” relativism, where identity has no stable core or guiding principles. That is not the intention. Instead, it's an invitation to **embrace imperfection and the ongoing, dynamic nature of self-discovery.**

Given that most of us are not

static, fully “enlightened” beings, the identities we inhabit are, by nature, works in progress, subject to revision as we experience and grow. It's not only okay – but often necessary for our understanding of “who I am” to change and deepen over time. The focus, then, shifts from a self-righteous attachment to being a certain (fixed) way, or always being right, towards cultivating:

- **The sincerity of our intentions:** Are our strivings oriented towards what is good, constructive, and conducive to growth and connection?
- **The integrity of our actions:** Do our actions, as best as we can manage, align with our deepest, most compassionate understanding, even as that understanding evolves?
- **The commitment to consistent effort and reflection:** Are we willing to keep

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learning from our experiences, adapting our perspectives, and even making amends when our past self-knowledge led to less-than-ideal outcomes?

[What got you here won't get you there.](#)

*Marshall Goldsmith*



### 6. Transcendent

*It is in self-forgetting that one finds.*

*Peace Prayer*

I remember as a kid attending church meditation sessions and getting to know these words for

the first time. It was (how do I say it)... wonderful! Though at that time, I did not have much life experience to fully comprehend it.

And now, after years have passed, the verse above now has a whole new layer of meaning to me.

When we talk about “self forgetting”, we are not talking about escaping who we are – but rather about the potential within our self-identity to experience **something that extends beyond the confines of our everyday, ego-defined awareness.** Rather than a denial of the personal self, it is an opening to what lies beyond the self’s perceived boundaries – the possibility of a connection to a larger unity, a sense of liberation from one’s usual limitations, an encounter with a deeper, more fundamental ground of being.

In his book ‘*Man’s Search for*

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*Meaning*’, the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl – who has endured the horrors of the Holocaust – observed that true self realization, and indeed a meaningful identity, are usually discovered not by an inward, obsessive focus on the self, but paradoxically, **by dedicating oneself to something beyond the self.**

By engaging wholeheartedly with a cause greater than oneself – or by deeply loving another person, we engage in what he termed “**self transcendence.**” In these moments of earnest engagement or selfless love, our narrow, everyday self-concerns fall into the background to be replaced by a more purpose-filled and deeply fulfilled sense of humanity.

***What is called self actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In***

***other words, self actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self transcendence.***

*Viktor E. Frankl*

If you are attentive enough, you should be able to notice countless instances of self transcendence in daily life:

- An artist completely absorbed in the act of creation, losing all track of time, their usual worries momentarily vanishing.
- A scientist engrossed in the pursuit of discovery, driven by curiosity about the universe.
- A volunteer dedicating their energy to alleviating the suffering of others.
- Someone deeply immersed in a loving, supportive relationship.

What’s interesting is that [studies and accounts](#) have noted

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that such individuals typically report their most vital sense of purpose and a truer feeling of “self” – precisely when they are “forgetting themselves” in service to something larger than their individual ego.

As such, this brings us to an idea that may initially seem counterintuitive: that to truly know ourselves, to find our authentic identity, **we first need to “lose” or consciously let go of the “self” we think we are** – particularly the constructed, conditioned, and often limiting notions we’ve accumulated over a lifetime.



After all, our daily self-concept is an intricate construction built

from societal conditioning, past experiences (both good and bad), ingrained fears, and various egoic attachments and defenses. These layers, while serving certain functions in navigating the world, may also obscure a deeper, more essential, and more peaceful sense of being. As uncomfortable as it may feel, removing them is essential to acquiring a more abundant experience of existence.

*Examples:*

- Letting go of a cherished professional identity after retirement may be a painful process of “losing” a familiar self, yet it also opens up new avenues of self discovery & fulfillment.
- Similarly, releasing the need to always be seen as “strong” or “in control” allows for a deeper vulnerability and, through that, more intimate connections with others.

## 2.2. CHARACTERISTICS OF IDENTITY

From our earliest days, human development has been a journey of reaching out, connecting, and expanding our world. A baby learns to crawl, then walk, exploring beyond their immediate physical self. They learn to communicate, to empathize, and eventually, find that their focus naturally shifts from purely self-centered needs towards contributing to others, to their community, or to what they perceive as a higher purpose or even a connection with “divinity” in its broadest sense.

In other words, humanity has always had an innate yearning for self-transcendence – not as an escape, but as a path to fullness, maturity, and a more integrated way of living. Surrendering the demands, fears, and illusions of the small, often anxious, ego-defined self doesn’t lead to emptiness in a negative sense; instead, it creates the inner space for a vaster, more authentic “real self” to emerge.

Like a sculptor chipping away excess stone to reveal the true form within, the “losing” of the superficial or constricting layers is necessary – so that one may “find” and connect to a “self” that is more peaceful, more interconnected with life, wiser, and imbued with a quiet sense of freedom.

***You will never make a good impression on other people until you stop thinking about what sort of impression you are making. In literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original; whereas if you simply try to tell the truth, you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it. The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self.***

C. S. Lewis

# NAVIGATING THE SHADOWS



**It is easier, far easier,  
to obey another than  
to command oneself.**

Irvin D. Yalom

## 3.1. CHALLENGES ON THE PATH

While the experience of looking within is deeply rewarding, it is certainly not without its hurdles – given the self’s complicated nature. As one learns to ‘command oneself’ – to realize who they are beneath the surface, to navigate the inner world with clear-eyed awareness, and to consciously cultivate an authentic way of being – they are sure to encounter challenges, pitfalls, misconceptions, and pressures along the way.

### 1. Delusions about the Self

*We take refuge in pride,  
because we are afraid to  
tell the truth to ourselves.*

*Okakura Kakuzo*

Previously, we have discussed the thing called “ego” – the familiar identity construct based on accumulated experiences, roles, and beliefs. This everyday “me” is shaped by a confluence of factors, including:

- **Past conditioning:** The lessons, hurts, and triumphs of our past leave their imprint.
- **Societal “noise”:** The pervasive cultural norms, unspoken expectations, and prevailing values of the society we live in.
- **Desires and aversions:** Our deep-seated urges (to succeed, to be recognized, to feel secure, to be right, to avoid pain or discomfort), as well as personal biases, fears, and insecurities.
- etc.

At the end of the day, the ego is just a representation of one’s thoughts about oneself – rather than the entirety of being. And yet, far too often, we mistake it for our actual, living essence.

Have you ever heard the Buddhist analogy of the finger pointing to the moon? In this analogy, the Buddha likens himself and his teachings to a finger

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that guides people toward the “moon” – which is the truth of the world. In other words, his words are only an indicator of the direction to head for. The “moon” itself, vast and luminous in the night sky, is the actual destination, the reality being indicated.



How does it apply to our quest for self-understanding then?

In our life journey, our beliefs, thoughts, cherished memories, the roles we play (parent, professional, friend), defined personality traits (“I am an introvert,” “I am a kind person”), and the overarching stories we weave about our lives (“My difficult childhood shaped who I am to-

day,” “I am a doctor who helps people”) are all like that finger. They are valuable descriptions, concepts, labels, and narratives that point towards who we are, or highlight particular aspects of our rich experience.

However, there is a deeper, more immediate experience of being – a core awareness that witnesses all these thoughts and roles, a fundamental nature not dressed in concepts. It is the experiential reality of our selfhood, which, as we have explored previously, is typically more alive and less easily definable with any description.

The problem arises when we become so fixated on the “finger” – meticulously analyzing it, polishing its appearance, defending it vehemently, etc. – that we entirely miss the actual “moon”. It happens when we over-identify with our self descriptions, personal histories, and mental constructs – to the

## 3.1. CHALLENGES ON THE PATH

point that we completely shield our minds, close our hearts from others, and become disconnected from reality.

Now, it's crucial to reaffirm that our personal identity, the "sense of self," serves a necessary role. It acts as an "anchor" or "compass," helping us navigate the world's complexities, make decisions, form relationships, and maintain a sense of coherence in our daily lives. The problem isn't its existence.

Rather, it is when **this functional, conditioned, and impermanent construct becomes a rigid "chain"** – when we mistake it for the totality or unchangeable essence of who we are, preventing us from recognizing anything deeper, from growing beyond its current confines, or from connecting with ourselves and others more intimately.

*Example: If someone rigidly identifies as 'the always compe-*

*tent one who never makes mistakes' (their ego-construct), they are likely to avoid challenging tasks for fear of failure (stifling growth), struggle to admit when they need help (preventing self-recognition of their own limits and needs), or become defensive when receiving feedback.*

When we primarily identify with our constructed "sense of self", the path to fulfillment becomes significantly tougher due to:

- **Vulnerability to suffering**

Our inner peace becomes precariously dependent on the stability of impermanent roles, possessions, relationships, or beliefs. As soon as these change (as they always do), our sense of who we are feels threatened, leading to anxiety and pain.

- **A constant need for external validation**

The ego, being a construct, re-

## 3.1. CHALLENGES ON THE PATH

quires ongoing external reinforcements – praise, recognition, agreement – to maintain its story and feel secure. It is akin to someone who meticulously curates their social media presence, feeling a fleeting sense of worth with every ‘like’ or positive comment (which are not always indicators of online success). As soon as a post does not receive the desired attention, a sharp dip in self-esteem is likely to follow.

- **Rigidity & fear of change**

New experiences, different perspectives, or personal growth that might contradict the existing self-narrative are perceived as threats rather than opportunities, leading to resistance and stagnation. For instance, think about someone who has always identified as ‘a purely logical, no-nonsense person.’ They are likely to automatically dismiss or ridicule any experience that feels intuitive or emotional –

like a moment of unexpected artistic inspiration or a surge of empathy – because it threatens their established self-narrative, thereby closing themselves off from potentially enriching aspects of their being.

- **Inauthentic connections**

If we primarily relate to ourselves and others through our long established “masks,” we hinder the possibility of genuine intimacy and mutual understanding. Not only does it result in less fulfilling relationships, but it also strips us of input from others and presents a major obstacle to honest self-reflection.



## 3.1. CHALLENGES ON THE PATH

The journey of self-discovery, therefore, calls for us to cultivate the wisdom to distinguish between the “finger” (our roles, thoughts, ingrained stories, and concepts about ourselves) and the “moon” (the direct experience of our deeper nature, that core awareness that simply IS). We don’t need to discard our personal identity entirely; however, we need to hold it more lightly, to recognize it as a useful but limited tool, a current chapter in an unfolding story. It’s about defining ourselves from the inside-out rather than from the outside-in.

*We have the choice of two identities: the external mask which seems to be real... and the hidden, inner person who seems to us to be nothing, but who can give himself eternally to the truth in whom he subsists.*

*Thomas Merton*

### 2. Internal obstacles & psychological traps

Beyond the ego, the path of finding oneself is also complicated by a host of internal psychological obstacles and ingrained mental habits.

#### ◆ Self-deception

Often termed “bad faith” in existential philosophy, it refers to one’s frequently unconscious effort to sidestep the discomfort and inherent responsibility that come with authentic selfhood. We might act as if our self-identity is rigidly fixed or entirely determined by certain external factors, rather than acknowledging our active role in shaping it. This manifests when there are noticeable discrepancies between our stated beliefs or values and our actual behavior – perhaps through hypocrisy, persistent [excuse-making](#), or consistently presenting a persona that feels fundamentally un-

## 3.1. CHALLENGES ON THE PATH

true to our inner experience.

Why is this the case then?

Typically, such self-deception is driven by a **deep-seated desire to fit in and gain social approval**, an attempt to **avoid accountability** for difficult choices, a **potent fear of the unknown**, or simply a **craving for the illusion of stability** in an ever-changing world. Whatever the causes are, the consequences are significant: not only does it cultivate internal suffering (e.g. chronic anxiety, a gnawing sense of emptiness, or persistent guilt), but it can also inflict suffering on others, perhaps through the broken trust that arises from deception (like a partner who verbally commits to honesty but consistently acts otherwise) or through the perpetuation of unhealthy relationship dynamics (for instance, someone habitually playing the martyr to gain sympathy or control, all the while denying their own

genuine needs and agency).

### ◆ The weight of the past

Many of us unconsciously use previous experiences, particularly traumas or perceived failures, as ongoing justifications for our current limitations, unhappiness, or inaction. Or, we may let internalized negative imprints – critical messages received from family, society, or formative experiences – distort our self-perception (e.g. “I am bad at communicating & working with people”), even despite contradictory evidence. In doing so, we effectively permit the past to dictate our present and future identity.

The thing is, the past is the past. There is nothing we can do to change it. We only have control over the “here” and “now”. [Living in the past](#), therefore, does nothing good to us – aside, probably, from making us a “puppet” of circumstances. Not

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to mention, when we focus excessively on bad memories, our view of the world becomes shaded in grey, and ultimately, we identify ourselves as something less than we deserve to be.

Many people tend to think of the world and their life events as something without. However, the truth is that the mind plays a very crucial role in shaping existence.

*PHILOSOPHER: Once, a man I was counselling recalled an incident from his childhood in which a dog attacked him and bit his leg. Apparently, his mother had often told him, 'If you see a stray dog, stay completely still. Because if you run, it will chase you.' There used to be a lot of stray dogs roaming the streets, you see. So, one day he came across a stray dog on the side of the road. A friend who had been*

*walking with him ran away, but he obeyed his mother's instructions and stayed rooted to the spot. And the stray dog attacked him and bit his leg.*

*YOUTH: Are you saying that memory was a lie that he fabricated?*

*PHILOSOPHER: It was not a lie. It is probably true that he was bitten. There had to be a continuation to that episode, however. Through several sessions of counselling, the continuation of the story came back to him. While he was crouching down in pain after getting bitten by the dog, a man who happened to be riding by on a bicycle stopped, helped him get up and took him straight to the hospital.*

*In the early stage of counselling, his lifestyle, or*

## 3.1. CHALLENGES ON THE PATH

*worldview, had been that ‘the world is a perilous place, and people are my enemies’. To this man, the memory of having been bitten by a dog was an event signifying that this world is a place full of danger.*

*However, once he had begun, little by little, to be able to think, ‘The world is a safe place, and people are my comrades,’ episodes that supported that way of thinking started coming back to him.*

*Was one bitten by a dog? Or was one helped by another person? The reason Adlerian psychology is considered a ‘psychology of use’ is this aspect of ‘being able to choose one’s own life’.*

*The past does NOT decide ‘now’. It is your ‘NOW’ that*

*decides the past.*

*Ichiro Kishimi, ‘The Courage to Be Happy’*

As demonstrated in the story above, our current mindset and beliefs actively shape which aspects of our past we emphasize and how those memories contribute to our ongoing definition of self. If we are courageous enough to be in the “here” and “now” – to value what we LONG to become more than what we USED to be – our lives will turn to a new page!

### ◆ Fear & avoidance

Back in the day, I used to feel really uncomfortable whenever I looked at myself in mirrors or photos. This deep-seated feeling of insecurity, as I figure, has to do with the fear of confronting perceived flaws, especially when measured against idealized images projected by those around me.

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I believe that the same attitude – reluctance to truly see oneself – also applies when it comes to what lies beyond physical appearance.

- Many of us instinctively shy away from rigorous introspection due to a palpable fear of what we might find if we look too closely – disliked traits, unacknowledged vulnerabilities, or truths about our current state that feel too uncomfortable to face. As such, we keep the ‘mirror’ to our inner self covered.
- Similarly, a fear of judgment, ridicule, or misunderstanding makes us hesitant to share our most personal aspects with others – including our cherished beliefs, hidden struggles, unconventional dreams, or shames. As a result, we conceal vital parts of our self, not just from others, but sometimes even from

our own conscious awareness, creating an inner sense of isolation.

- A particularly significant barrier is the fear of confronting what Carl Jung called our “Shadow” – those aspects of our personality we’ve repressed, disowned, or hidden, often because we, or society, have labeled them as negative or unacceptable. Yet, true self-knowledge and integration necessitate courageously acknowledging and working with these shadow parts.

When these fears become pervasive, they contribute to a pattern of avoidance, where individuals may habitually perceive themselves as passive recipients of life’s difficulties. Instead of exploring their own complex role and inner workings, the focus shifts to blaming external factors – other people, ‘bad luck,’ or societal structures – for

## 3.1. CHALLENGES ON THE PATH

their unhappiness. This effectively denies personal agency and the power to connect with and transform the self within.



### ◆ The maze of overthinking

Our own minds, in their eagerness to gain knowledge & insights, may sometimes lead us into the trap of excessive rumination and self-analysis. Instead of leading to clarity, they churn up more anxiety, fuel indecision, and create a hyper-focus on perceived flaws or inconsistencies. We get caught in an endless loop of thinking about the self, rather than directly experiencing our being or taking constructive, life affirming actions.

This mental overdrive fuels unhelpful self-judgment and the habit of constantly comparing ourselves to others – a tendency that, as we’ve previously noted, breeds inadequacy or an equally distorting sense of artificial superiority.

### 3. External pressures & societal influences

*We are like chameleons, we take our hue and the color of our moral character, from those who are around us.*

*John Locke*

Identity formation doesn’t happen in a void. Beyond the above mentioned inner landscapes, our sense of self is also shaped by the external world – our intricate web of relationships, the communities we are part of, the broader culture we inhabit, and the often unspoken societal expectations that surround us.

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The desire for connection, approval, and a sense of belonging is a fundamental human need. It is essential for one's well-being, and is deeply linked to our innate "community feeling". In its healthy expressions, it fosters empathy, cooperation, and the formation of supportive, life-affirming relationships.

However, the problem arises when this drive becomes entangled with an overwhelming fear of rejection or an intense pressure to "fit in". When this happens, we might find ourselves:

- Constantly seeking validation from others as the measure of our worth.
- Suppressing our thoughts, feelings, or perspectives if we sense they deviate from group norms or might invite disapproval.
- Making significant life choices based primarily on pleasing others or gaining acceptance.

- Conforming to and adopting the prevailing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the collective purely due to societal pressure.

It's important to distinguish genuine social harmony – which arises from shared, consciously chosen values, mutual respect, authentic connection – from unthinking "herd mentality." The latter stems from a fear of standing out, an unwillingness to engage in independent critical thought (a form of intellectual laziness) or a passive acceptance of the status quo, rather than a conscious alignment with what feels true.

I assume that you are already familiar with the classic tale of "[The Emperor's New Clothes](#)". It is about an emperor obsessed with fine clothing. Two cunning weavers (who are actually con artists) claim they can create the most magnificent outfit for him – one that is invisible to

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anyone who is stupid or incompetent. Eager to show off his intelligence and sophistication, the emperor commissions them to make the garment. However, since there is no actual fabric, the emperor and his court pretend they can see the magical clothes rather than admit their supposed ignorance.

Eventually, the emperor parades through the city in his non-existent outfit. Everyone in the crowd hesitates to speak up – fearing to appear foolish or out of step with the supposed consensus. Only an innocent child, not yet conditioned by such fear, speaks the truth out loud:

*He hasn't got anything on!*



Though fictional, the story serves as a vivid illustration of how societal pressure, and the fear of its repercussions, can silence individual observation and critical thought – both of which are key components of a robust identity.

From the earliest years, we are immersed in a sea of societal messages, cultural narratives, and stereotypes related to aspects like gender roles, ethnicity, social class, professional paths, age-related expectations, and perceived abilities. These are transmitted subtly through family upbringing, educational systems, media portrayals, and the general social discourse around us.

Long before we even begin to consciously question who we are or who we might aspire to become, these “imprinted” expectations and categorizations have operated like invisible scripts, shaping our self per-

## 3.1. CHALLENGES ON THE PATH

ception and limiting our sense of possibility. They dictate what feels “normal” or “appropriate” for someone “like us,” sometimes steering us away from paths that might feel more resonating as we grow up.

The very way we conceptualize “self-identity” is significantly molded by the broader cultural context. For instance, Western cultures tend to promote an independent self-construct, emphasizing personal autonomy, uniqueness, and individual achievement. Conversely, Eastern cultures (and many collectivist societies worldwide) often cultivate an interdependent view; accordingly, identity is defined by one’s relationships, social roles, contribution to group harmony, and the fulfillment of mutual obligations.

It’s vital to approach these distinctions with nuance, avoiding simplistic binaries of “this way is right, that way is wrong.”

What’s important is not to rigidly label one approach as inherently superior, but to **become aware of our primary cultural conditioning** – and then to pick which values/ perspectives we wish to integrate into our understanding of self, rather than passively accepting any single script as the absolute truth.

In the search for identity, it’s natural and immensely helpful to look up to role models, mentors, teachers, or influential figures – “gurus” in the broadest sense – so as to benefit from their wisdom, perspectives, and guidance. However, we need to be careful not to let healthy admiration shift into uncritical idolization or blind imitation. Otherwise, we will lose sight of the path and become a replica of someone else.

## 4. Emerging challenges in the digital age

The rapidly evolving digital

## 3.1. CHALLENGES ON THE PATH

landscape of the 21st century has introduced [a new array of problems](#), namely:

- **Distorted self-perception**

Social media platforms, now deeply woven into the fabric of daily life, become stages for showcasing idealized, highly curated versions of oneself. Constant exposure to these polished images inadvertently fuels a relentless cycle of social comparison; as a result, many become victims of persistent feelings of inadequacy, envy, and a skewed perception of both others' lives and the perceived shortcomings of their own. Authenticity is sacrificed for online approval, the maintenance of a carefully crafted digital persona, and the desire to appear 'in the know'.

- **Erosion of original thought**

With the recent advances in in-

formation technology, more and more people are becoming reliant on AI tools to do their work – from generating text, creating art, finding solutions, to even mediating emotional responses. While these tools are definitely helpful (I myself wouldn't recommend against using them), we should be mindful that there is the risk of diminishing the connection to one's unique voice, innate creative impulses, and capacity for independent critical thinking – especially if one is too dependent on them.

- **Existential shifts in the workforce**

The expanding capabilities of AI have also been giving rise to concerns about job displacement. Given that [work and professional roles form a significant pillar of personal identity](#) for many (as psychology has long recognized), the recent technological shift can trigger

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far-reaching existential uncertainty. It forces individuals, and indeed societies, to re-evaluate traditional concepts of purpose, contribution, and self-worth, looking beyond employment as a primary definer of identity.

- **Technological FOMO**

The societal buzz and peer pressure to adopt every new AI tool or integrate AI deeply into all facets of life – without thorough consideration of genuine needs, ethical implications, or the potential impact on personal autonomy and intrinsic human capacities – lead to lives increasingly driven by technological trends rather than by human values and consciously chosen self-development.

- **Information overload & algorithmic curation**

The sheer, unceasing volume of information, opinions, and narratives available in the digital

age makes it increasingly difficult to find the quiet mental spaces necessary for deep, uninterrupted reflection. Not to mention, algorithmic filter bubbles and echo chambers – prevalent on social media, news feeds, and search engines – can inadvertently reinforce one's existing biases and severely limit exposure to diverse perspectives, leading to a more rigid, insular, and less examined sense of self.

Navigating these challenges requires a commitment to conscious engagement. This means fostering robust critical thinking about the technologies we use, mindfully curating our digital environments to support our well-being (rather than detract from it), prioritizing human connection, and consciously carving out spaces for undistracted self-reflection, away from the constant online noises.

## 3.2. QUALITIES FOR SELF-REALIZATION

- **Courage**

The journey into your inner world demands a particular kind of valor – to honestly face yourself (including your hidden fears, ingrained self-deceptions, and uncomfortable truths). It’s the courage to be vulnerable, acknowledging imperfections and uncertainties without a protective facade.

At the same time, it also means daring to be yourself, even if that involves deviating from societal expectations or the comfort of familiar norms, and stepping into the unknown as your identity evolves.

*To know who you are without any delusions or sympathy is a moment of revelation that no one experiences unscathed. Some have been driven to madness by that stark reality. Most try to forget it. But as much as the name will give others*

*power, so you may gain power over yourself, if the truth doesn’t break you.*

*Christopher Paolini,  
‘Eragon’*

- **Self-truthfulness**

This involves a commitment to seeing yourself without the distorting filters of ego-defense, pride, wishful thinking, or preconceived notions about who you ought to be. It requires a willingness to meet your internal inconsistencies, moments of inauthenticity, and the sometimes unsettling gap between your aspirations and your actual daily experience.

- **Humility**

True self-discovery flourishes when you recognize that your current understanding of yourself is inherently incomplete, a work always in progress, and quite possibly contains flawed

## 3.2. QUALITIES FOR SELF-REALIZATION

perceptions or blind spots. Such an attitude fosters openness to being wrong about yourself and readiness to learn from all experiences – especially mistakes and failures – viewing them as vital lessons rather than indictments of your worth.

*Pride makes us artificial;  
humility makes us real.*

*Thomas Merton*



- **Introspection**

This is the cultivated capacity to consistently turn your attention inward, to observe your thoughts, [emotions](#), motivations, and behavioral patterns without immediate judgment or

over-identification. It's about becoming a curious and compassionate witness to your inner life, developing the ability to distinguish between the authentic impulses of a deeper self and the conditioned responses/ limiting narratives of your daily “sense of self”/ ego.

- **Openness & receptivity**

A genuine [willingness to consider new perspectives](#), encounter different experiences, and integrate fresh insights – even if they challenge the long-held beliefs about yourself or the world – is vital for growth. Flexibility in the mind and heart allows you to adapt, evolve, and learn, rather than rigidly resisting change, discomfort, or unfamiliar ideas.

- **Critical thinking**

As you open yourself to new experiences, the ability to discern wisely and think critically be-

## 3.2. QUALITIES FOR SELF-REALIZATION

comes essential. This involves carefully evaluating both your internal narratives (your habitual self-talk, ingrained beliefs, old stories) and the myriad external influences (societal messages, digital noise, others' opinions and projections). It's about sifting through these influences to discover what truly resonates with you.

- **Patience & perseverance**

Self-realization is a lifelong process; it is not a one-time event, a quick fix, or a final destination to be definitively “achieved.” Everyone's journey unfolds in its own time, often with cycles of insight, integration, and even periods of quiet or confusion. As such, resilience is necessary to continue one's exploration.

- **Willingness to engage & take responsibility**

Realizing your self-identity demands an active commitment –

i.e. proactively engaging in self-exploration, consistent reflection, and conscious decision-making. In other words, one needs to accept responsibility for their choices and actions, regardless of the consequences.

- **Self-compassion**

Perhaps one of the most crucial qualities, nurturing all others, is self-compassion – i.e. treating yourself with consistent kindness and forgiveness. It's about acknowledging your shared humanity and inherent imperfections without resorting to harsh self-criticism or debilitating shame, especially when facing your “shadow” aspects, past regrets, or the inherent difficulties of change.

# THE ALCHEMIST'S TOOLKIT



**You are what you do, not  
what you say you'll do.**

Carl Jung

## 4. 11 PRACTICES FOR CRAFTING AN AUTHENTIC SELF

### 1. Let go of all established notions & attachments

*Identity cannot be found or fabricated but emerges from within when one has the courage to let go.*

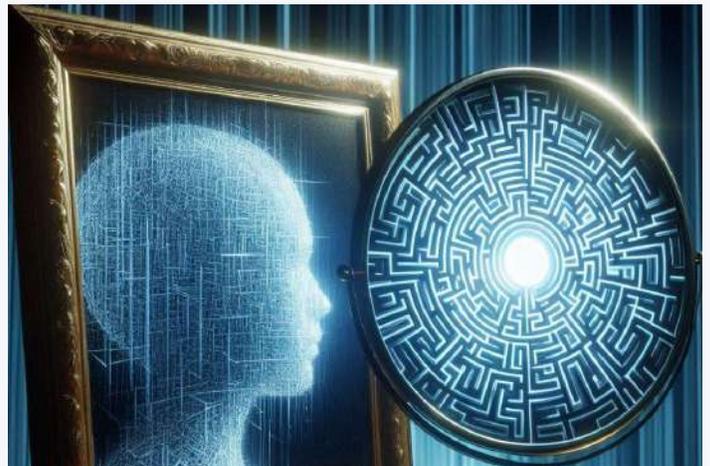
*Doug Cooper*

Back in the day, Nietzsche made a statement that, at first glance, might seem absurd (but not if we think about it):

*To become what one is, one must not have the faintest idea what one is.*

The idea is: before we can truly discover or define our self identity, we must first have the courage to release the grip on who we think we are, or who we have been conditioned to believe we must be. To let go of fixed, premature conclusions about ourselves – those limiting boxes of “I am this” or “I am that”. Rather than a descent in-

to nihilistic emptiness, “letting go” in this context involves an active, conscious, and ongoing process – when we intentionally release self-definitions that no longer serve our growth, as well as unhealthy attachments to particular self-images, past narratives, or limiting beliefs.



In his book *Falling Upward*, author Richard Rohr argues that one’s life journey is comprised of two halves. The first one, he notes, is frequently dedicated to building our “container” – establishing our ego-identity, defining our roles, achieving external markers of success, and creating a sense of order and security in the world. It is a natural and necessary stage of

## 4. 11 PRACTICES FOR CRAFTING AN AUTHENTIC SELF

development, where we form a functional self to navigate societal expectations and personal responsibilities.

However, the identity established in this phase is typically built upon societal scripts, external validations, and the strivings of the ego. Life, in its wisdom, inevitably brings what Rohr calls “necessary falls” – disappointments, failures, losses, personal crises, or moments where our carefully constructed world feels like it’s crumbling.

These experiences, however painful, are not just setbacks. They are crucial initiations into the second half of life – which is characterized, above all, by **letting go**: letting go of the ego’s tight grip on control, releasing the need for constant external validation, and loosening our attachment to the carefully constructed first-half persona. It involves courageously embracing vulnerability, accepting our

imperfections, and through this surrender, discovering a more authentic Self that lies beyond the initial “container.”

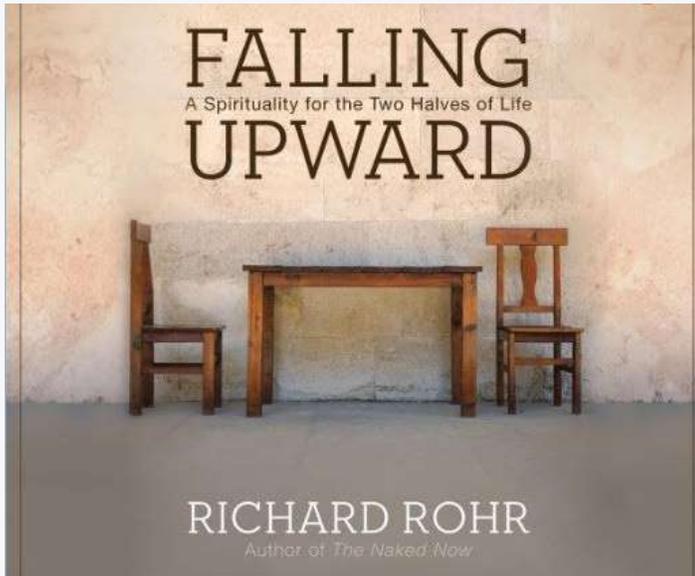
It’s a shift from defining ourselves by “**what I do**” or “**what I have**” to “**who I am**” at a more essential, intrinsic level.

*Examples:*

- A high-achiever whose entire identity was built around their career faces a sudden job loss. The initial devastation forces them to stop thinking of “success” as their primary definer, and instead explore deeper values, previously ignored passions, or a sense of purpose not tied to external accolades.
- Another person was deeply enmeshed in a particular relationship. The pain of a separation, while a “fall,” necessitates letting go of their “partner” role, lead-

## 4. 11 PRACTICES FOR CRAFTING AN AUTHENTIC SELF

ing to a rediscovery of their individual self and inner resources.



Unfortunately, many resist these transformative “falls,” clinging desperately to their familiar first-half identities and thus missing the chance to embrace deeper authenticity, spiritual maturity, and a more expansive view of self.

***The human ego prefers anything, just about anything, to falling, or changing, or dying. The ego is that part of you that loves the status quo – even when it’s not working. It attach-***

***es to past and present and fears the future.***

*Richard Rohr*

On the quest for the truth – including the truth of our own being, the labels we (or other people) attach to ourselves – e.g. “I am anxious,” “I am an executive,” “I am spiritual,” “I am a failure” – can become conceptual filters that prevent us from directly experiencing the fluid, multifaceted reality of the self. Letting go of these fixed notions, or at least holding them much more lightly, creates the inner space needed to encounter ourselves afresh, beyond the confines of preconceived concepts and worn-out stories.

Instead of trying to immediately define, categorize, fix, or resolve our inner complexities, cultivating an open, accepting awareness is crucial for a deeper, more organic understanding of ourselves to emerge.

## 4. 11 PRACTICES FOR CRAFTING AN AUTHENTIC SELF

***Do you know that even when you look at a tree and say, ‘That is an oak tree’, or ‘that is a banyan tree’, the naming of the tree, which is botanical knowledge, has so conditioned your mind that the word comes between you and actually seeing the tree? To come in contact with the tree you have to put your hand on it and the word will not help you to touch it.***

***If you would listen in the sense of being aware of your conflicts and contradictions without forcing them into any particular pattern of thought, perhaps they might altogether cease.***

*Jiddu Krishnamurti*

As Carl Jung pointed out long ago, letting go is part of the [individuation process](#) – that jour-

ney in which one learns to release the grip of the Persona (i.e. attachment to the social masks we wear for acceptance & conformity), cease to deny or repress their disowned aspects (the Shadow), relinquish egocentrism (i.e. the ego’s belief that it is the sole captain of our ship, the entirety of our being), and differentiate from unconscious collective influence. According to him, even our most cherished internal “convictions” about who we are need to be subjected to honest reevaluation – so that we may move towards a psychologically whole self.

***One cannot individuate as long as one is playing a role to oneself; the convictions one has about oneself are the most subtle form of persona and the most subtle obstacle against any true individuation.***

*Carl Jung*

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It is vital to carve out time for quiet contemplation, so that one may become aware of and gradually loosen the grip of ego-attachments. At the same time, insights may also come from [unexpected, sometimes painful, interactions with the world and others](#).

When someone's words/ actions deeply hurt or trigger us, it's frequently because they've struck a chord with an unhealed insecurity, a rigid belief we hold about ourselves, or a particularly sensitive part of our ego-identity. For instance, a casual remark about your organizational skills might unleash a surprisingly strong defensive

reaction if it touches upon a hidden fear of not being 'good enough' or an idealized self image as 'perfectly competent'.

In such instances, we need to undergo a courageous shift by:

- Observing our ego's defensive reaction (shame, anger, withdrawal) **without immediately acting** on it or becoming completely identified with it.
- Ask ourselves: Does this trigger point to an "established notion" about myself that needs re-examining? Is this an old wound, a sensitive spot from my past that needs healing and release? (e..g: "Is my intense reaction to this feedback rooted in an old belief that I must always be the expert to be valued? Or does this person's dismissive tone echo past experiences of being unheard, a sensitivity that still needs gentle

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- acknowledgement?”)
- Realizing that these moments, as difficult as they are, can act as inadvertent “teachers.” They reflect back to us the parts of our constructed self that are fragile, overly defended, or in need of release. By understanding that “this pain is an indicator, not my ultimate truth”, we begin to disarm its power and create inner space for a more resilient, whole self to emerge.

### 2. Look beyond the superficial

***What’s in a name? That  
which we call a rose  
By any other name would  
smell as sweet.***

***William Shakespeare,  
‘Romeo and Juliet’***

The words above are spoken by Juliet in Act 2, Scene 2 – often called the “balcony scene”. In this instance, Juliet laments

that Romeo, whom she is in love with, belongs to the house of Montague, her family’s sworn enemy. She wonders why his family name – a mere label, a societal marker – should be a barrier to their love when his qualities, the essence of who he is, are what truly matter to her.



If we really think about Juliet’s question, we should realize that it applies to our journey of self-discovery too.

Humanity’s tendency is to cate-

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gorize everything, including each other and ourselves, as a way to make sense of a complex world. Think of how people define themselves – or are defined – solely by “I am a CEO,” “I am an introvert,” “I am a victim of circumstance,” or “I am a [nationality/political affiliation].”

While labels (like job titles, personality types, social roles, or even diagnoses) are indeed useful for communication or initial understanding, they can swiftly become rigid boxes if we cling to them and refuse to acknowledge their dynamic nature. As soon as they are challenged or need to evolve (as life often demands), we are likely to succumb to a feeling of being lost, threatened, or out of place.

After all, our sense of self is a continual interplay between various factors, many of which can be quite contradictory to each other. For instance, I used to be perceived as primarily

‘emotional’ by my mother and some teachers during my early upbringing; this perception was further reinforced by my feeling a pull towards social science subjects (often stereotyped as “softer”) as well as towards humanistic values.

And yet, as I grew up, many people I encountered described me as ‘analytical’ instead. Things became even more confusing when I realized that though I – to a certain extent – felt comfortable learning things like arts and writing, I tended to approach them with a logical, almost scientific mindset. Pretty ironic, right?

“What kind of person am I?” I could not help but question myself.

Eventually, I believe I have found an answer to this seemingly absurd situation as soon as I realized my areas of interest – namely linguistics and philos-

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ophy. Both of these fields are highly analytical in nature, and yet, they also grapple with the human condition (which I am strongly passionate about).

In other words, I am “an analytical thinker with deep empathy, drawn to understanding human complexities”.



Reflecting on my own journey so far has allowed me to come to terms with a fundamental truth: **it does no good to force oneself into one single definitive label.** Confusion often arises from trying to fit into one predefined box, rather than appreciating the unique, and sometimes paradoxical, blend that constitutes one’s being.

Far too often, societal biases create arbitrary hierarchies between different talents or interests (like the stereotype that ‘science subjects are intellectually superior to social sciences,’ or that the latter ‘only require memorization skills to perform well’). Internalizing such superficial judgments will distort your self-worth if your passions lie in an area that society happens to devalue.

As such, we need to look beyond simplistic categories and embrace a more nuanced, multifaceted worldview. Only then may we learn to honor people’s true inclinations (including ours as well) and recognize the diverse forms of intelligence, passion, and contribution that make up the spectrum of human identity.

***What labels me, negates me.***

*Soren Kierkegaard*

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*How to look beyond the superficial:*

- Cultivate the habit of revisiting previous experiences and questioning all assumptions/ expectations – both those imposed upon us by others and those we, many times unconsciously, impose upon ourselves.
- Think about whether a popular trend truly aligns with our needs and world-views – whether our desire to heed it stems simply from the need for validation or not.
- Make an effort to look past someone’s job title, social status, or outward appearance to connect with their shared humanity.
- Practice looking beyond social stereotypes and dogmas, especially if attachments to them cause suffering or require us to compromise virtues such as compassion.

Easier said than done. Perhaps, because our human inclination is to treasure the components of our identity – especially the more communal, fundamental ones like spiritual/ philosophical orientation. This attachment is particularly strong when it comes to deeply ingrained frameworks like religion.

Speaking of which, I remember once coming across a question like this:

***What is God’s religion?***

As absurd as it may seem, I can not help but wonder: how come may an omnipotent force like God be restricted by a thing called ‘religion’? How can one confine an ultimate, universal concept within exclusive human made labels?

At the end of the day, the English term ‘religion’ is believed to have originated from ‘religare’ – which is about re-connection.

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In light of this, religious traditions are like the “finger pointing to the moon” – they are pathways, indicators towards a deeper truth, a more profound connection, or a more ethical way of living. They are NOT the truth itself.

If we become fixated on the label of our path – ‘Christian,’ ‘Muslim,’ ‘Buddhist,’ ‘Atheist,’ ‘Spiritual But Not Religious’ – and use that label to create rigid divisions, claims of exclusive truth, or a sense of superiority, we risk missing the underlying universal principles – i.e. values like love, empathy, integrity, and the shared human experience of conscience, which are not limited to any specific tradition at all.

Even young children, before being formally introduced to specific religious or philosophical labels, are known to exhibit an innate capacity for compassion and a natural sense of wonder

about existence.

*People at birth are naturally good.*

*Mencius*

As such, on the quest for identity, we should aim to look beyond the superficial adherence to ANY doctrine (religious or otherwise) and instead cultivate a **personal, intelligent, and deeply felt engagement** with what gives our individual life meaning and purpose.

It is about being an **active seeker**, practicing honest reflection, adopting critical thinking, and prioritizing the ‘Heart’ – one’s innermost knowing (or “*心*”, as it is referred to in East Asian languages) – in every decision.

While we can participate in traditions, social groups, or professional roles, we should still be aware of the danger of rigid adherence to their superficial as-

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pects. Clinging too tightly to any label without looking deeper, without questioning, without allowing for personal interpretation, will only lead to self-sabotaging behaviors, distance us from others, and deny us the chance to embrace the evolving Self within.

***When I speak of a religion of one's own, I'm not talking about a selfish, ego-centered, loosely patched together spiritual concoction. I'm recommending a courageous, deep-seated, fate-driven, informed, and intelligent life that has sublime and transcendent dimension. It can be shared in a community. It can be accomplished inside or outside a traditional religious organization. It is suitable for pious members of a religious group and for agnostics and atheists.***

***To be religious even in a***

***personal way, you have to wake up and find your own portals to wonder and transcendence.***

*Thomas Moore*

### 3. Clarify core values (with flexibility)

In Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* novel, the main character – Piscine Molitor Patel – is burdened by his own name, which is often mispronounced in an intentional way by his friends as “pissing”. To escape being ridiculed and bullied, he consciously chooses to rename himself “Pi” based on the mathematical constant  $\pi$ . Though his act is, in part, a practical solution to a social discomfort, the name “Pi” ( $\pi$ ) itself carries a deeper, more metaphorical connotation (i.e. irrational, infinite, and non-repeating) – which lays the foundation for Pi's journey of self-exploration and spiritual maturity later.

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Just as Pi claimed a name that resonated with him (and later set the precedent for his whole story), we are also called to discover a “true name” that defines the “essence” of our identity. To clarify our core values – the principles that represent what is genuinely energizing to us (distinct from external expectations or inherited beliefs) and give our life a distinct meaning and direction.

Now, how about a moment of intimacy – as I share with you the idea behind my own name?

My original name in my mother tongue is **Dang Khoa (登科)**. Historically, in ancient East Asian cultures, “Dang Khoa” referred to the act of passing the im-

perial examinations; in other words, it signifies academic success, worldly achievement, and an aspiration for high position and recognition.

To be honest, my mother gave me that name mostly because she found its sound appealing, without knowing anything about its historical weight. As I grew (and found out what “Dang Khoa” means), I sometimes felt a slight discomfort with it, partly due to what I perceived as its somewhat ‘materialistic’ or externally-focused connotation.

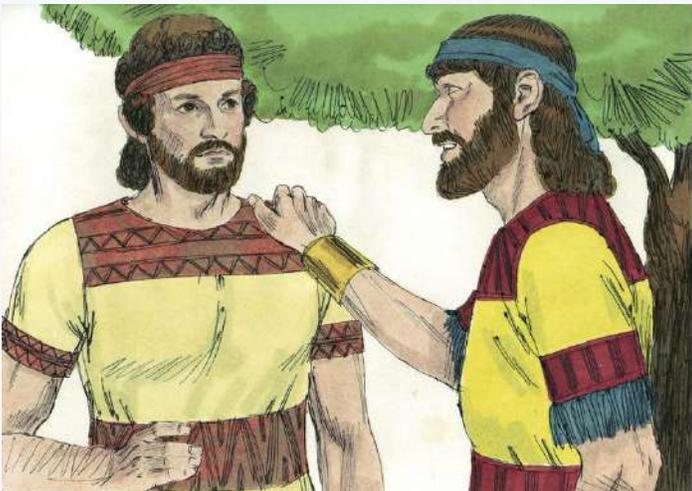
Perhaps it was because of a feeling rooted in my upbringing – a deep-seated belief that true wealth and worth come from within, from character and contribution rather than status.

Later in life, I picked the English name ‘Jonathan’ – this choice was inspired mainly by [the Biblical character of the same](#)

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name (though some other literary figures played a part too). To me, the name is a representation of the values I aspire to (though I have to admit I often struggle in embodying them) – namely **selfless friendship, a sense of chivalry and honor, courage in the face of adversity, loyalty, a spirit of service, integrity, benevolence, goodwill, kindness, inner strength, and endurance.**

To me, ‘Jonathan’ is more like an IDENTITY rather than a convenient English name for interacting with a global audience. An identity that I am genuinely happy with (at least for this chapter of my life).



To be fair, my original name, ‘Dang Khoa,’ still holds meaning, especially if one views it more philosophically as ‘**to pass the test**’. To ‘**pass life’s tests with wisdom and diligence**’ – rather than through a purely literal, historical lens focused on external success.

Even as I embrace the identity ‘Jonathan’, I still feel that it’s important to learn to accept and integrate the name my mother gave me, with the love it represented.

As for the letter ‘M.’ in my chosen English name (Jonathan M. Pham) – it stands for **Maximilian**; hence, my full English name is **Jonathan Maximilian Pham**.

“Maximilian who?” some might wonder.

For now, I prefer not to tell you specifically what it means – yet.



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However, if you have a look back at the previously published content on this blog, I suppose you should be able to find the answer – somewhere, in some article. And you should come to understand what the middle name Maximilian is about, what kind of core values it represents for me.



How about yours? What is your ‘true name’? What are your core values?

For those who have not yet thought about it, here are a few ways to begin the exploration:

- **The Unconstrained Dream Exercise**

Take some quiet time to ponder

your deepest dreams with a truly open mind, setting aside, just for a moment, any judgments about feasibility or what others might think. Ask yourself:

“If money weren’t a factor, if other people’s opinions held no sway, and if geography and logistics were no object – what would I truly love to do with my time and energy? What would my most [fulfilling life](#) look and feel like?”

Just let your mind play freely in this open space, even if the “how” of achieving such a life seems unclear right now. As you become engaged in the process, you may realize underlying values like freedom, creativity, connection, service, learning, adventure, or peace that are longing for greater expression.

- **Mining your “Golden Moments”**

Reflect on your past experien-

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ces. Think about moments, even fleeting ones, when you felt genuinely happy, deeply fulfilled, authentically alive, or truly “yourself.”

What were you doing? Who were you with, if anyone?

What qualities were you embodying or expressing?

These memories often act as “breadcrumbs,” leading you back to your core values. Were you learning something new (value: growth, knowledge)? Were you deeply connected with someone (value: love, relationship)? Were you making a difference (value: contribution, service)? Were you facing a challenge with courage (value: bravery)?

Write these moments down, study them, and look for the recurring themes – they point to what truly nourishes your spirit.

- **Emotional Resonance Test**

Pay close attention to what truly moves you in daily life. What topics, activities, principles, or stories evoke a strong emotional response within you – be it a surge of joy, a passionate engagement, a sense of righteous indignation, deep compassion, or a feeling of peace and rightness?

This inner emotional “ping,” this resonance, often signals that a core value has been touched or activated.

For instance, someone might feel a genuine uplift and a burst of energy when discussing or participating in efforts towards environmental sustainability, revealing a core value for stewardship or a connection to nature. Conversely, they might feel indifferent, or even a subtle resistance, to conversations focused purely on corporate profit margins or social status if

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those don't align with their guiding principles.

- **Value-mapping tools**

Beyond personal and intuitive reflection, more visual, structured tools may also help articulate your inner landscapes with greater clarity – examples include the [Personal Identity Wheel](#) (and similar audit exercises).

These tools typically present a list of common values (like honesty, creativity, security, compassion, etc.) and ask you to rank them in order of personal importance. Or, some might prompt you to consider various life domains (career, relationships, personal growth, community, health, spirituality) and identify the qualities that are most essential for you to honor in each of these areas. Based on them, you may identify recurring patterns, clarify your priorities, and also see where your current lived actions align (or perhaps misalign) with them.



It's worth noting that once you have identified a set of resonating core values, it's tempting to treat them as immutable laws, etched in stone. However, a crucial aspect of cultivating a healthy identity is to **hold these values with flexibility**.

Why is flexibility so important?

Life circumstances change, we gain new experiences, our wisdom deepens. A quality that seemed paramount in one phase of life might shift in priority, or find new and different ways of expression, in another. Our very understanding of what a value means in practice can also mature and become more nuanced over time.

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Imagine someone whose core value is ‘**strength**,’ which they initially interpreted solely as ‘**never showing vulnerability or needing help.**’ Hence, they have trouble when it comes to seeking support during difficult times, forming trusting interdependent relationships, and learning from moments of perceived weakness. As they grow and gain more life experience, they eventually come to realize that true strength actually includes the courage to be vulnerable, to [ask for help](#), and to connect authentically.

Your core values, therefore, are best seen as a **compass**, providing guidance and orientation for every decision and action. They are not meant to be a rigid cage that prevents you from adapting to new realities or makes you judgmental of yourself and others when life calls for a nuanced approach.

Sometimes, life calls for a de-

tour, a re-evaluation, or a new path; your values-compass will help you navigate these shifts with integrity, even if the terrain looks different from what you initially expected.

It’s about striving for internal alignment with what feels most life-affirming, not about dogmatic adherence to an unchanging rulebook.

Ultimately, you’ll know your values are yours and are serving your growth when living in accordance with them brings a deep sense of integrity, purpose, and an intuitive ‘yes’ from within, a feeling of rightness that resonates through your being. In other words, “**you know it when you see it**”.

### 4. “Purify” yourself regularly

*Perhaps the pollution of water is nothing more than the pollution of the human soul. Modern society has*

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*gone as far as we can go.*

Masaru Emoto, ['The Secret Life of Water'](#)

Just as a garden needs regular tending to flourish, our inner landscape requires ongoing care to maintain its clarity. This is where the practice of regular “self-purification” – or perhaps, more accurately, **inner clearing** – becomes essential.

In Hayao Miyazaki’s animated film *Spirited Away*, there is a striking scene in which a seemingly repulsive “Stink Spirit” (‘Okusaresama’ in Japanese) enters the spirit world’s bathhouse. He initially appears as a massive, foul-smelling sludge-like entity, causing distress due to his unbearable stench. Chihiro, the protagonist, is assigned to assist him. She then discovers that the Stink Spirit is actually a polluted River Spirit burdened by human waste and debris. After a thorough cleansing,

he is eventually restored to his original glory.



Think about it. Isn’t it that we, to a certain extent, are just the same as the River Spirit in the story above? We are also “polluted”, albeit in a metaphorical sense, due to:

- External pressures and societal expectations.
- Negative thought patterns and limiting beliefs.
- Unexamined societal conditioning and internalized judgments.
- The sheer “noise” of daily existence, including information overload.
- The relentless pursuit of material success.

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- Emotional baggage from past experiences.
- The chronic stress of constant striving.

All these “pollutants,” like the debris on the River Spirit, play a role in obscuring our nature. They cause a disconnect from our core values, a feeling of inner confusion, a sense of being weighed down/ unable to access our full vitality. Hence, our “original intention”/ “beginner’s mind” (初心/ shoshin), characterized by openness, eagerness, a lack of preconceptions, is blocked out.

To maintain a vibrant, responsive, and authentic self-identity, we need to cultivate practices for regular inner clearing and decluttering – just as we attend to our physical hygiene.

- **Creating a personal “sanctuary”**

In today’s fast-paced world, it is

vital that we regularly step away from the usual demands, distractions, and stimuli of life – and retreat to a “sanctuary” (which doesn’t need to be a remote hermitage). Find a quiet corner in your home, get out for a regular walk in nature, or just simply carve out short, intentional periods of inner quiet amidst a busy day.

The idea is to create a dedicated space and time free from external inputs, allowing the “muddy waters” of the mind to settle and clarity to emerge. While the accompanying solitude may seem unsettling to certain people – at certain times, it offers an opportunity to disengage from performing social roles and to hear one’s own inner voice more distinctly.

*If you stay in the hurly-burly of this world, you’ll run around in circles without ever finding your way. You’ll become the kind of*

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*person who just stamps  
and screams.*

*Takashi Nagai*

- **Emotional decluttering**

Our minds and hearts are capable of accumulating clutter just like our physical spaces. Regular decluttering is key, and it is achievable via practices such as journaling, meditation, and reflection. Try writing down your thoughts, feelings, and experiences – without censorship – and processing them. Once you identify recurring negative patterns or limiting beliefs (e.g., “I am not capable enough to pursue X,” “I always mess up Y relationship”), take some time to consciously re-evaluate, re-frame, or release them. Just make sure not to be too obsessed with finding an immediate, forced solution.

- **Participating in [spiritual activities](#)**

[According to researcher Patrick McNamara](#), certain religious experiences can help in “**decentering**” the self – aka, shifting one’s primary locus of identity away from a narrow, self absorbed ego towards a more “integral self”, one that feels more connected to a larger whole, is more aligned with deeper values, and is less buffeted by anxieties and demands. Spiritual practices – be it prayer, specific contemplative traditions from various faiths, or connecting with wisdom literature – allow one to experience something grander than their everyday ego (like awe, deep compassion, or a sense of the sacred), which makes the ego’s relative importance shrink, allowing for a more objective, expansive, and less reactive self-view.

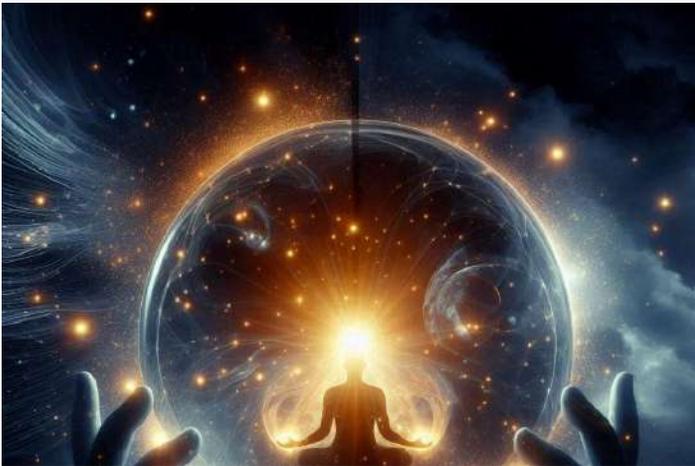
One thing I would like to note here is that the true benefit of such activities lies in **genuine inner stillness and sincere intention** – not merely in habitual

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ritual, performative spirituality (done to enhance the ego or gain social approval), or rigid adherence to ideologies. The aim is to quiet the “noise” so that inner wisdom may emerge.

*In the stillness of the heart,  
the truth speaks most  
clearly.*

*Rumi*



- **Reprogramming with mindful affirmations (behavior-focused)**

Affirmations provide an amazing tool for this self-cleaning process, especially when they are chosen consciously, resonate deeply, and focus on **desir-**

**ed behaviors or states of being**, rather than on rigid, fixed identity statements. For example, instead of the fixed, negative identity label “*I am disorganized,*” you might try a behavioral affirmation like, “*I am consistently developing and practicing effective organizational systems.*” Or, instead of “*I am confident*” (which might feel untrue and thus create inner conflict if you’re not feeling it), try, “*I am practicing courage by taking small steps outside my comfort zone each day.*”

- **Grounding techniques**

Simple practices like focused deep breathing (noticing the inflow and outflow), mindfully engaging your senses (truly noticing the sights, sounds, smells around you), taking a short walk in nature, or even just feeling your feet firmly on the ground can interrupt cycles of overthinking and restore a sense of calm presence.

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- **Cultivating “purifying” lifestyle habits**

Beyond techniques, regular “self-clearing” also involves consciously adopting habits that nourish clarity and well-being, while mindfully minimizing those that tend to “pollute” our inner state. This includes practices like mindful media consumption (being selective about the information and entertainment you absorb, reducing exposure to negativity or comparison triggers), nourishing your body with healthy food, engaging in physical activity that helps clear the mind as well as the body, spending quality time with genuinely supportive and uplifting people, pursuing creative outlets that allow for authentic expression, and practicing gratitude to shift the focus towards what is good and present.

*Your beliefs become your thoughts,*

*Your thoughts become your words,  
Your words become your actions,  
Your actions become your habits,  
Your habits become your values,  
Your values become your destiny.*

*Mahatma Gandhi*

## 5. Be a “philosopher” of life

*All I know is that I know nothing.*

*Socrates*

At first glance, the above statement by Socrates might seem peculiar. And yet, other great thinkers also share the same belief. For instance, Confucius is credited with saying:

*Real knowledge is to know the extent of one’s ignorance.*

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Rather than promoting a nihilistic worldview, these wise words serve as a call for us to **cultivate a learner’s mindset** – an intellectual and existential humility that courageously recognizes that our current understanding of ourselves and the world is always incomplete, a work in progress. It’s a mindset akin to that of a philosopher – a “lover of wisdom”, rather than one who has already attained it.

When we operate from the assumption that we already ‘know’ who we are, fixed and defined, we inadvertently close the door to further discovery & evolution. On the other hand, an open attitude lays the fertile ground from which true self-knowledge can actually sprout.

*Only if you see, ‘I do not know,’ the possibility of knowing will become a living reality in your life.*

*Sadhguru*



Being a “philosopher of your life” isn’t about retreating into abstract theories; it means actively engaging with the world and with yourself as a dynamic field of ongoing discovery. It’s about approaching your own life with curiosity and a willingness to experiment. About being committed to living an examined life by:

- **Trying new things**

How well do you truly know your preferences, joys, dislikes, if they’ve never been genuinely tested beyond the confines of your established routine?

The “philosopher of life” is one who actively seeks out new ex-

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periences – which could be as simple as trying unfamiliar foods, listening to entirely different genres of music, exploring new hobbies you’ve only day-dreamed about, or reading authors whose viewpoints challenge your own. You might not fall in love with everything you try – and that’s perfectly okay!

Each experience, positive or negative, provides “data” about yourself: ‘Ah, I learned something new about what resonates with me (or what doesn’t).’

The idea is not to be obsessed with a frantic search for a ‘perfect’ fit or a definitive label – but to intentionally broaden awareness of your own tastes, reactions, hidden talents, and potential sources of joy.

- **Stepping out of your comfort zone**

It’s often said that real growth and self-discovery happen at

the edges of our comfort zone, and there’s much truth in this. Being a philosopher of your life involves intentionally exposing yourself to things that feel a little daunting, perhaps even slightly scary, yet also intriguing or aligned with a quiet aspiration. This could mean taking that solo trip you’ve always pondered, joining a club or group focused on something completely outside your usual circle, finally [learning a skill](#) that you’ve always thought was “cool” but felt unqualified to try, or finding your voice and speaking up in situations where you normally wouldn’t.

These experiences push you to tap into unknown strengths, confront hidden fears, and discover facets of your personality/capabilities you might never have known existed. In these moments, you are actively “philosophizing” by testing your perceived limits, observing how you respond to novelty and

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challenge, and adapting knowledge of who you are based on these direct encounters.

- **Self-questioning**

A core practice for the philosopher of life is ongoing, honest self-reflection through the art of incisive, compassionate questioning. Inspired by Socrates' method of inquiry, it involves systematically and gently evaluating your own thoughts, beliefs, assumptions, emotional reactions, and behavioral patterns to uncover deeper truths, inconsistencies, or underlying motivations. In other words, it's about becoming a kind but persistent interrogator of your own inner world, not to judge, but to understand.

Instead of just noting an emotional reaction and moving on, try delving deeper: *“I felt intensely defensive when my approach to that project was criticized. Why did that specific feedback*

*feel like such a personal attack? What underlying belief about my competence, my intelligence, or my worth might have been triggered by that comment? Is this belief truly serving me, or is it perhaps a rigid part of an old self-story that needs updating?”*

Or, when you notice a strong pull: *“I consistently find myself drawn to activities related to [helping animals/ creating art/ solving complex puzzles], even if it's unconventional or doesn't fit my current 'role.' Why does this resonate so deeply with me? What core value is being expressed or seeking expression here? What does this persistent pull tell me about what makes me feel alive and engaged?”*

This practice of asking “why” repeatedly, like peeling the layers of an onion, helps you move beyond surface-level knowledge to the core motivations, fears, values, beliefs that shape your identity and daily actions.

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- **Conversing with others**

In order to better nurture a philosophical mindset, it may be a good idea to occasionally participate in thoughtful, open ended dialogue with a friend, mentor, [accountability partner](#), or therapist who can help you explore your own thinking without imposing answers.

- **Embracing the mystery**

Sometimes, being a philosopher of your life means questioning the very nature and solidity of your perceived reality, including your most immediate sense of self. As reflected in the Socratic wisdom of “knowing that we know little for certain,” our grasp on “who I am” is always an interpretation, a story, a perspective within a larger, perhaps unknowable reality.

*Once upon a time, I dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all in-*

*tents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was myself. Soon I awaked, and there I was, veritably myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man.*

*Zhuangzi*

- **Being with the “flow”**

Last but not least, a philosopher’s mindset requires us to internalize the fact that the quest for self-knowledge is not a one-time project with a final exam or a definitive conclusion. It is, by its very nature, a continuous, lifelong process of discovery and integration. There is no need to succumb to the pressure of having to “figure ourselves out” completely or definitively. The important thing is to

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maintain an ongoing, open hearted engagement with our evolving self, appreciating each new insight, each challenge, each moment of clarity.

*The more you know yourself, the more clarity there is. Self-knowledge has no end – you don't come to an achievement, you don't come to a conclusion. It is an endless river.*

*Jiddu Krishnamurti*

### 6. Embrace uncertainty

As human beings, most of us exhibit a strong, almost instinctual, attachment to certainty. We crave quick answers, clear formulas, definitive commitments from others, and sharp, unambiguous distinctions between 'right' and 'wrong.'

The desire for predictability is entirely understandable; after all, it offers a fleeting sense of

security and control in a world that often feels anything but. However, this relentless pursuit of certainty, especially in areas as fluid and deeply personal as self-identity, comes with hidden costs and can become quite detrimental to one's growth.

Why is this the case?

- It prompts us to latch onto premature conclusions about ourselves (e.g., "I am an anxious person, and that's just how I am, full stop"), thereby stifling awareness of the potential for change and evolution.
- It fosters rigid belief systems and an intolerance for ambiguity, making us resistant to new experiences, unfamiliar perspectives, or personal insights that might challenge our constructed self-view.
- It causes us to outsource our self-definition to external authorities, systems, or

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dogmas that promise clear-cut answers, rather than engaging in the more challenging but rewarding path of open-ended self-exploration.

- It prevents us from reflecting on other potential facets of identity that might lead to greater joy and purpose. An example is when one desperately clings to a career identity that no longer brings fulfillment, simply because the uncertainty of exploring a new path, of not knowing what comes next, feels too threatening.

The truth is, as we've explored before, our self-identity, much like life itself, is not a static entity but a dynamic, unfolding process. Our inner worlds are complex and multifaceted, our deepest experiences ineffable, and life continually presents us with new information and circumstances.



Therefore, a degree of uncertainty is inherent in everyone's journey. Who we will become next year, or even next month, is not rigidly predetermined.

Major life choices – about relationships, careers, where to live, what to believe – are almost always made with incomplete information and no absolute guarantee of the outcome.

Our perspectives, values, and even core feelings are likely to shift and mature as we learn and grow.

Given this fluid reality, attempting to impose absolute certainty on it is like trying to freeze a flowing river; it denies its esse-

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ntial, vibrant nature. Authentic self-knowledge, as many spiritual teachers have suggested, emerges from an open, unbiased awareness of our total being – our thoughts, feelings, contradictions, and potentials – without a predetermined agenda or the promise of a comfortable, predictable result.

***We follow authority – if not that of a person, then of a system, of an ideology – because we want a result that will be satisfactory, which will give us security. We really do NOT want to understand ourselves, our impulses and reactions, the whole process of our thinking, the conscious as well as the unconscious; we would rather pursue a system that assures us of a result. But the pursuit of a system is invariably the outcome of our desire for security, for certainty, and the result is obviously not***

***the understanding of oneself.***

[...]

***Authority in its very nature prevents the full awareness of oneself.***

*Jiddu Krishnamurti*

Have you ever watched the movie *Mr. Nobody*? The story follows Nemo Nobody, the last mortal in a futuristic world where humanity has achieved quasi-immortality. As he approaches his own demise, Nemo is forced to reflect on the numerous potential lives that could have stemmed from the choices he could have made.

As illustrated in the film, life presents a vast array of branching paths created by our decisions – each of which, while opening some doors, closes others. However, the important thing is **not to identify one sin-**

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gle, objectively “right” choice that guarantees a perfect, pain-free existence.

Each path taken can lead to a unique life with its own inherent meaning, its own unique blend of joys and sorrows.

Therefore, what one needs to do is to embrace uncertainty – to accept the responsibility of their choices without the illusion of a “perfect” outcome or a “correct” preordained identity. To be present and find meaning *within* the life that emerges from the decisions one makes.



***Every path is the right path. Everything could've been anything else. And it***

***would have just as much meaning.***

*Nemo Nobody*

Back in the day, the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard proposed the concept of a ‘leap of faith’ – i.e. committing to choices and actions based on one’s deepest convictions and values, even in the absence of absolute certainty or complete rational proof of the outcome. According to Kierkegaard, authentic selfhood requires us to venture beyond the comfortable shores of the known. To constantly avoid such leaps for fear of the unknown is to risk never truly discovering the self that emerges (and is strengthened) through committed, courageous action.

After all, as those like Immanuel Kant have pointed out earlier, [pure reason has its limits](#); it can not definitively answer [all of life’s ultimate questions](#) (such as the precise nature of the self

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or the definitively “right” path). Given that intellect alone can not provide all the guarantees we crave for our most vital decisions, then at some point, embracing the unknown through a committed, value-driven choice becomes essential.

When faced with choices where the outcome is uncertain, after sincere reflection (asking ourselves, as you might, “Was my mind & heart clear at the time of decision? What did my intuition, that quiet inner knowing, seem to indicate?”), there’s a certain wisdom in “trusting the process.” Rather than passive resignation or abdicating responsibility, it demonstrates an active trust in life’s unfolding – as well as in our own capacity to learn, adapt, and find our way, even when the path isn’t fully illuminated.

It acknowledges that every decision arises from a complex web of past causes and condi-

tions and will, in turn, shape future ones in ways we cannot always fully predict or control.

***You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.***

*Thomas Merton*

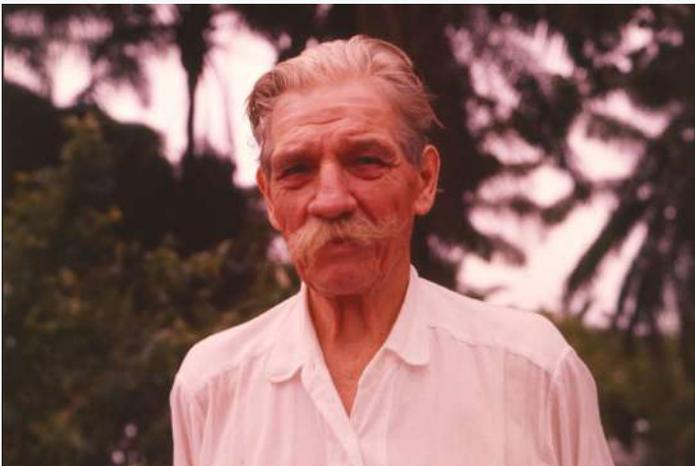
### 7. Do not fear starting anew

The path of one’s life sometimes calls not just for subtle adjustments, but for the courage to make significant shifts, to reinvent certain personal aspects, or even to feel like one is starting anew. This prospect can be daunting, yet many times, it holds the key to deeper authenticity and fulfillment.

Just think about the remarkab-

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le life of Albert Schweitzer. A distinguished theologian, philosopher, and musician in Europe, he reached a point, around the age of 30, where an inner calling led him to a radical decision : to pursue medicine and dedicate his life to humanitarian work in Africa. His choice to abandon a well-established and respected path was met with considerable skepticism and objection from many of his relatives & friends. Yet, Schweitzer persevered and eventually – through his efforts – became a global phenomenon.



The impulse to start anew isn't confined to iconic historical figures like Schweitzer; it's a deeply human experience, a

thread that can run through any life. Perhaps you, like me, have found yourself at a crossroad, a point where the path you were on, however successful it may have seemed externally, no longer resonated with the person you were becoming.

I recall once working as an SEO manager at an international digital agency – a position highly regarded by people in my own circles. Yet, right at the peak of my career, a quieter calling began to emerge – a desire to engage more directly with the human condition. In the end, I decided to step away from my stable full-time role and established career trajectory to pursue a new professional path.

This transition was certainly filled with uncertainties – and might have appeared 'absurd' or impractical to some people. That being said, it has brought with it a sense of alignment and satisfaction that the previous

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path, for all its external markers, could no longer provide. And as of now, I have no reason to regret it.



Given the impermanent nature of self-identity, it is essential that we grant ourselves explicit permission to evolve, to make substantial changes, or even to feel as though we are “starting over” in certain areas of life when the inner compass points in a new direction. Past identities, roles, relationships, or self-definitions that were once fitting or necessary should be released if they no longer are.

However, even when we truly yearn for new beginnings (and know the reasons why), we of-

ten find it hard to embrace them. “Starting anew” feels so frightening, as it is akin to a kind of “death” – the death of a familiar self, a known identity, a predictable (even if unfulfilling) way of life. Due to the inherent uncertainty of changes, we resist them and try to rationalize staying in situations that no longer benefit our well-being.

**PHILOSOPHER: Carrying out change is ‘death itself’. [...] Regardless of how dissatisfied you may be with your current situation, can you choose death? Can you throw yourself into the bottomless darkness? This is not such an easy thing to talk about.**

***That is why people do not try to change and why they want to feel okay with things as they are, no matter how tough life gets. And they end up living in search of ‘okay as I am’ ingredi-***

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*ents in order to affirm their current situation.*

*Ichiro Kishimi, 'The Courage to Be Happy'*

The key to navigating this fear is the realization that change is not just a future possibility, but a **constant, present reality**. The fear of “dying” to an old self is largely based on the illusion of a fixed, static identity. In reality, you are not the same person you were five years ago, or even yesterday.

I myself see this clearly in my own life. When I look back, I can see that the ‘I’ of today is a distinct evolution from earlier versions: the university student facing an unknown future, the professional who once operated on near-autopilot, the specialist chasing fleeting metrics. These past selves were part of the path, but a continuous process of change, fueled by a growing awareness of both inner and

outer realities, means I am always in a state of becoming someone new.

We are, in a very real sense, being subtly “reborn” in every moment, with every new experience we integrate, every new insight we gain, every choice we make. Accepting this continuous flow of becoming will make the prospect of “starting anew” feel less like a terrifying leap into an abyss – and more like a conscious participation in an already ongoing, natural process of evolution.

Choosing to “start anew”/ significantly change course is not necessarily a sign of previous failure or a lack of consistency. Instead, it’s an indication that we are listening deeply to ourselves, to our evolving needs and values, and that we are courageous enough to adjust our path as our understanding of our “destiny” – our authentic way of being and unique pur-

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pose – matures and clarifies.

*The snake which cannot cast its skin has to die. As well the minds which are prevented from changing their opinions; they cease to be mind.*

*Friedrich Nietzsche*

### 8. Live in the ‘here’ and ‘now’

*If you feel lost, disappointed, hesitant, or weak, return to yourself, to who you are, here and now and when you get there, you will discover yourself, like a lotus flower in full bloom, even in a muddy pond, beautiful and strong.*

*Masaru Emoto*

Regardless of past difficulties (the “muddy pond” of our histories) or anxieties about future uncertainties, our truest strength, our most vibrant

beauty, our core self, is most clearly discovered and experienced when we learn to fully turn our attention to the present moment. It is not an escape from life or from ourselves; rather, it is one of the most direct and potent ways to engage with and actively shape our self-identity.

As mentioned, many of us find ourselves carrying the weight of past traumas, lingering disappointments, or perceived failures – worse, we tend to allow them to cast long shadows and define our current sense of self. But while the events of the past are indeed unchangeable, their power over our present identity and future path is not fixed.

As challenging to accept as it may seem, the truth is: **your identity is not determined or imprisoned by your history.**

It’s so tempting to wallow in psychic wounds (whether caus-

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ed by other people/ your own doings) – to treat your life as a narrative driven by causality. And yet, we are not like other ordinary creatures. We possess a powerful mind capable of impacting realities.

We have the choice to live in the “here and now” – to actively choose the kind of person we are becoming in each moment.

It’s up to you – would you rather give weight to what cannot be changed, or would you rather think about what can be done right now?

*Your story may not have such a happy beginning, but that doesn’t make you who you are. It is the rest of your story, who you choose to be.*

*Soothsayer, ‘Kungfu Panda’*

Below are a few ways to practice being present:

- **Mindful awareness:** Gently be attentive to your current thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations without immediate judgment or attachment. Notice them as passing experiences, clouds drifting through the sky of your awareness, rather than definitive truths about who you are. This creates a space of observation from which self knowledge may arise.
- **Engage your senses fully:** Take moments throughout the day to [find the beauty in your surroundings](#) and engage with them with all senses. Take your time tasting your food, feeling the texture of the clothes you wear or the objects you touch, listening to the sounds around you (near and far), and noticing the play of light and shadow, the colors and shapes that meet your eyes.
- **Focus on one thing at a**

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**time (single-tasking):** The ability to multitask is something typically hailed in today's frenetic world; however, performance optimization is one of the worst enemies when it comes to cultivating self-awareness. Whether you're working, conversing, or even doing a simple chore, try to focus on that one thing – and do your best to resist being pulled away mentally.

- **Active listening in conversations:** When someone is speaking, listen with the intent to truly internalize their perspectives, feelings, and experiences – rather than just waiting for your turn to speak or letting your mind drift to your own thoughts and rebuttals. This not only deepens the connection with others but also offers mirrors for self-awareness. (e.g. you might notice your own as-

sumptions or judgments surfacing as a friend shares about an experience radically different from yours)

- **Embrace your current state:** Acknowledge and allow whatever you are feeling or experiencing in this moment – be it joy, sadness, peace, or restlessness – without trying to resist or change it.

As we evolve and grow, it's natural to look back and realize that some of our past self perceptions or decisions made from an earlier understanding of our identity may now seem like "illusions" or misalignments. Think of it not as a sign of failure, but a hallmark of growth. Just learn from previous experiences – and try to make more conscious choices that resonate with you NOW moving forward!

*No matter what has occurred in your life up to this*

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***point, it should have no bearing at all on how you live from now on. That you, living in the here and now, are the one who determines your own life.***

*Ichiro Kishimi*

### 9. Exercise personal agency

***It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.***

*J. K. Rowling*

While our innate talents, learned skills, and inherent capacities certainly play a role in our lives, it is the decisions we arrive at in each moment, big or small, that most truly reveal our character, values, and the direction of our evolving identity.

It's not just what we CAN do, but what we consciously CHOOSE to do that sculpts the person we are becoming.

For instance, think about someone who might possess a remarkable ability for emotional intelligence. They can either use that ability to connect and heal, or, conversely, to manipulate. The ability is neutral; the choice defines its expression and impact on their identity.

Exercising personal agency involves two sides:

- Recognizing humanity's inherent power to make conscious decisions, and
- Accepting full responsibility for those choices & their outcomes (even if things don't go as planned).

This principle applies to the entire spectrum of our lives, from seemingly small, everyday decisions to major, life-altering ones. For example, do you choose to react with habitual anger – or with a moment of empathy in a challenging conversation?

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Do you choose to let a meaningful personal goal languish through procrastination, or do you take even a small step towards it today?

Do you choose the path of authenticity, even if it's less popular, over the easier road of conformity?

Each choice, however minor it may seem at the time, is a brushstroke on the canvas of the person you are becoming.

If we decide not to exercise our agency – by consistently blaming external circumstances, [passing responsibility to others](#), or succumbing to a pervasive feeling of powerlessness, we will become a vessel adrift in the currents of life.

When you passively accept a job you dislike, simply complaining about the long hours and dull tasks instead of exploring other options or seeking changes, you

essentially let your path be dictated by the employer's needs. Others will make decisions about your workload, development, and ultimately, your professional future, while you remain stuck, a mere passenger on a journey you didn't choose. And with every complaint you make, you reinforce your own identity as a resentful person controlled by external forces.

Is it a life you would like to live?

***We've all got both light and dark inside us. What matters is the part we choose to act on... that's who we really are.***

*J. K. Rowling*



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The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl once recounted the horrors of Nazi concentration camps in his work *Man's Search for Meaning*. Those confined there were stripped of nearly all external freedom, dignity, and even their own names. Despite the immense sufferings, people did not respond in the same way.

Some, faced with the constant threat of death, starvation, and brutality, decided to prioritize only their own bare survival, often at the terrible expense of their fellow prisoners. This sometimes manifested in actions like stealing meager food rations from those weaker, ruthlessly pushing ahead in lines, or, in the case of some “Capos” (prisoners given positions of power by the guards), collaborating with their captors and mirroring their cruelty to gain slight advantages.

Yet, amidst the despair, Frankl also witnessed extraordinary

acts of altruism, compassion, and resilience. He saw prisoners share their last crumbs of bread, offer words of comfort and support to the dying, maintain their inner lives through art, philosophy, or cherished memories, and face their own deaths with profound dignity. Even in the face of unspeakable horror, these individuals chose to hold onto their ‘inner light’.

Were these “saintly” people inherently morally superior compared to the others? Not necessarily, as Frankl has concluded. According to him, the extreme pressure-cooker of the concentration camp environment simply revealed the fundamental human capacity for both an almost primal depravity and an extraordinary, almost transcendent, goodness.

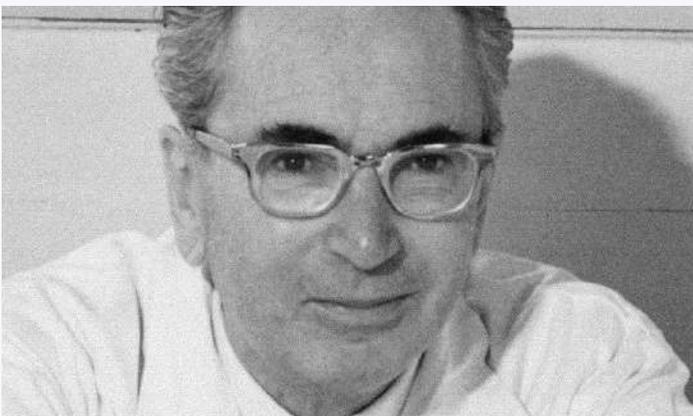
The critical factor, Frankl argued, was the decision each person made about how they would respond to their unima-

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ginable circumstances. Even when all external freedom was gone, the freedom to choose one's attitude, one's inner response – and thus, to define one's ultimate identity in that moment – remained.

***In the concentration camps, in this living laboratory and on this testing ground, we watched and witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions but not on conditions.***

***Viktor E. Frankl***



Even those who have committed terrible acts still have the capacity for change. This is illustrated through the story of a man known as Dr. J. – one who had been deeply involved in the Nazi euthanasia program, responsible for the deaths of countless individuals deemed “unfit.” Yet, after the war, while imprisoned himself by the Russians, this same Dr. J. underwent a profound transformation. He became a deeply compassionate and supportive comrade to his fellow prisoners, living up to the highest moral standards until his own death from cancer.

Even deeply ingrained patterns and past identities can be redefined through the power of conscious choice and a reorientation of one's being.

***Let me cite the case of Dr. J. He was the only man I ever encountered in my whole life whom I would dare to call a Mephistophe-***

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*lean being, a satanic figure. At that time he was generally called “the mass murderer of Steinhof” (the large mental hospital in Vienna). When the Nazis started their euthanasia program, he held all the strings in his hands and was so fanatic in the job assigned to him that he tried not to let one single psychotic individual escape the gas chamber.*

*After the war, when I came back to Vienna, I asked what had happened to Dr. J. “He had been imprisoned by the Russians in one of the isolation cells of Steinhof,” they told me. “The next day, however, the door of his cell stood open and Dr. J. was never seen again.” Later I was convinced that, like others, he had, with the help of his comrades, made his way to South America.*

*More recently, however, I was consulted by a former Austrian diplomat who had been imprisoned behind the Iron Curtain for many years, first in Siberia and then in the famous Lubianka prison in Moscow. While I was examining him neurologically, he suddenly asked me whether I happened to know Dr. J.*

*After my affirmative reply, he continued:*

*“I made his acquaintance in Lubianka. There he died, at about the age of forty, from cancer of the urinary bladder. Before he died, however, he showed himself to be the best comrade you can imagine! He gave consolation to everybody. He lived up to the highest conceivable moral standard. He was the best friend I ever met during my long years in prison!”*

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***This is the story of Dr. J., “the mass murderer of Steinhof.” How can we dare to predict the behavior of man? We may predict the movements of a machine, of an automaton; more than this, we may even try to predict the mechanisms or “dynamisms” of the human psyche as well. But man is more than psyche.***

*Viktor E. Frankl*

These experiences speak to the same truth: **you are not merely a passive victim of your circumstances, past, or conditioning.** You are an **active agent** in your own life, in the ongoing shaping of your identity.

To exercise personal agency means consciously shifting away from blaming external causes or feeling perpetually powerless, and instead, focusing your energy on the questions: What can I choose in this

moment? What constructive action can I take? What kind of person do I choose to be, right here, right now?

This is akin to adopting a “survivor” or “thrivers” mindset, rather than a “victim” one. Instead of dwelling on “poor me” narratives or endlessly cataloging the perceived failings of others, the focus becomes proactive: “What should I do from now on to move towards the person I wish to be?”

Exercising true personal agency means making choices based on your own clarified values and inner guidance, rather than blindly following external expectations, societal pressures, or the scripts others may have written for you. For example, I myself took a leap of faith some years ago when I chose to resign from a full-time role as an SEO manager – a position that seemed secure and well regarded – to instead pursue a path of

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research and writing in areas more directly related to the human condition (which is, as I figure as of now, is a combination of psychology and philosophy). It is a path that feels deeply meaningful to me, despite the initial doubts from some around me and the inherent financial uncertainties.

This choice, rooted in a sense of inner calling, has led to a far more fulfilling expression of my identity than adhering to a conventional career path chosen primarily out of a desire for approval or perceived security.



Now, it's worth noting that exercising personal agency doesn't mean denying your current rea-

lities or pretending to be someone you're not. We need to acknowledge and accept our current state – our strengths, talents, passions, and yes, even our flaws and areas for growth – while simultaneously making conscious choices to evolve in the direction we aspire to.

For instance, I recognize myself as someone who is generally resilient and not easily swayed by external influences, but who also tends to be over contemplative at times and could benefit from cultivating greater spontaneous emotional openness. I see my nature sometimes like a sturdy tank: durable and steady, but perhaps slow to change direction and sometimes a bit insulated.

Accepting these current aspects of my “equipment” isn't resignation; it's a clear-eyed acknowledgment of my present starting point as I strive to cultivate greater balance & connection.

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This kind of nuanced self acceptance is crucial to avoid the traps of either self-paralysis (from focusing only on flaws) or self-condemnation, while still actively choosing the direction of one's ongoing growth.

*Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.*

*George Bernard Shaw*

### 10. Adopt the “right view”

The journey of defining and developing our self-identity is significantly shaped by the lens through which we choose to view ourselves, others, and the world. Many wisdom traditions, both ancient and contemporary, emphasize the importance of cultivating what might be called a “Right View” as a starting point for a truly meaningful and authentic life.

The concept of “Right View” is

inspired by principles found in Buddhist thought; that being said, I believe it is applicable to anyone. Essentially, it is about **making a conscious choice, moment by moment, to see reality as it truly is, rather than how we might wish it to be, or how our fears and desires might distort it.** In other words, it involves an effort to:

- **Acknowledge what is, without flinching**

This means looking directly at our experiences as they are – the pleasant, the unpleasant, the challenging, the “inconvenient truths” – without an immediate urge to change, deny, escape, or sugarcoat them.

- **Embracing life's fluidity and our interconnection**

In other words, it involves willingness to recognize that all things, including our sense of self and circumstances, are con-

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stantly changing and evolving – as well as how deeply interconnected we are with everyone and everything around us. As [one reflection puts it](#):

*Observe how you are different with your kids than with your pet than with your boss, and recognize that nothing you do happens in isolation, that you are touched by everything and everyone around you. Accept that they shape you, and as you do, allow for the fact that you are in turn shaping them, both in ways that are in your control and in ways you can never know.*

- **Facing difficult realities head-on**

This includes a gentle but clear acknowledgment of our shared human condition – our vulnerability to sickness, aging, and eventually, death, as well as the

universal experience of challenges, disappointments, or what some traditions call *dukkha* (suffering or inherent unsatisfactoriness in conditioned existence). No matter how uncomfortable things are, one needs to be willing to embrace them. Only when one's outlook on life is grounded in truth may authentic self-knowledge and wise action follow.

*My eye passes lightly over no single trifle; it strives to touch and hold closely each thing its gaze rests upon. Some sights are pleasant, filling the heart with happiness; but some are miserably pathetic. To these latter I do not shut my eyes, for they, too, are part of life.*

*To close the eye on them is to close the heart and mind.*

Helen Keller, '[3 Days to See](#)'

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Adopting this clear, honest, and expansive perspective can help us connect with what many traditions point to as our **innate human potential for wisdom, goodness, and a kind of inner awakening**. In Buddhism, this is sometimes referred to as “Buddha nature” – an inherent capacity for enlightenment.

But regardless of your specific spiritual background or beliefs, you can think of this concept in terms analogous to the “Holy Spirit” in Christianity, the “Atman” (the true Self connected to ultimate reality, Brahman) in Hinduism, the idea of a “Divine Spark” within, the “Pneuma” (divine spirit or reason) in [Stoic philosophy](#), the “Tao” (the natural Way) in Daoism, our intrinsic “conscience,” or simply that fundamental human goodness and capacity for empathy that thinkers like Mencius believed people are all endowed with.

It’s that core of awareness and

potential for profound good that resides within each of us, often obscured but always present. A “Right View” helps clear the way to recognizing and nurturing this potential.

Cultivating such an outlook starts with adopting a minimal lifestyle over fame, possessions, and ego-driven desires. To regularly declutter your physical and mental space – as well as to savor all experiences, rather than seeking stimulation.



Now, how about me sharing a personal parable to demonstrate the above point? (*spoiler: this one may resonate more with East Asian audiences – but I hope you can get my point*)

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One day, my spiritual mentor shared with me about a book named “[禪的]持たない生き方” (lit. ‘[Zen] Living without possessions’) written by Zen Master Soushin Kanetake. Based on the book, he pointed out that the character 私 (watashi), which means “I” or “me” in Japanese, is composed of two main parts.

On the left is the radical 禾 (nogi), which relates to “grain” or “harvest.” Metaphorically, one can see it as representing our attachments to the material world – our possessions, achievements, worldly concerns, the “stuff” we accumulate, the aspects of our constructed ego tied to external things.

If we symbolically “let go” of this 禾 (our external attachments), we are left with the component 亠 (mu), a simpler, perhaps more private element.

And then, as my mentor show-

ed, if we add the radical 亻 (ninben) to the left of this 亠, the character transforms into 仏 (hotoke), which means “Buddha”, “awakened being.” The 亻 radical specifically represents a “person”/ “human being.”

The symbolic journey here – from 私 (I), through letting go of all attachments (禾), to what remains (亠), and then reembracing our core humanity/ personhood ( 亻 ) to arrive at 仏 (Awakened Being) – offers a beautiful guide for living with “Right View.” By seeing clearly the nature of our attachments and consciously choosing to simplify, to let go of what is non essential, and to connect with and cultivate our essential, compassionate humanity, we move from our daily sense our self toward our most awake, authentic, “enlightened” potential.

This isn’t about becoming less of who we are, but about becoming more authentically and

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wisely human.

*Pray with your eyes open.*

Ferreira, '[Silence](#)' (2016)

### 11. Choose love as a guiding principle

**PHILOSOPHER:** *Any person can be happy from this moment onward. [...] But happiness is not something one can enjoy by staying where one is.*

*You took the first step. You took a big step. Now, however, not only have you lost courage and let your feet come to a halt, you are trying to turn back. Do you know why?*

**YOUTH:** *You're saying I don't have patience.*

**PHILOSOPHER:** *No. You have not yet made the biggest choice in life.*

**YOUTH:** *The biggest choice in life! What do I have to choose?*

**PHILOSOPHER:** *I said it earlier. It is 'love'*

**YOUTH:** *Hah! You expect me to get that? Please don't try to escape into abstraction!*

**PHILOSOPHER:** *I am serious. The issues you are now experiencing all stem from the single word 'love'. The issues you have with education, and also the issue of which life you should lead.*

*Ichiro Kishimi, 'The Courage to Be Happy'*

As demonstrated in the conversation above, beyond all techniques for self-understanding or specific methods for personal growth, the most foundational choice we make in shaping our

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lives and identity is the choice to **orient ourselves around love**. To embrace love – in its unconditional, courageous, and action-oriented forms.

The “love” we speak of here transcends the fleeting nature of romantic infatuation or casual affection. It is a deeper, more expansive quality of being and relating that encompasses:

- **Unconditional acceptance:** A courageous willingness to accept oneself and others, flaws, imperfections, and all, without demanding change as a prerequisite for care.
- **Compassion:** The active desire, born from empathy, to alleviate suffering and promote well-being, both in ourselves and in those around us.
- **Connection & empathy:** A genuine recognition of our shared humanity (i.e. our ‘interbeing’) and a striving

to understand and feel with others’ perspectives and experiences.

- **Active care & responsibility:** Taking thoughtful actions that support well being, uphold dignity, and contribute positively to the lives we touch.

This is a love akin to what some traditions call *Agape* (a selfless, unconditional love for all) in Greek philosophy, or *Bodhicitta* (the awakened heart that aspires for the enlightenment and liberation of all beings) in Mahayana Buddhism. It is less an emotion that passively happens to us, and more a **consciously chosen orientation, a fundamental way of being**.

Does that sound a little idealized? Well then, how about us revisiting an old parable?

There are two seas in the Middle East. The Sea of Galilee receives fresh water from the moun-

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tains and gives it freely to the River Jordan, which flows out from it. As a result, the Sea of Galilee teems with life – fish, plants, and surrounding greenery. Further south, the River Jordan flows into the Dead Sea. This sea receives water but has no outlet; it hoards every drop. The result is a body of water so saline and devoid of current that it supports almost no life.



A simple story, yet it presents a powerful truth about love and identity: **an identity that is open, giving, and rooted in a loving connection to the world is vibrant, generative, and full of life.** Conversely, an identity that is primarily closed off, self-absorbed, and focused on ‘get-

ting’ or ‘hoarding’ rather than ‘giving’ or ‘flowing’ will end up stagnant, isolated, and disconnected from the vital currents of reality.

Paradoxically, we often find our truest, most vital selves not by focusing inward in isolation, but by courageously reaching out in love. When we:

- Engage with others with genuine interest/ empathy
- Offer help or support without expectation of return
- Choose to mentor, coach, or simply offer a compassionate listening ear
- etc.

It’s worth noting that our outward flow of love must be rooted in, and continually nourished by, a love for oneself.

Unlike narcissism or self inflation, [self-love](#) empowers us to make the best use of who we are, just as we are, by:

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- Tuning into our needs with gentleness and accepting ourselves fully (including our imperfections, efforts, and potential for growth).
- Being ready to set healthy boundaries, to say ‘no’ when necessary – not from malice, fear, or defensiveness, but from a clear understanding of our own values, limits, what serves our well-being & integrity.
- Resisting the urge to constantly compare yourself to others, a habit often fueled by external pressures like social media.

*Everyone seems to have a clear idea of how other people should lead their lives, but none about his or her own.*

*Paulo Coelho*

To live from a place of love – for self and others – requires immense courage; quite often, it

requires us to tread into uncomfortable territory:



- **The courage to be disliked**

True belonging and connection stem from being true to yourself with integrity, not from the impossible task of trying to please everyone. This may mean that some will not understand or approve of your choices or your way of being, and that’s perfectly fine.

- **Going your own way, guided by inner truth**

Choosing your path, guided by love and inner truth, is paramount for an authentic identity, even if it involves making what

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others might perceive as ‘mistakes’ or deviating from conventional standards.

*To go wrong in one’s own way is better than to go right in someone else’s.*

*Fyodor Dostoevsky*

- **Accepting differences unconditionally**

In the [movie \*Silence\*](#) by Martin Scorsese, there is a conversation between the two priests – Father Rodrigues and Father Ferreira – about the evangelization efforts in Japan. During their exchange, Father Ferreira mentioned an old proverb:

*Mountains and rivers can be moved, but man’s nature cannot be moved.*

Interpreting this saying may be a little tricky; however, I would like to emphasize one aspect of the message it conveys: huma-

nity’s inherent differences in terms of worldviews. Admitting this reality is, indeed, a crucial part of love.



A challenging, yet vital, aspect of loving expansively is learning to accept people (including ourselves) as they are, without demanding they change to fit our ideals. It means being patient enough to resist the ego’s urge to judge, categorize, or [impose its will](#).

Love does not seek to forcibly change others, but strives to create conditions of acceptance where transformation might organically emerge from within.

Choosing love is, indeed, an act of faith. There are no guaran-

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tees of how others will respond, or what the precise outcomes of your actions will be.

However, it is a commitment made from a place of inner truth, a belief in the generative and healing power of love itself, and a willingness to engage with life wholeheartedly.

It is, after all, a part of adopting the “right view”, as we have mentioned previously.

In a world often characterized by division, fear, and suffering, consciously adopting love as one’s guiding principle offers a transformative way to navigate life’s challenges and define the very core of one’s self-identity. It shifts the focus from rigid self-definitions, moralistic pronouncements, or ego-driven pursuits towards the simple, yet profound, aim of lessening suffering – in oneself and in others – and cultivating connection and well-being.

Only through love that we may experience the nature of the Self at its fullest – multifaceted, experiential, impermanent, interbeing, and transcendent!

***Love is my true identity.  
Selflessness is my true self.  
Love is my true character.  
Love is my name.***

*Thomas Merton*

## 4. 11 PRACTICES FOR CRAFTING AN AUTHENTIC SELF

# Define & Develop Self-identity



Let go of all notions



Be ready to start anew



Look beyond labels



Live in the present



Clarify core values



Exercise agency



“Purify” yourself



Adopt the “right view”



Think philosophy



Love unconditionally



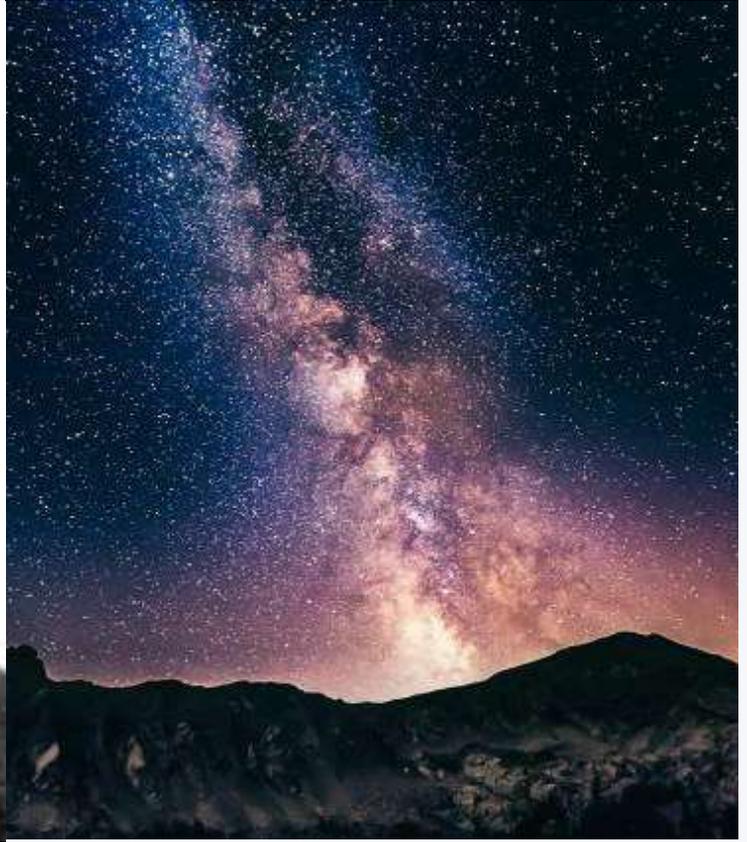
Embrace uncertainty

# EXPERT INSIGHTS



Check out some professionals' perspectives on how to find & embrace one's identity in life!

## 5.1. BECOMING YOU: IDEAS VS. EXPERIENCES



Originally published at [Psychology Today](#)

Credit: Patrick De Vleeschauwer

Is modern identity built on ideas rather than direct experience of the world?

Can we ever be free of our ideas for a moment? Can we ever pause from the vital ideas that sustain our lives? Free of the ideas that have become the foundation of our identity?

We are so used to the personal ideas that guide our lives and direct every choice we make. Ideas have become the basis of our psychology. Can we just let them go for a moment and feel what is?

When did ideas become the basis of our psychological life? The creat-

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or of *The Principles of Psychology*, William James, was immediately confronted with this question when he wrote his epic work. He wondered whether we thoroughly test or falsify our ideas. Do we have the right to declare our ideas to be the objective reality? Are our most cherished beliefs about life and the world absolutely true?

And yet, at this very moment, cruel wars are raging in the name of ideas and beliefs. Precious resources are being used to defend our beliefs. It is therefore essential to examine where these cherished ideas come from and why we are so attached to them.

The proto-psychologist Friedrich Nietzsche also made this his central task. Ideas are the driving force behind the choices we make in our lives. Every thought, every emotion, every choice, everything we become is guided and profoundly influenced by our ideas.

What we call our mind has become for modern humans an almost incessant stream of concepts and judgments based on ideas, schemes, and categories. Ideas and beliefs create our psychological life. Do they make us who we think we are, or who we really are? Has the experience of who we are been taken over by figments of the imagination?

### Psychology's Task

The great task of psychology is to examine the conceptual building blocks of our mind and ask whether they still relate to the original building blocks of life. Our modern identity is made up of conceptual structures passed down from generation to generation. People have been asking the question of the relation between ideas and reality for

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many centuries, long before scientific psychology began. Research into the question has not been encouraged by the power structures of most cultures, and it still is not.

Thanks to the extraordinary translation work of people like David Hinton, we can trace the roots of the question back to ancient China and, even further, to the expressions of the Paleolithic. Many centuries before the Western era, people were trying to look beyond the conventional structures that define our thinking and our identity.

The pre-Socratic Greek philosophers also did this. Western thought became deeply influenced by people like Plato, who placed the unchanging world of ideas above the changing and transient world in which we live. These immortal ideas transcend the process of empirical reality to this day.

As written language grew in importance in most cultures, the eternally unchanging became increasingly important in the organization of our psyche. The transcendent and isolated conceptual identity became the basic structure of the organization of the modern identity. It was in the interest of those in power that this remain unchanged. And this is still the case in today's autocratic and ideology-based democracies.

### **Toward a Phenomenological Psychology**

It is the great task of psychology to investigate the foundation of our mind and its relationship to empirical reality. Hence the question: Is it possible for our self to free itself from these cherished conceptual constructs by directly exploring the nature of our conscious mind?

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How does our mind relate to life and nature? What kind of psychology would emerge?

That the mind is constantly changing seems to be an undeniable empirical observation. Can an unchanging, immortal mind be perceived? Does our mind exist apart from life or nature? Or is it an inseparable part of the world as a process? Are knowledge and life inseparable? What are the necessary conditions for a phenomenological psychology that belongs to life?

What we need is a psychology that dares to look beyond our fixed ideas and considers our direct phenomenological experience of life as an equally valuable perspective. There is one fundamental condition needed for this: the training and development of our own consciousness as an important aspect of empirical research. Are we ready for this unconditional openness to the world? What is consciousness before our thoughts enter?

**Are we ready for this unconditional openness to the world?  
What is consciousness before our thoughts enter?**

Patrick De Vleeschauwer

## 5.2. KEEPING BETTER COMPANY



Originally published at [The Philosophers' Magazine](#)

Credit: Carolina Flores

I am defensive about the virtues of big cities. After moving to New York in my early 20s, I came to strongly identify as a city-dweller. When someone points out the downsides of big cities, I retrench. I try to find problems with their arguments against cities or any studies they cite. I reinterpret the points they make, try to show that they only apply in specific circumstances, or that they are not really disadvantages. As a result, I can keep my many rose-tinted beliefs about cities. In turn, this enables me to remain convinced that a city-dweller is the Cool Thing To Be – exciting, attractive, fun, and virtuous.

This is a case of **identity-protective reasoning**. To protect my identity as a city-dweller, I reason in ways that help me defend the goodness

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of cities.

We ALL do this. And often, it is harmless enough. As far as I can tell, the worst outcome of my defensiveness about cities has been bickering with my suburban parents. In fact, counter-intuitively, identity-protective reasoning can be good. If you are constantly exposed to misleading evidence against true beliefs, it can be good to be defensive. For example, we are bombarded with misleading evidence that suggests that Black people are criminals, queer people are mentally unstable, and working-class people are lazy. Having a proud Black, queer, or working-class identity can motivate people to scrutinise this evidence, rightly rejecting its implications.

But in many other cases defending aspects of one's identity is wrong-headed. It can lead us to maintain false and harmful beliefs in the face of strong evidence against them. For example, identity-protective reasoning sometimes sustains beliefs that vaccines are dangerous. For some people, this belief is tied up with their core identities – as Republicans, anti-establishment hippies, or conservative mothers. Protecting these identities involves defending anti-vax beliefs against the evidence. Similarly, protecting a white racial identity involves resisting evidence of racial privilege. Protecting masculinity may involve resisting arguments against meat-eating. And protecting national identity may involve explaining away evidence of the country's past atrocities.

So identity-protective reasoning can have positive or negative effects: it can help us track the truth or get us very far from it. How can we avoid falling prey to the bad kind of identity-protective reasoning, and harness its positive powers?

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### The Role of Changing Identities & Circumstances

The key here is to notice that **the goodness of identity-protective reasoning depends on the identities we are defending.** And our sense of self – the identities that matter to us – can change, shifting what beliefs we defend. My move to New York made me more of a city-dweller, turning a moderate preference for cities into deep-seated pride.

But I acknowledge (begrudgingly) that this could change. If I were to move to a small town and find community and joy there, I doubt that I would still think of myself as a city person. And I doubt that I would defend the virtues of cities against all arguments. In fact, I might do the opposite. I might undergo a transformative experience, one that changed my fundamental values. As a result, I might become the kind of person who extolls the virtues of fresh air, peace and quiet, and open spaces.

The central point is this: **when our circumstances change in ways that change our core identities, we cease to defend beliefs connected with those identities.** We become open to a wider range of evidence on those topics – and to changing our minds on them. On the flipside, adopting new social identities can make us close-minded in ways that protect our true beliefs against bad evidence.

### The Influence of Social Networks and Communities

If our identities were completely outside of our control, this would be a largely idle observation. But importantly, it is in our power to change our sense of who we are. Here I want to focus on the effects of

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### changes in social networks and communities.

Changes in social networks matter to the evidence we have. By talking with many different people, we get access to a wide range of considerations bearing on our beliefs. Conversely, social networks in which we only interact with like-minded people – **epistemic bubbles** – only provide evidence that supports our beliefs.

That much is familiar. What is less-often noted is that our social networks and communities also affect our sense of self. And, as we have seen, this in turn affects what we are defensive about. Some communities – call these **identitarian communities** – might make us very close-minded about beliefs related to the identity the community inculcates.

These effects of social networks – on what evidence we have, on the one hand, and on what topics we are defensive about, on the other – come apart. If we want to pop an epistemic bubble, all we need to do is offer its members access to a wider range of evidence. But merely offering more evidence will not persuade members of identitarian communities. They will simply resist that evidence. To persuade them, we need changes in social networks that restructure their sense of who they are.

Which kinds of changes to social networks can do this?

### How Cross-Group Contact Can Foster New Identities

Interacting with people who do not share our central social identities can make us notice new commonalities with them. This can destabi-

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lise our sense of self and lead us to adopt and value new identities. At least, this can happen when contact involves mutual respect, curiosity, and cooperation.

Let's take a prosaic example. In successful company mergers, people stop identifying with the smaller company they used to work for. In its place, they adopt a new identity associated with the larger company. **This shift in identity makes a difference.** Employees in corporate mergers find their interactions less stressful once they adopt a shared identity.

New identities can completely erase existing affiliations, as in the corporate merger case. Or they can function as add-ons to one's existing sense of self. This often happens when students enter university and add that identity to others.

In either case, a new, overarching identity makes you less motivated to single-mindedly defend your previously dominant identity. You now need to balance preserving various aspects of yourself – as a student, religious person, and member of a certain ethnic group, for example. In other cases, you no longer need to defend your previous identity at all. Without the defensive motivation, you have less need to resist evidence against beliefs related to that earlier identity.

### Reducing Partisan Motivated Reasoning Through Shared Identities

Indeed, there is evidence that cross-group contact reduces one especially toxic form of defensiveness: **partisan motivated reasoning**. This happens when partisans reason in ways that help them defend their political identities (e.g. as Republicans or Democrats). By shutting off

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substantive debate, this causes serious trouble for collective deliberation.

One cause for the increase in partisan motivated reasoning is **increased social sorting**. As political scientist Lilliana Mason [has shown](#), most partisans now live in partisan bubbles. They barely ever interact with supporters of the other party. As a result, they have ceased to have cross-cutting social identities. As Democrats and Republicans share fewer and fewer (non-political) identities, they grow more invested in defending their partisan identities grows. In an important sense, their entire sense of self stands and falls with their partisan identity.

If social sorting is the problem, **cross-group contact** might be the solution. In support of this suggestion, there is [evidence](#) that Democrats who share important identities with Republicans, and vice-versa, are less likely to engage in partisan motivated reasoning. If we want to reduce partisan motivated reasoning, we need to build networks that make room for shared identities among Democrats and Republicans.

### **Alternative Communities & Social Movements in Identity Formation**

Creating melded, over-arching identities through cross-group contact can reduce bad defensive reasoning. But it will not be enough. We also need to ensure that there are **positive social identities that people can adopt** to replace the ones they abandon. And we also need social identities that function as a defence against misleading evidence, for instance about the supposed inferiority of marginalised social groups. Here, **alternative sub-communities and social movements** play a key role.

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Alternative sub-communities and social movements often creatively develop new social identities or reimagine existing ones. Sometimes this is an explicit goal of the movement. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. framed the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956 as the source of an identity shift to what he called “the new Negro” – “a person with a new sense of dignity and destiny, with a new self-respect.” Other times, new identities are a side effect of shared projects. Working together toward an important shared goal generates opportunities to notice commonalities. This often generates new identities. In this way, for example, labour activism often gives rise to activist or worker identities.

In addition to creating new identities, social movements and alternative communities inculcate these identities in members. By participating in new communities, you might add new identities to your self conception. For example, you might come to think of yourself as an activist and not as a passive victim. Or you might come to centre some identities more and others less. For example, as many white women in the 1970s began to think of themselves as feminists, they also came to identify less as housewives.

### The Impact of Identity Change on Reasoning

New social identities change how we reason. Ceasing to identify with whiteness or masculinity as a by-product of union activism can make one **less defensive** around issues surrounding race and gender. Adopting a proud Black, feminist, or queer identity, can make one more sensitive to injustice and less motivated to defend the status quo.

Identity-change is a powerful motor. It alters which views of the world

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we leave vulnerable to the evidence, and which ones we cherish. And, as we have seen argued, identity change is often driven by change in social networks.

Changing minds requires much more than good arguments. It requires reshaping the social structures in which we interact.

### The Role of Philosophy in Changing Minds & Identities

Does this leave any room for philosophical reasoning?

Philosophy is often taken to make two key contributions to changing minds. The first is producing rigorous arguments. But we have seen that, by itself, even the most solid argument is unlikely to change defensive minds.

The second is cultivating skills in logical reasoning and fallacy detection. But a defensive reasoner will use whatever tools they have to defend their identity. Critical thinking tools may make them better at viciously protecting their misguided views against good evidence.

So perhaps **philosophy is at best irrelevant, and at worst actively damaging.**

This is too pessimistic. Critical thinking and good arguments on their OWN do not suffice. But they still matter. If we want people to change their minds **for good reasons**, we need valid arguments and sound reasoning. But we also need to make sure that people are receptive to those arguments. Changing social connections sets the stage for that reception.

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As it turns out, philosophy can also help us set the stage. Philosophy is not merely critical. As Jennifer Morton argues, it is also an **imaginative activity**.

Plato called on us to imagine that all we see are shadows on the wall of a cave; Descartes that everyone around us is an automaton; Rawls that we stand behind the veil of ignorance, waiting to know what our lot in life will be.

In asking us to consider these scenarios, these philosophers call on us to realise that **there is nothing inevitable about the way things are**. In doing so, they invite us to envisage and explore alternative ways that the world could be.

Likewise, by using the philosophical imagination, we can come to see that there is nothing inevitable about our social connections – or, more disorientingly, about who we take ourselves to be.

Finally, philosophy can help us build new identities out of the rubble. This is because philosophy involves **perspective-taking**. In doing philosophy, we strive to understand others' reasons. We try on their values and way of looking at the world.

This helps us achieve what Hannah Arendt calls an “enlarged mentality”. We become better at accessing new standpoints. And this is crucial to forming new shared identities with others.

At a collective level, then, philosophy can make space for new experiments in living. We can envisage new ways of relating to one another, new aspects of ourselves to nourish, and new identities to orient us.

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This can make us less defensive about beliefs that pose obstacles to social change and sharpen our eyes to injustice.

Ultimately, it might get us closer to a just world.

**Changing minds requires much more than good arguments.  
It requires reshaping the social structures in which we interact.**

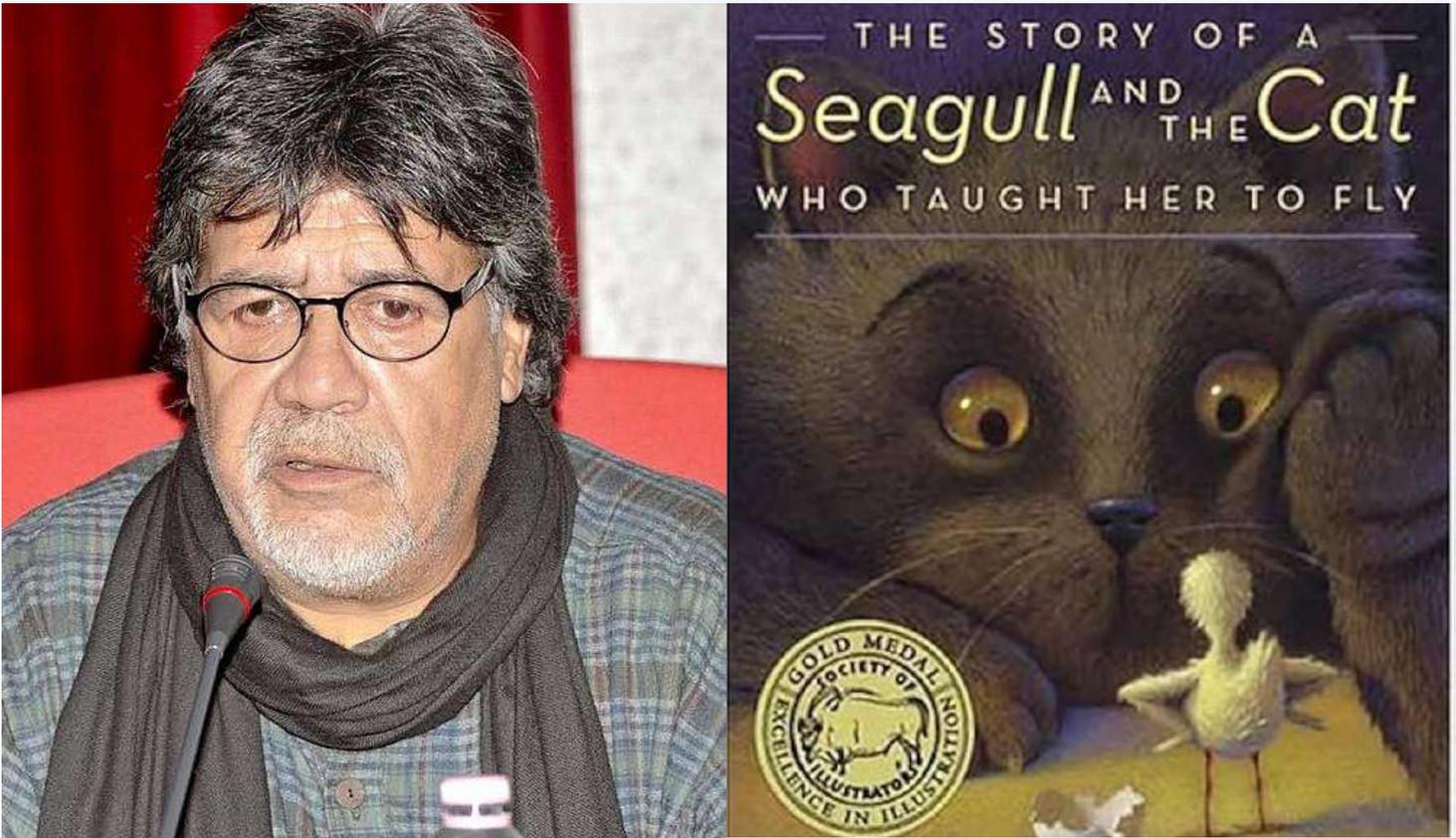
Carolina Flores

# A LITTLE DOSE OF INSPIRATION



A collection of stories & words  
to illuminate the path &  
spark the light within you!

## 6.1. THE SEAGULL & THE CAT WHO TAUGHT HER TO FLY



**Author: Luis Sepúlveda**

**Image sources: Wikimedia & Amazon**

***(Background information: "The Story of a Seagull and the Cat Who Taught Her to Fly" tells the tale of an unlikely bond forged by a death-bed promise. The story begins with Kengah, a seagull who, poisoned by an oil spill, makes a final, desperate flight to the port of Hamburg. She lands on the balcony of Zorba, a large, black tomcat, and with her last breaths, extracts three promises from him: that he will not eat the egg she is about to lay, that he will look after it, and most importantly, that he will teach her to fly.***

***Bound by his word of honor, Zorba finds himself the unexpected guardian of a seagull egg. When the chick hatches, Zorba and his motley crew of port cat friends – including the intellectual Einstein, the loyal Secret-***

## 6.1. THE SEAGULL & THE CAT WHO TAUGHT HER TO FLY

*ario, and the wise Colonel – take on the challenge of raising the little seagull, who they name Lucky.)*

Lucky grew rapidly, enveloped in the affection of the cats. After a month of living in Harry’s bazaar, she had grown into a svelte young gull with silky silver feathers.

One day, Einstein frantically pawed through book after book, looking for the method by which Zorba might teach the fledgling to fly.

“Flying consists of pushing air backward and downward. Aha! Now we have something important,” Einstein mused with his nose in a book.

“And why do I have to fly?” Lucky squawked, wings tight against her body.

“Because you are a seagull, and seagulls fly,” Einstein replied.

“But I don’t want to fly. And I don’t want to be a seagull, either. I want to be a cat, and cats don’t fly.”

One afternoon, she waddled to the entrance of the bazaar, where she had an unpleasant encounter with the chimpanzee (named Matthew - who is a friend to the cats).

“I don’t want bird droppings around here, you pain-in-the-behind birds!” Matthew screeched.

“Why do you call me that, Mr. Monkey?” she asked timidly.

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“That’s all birds do. Leave droppings everywhere. And you’re a bird,” the chimp repeated with authority.

“You’re mistaken. I am a cat and very clean. I use the same box Einstein uses.”

“That’s a laugh! What’s happened is that that gang of fleabags has convinced you that you’re one of them. **Look at your body: You have two feet, and cats have four. You have feathers, and cats have fur. And your tail? Eh? Where’s your tail?** You’re as nuts as that cat that spends its life reading and exclaiming ‘Dreadful! Dreadful!’. Idiot bird. And do you want to know why your friends are so good to you? Because they’re waiting for you to fatten up so they can make a good feast of you. They’ll eat you feathers and all!”

That afternoon, the cats were surprised that the seagull did not show up to eat her favorite dish - the squid that Secretario filched from the restaurant kitchen. Worried, they went to look for her, and it was Zorba who found her sadly huddled among the stuffed animals.

“Aren’t you hungry, Lucky? We have squid,” Zorba told her.

The gull didn’t open her bill.

“Do you feel bad?” Zorba insisted, worried. “Are you sick?”

“Do you want me to eat so I’ll get nice and plump?” she asked without looking up.

“No, so you will grow up healthy and strong.”

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“And when I’m fat, will you invite the rats to eat me up?”

“Where did you get that nonsense?” Zorba yowled angrily.

Tearfully, Lucky recounted everything Matthew had screeched to her. Zorba licked away her tears and soon he heard himself addressing the young seagull as he never had before.

“You are a seagull. The chimpanzee is right about that, but **only about that**. We all love you, Lucky. And we love you **because you are a seagull**. A beautiful seagull. I haven’t contradicted you when I’ve heard you squawk that you’re a cat, because it flatters us that you want to be like us, but **you’re different and we’re happy that you’re different**. We weren’t able to help your mother, but we can help you. We’ve protected you from the moment you pecked your way out of your shell. We’ve given you all our affection without ever thinking of making a cat out of you. We love you as a gull. We feel that you love us too, that we’re your friends, your family, and we want you to know that with you we’ve learned something that makes us very proud: **we’ve learned to appreciate and respect and love someone who’s different from us**. It’s very easy to accept and love those who are like us, but to love someone different is very hard, and you have helped us do that. **You are a seagull, and you must follow your destiny as a seagull. You must fly**. When you do learn, I promise you that you’ll be happy, and your feelings towards us and ours for you will be even deeper, because it will be affection between totally different creatures.”

“I’m afraid to fly,” Lucky squawked, standing up.

“When it happens, I will be with you. I promised your mother.”

## 6.1. THE SEAGULL & THE CAT WHO TAUGHT HER TO FLY

[...]

Lucky attempted to fly, and 17 times she ended up on the floor after rising only a few inches. The cats were centering all their attention on Lucky, who, with every failed attempt, became more sad and melancholy.

“She has to fly. I promised her mother and I promised her. She has to fly,” Zorba repeated.

“And each of us is responsible for keeping that promise.”

“We have to admit that we don’t know how to teach her to fly; we must look for help beyond the cat world.”

(And then Zorba went searching for a human.)

[...]

So Zorba told him the story of the dying gull, the egg, little Lucky, and the fruitless efforts of the cats to teach her to fly.

“Can you help us?” Zorba asked when he had finished his cat tale.

“I think I can. And this very night,” the human responded.

[...]

“No! I’m afraid! Zorba! Zorba!” Lucky cried.

“You are going to fly, Lucky. Take a breath. Feel the rain. That’s water. In your lifetime, you will have many reasons to be happy. One of them is called water, another is called wind, another sun, and it always

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comes as a reward after the rain. Feel the rain. Open your wings,” Zorba said patiently.

The gull stretched her wings. The spotlights bathed her with light, and the rain spattered her feathers with pearls. The human and the cat watched her lift her head, with her eyes closed.

“Rain. Water. I like them,” she said.

“You are going to fly,” Zorba said again.

“I love you, Zorba. You are the best cat in the world.”

[...]

“Fly!” Zorba cried, reaching out with one paw and giving her the lightest of taps.

Lucky disappeared from view, and the human and the cat feared the worst. She had fallen like a stone. Holding their breath, they leaned over the railing, and then they saw her, beating her wings, flying over the parking lot, and then they followed her flight upward, up higher than the golden weather vane that crowned the singular beauty of Saint Michael’s.

Lucky was flying alone in the night over Hamburg. She flew away, rapidly beating her wings, until she rose above the cranes in the port and above the masts of the ships, and then she returned, gliding, circling again and again around the bell tower of the church.

“I’m flying! Zorba! I can fly!” she squawked.

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The human stroked the cat's back. "Well, cat, we did it."

Zorba seemed to reflect for a moment. "Yes, at the edge of the void she understood the most important thing of all," Zorba said.

"Oh yes? And what was that?" the human asked.

"That only those who dare may fly."

"I suppose I'm just in the way now. I'll wait below."

Zorba sat there watching the gull until he didn't know whether it was raindrops or tears that were filling the yellow eyes of a big, fat, black cat... a good cat, a noble cat, a cat of the port.



*We all love you, Lucky. We all love you **because you are a seagull.** It's very easy to accept and love those who are like us, but **to love someone different is very hard,** and you have helped us to do that. You are a seagull, and you must follow your destiny as a seagull. **YOU MUST FLY.***

## 6.2. WORDS OF WISDOM

**Man is what he believes.**

Anton Chekhov

**You wear a mask for so long,  
you forget who you were beneath it.**

Alan Moore

**The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others.**

Fyodor Dostoevsky

**If you base your identity on having friends, being accepted, and being popular, you may find yourself compromising your standards or changing them every weekend to accommodate your friends.**

Sean Covey

## 6.2. WORDS OF WISDOM

**Ubuntu: I am because you are.**

African philosophy

**The more you know yourself, the more patience  
you have for what you see in others.**

Erik Erikson

**In a salad bowl, you put in the different things. You want the  
vegetables – the lettuce, the cucumbers, the onions, the green  
peppers – to maintain their identity. You appreciate differences.**

Jane Elliot

**Hindus, in their capacity for love, are hairless Christians; Muslims,  
in the way they see God in everything, are bearded Hindus, and  
Christians, in their devotion to God, are hat wearing Muslims.**

Yann Martel, 'Life of Pi'

## 6.2. WORDS OF WISDOM

**We know what we are, but not what we may be.**

William Shakespeare

**Often in the search for your destiny you will find yourself obliged to change direction.**

Paulo Coelho

**Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become the next moment. By the same token, every human being has the freedom to change at any instant.**

Viktor E. Frankl

**Human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them; life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves.**

Gabriel García Márquez

## 6.2. WORDS OF WISDOM

**Those who know don't talk. Those who talk don't know. Close your mouth, block off your senses, blunt your sharpness, untie your knots, soften your glare, settle your dust. This is the primal identity.**

Lao Tzu

**Give up the notion that 'I am so and so'.  
All that is required to realize the Self is to be still.**

Ramana Maharshi

**This body is not me; I am not caught in this body,  
I am life without boundaries.**

Thich Nhat Hanh

**You are not a drop in the ocean.  
You are the entire ocean in a drop.**

Rumi

## 6.2. WORDS OF WISDOM

**A body has many parts, but all its parts form one body. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?**

1 Corinthians 12:12-17



## 6.3. A SONG OF HOPE



### **“Always with Me”, from *Spirited Away***

Image source: [YouTube](#)

*Somewhere, a voice calls, in the  
depths of my heart  
May I always be dreaming, the  
dreams that move my heart*

*So many tears of sadness, un-  
countable through and through  
I know on the other side of them  
I'll find you*

*Everytime we fall down, we look  
up to the blue sky above  
We wake to its blueness, as for  
the first time*

*Though the road is long, lonely  
and the end far away  
I can, with these two arms,  
embrace the light*

## 6.3. A SONG OF HOPE

*As I bid farewell, my heart stops,  
in tenderness I feel  
My silent, empty body begins to  
listen to what is real*

*The wonder of living, the wonder  
of dying  
The wind, town, and flowers, we  
all dance in unity*

*Somewhere a voice calls in the  
depths of my heart  
keep dreaming your dreams,  
don't ever let them part*

*Why speak of all your sadness or  
of life's painful woes  
Instead let the same lips sing a  
gentle song for you*

*The whispering voice, we never  
want to forget,  
in each passing memory, always  
there to guide you*

*When a mirror has been broken,  
shattered pieces on the ground  
Glimpses of new life, reflected all  
around*

*Window of beginning, stillness,  
new light of the dawn  
Let my silent, empty body be  
filled and reborn*

*No need to search outside, nor  
sail across the sea  
Cause here shining inside me,  
it's right here inside me*

**I've found a brightness, it's always with me.**

## EMBARKING ON THE JOURNEY



And here we are – the end. Thanks for having stayed with me!

As we have explored together, the quest for identity is far from something trivial – it is, in reality, one of the most vital and continuous inquiries of humanity.

We've seen that “self-identity” is not a singular, static object to be found and neatly cataloged, but rather a dynamic experience – an ever-evolving understanding of who we are in relation to ourselves, others, and the world.

We've peered through the diverse lenses offered by philosophy, spiritual traditions, psychology, and contemporary thought, each illuminating different facets of this complex phenomenon.

## EMBARKING ON THE JOURNEY

We've acknowledged that the "self" can be both an anchor and, if held too rigidly, a chain; that it is shaped by the inner world and outer circumstances; and that the path to knowing it is filled with both opportunities and challenges.

But if there is one central thread that runs through this entire exploration, it is perhaps this: **the journey of realizing and defining your self-identity is an active and deeply personal art, not a passive discovery.**

It calls for the courage to shed limiting self-perceptions, the wisdom to discern one's own path, and a commitment to navigate evolving circumstances with presence and compassion.

Ultimately, no article, no teacher, no external framework can hand you your identity. They can only offer pointers, perspectives, and practices – like fingers pointing towards the moon. The real "moon," the living truth of who you are, is something you need to discover and co-create through direct experience and the willingness to engage with everything presented to you.

So, let us continue the exploration with an open heart and an inquisitive spirit. The process of knowing and becoming yourself is not a problem to be solved, but a life to be lived.

Just believe, and you will find your way!

Until next time,

**Jonathan M. Pham**

## EPILOGUE



Image source: YouTube ([\[1\]](#) & [\[2\]](#))

# EPILOGUE



Image source: [Pinterest](#)

BONUS: AN EASTER EGG FOR YOU 😊😊😊



*Hagrid's deduction is pretty... logical, right?* 😊😊😊

*Image source: [Reddit](#)*

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<https://jonathanmpham.com/en/newsletter-sign-up/>



**There are two ways of spreading light: to be the  
candle or the mirror that reflects it.**

Edith Warton



I'm **Jonathan M. Pham**, and I'm delighted to welcome you to my self-discovery blog!

Life, to me, is an endless expedition, and through this blog, I invite you to join me on the exhilarating journey of self-exploration and personal growth.



[jonathanmpham.com](http://jonathanmpham.com)