

Ask What Are You? And Discover What We Could Become

Okay, I'll confess. I wouldn't want to repeat my high school years. Wouldn't go back to that awkward stage. Faking my way of talking, behaving and associating so I could pass as one of the in-crowd. Suppressing my true urges, interests, values and ideas so as not to stand out. Actually, I'm amazed that any adolescent ever comes out the other end of that tunnel with a solid sense of who and what they are. And while most of us do, some of us take many more years arriving at a healthy level of self-comfort.

Of course, we all understand why developing a positive identity matters. Our sense of self becomes the foundation for everything from how confidently we pursue our life dreams to how well we will be able to engage and sustain healthy friendships, intimate partnerships, and family ties. Even our business ventures, our stress levels and our ability to stay healthy as we age depend, in part, on how secure and happy we feel about ourselves.

Now back to high school. I recently visited my son's school for a day. While I enjoyed nearly every one of his subjects and teachers, my favorite class was art. The students are replicating a fascinating exhibit created by a California photographer named Kip Fulbeck. He is multiracial - one part Chinese, many parts other nationalities and ethnicities. Hawaiians call such people Hapas - persons of mixed racial heritage who have partial roots in Asia and/or Pacific Islander ancestry. Kip recalls a difficult childhood, challenged by the ignorance, discomfort and hostility directed toward him by his Caucasian peers. Today, his diverse gene pool is a matter of personal pride. Kip invited Hapas from all across the United States to have their picture taken and to compose up to a half-page of text in answer to the question "What are you?" In dozens of cities, a total of 1200 individuals participated. They were all photographed as bare-shouldered mug shots, without hats, eye glasses, make-up or jewelry. The resulting exhibit and book is called "Part Asian, 100% Hapa." It's one of the most engrossing, affecting and provocative psychological art projects I have ever seen.

My son's teacher encouraged the parents to get photographed, identify our ethnic heritage (Polish, Austrian) and to write our own answer to the "What Are You?" question. Next week, each student will try to guess which answer matches his or her parent's picture. Some of my classmates-for-an-hour wrote long personal statements. I kept mine short (to fool my son?) - "I am all that I am and all that I believe. I have dreams." For the next two days, my thoughts kept returning to this simple and simply stunning exercise in self-revelation. I started thinking of all the possible ways people might choose to identify themselves. Soon I realized that my point of reference could be completely different from my neighbor's. Do you see yourself as a member of an ethnic group, a national citizenry, a sexual preference, a political party, a fan club, an occupation, a philosophy or an emotional state? Do you not fit into any box?

I started listing all the ways I could think of that people might use to associate themselves and, through association, identify as a member of a group of people like themselves. Here, then, is a quick tour through the human race, one identity grouping at a time:

Ethnicity or race is an obvious category that sometimes unites, sometimes unites us. Families, communities and nations have organized in proud determination to honor and promote their ethnic identity. At the same time, wars have been fought between and within families, communities and nations intolerant of racial diversity and coexistence.

Religion is another of the more obvious group identifiers. We are all Americans and, at the same time, we are practicing Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Hindus, Bahai, Jews and Humanists.

How about place? Proud to be a Southerner, a Midwesterner, a New Yorker, an Alaskan Native? In this nation of immigrants, new citizens may find common ground with each other's stories, language and cultural heritage.

Maybe you identify yourself first in your work role. Are you a lawyer, a retailer, a manager, an athlete? My professional colleagues come from every race, place and religious faith on the planet. We all have abilities that mark our areas of strength. At the same time, most of us achieve despite a weakness or disability in one or more physical, intellectual, emotional, or social skills.

How about some alternative identifications? School for example. I feel akin to anyone who attended my high school or college. Alumni networks (for some reason, here in Florida, the Gators come to mind) are some of the most (fiercely) loyal associations I have ever observed. Membership affords everything from advantage in job hiring to shopping discounts to invitation into social networks.

Other folks may identify themselves most strongly with their military service, income level, marital status, parentage or birth order.

Don't laugh too loudly when I list a few other possibilities for self-definition. Our friendships, for example. Oscar Wilde famously pronounced "Show me your friends and I'll tell you who you are." Beliefs or ideologies may also join or separate principled folks from all walks of life. Are you your temperament? If so, you might cry out: optimists (or pessimists) of the world unite! Persons who participated in the same life-or-earth-shattering experience feel joined forever by the memory of the moment they once shared – a hurricane, a battle, a depression, a fire, a Stanley Cup win, the death of a national leader. Our hobbies, our passions and our fetishes, whether for art (realist or abstract), music (hip-hop versus jazz), sport (How 'bout them Bucs!), nature, reading, stamp collecting, chess, shoes, national or community service, aiding a neighbor or acknowledging the humanity of a homeless person, each and all can give defining meaning to our lives and our sense of existence and purpose.

Sadly, there are those who, consciously or not, try to erase their identity in hopes of finding, in anonymity, protection from past victimization at the hands of violence, abuse or psychological torture.

I encourage you to add to my list of things real and imagined that serve to give us a sense of personal and group identity. Having free will and being part of a number higher than one inspire our effort for self-improvement, achievement and contribution. In the end, this exercise reminds me that both are true - every person is unique and all people are a lovely mixture of many influences, biological and environmental, that combine to form our personalities, our preferences, our values and our individual gift to those whose lives we touch. These traits that we share with others and declare as our own make us identifiable to those seeking our particular abilities, interests or history. Yet we are never just what we appear to be. We can be identified but we must never be labeled. Labels are boxes that limit people's knowledge and understanding of us and can be used to prejudice, diminish and exclude. When we accept our labels, we risk limiting our own dreams, expectations and opportunities.

This simple exercise exposes the rainbow of humanity we call community. Each person I meet is now implicitly more interesting for being a composite of so much history, biology and chance. "What are you?" Answering this question reinforces the importance of knowing yourself by acknowledging all the parts of your identity. With such personal insight securely tucked in your pocket, you will be able to fully engage with another person. I bet you'll discover many things that matter to that someone you want to know. Don't you love it – good questions create possibilities and clear the air of assumptions that abbreviate our search and, ultimately, our personal growth.

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