The 4 Stages of Becoming

From ME at the Center to God at the Center

The Journey from Dependence and Identity to Awareness, Surrender, and True Freedom

By Dr. Mike Van Thielen, PhD

We enter this world with ME at the center, and for good reason. As infants and young children, we are completely dependent upon others. Someone must feed us, protect us, comfort us, and make us feel safe. Long before we have the intellectual ability to understand what is happening around us, our nervous system is already learning from every experience. Am I safe? Am I loved? Do I belong? Will someone come when I need them? Our little universe naturally organizes itself around these questions because, at that stage of life, our survival depends upon how the world responds to us.

What fascinates me is that this natural starting point may also become the foundation for much of the suffering we experience later in life. We grow older, gain knowledge, acquire responsibilities, and develop increasingly sophisticated ways of navigating the world, yet we may never question the most fundamental assumption underlying our experience: that ME belongs at the center of everything.

Looking back on my own journey, I recognize four stages of becoming. They are not rigid developmental milestones, nor does everyone necessarily move through all four. Rather, they describe a progression I have come to recognize in myself, from unconscious dependence and the construction of identity to self-awareness and, ultimately, the possibility of surrender.

Stage 1 — Childhood: Dependence, Safety, and the Birth of ME

My own story began in Belgium, where my parents divorced when I was very young. I was raised primarily by my mother and grandparents, with my biological father largely absent from my life. At that age, I obviously didn't understand attachment, childhood conditioning, or subconscious programming. I simply adapted, as children do.

We learn what brings connection and what threatens it, what gets attention, what creates conflict, and which parts of ourselves seem safest to reveal or hide. Some children learn to become quiet and agreeable, others become performers, achievers, caretakers, rebels, or the strong ones who never seem to need anything. These adaptations aren't necessarily conscious decisions. They are ways of navigating an environment in which love, belonging, and safety feel essential.

As adolescence arrives, the dependent child begins fighting for independence. We challenge authority, test boundaries, search for our tribe, experiment with identities, and attempt to establish our place in the world. Yet underneath the rebellion, many of the same questions remain. Do they like me? Am I good enough? Where do I belong? Am I attractive enough, smart enough, strong enough, or different enough?

The teenager who insists that nobody can tell them what to do may simply be the dependent child attempting to establish a separate identity. The outward behavior changes, but the internal reference point often remains the same. Life continues to be interpreted through ME.

Gradually, we construct a character from our experiences, relationships, conditioning, and beliefs. We rarely recognize that construction while it is happening because we experience the character as who we are. By the time we reach adulthood, we have already developed a remarkably convincing story about ourselves, one that will influence how we interpret almost everything that follows.

Stage 2 — Adulthood: Independence, Attachments, and the Illusion of Control

Eventually, we become adults and proudly declare ourselves independent. We build careers, relationships, families, businesses, homes, and reputations. We acquire possessions, accumulate experiences, and develop increasingly elaborate definitions of success. Yet rather than discovering who we truly are, we often begin identifying ourselves with everything we have accumulated around us.

That certainly happened in my life. I collected degrees and professional titles, built businesses, won national swimming championships, set a world record, wrote books, appeared in the media, and stood on stage. I became a father, doctor, athlete, entrepreneur, author, speaker, teacher, and mentor. I remain

deeply grateful for those experiences, and I certainly don't believe that achievement or ambition is inherently wrong. The problem begins when the things we experience become the things we believe we are.

Without realizing it, our attachments become our identity. We begin defining ourselves through accomplishments, relationships, money, possessions, reputation, appearance, and recognition. The child who once depended upon parents for reassurance may now depend upon professional success or external validation to feel worthy. We believe we have become independent, yet perhaps we have simply exchanged our childhood dependencies for adult ones.

And with those attachments comes the need for control.

If our identity depends upon professional success, failure becomes threatening. If our sense of worth depends upon approval, criticism becomes painful. If we define ourselves through a relationship, the possibility of losing that relationship can shake our entire sense of self. The more we identify with the things surrounding us, the more energy we invest in protecting them.

One of the most revealing places I have recognized this pattern is in my professional life, particularly with my books. Writing has become an important way for me to share what I've learned through decades of studying human health, performance, consciousness, and transformation. I genuinely want these messages to reach people and make a difference. Yet I also know how easily a meaningful mission can become entangled with the character's expectations.

I can write a book from the heart, convinced that its message may help thousands of people, and then find myself concerned with how many copies are selling, whether the marketing is working, how quickly the audience is growing, and whether the results justify the investment. Suddenly, the creative process that began with inspiration becomes a business problem demanding a solution. I started evaluating funnels, advertising, conversion rates, and all the things an entrepreneur is supposed to evaluate. Those are legitimate responsibilities, but somewhere along the way, the mind can quietly shift from serving the message to trying to control its outcome.

For much of my life, setting goals, creating strategies, solving problems, and pushing toward results were natural expressions of who I believed myself to be. If something wasn't working, I searched for a better method. If results

were disappointing, I looked for another solution. Yet I gradually began recognizing how much of my internal peace could become dependent upon circumstances unfolding according to my expectations.

I could spend years teaching people to release their attachments while discovering how attached I remained to the success of my own work. I could understand surrender intellectually, experience it deeply during meditation or breathwork, and still find myself trying to force the next chapter of my professional life to unfold exactly as I imagined.

That contradiction would eventually become one of my greatest teachers.

Stage 3 — Awareness: The Masks, the Observer, and the Question of Who I Am

For some of us, life eventually creates an opening through which we begin to question the identity we have constructed. Sometimes suffering creates that opening. Sometimes loss. Sometimes another human being becomes the mirror we didn't know we needed.

My life contained all three. Losing my younger brother when he was only twenty-four confronted me early with the fragility of life. Years later, my relationship with Jo Ellen became another powerful mirror. She helped me recognize patterns, defenses, wounds, and behaviors that were far easier to identify in others than in myself.

That began what I often describe as peeling the onion. Underneath accomplishments, I discovered identities. Underneath identities were beliefs, and beneath those beliefs were fears, wounds, conditioning, attachments, expectations, and protective strategies. My exploration eventually took me deeply into neuroscience, nervous-system regulation, consciousness, meditation, breathwork, self-inquiry, and what I came to call Science & Soul.

Instead of simply being the character, I slowly learned to observe the character.

That's when the masks became visible: the achiever, the strong one, the successful one, the healer, the teacher, the one who needs to know, and the one who needs to accomplish. At first, awareness feels liberating because we begin removing those masks. We peel one away and think we've finally discovered our authentic self, only to realize that we may simply have replaced it with another.


1
CHILD – DEPENDENT
LOOKING TO BE SAFE
PARENTS
FAMILY
SOCIETY
ME
SCHOOL
FRIENDS
2
ADULT – INDEPENDENT
IDENTITY BASED ON ATTACHMENTS
CAREER
PARTNER
MONEY
HOME
ME
SUCCESS
HEALTH
FRIENDS
3
AWARENESS – WHO AM I?
REALIZING THE MASKS
PEOPLE PLEASER
THE STRONG ONE
THE BUSY ONE
THE GOOD ONE
THE HELPER
ME
THE SUCCESSFUL ONE
THE HAPPY ONE
4
GOD AT THE CENTER
TOTAL SURRENDER • TRUE FREEDOM • INNER PEACE
GOD
JESUS
ME

Even becoming "awake," "conscious," or "spiritual" can become an identity. We can become attached to being unattached, and the ego can become rather proud of having transcended the ego. ME remains comfortably seated at the center of the universe; it just meditates now.

Some of my most profound experiences with surrender occurred during periods of deep personal exploration, when I temporarily stepped outside the familiar boundaries of my analytical mind. During one psilocybin experience, I found myself confronting how desperately I was still holding on to the past. I remember being guided outside, experiencing the trees and natural world in an entirely different way, and feeling a powerful invitation to stop fighting and surrender control. What stayed with me wasn't simply the intensity of the experience, but the recognition that so much of my struggle came from resisting what I couldn't control.

During another experience, while a storm unfolded around me, I confronted the choice between remaining attached to what was familiar and trusting what I couldn't yet see. The message I took from that experience was simple but uncomfortable: faith over fear. It was one thing to speak about infinite possibilities, consciousness, and surrender. It was another to release my grip when the future was genuinely uncertain.

These experiences didn't magically eliminate my attachments. In fact, they often made me more aware of how persistent those attachments could be. But they helped me recognize the difference between understanding surrender and actually living surrendered.

Gradually, another question emerged. I had spent so much time asking who I was underneath all those masks, but what if the ultimate purpose of awareness wasn't to discover a better, more authentic, more enlightened version of ME? What if the deeper invitation was to question why ME needed to occupy the center in the first place?

That question opened a door I hadn't anticipated.

Stage 4 — Surrender: God at the Center and the Freedom to Be Guided

My journey toward Christianity didn't begin with a deliberate decision to become religious. In fact, it unfolded in a way I never would have predicted.

During a manifestation exercise with my mentor Cassie, I set an intention to receive a book. Sometime later, a Bible arrived anonymously. Subsequently, a

patient gave me two books, *Escape from Reason* and *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. I hadn't been actively searching for Christianity. I had been exploring consciousness, energy, spirituality, and the relationship between science and the deeper dimensions of human existence. Yet these books entered my life through circumstances I hadn't planned.

I could have dismissed the sequence as coincidence. I could have analyzed it, categorized it, and moved on. Instead, I became curious. What if the path I had been trying so hard to understand was unfolding in a direction I hadn't anticipated? What if the answer wasn't another technique, another method, or another level of self-awareness, but an invitation to reconsider who or what I was placing at the center of my life?

I began reading, questioning, and exploring the teachings of Jesus. What struck me was how many of the principles I had been exploring through Science & Soul resonated with themes Christianity had been teaching for centuries: humility instead of pride, forgiveness instead of resentment, love instead of fear, service instead of self-importance, and surrender instead of the endless pursuit of control.

I don't see science and faith as interchangeable, nor do I believe every spiritual experience should automatically be interpreted as divine guidance. But my exploration of consciousness had opened questions that eventually led me toward something I hadn't expected to find: a renewed relationship with God and a growing desire to understand and follow Jesus Christ.

I have spent years studying how to improve the human experience, regulate the nervous system, remove limiting beliefs, expand awareness, and unlock human potential. Yet the more I explored the teachings of Jesus, the more I began to wonder whether the greatest transformation wasn't about expanding the capabilities of the character at all. Perhaps it was about learning to surrender the character's insistence upon being in charge.

For most of our lives, that character desperately tries to control the movie. We decide what should happen, when it should happen, who should remain in our lives, what success should look like, and which outcome would finally make us happy. We may call this planning, ambition, certainty, or even manifestation, but beneath it often lies the assumption that we already know what is best.

The problem is that the character can only imagine tomorrow using material collected yesterday. Our minds search for previous experiences, successes, failures, wounds, fears, beliefs, and expectations to predict what should happen next. We then identify one or two outcomes that seem acceptable and invest enormous amounts of physical, mental, and emotional energy trying to force reality toward one of them.

Control feels powerful because it gives us the illusion of certainty, yet it can dramatically narrow our perception of what is possible. Surrender, by contrast, allows us to loosen our attachment to the limited outcomes our past has taught us to expect.

Consider my books again. The character may decide that success means selling a certain number of copies within a particular timeframe, reaching a particular audience, or generating a specific amount of revenue. Once that expectation is established, anything that doesn't match it can begin to feel like failure. Yet who decided those were the only meaningful outcomes? Perhaps one reader will encounter a message at precisely the right moment and experience a profound transformation. Perhaps a book will open a relationship, conversation, opportunity, or direction I could never have predicted. Perhaps its greatest purpose will unfold years from now, in ways I will never personally witness.

That doesn't mean sales are irrelevant or that responsible marketing should be abandoned. It means the character's definition of success may be much narrower than the possibilities available when I stop insisting that I already know how the story must unfold.

Control narrows our attention to the outcomes our past allows us to imagine. Surrender opens us to possibilities beyond the character's existing script.

This distinction has become one of the most important lessons of my journey. Surrender doesn't mean doing nothing, abandoning ambition, or refusing to take responsibility. I can still write books, build businesses, improve marketing, make decisions, and act. But I can do those things without making my identity, happiness, and inner peace dependent upon a particular result.

More importantly, surrender changes the questions I ask. Instead of continually asking what Mike wants and how Mike can make it happen, I am learning to ask what God wants from me, how I can best serve, what I am

supposed to learn from the circumstances in front of me, and who I am being called to become.

This is where my understanding of the soul and the Holy Spirit has begun to take on deeper meaning. For years, I explored the idea of an inner awareness that exists beyond the habitual thoughts and protective patterns of the personality. Christianity has invited me to approach that inner life with greater humility and discernment, not assuming that every feeling or intuition is divine, but seeking to align my heart and actions with the teachings of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus becomes more than a historical teacher or a source of inspiring wisdom. He becomes the example of the life I am called to grow toward; one expressed through love, forgiveness, compassion, humility, courage, truth, and service. The goal is no longer to construct another impressive identity, not even the identity of a particularly spiritual or accomplished Christian, but to become increasingly willing to let those qualities shape the way I live.

In this sense, the fourth stage represents something quite different from the first three. Rather than continuing to build, defend, or refine the identity at the center of my world, I am learning to move that identity aside. God becomes the center, Christ becomes the example, and the Holy Spirit becomes the guide. My soul, rather than being another identity to protect, becomes the place where I seek to listen, discern, and respond to that guidance.

And this is where surrender begins to feel less like giving something up and more like freedom. I don't have to know every answer, force every outcome, or manipulate the external world until it matches the movie playing inside my head. I still act, create, dream, work, make decisions, and take responsibility for my choices, but I no longer need to believe that the entire story depends upon my ability to control it.

Becoming Who We Were Created to Be

Looking back, I no longer see my exploration of neuroscience, breathwork, meditation, consciousness, and Science & Soul as separate from the spiritual journey that followed. Those disciplines helped me recognize patterns I once mistook for personality, attachments I mistook for identity, and thoughts I mistook for truth. They helped me understand how the character was constructed and how much of my behavior had been influenced by unconscious conditioning.

But awareness wasn't the destination. It opened another door, and behind that door was the possibility of surrender.

I am still learning. I still catch myself wanting to control outcomes, especially when something matters deeply to me. I still have moments when the entrepreneur wants immediate results, the author wants more readers, and the problem-solver wants to fix everything. The difference is that I am beginning to recognize those impulses without automatically allowing them to determine my peace.

Perhaps that is what true freedom looks like. Not the absence of goals, responsibilities, or uncertainty, but the ability to participate fully in life without demanding that life unfold according to the limited expectations of the character. We can continue to create, love, serve, and act with intention while accepting that our perspective is incomplete and that God's purposes may extend far beyond what we can presently understand.

The full circle is therefore not a return to the helpless dependency of childhood. It is a movement toward conscious trust. What began as an unconscious need for protection becomes, through experience and awareness, a freely chosen relationship with God. Independence is no longer confused with having to control everything, and freedom is no longer measured by how successfully we can arrange the external world to satisfy our expectations.

For me, the journey has become less about discovering who Mike really is and more about discovering who God is calling Mike to become. Through prayer, stillness, discernment, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I hope to become a little more like Christ, not by perfecting the character, but by allowing love, forgiveness, humility, and service to replace the attachments that once defined him.

Maybe true freedom was never about becoming completely independent. Maybe it was about becoming conscious enough to choose what we depend upon. We spend so much of our lives trying to make ME safe, important, successful, admired, and eventually enlightened, believing that happiness will arrive when the next scene finally unfolds according to our expectations. Yet the character can only write from what it already knows, while surrender allows us to remain open to possibilities that we could never have scripted ourselves.

And perhaps that is the full circle: not finally getting the entire movie under our control but trusting God enough to stop demanding that we write every scene.