

Becoming Your Truest Self

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People are searching for who they are these days, hence the popularity of businesses like Ancestry.com. Send in your saliva, and they will tell you your genetic make-up: what part English, Irish, African, Asian. Sue gave me an Ancestry.com kit for my birthday. I turned out 64% British Isles and 35% Scandinavian. One woman got her results and said she experienced a “genetic epiphany”, a sudden realization of who she was.

I

God has been trying to give us a “genetic epiphany” forever. Here are three disclosures from the Bible. The first comes from Genesis 1:27:

So God created humankind in God’s own image, in the image of God God created him; male and female God created them.

We were created in the divine image. This is our spiritual D.N.A., our theological anthropology.

This should affect how we treat others and treat ourselves. A rabbi said when he saw someone approaching: “Make way, make way for the image of God!”

What is the divine image in us? Some say the intellect, others our capacity for speech. But deeper is this: our capacity to love and be loved, to be in communion with one another and God. God has given divine worth and dignity to every person.

The second image is this: *You are God’s Beloved*. When Jesus was baptized the Voice of God said, “You are my son, the Beloved, in whom I take delight.” This is what God has been trying to get through to all of us: “You are my beloved daughter, son in whom I take delight.” What if we believed this all the way down to the core of who we are?

The third image comes from Ephesians 2:10:

For we are God’s *poiema*—poem, work of art—created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

You are God’s work of art. You are an original. Each called to love and give the unique things you can offer the world.

The story is told about Mahalia Jackson when she was a young girl. She had been taking dance lessons, and the time came for her dance recital. She went out

on stage, paused a moment and said, “I’m not going to dance, I’m going to sing!”
And sing she did—all her life.

So we start here with our genetic epiphany: We are made in the image of
God, God’s Beloved and God’s work of art.

II

We are all seeking our truest self so we can live more fully who we are and
not only *love* with all our heart, mind soul and strength but *live* with all our heart,
mind, soul and strength. The poet e.e.cummings wrote:

To be nobody-but-yourself
in a world which is doing its best
night and day
to make you everybody-else
means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight
and never stop fighting.

So we are called to discover and become our truest self. Frederick Buechner
says this entails “listening to your life”. To do so, we must slow down and listen
deeply. Parker Palmer says your “soul” is like a shy, wild animal in the woods. If
you come crashing toward it it will run away. Some forms of Christianity come

crashing in like a circus or army. Our soul runs for dear life. So we sit in quiet and wait for our soul to come close and reveal itself.

The journey to your truest self is an ongoing journey. The poet May Sarton wrote:

Now I become myself

It's taken time, many years and places.

I have been dissolved and shaken,

Worn other people's faces.¹

It's *you* God wants you to be, not your imitation of someone else. We're like a young artist who learns to paint by copying other artists until we find our own unique way of painting.

There are two rabbinic stories which make the point. I've told you at least one of them.

Here's the first. A Jewish man named Josef kept praying: "Make me like Abraham! Make me like Abraham!" God said "I've already got an Abraham, I want a Josef." Second story: Rabbi Zusya said when he was an old man: "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'"

We each come into the world with our “birthright gifts.” They make us who we are. We are blessed indeed if we know what they are and use them to the glory of God and the love of the neighbor.

III

Of course, finding the true self is not as easy as it sounds. It is a journey, and it is a journey with God.

Thomas Merton, America’s most famous monk, taught about the tension in us between the “true self” and the “false self”. William Faulkner wrote that the only thing worth writing about was the human heart in conflict with itself. Reinhold Niebuhr begins his great work, the *Nature and Destiny of Man* with these words: “Man has always been his own most vexing problem.”² This vexation, this inner conflict can be termed the tension between the false self and the true self.

The false self, Merton says, is the “illusory self”, the pretend self, the self we think we are but are not really.

It is the self shaped by the world around us, by our life’s experiences and our responses to what happens to us. It is the fabricated self, the self the world around us tells us we should be.

Visualize it this way. The true self is a circle in the center with a series of concentric circles around it. The true self in the center is created by God. It is a place where we've never been wounded. Merton wrote that there is in us all "a hidden wholeness." This is the true self at the center.

But around the true self there are many layers of false self: These come from experiences, influences, things people have said or done that have hurt us. There is the false self the world around us is telling us to be: how to look, dress, achieve, behave. Our materialistic consumer society is saying: "This is what beauty is, success is". But your true beauty is in who you are. And success is being and doing what God has created you to be and to do.

One way to look at the spiritual journey is as an excavation down through the layers of false self to the true self at the center. It is a journey with God, and Jesus, the true humanity, is our guide.

Some days we are acting out of our true self, other days out of our false self. Have you ever said, "I was just not myself today!" that was your true self looking at your false self at work.

Many years ago I wrote a book on the “Seven Deadly Sins”. I have discovered more since then. I now call these seven deadly sins “compulsions of the false self”. Do you remember what they are?

Pride, thinking too highly of oneself.

Sloth, thinking too lowly of oneself.

Envy, the evil eye, the consuming desire to be what others are and to have what others have.

Anger, nursed hatred and resentment.

Greed, which says, You are what you own.

Gluttony, the desire to make ourselves full as a cure for spiritual emptiness.

Lust, the desire to use another person to satisfy your need for pleasure.

Are not these compulsions of the false self? Distortions of the true self?

And we could add some more:

Lying, distorting the truth in order to bolster or defend the self.

Ambition, the consuming desire to be on top.

Our spiritual goal is to act more and more out of our true self and less and less out of our false self.

V

The true self appears when you can rejoice in who you are, made in the image of God, God's beloved, God's work of art. It is where you claim your uniqueness.

It is when you feel fully alive, then use that aliveness to become "celebrants, advocates, defenders of life wherever you find it" (Parker Palmer). The second century theologian Irenaeus said that "the glory of God is the human being fully alive."

Finding your true self is a journey with God. The more you know yourself the more you know God, the more you know God, the more you know yourself, for you were made in the image of God. Listen to how Thomas Merton describes this journey.

Our vocation is not simply to *be*, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny....We do not know clearly beforehand what the result of this work will be. The secret of our full identity is hidden in [God]. [God] alone can make me who I am, or rather who I will be when at last I fully begin to be.³

The black poet Lucille Clifton in her poem “i am not done yet”, writes, “most of my lives is where I’m going.” The poet Stanley Kunitz writes as an older man looking over his life in his poem “Layers.” He ends with these words:

Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations is already written.
I am not done with my changes.

When Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free,” part of what he meant was the truth of who you are.

So let us be on our journey toward *becoming*, becoming our truest self.

1. May Sorton, “Now I Become Myself”, in *Collected Poems, 1930-1973* (New York: Norton, 1974), 16.

2. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941) p. vii.

3. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (A New Directions Book, N.Y., 2007 edition), p. 33.