

WHO AM I?

Background and Context

There are certain questions that can never be answered once and for all. Who am I? is one such question. Though you will never arrive at a definitive answer to this question, your answers are likely to change over time—that is, provided you are growing in knowledge and wisdom. At age five, this question—Who am I?—might be understood as an invitation to a game; at age ten it might be received as a kind of test that has only one right answer. At fifteen, “Who am I?” might arise, not from outside, but, from within. At twenty, it might promote a mother lode of existential angst or, just as readily, profound spiritual insight.

It is often fear that keeps us from broaching life’s fundamental questions. Fear of living an examined life; fear of being real; fear of ventilating the turmoil that broils in us; fear of the truth; fear of what might burst forth if we stopped, once and for all, playing the game of “let’s pretend.”

Activity One: Your Body Breathes You

There is a story about the renowned zoologist Louis Agassiz that is instructive. It was 1859 and Agassiz was a professor at Harvard when a student named Nathaniel Shaler asked if he might study under him. To gauge both the depth and breath of Shaler’s knowledge, Agassiz first peppered the young man with questions. Then, satisfied, Agassiz placed a preserved fish in front of Shaler and instructed him to learn all that he could without, in any way, damaging the fish. Shaler set to work observing, thinking that in an hour the professor would return. But Agassiz did not return that day, nor the next. It wasn’t until a week later that the professor finally approached Shaler to ask what he had learned. Based on his observation of the specimen’s shape, mouth and teeth design, scales, fin structure, etc. Shaler shared his conclusions. When he finished, Agassiz said, “That is not right,” and walked away. Shaler went back to work and to his astonishment, found that the deeper and more attentive he became, the more he discovered until, in his words, he was learning “a hundred times as much as seemed possible at the start.” Such is the power—largely forgotten in contemporary schooling—of sustained observation.

Instructions:

This is a rather simple exercise which asks that you visit your body as an observer. Search yourself for observable or experiential facts, or further suppositions based on learned facts about this body of yours. Ponder what this fact or supposition might mean, what questions it raises for you. The questions may be as simple as, "How?" or "Why?" or "What?" The point of this exercise centers around the question: "What am I?" After a few minutes of observation and contemplation, we will all share, one-by-one, just a single one of these observations and its related question. If you find yourself getting stuck, try on different points of view: a biologist, a chemist, a cosmic physicist, an ecologist, a mosquito, a bird. To spur your imagination, three examples gathered from a look down to my left arm include:

- I can see the vein in my arm. Why is it not more protected?
- There are very definite creases in the palm of my hand. How did they get there?
- I can move my finger. How does my body convert a candy bar into movement?

Activity Two: Who Is Experiencing This Moment?

What happens if we engage the question “Who am I?” LIVE, in the present moment? Arjuna Ardagh in his book, *The Translucent Revolution*, suggests a powerful way of doing just this. Find a willing partner and sit face-to-face. One of you will serve as a witnessing presence, holding the space, while the other will respond to the question: “Who is experiencing this moment?” If you are the one answering this question, the challenge is to locate your essence, deeper than thought, feelings, and body sensations and beyond memory; this requires dissolving your ego. What do you find when you look for the essence of you? Is there anything? Do you have form? Boundaries?

Should you fall silent, your witness simply repeats the prompt: Who is experiencing this moment? Then you continue, as best you can, to describe yourself in this present moment. Feel your body, your breath, the sensations in your hands, belly, feet... Who is it that feels all that?—i.e., Who is this one who is experiencing awareness of breath and body sensations? As Ardagh (2005, pg 28) encourages: “Try to find out for real, in a way that satisfies you more than spiritual ideas, more than anything you have ever read or thought or heard or understood. Try to find out what is really true about you, deeper than thinking.” If an answer arises like “I am spirit,” push yourself and ask, “What is that?” After all, “I am spirit” is just a thought and as such it is unreliable. So go deeper asking again and again, “Who is the one who is aware of these thoughts?”

After five minutes, partners switch roles. You may want to go back and forth like this many times for there really is no end to the possible deepening.

As Arjuna (2005, pg, 28) observes: “When I inquire in this way, I find that what is really meeting this moment, hearing sounds, seeing movement, and feeling currents of sensation is formless empty space, pregnant with infinite possibility. There is a mysterious presence, indefinable, with the capacity to embrace everything, just exactly as it is, but which in itself is nothing, just pure context, without content. This presence contains the body but still exists with or without the body. In this recognition, just here, just now, there are no problems and never have been. Disorienting and confusing as it may be, this realization brings a sense of peace, wonder tremendous energy, and a feeling of love with no specific object.”

Viewing the “self” in this way, you stop identifying so desperately with “form.” My daughter, introduced me to the expression, “Get over yourself,” meaning “Don’t take yourself so gosh-darn seriously”. In this vein, I remember the jolt of liberation I experienced when I began to understand that “my life was not about me”—this is the letting go of form. Tolle (2005, pg. 79) puts words to this jolt of liberation: “When I know myself as simply beingness then whatever happens in my life is no longer of absolute but only of relative importance. I honor it, but it loses its absolute seriousness, its heaviness. The only thing that ultimately matters is this: Can I sense my essential beingness, the ‘I Am’ in the background of my life at all times? To be more accurate, can I sense the I Am that I Am at this moment? Can I sense my essential identity as consciousness itself? Or am I losing myself in what happens, losing myself in the mind, in the world?”

Activity Three: The Castle Within Us

Psychologist John Wellwood, in his book *Love and Awakening*, uses the image of a beautiful castle with thousands of rooms to describe the experience of early childhood and how it

is that our shadows are created. Each room of the castle is beautiful in its own right; each has its own gift to offer. As little ones, we explore our glorious castle, room by room, giving full expression to each aspect (each room's gift) of our unfolding self. As fresh-borns, the concepts of "good" and "bad" do not exist. Everything simply is as it is; each room is experienced and accepted just as it is.

Then one day—maybe you were only a year old—someone came to your "castle" and announced that one of your rooms was deficient and that if you want a perfect castle you should lock that room; and because you desired the love and approval of that person you complied. With time other's came and they, too, passed judgment on your castle's various rooms. Some said certain of your rooms were too conservative; others complained that some of your rooms were too bold; others observed that certain rooms were not seen in any other castle, and so forth. Gradually, you locked off more rooms, relegating these rooms—essential aspects of yourself—to darkness. Eventually, you found yourself confining your life to just a few of your castle's rooms, and even forgetting that the other rooms had ever existed.

Your castle, with its thousands of rooms—one containing love; a second, honesty; a third, hope; a fourth, passion; a fifth, kindness; a sixth, playfulness; a seventh, patience; an eighth, courage—represents the enormity of who you are. And make no mistake, for each room in your castle with a so-called positive attribute there is an adjoining room containing it's opposite—yes a room in your castle that contains hatred; a second, dishonesty; a third, despair; a fourth, passivity; a fifth, selfishness; a sixth, dourness; a seventh, impatience; an eighth, timidity, and on and on.

There is a tendency to think of our "shadow" in negative terms. In fact, our shadow includes all those aspects of ourselves that we have not fully accepted and we are just as likely to disown our capacities for greatness as our capacities for smallness. It is in the "other" that we are able to see both our darkness and our light.

As Ford (1998, pg. 26) points out: "The castle is a metaphor to help you grasp the enormity of who you are. ... Most of us are scared of what we will find behind the doors to these rooms. So instead of setting out on an adventure to find our hidden selves, full of excitement and wonder, we keep pretending the rooms don't exist.... But if you truly desire to change the direction of your life you must go into your castle and slowly open each and every door. You must explore your internal universe and take back all that you've disowned. Only in the presence of your entire self can you appreciate your magnificence and enjoy the totality and uniqueness of your life."

Ford suggests a simple practice of publicly speaking these "shadow" qualities in order to reincorporate our disowned aspects of self. Doing this helps to break down our resistance to having that quality as part of who we are. More importantly, it helps to break down our deep resistance to its presence in others. With time, we may even come to see the gift in this quality.

Instructions:

1. Come up with TWO words for qualities that are the very hardest for you to accept in yourself—things that are highly charged for you. For example, perhaps you have spent your entire life trying to be sweet and kind. And as you examine your past, you realize that this goodie-two-shoes behavior is, in fact, a response to being called a "bitch" when you were younger. So it is that the quality "bitch" is locked in one of your castle rooms.

2. The practice is done in pairs and involves simply speaking the disowned quality to a partner.

3. In the example above, Person "A" would say "I am a bitch" and her partner would look her in the eyes and affirm, "You are a bitch." They continue in this matter until saying "I am a bitch" or hearing "You are a bitch" no longer holds any charge for partner "A."

Discussion:

Can you see the "good" in your "bad?" In your own life? Can you see it in other cultures or times?

Activity Four: A Greater Stature

We have already introduced ourselves to each other following the typical, "Hi, I'm Joe..." model. Today, let's experiment with a different form of introduction, one that recognizes that just as there are dark qualities that we all possess and don't acknowledge, so, too are there the unnamed bright qualities.

Begin by thinking of something that is really amazing about you—e.g., your loving heart, your hot body, your beautiful smile. It should be something that could make you blush.

Once you have something, I am going to ask you to stand up and mingle with the group, introducing yourself, not with your name, but with what you are. For example, "Hi, I am an extraordinary lover..." The response from the person you meet will be their own new definition: "Hello extraordinary lover, I am fabulous."

Note: If you go up and say, "Hi I am a nice person" this is not going to rock anybody's world, much less your own. So really go for things that make you blush.... For these are the unclaimed parts of your grandness.

Note: Avoid giving a description of yourself—e.g., instead of "I like to play," say "I am playful."

Discussion:

* Close your eyes. How do you feel right now? How many of you feel more alive? How many feel energy circulating in your body? Why do you suppose this is?

* What was this experience like for you?

* We make ourselves large/full or small/hollow by the words we use to describe ourselves. What if you were to assume your full stature? Think on this. Answer, if you wish. "What if you were to assume your full stature?"

Take-Away Quote:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate; our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? ... We are born to make manifest the glory ... that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it's in every one. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others. –Marianne Williamson

Check Out:

In 5 words or less ... Who are you?

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITIES

Supplemental Activity One: Why You Are You

Introduction:

Take a breath, for this is a big question. “**Why are you the way you are?**” This is serious. Consider this for a moment? Why are you—your life—your circumstances—the way they are? This is a powerful and important question.

Instructions:

- Pair up.
- One person is the speaker, the other the listener.
- The speaker starts: “My life is the way it is because . . .,” and completes that sentence.
- S/he does this ten times, each time offering an explanation why s/he is as s/he is.
- Then the partners switch roles.

Discussion:

- First, free-discuss in pairs.
- “We live in a culture that encourages victimization and blame, and, in so doing, it undermines our personal agency and personal sense of responsibility for our lives.” Discuss.
- “We live in a culture that encourages a sense of agency and individualism, and, in so doing, it undermines a fuller sense of the workings of chance and fate in the composition of our life.” Discuss.
- What more do you want to say, no matter how well-spoken or not?

Supplemental Activity Two: Transparency Exercise

One way to approach the question Who am I? is to consider how our past shapes our present-day thinking, actions and world view.

To begin: Pick a specific time in the past when you were going through a transition (e.g., graduation from high school, starting your first job, beginning a special friendship, the death of a loved one). Note: It is not important which actual ‘transition’ you pick, just that you pick something which demarcates a concrete moment in your life. In fact, it would be fine if everyone simply chose the moment when they graduated from high school, as this is likely to be a transitional moment that everyone shares in common. Next, bring to mind the **people, experiences, places, activities, and institutions** which influenced you up to that point in your life and, also, recall what you understood to be true about the world at that time—i.e., your beliefs about your country, home, friends, schooling, future, life in general. In addition, think about the possessions that were most important to you at that time, the things that you most enjoyed doing, and what it is that you most valued.

After several minutes spent revisiting this time in your life, take the transparency and, using the box of magic markers in the center of our circle, draw the pictures and symbols (avoiding words) that describe what influenced you (for better and for worse), what was true for

you (your beliefs), and what you valued at this particular time in the past. Really take your time and let this stew.

When everyone has finished his or her drawing (8-10 minutes), organize into groups of three. And, then, one-by-one, each person talks about his/her transparency—i.e., about the big themes—beliefs—that shaped his/her world view up to the chosen historical marker. After everyone has had the chance to speak, the group comes together and each person is given the opportunity to bring "something" to the whole circle.

After the conversation subsides, the facilitator invites everyone to take a deep breath and bring the attention back to yourself. Then, he says:

*OK, it is time to see what this exercise is really all about. Please hold your transparency on your lap with both hands. Then, hold your transparency before your face and look through it. What you have on your transparency is the beliefs (worldview) that you have absorbed from your families, schools, authorities, natural surroundings, and culture. Each of us looks out onto the world through lenses tinted and modified by our particular past. That is, **we look out through a collection of mostly unexamined beliefs**. In fact, much of what we believe, we inherited from family, church, culture by the time we were 6 or 7 years old. In other words, we inherited much of what we believe to be true before we even had the cognitive capacity to evaluate its validity. It is downloaded into us and, with few exceptions, we haven't looked back since to examine it!*

*When we forget that we have a lens on, we make the mistake of thinking that the way we see the world is the way the world really is. **BUT: We see things not as they are but, rather, as we are.***

Of course, we are not stuck with our lenses (not stuck with our stories/beliefs). Are there any images on your transparency that are no longer present for you today? Are there any images you would add to your transparency to make it more appropriate to your way of being in the world today (e.g., more compassion)? It may be that this change in your lens arose during periods of trauma or loss, or maybe after a blessing.

OUT-OF-CLASS FIELD STUDY: WHO AM I?

1. Soul Profile

Less is more. Here are seven questions. Ask each of yourself, and respond with only three words or phrases for each question. Be slow to answer and long in your contemplation. For each question, write your answer down.

1. What is your purpose in your life?
2. What did you feel when you had a peak experience (in sports, sex, meditation, prayer)?
3. What is your contribution going to be to your family, your community, the world?
4. Who are three of your heroes & heroines (in myth, culture, history, religion)?
5. What are the qualities you look for in a good friend?
6. What are your unique skills and talents (and how do you like to express them)?
7. What are the best qualities you possess in your personal relations?

When you have finished, the answers to these questions should come to no more than 21 words or phrases. Deepak Chopra, who developed this exercise, finds that these words represent a description of your "soul" and its calling; a sort of "soul profile."

2. Break a Pattern

It is possible to free ourselves of the illusion that we are our thoughts. One approach is to refer to yourself in the third person rather than using "I" or "me." For example, instead of saying "I am going for a walk" you might say "He (referring to yourself) is going for a walk" or "This being is going for a walk." If you have a willing friend, the two of you might experiment, eliminating all personal pronouns for a day. In this case instead of saying to your friend "Do you want to go for a walk?" you might say, "Does he (or does that one) want to go for a walk?" The idea is to begin to experience yourself in a less personal, more spacious way.

In fact, to begin this exercise is to begin to wonder, "Do I really know this person at all?" For you might ask a question like, "Does he go dancing on Friday nights?" or "Does she skip class just because?" or "Does he call his sister tonight because he wonders how she's doing?" And how are you to respond, except—I hope—not too quickly, for maybe you will see that you are just meeting him ... just meeting her. Perhaps you will see that, to some degree, your life has made of you a sculpture, somewhat hardened, slowly malleable. Yet, are you really made of something so hard as stone, and just as slow to change? Are you really just a pattern, long-formed? A series of habits?

The challenge of this exercise is to 1) try something new—that is, break a pattern of action, and 2) be someone new—that is, break a pattern of "acting." In the first case, simply begin by asking "him/her" all the things that s/he might do. "Does s/he swim at the local pool? Does s/he eat out in a restaurant for lunch? Does s/he sleep all day, stay up all night?" Ask as many questions as you can; keep a list of these as you go. Once you have begun and continued to ask meaningful and interesting questions of this person, choose one of them to observe. That is, go out and see him/her do this thing that you asked about. After a period of meditation, compose a response to your experience.

In the second case, think of an actor, of the way they are asked—and ask themselves—to enter into and become someone else. Think of a sculpture; think of taking a hammer to it. Your chore is to become someone else. It may be anyone whom you have met in person, through a

magazine, on TV, in a myth, etc. It may simply be your understanding of a stereotype or its negation. Think on who you would like to become, and why this appeals to you. Become this person for at least one hour—even better if you can do it for more. While you are this person, you do not even have to speak, because, at its core, this is about a way of carrying yourself, a way of knowing yourself. Of course, you may take this as far as you desire. After a period of meditation, compose a response to your experience. Why did you choose to become this person? What did you learn about your sculpture? What difficulties did you encounter? What liberations?