

# I am what I do

Reshaping our  
understanding of  
**self** and **work**

**Andrew Laird**

You meet someone for the first time, and after the introductions have been made the inevitable question follows: "What do you do?"

We live in an age when our sense of self is deeply shaped by our work—the activity we spend hours doing each week, generally an activity we've chosen to suit our own interests and situation. Whether consciously or subconsciously, many of us are captured by the mantra "I am what I do".

In his years working as a journalist and then as a mentor and spiritual adviser to urban professionals, Andrew Laird has seen the dangers of "I am what I do" from every angle. In this clear and compelling book, Andrew tackles the issue of work and identity head-on, showing the ways in which this mantra enslaves us.

But there's hope: Andrew also shows us how the good news about Jesus liberates us from this flawed way of thinking, changing our lives and bringing a fresh new perspective to our work.

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The background features several thin, light gray lines that intersect to form a complex, star-like geometric pattern. The lines are straight and extend across the page, creating various triangular and polygonal shapes. The main title is centered within the upper portion of this pattern.

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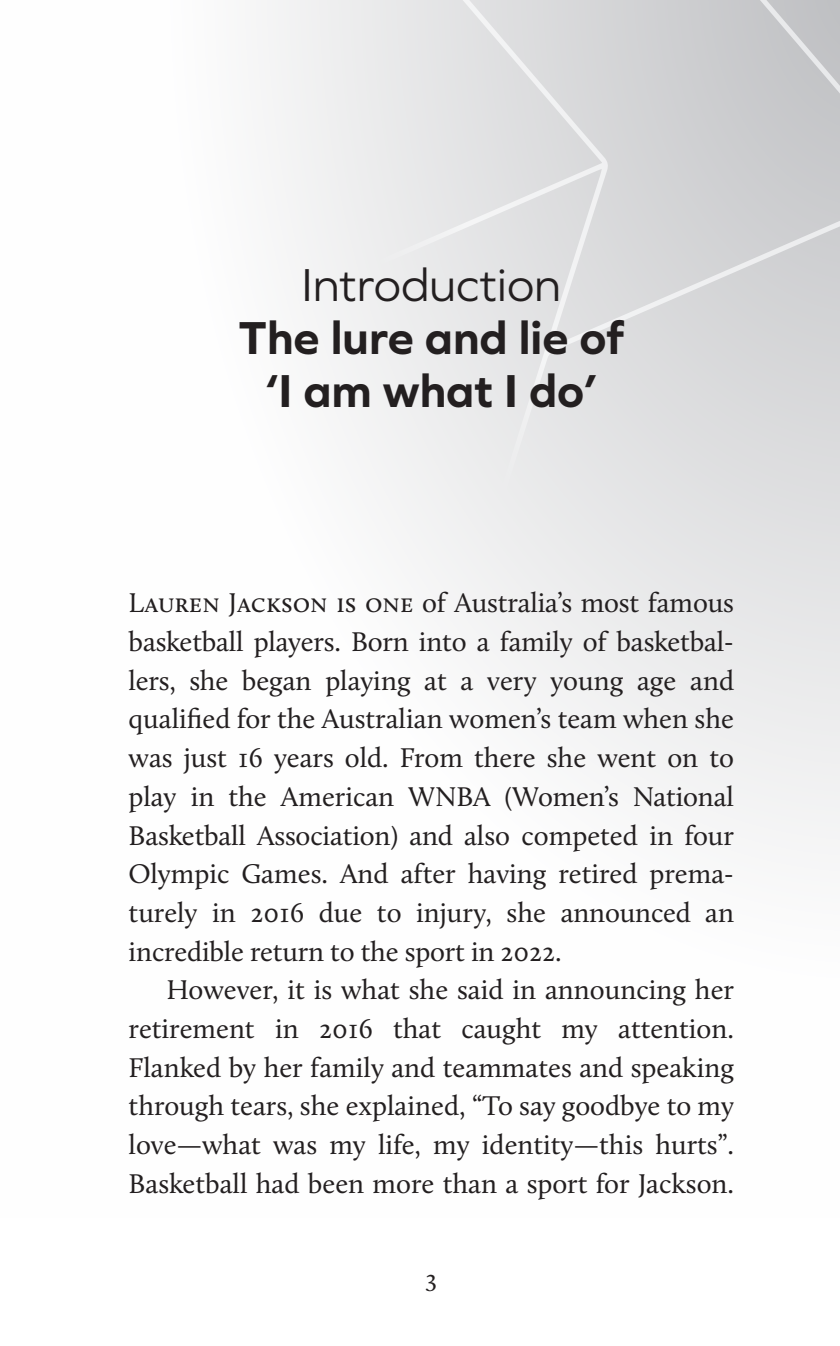
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## Introduction

# **The lure and lie of 'I am what I do'**

LAUREN JACKSON IS ONE of Australia's most famous basketball players. Born into a family of basketballers, she began playing at a very young age and qualified for the Australian women's team when she was just 16 years old. From there she went on to play in the American WNBA (Women's National Basketball Association) and also competed in four Olympic Games. And after having retired prematurely in 2016 due to injury, she announced an incredible return to the sport in 2022.

However, it is what she said in announcing her retirement in 2016 that caught my attention. Flanked by her family and teammates and speaking through tears, she explained, "To say goodbye to my love—what was my life, my identity—this hurts". Basketball had been more than a sport for Jackson.

It had even been more than a job. It had been her life—her identity.

Jackson acknowledged something that I believe is true for many of us to varying degrees. We live and work in a time shaped by the idea that ‘I am what I do’. A time when our personal identity is so often shaped by our work: what we do ... or don’t do.

Think about it for a moment. What is one of the first questions that you ask someone when you meet them? After their name, we typically ask, “What do you do for work?” And have you noticed how people often respond? Not “I work as a lawyer” but “I *am* a lawyer”. Or to put it another way, ‘I am what I do’.

## **A modern form of slavery**

This is not a satisfying way to live. Maybe you’ve noticed this, and maybe you haven’t. But when we constantly feel the need to prove and express our identities to others, this quickly becomes a terrible burden. It’s a burden to be constantly second-guessing ourselves, asking, “Have I done enough to be respected by others? If I do this, will it make me look better or worse in the eyes of others? How do I make sure that those whose opinions I really care about know I’ve done this?” At best, this is exhausting; and at worst, it’s soul-destroying. It can feel like being under a heavy yoke.

This isn’t the way God intended us to live and



work, or indeed think about ourselves. Think back to the beginning of creation and the identity that all humanity was given: we are nothing less than creatures made in the image of God! But more than this, humans at first lived in the perfect freedom of knowing and being known by the God who had made them. There's no burden to perform or prove yourself when you have *that* sense of self.

But, of course, this perfect sense of self—knowing ourselves in relation to God—was lost in the Fall when we went about things our own way. Estranged from God, we lost our moorings when it came to knowing who we are. Our modern attempts to find ourselves—often through what we do—fail to provide us with a stable and secure sense of self, but rather put us under an enormous burden.

So that's what this book is all about! It's to help expose the *lure* and the *lie* of 'I am what I do' that is so dominant in our culture today. It explores the degree to which we might have become enslaved by it, how the gospel frees us from it, and the wonderful difference that being freed makes for good, not only in our own lives but in the powerful witness that we are to others as we live in the freedom of the gospel.

At this point, I want to address those of you reading this book who might not necessarily call yourselves Christians. Firstly, I'm glad you're reading! I've written this book especially for Christians,

to encourage them to see the ways that they might have embraced the lie of ‘I am what I do’ and remind them of how much better the good news of the Christian faith is. But that doesn’t mean I don’t hope this book will be valuable for you too!

On the contrary, my hope is that as you see the wonderful, liberating difference that the Christian faith makes in this significant area of life, you might be encouraged to consider the Christian faith more deeply for yourself—so I’m very glad to have you on this journey.

## **The surgeon’s wound**

Where will this journey take us? Firstly, in order to truly embrace the freedom we have in Christ, we’re going to need to go deep into the heart of the issue. And I’ll be honest: that might feel uncomfortable at times. I find it uncomfortable when God reveals to me afresh the degree to which this thinking continues to entrap me.

But just as the wound of a surgeon is necessary in order to bring healing, so we’ll need to go deep into our hearts first in order to have the gospel heal us afresh. It will be worth it! The glorious freedom of the gospel is always worth understanding and embracing anew.

So to begin, in chapter 1 we’ll explore how pervasive and crushing the burden of ‘I am what I do’ is in our culture today. This will be important in two

ways: to help us understand the potential *lure* of it in our own lives; and to help us minister to others—either our brothers and sisters in Christ or those we know who don't know him—who are in bondage to this way of thinking about themselves and their identities.

In chapter 2, we'll get even more personal. We'll undertake a personal diagnosis of the extent to which we might have knowingly or unknowingly been gripped by 'I am what I do'.

But once the 'wounding' has been done, in chapter 3 we will be refreshed by the glorious truth of the gospel: that our identity is not bound up in our achievements and accomplishments. We'll unwrap again the wonderful gift that is the identity we have in Christ.

To finish, we'll get really practical—the rubber will well and truly hit the road—as we consider in chapters 4 to 7 various ways in which the freedom of the gospel changes how we think about ourselves and our work. But we won't stop with ourselves, because the freedom we find in the gospel is a gift we have to give to those we know who are also enslaved by our 'I am what I do' culture. The freedom we'll find in these pages is to be shared!

So come with me on this journey out of slavery and into freedom—a journey that begins at a beautiful, scenic location but quickly takes a devastating turn ...



# 1

## **The burden of 'I am what I do'**

THE YEAR WAS 1957 and Professor Vere Gordon Childe was late. The recently retired English archaeologist had made a trip 'down under' to the Blue Mountains of New South Wales. After a morning of bushwalking, he was due to be picked up for a lunch appointment.

He never arrived.

People began searching at nearby lookouts, only to make a tragic discovery: the Professor's lifeless body lay at the base of Govetts Leap lookout. The local coroner was called in to investigate, quickly concluding that the death was a horrible accident.

However, all was not as it seemed. Before his death, Childe had written a letter to a close friend asking him to keep it private for at least a decade. In the letter, he had outlined his plan to take his own

life, writing, “An accident may easily and naturally befall me on a mountain cliff”.

Childe had had a distinguished career, which included roles as the Professor of Archaeology at Edinburgh University and the director of the University of London’s Institute of Archaeology. But upon retirement, the Professor penned his now published letter, a piece of writing that has been described as “an unemotional meditation on the meaninglessness of a life without useful work to do”.<sup>1</sup> He wrote that he had no “further useful contributions to make” to the field. And so, because his work was over, he concluded that his life should also be over. Childe took the ‘I am what I do’ philosophy to an extreme and tragic conclusion—that because he no longer worked, there was no valuable reason for remaining alive.

## **The pervasive nature of this burden**

Such an “unemotional meditation” upon one’s value in light of one’s work might be rare; however, Childe (sadly) is not alone in this line of thought. And neither is this an exclusively male phenomenon (in spite of the tragic suicide rates among men of Childe’s age and stage of life and career).

Australian art curator Jane Scott admitted in a 2020 interview how she felt after suffering major

1 J Suzman, *Work: A history of how we spend our time*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020, p 176.

disappointments in her work, and her words bore alarming parallels to Childe's reflections. "I've had a couple of traumatic job losses," she explained. "We are our jobs, so when something doesn't work it's often devastating. [A friend of mine] has saved me on a couple of occasions from a pretty dark place".<sup>2</sup>

When "we are our jobs", there is no alternative outcome if—or rather *when*—our work is lost, or no longer fulfils us, or disappoints us. 'I am what I do' inevitably crushes all those who've tied their identity to their work.

And this crushing burden can also work itself out in other smaller, yet still debilitating, ways. I recall once receiving an email from a woman who described herself as "useless" because she had been sick for a while and unable to fulfil all the responsibilities of her job. Because she couldn't 'do', she believed herself to be "useless", so much was her identity caught up with what she did (or, in this case, *didn't* do).

This burden doesn't only manifest itself when work goes bad. My friend Graham Hooper tells the story of meeting a man who had recently retired. He introduced himself with the words, "Hello, I'm Bill. I used to be someone." Graham reflects: "He was half-joking but, in the way he said it, he was

2 S Horsburgh, "We were the same—fake it till you make it": the two inseparable "outsiders", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 October 2020 ([smh.com.au/culture/theatre/we-were-the-same-fake-it-till-you-make-it-the-two-inseparable-outsiders-20200907-p55t69.html](http://smh.com.au/culture/theatre/we-were-the-same-fake-it-till-you-make-it-the-two-inseparable-outsiders-20200907-p55t69.html)).

unintentionally revealing his struggle with the loss of the position and respect he had once held”.<sup>3</sup> We might have the most successful career, achieving all the goals we dreamed of, but inevitably it will come to an end. And when it does, if our personal identity has been wrapped up in it, just like Bill we might be left wondering who we are, or whether we still have any value.

However, there is an equally destructive flip side to attaching our value to our work. If I measure my worth by what I do, and what I do is quite frankly pretty impressive, this only leads to pride. And pride inevitably leads to destructive outcomes also.

I’ll admit I’ve let my thinking run away in this direction at times and it’s not pretty. Actually, it’s quite ugly—just ask anyone who has to live with someone who thinks about their identity in terms of their successes (and no, that’s not an invitation to raise this matter with my long-suffering wife!).

Author and pastor Timothy Keller summarized the two-pronged danger of attaching our worth to our work perfectly on Twitter: “When work is your identity, success goes to your head, and failure goes to your heart”.<sup>4</sup> ‘I am what I do’ is ultimately a destructive and burdensome way to live.

3 G Hooper, *Undivided: Closing the faith-life gap*, IVP, 2013, p 91.

4 T Keller, ‘When work is your identity, success goes to your head ...’ [Tweet], Timothy Keller, 13 September 2014 ([twitter.com/timkellernyc/status/510539614818680832?lang=en](https://twitter.com/timkellernyc/status/510539614818680832?lang=en)).



## A recent phenomenon

It's important at this point for us to recognize how recent this phenomenon is, and that it is not necessarily a global concern, either. Rather, it is an outworking of a value that our contemporary culture holds dear: individualism.

To put it colloquially, individualism is the idea that 'you do you'—that if you are not being 'true to yourself', then you aren't truly living. The mantra of our age, as Alan Noble laments, is a perversion of the wonderful truth of the Heidelberg Catechism, which he paraphrases: "I am not my own but belong to Jesus Christ". Instead, our world tells us, "I am my own and I belong to myself".<sup>5</sup>

In this individualistic way of thinking, our identity (and corresponding worth) is not shaped by others, nor does it come from anything outside of ourselves. Rather, it is ours to create and re-create, as the case may be.

While individualism has its roots in Ancient Greece (consider the tale of Narcissus), Will Storr in his book *Selfie* has extensively documented its recent rise to the 'hyper-individualism' we see today, especially in so-called Western nations. Storr cites data that suggests that individualism has risen rapidly since the 1960s, "including greater use of

5 A Noble, *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an inhuman world*, InterVarsity Press, 2021, p 5.

self-focused language in books and song lyrics” and other cultural expressions.<sup>6</sup>

Philosopher Luc Ferry has also written about this phenomenon, carefully documenting a strong connection between individualism and work. Describing individualism as the idea that you are “an end in yourself”, Ferry explores the key arenas in which we might create or re-create our identity and so build our worth. And for Ferry, there is one main arena in which we might do this—our daily work. As he explains, because of individualism, daily work becomes:

... the defining activity of man: a human being who does not work is not merely poor—without income—but impoverished, in that he cannot realize his potential and his purpose on earth ... In the [traditional] worldview, work was considered to be a defect, a servile activity ... In the modern worldview it becomes an arena for self-realization.<sup>7</sup>

Who am I? Individualism tells me that one of the key ways in which I shape myself and prove my worth is through my work. It is a significant source of my identity, an important “arena for self-realization”.

6 W Storr, *Selfie: How the West became self-obsessed*, Picador, 2017, p 262.

7 L Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A philosophical guide to living*, Harper Perennial, 2011, pp 126–127.

Of *course* this makes sense—doesn't it? Because if my identity isn't shaped by others or by anything outside of myself, then it's up to me to create it by what I achieve or accomplish. And where can I do this more than anywhere else? In my daily work! It becomes the source of my identity, and so 'I am what I do'.

I mentioned above how this burden might present itself as we near the ends of our careers. But, as Alan Noble explains, if "our lives are our own responsibility, it's our own fault if we make nothing of ourselves, and the easiest way to make nothing of ourselves is to choose the wrong career".<sup>8</sup> Young or old, we all experience the burden of needing to create our own identity and, often, seeking to do that through our work. And that is both burdensome and exhausting.

### **Is a collective sense of self the solution?**

I mentioned above that such a way of thinking about ourselves is recent, but not necessarily global. On the contrary, in many cultures today people still think about their identity primarily in relation to others—that is, they have a more collective sense of self.

In *Selfie*, Will Storr traces the roots of both individualism and this more collective sense of self,

8 Noble, *You Are Not Your Own*, p 89.

commonly found in Asian cultures, concluding that, “the Asian self melts at the edges into the selves that surround it ... to them, the group is everything”.<sup>9</sup> To talk about an ‘individual identity’ in this cultural context is an oxymoron—those two terms just don’t go together. Indeed, Storr observes that “the term for ‘human being’ in Japanese and Korean translates as ‘human between’”.<sup>10</sup> If I am part of a culture like this, I cannot think about myself apart from who I am in relation to others, be they my family, my tribe, or indeed, my workplace.

So could this be the solution to escaping the burden of ‘I am what I do’—finding our identity primarily in relation to others? Such a view of self can certainly encourage us to be less selfish as we think about others around us rather than just ourselves. And it can also foster in us a healthy dependence upon others (and equally, service towards others who depend on us). However, this is not ultimately the solution either.

In many Asian countries where a collective sense of self is more common, one of the ways that this plays out in relation to work is that it’s not uncommon to identify yourself in relation to your corporation. For example, Storr describes meeting a man in Japan who introduced himself not as “David”,

9 Storr, *Selfie*, p 75.

10 Storr, *Selfie*, p 76.

but as “Sony’s David”. And as with individualism, this can lead to devastating consequences.

In many Asian countries, suicide rates are devastatingly high, because “in a place where acceptance by the group is so important, its rejection can be disastrous to the self”.<sup>11</sup> That is, if (or when) you fail, you let down not only yourself but the entire group. It follows, then, that “by one individual taking his or her life, honour is restored [to the group]”.<sup>12</sup> This way of thinking means that tragically, in places like Japan, a CEO taking their life can make perfect logical sense.

## **The only way out**

By now it should be clear that in our culture today, we’ve made a mess of personal identity. The individualistic approach of *looking in* is burdensome and exhausting.<sup>13</sup> But a collective view of self where we *look around* to define ourselves can be equally unhelpful. This is not how God made us to be, and neither is it living in the freedom that the gospel affords us. On the contrary, thinking about identity in both of these ways places us in a form of bondage, both to ourselves and to the vain quest to

11 Storr, *Selfie*, p 81.

12 Storr, *Selfie*, p 81.

13 I have taken the concepts of looking in, looking around and looking up to form our identity from Brian Rosner’s book *How to Find Yourself: Why looking inward is not the answer*.

create an identity that fulfils us and makes us happy while also giving us status in the eyes of others.<sup>14</sup>

I mentioned above that I know something of this bondage only too well. I've lost count of the number of times I've made decisions to do or not do something in relation to my work based on how it will make me look in the eyes of others. I've chased roles and responsibilities in the hope of building my 'personal brand' (this very concept being another expression of individualism) only to find myself exhausted, burnt out or crushed that the desired approval of others hasn't eventuated. It's a miserable way to live—living for the applause of your peers, or even just approval in your own eyes according to what you achieve or accomplish.

The gospel offers a far better way, a freedom from the bondage of 'I am what I do'—a way in which we ultimately *look up* to find our identity. But before we come to it, we need to turn the spotlight on ourselves a little more directly. In this chapter, we've primarily been considering the problem 'out there': the way individualism and its toxic fruit are rampant in our culture and infect our work. But to really experience the wonder of the gospel solution, we need to look at our own hearts and explore the ways in which we might be

14 In chapter 2 we'll consider this further as we look at our need to express our identity in ways that gain affirmation and praise from others.

drinking from the fountain of individualism rather than the living water found in Jesus.

It's time now to diagnose the condition in our own lives. Let's explore the extent to which we might have knowingly or unknowingly been gripped by 'I am what I do'.