



Who Are You? Your Identity Is Unique

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Merriam Webster dictionary defines the word "identity" as: "the fact of being who or what a person or thing is". Now that's a little confusing!

I have been thinking about identity and exactly what the word really means. You see, identity is complex and can change over time and circumstances. For example, someone with Alzheimer's disease loses their identity.

Here are some thoughts about some of the contributors to identity:

1. Physical - Our gender, size, colouring and features usually allow others to recognize us at first glance. What is not immediately evident, however, is our DNA or fingerprints, both of which are used in science as accurate methods of identifying a person.
2. Ethnicity - We learn from our surroundings and adapt language, customs and even superstitions from the caregivers who raise us. These usually are so interwoven into our being that they can remain for years or even a lifetime. Stigma and discrimination can be associated with one's skin colour, accent or habits when matched with someone who's opinion is biased.
3. History - All of our experiences contribute to our identity either because we learn from them or because we ignore them. When asked, each of us can share memories from our past that have influenced us one way or another.
4. Personality - As a psychologist, I know that how we think, what we do and how we feel interact every minute of every day. Those who think negatively about life usually feel afraid or sad and can either lash out or withdraw. On the other hand, those who think positively usually smile more, feel confident and take action even when there is some risk of failure.
5. Roles - Are you a parent? An employee? A neighbour? A volunteer? What roles do you assume? Frequently, other people identify us by our associations and the roles we play.
6. Beliefs -Some people believe that the world is a scary and unfriendly place. They feel like victims and can be overstressed with responsibility for everything that happens. Others view the world as a wonderful, friendly place and cherish each day. Those who have a spiritual faith usually take on a primary identity as a child of God.
7. Vocation - Our careers can provide a form of identity. We become the consultant, doctor, teacher, author, painter or whatever job title our workplace assigns.
8. Health - Good health is often taken for granted whereas those who are suffering from physical or mental disorders might assume the illness as an identity. They are referred to as stage three cancer, schizophrenic or special needs.
9. Focus - The things that we think about and in which we invest our time and energy can result in a title. One might become known as the gold medal winner, Order of Canada recipient, concert pianist, or decorated soldier.
10. Values - I remember my unmarried cousin who was Administrator of a large hospital. She was asked "What does your husband do?" When she replied that she wasn't married she was asked "What did your dad do?" It bothered her that she was not recognized as an accomplished professional by the person who obviously thought her value was based on the closest male figure in her life.

I know that true identity is a complex concept. I am not just Mark's mother. I am more than my laughter and my resume. My height is unique to me and my family history is powerful, but they do not solely define me. There is more to each of us than a few facts.

Sadly, I hear clients and friends talk about how important their career is and how busy they are because of it. Then they retire and within months they are struggling because there is such a gap in their lives that they feel they don't have an identity.

In the award-winning musical "Les Misérables" there is a beautiful song with lyrics that reveal the inner struggle of the singer. He is facing an ethical dilemma about revealing his true identity and how that will affect those around him. He ends his solo with the words "Who Am I? I'm Jean Valjean!"

Who are you? Are you a person who enjoys flowers and helps other people? Are you someone who is trapped in sad memories from your past that emotionally imprison you? Are you an example and inspiration to those who know you?

Perhaps you are like Jean Valjean, and don't know if you should let yourself and others see who you really are deep down.

Or maybe you just haven't totally figured it out yet?

Homework for this week: Write one sentence with as few words as possible that clearly defines your identity.