

Who We Really Are

There is a story that you may know – it's from the Jewish Hassidic tradition and it tells of the great Hassidic master Zusya. When rabbi Zusya knew that his time on earth was drawing to a close, his disciples gathered around him, still eager to hear his words of wisdom. One of them asked him if there was anything that he feared about dying.

"I am most afraid of what they will ask me when I get to heaven," the great master replied.

"Why? What will they ask you?" the eager disciples asked.

"Well ... they will not ask me 'Zusya – why were you not like Moses? They will ask me Zusya why were you not Zusya.'"

And in that simple tale is summed up one of the great messages of human life – the injunction to find and understand and express oneself as the unique individual that each one of us is. It was there carved on the lintel above the Temple of Apollo – one of the Delphic Oracle's most famous sayings – 'Know Thyself'. It's there in a different form on the front of your order of service sheet in the quotation from Osho, otherwise known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh – a flawed but at times hugely wise figure in the personal growth movement of the 70s.

"One has to be oneself; that's my basic message. The moment you accept yourself as you are, all burdens, all mountainous burdens, simply disappear. Then life is a sheer joy, a festival of light."

Danish philosopher Soren Kirkegaard wrote of the purpose of life as *"to be that self which one truly is"*.

But perhaps before delving further into this topic we need to attach a note, a reminder, that this kind of exploration, and development, of the self is a primarily western and primarily modern pursuit. It may seem to us to be the correct path to take but through much of human history, and for much of the world today, an over-emphasis on the self, on the individual, would be seen as potentially harmful to the well being of the group – be that a family, a tribe, a community, a nation. It's sometimes too easy for me to forget that there are many ways to live a human life and that pursuing an individual path of self exploration is not necessarily the best for everyone.

And the path of self exploration is in any case far from a straightforward path. Many years ago I took part in what was called 'an enlightenment intensive'. The whole process was supposed to take three days but I did the one day version and that felt quite enough of an achievement. For that day we sat opposite a partner and for half an hour at a time, taking it in turns, we asked each other – "tell me who you are". You might want to ask yourself that now – who am I?

(Several people had been asked in advance to think of the descriptions they might give of themselves – singer, parent, partner, retired, treasurer, actual name etc etc. which they then shouted out.)

As the day went on we exhausted all the roles that human beings can identify themselves as – sons and daughters, partners, parents, friends and colleagues, Unitarians, work roles – teachers, librarians, carers, musicians perhaps, .. then you move on to characteristics – good and bad – kind, mean, judging, calculating, irritable, for example.

If you keep going with this question long enough – it brings up strong feelings – people laughed and cried, became frightened or angry. But eventually all of this falls away and you're left with well, nothing. But the kind of nothing that is everything, in that mystical kind of paradox that often seems to emerge on the spiritual path. It's almost as if the more we search for something the more it slips away from us – especially if that which we seek is the self that is doing the searching. Remember these enigmatic words Jesus spoke to his disciples, as recorded in Matthew's Gospel: *"He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it"* — Matthew 10:39.

In most religious traditions there is a concept of a self that exists beyond the trappings of our individualism – an enduring eternal self, rather like the self we explored earlier on in the meditation based on Roberto Assagioli's work from Psychosynthesis. This concept is well put I think in these words by Alan Watts – a western Zen Buddhist writer:

"Show me your original face which you had before your father and mother conceived you. Show me – in other words – your genuine, deepest self, not the self which depends on family and conditioning, on learning or experience, or any kind of artifice."

'Show me your original face' – such a beautiful message of acceptance of who we truly are when all the stuff of life is peeled away and reveals our deepest nature.

In our world today – who we are – has an almost obsessive importance - as anyone who has tried to open a bank account or get a passport can tell us. One of the fastest growing forms of insurance is that which has been designed to protect us from identity theft. Our governments are forever trying to find new ways to identify those who have a right to be in a particular

place and those who do not. Databases the world over have many techniques designed to verify just who we are. Clerks ask us special questions - the answers to which only we should know – our mother’s maiden name, the name of our first pet or first school. How strange we humans sometimes seem. But perhaps such concerns about identity are as old as the hills. There is a lovely story about the Sufi holy fool mulla Nasrudin – which I’m telling here in a modern version written by Peter Hawkins.

It’s said that Mulla Nasrudin went into a bank that he did not usually frequent and asked to withdraw a large sum of money from his account. The bank clerk was naturally a bit suspicious and asked him politely. *“Do you have any means of identifying yourself?”* Nasrudin reached down into the pockets of his long cloak and found an ornate hand mirror. He held the mirror up and looked studiously into it and then exclaimed to the bank clerk, *“Yes that’s me alright”*. Nasrudin is playing with the idea that when it comes to our identity – ultimately it is we who decide who we are.

Jo read earlier on that very interesting piece by Carl Rogers in which he suggested that transferring ideas from psychotherapy into foreign affairs might bring some refreshing honesty to diplomatic talks. In the same chapter Rogers lists some of the changes that he has noted in his clients over the years – when they have been allowed and encouraged to explore their true selves.

- He writes of people moving away from facades and false fronts in their identity
- Of moving away from ‘shoulds’ and ‘oughts’ in life
- Away from always needing to meet the expectations of others and away from needing to please others
- Moving instead towards self-direction, towards an acceptance of life as an-going process in which little or nothing is fixed or static, of moving towards an acceptance of complexity in human emotions and thoughts, having an openness to new experiences, a greater acceptance of others and a greater trust in oneself.

I think I might add to his list that the more we explore the question of who we are, the more it may become apparent to us that we make much, if not all, of this up, that our lives are constructed through stories, the stories others tell of us and the stories we tell of ourselves. Which of us does not have at least one label from childhood that sticks to us to this day – for good or ill. You know the kinds of family stories – we might be the clever one or the sickly one, or the messy one or the entertaining one. We learn this habit of story telling about ourselves and others early on and we continue the habit throughout life. But they are just stories that we choose, either consciously or unconsciously to live into. And one of the fascinating things about us is our ability to become someone different – perhaps by going on holiday or by finding a new interest or a new friend or a new job. Our identities then feel far less fixed. We can gain new perspectives and consider ourselves in a different light. By loosening our hold on our fixed identity we can start to expand into the creatures of infinite potential that we truly are.

Once again the Mulla Nasrudin might be able to show us the way. For there was a day when he was so very hungry and he found himself walking past the palace. Peering inside he saw that there was a great wedding feast going on, held in honour of the son Prince William and his wife Katherine. Nasrudin was so hungry that he slipped into the banqueting hall and found an empty place – not realising at first that he was in fact sitting next to the Queen herself. She politely turned to the Mulla and asked him who he was.

“Are you a foreign diplomat?” she enquired.

“No,” he replied. *“I rank above a diplomat.”*

“Are you a leader of a country?”

“No I rank above a leader of a country.”

“Do you run the United Nations?” the by now confused queen asked.

“No I am above the secretary general of the United Nations,” Nasrudin calmly replied.

“Then you must be God,” the queen replied with perhaps a tinge of sarcasm now in her voice.

“No,” said Nasrudin, *“I am above that”*.

“There is nothing above God!” shouted the queen, now thoroughly rattled.

Nasrudin replied – *“Now you know who I am. That ‘nothing’ is me”*.

And with that the queen and Nasrudin settled back to enjoy the wedding feast and we can perhaps settle back into the comfortable realisation that answering the question of who we are is at least the work of a life time. Amen.

Benediction:

May we, each and every one of us, walk in the knowledge of our own true worth
– able to recognise the true worth of others we meet along the path. Amen, go well and blessed be.