

IDENTITY

Our individual DNA and our unique fingerprints serve to identify us as individuals unique among all other beings. We go through life with personal identification numbers, like our Social Security number, assigned to us to help distinguish us from other individuals. We may even consider our name to be part of our identity, and yet many of us have common names that we share with others. With these diverse definitions of identity available to us, it is interesting to note that when asked “what is your identity?” many people often respond with a quizzical look or a blank stare. Some will say something like “that depends,” but the most profound answer and the one that seems most accurate is: “My identity is determined by a complex mix of things.”

All people have an identity defined by their cultural classifications (nationality, race, religion and gender) as well as by societal characterizations (family, career, and position or title.) These are external components of identity that are bestowed upon them. Many people just use these labels or external definitions to describe their identity. However, there is value in going beyond these external descriptors to recognize one’s total identity.

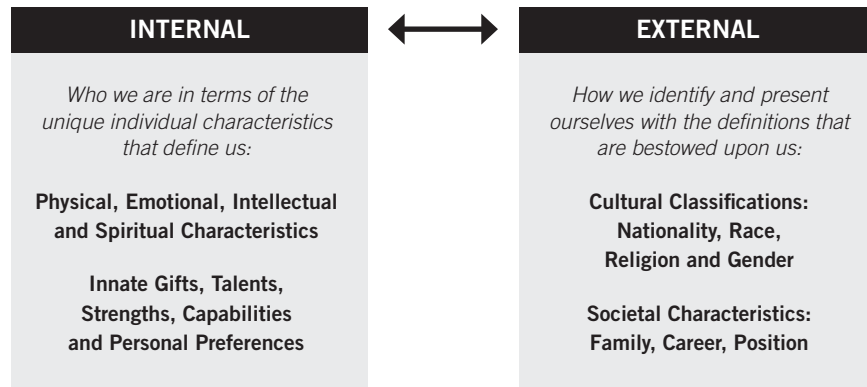
Internally, we also have natural gifts, strengths and capabilities. I call this your “*internal*” identity. This is the aspect of identity that needs to be nurtured and embraced. Awareness of your internal identity involves looking inside yourself and knowing what you know to be true about yourself, including your core values and beliefs.

The intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual characteristics that comprise your uniqueness are all part of your identity. Your individual makeup goes beyond physical genetic characteristics and includes many aspects of your personality, such as your innate talents and abilities, your basic orientation toward the world around you, your learning styles, how you process and organize information, and other predisposed tendencies and characteristics. These are all part of your *internal* identity.

All of your sensory preferences – taste (what you like to eat), touch (what you like to touch and feel), smell (what pleases or displeases your olfactory senses), and sight (what you like in terms of color, shape, design or artistic motifs) – are uniquely ingrained in your identity. Even your religious and sexual preferences are part of your identifying features.

OUR SENSE OF IDENTITY

This relationship forms our IDENTITY



This dynamic relationship is what makes our IDENTITY an evolutionary process.

Embracing your full identity requires accepting and supporting all its internal and external elements. Your gifts and strengths, your needs and challenges, your goals and dreams are all part of the fabric that is woven into the fiber of your being.

When your identity is formed from both components, you will be more apt to appreciate your uniqueness and the full sense of what makes you whole. The formation of your identity is an evolutionary process that balances the internal and external sources of that which defines who you are. Embracing both parts of your identity allows you to associate with others *and* to be uniquely individual. You are the totality of your cultural and societal classifications *together with* your distinctive physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual characteristics.

As presented earlier, when your identity is formed from both sources, you have a foundation for who you “are” – not what you “do” or what you “have.” When you embrace your whole identity, your motivation to achieve emanates from within.

With this awareness of your identity, striving to reach your potential comes from an internal motivation, and you are free to just *be*.

With full recognition of your *internal* identity – your internal truth – you are less likely to seek something else (connections, relationships, and/or accomplishments) to make you feel complete. Your identity can be thought of as who you are at your deepest core. The process of uncovering that core, and the ability to get in touch with who you are, is the first step toward living a sentient life.

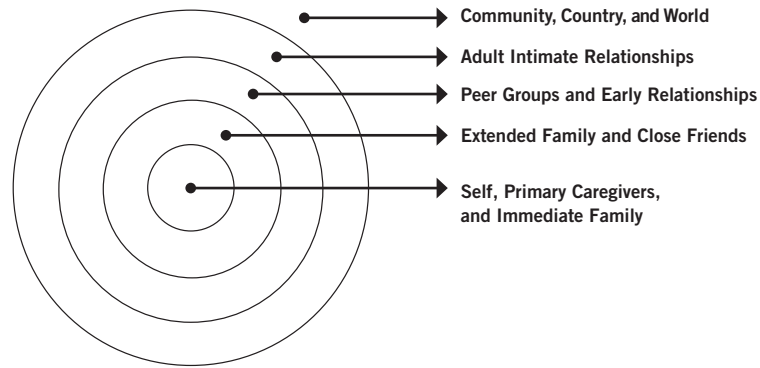
Without awareness of our identity, we can not be authentic. How can we be “real” if we don’t know what real is? Without knowledge of our values and core beliefs, how can we make decisions or know what we want? Our relationships, careers, lifestyle, and choices as an adult are all impacted by our identity. Awareness of our identity allows us to authentically choose our path in life.

Without knowledge of what makes our heart sing, what is important to us, or what is our life purpose, how can we form a vision for our future? Again, if we don’t know who we are, how can we determine what we want and where we are going? The actions we take toward our vision must be consistent with our values, core beliefs and the essence of our identity if we are to be fulfilled and live our life to its highest purpose.

Awareness of your identity spawns your creativity, your passion, your energy and attraction, and your vision. That is YOU. It is empowering to tap into your internal gifts and talents. This self-knowledge helps you be on your power base. This is the central stance from which you draw your strength and stability. When you are on your power base, there is a solid foundation, and you are less likely to falter. To be fully sentient is to be empowered by living life from your power base. From this posture, you are in a better position to resist outside forces that threaten to move you off-center as you pursue fulfillment of your potential.

The development of our identity is an evolutionary process. For the most part, our genetic traits are predetermined characteristics that do not change throughout our life. However, since identity is a complex mix of our innate gifts, our predispositions, our hereditary personality characteristics, and the sum total of our experiences, it continues to develop over time as we grow and develop, expand our relationships, and have new experiences.

Our identity forms in relation to the concentric circles or *Relationship Circles of Influence* in our life. First, in early childhood, it is all about self. Our identity is central to our “world” which is defined by our basic needs and desires that are satisfied by our primary caregivers or immediate family. Eventually, as we develop,

RELATIONSHIP CIRCLES OF INFLUENCE


we expand that definition to include family values and lifestyle. Our lifestyle and identity are influenced by our heritage (including family values) and other external cultural factors. Once we begin interacting with playmates during the school years, peer relations add to our composite image of self. Teachers, extended family and other close friends also impact the formation of our identity or sense of self.

About the same time, environmental and social values creep into our personal definition of who we are. As we mature, societal influences have a more profound effect on our identity, especially in terms of our need for acceptance. So often, external acceptance takes precedence over self-acceptance as the yardstick by which we measure our value and worth. Eventually, intimate relationships have more influence on the formation of our identity than general social factors. Depending on our lifestyle and how we are raised, our community values may also affect our sense of identity. Even the definition of community becomes highly personal to each of us. Peer community, local community, our country, or the world are all prospective playing fields on which our personal identity develops and manifests itself.

Each moment of our past ultimately becomes part of our identity. The present is where our identity is expressed; by fully embracing our identity we can live authentically in the present. The future is impacted by our identity; our passions and our dreams form the goalposts on our playing field as we journey through life. The actions we choose each day carry us from the present moment toward our future aspirations. These actions, determined in part by our identity, serve as stepping stones to the future.

When does our sense of identity crystallize in our mind? Unfortunately, as human beings we rarely take the time to answer that question for ourselves. Instead, we often seek external validation of our identity. We search for different mechanisms to tell us who we are – astrology, tarot cards, personality tests, classes and workshops, books, religion, and therapy are just some of the examples. Sometimes it is as if we are searching and wishing upon a star to define who we are.

We also avoid defining our true identity because of what I call the “Do Trap.” As human beings we spend many years being praised for what we “do.” As babies, we receive applause and cheers for each tiny achievement – rolling over, sitting up, crawling, standing, walking and going potty! In our formative years, we get rewarded with grades for what we do in school. We get athletic and academic commendations all the way through college for what we do. The do trap even extends to our adult years when the very first question most people ask when meeting someone is “What do you do?” It often seems as though it is not who we are but what we *do* that matters.

The “Do Trap” has two distant cousins: “Identity by association” and “Identity by possession.” Many of us have been known at different times in our life as someone’s child, someone’s spouse, and/or someone’s parent. Who we are is relative to whom we are associated with, and we may even introduce ourselves that way! (“She’s the President’s daughter,” or “That’s the mother of the new American Idol,” or “I’m John’s wife.”)

Some people are known by what they have or how much money they make – identity in relation to possessions. These people may be classified by their homes, cars, country clubs, adult toys, and their bank accounts. (“He’s the guy who drives the BMW and lives in that huge house on the corner,” or “She’s the lawyer who won the ten-million-dollar lawsuit,” or “That’s the couple who own the biggest boat on the river!”)

When you have full awareness of your identity, you don’t have to rely on external descriptors to define who you are. You get to be who you are – a unique being, accepted for your individual qualities and characteristics. With awareness and acceptance of your internal identity, you are less likely to fall into the comparison trap; you are free to design your life for who you are, not for what others expect of you.

Each of us ought to know the answer to the question “What is my identity,” but most of us have not taken the time to dig deep inside of ourselves for the true response. I invite you to learn about your own natural tendencies. There are many psychological instruments and personality inventories that are valuable tools for assessing personal orientation.

The acquisition of knowledge from these instruments can be helpful in understanding your genetic predisposition, learning style, emotional sensitivities, and other behavioral preferences. These instruments can be valuable in raising your consciousness because they can bring a deeper awareness of your natural preferences and orientations in multiple aspects of your life – home, career, relationships and personal growth. For example, how do you perceive or process information, organize your thoughts, and make decisions?

At the end of this chapter, there is a list of some well-known books, personality assessments and inventories that you may find helpful in your discovery process. I encourage you to gain expanded insight into your natural tendencies and innate qualities so that you may increase your communication, relationship, and decision-making effectiveness at work, at home and in life.

The secret to finding your identity, or internal truth, is solitude and silence. Rarely do busy beings choose to be quiet or alone. And yet, it is in the quietest of moments when you can look deep inside and discover your truth. The answers all lie within.

Finding your truth means really getting to know yourself. You can gain great insight and knowledge about yourself during peaceful moments of reflection, a quiet walk in nature, or through thoughtful contemplation while listening to quiet music. For some, personal awareness comes from exercising – jogging, biking, swimming, and other sports where you can be alone with your thoughts. Prayer and religious meditation can also yield inner knowledge. Still others of you may be able to gain insight and awareness by paying close attention to your dreams and the messages initiated in deep slumber.

As you grasp the full understanding of who you are, it is imperative that you compassionately love yourself in the process. No matter what you discover, you need to welcome that knowledge as your truth – the truth that makes you who you are. All people are miracles of life, unique beings unlike any one else. There may not be perfection in God’s creation, but there is beauty in knowing that you were created as a distinctive being – a complex individual with a myriad of qualities that makes you whole.

With this discovery process, know that your authenticity, vision and actions all burst forth from the wellspring of your identity. Becoming one with your identity is an important first step toward becoming sentient and empowering yourself to reach your potential.

DISCOVER YOUR POTENTIAL

The following questions are for your personal reflection as you seek to answer the question “What is my identity?”

- What traits are parts of my congenital make up?
- What parts of my identity have been assimilated through parental influence, religious norms or societal pressure?
- Which qualities describe my personality? What are my values and core beliefs?
- What are my preferences? What is important to me?
- What are my priorities in life?
- What are my natural talents and gifts?
- What challenges do I face? What comes naturally to me?
- What are my individual needs – in every sense of that word?
- What makes my heart sing?
- What causes me sadness and pain?
- What do I love about myself? What am I most proud of?
- What parts of myself do I embrace and cherish? What do I wish was different?
- To what degree do I accept myself as unique and unlike any other being?
- Am I able to see myself as God’s blessing – a living miracle in this world?