

Discovering the Answer to the Question: Who Am I?

The journey of self-discovery begins early in childhood, and it is influenced greatly by a child's parents, by other influential adults, and by one's own peers. This desire to answer the question "Who am I?" is often challenged by how others may answer the question for us.

For many young children, name-calling cuts deeply. Elementary school meanness starts on the playground and continues into late teen years through cyber-bullying. Schoolyard bullies make sure to reinforce the message of worthlessness, and insecure peers prop up their own failing sense of self-worth with put-downs. Unfortunately, many children also experience put-downs and messages of worthlessness from adults in their lives. When parents and teachers are hyper-critical of school and sports performances, it reinforces the message of "not good enough."

Some kids hear, "You're bad!", "You'll never amount to anything!", or "You were a mistake." Sometimes these messages are not outright said, but the message is clear nonetheless through the behavior of those who influence the child. The media, also, reinforce messages that both children and adults internalize. These messages insist that thinness, wealth, high achievement, and many often unattainable ideals are essential to self-worth.

Those children who make it to adulthood find themselves no longer seeking to discover themselves, but rather to please the boss, their spouse and children, or others. They try to project an image of worth to every critical eye in their life. The question "Who am I?" gets answered, instead, with labels: student, father or mother, husband or wife, teacher, plumber, or business person. But these roles are only a part of a person's identity. Failures in these roles, then, only reinforce the message of worthlessness that has dominated many people's lives. Now the labels include: school dropout, divorced, fired or laid off, absent parent, addict, or failure.

Sometimes this message of worthlessness leads one to choose a life of crime or to make a criminal choice that leads to prison. Now, more labels are added: delinquent, deviant, criminal, convict, robber or thief, sex offender, or murderer. These new labels not only serve to reinforce a continual sense of worthlessness, but they also serve as a scarlet letter that announces one's worthlessness to society. The cycle of rejection that began in childhood continues.

But this cycle does not need to continue. We can change both how we label others and how we identify with the labels others assign to us. Rather than accepting an identity chosen for us by others, we can live into the identity we choose for ourselves. We do not have to accept the labels give to us by others

Toxic labeling is designed with one purpose in mind. It separates us from those we esteem as less than us. It perpetuates a shame identity that says, "You are not enough." In so doing, it elevates us, in our mind, so that we can justify excluding others or treating them poorly. It is used by politicians, businesspeople, religious and non-religious people, wealthy and poor people, white people and people of color, children, and adults. It is self-serving and promotes the social isolation of others.

Using toxic labels is the result of a scarcity mindset. It stems from believing in a zero-sum economy. If I can exclude you, there is more for me. In high school it might be scarcity of popularity. I must put others down so I can rise to the top. It's the same in business, politics, and religion. But rather

than focusing on different approaches or different goals, we, instead, use toxic labels aimed at causing division and isolating those we are either threatened by or whom we deem as less than.

When we, as a society, approve of socially isolating others because we deem them different, we stifle the possibilities that exist within diversity. Instead of trying to understand the stories of others, we write their stories for them. Instead of seeing the value and strength of unity, we promote division and elitism. Mistakes and poor choices are used to define people instead of the sum of their character and their potential for good.

Instead of helping those floundering to discover the answer to their question, "Who am I?", we provide them with an answer, a toxic label that tells them it really doesn't matter. Whoever they are, by our definition, is not enough. We bury their potential under the heavy weight of hopelessness. We stifle their possibilities by isolating them with shameful labels. We even determine that a single bad choice, a single moment of foolishness, forever disqualifies them from hope for redemption. Society has now assumed the role of schoolyard bully. Collectively, we push those we dislike into the dirt and spill the contents of their hopes and dreams on the ground.

A few, very few, pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and refuse to accept the shameful labels hurled at them. They labor, sometimes alone, sometimes next to a brave friend or two, to live above their worst moments. They work to make right those worst moments, to change the worst parts of their character, and to redeem themselves. But they don't do it for the schoolyard bully. They do it for themselves and for those they harmed. They live a redeemed life because they owe it to themselves and to their victims. They do it because they finally know the answer to the question, "Who am I?"

These brave souls have discovered that they are not the labels, no matter how shameful or toxic, that others place on them. No, they now know that they are whoever they choose to be. For we are not the sum of our worst mistakes, not the worst five minutes of our lives. We are not failures because we failed. We are not worthless because of our worthless choices. We are filled with potential for good, for living out the values we hold dear. We define ourselves by the life we choose to live now, beyond the blemished choices of our past.