

From the Kitchen

27 July 2011



Who *are* you?

You were brought up by your parents or one of them, or by someone else. These people moulded your behaviour, your responses, your likes and dislikes, your prejudices. You probably had teachers for years. To what extent did their attitudes influence you?

Some people discover that the one, or both of those, they thought were their parents, turn out not to be. This can have a huge effect on them. They suddenly no longer know who they are, until they can identify their biological parents. On the other hand, there are people who falsely believe their parents to be their biological parents and never find out that this is false. Is their belief about who they are false? What about people who have believed that they were Aboriginal, only to find out that they are in fact descended from African-American slaves who jumped ship in Australia a century or more ago?

There are people who feel that they are the wrong gender. Some of those people eventually have gender reassignment operations and finally feel they know who they are. There are also people who are ambiguous about their gender and may not feel totally at home in a male or female body. To what extent does your body dictate who you are? To what extent is your sexuality dictated by your gender?

Who do you think you *are*?

How do you respond to things which happen to you? Your responses to your world are very much dependent on who you think you are. Your whole world depends on who you think you are. To a large extent you will not know who you in fact are, as many of your responses are unconscious. These unconscious responses are the result of many years of conditioning. However, if you carefully observe such unconscious responses, you can learn much about yourself and change many of these unconscious responses to conscious ones.

Are you a victim? Do you respond from the premise that the world should be a certain way and, if it is not, you are aggrieved? Does the world owe you something? Are people unfair to you? Do you lack power to do anything about circumstances?

Or are you someone who ‘rolls with the punches’? Do you regard blaming as something that is not useful or constructive?

How much of your response to what happens to you is a conscious decision?

The English astrologer Liz Green¹ once told me, “We are fated to the extent that we are unconscious”. She explained that we see as fate or destiny those things we do not fully understand. She uses astrology to gain insight into people’s real nature and through this is able to guide them to better fulfil their potentials. This is akin to the ‘Serenity Prayer’ used by AA: “God, grant us the serenity to accept those things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference”.²

Many people’s notion of who they are is related to their surroundings. Take someone away from their environment or the land they feel connected with, and they can wither and die – their identity is bound to the land they were born in and grew up in. This is not only true for

societies such as the Australian Aborigines or jungle tribes from the Amazon; it can apply to people brought up in the mountains of Austria, or the suburbs of Melbourne.

If someone loses a job they have been doing for years they can feel a loss of identity. Someone who loses a life partner can feel they have lost something of themselves.

What is it that has people invest some of their identity – some of who they are – in another person, a job or a locale? To what extent do you do this? Can any of us avoid doing this?

To find out who you really are, you would need to divest yourself of reliance on these externals for a while. Some people do this through meditation, some through prayer, some by spending time by themselves in the desert or in the forest. Some seek to do this through taking drugs, and largely fail.

Many people who go through such a process experience themselves as inextricably enmeshed in their environment, the people around them and, in fact, the entire universe. They feel they are ‘one’ with everything. Some people find the answer to the question of who they are, by discovering that the question is nonsensical.

Playing or listening to music, creating works of art or immersing oneself in looking at art works, watching a rough ocean from a cliff top – any of these can help some people remove themselves from those things which cloud who they really are.

The British who came to Australia found it difficult to relate to the new environment, partly because of the strange vegetation and animals. They deliberately brought familiar animals, birds and plants with them and introduced them into the environment here in order to make it into a ‘proper’ place to live. Who did they think they were? Their identity was to a large part bound up in the environment they came from. Well into the 1960s, people in Australia (some of them second and third generation Australians) talked of Britain as ‘home’. They identified with a place they had (in many cases) no direct experience of. Immigrants from other countries also experienced a loss of something – often something which helped define them.

We have an expression: to be ‘beside yourself’. What does this mean? If you can have a sense of being beside yourself, which of you is which? Exploring this is similar to exploring the expression of being ‘out of your mind’. These are issues of identity, of perception and of belief. What you believe and how you come to hold those beliefs is worth investigating further.

1. Author of *Saturn: A New Look at an Old Devil* (1976) and other books; also a Jungian psychologist and psychoanalyst.
2. Used by Alcoholics Anonymous and attributed to American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971).