

Resources for Communities of Ongoing Religious Exploration

V. 2 Unit 4

Identity

Suggested Chalice Lighting

I am tomorrow, or some future day, what I establish today. I am today what I established yesterday or some previous day. ~ James Joyce

Introduction

Identity. It is a word we all know, and use in a variety of ways. We quarrel over 'identity politics,' endure 'identity crisis,' and try to 'identity theft.' Identity answers the question, "Who am I?" It is a question we all answer in different ways; name, job, ethnicity, sexuality, relationship status, gender, age, physicality, abilities, interests, religious and political beliefs, and more. It is a public matter that is deeply personal, both existential and essential. The foundation of our every relationship, it is also profoundly spiritual.

Readings

My God calls to me in the morning dew / The power of the universe knows my name
~ Bernice Johnson Reagon

When someone says, "I believe God knows my name," I think they mean our truest, original self... Your true name, the name God knows, is a singular composite, a gorgeous and unprecedented tapestry. "Who are you?" is a complicated question. Who are you? And whose? And why, and how, and who says so? Who gets to say? The soul is a spark deep within, inviolate, your own, and you stoke that fire with new vitality your whole life long, shining your bright flame, and warming your hands at the hearths of strangers and lovers and everyone else.
~ Victoria Safford

Each of us has a name
given by our stature and our smile
and given by what we wear

Each of us has a name
given by the mountains
and given by our walls

Each of us has a name
given by the stars
and given by our neighbors

~ Zelda Schneersohn Mishkowsky

Our mind isn't calibrated to perceive reality as it is, but rather, is calibrated to make sense of our reality. And often, this means that our mind just makes up stuff that doesn't really exist. A well-known example of this is that, although we cannot see anything in what is known as the "blind spot" (the spot in our visual field where nerves connect to the retina), our brain "fills in" this gap. The fact that we are programmed to see things that don't really exist implies that our brain is not be capable of perceiving the truth about ourselves. For example, our brain may make up reasons for why we decided to marry the person we married, or why we chose a particular product over another. a plethora of findings suggest that we are routinely blind to determinants of our judgments and decisions. Further, and this is why the mind is particularly ill-suited for figuring out the self, even if the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, and why we did what we did, are sometimes true, we are unable to discern whether our self-told stories are true or fabricated. ~ Raj Raghunathan

Identity formation normatively has its dark and negative side, which throughout life can remain an unruly part of the total identity. Every person and every group harbors a negative identity as the sum of all those identifications and identity fragments which the individual had to submerge in himself as undesirable or irreconcilable or which his group has taught him to perceive as the mark of fatal "difference" in sex role or race, in class or religion. In the event of aggravated crises, an individual (or, indeed, a group) may despair of the ability to contain these negative elements in a positive identity. A specific rage can be aroused wherever identity development thus loses the promise of an assured wholeness: an as yet uncommitted delinquent, if denied any chance of communal integration, may become a "confirmed" criminal. ~ Erik Erikson

I see the Self as a kaleidoscope. As with the Gestalt and the Many Selves models, the pattern is ever changing. Life and its activities is rotating the kaleidoscope, rather than me. My very limited control is to speed it up or slow it down. The constant 'me' I wake up as is the kaleidoscope briefly at rest before the environment begins to turn it. The kaleidoscope's glitter are the few fixed aspects of me, such as gender, body, culture, etc. What's new every time is the mood I wake up in or experience. Differences between people are simply different combinations of different bits. His bits are mainly red and angular – a spiky person; hers are mostly greenish and rounded, a softer personality. To a degree I can add or remove bits of glitter, choosing colour and shape, such as changing my behaviours and attitudes. But, as with a real kaleidoscope, this means opening up and getting inside, which we mostly resist. ~ Tony Morris

Questions for consideration and discussion

1. How do you think of identity? E.g., made mostly of inherited qualities, or individual choices? Evolving and maturing over time, or a momentary and kaleidoscopic

product of circumstances and society? The cumulative product of our life experience, or a self-constructed illusion to make sense of seeming chaos?

2. Children often identify with a favorite pop music star, athlete, actor, teacher, or other person they encounter through media or real life. Do you have an image of someone in your mind with whom you remember identifying?
3. Can you recall a specific element of your own crisis of identity that is a natural part of adolescence (as used by Erikson, crisis includes meaning of both enormous challenge and opportunity)? Was there someone, or something, that was helpful in working out who you are?
4. Does the person you see in the mirror look like “you”? If not, what about your physical appearance does not match your understanding of who you are?

Taking it home

Try this exercise in personal/social identity definition:

- Make a list of 10 things that define who you are. Be as specific as you can, so that the list creates a good description of who you are.
- Cross two of them off the list. How does it feel to choose parts of yourself to ‘delete’?
- Cross off three more. With half of your descriptors gone, does it still feel like you?
- Remove two more items from the list. You have three things left. That’s not enough?

How would your life be different, if you could not claim those removed items as part of your social identity? If you had to keep them concealed or private in daily life?

This is based on an exercise designed to teach about social privilege and exclusion.

Perhaps it also can tell us something about the particular ways in which define ourselves, whether in similarity with or in contrast to others.

Conclusion

Was the discussion interesting? Or did it get bogged down or off track? Did it feel relevant to your life and religious journey? How might you have approached the topic differently? Were there moments in which you felt uncomfortable? Confused? Anxious? Affirmed? Eager? Hopeful? Surprised? What other feelings did you encounter?

If people in the group would like, allow them to share these things, without interrogation or challenge.

Suggested Closing Words

If you possess enough courage to speak out what you are, you will find you are not alone.

~ Richard Wright