

Psyche & Soul - 10

WHO AM I REALLY?

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha centre, Jeolikote, with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

Last weekend we explored the role of meaningfulness in living a healthy and happy life. This weekend we shall explore an important dimension of this meaningfulness. Our self-understanding of who we are.



“*Who am I really?*” This is a question all of us ask sometime in our life. Some of us find an answer, others continue to keep asking the question.

Emotionally healthy persons have some clear and convincing answers to the question “Who am I?”

In Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson’s developmental schema, identity formation is the crucial task to be accomplished during adolescence. But we can struggle with issues of identity all through life.

Personality psychologist Dan McAdams presented identity as an *evolving story* that integrates a *reconstructed* past, a *perceived* present, and an *anticipated* future into a coherent and vitalising life myth. Our personal life myth “is a special kind of story that each of us naturally constructs to bring together the different parts of ourselves and our lives into a purposeful and meaningful whole.” In other words, when we achieve identity we are able to bring together all of our past experiences, current realities and future goals and aspirations to create a picture of who we are and who we want to be.

Erikson described three significant ways in which identity formation can fail. These are identity *foreclosure*, identity *confusion* and *negative* identity.

Foreclosed Identity

Identity foreclosure is a premature (without much reflection or soul-searching) resolution of the identity issue. We can slip easily into a role expected of us by family or community. We may not in any way identify with this role or find it meaningful. But the internalisation of the expectation of others, a process which is often unconscious, pushes us into identity foreclosure. A sense of dissatisfaction and lack of fulfilment, often with no knowledge of its source, is the result.

Negative Identity

A *negative identity* develops when we conform to an image of us that is contrary to family or cultural ideals but which is projected on to us by the same family or community. For example, the family may not approve the way we are living or of our life choices and label us as the “black sheep” of the family. In such a situation we may strive hard to prove the family right by living up to that negative label, adopting and engaging more and more in behaviours that are socially disapproved. Or, while in school, a teacher might ridicule us describing us as “good for nothing.” We might then adopt behaviours that fit the label and really turn out to be a good for nothing. We sabotage our own welfare and happiness and hurt ourselves by going out of our way to prove our detractors right.

Negative identity can develop also from idealisation of or identification with someone devalued by family or community but whom we idealise. For example, in our childhood or youth we may have idealised an uncle or an aunt whom we loved very much and wanted to be like. It happened that this beloved uncle or aunt was also an alcoholic. As we grow up we may also identify with our uncle’s or aunt’s alcoholism and ourselves become alcoholic.

Identity Confusion

Identity confusion occurs when we are unable to make up our minds as to who we are or who we want to be. We are unable to make a commitment to any single view of ourselves. This may be because we are caught up in conflicting values or lack the confidence to make meaningful and lasting decisions. Young religious who are unable to decide if they want to make their perpetual profession or not, provide a relevant example. They keep postponing a decision.

Achieved Identity

A healthy and positive resolution of the task of identity formation leads to *identity achievement*. The pathway to identity achievement is through *role experimentation*. Erikson termed this period of free experimentation of various roles and identities before a final identity is achieved *psycho-social moratorium*. Before we make a final choice of what we want to be, we need to look carefully at and even experiment with various options by living them out for a period—in fantasy or reality. We have to do some real soul-searching about who we want to be and what we want to do, and then make definitive choices.

According to Erikson identity achievement moves us toward becoming and functioning as well-adjusted adults, with a fine balance of love and work—forming healthy relationships

and engaging in meaningful and constructive activities. We become creative and productive, and contribute to the welfare of society.

Life-Long Process

Although Erikson postulated that identity formation is something that happens in adolescence, recent theory and research show that individuals engage in a lifelong process of identity formation. Thus even if we have had a strong sense of achieved identity for a considerable period of our lives, we can still shift back into identity confusion, often triggered by new and unexpected experiences or developments in our lives. Such falling back is a positive thing, because we can now do further soul-searching and re-confirm our identity or choose a new one and move toward a deeper level of identity achievement. For this to happen we have to recognise our deepest desires and longings and the dynamics operating behind our conscious selves. The question we asked last weekend, *What do we really want?* comes into play here too.

Introspection

So, who are you really? ... How do you see yourself?... How would you describe yourself to another?

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“Who am I really?” is a question that Jesus struggled with all his life, from the beginning of his public life to its end on the Cross. The devil confronted him with that question in the desert. The devil tried to put doubts into his mind: Three times the devil said to him, “*If you are the Son of God...*”). Jesus had his own doubts. Who was he really? Was he just a man like any other? Or, was he truly the Son of God? During his public ministry he wanted some assurance and asked his disciples: “Who do people say I am?... Who do you say that I am?”). His last temptation on the Cross was related to the same issue. The bystanders taunted him: “*If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross.....*”

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This same Jesus who struggled with identity is with us and walks with us in our struggle? What would we like to tell him? You could visualize walking with him and holding a conversation with him.

Have a pleasant weekend. Be well. Be safe. Be blessed.

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