



Soul Matters

February 2017

Prepared for the Washington Ethical Society

Identity



Identity

Afraid that our inner light will be extinguished or our inner darkness exposed, we hide our true identities from each other. In the process, we become separated from our own souls. We end up living divided lives, so far removed from the truth we hold within that we cannot know the "integrity that comes from being what you are." ~Parker Palmer

*Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.
~Walt Whitman*

It's one thing for a religion to offer you an identity; it's quite another for a religion to celebrate your identity. At our best, Ethical Culture and Unitarian Universalism seek both.

In a sense, every congregation like ours hangs two signs on their front doors:

One that reads "**Hidden Parts Allowed in the Open!**"
And another that says "**Contradictions Welcome!**"

We agree with Parker Palmer that our society has separated us from our innermost selves. Indeed, the only relevant religions today are the ones that take this seriously. Hell certainly exists; it's the state of having to hide ourselves. And we also cheer on Walt Whitman's celebration of messiness and contradiction. We don't just want people to be honest about their contradictions; we want them to see those contradictions as great gifts! Bottom line: we want our congregations to be places where you don't have to pretend.

And it's not just the pressure to pretend that breaks our hearts. Our tradition also worries about the way our culture urges us to live small. As social critic, Courtney Martin points out, "It's never been more asked of us to show up as only slices of ourselves." The risk of this, of course, is that if we live too long only in our "slices," they become all that we are. There is no greater spiritual warning than one Kurt Vonnegut lifted up: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be." Friends, this identity work isn't a game or merely a pastime. It's unquestionably life and death stuff.

And here's the kicker: our faith wants you to stop hiding and live fully, not just for *your* sake, but for *our* sake as well. We are all struggling to escape our slices and connect to our hidden wholeness. Seeing you be real gives us permission to be let our true self out of the dark! Your brave honesty about your contradictions, allows us to proudly strut around in our multitudes! We save each other by being true to ourselves.

So this month, maybe those signs need hung on your own personal doors. Hidden Parts Allowed Out in the Open! Contradictions Welcome! No More Pretending! For all of our sakes.

Our Exercises

Option A:

A Reunion with Your Former Self

A bored sociology student decided he could learn more out in the real world than by sitting in a classroom. So he picked up his camera and took pictures of interesting looking people around town, capturing not only their images but also their stories. Thirty years later he hunted them down to show them those old pictures and give them a reunion with their younger self. Check out pictures of these “reunions” here”:

<http://twistedifter.com/2016/11/reunions-by-chris-porsz/>

<http://www.upworthy.com/there-are-over-30-years-between-these-amazing-before-and-after-photos?c=upw1&u=41aa6fc0057fcfdc850d917bc669deaf216c544e>

This exercise invites you to have a similar reunion with your own former self. Dig through your old photos and find 2 pictures of your “younger self” that best represent your core identity at that time. Then spend some time thinking about what you would say to and ask that younger self if given the chance:

What story would you want to rehash and revisit the most?

How would you thank him or her?

How would you apologize?

What compliments would you give?

What secrets would you tell them to keep? Or not keep?

What warnings would you offer? What encouragement would you give?

Bring your two photos to the group and come ready to share which 1-2 of the questions above best helped you re-connect with your younger self.

Here are two videos to inspire you and get you into the mind frame of reunion:

To the Girl I Was: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9ERUJQpdeU>

The psychology of your future self: https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_you_are_always_changing

Option B:

The Artist Who Helped You Find You

“Artists are always in the vanguard of social change...The music proclaimed our identity; it made every statement we truly wanted to make.” ~Dizzy Gillespie

Art and artists help us find our way. They provide mirrors and containers for our identity. Seeing their work, we see ourselves. Hearing and reading their work, we remember who we are. So hunt down and bring into your group one of the books, songs, paintings, photos or movies that has helped you find (and hold onto) yourself. Come ready to share the story of your first encounter with that piece of art.

Option C:

Your T-Shirt

Yes some of us may wear our heart on our sleeves, but virtually all of us wear our identities on our chests. Our t-shirts don’t just inform the world of our allegiances and accomplishments (alma mater, favorite band or sports team), they also tell the world what we want it to be (<https://libertymaniacs.com>). T-shirts announce our clan (<http://101tees.com/50-funny-state-t-shirts>) as well as our class (think about whether that polo logo on your shirt mattered as a teen).

And here's the most important thing about t-shirts: we keep them around forever. You know the t-shirt that embodies your identity because it's the one that has holes in it! The wording has faded and the sleeve is torn, but you don't care! It's a piece of you. No way is anyone going to throw that away!

So this month, slip your identify over your head and wear it on your chest when you come to your group. Come ready to tell your group why, although the image has faded, you're still holding on. (New found identities and t-shirts are, of course, welcome as well.)

One last note: Show your clergy person your t-shirt. Help him or her imagine what an awesome Sunday it would be if everyone (adults and kids) came to church wearing their identity on their chest. Maybe it's time for your congregation to start an annual "T-Shirt Sunday"! ☺

Option D: Bring Your Identity to Dinner

Identities love to come to dinner! Great grandma's German pot roast. Aunt Audrey's pie crust recipe. Norwegian family Christmas and that awful lutefisk. The requirement that great-grandpa's knife with the ivory handle be used to cut the turkey. And with these dinner table traditions, the old stories come out and we are able to tell ourselves into being once again.

So this month, you are invited to concoct an "Identity Dinner." Do it with your wider family and make it a way to pass on your traditions to the kids. Pull together your neighbors or even your Deepening Circle. Simply, ask everyone to bring a dish, an heirloom and a story that celebrates a piece of your heritage and informs who you are to this day.

Here's some inspiration to help you get started:

- **Keep family history alive through food:** <http://www.austin360.com/lifestyles/food--cooking/keep-family-history-alive-through-food/iNiOL7jYlifDtjZsu1E24L/>
- **Heritage Comes Alive At My Family's Dinner Table:** http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/abigail-esteireiro/cultural-food-traditions_b_12558520.html

One important note: For many of us, our heritage and identity now feels under threat. Gathering around a table as a Hispanic or Muslim doesn't feel as safe or celebratory as it should. This is part of the exercise as well. Find a way for the dinner to honor the way our identities are under threat; make sure the dinner involves a commitment to help others feel safe as they embody theirs.

Your Question

As always, don't treat these questions like "homework" or a list that needs to be covered in its entirety. Instead, simply pick the one question that speaks to you most and let it lead you where you need to go. The goal of these questions is not to help you analyze what Identity means in the abstract, but to figure out what being a part of a community of Identity means for you and your daily living. So, which question is calling to you? Which one contains "your work"?

1. **Which of your contradictions needs celebrated as a wonderful multitude?!** (*"Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes."* ~Walt Whitman)
2. **Is it time to pick a new group to tell you who you are?** (*"Who we are is a direct function of who we are with. We are relational creatures."* – Rev. Kenn Hurto)
3. **Has your struggle become your identity?** (*"Don't let your struggle become your identity."* ~Unknown)
4. **Is your identity longing for more alone time?** (*"Privacy is crucial to the sense of self."* – Oliver Stone)
5. **Have you thanked your wounds for making you you?**
6. **Have you become who you pretend to be?** (*"We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be."* ~Kurt Vonnegut)
7. **Are you living only a slice of yourself?** (*"It's never been more asked of us to show up as only slices of ourselves in different places."* ~Courtney Martin)
8. **Are you listening when people tell you who they are?** (<http://www.oprah.com/oprahs-lifeclass/when-people-show-you-who-they-are-believe-them-video>)
9. **What are you besides your work?** (<http://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/who-are-you-this-breathtaking-video-might-change-your-life/#.vonql35h-3i.facebook>)
10. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it.

Recommended Resources

As always, this is not required reading. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to companion you on your journey this month, get your thinking started, and maybe open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to be *a community of Identity*.

Word Roots

Identity: The set of characteristics by which a person or thing is definitively recognizable or known. from late Latin *identitas*, from Latin *idem* 'same' and *itas* - indicating a state of being

Wise Words

Who am I? My answer: I am everyone whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each 'I', every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow the world. ~*Salman Rushdie*

Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes. ~*Walt Whitman*

It's never been more asked of us to show up as only slices of ourselves in different places. ~*Courtney Martin*

We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be. ~*Kurt Vonnegut*

I can tell a lot about a person by what they choose to see in me ~*Unknown*

Afraid that our inner light will be extinguished or our inner darkness exposed, we hide our true identities from each other. In the process, we become separated from our own souls. We end up living divided lives, so far removed from the truth we hold within that we cannot know the "integrity that comes from being what you are." ~*Parker Palmer*

I am a frayed and nibbled survivor in a fallen world, and I am getting along. I am aging and

eaten and have done my share of eating too. I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits, but instead am wandering awed about on a splintered wreck I've come to care for, whose gnawed trees breathe a delicate air, whose bloodied and scarred creatures are my dearest companions, and whose beauty bats and shines not in its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them. ~*Annie Dillard*

She was the kind of girl that searched for the things that could never be found ~*Unknown*

She was simple like quantum physics ~*Unknown*

I am difficult, but I promise I am worth it ~*Unknown*

There are your fog people and your sun people, he said. I said I wasn't sure which kind I was. He nodded. Fog'll do that to you, he said. ~*Brian Andreas*

Don't let your struggle become your identity. ~*Unknown*

"There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility is being superior to your former self." ~*Ernest Hemingway*

We are lonesome animals. We spend all our life trying to be less lonesome. ~*John Steinbeck*

When people show you who they believe them; the first time. ~*Maya Angelou*

When people try to tell you who you are, don't believe them. ~*Maria Popova*

Self-deception remains the most difficult deception. ~*Joan Didion*

One of the major shifts in human understanding has been a move away from seeing ourselves as solitary, independent agents in charge of our destiny toward a more complex awareness

that who we are is a direct function of who we are with. We are relational creatures. Everything about us is shaped by our connections (or disconnections) with those around us. ~Rev. *Kenn Hurto*

If you will think of yourself as coming out of the earth, rather than having been thrown in here from somewhere else, you see that we are the earth, we are the consciousness of the earth. These are the eyes of the earth. And this is the voice of the earth. ~*Joseph Campbell*

The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of stardust. ~*Carl Sagan*

The earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the sons [and daughters] of the earth. If [we] spit upon the ground, [we] spit upon [our]selves. This we know. The earth does not belong to [us]; [we] belong to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. ~*Chief Seattle*

To rise through hard earth, be plant
desiring sunlight, believing in water.
To enter fire, be dry.
To enter life, be food.
~*Linda Hogan*

Wrong
I wish to be misunderstood;
that is,
to be understood from your perspective.
~*Bill Knott*

Songs and Music

I am not the clothes I am wearing
True things - JJ Heller
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEH7zqkRplg&feature=youtu.be>

We Belong - Namoli Brennet
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rgdzz_UEuMM

What if we are stars? Namoli Brennet
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yV4WNhdta1k>

For Today I Am A Boy - Antony & The Johnsons

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kslkgAX3uAg>

Tell Me A Story - Skylar Kergil
“Strangers stare and they want to be the first to ask for my life in one word... Am I a boy or a girl?”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbQDTE2s3dI>

Videos

Arab: How You See Me
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3ydbIUo0EY>

Asian: How you see me
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTLjtGUGgN8>

What Kind of Asian Are You
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoP0ox_Jw_w

Black: How You See Me
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FO6DADHDPQw>

LGBTQ:| How You See Me
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxHHstcyP4I>

Body Size: How You See Me
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOF70kAB1-s>

Women: How You See Me
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cFQ6Ce3VpeQ>

HUMAN by Yann Arthus-Bertrand - Genesis of the film

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUWrdbOEOO>

Parts 1 2 & 3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdb4XGVTHkE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShtAt5xtto>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0653vsLSqE>

You can always choose who you are
Sapeurs of the Congo in Guinness Ad
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1fbUbDoGnA>

Lost Voices ~Darius Simpson & Scout Bostley
The problem with speaking up for each other is that everyone is left without a voice.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpPASWlnZIA&feature=youtu.be>

Angry Black Woman with Porsha O.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSolTsaSs0M>

You Are Not Your Work
"Normal is getting dressed in clothes that you buy for work, driving through traffic in a car that you are still paying for, in order to get to a job that you need so you can pay for the clothes, car and the house that

you leave empty all day in order to afford to live in it." - Ellen Goodman

<http://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/who-are-you-this-breathhtaking-video-might-change-your-life/#.vonql35h-3i.facebook>

The art of being yourself - TED Talk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veEQQ-N9xWU>

When People Show You Who They Are, Believe Them

Oprah learned the hard way that if a man shows you he's untrustworthy, believe him the first time. Watch Dr. Maya Angelou discuss this important life lesson with Oprah.

<http://www.oprah.com/oprahs-life/class/when-people-show-you-who-they-are-believe-them-video>

Podcasts

The Secret Emotional Life of Clothes

Invisibilia Podcast

<http://www.npr.org/programs/invisibilia/485605882/the-secret-emotional-life-of-clothes>

What it means to be an American: Artists, musicians and activists speak

https://www.mprnews.org/story/2016/10/19/what-it-means-to-be-an-american?=&trent-gilliss-on-being&utm_source=On+Being+Newsletter&utm_campaign=a8196e3d1e-20161112_vincent_harding_newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1c66543c2fa8196e3d1e-69930673&goal=0_1c66543c2fa8196e3d1e-69930673&mc_cid=a8196e3d1e&mc_eid=1963d8e98f

The beauty of being a misfit

TED Talk~ Lidia Yuknavitch

<http://www.ted.com/talks/>

[lidia_yuknavitch_the_beauty_of_being_a_misfit](http://www.ted.com/talks/lidia_yuknavitch_the_beauty_of_being_a_misfit)

The psychology of your future self

TED Talk – Dan Gilbert

We somehow imagine that the person we are right now is the person we'll be for the rest of time. Hint: that's not the case.

<https://www.ted.com/talks/>

[dan_gilbert_you_are_always_changing](http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_you_are_always_changing)

Articles

Our identity changes over time.

There are over 30 years between these amazing before-and-after photos.

[http://www.upworthy.com/there-are-over-30-years-between-these-amazing-before-and-after-photos?](http://www.upworthy.com/there-are-over-30-years-between-these-amazing-before-and-after-photos?c=upw1&u=41aa6fc0057fcfdc850d917bc669deaf216c544e)

<http://www.twistedifter.com/2016/11/reunions-by-chris-porsz/>

I am Transgender

<http://www.transfaithonline.org/tdor/resources/readings/jam/>

Immigration Stories

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<https://myimmigrationstory.com>

The End of Identity Liberalism -New York Times

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html?smid=nytcore-iphone-share&smprod=nytcore-iphone&_r=0

Is Criticism of Identity Politics Racist or Long Overdue?

http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/11/23/is-criticism-of-identity-politics-racist-or-long-overdue?emc=edit_th_20161125&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=62154555

Books

A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life by Parker Palmer

An ennobling field guide to living with the grace and integrity of being your whole self, where soul and role join.

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0029U1RGA/ref=dp_kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btcr=1

Tiger Writing: Art, Culture, and the Interdependent Self by Jen Gish

Explores the aesthetic and psychic roots of the independent and interdependent self, each yielding a distinct way of observing, remembering, and narrating the world.

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/16241536-tiger-writing?utm_content=title&utm_medium=email&utm_source=friend_update

Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self

by Richard Rohr

Likens True Self to a diamond, buried deep within us, formed under the intense pressure of our lives, that must be searched for and uncovered.

https://www.amazon.com/Immortal-Diamond-Search-True-Self-ebook/dp/B00BG4FOA0/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1481133617&sr=1-1&keywords=Immortal+Diamond%3A+The+Search+for+Our+True+Self

Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking by Susan Cain

Although they are often labeled "quiet," it is to introverts that we owe many of the great contributions to society—from van Gogh's sunflowers to the invention of the personal computer.

https://www.amazon.com/Quiet-Power-Introverts-World-Talking/dp/0307352153/ref=as_li_tf_tl?tag=teditideas-20&ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0520271440&linkCode=as2

How To Be Black by Baratunde Thurston

Audacious, cunning, and razor-sharp, *How To Be Black* exposes the mass-media's insidiously racist, monochromatic portrayal of black culture's richness and variety.

https://www.amazon.com/How-Be-Black-Baratunde-Thurston/dp/0062003224/ref=as_li_tf_tl?tag=teditideas-20&ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0520271440&linkCode=as2

Waking Up White: And Finding Myself in the Story of Race by Debby Irving

How easy it is for a white person to just wake up and go about in a world that was constructed for them.
[https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00HZZ1JD0/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00HZZ1JD0/ref=dp_kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1)

Movies and Television

Boyhood

<https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/boyhood>

Girlhood

<https://thedissolve.com/reviews/1344-girlhood/>
https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/girlhood_2015

Tomboy

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/tomboy_2011

Moonlight

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/moonlight_2016

Dear White People

<https://thedissolve.com/reviews/1148-dear-white-people/>
https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/dear_white_people

A Borrowed Identity

<https://thedissolve.com/reviews/1682-a-borrowed-identity/>
https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/a_borrowed_identity

Band of Brothers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ehwsOL04og>

Inside-Out

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_MC3XuMvsDI

My Big Fat Greek Wedding

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfYF3TAST5E>

Testing Your Identity

Your Spiritual Type

<http://prayer-center.upperroom.org/resources/quiz>

16 Personalities

<https://www.16personalities.com/free-personality-test>

What Your Higher Self Wants

<http://www.higherawareness.com/soul-purpose-test.php>

Your Spirit Animal – Come on, have some fun!

<http://www.spiritanimal.info/spirit-animal-quiz/>

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