

“Be yourself” is the most common adage given to a teenager before a first date, off to a party, a job interview, when playing music, when traveling, and drawing. It’s a phrase that symbolizes showing the full expression of what makes one unique and to act as they naturally are. Yet as simple as two words can be, growing up I was never more confused what it meant. The idea of being myself was littered in abstraction. First off, what in the world is the self and what does it mean to be it?

At fifteen I was addicted to the internet and video games. My hobbies consisted of Minecraft, Call of Duty, and the impulsive checking of my Snapchat. My romantic life was pornography and my social life was the classmate assigned next to me. To “be myself” was an insult to the highest degree, as the self in question was a confused young teenager who was depressed and confused by the world. Being myself meant to lay in bed until my skin melted to the couch and watching Youtube until my eyes dried to raisins. From the outside, the self was no more than a hedonistic self gratifying machine that clung to the drops of dopamine released by a screen and controller.

Intuitively, we sense that this version of our self is not our genuine true self. We can differentiate our current actions from how we want to act and who we are with who we could be. Psychologist Carl Rogers defined this distance between selves as incongruence and he targeted this as the cause of emotional pain and mental illness. But what makes one of these selves more real than the other? Why would there be two selves to begin with and why would one be more difficult to become?

As an older brother, I witnessed my little sister grow from an infant to a child to a teenager. I watched when she was five as she played pretend as a babysitter one moment to a princess the next. Seamlessly she would transition from Rapunzel to Cinderella, to Pocahontas. As she aged her actions continued to mimic characters she cherished, from Ariel to Hannah Montana. As she grew older though the mimicry changed from princesses to her peers. But is this not how we all develop ourselves? Doesn’t a medical student mimic a surgeon until he can

do it so seamlessly that other students call him a doctor as well? In a sense we are all children acting out a play of life, becoming a mosaic of the people we surround ourselves with and the fictional characters we love, but is this our self?

At 19 I was asked to introduce myself to the class and tell them who I was yet I didn't know how to answer. I tell myself I am kind and I take refuge in being a hard worker. I am Trevor, I am a boy, I am a kickboxer, I am introverted, and I am a runner. Sometimes I am lonely other times I am happy. I can be many things but are these not descriptions of myself instead of who I am? Who is a runner after losing their legs? I can tell the class what I do, how I feel, and how I act yet I'm not sure how to tell them who I am.

Many of us look in the mirror and feel discomfort by the look of our reflection. Our physical appearance never seems to reflect the actuality of our internal being. We are born in to a body with no choice to how it appears and spend the rest of it shifting and changing it to become a better representation. We cut our hair, lift weights, change our clothes, undergo surgery, and cover ourselves in paint all to feel more comfortable when looking in a mirror and we pray others accept it. Is the self the body or is the self what the body represents?

What makes a rose a rose? Take your valentines flower and peel it back petal by petal. At what point does the rose shift from a flower to a pile of leaves? Where does the rose lie? Is it in the stalk, the leaves, or the crimson red flower? How about the self? Are we the collective of our components or are those components extensions of the self? If we are not our arms, legs, torso, or head then one would have to assume that the self is nothing but a brain in a jar.

Scientists argue this is true but the Buddhist will say the brain is the vessel of the self. Will my brain lobotomy make me lose part of my self or would it change the self all together? Are we willing to admit that we are nothing but neurons and action potentials?

In July I stayed in a Buddhist temple to find my self but with three days of silence and contemplation I only found more questions. The monk taught me I'm not my thoughts and

instead the awareness of my thoughts, The nun showed me I am not my emotions but the experiencer of emotions, and the night sky told me I'm stardust.

I am not my actions, I am not my body, I am not my thoughts, and I am not my emotions yet its not quite clear what I am. We navigate our lives playing the roles of mothers and fathers, dentists and students, models and mystics yet we don't know how to be ourselves. In learning who I am not I have never gotten to be myself more. The "I" who I love and hate is nothing more than a concept I have become familiar with. My identity is the one in which I craft or the one I choose to kill at will. There is profound wisdom in embracing the unknown, for in the depths of uncertainty, we embark on a journey of self-discovery that transcends the boundaries of our physical existence.