

"Who Are You?" by Tai Quinn Whyte

"Who are you?"

A seemingly innocuous and common query asked at house parties, networking functions and mixers the world over.

Like Rome, all roads of inquiry lead here after more obvious openers around work, relationships and identity. Even those questions are merely peeling layers off the onion as we go about categorizing each other. For some, it's enough to simply know your name, profession and marital status. Their curiosity is sated.

Let me reframe the question in the first person.

"Who am I?"

This is not just the bane of anyone writing the seventh draft of their 'About Me' page. It is both a classic Zen koan and the question that forms the core of Indian mystic Ramana Maharshi's method of self-inquiry.

In a more typical social setting I, like most, begin with my first name, Tai. No earth-shattering insights here. We exchange names, nod along, smile and go on with the interaction as if it actually signified anything. And yet what is a name other than "the most pleasing sound" we respond to in the course of healthy psychological development?

I recall investigating the etymology of my name once upon a time as a young man. In Mandarin, 'Tai' means 'superlative', 'grand' (as in Taijiquan - 'grand ultimate fist') or 'too' as in 'too much'; it translates as 'body' in Japanese or 'red snapper' on a sushi menu or 'beef' on a Vietnamese one. 'Quinn' is more straightforward and translates as 'chief', 'head', 'intelligent' or 'wise' in Irish (perhaps that explains a lot). 'Whyte' is fairly obvious though I like to think the 'y' variation accounts for my curiosity.

Less than a decade ago, I started using my full name Tai Quinn Whyte here and there. Names are gifts from our parents ('Tai Quinn') and my father's father ('Whyte'). Put together, my name could mean something like "the most intelligent or wise" or "supreme leader." During this same investigation, I felt the heat of intense shame upon learning of my name's grandiosity and vividly recollect sweating and cringing beneath the weighty expectations such an appellation entailed.

My folks had high hopes. May they rest in peace.

Is there anything that evokes simultaneously more wonder and tenderness than the unbridled potential of a newborn welcomed into the world?

Returning to the practice of self-inquiry, when I contemplate "*Who am I?*", the query serves as a pebble tossed into the still pristine lake of the mind, rippling outward through consciousness with a silent experiential splash.

A variation of this practice involves a dyadic process where two individuals sit across from each other asking – "Who are you?"

We've now come full circle to where we began but find ourselves in very different territory. This process stems from the Enlightenment Intensive, a retreat where attendees take turns asking and answering this simple question over and over. For hours. Days. All in hopes of eliciting a mystical experience. Depending on the retreat, participants are otherwise silent. While I haven't attended one of these sessions consisting of such marathon-like intensity, engaging this process for even ten to fifteen minutes stretches the mind in strange ways. After the easy answers are out of the way -- name, profession, roles (relational, professional), hobbies – things get interesting.

A stream of consciousness emerges.

Conventional intelligibility dissolves and responses become chaotic or poetic, depending on your interpretive charity.

What does it reveal?

The mind's grasping at descriptors and dualistic quality becomes salient along with one's degree of self-censorship and impression management.

I am this. And that. And this. But not that.

I tend towards the increasingly abstract, precise and reductionistic: body, sensations, thoughts, perceptions, emotions, cells, organs, microflora, being, memories, a system of systems – circulatory, nervous, respiratory, immune, digestive, reproductive, musculoskeletal, etc. Or social identities like regional, familial, cultural, and genetic ones. Other affiliations include preferences and aversions; cuisines, music, hobbies, practices, religious inclinations, cinema, sports teams. Then there's the gerund phase -- speaking, thinking, meditating, playing, breathing.

Again, what does it reveal?

The nature of mind and how it clings to identities like a climber desperately scraping to find purchase on an untenable surface. Like freefalling with nowhere to land.

It reveals how the mind reduces dynamic processes into static thought forms manipulable by language. It hijacks them with possessives claiming them as its own creation – me, my, mine.

It turns verbs into nouns.

It disenchant the world into a manageable set of affordances. The mind uses these affordances to navigate the otherwise overwhelming complexity of this mystery we call life.

And that all of this subtle mind stuff is happening 'in' awareness as much as what I see, hear, and feel 'out' there in the world.

As Nisargadatta Maharaj once said,

"Wisdom is knowing I am nothing,
Love is knowing I am everything,
And between the two my life moves."

And so it is, dear reader. May this piece give you pause when you meet someone new.

I end as I began.

Who are you?