

## What Is My 'Self' and Who Cares Anyway?

If I am not for myself, who am I?

If I am only for myself, what am I?

M. Maimonides, 12th Century

This matter of a 'self' is complicated and has been so for centuries. Not infrequently, a person calls me, asking for an appointment, stating that "I'm just not myself." What does this mean? The caller's tone is at the least confused, often anxious or fearful.

What is this entity, a 'self'? What are its properties? Is it malleable or set? Is a strong 'self' fixed and a weak 'self' elastic? And if it feels different than normal, why should any of us care?

Older than our English language, the concept of 'self' always carried specificity within: 'to that very individual' it refers in Latin, and 'to none other.' Spenser refined this meaning by locating the 'self' within man: "And in my self, my inward self I mean . . ." (*Amoretti*, xlv,3). And Shakespeare and his peers developed the compound form, often carrying a moral context: remember Hamlet's conflict about "self-slaughter" or Polonius's edict "To thine own self be true"? 'Self' is our uniqueness, more than body, inclusive of spirit and values.

We arrive in birth a myriad of potentialities, instincts, sensitivities, some miraculously refined. Imagine: from the beginning days of life, an infant can differentiate his mother's breast milk from some other mother's breast milk through his sense of smell (A. MacFarlane, 1975). Capacities begin to develop: eye-hand coordination and visual focus as indicators of intelligence; the ability to wait or lack of it; withdrawal into sleep as self-protection from excessive stimuli; persistence in the effort to impact the world through repeated attempts or the tendency to readily seem defeated and to 'fold' (W. Hoffer, 1953; R. Spitz, 1965; J. Bowlby, 1958; M. Mahler, 1975, among others)

By two years of age, a child has a rudimentary sense of what he or she knows as 'good' or 'bad,' 'right' or 'wrong'. "No! No! No!" the toddler insists; "Bad boy. Spot went poopie in my room!" From that age onwards, beliefs and values are molded and challenged, each choice the opportunity to modify or reaffirm a value or ethic. And through these early first years, the individual's sexual identity is evolving, initiated by anatomy and influenced by environment (R. Stoller, 1968). Boy or girl, infinite variations of traits each of us begins, that very and singular 'self.'

And what is that aspect that suddenly calls to us from inside unbeckoned, involuntarily? "I knew that; why didn't I think of that before?" Or the moment when your partner appears, impeccably dressed, and you realize that you truly, genuinely 'forgot' Aunt Tillie's party and those people you didn't want to see there. Sheepishly you confess to your partner, "I guess I really didn't want to go, huh?" Or when you just know that the fury you feel for a co-worker's error is far, far out of proportion to the mistake made. What feelings took dominance over your 'self'? Where was your knowledge when it vanished from your awareness? A deeper consciousness, not subject to being willed or ordered to function . . . what we call the unconscious, also a unique part of each 'self.'

That disappearing act, to vanish and reappear in consciousness, speaks of the malleability of part of our 'self.' We can observe that when an individual experiences what we metaphorically call a breakdown, some of the 'self' may be preserved; but sometimes reason, judgment, memory, values, coping mechanisms lose function and cohesiveness, and the uniqueness of the 'self' is damaged or destroyed. Thus, we understand that enough of the 'self' must remain fixed and stable, strong enough to persist. Yet we also realize that without some elasticity, we could not grow or accommodate changes. The miracle of 'self' is that we can lose a body part, a decade of memory, experience a period of upheaval when we are unable to make clear judgments, yet then we can go forward to adjust while 'self' persists.

When this rarefied, synchronized, yet amorphous entity signals your consciousness that something of 'self' is amiss, think of the extraordinary complexity involved; think of the awesome refinement warranted to send you a message. Pay attention. If this occurs only once, perhaps just make a note. But if it occurs more, instead of dismissing your feelings as merely an 'off' day, listen . . . This is your 'self' calling with a text message of an opportunity for further growth. Enrich yourself. Seek out a therapist skilled in the language of the 'self' and have a conversation.