Becoming Who I am Meant to Be

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January 22, 2016

Who am I? It is not an easy question to answer. Thomas Merton defines our “true self” as the person we are before God and the person we are meant to be. Neil Anderson answers the question for a Christian using biblical statements such as “I’m a child of God, a saint, a holy one…” If you would have asked me at various times in my life, I might answered with my relation to others, my name, my religious preference, or I might have looked at you strangely and say, “I don’t know.” Even now, I can not say I have a satisfying answer to that question. But I am getting to know myself.

In February 2007 I was in Iraq with the Airborne Infantry. I was mildly injured in an improvised explosive device attack. I became familiar with depression, mild traumatic brain injury, and post-traumatic stress. Over the next year I would struggle, reach out, and find a healing path. Looking back, I really got to know myself as a result of that experience and the new path that followed. I became aware of the various parts in me and how they influenced my thinking, my feeling, and my relations with those around me, including God. I have become more convinced that knowing who I really am and how that shapes my interactions is the *sin qua non* of healing, my part of the Divine sanctifying process.

When something happens I must make sense of it, especially when something extraordinary or painful happens. Dr. Terry Wardle taught me that trauma is burned into an episodic memory that carries the sensory data of the event, my emotions and thoughts regarding the event, and more importantly, the meaning of that event, which may or may not be based on truth. He further taught information alone can not trump an episodic memory. Episodic memories are best processed by another, more powerful, true episodic experience. Once I get into the arena of ascribing meaning to events, I am touching on my identity: who I am. I am trying to understand why an event happened and what it means for me. Trauma shapes our identity, for good or bad.

Early on in my life, there developed a part of me that wanted love and attention, which I think is natural. However, that part of me wanted it on my terms and in my timing. When that did not happen in the way I wanted, that part became wounded and other parts developed to attempt to soothe that perceived wound. Chief among them were the parts I call, *perfectionism* and *performance*. When those managing parts of me were at the controls of my external interactions, I often succeeded and received praise. That felt good and added energy to those parts. For most of my life, I was not consciously aware of what I just described.

These compensating, well-intending, yet unsanctified parts grew and took on more prominent roles in my life. They existed to help that wounded, stuck part of me avoid pain and to help me feel better. They served me well in my academic and vocational pursuits. This is especially true of my work in the US Army. The Army rewards performance with promotion, awards, and increased responsibility. As a chaplain and officer, I found it fairly easy to be a success. I was well educated, and I was motivated to perform. I didn’t know it all, but I thought myself in the top percentile of my peers and not without reason. I graduated my degree programs with honors. I graduated most military schools as an honor graduate, in the top twenty percent of my class, or as the distinguished honor graduate. All of this nurtured and built up a false self that directly contributed to my temporary inability to overcome significant combat stress.

A couple days after my injury, while still bandaged and swollen, a Paratrooper said to me, “Damn Chaplain, what did you do to get God pissed off at you?” It was his attempt at humor. I smiled, shook my head, and walked away. But on the inside I wondered, “What did I do to deserve this? Haven’t I been good enough? How much harder do I have to work at being good? Where are you? You should be with us in a more powerful, protective way! Aren’t we fighting the good fight? Where are you? It is as if you have your back turned on me, on us?” By that point in the deployment we had suffered witnessing the death of 11 of our own and so many more injured. For the most part, we followed the book. We did our duty. But it seemed like God was distant. These thoughts and feelings were coming from the various parts in me, from my unknown false self. These were the very parts driving my conscious interactions with others, and my self-soothing behaviors. The perfectionistic and performance parts were in crisis. They were exposed for not being good enough. The wounded child-part of me wanting love on his terms and in his timing was flooding. It felt like, from that part’s perspective, God turned his back and was distant. This ushered in depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms.

Who am I? At that time I would answer, “Obviously not good enough, not lovable, and abandoned.” But I wasn’t thinking about my identity and how I was making sense of my episodic traumatic memory. So I tried old faithful: do your duty, repress, and avoid these uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. Avoid people and circumstances that would trigger the inner pain. In other words, be more perfect, perform better, and operate from the false self I had created—be my own God. My symptoms worsened. My sleep was interrupted. My body became physically numb. I had intrusive thoughts. I experienced survivor guilt. I felt lots of shame. And emotionally, I felt little more than varying degrees of anger.

I tried anything I thought would help. I experienced Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. I tried anti-depressants. I tired speaking publically about my experience. I tried praying and reading scripture. If you told me “X” would help, I would try “X”. While these things did not hurt me, none of them directly addressed my false self, nor did they intentionally help me find and operate from true self. I would remain stuck for several months.

In *No Man is an Island*, Thomas Merton wrote, “We can not become ourselves unless we know ourselves.” I needed to understand what was going on inside of me. I needed to become familiar with my inner world. I needed to look upon my inner world: the wounded parts and the managers that developed in light of the wounds, with compassion and grace. Yet I could not leave them unattended. I needed to hear their pain. I needed to invite them to unburden. I needed to position them before the Divine and experience liberation and transformation. I needed to lament and grieve with them. They needed to hear words of life and truth, and to receive nurture after years of being unknown and neglected by my conscious states. I needed to know myself so that I could become who God made me to be.

The Anchorage Vineyard Church, now known as Anchorage City Church, developed a ministry of inner healing called “Healing the Heart”. There I found a group of people who, in various degrees, had gotten to know themselves and position themselves before each other and before God for the sake of wholeness. They were fairly comfortable with who they were and comfortable being present with others. In my desperation, I signed up for Healing the Heart. There were many things helpful for my ultimate healing experience to include: connection to a compassionate, judgment free group, opportunity to lament and grieve wounds, and a place to receive and extend forgiveness. But the greatest gift of Healing the Heart was becoming more aware of my inner world and the various roles the wounded and managing parts took on in my life. When the light and love of God operating through these people shown on the wounded part wanting love and attention, it became easy to position it for God’s healing touch, to lament what happened to create it, and to receive and to extend forgiveness. The little, wounded boy who dwelt in the shadows was now embraced in the light of God’s love and was free.

The compensating managers of *perfectionism* and *performance* were finally known, touched, and transformed by God through confession. What was *perfection* is now *grace*. What was *performance* is now calm *presence*. When this happened during the ministry retreat at Healing the Heart in the witness of a small caring community, the episodic memory was trumped by a more powerful experience of God’s love, grace, and sanctifying touch. I wept and laughed for the first time in months. I slept through the night. I could feel again, emotionally and physically. I was calm and not afraid. Shame evaporated, and in its place came compassion for self and others.

Since then, my life has not been without ups and downs and additional painful experiences. Yet now I am more aware of who I am and how I operate in my inner world. I am not perfect. I am far from it. And I accept that. I am human, yet I am deeply loved by God. I had spent time and energy trying to be like God, taking on responsibility for healing my pain on my own by repressing, avoiding, and trying to be perfect apart from God. These things fed the false self. Once I discovered this, I was able to let God do the healing work of my identity. Who am I? I’m not sure I can tell you who I am. But now I am becoming who I am meant to be.