



The Search For Identity

The question of who and what you are can be an agonizing one, especially now, when people have so many roles to play. But better to suffer a little uncertainty than to be too sure of your identity. That goes for Canada, too!

□ There cannot be many thinking persons who have never asked themselves in the dark of night, "Who am I?" On the face of it, that would seem to be the world's easiest question to answer: just fill in the particulars at the top of any official form. But it would not be asked so frequently or so wistfully — indeed it would not be asked at all — if people did not feel a certain confusion about their identities. As life in modern societies grows more complex, more and more of them find themselves paraphrasing that old line from a television show: "Will the real me please stand up?"

Like the problems of prosperity, identity problems are nice ones to have in the overall scheme of things. Better to worry about the consequences of too much personal freedom than too little, as there is in so many parts of the world. There are countries where the authorities dictate all the details of an inhabitant's place in life; in freer but highly traditional societies, identities are preordained by custom. Though Canada has always offered more social and geographic mobility than most nations, there was a time when identities were largely cemented in circumstances here too.

People ordinarily identify themselves and are identified by others by a few simple reference points: ancestry, age, sex, occupation, religion, place of birth, place of residence, etc. In the old days, these points were pretty well fixed. Most men were likely to do the same sort of work as their fathers, and most women were housewives like their mothers. The great majority lived in their home towns all their lives, and were strongly identified with their communities and regions. About the only

standard reference point that was subject to change was age: in the eyes of the community, you went from being "young so-and-so" to being "old so-and-so."

By contrast, a person living in a dynamic, pluralistic society like Canada's today is likely to go through a number of changes in identity in a lifetime. Most people now spend a fair amount of time being students, and are identified as such for as long as they are in school or university. They also retire earlier than their forbears did, and live a longer time being known as "seniors." They move from one place to another, and take on the cultural coloration of their new home areas. Someone born and raised in Saskatchewan could well end up being identified as a prominent resident of Halifax.

Drastic changes in identity are now quite within the realm of possibility. Years ago, a switch in religion was enough to make a person into a social pariah; now, changes in religious and political affiliation are made with relative ease. People can move from one country to another, adopt a working language other than their mother tongue, and move up or down in social status. Through divorce, they can undo the bonds of marriage. They can change their names, and even their sex.

Without going quite that far, identities in our times are largely self-created. Whereas individuals were once identified *by* things, they are now free to identify themselves *with* things as a matter of choice. They can exercise a degree of control over how they will be publicly known by highlighting certain features of their personas, those aspects of the personality that are shown to and perceived by

others. They are no longer necessarily identified by their occupations; a baker, for instance, might decide that he would sooner be known as a leader in his ethnic community than as a baker, and as an ethnic leader he shall be recognized.

The availability of ample leisure time makes it reasonably easy to build up multiple identities. To a store owner, that woman over there is the manager of the ladies' wear department; to a member of her club, she is the secretary-treasurer; to a young girl, she is coach of the softball team; to another young girl she is one thing above all else — her mom.

While it is marvellous to be able to pick and choose among the things you want to be, it is not an unmixed blessing. It sometimes generates the kind of divided interests that make for restless nights. The question of who you are really boils down to *what* you are primarily. Are you first a company or a volunteer worker? A student or an athlete? A lawyer or a political organizer? The difficulty of answering such questions makes for inner tensions. Working women are especially susceptible to these as they try to deal with the conflicts between their jobs and their personal and family lives.

Whether they are employed outside the home or not, married women are more likely than most to run into identity problems. It is built into the system: with rare exceptions, legal jurisdictions cling to the convention that they must sacrifice one of the most basic elements of an identity — their family names — when they wed. Feminism notwithstanding, the notion that a married woman should subordinate her personality and aspirations to those of her husband has never quite died.

Said the crab: "I am no such thing. I am myself."

Women in general are victims of stereotyping, the habit of attributing characteristics to classes of people whether or not they actually have them. We are all inclined to hang labels on people, identifying members of ethnic groups, for instance, on the basis of real or imagined racial peculiarities. These labels take the form of ill-considered generalizations: all Scotsmen are cheap, all teenagers are irresponsible, all accountants are conservative.

When it comes to our own identities, we are far more particular, like the crab mentioned by William James who objected to being called a crustacean: "I am no such thing. I am *myself, myself* alone."

It is in trying to pin down this essential self that people encounter psychological confusion. They feel lost and frustrated because they are unable to establish firmly who and what they are. Strictly speaking, the term "identity crisis" refers to a phase of growing up; nowadays, however, it is being applied increasingly to adults who suspect that, somewhere along the line, they have taken a wrong turning. They experience what is called a mid-life crisis, which is an identity crisis of a special kind.

A Toronto personnel consultant interviewed on CBC Radio recently said that not knowing who they are is a common characteristic of the middle-aged managers who come to him seeking job changes. They are representative of the countless numbers who wonder at some point in their lives if they are in the wrong line of work. In acute cases, mid-life crisis sufferers become convinced that they have wasted a large part of their time on earth doing something they were not cut out for. This is likely to lead to debilitating stress, with attendant problems such as alcohol or drug abuse.

The need to belong carries youth into its necessary role

The missteps that lead to these painful situations are usually taken in adolescence, when young people struggle to build identities distinct from their parents and siblings. Sigmund Freud did not exaggerate when he called this a "great task." He explained that the identification infants make with their parents is "the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person." Thus adolescents trying to break out of the family sphere of influence are tugging at their deepest roots.

Freud explained that detaching oneself from one's parents is a natural step in taking one's place as a useful member of the social community. In neurotics, the detachment is never complete. Some remain in subconscious subjugation to their parents even after their parents are no longer with them. Others, who come closer to making the break, develop seriously split personalities.

At the same time as they are pulling at family ties, adolescents are being pulled in other directions.

They have a powerful urge to join with others of their own age. They hunger to belong to something bigger than themselves, usually one or more groups outside the family circle. Their emotions become caught up in a tug-of-war between the attitudes and values of their family and their peers.

Freud described the need to belong as being "essential to the genesis of man as a social animal." It is a positive and necessary force in the perpetuation of mankind. When steered by a sense of "dynastic history" into existing institutions, it carries youths into their proper roles as the renovators and rejuvenators of society.

But the urge to join can also take some strange directions. Thus young people today will shave off all their hair or dye it fluorescent purple to advertise their identification with their chosen group. In one way gestures like these are acts of defiance of established society; in another they amount to simple conformity. Nothing renders people more alike than the voluntary wearing of a uniform, whether of an army or a motorcycle gang.

According to Freud, young people in search of identity typically gravitate to "groups of many equals, who can identify with one another, and a single person superior to them all." This makes them vulnerable to manipulation by demagogues who understand what a powerful political force the need to identify can be.

Historically, it has been in groups with charismatic leaders that the identity crisis has turned dangerous and ugly. If there is one thing that demagogues are sure of, it is that nothing unites a group more than the identification of a common enemy.

"Identity formation ... involves a continuous conflict with powerful negative identity elements," wrote Erik Erikson, the father of modern identity theory. "In times of aggravated crisis these come to the fore and arouse in man a murderous hate of 'otherness' which he judges evil in strangers — and in himself."

The negative elements he mentions are peoples' own faults and wicked desires, which they project onto human beings who are externally different from them and their associates. When groups cannot reconcile themselves to diversity in customs and values, they build up "irrational aversions and

prejudices which can lead to erratic violence on a large scale and to widespread self-damaging malaise," as Erikson wrote.

The world, unfortunately, is full of bloody examples of the results of such irrationality. They are all in aid of insecure identities which seek to eradicate other identities under the delusion that their own will thereby be reinforced.

A permanent identity crisis equals permanent immaturity

The common thread that runs through the horrors committed in the name of identity is a simplistic view of humanity which divides the world into "us and them," white and black, good and evil. This bespeaks a permanent identity crisis — and a permanent immaturity.

Behind it is an instinctive desire to resolve the confusion that comes with an identity crisis by identifying oneself with something that is plain and clear-cut. Out of this are forged the religious bigots, the super-patriots, the zealots for any number of different causes. Movements are especially appealing and exciting to young (and not only young) people looking for instant identification. And, as Bertrand Russell said in only a slight overstatement, "All movements go too far."

The desire for a quick resolution of identity confusion is the villain in those mid-life crises which come to haunt people when youth is over. And as if youths weren't impetuous enough, their parents sometimes give them an impatient push. The complaint is commonly heard that teenaged sons and daughters "don't know what they want to do" in the way of a career, and some parents press them to make up their minds about it. Actually, this is a sensible and healthy response to an identity crisis. What you want to do in life is inevitably wrapped up in the type of person you are, and it is the beginning of wisdom to postpone making any binding decisions while the issue remains confused.

Being in too much of a hurry to find an identity (or, in effect, borrow one from a group) results in what psychologists call "over-identification." People tend to over-identify as a defence against uncertainty. In this state, they become absolutely convinced that they have found themselves in one

all-absorbing group or activity. They are like the single-issue candidates who have appeared in politics — single issue personalities.

And indeed they always have a single answer to the question of who they are: "I am a doctor ... I am a union member ... I am a (name the religion)." They seem incapable of being two things concurrently, like the character in George Bernard Shaw's *Getting Married* who protests: "If I am to be a mother, I really cannot have a man bothering me to be a wife at the same time."

On the individual level, over-identification need not be harmful. We can all think of people who seem totally wrapped up in one aspect of their lives — a habit, a hobby, their work or another person. Some cling cosily to an identity they had in the past — the veteran who still thinks of himself as a soldier, the old college football player, the wearer of the old school tie. No problem; but on the other hand, there are plenty of people for whom over-identification can bring grief to themselves and those around them. A "company man" who neglects his identity as a parent in favour of his job may alienate his children, and eventually find that he has lost their love when he most needs it. A woman who over-identifies with her husband to the point of being a carbon copy of him may find herself abandoned with no range of interests, no social contacts, no real personality of her own.

The quest for a better self is the work of a lifetime

Given the dangers associated with over-identification, we should check up on ourselves from time to time to ensure that we have not put too many eggs in one basket. It is difficult to break the habit of over-identifying with one thing, but it can be done. The story is told of an Olympic pole-vaulter who had given his life to the sport until he suffered a crippling accident. Asked if he felt he was finished, he replied: "As a pole-vaulter, yes. As a man, no."

A normal identity is an amalgam of many different characteristics. It is "all the things you are," which, when counted up, can come to a surprising

amount. Where the search for identity becomes discouraging is when we confuse the things we actually are with the things we would like to be. The dissatisfaction we feel when we ask "who am I?" may come not from any deficiency, but from disappointment that we have not lived up to the potential we possess.

As with individuals, so with nations. We in Canada collectively agonize over a perceived lack of national identity because, like young people unconsciously trying to clear the confusion from their minds, we seek a clear-cut, categorical definition of what we are. We over-formulate it by tying it too tightly to culture with a capital "C." We fail to take into account the economic, geographic, linguistic and ethnic factors that set us apart from the other peoples of the world.

Psychologists maintain that positive identities are formed out of a tolerance for ambiguity — of "the inevitable contradictions and confusions of value systems," as Erik Erikson put it. This approximates the old definition of maturity as the ability to hold two apparently warring facts or ideas in the head at the same time. The acquisition of this ability is, wrote Erikson, "the end of growing up," but it does not mean an end to the search for identity. At a time in which it is possible to add to an identity and continually refine it, that is a process which should never stop.

To stop would mean abandoning the quest for that better self which we would like to be — and probably could be. The lingering dissatisfaction we feel because we have not achieved our ideal is not something to dread or fear. As individuals and Canadians, we should recognize that the "great task" of building an identity is — or should be — the work of a lifetime. "Show me a thoroughly contented person and I will show you a thoroughly useless one," wrote Josh Billings. If we were to become entirely content with our identities, we might lose the ability to play a useful role in this confusing and contradictory world.