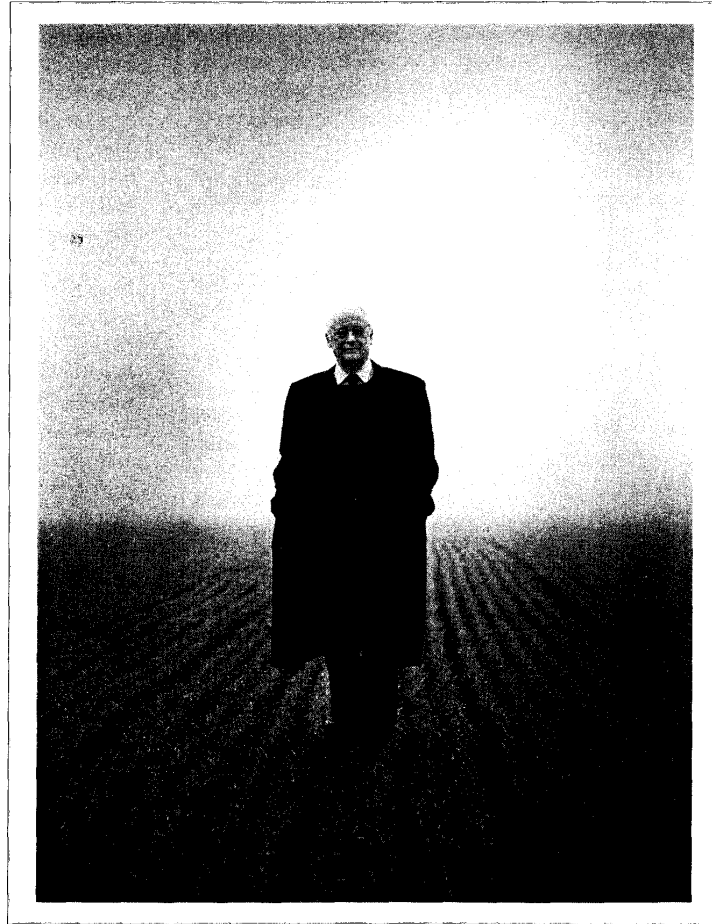


PROPER SELFISHNESS

Charles Handy explores the deepest and most significant question of personal identity.



“I spent the early part of my life trying hard to be someone else. At school I wanted to be a great athlete, at university an admired socialite, afterwards a businessman and, later, the head of a great institution. It did not take me long to discover that I was not destined to be successful in any of these guises, but that did not prevent me from trying, and being perpetually disappointed with myself. The problem was that in trying to be someone else I neglected to concentrate on the person I could be.”

That idea was too frightening to contemplate at the time. I was happier going along with the conventions of the time, measuring success in terms of

money and position, climbing ladders which others placed in my way, collecting things and contacts rather than giving expression to my own beliefs and

personality. I was, in retrospect, hiding from myself, a slave to the system rather than its master. We can't, however, discover ourselves by introspection. We have to jump in before we learn to swim. That is hardly a new discovery. The idea that true individuality is necessarily social is one of the oldest propositions in philosophy. We find ourselves through what we do and through the long struggle of living with and for others. 'I do therefore I am' is more real than 'I think therefore I am'.

It was Pascal who said that all the ills in the world come about because a man cannot sit in a room alone. But also all the good things, surely, because most of the delights of life come from our association with other people. To be 'shut up in the solitude of his own heart' - what de Tocqueville saw as the danger of extreme individualism in America - is not something to be desired. As Peter Singer, the Australian philosopher, puts it, "to be completely self-absorbed and self-sufficient is equivalent to spending our life writing your autobiography", there is nothing to write about, except writing the autobiography. To be ourselves we need other people.

What I term a 'proper selfishness' builds on this fact that we are inevitably intertwined with others, even if sometimes we wish that we weren't, but accepts that it's proper to be concerned with ourselves and a search for who we really are, because that search should lead us to realise that self-respect, in the end, only comes from responsibility, responsibility for other people and other things. Proper selfishness is not escapism. Paradoxically, as I have suggested, we only really find ourselves when we lose ourselves in something beyond ourselves, be it our love for someone, our pursuit of a cause or a vocation, or our commitment to a group or an

institution. Forced to be selfish by the changes in the world around us, we have the choice to make it proper. If more of us so choose, we can make the systems work for us rather than the other way round.

THE HUNGRY SELF

It is our duty to get a life, as they say in America. To choose life, says Timothy Gorrige, the theologian, is the only ethical imperative, but that begs the question nicely - what is this thing called life? Life is a chance to make the best of ourselves. We owe it to everybody to give them that chance. There is in each of us a tendency towards good and a tendency towards evil. We could argue whether these tendencies come from God or from our genes, but perhaps, if you believe that God is the mastermind behind the universe, it comes to the same thing. The proper, or decent, self is one in which the good is revealed and the evil restrained. Most of us are hungry for a self of which we can be proud. More and more people, especially the young, in the affluent societies of the West, share this hunger. Paul Ray, an American sociologist, calls these 'hungry people' and believes that they account for a quarter of all Americans. Walk into any American bookstore and marvel at the number of books which include the word 'soul', even in the business section. Proper selfishness starts by reinterpreting self-interest, insisting that it is more that: economics.

Margaret Thatcher, in her heyday, talked of self-responsibility, not selfishness. But because she failed to define what the self could or should be, she was understood to mean self-interest, and short-term monetary interest at that, financial selfishness. That was unfortunate, because self-interest cannot be seen simply in monetary terms even by the most materially minded. It is important to correct the definition because if our

self is more than an economic item, then growth based on self-interest has to mean much more than economic growth. One tradition the Christian one, has it that life is not about the satisfaction of needs although that is inevitably part of it but the chance to test oneself against all the challenges and so to prove oneself. Money will form a part of this type of self-interest, but only a part.

THE WHITE STONE

The journey towards self-knowledge is a long and tough one. It needs a jolt to start it, the sort of jolt that comes from a brush with death, divorce or redundancy. Luke was lucky in a way he had such a

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jolt early in his life. Luke is a young man of West Indian parents. Last year he was down and out and living in London. He had no job, no home, no money and no hope. There seemed to him to be little point in living. The market economy and the freedom that capitalism offers meant nothing to him. He was outside all of that. By the time I met him, however, there was no trace of that defeatism and depression. He was enrolled in a college now, he told me. He was upbeat, charming, interesting in his views - we met at a conference on the future of work - and interested in ours. "What happened?" I asked. "Well, when things were at their worst, I rang my dad and told him how I felt." All he said was, "Think about this; when you get to heaven you will meet the man you might have been", then he put the phone down. That was all I needed. I went away,

thought about it, and applied to the college. You don't have to believe in a literal heaven to get the point. I keep a small white stone on my desk to remind me of the same point. It refers to a mysterious verse in the Book of Revelations in the Bible, a verse which goes like this: "To the one who prevails, the Spirit says, I will give a white stone on which is written a name, which shall be known only to the one who receives it." I am no biblical scholar, but I know what I think it means. It means that if I 'prevail', I will, eventually, find out who I truly ought to be, the other hidden self. Life is a search for the white stone. It will be a different one for each of us. Of course, it depends on what is meant by 'prevail'. It means, I suspect, passing life's little tests, until you are free to be fully yourself, which is when you get your white stone.

James Hillman, one of the most respected of America's philosophers of 'soul', talks of there being an 'acorn' in each of us which contains the seed of our destiny. The Greeks spoke of our daemon and the Romans of each person's genius. Jesus said the kingdom of God was within us. Today we use words like 'spirit', 'soul' and 'heart'. These ideas suggest that our soul is what drives us, if we can only get in touch with it. I favour the symbolism of the white stone because it suggests that we have to take the initiative. To lie back and hope that our soul will lead us to nirvana is not an option. We have today the opportunity, which is also the challenge, to shape ourselves, even to reinvent ourselves. Our lives are not completely foreordained, either by science or by our souls. We can make of our lives a masterpiece if we so wish. It is an opportunity that ought to be available to all humans. It could be. It is the fortunate combination of liberal democracy and free market capitalism that gives us this opportunity, as long as

we make these two our servants, not our masters.

If we knew what was on the white stone to start with, what it meant to be fully yourself, it would all be easy. Since we don't know what it is until we have it, we can only proceed by constant exploration. It is always a long search. Many give up or never start. If it were true, as some hypothesize, that we only discover 25% of our potential talents by the time we die - a hypothesis that must remain a conjecture because who would ever know the truth? - then the sooner we start experimenting with ourselves the better. I like the idea of a self which can lift itself to unknown heights, a self which exercises self-discipline, postpones gratification, and stops short of aggression in order to discover the very peaks of life. The thought that this might all be preordained by our genes or by our daemon is, to me, depressing. It removes any point from life.

Know Yourself, the ancient Greek admonition, should, logically, be the first step on the way to the white stone. In fact it turns out to be the end of the quest, not the beginning because we are growing and changing all time. "It's a wise man that knows his own father," the cynic said, but it's an even wiser one that knows himself before the closing of his days. "To thine own self be true", was Polonius' advice to Laertes, an uncomfortable charge to lay on a young man, who probably had not the slightest idea of who he was at that age and who would have done better to heed the advice of the old Roman, Paracchisus, who advised that if we can't be who we are, we should at least not be who we are not - advice I failed to hear myself.

This start on the road to the white stone is not, therefore, an invitation to endless navel-gazing, but a warning not to wear

clothes that don't fit you. Stop pretending, in other words, or you waste your life. "Where I am folded in upon myself," said the poet Rilke, "there am I a lie." Look outside first, to find yourself, and do not expect to find the full truth until you have exhausted most of the possibilities, until you are near the end. Death is welcomed by many, because it is the end of searching. Arthur Miller, the playwright, put it like this: "I see it (life) as an endless, truly endless struggle. There's no time when we're going to arrive at a plateau where the whole thing gets sorted. It's a struggle in the way every plant has to find its own way to stand up straight. A lot of the time it's a failure. And yet it's not a failure if some enlightenment comes out of it".

THE PUZZLE OF IDENTITY

We cannot wait for the approach of death to start the search, however; so how do we go about defining ourselves to start with? Work has always been a major strand in people's self-description, and, therefore, a major component of their identity. Some years ago, my son, then seven, was given a class assignment to write a description of what their father's did. While disapproving of the assignment on the grounds that it might be discriminatory, I was nevertheless intrigued to know what my son had written. My job at the time, a Professor at a Business School, was not, I felt, part of his conscious world.

"I said you were a painter," he said. "Oh," I replied, rather startled by his imagination, because I had never put brush to canvas, but flattered all the same, "What do I paint?" "Walls," he said, as indeed I had been doing that weekend. Deflated by his image of me as a painter/decorator, I spent a little time wondering whether it mattered, in his young life, what he thought I did at work. I decided that it didn't. It shouldn't matter to me either. I was, however, taken aback by the headmaster's reaction when I told him that we were moving, because I had

accepted a post as the head of an academic institution in another town. He looked at me, puzzled: "But, how interesting [meaning, how strange]. I thought that you were a decorator." Was that why, I asked myself, we had received such scant attention from him in the past two years? Our work role defines us, but only partially. To a degree we are as we are seen by those to whom we are connected - our family, tribe, and friends and colleagues. When I meet my relatives, or my long-standing friends, I am conscious that I am not really interested in their work or career unless it is causing them personal problems. In fact, if they are successful I almost resent it, because it means that they have less time for me. The same is true in reverse - they don't want to hear about books published or lectures delivered. I know and cherish a more personal side of them. My identity, and theirs, is rooted in mutual affection and a shared history. They see a different 'me' to the one that others see.

However much we may deny it, the way other people see us does influence the way we see ourselves. Proper selfishness requires that we take our identity into our own care, provided that we give it a reality check with those who know us. We define, for ourselves, who we are and what we stand for. Some people do this with a devil-may-care arrogance, which often conceals a deeper sense of doubt. Others, like myself, are too ready to accept the characterisation that others give us - another sign of doubt.

We are all different people in different situations. In one series of portraits in my photographer wife shot David, a general, first in his uniform, then in civilian clothes with his wife, and finally in casual garb with his children in the garden. Three very different images of the same person. It is

tempting to ask which is the real David. The answer has to be that they are all real at that time, but which one, or which blend, will emerge at the end, imprinted on the white stone, must be for him to find out. It is when the images are too different that life gets confusing. Most of us find that the images come together as we get older, until we become one person, not several. The moment will arrive when you are comfortable with who you are, and what you are - bald or old or fat or poor, successful or struggling - when you don't feel the need to apologize for anything or to deny anything. To be comfortable in your own skin is the beginning of strength. Derek Walcott, the Nobel prizewinning poet from the Caribbean, sums up what it feels like when you reach that goal:

*The time will come
When, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other's welcome,
and say, sit here. Eat.*

*You will love again the stranger
who was yourself
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your
heart
to itself, to the stranger
who has loved you
all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.*

*Take down the love letters
from the bookshelf,
the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.*

*Charles Handy 1997. Extracted from the
Hungry Spirit.*