

Is it good advice to “be yourself”? Why looking inward is not necessarily the answer

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Consider the following statements.

From Marvel’s Thor: “I need to figure out exactly who I am”.

From [Dylan Alcott](#), the 2022 Australian of the Year: “Be yourself and watch your world change. The hardest thing to understand is that it’s the easiest thing in the world to do. You’ve gotta believe me, mate. It changes your life.”

From Taylor Swift, when accepting her honorary doctorate: “We are so many things, all the time. And I know it can be overwhelming figuring out who to be ... I have some good news: It’s totally up to you. I also have some terrifying news: it’s totally up to you.”

Knowing who you are and being true to yourself have never been more important than in the West in the twenty-first century. They are said to be signs of good mental health and wellbeing, the keys to authentic living and true happiness.

Common wisdom today has it that there is only one place to look to find yourself, and that is *inward*. Personal identity is a do-it-yourself project. All forms of external authority are to be rejected, or at least questioned, and everyone’s quest for self-expression should be celebrated — personal happiness is the ultimate goal. Self-determination, once a principle for nations emerging from the First World War, is now the responsibility of every individual. A novelty in the history of ideas, this strategy of identity formation is sometimes labelled “expressive individualism”.

Clearly, there is nothing wrong with looking inward. There are many gains to living an examined life. And the alternative is far from attractive. As the philosopher [Charles Taylor](#) explains, the movement of expressive individualism is, in part, a reaction against a 1950s culture of conformity, which is believed to have “crushed individuality and creativity”.

Authenticity is also desirable. It is much better for a person to inhabit an identity that they own and can fully appropriate for themselves; there is something to be said for feeling comfortable in your own skin. Psychologists generally regard authenticity as a basic requirement of mental health.

So, are there any downsides to looking inward and being yourself? I can think of three pretty big ones: it seems to produce fragile selves; it’s failing in terms of outcomes for individuals and society; and it is faulty in its assumptions about human nature. Let me briefly discuss these in turn.

Though there have always been life experiences that can destabilise a person’s identity, the rise of expressive individualism, aided by the powerful tools of social media, means that more people than ever are unsure who they really are and consequently have a fragile sense of self. Defining yourself by means of social media is fraught with dangers and can lead to projecting an inauthentic self. Because, along with the exciting opportunity to find yourself comes the daunting possibility of not succeeding, or of not liking what you find. The cruel irony is that, while it’s never been more important to know who you are, it’s rarely been more difficult.

Expressive individualism is also failing to deliver on its promise of the good life. Anxiety, depression, narcissism, anger, and resentment are all on the rise. And happiness, by any measure, is actually in decline. While we cannot lay all the blame for this on looking only inward to find yourself, it would hardly be surprising for such a self-focussed approach to personal identity to produce selves that are self-deceived, self-absorbed, and self-centred. [Francis Fukuyama](#) writes: “The problem is that the inner selves we are celebrating may be cruel, violent, narcissistic, or dishonest. Or they may simply be lazy and shallow.”

“Look into your heart” and “follow your dreams” is the frequent advice from celebrities, with the sometimes-explicit message that you could achieve greatness if you did the same. But, by definition, we can’t all be exceptional. After all, the people in question are being interviewed precisely because they are set apart from the rest of us. [Jane Caro](#) puts it nicely when she writes that the constant message that we all can be exceptional is a lie:

You are not fabulous. Nor are the [men and] women — no matter how fabulous they may look or sound — who like to sprinkle such adjectives around. No one is. We are all flawed, insecure, tired, self-indulgent, often bewildered human beings who mostly struggle to stay on top of the demands of everyday life.

Despite the amazing advances in medical science in our lifetime, all human lives are marked by things like serious illness, heartbreak, tragedy, loneliness, and grief. According to social researcher [Hugh Mackay](#), many young people in the West today are in the grip of what he calls “the utopia complex”: “a world we dream of and think we are entitled to with outcomes that are always positive”.

A few years ago, my younger son finished primary school. The school held a graduation of sorts where every student was introduced by their teacher as they walked across the stage, beaming with promise; in every case the teacher gave a glowing description of their likely future and promise. I was struck by how fortunate I was to be in the presence of so many forthcoming music and movie stars, world leaders and captains of industry! Interestingly, there was not a single office worker or tradie in sight.

The biggest problem with looking only inward to find yourself is that it is hopelessly reductionistic, ignoring crucial dimensions of what it means to be a human being. The sociologist [David Jopling](#) is, I think, on to something when he writes that “the self is too complexly configured to be accessible to a single finite mind inquiring into itself by itself”. Along with looking inward to find yourself, we look around to others; we know ourselves in being known by others, especially those who know and love us intimately. We also look backwards and forwards to our life stories. Human identity does not exist in isolation, and it cannot be defined without reference to the narrative in which it finds itself.

But as much as we might like to think of ourselves as the narrator and main protagonist and as writing our own script, each of us participates in shared stories. As [Trevin Wax](#) puts it, “a restless, individualistic pursuit of happiness evolves into a strange conformist impulse. We think we’re blazing our own path, but the paths we take look strangely like everyone else’s.”

There is, in fact, a fourth direction to which you can look to find yourself — a direction that many believe offers a better story. They insist that personal identity requires *looking up*. Former Archbishop of Canterbury, [Rowan Williams](#), writes: “Without the transcendent we shall find ourselves unable, sooner or later, to make any sense of the full range of human self-awareness”. On the other side of the ledger, [some have argued](#) that Friedrich Nietzsche, sometimes described as the first real atheist because of his fearless pursuit of the consequences of his antitheist stance, has no place for the notion of personal identity. Does looking up have a role to play in identity formation?

The key to an authentic, stable, and satisfying sense of self is to inhabit a narrative identity that is worth living. One that deals well with life’s joys and sorrows, triumphs, and disappointments, and responds well to injustice.

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