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Personal Identity - Who am I really..... ?

Before reading this article please just think for a few minutes about how you would complete the sentence "I am....."

Think about how you would describe yourself. How would you introduce yourself at a job interview? How would you introduce yourself when meeting another parent whilst waiting for your child to come out of school? What about on a training course at work or how would you introduce yourself to someone at a neighbour's house party? Or any other situation you can think of.

Write down your answers, before reading further.....

You may have been interested in answering the question or you may have thought it was silly or pointless but the ways in which we think of ourselves (and compare ourselves with others) is fundamental and we are all wired to need some sense of identity. Some reference point that describes who we are and enables us to communicate with and relate to others.

I started thinking about this most recently when reflecting on how my career has changed over the last 5 years. I was educated as a Mechanical Engineer and my career over the last 30+ years has seen me in a variety of jobs in different industries and also in managerial and leadership positions.

When asked to declare on forms (e.g. for car insurance) what my profession was I decided some time ago that rather than just state my current job I would say I was a “Chartered Engineer”. I was proud to have achieved that professional status and it seemed to be a broader and more permanent description than saying “Compliance Engineer” or “Senior Inspection Engineer” or “Engineering Leadership Team Member.” Job done, that’s who I was in a work context – but no, that’s not who I am today.

I took voluntary redundancy in 2012 after 20 years working for a global blue-chip pharmaceutical company. I did not want to “retire” and also was tired and frustrated by the politics and constraints of working in the “corporate world” – the performance management targets and annual reviews - and therefore I didn’t want to apply for another “job”. So I decided to start my own business – but what would I do?

I brainstormed the variety of transferrable skills I felt I had and the aspects of work in which I felt engaged and energised along with the contacts and networks I had that might be interested in what I could do. So, to make a long story shorter, I currently do a number of somewhat disparate things from specialist engineering compliance assessments, quality management consultancy, compliance management training, right through to management and leadership development training and facilitation. So now, the simplest thing for me to say when asked “What do you do?”, is to say “I’m a management consultant.” So, in the work space I have changed my sense of identity – and it feels great !!!

So how else might a change in our sense of identity open things up for us all and liberate us or energise or inspire us?

Go back to the short exercise I asked you to do before reading this article. What did you write down? Some of the things I brainstormed when thinking about my own “identities” were:

I am.....

- Management Consultant
- Chartered Engineer
- Son
- Facilitator
- Male
- Father
- Tutor
- Husband
- Step-Father

I realised in doing this short exercise that I could probably have filled a whole page of “Identity descriptions” – White, British, Rugby Fan, Skier, (Bad) Golfer, Socialist, Moderate, European etc.....

I also realised that whilst it was enlightening to have such a wide range of ways of describing my identity it was also somewhat confusing – the question that kept surfacing was “Who am I really....?”

I was also struck by the fact that these labels are just convenient, short-hand and useful ways of describing ourselves in different contexts but that they are also in some sense still potentially very limiting and constraining, and sometimes divisive.

When we hear an identity label we immediately and subconsciously have a reaction to it – a set of preconceptions and prejudices about that label. For example, most of us in the UK at the moment are divided into either “Remainers” or “Leavers/Brexiteers”. Our reactions to these labels are fuelled by media stereotyping and the inevitable fact that when we see/hear a Remainer or a Brexiter interviewed we are of course only hearing a very small number of people’s views. But these labels have divided my country and it is sad and frightening to see.

Much of the EU referendum campaign has focussed on the very emotive issue of immigration and we have seen some awful xenophobic behaviours and attitudes in public places with people being taunted and told to “go home”. I am sure that many people that have suffered such abuse are actually “completely British” – born here, raised here, working here, paying taxes, raising children here and have as much right to stay in this country as the Queen herself does. However, at the very root of these misconceptions and xenophobia are the “identities” that we associate with skin colour, face shape, accent, religion, dress code, “unusual names” etc...

Sadly, as I write this there are demonstrations, riots and shootings fuelled by racism and responses to the #BlackLivesMatter campaign movement in the USA. Again, labels and prejudice are at the root of these killings.

We all see someone that is “different” to us and without conscious thought we make snap judgements and “decide” whether we are safe, comfortable, or somehow threatened or insecure. (If you want to really explore your biases and potential prejudices then visit <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>) .

The labels we use to describe ourselves are of course useful in conversation, to introduce ourselves and to help us understand more about others. But they are also potentially very limiting and as we have seen can be very divisive.

If I see myself as “White British Heterosexual Male” then I’m setting myself up to perhaps distance myself from “Black African Lesbian Female” and the same goes for any other identity labels that we choose to describe ourselves – they limit our potential and close our minds. By changing my identity from “Chartered Engineer” to “Management Consultant” I opened up

broader opportunities for work that I enjoy and further learning and growth. But at the same time the new label is just a new “limitation”.

I am always struck and personally moved by the lyrics of John Lennon’s song “Imagine” – here’s just one verse:

*Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion, too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace... You...*

However, despite John Lennon’s optimism that “it isn’t hard to do” it is **incredibly hard** for most people to imagine the beautiful aspirational and peaceful world that he describes for us. In fact as human beings we are wired to automatically see difference, to be wary and to fear others that are different to us. It is only through **consciously challenging** these labels and nurturing a habit to create space to stop and think that we have any chance of achieving that peaceful world.

I’m not yet comfortable with adopting the identity label of “writer”, but thank you for reading this far. If I have encouraged just one person to reflect on how their identity affects their self image and their perceptions of others in a positive way then this article will have been worth the few hours it’s taken me to write.

To close, I just want to describe an exercise I did after I’d started to think about the identity issues I raise here and after my initial brainstorm of the many identity labels I use. Just like I “chunked up” from Plant Engineer, to Chartered Engineer, and then to “Management Consultant” – each new label broader and less constraining than the previous one, I decided to see how far I could broaden my “self description” so that it opened up my horizons and potential and my ability to try to see other people more broadly too. A self description that was bigger and more inclusive than all of the others put together. **“It wasn’t hard to do.....”**

After a few iterations I ended up with:

I am a living, breathing, feeling, caring creature in a complex universe, seeking peace, understanding, meaning, fulfilment and true happiness.

Of course, if I were to introduce myself like that at a neighbour’s barbecue then people would probably give me other labels like drunk, hippy, drug-taker, nutter etc... so do be careful how you use your new “identity”. But it is already giving me a broader perspective and an increased ability and comfort to be able to step back and think about the bigger picture on this beautiful blue marble we all call “home”. **I’m on a journey finding out Who I Really Am.....**

Neville F. Eden
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