

KNOW WHO *you*
CAN *be* NOW

In my experience, many people who live in rural areas often seem to be more “real.” On the other hand, those of us raised in urban areas (like me) are often taught to put up a front for the people we are with. We are told to play a role, keep our defenses up, stay safe. Adding to the deception, although no one says it explicitly, we are advised—especially beginning in adolescence for males—to inflate our ego. Yet, when we do this, we start to value the wrong things and fail to grasp the implications of this role-playing. A famous quip by the writer Flannery O’Connor serves as a warning to us. When a friend complimented her on the publication of her book *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, she wrote back saying that fame was merely “a comic distinction shared with Roy Rogers’ horse and Miss Watermelon of 1955.”

We sacrifice a great deal in being so concerned about our reputation and persona. All the energy we spend on our

defenses and building up our egos (because we were told, and erroneously now believe, we are not good enough) is not available for creativity, growth, and appreciation of who we *really* are. (I know someone who has played so many roles that I don't think she knows who she really is.) However, we eventually see the folly of this masquerade if we are fortunate enough to interact with persons who model transparency and self-acceptance. This is reassuring and surprising—and often quite enjoyable. True ordinariness is, indeed, a tangible wonder.

I remember once visiting a hermit who was so non-defensive and at ease with himself that I don't think I aged when I was with him. After all, how could I? Aging takes some sort of friction. There was none. If for some reason I would have verbally attacked him with a statement like, "You are a fool!" I don't think he would have defended himself. Instead, he would have paused, reflected (rather than reacted), and responded with a smile, saying, "Yes, I do behave foolishly at times, but how did you know?"

Another person who stood out for me like that was Jack, a Lutheran pastor who was a professional counselor, educator, and my department chair at the university. Nevertheless, he for me typified the image of a country parson. He was gentle, welcoming, wise, and had a look in his eye that was either compassionate or full of fun depending on the circumstances.

Jack was also typical of the country parson in how he meticulously minded the funds. And so I was shocked when he said to me one morning that we should go out to eat together on the department to mark his passing of the

leadership torch to me. He said, “Bob, soon you will be chair of our department, and I will be moving back to faculty. I think it is justified that we take money from the budget and go out to eat.”

I was incredulous. “You mean we are going to go out for dinner together on the department, Jack?” He calmly replied, “No, *lunch*, Bob, *lunch*.”

We did finally match our schedules and went out. After we had a chance to look over the menus and order, I asked Jack to say grace before we began eating as a nod to his role as minister. He agreed, bowed his head, and belted out a prayer of thanksgiving. Everyone in the restaurant put their knives and forks down. There was a couple in the corner that I think were planning to have an affair. They changed their minds! Finally, he looked up, smiled, and said, “Well, I think we thanked the Lord well enough.”

That’s the way Jack was. He was spontaneously himself. He knew who he was, enjoyed himself fully in being that person, and all of those with him were touched by his comfortable honesty as well. His ordinariness was magnetic.

This is different from people who *think* they are ordinary, transparent, or spontaneous, but are instead erratic, leave no psychological space for others, or are just plain rude. I had a colleague in graduate school many years ago like that. His unconscious was close to his mouth. He thought he was simply being himself when he would blurt out uncharitable comments, but instead he was actually living out a role that was unexamined and unnatural. It was more a reaction to his family of origin than to the people in front of him.

Poor fellow. I think he was trying to be like another of our classmates who also said outrageous things but was so likeable and fun that he would make you laugh rather than react. I still remember one day when this other classmate came up to me, stared at a flamboyant tie I was wearing during my rotation on the inpatient psychiatric unit, and quietly said, “Where did you get that tie?” After I told him, he said, “Do me a favor. Don’t go in that store again.”

He was impossible, but the special thing about him was you always knew he was kind and liked you. Ordinariness and kindness make a good combination. When people are their spontaneous, gentle selves—no matter what personal style the person is clothed in—everyone around them feels good as well. You feel cleansed by their presence, much like when you take a quiet walk in the woods.

Gentleness warms our style of interacting with others so the best of our personality can come forth. This is especially so when we turn that kindness on ourselves so we can see clearly, but not hurtfully, what our faults are and what our gifts can be. It doesn’t take much to be this way, just a little attention and effort. And when it happens, not only do others feel the difference, but so do we.

Yet ordinariness seems so rare today. There are so many people who are self-centered and narcissistic. Once, a colleague of mine gave a workshop on psychiatric diagnosis to a large group of mostly female social workers. As part of the presentation he showed little video clips of the different psychological disorders. When he was showing one of a narcissistic male, he noticed that in the far back of the room six of the social workers were giggling loudly. When the

lights came up, he had to ask them what their observations were and why it was so funny. In response, one of them yelled out, “All six of us dated him!”

To be truly our ordinary selves, each of us must respond to three calls. If we don't, there is a good chance that we will spend our lives focused externally on our persona or reputation, merely existing, drifting, or reacting to the events. You might ask, “Don't many people live that way?” Yes, I think they do. When a certain spiritual guide was asked what he learned after years of mentoring others, he responded sadly, “Most people are unhappy, and they make the same mistakes over and over again.” But we don't have to live that way. If we are aware of the three calls of identity each of us must face eventually in life, we can let go of the past and respond to the calls when they present themselves.

*Answer
your three
calls.*

The first call is: *self-awareness* (or what I like to call knowing your “true name”). There is more in a name than we realize until we come upon the use of one that opens our eyes. We especially see the importance of names in the Bible. In the Hebrew scriptures, Abram is called to become Abraham, the father of his people, and Sarai to become Sarah, a woman filled with new potential. In the Christian scriptures, we see how Simon is renamed Peter, and later Saul becomes Paul. Our given name often brings with it the limits family and society have put on it. Our family role quietly and unconsciously follows us into adult life like an invisible puppeteer. However, if we determine a name that *we* believe is truly reflective of our gifts, then we have a basis

for discovering what it might mean not only for us but also for those with whom we interact and whom we guide.

I remember years ago saying to my wife, “I have a new name.” She is used to these types of crazy proclamations from me, so she simply replied, “What is it?” I said, “Enthusiasm.” She paused and looked at me. “I don’t like it.” I told her that this wasn’t meant to be a sharing; it was more of a male thing. I wanted to simply utter it and have her applaud. Finally, realizing she was right, after a bit of reflection I said, “What about ‘passion?’” She smiled and said, “I like that one. It is large enough—it is *you*.”

I then began to see how I could feed the name “passion” that I felt captured my main gift. I wanted to do this so it could be pushed into the realm of magic for myself and others whom I served as therapist, friend, family member, coworker, or associate. Via my passion I sought to bring whatever natural joy I could into all situations. I wanted to encourage people. I also wanted to learn how I might inspire them in my presentations and writings. The goal was to honor passion as I lived it out in my own life. I knew this would take work, but that it would be well worth it. And, I must say, I was pleased with the results. I did find that by using this new word or name as a guide, I could really live out a meaningful life. But after some years I ran into a wall. I was being called now to respond to a second, less direct calling in life: *pruning*.

I began to see that I didn’t need to take any further steps to extend my central talent but instead needed to prune it. I needed to take an even more difficult step than I had in the past: I needed to step *backward* into the shadow or

the underused areas of my psyche and find a new name or word to balance “passion.” If I didn’t, I would be intrusive in people’s lives. My passion had become irritating rather than enhancing for others. It had become unfocused and unruly, like an untended rose bush. In seeking this balancing word I came across the word “gentle” as a guide. I needed to be a gentle passionate person. The gentleness would be like the greens around the rose. It wouldn’t supplant my main gift but would accent it in such a way that it could be better appreciated by me and of more use to others.

This worked quite well. It produced the same results that we see in nature when a bush or tree is properly pruned at the right time: more fruit is produced! I could see that when I was more attuned to when and how to intervene with others, I could have a greater impact than when I just passionately pushed ahead full speed. The same is evident with other styles/names/words as well. For instance, if you are a great listener and this is your main gift or name, then there comes a time when listening must be pruned in the direction of activity. Choosing to sit at the far end of the table is no longer humility; it is unnecessary diffidence that results in the loss of your presence from the community you are in. One friend told me that she naturally was an introvert and that she tended to listen and not participate in class. Unlike extroverts who speak first and then think, she thought before speaking. The result was that she reflected a great deal, but didn’t share. Finally, her teacher said, “I recognize your listening style, and it usually is of great benefit to you and to those with whom you share your ideas later on. However, to remain with this style now in class is actually selfish; you need to risk sharing