

ENCOUNTERING ONESELF

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To be and become the person we truly are is a pervasive theme in third force psychology. In this paper, I succinctly summarize how we become ourselves by focusing on 5 distinct dimensions of personality functioning. Freeing oneself from an idealized self-image and experiencing the real self is seen as a beginning phase. A cognitive restructuring involving modifying internalized value orientations is then stressed. Assuming responsibility for one's choices and initiating self-direction is encouraged to develop authentic personhood. The growing person is conceptualized as being open to inner experiences and viewing one's life as a fluid process involving change and risk taking. Finally, vitality is generated and sustained by receptivity to one's inner life.

Keywords: personality functioning, self-image, self-direction, real self, value orientation, inner experiences, change, risk taking, personhood.

In quiet reflection and sometimes in utterly painful agony and despair, there are basic questions each of us eventually must ask and answer for ourselves. These include "What is my goal in life?", "What am I striving for?", "Who am I?", "What is right?", and "How do I find personal meaning for my life?"

For me, at the moment, the most helpful way to state my aim in life is to use the words of Soren Kierkegaard: to become a person is "to be that self which one truly is." What are the implications of Kierkegaard's statement for those of us who are trying to experience life fully? Further, how do we become ourselves?

First, when we become persons we move away from facades. No doubt, for many of us it is very painful to recognize who we are, and it is often much easier to be a self that we are not. As Karen Horney and others have

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noted, we often pursue an ideal image of ourselves in order to escape the frightening conflicts stored in our inner life.

The ways in which we wear facades are probably clear to all of us. Beneath a person who is the “life of the party,” we may find an individual frightened by the essential realities of his or her life. Underneath the forced smile of another, we may find someone who is afraid to admit that s/he sees her/himself as a failure or hack. A person who seems to be running in circles may be trying to escape a life he or she finds empty and tragic. A person who is compulsively aggressive and angry may well be trying to hide from the weak little boy or girl inside him or her.

Second, when we become persons we move away from “oughts,” that is, images of what we ought to be. For example, Albert Ellis suggested that neurotic people experience masturbatory, and he urges elimination of self-defeating “musts,” “oughts,” and “shoulds” from our cognitive structures.

Far too many people feel trapped by the expectations of others and are conditioned to feel that we must do what is expected in order to be loved or accepted. Many of our parents withheld their approval and love when we were angry or defiant, telling us to “grow up” when we giggled at the dinner table or stayed up all night after a prom to watch the sun come up. As such, we have come to believe we ought not to be angry when we have reason, find it hard to laugh spontaneously, and miss the mystery and beauty of a sunrise because only “morons” stay up all night.

It seems to me that we are healthiest when we begin to move away from the paranoia of feeling that we have to meet the expectations of others. Rather, we should begin to live according to what seems meaningful and right to us. In fact, it is a fraudulent approach to life to behave in certain ways just to make people like us.

Third, when we become persons we move toward self-direction and being autonomous. The self-directed person steadily moves in a direction where he or she chooses goals and objectives that are purposeful and satisfying for him/herself. Conversely, the self-directed person chooses to extricate himself or herself from a style of life that does not have meaning for him or her.

It would be unrealistic and irresponsible for me to suggest that self-direction is easily achieved. Becoming an autonomous individual can be frightening and painful. Recall the first time you stood your ground with your parents when you thought your decision was right. It is not easy to experience the rejection and cruel intimidation they can wield.

However, we do not always make the best choices when we assume responsibility for the direction of our lives. Thus, pain and suffering may result from the consequences of our choices, but it seems to me that the sense of internal strength and exhilaration one experiences by acting as an

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autonomous individual is well worth risking uncertainty, vulnerability, and learning by making mistakes.

Fourth, becoming a person means that we become more open to change. It seems incredible to me that some individuals expect that they will never change or that there must be something wrong with them if they do change. My feeling is that personal growth and development is a fluid process. From day to day, our feelings about ourselves, our friends, and our jobs may vary.

I think life would be dull if we never experienced new feelings and insights. Imagine going out on a date or going home to your wife or husband, only to find the conversation is the same or that nothing is different except for the date on the calendar. Can you imagine yourself remaining the withdrawn or loud-mouthed kid you were as a freshman in high school?

For me, life is a process of becoming who we are and can be, which means taking risks, and being willing to open yourself to new experiences, both within and outside of yourself. It also means being willing to experience the sometimes conflicting feelings within us. It strikes me as a tragedy that individuals develop hardening of the psychological arteries at any period in their lives, whether at 15 or 85.

Fifth, to become the self that one truly is means moving toward living in an open, friendly, close relationship with one's own experiences. This notion was previously implied, but I want to expand on it here.

Probably one of the most difficult experiences in life for any of us is to accept parts of ourselves that we have hidden or denied. Some of us find it painful to admit that a very real part of us is dependent on others—that we need care and attention. Some people never fully experience the frustration and disappointment that are deep within themselves because these might be taken as signs of weakness. Although we have affection for another person, we do not express it because society says only those who are somehow committed to each other should physically embrace or touch.

Thus, it seems to me that we become persons by getting close to the messages and meanings that flow from our inner reactions and feelings. We become more aware and accepting of our impulses, desires, opinions, and subjective reactions. In a sense, we become closer to the realities of our existence. As Maslow suggests, those who are open to themselves have “a wonderful capacity to appreciate again and again, freshly and naively, the basic goods of life with awe, pleasure, wonder, and even ecstasy, however stale these experiences may be for others.”

Let me conclude by drawing a more concise image of the person who is becoming him/herself: The person I am talking about seems to trust the processes going on within himself or herself, and dares to feel his or her own feelings. S/he lives by the values that s/he discovers from within, and

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expresses these values in his/her own personal ways. S/he moves away from being what s/he is not, that is, from being a phony. He or she is not attempting to be more than s/he is, with the inevitable results being painful insecurity and obvious defensiveness. She or he is not intimidated into being less than what she or he is, with the inevitable results being guilt and neurotic self-devaluation. S/he increasingly listens to the innermost parts of her/his physiological and psychological being, resulting in a greater willingness to be the self that s/he most truly is. He or she is willing to explore, and finds tentativeness friendly rather than fearful. Finally, she or he finds that to be all of her/himself is not synonymous with being evil or uncontrolled.