

We Hardly Know Ourselves

Once, there was no “self.” That may be hard to fathom with the reverence we now pay to *self-expression*, *self-chosen* career paths, and *self-made* celebrities. We all know a phrase like, “she has a strong sense of *self*,” indicates someone highly to be praised, while a person mired in low “*self-esteem*” may require therapeutic intervention. But these descriptions are very different from, say, the virtues and vices laid out in a Catholic *self-examination* for confession. The latter assume a particular kind of life *together* called Church, whereas the former trumpet an entirely new portrait of the person-as-*individual*. We have already looked at many of the underlying social conditions that made this new language of “self”—very much a modern invention—so attractive, but it’s worth coming at them again from this angle because here as elsewhere the Catholic Worker rearranges our sensibilities. It helps us see that “who we are” invariably escapes our own grasp (and that’s a good thing!), because true “self-knowledge” is a gift received only *after* our being woven into the Body of Christ.

We’ve talked about the breakdown of local communities and a common good. What did this do to our sense of personal identity? To get at this, imagine living a life firmly within a thick local ethnic community – one with the shared “projects” we’ve mentioned. In this situation, you would *receive* yourself – your sense of who you are – from interaction with the people around you. Your social role, from father to farmer to friend to taxpayer to worshipper, would define you, more or less entirely. You would just *be* those acts you performed in those roles. You would define your “self” by what was external to you, including by the (shared) expectations of others. You would be, quite literally, *placed* within a dynamic tapestry of unique and unrepeatable characters interacting with one another and their environment.

So, discovering who you were in this context would be part of life’s adventure. Rather than a frantic search for meaning and self-definition, you were thrust into the middle of a dramatic plot from the get-go. It was something you received as gift. Moreover, you would have understood yourself as *part of a whole* in a much different way than we do today. That is, your self-understanding would not have begun with yourself at all—your experiences, thoughts or feelings—but rather with the community’s story about itself. You were a *being-as-community*, or a *community being*. Introspection would have been turned outward toward *contemplation* of the people, places, and actions that made you.

This is not our world. For, as we have seen, the modern market state has produced an ever more isolated “individual,” and one of the very things we have come to purchase and consume from this market is our own autonomous “selves.” The unique thing about this self is precisely that it is “autonomous”. Rather than receive my identity from others, now I *control* who I am. I spend my life studying or making *myself*. Instead of being defined from without, we now define ourselves by looking within: our feelings, emotions, experiences, and thoughts. We give this inner world a great amount of weight in determining the “meaning” of life and our place in it. Even the best of us – devout Catholics who believe in God and the Church and conscience and a moral order and all that – still define true and false, good and bad, with reference to this inner life to a far greater extent than ever before. It is literally a source of revelation, and a guide to our actions. What else, for most people, *would* you go by? We are told from an early age: Listen to your heart. Go with your gut. Follow your passion.

And it is not that we now look on those communities that once gave us our identity with mere indifference. We are taught from an early age to be positively suspicious of them. Hometowns, commitments, tradition, religion, even family, we are warned from youth up in subtle and not so subtle ways, threaten to devour our personal freedom unless held at a safe distance. It may have been inevitable that we view them this way. Given the social consequences of broken families, the regular displacement of people and work by industry, or the devastation caused by 20th century warfare, the modern self almost had to turn against its traditional moorings – now shattered and fragmented – and distrust them. Other people, if not kept at a safe distance, may interfere with me becoming who I really am. I am, so we are told, the only person with the right to determine my identity.

And so, *freedom*, a certain amount of safe space around my inner self, is essential to this project. Of course, we have lots of technologies that help us keep other “selves” away: social media, online “networking” and other forms of digital “connection,” are the obvious examples. Such technologies allow us all to manage meticulously the way we present ourselves, and so distance *our* selves from other selves doing the same. This gives each of us the illusion of a safe buffer zone around who we really are. Even where families or communities seem relatively intact, the sinews holding them together are now merely voluntary – have to reach across the buffer zone to *allow* others in, rather than simply having them as a part of who we are. And, as our world proves, these are loose bonds easily dispensed of without a shared life together, or common good.

Put differently, this inward turn has been made necessary by the absence of a received *story* of our lives. So our most important task, we are told, is to *choose* or *construct* our story under the assumption we have had no story to begin with. The name for this is something called self-actualization. Yet, it’s worth reflecting: how do we in fact acquire this *bird’s-eye view* on ourselves? Can we be the subject doing the “looking” (or constructing) and the object “being looked at” (or constructed) at one and the same time? Even if we could, it leaves us in a rather closed-loop of self-reference. So this frantic pursuit of self-actualization turns out to be itself an indicator that something much deeper has gone wrong: not only do I imagine that there is a buffer of control between myself and everything “outside” of me, but I also imagine one between me and myself. I constantly must manage, not only other people, but my own internal psychology. And this is not just the common self-awareness that comes with being human. For today, to be “well adjusted” is to install an internal therapist office permanently within ourselves. Our attention is ever to be on what you might call our own inner theatre – the psychological stage on which the drama of our internal lives takes place. Today, this stage is given unprecedented levels of attention. As at the therapist, now even within ourselves, we are always scrutinizing, questioning, reflecting, and adjusting. We have become our own highest curiosity. Narcissism, or navel-gazing, as it were, is almost unavoidable.

This shouldn’t surprise us. The same logic that birthed modern technology, economics, and bureaucracy – that the world is there to be manipulated – was simply extended to our own inner psyches. Now, *we ourselves* have become the objects managed alongside the people, places, and materials we encounter “externally.” In fact, this was exactly how Sigmund Freud conceived psychotherapy. In encountering the fractured “patients” of modernity, Freud sought to repackage their idiosyncrasies into objective, scientific terms accessible to “expert” intervention.

This had the quite ironic effect of making “feelings” something that were always rational. Negative emotions were no longer, as in Christian theology, irrational passions in need of proper training. Rather, for Freud they arise predictably, and so logically, as a result of certain traumatic events in our past. The moral task of life can then be reconceived as therapy – as “coming to terms with” our feelings. This has the result, as I say, of making the irrational rational. But it might also be seen the other way around: in a sense Freud has made all of life *irrational* – a life determined by the logic of whatever emotions we associate with our pasts.

Now, don’t get me wrong, there is no doubt that events, good and bad, have lasting impacts on people’s lives. But today this idea has become sometimes the only lens through which we see others, or even ourselves. “Pain”, “abuse”, and “trauma” no longer merely name events in our lives, but rather almost a kind of self-conscious acceptance of the permanent status of “victim.” As such, constant introspection becomes the “normal” experience of “selves” straining, understandably, to overcome the isolation and meaninglessness of our world. Under these conditions *any* unwelcome situation, relationship, or memory can be made a container for our generalized anxiety.

So, in a world without the kind of communities necessary for mutual care and concern, Freud and his therapeutic heirs fill a necessary gap – professional therapists can become our rent-a-friends. Therapy, then, is a sort of creative writing process between counselor and client for the sake of constructing the life-story we are lacking. But this story is not the external history of any community, but the emotional history of our inner theatre. And, it is worth noting, it does not matter if these stories are true or not. It only matters that they make us feel better – a standard that is also self-created. And this can make a big difference, since it is in light of our standards that we shape our lives. In including the therapist in what we tell ourselves about ourselves, we ask them to broker our marriages, our divorces, and even our relationships to our own bodies. They have become our priests, confessors, and spiritual directors. They help us assert our desires, set boundaries, relieve us of guilt and shame, and make decisions about the future.

All this, of course, cannot but deeply impact the way that we interact with the world. It is commonplace that recent generations – “millennials”, Generation Z, or whatever – tend to avoid commitments to people, places, and even their own identity. But to a great extent we all have come to value spontaneity and freedom above all else – the ability to attach and detach ourselves from one another as we see fit. We have all become what you might call *tourist* selves – always on the move, looking for the next experience. And, of course, this means that none of us ever actually get around to building a world that is worth anything, because to do that you have to both care and commit. No one really cares about tourist towns, and that’s why they look the way they do: cheap, plastic, disposable. Use it, throw it away when you’re bored. And, so, just look around as you drive down the road – we’ve literally built a physical American landscape perfectly suited to American selves.

We are a tourist nation, and we treat our relationships as disposable as well. An obvious example is our marriages and families. But such tourism also includes abandonment of the kind of commitments that make life possible for the least of these: the poor, the elderly, the sick, the imprisoned, and the young. The poor are ignored as shadows on the streets; the elderly sequestered in asylum-like facilities; the sick handed over to technocratic institutions; the

prisoner tortured in soulless exile; and the child left out of life entirely. The only things we don't get rid of is those things that themselves constantly change to suit our whims: our phones.

All this is important to keep in mind when considering the Maurin Mandate. The sorts of communities Peter was calling into being are meant to allow us to once again receive our identity as a gift from others, including the poor. But, as we have seen, to tourist selves this can be a strange, even threatening experience. It can be an obstacle to even getting started. Often Catholic Worker communities and those like them have set routines and rhythms that simply go on from day to day with an almost mechanical consistency. It is not uncommon for newcomers to such an environment to get their feelings hurt. Why? Often, because those who are new are nurturing the expectations of tourist selves. If so, getting your feelings hurt might be exactly what we would expect to happen. For part of the point of such communities is that they do not bend over backwards to accommodate themselves to new identities. Newcomers are asked to fit *themselves* to the community. And in this lies the potential for transformation.

So, for instance, I once heard the complaint from a newcomer, that, for a hospitality house, it doesn't actually feel very hospitable. Though people were friendly enough, he said, everything seemed to go on as if he wasn't even there. I had to explain that "hospitality" referred to what *happened* at the house: external events, not inward ones. We were all fed, and housed, though none of us deserved it. Try to get a household, or a family, or any community, to stay together because everyone *feels* welcome, or comfortable, or whatever, and you will have a community that will not last a day. Yet this is the premise upon which most of our communities stand. And this is just what we've been saying: the newcomer had been accustomed to define hospitality as a kind of sentiment. People were not being attentive enough to his inner theatre. And that is just the point. For in the hospitality house he had stepped back, in a certain way, into a world that is difficult to find any more. A world in which he could only discover who he was by fitting himself to that world, and understanding himself in its terms, not it in his own terms. It was a world that was held together by shared work in the pursuit of a common good. And, for many, this is exactly what is so liberating about these communities, and it is yet another reason the Maurin Mandate is important. It can relieve you of the unbearable burden of your self.

Another way of getting at all this is encapsulated by Dorothy Day's statement, "I have long thought it best to take people for just what they do, not what they say." In other words, *you are what your body does*, not what you think yourself to be internally. And here she was just expressing the Christian approach to psychology taken by thinkers like Augustine or Aquinas. For them, our feelings and emotions are not the standard by which we should judge the world. They are, for most of us, raw and untrained. They do not respond to the vision of what is truly good that we see in Jesus Christ; we are deeply self-centered, and we naturally turn away from anything that doesn't make us feel good. Changing this, says the Christian tradition, takes immersion into a new kind of community.

In other words, we are used to thinking the real me is on the "inside" and that what I most need to do is control my "outside" presentation—the clothes, makeup, or tattoos I exhibit, the mannerisms I display, actions I perform—for the authentic "me" to be *expressed*. But what if the real me *is* the "outside" stuff and what is deceptive is actually what I tell myself on the "inside"? Moreover, what if I am relatively blind to myself, both the inside *and* the outside? What if others actually know me much better than I know myself? If this is the case, both my insides – which

are not, after all, unimportant – and my outsides will have to be remade. But this is not something you can *think* yourself into. It only happens in the community called Church, because there we work on our souls, not through introspection, but through our bodies. We place our external actions under the judgement of others, and begin to form new habits of action that are the only way to access our souls: actions like kneeling to pray, being present with others, giving alms, cooking meals, saying thanks, and of course, just showing up. We remake our souls by repeated bodily actions. And, as Dorothy knew, to think and live in this outside-in fashion, is exactly what the Catholic Church has told us all along about what makes a human being. For community, or *communion*, is tied to the very being of God. The three persons of the Trinity exist in relationship to one another. *Being-as-communion* is more primary than the persons in isolation. *Our* being is rooted in God's being such that we are fundamentally and irreducibly built for communion. You can only be a self with others.