

# Examined Life: Who Am I?

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation.

I've never taken my horoscope seriously.

Though I appreciate that a lot of people find it compelling, astrology has never really made a lot of sense to me.

I've never really been able to understand how the movements of the planets and stars are supposed to tell us anything about our individual lives, here on Earth.

And, yet, from the moment in high school when I saw the musical *Hair* and heard all about the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, with its promise of peace, and love, and harmony, some part of me has thought, “yeah, that’s me.”

I mean, who wouldn't want to be an Aquarian?

We're considered original, progressive, independent humanitarians who communicate well.

What's not to love?

Indeed, I have felt a kindred bond with other Aquarians, and often found them to hold wonderful attributes I greatly admire.

And, so, though I've never invested in astrology, I have found some affinity with the people who share my sign.

The problem, as it turns out, though,

is that I'm not actually an Aquarian.

At least not if the scientists  
at the Minnesota Planetarium Society are to be believed.

They argue that our understanding of modern astrological signs  
is completely out of whack with the originals.

When the ancient Babylonians created the signs of the zodiac,  
they started with a set of thirteen—not twelve.

A person's sign depended on what constellation of stars  
the sun was "in" when a person was born.

Over millennia, though, the earth has wobbled on its axis  
because of the moon's gravitational pull,  
leaving our modern signs of the zodiac  
a month out of sync with the original constellations.

That means I, and many of you who may have thought yourselves  
fellow Aquarians five minutes ago, are, quite possibly, Capricorns.

The thing is, I don't feel at all like a Capricorn.

Now, this isn't a sermon about astrology.  
It's a sermon about the self.

So, if you're in any way feeling discombobulated  
about what I've just shared,  
hang on to it until I get to Buddhism later!

And, if you're feeling out of sorts...,  
know that you're not alone.

Many people after reading the initial article in the newspaper  
in Minneapolis-St. Paul had some choice words for the editorial team.

Some were distraught.  
Some bewildered.  
Some furious.

It's never easy to have our sense of self upended.  
And, yet, it happens.

But when it does, we may find an invitation  
to come to a fuller understanding of ourselves.

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Today we begin this series of seven services  
focused on "The Examined Life."

It's an opportunity to look at our lives,  
to seek to better understand ourselves  
and the meaning of our time on this planet.

We begin with the fundamental question of "Who Am I?"

It's a question that's been at the centre of philosophy  
for a very long time.

Some of the "great thinkers" through the ages  
have weighed in with an array of answers.

While Immanuel Kant, in the Enlightenment,  
took the question "Who Am I?"  
as the first of his four guiding propositions,  
he eventually decided it was an unanswerable question.

And so he joined the long line of people  
who have wondered whether we  
can really ever know who we are.

Such doubt, though,  
has never seemed to stop us from trying.  
It's never put an end to our exploration—  
to our grappling with who we are.

\* \* \*

So, when you take on this question for yourself,  
just how do you answer?

*Just who do you think you are?*

When asked, do you give your name?

Or your gender or sexual orientation?

Do you point to your background,  
or tell the story of where your forebears were born?

Do you tell about your family,  
and pull out photos of your beloveds?

Do you talk about your job,  
or how you spend the bulk of your time?

Or do you discuss how you feel,  
explaining your story by what you've accomplished,  
or by what you've left undone,  
by the mistakes you've made,  
or the rough patches you've endured?

There's an exercise I've taken part in  
during a couple of different retreats over the years.  
Maybe you have, too.

Participants are invited to make a list  
of ten key aspects of their identity.

People list things like their gender,  
or elements of their background.

They list their job and name roles they play—  
mother, son, uncle,  
breadwinner, outcast, rabble-rouser,  
lesbian, poet, citizen.

The facilitator of the exercise then invites people  
to cut the list in half,  
eliminating five of the ten parts of themselves.

Then comes another cull.

And then another, until everyone is left  
with the impossible choice of picking just one.

While the exercise is geared towards bringing focus  
to the most important aspects of one's sense of self,  
I find it reinforces for me the truth that each of us  
is wondrously made and incredibly complicated.

We can be full of contradictions, and countless things  
we rarely even recognize about ourselves.

We are more, rather than less, in terms of the layers of our being.

Which is why sometimes it's true  
that the people around us know us better  
than we even know ourselves.

In fact, there are many who would argue—  
and I am one of them—that there is no “I,” no “me,”  
completely separate from others.

As Quaker teacher Douglas Steere puts it:  
“There is no identity outside of relationships.  
You can't be a person by yourself.”

This bit of wisdom is, for me, the balancing point  
between our first and seventh principles—  
between our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity  
of every person, and the recognition that we, with all of life,  
belong to the single, wondrous web of being.

We are who we are because of the relationships that shape us.

This growing sense of ourselves as being co-created,  
as being mutually-constructed with others,  
has shifted our understanding in recent years  
of what it means to be human,  
as we've come to behold  
that we are deeply interdependent,

and that our destiny on this planet  
is bound up with that of everything else.

It's impossible, then, to answer the question, who am I,  
without also asking, who are we?

Now, I don't know if it's me, or if it's just aging,  
or if it's just the age we live in,  
but I find myself increasingly concerned  
with the answer to that question—  
to the question of who we are.

I see us teetering between boundless potential  
to live into our promise as a species on this planet  
and the very real possibility  
that our worst instincts will eventually get the best of us.

This week's report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change  
was a sobering reminder of how high the stakes are.

In the Torah, God places before the Israelites  
a choice between life and death, between blessings and curses.  
God implores them to choose life, that they might live.<sup>1</sup>

It seems that same stark choice sits before us still,  
this day and every day.  
Life or death? Blessings or curses?

To answer that question well, I believe,  
requires knowing who we are—  
or are at least doggedly trying to find out.

Because people who have some idea of who they are  
tend to make more confident and courageous choices.

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Many years ago, as an undergraduate,  
I took an academic course in esoteric Buddhism.

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<sup>1</sup> *Deuteronomy* 30:19.

It just about did me in.

It turns out that it's a lot harder than it might seem to write a 30-page paper on the Buddhist notion of emptiness.

I'm pretty sure that the thought that occurred to me while staring at a blank Word document occurred to each of my classmates, too.

Wouldn't our professor think we were brilliant and so deeply enlightened if we were to simply turn in an empty piece of paper, devoid of any words, but our name at the top?

It remains one of the hardest papers I've ever written. And I recall feeling grateful to get even a mediocre grade.

What I did take from that course, though, ironically, was about the Buddhist concept of the self, or rather, the no-self.

This core tenet of Buddhism is nested together with two others: an awareness that suffering is simply part of the human condition and that absolutely nothing in this life is permanent.<sup>2</sup>

That impermanence applies to our sense of self.

We are forever changing.  
We are only who we are, here and now, in this moment.  
And in this moment.  
And in this moment.

As such, we are nothing and we are everything.  
It doesn't matter whether we're Aquarians or Capricorns!

The Buddha taught that we should, in our search to understand the self, avoid asking "about caste or class, riches or birth, but instead ask about heart and conduct."

He said:

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<sup>2</sup> *Dhammapada*, 277-279.

Look at the flames from a fire.  
Where does the brightness arise?

From the nature of wood—  
and it doesn't matter what kind of wood.

In the same way the bright heart of wisdom  
can shine from wood of every sort.

It is through virtuous conduct,  
through loving-kindness and compassion,  
and through understanding of truth  
that one becomes noble.<sup>3</sup>

In Buddhist thought, what we do  
and how we are in the world matters.

It's similar to where Kant, taking a very different path, ended up.

In addition to the question of who am I,  
he focussed a great deal of energy on three other questions:

What am I?

What can I do?

And what can I know?

In the end, he decided the only answerable question is  
“what can I do?”

What can I do?

How can I make a difference?

How can I use my life

in service to something greater than myself?

These are the questions at the heart of being human.

These are the questions that, in the end, give shape to our lives.

As John Ruskin put it, “The ultimate reward

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<sup>3</sup> Jack Kornfield, *The Wise Heart*, 71-72.

for human toil and human generosity  
is not what we get for it,  
but what we become by it.”

How we live in this world  
becomes the testament to who we are.

Whether that sense of self being is understood  
as something that endures  
or something that is ultimately impermanent,  
the outcome turns out to be the same.

In the end, our legacy boils down  
to a lifetime of actions, both big and small.

The essence of who we are  
is revealed in how we treat others,  
and whether we journey through the world  
with kindness and compassion.

\* \* \*

I was moved this week hearing the story of Gia Tran,  
who has been collecting bottles and cans  
in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside for over twenty years.

At 62, still nearly every day,  
she gathers up whatever discarded bottles and cans  
she can find and she takes them to the Return Depot  
to redeem them for the deposit.

She then travels, most often by foot,  
a forty-five minute walk each way,  
to the B. C. Cancer Foundation,  
where she donates the proceeds of her day’s efforts.

The staff there is always glad to see her,  
as she radiates with an infectious joy.

They estimate that over twenty years,  
she has given over \$15,000.

It's certainly not the largest donation the foundation has received.

But it is hard to argue that it's not the most heartfelt.

Her steady generosity is a reminder that little things add up.

That day building upon day,  
that gesture by gesture,  
we, over time, answer the question, "Who am I?"

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In this day that we are given,  
may we choose life.

May we choose the compassionate path.

May we choose to make a difference in this world.

That the sum of our days  
might form a beautiful answer  
to life's timeless question.