

Who are you, really?

Quick, finish this sentence: "I am a _____."

What popped into your mind? Did you immediately think of your job title? Did you identify yourself with a relationship term, like wife, daughter, or Elvis fan? Maybe you described your body ("I am a slim size 10), your personality ("I am an optimist"), or your favourite hobby ("I am a heavy drinker").

Identity labels like these are useful, even necessary. They shape the way we act and feel (and the way people act and feel toward us) in every situation, from taking the bus to taking a lover.

But many labels are misleading, and none can fully describe the multifaceted reality that is a human being. Moreover, any external criteria we use to label ourselves—looks, power, health, relationships, anything—can disappear in a heartbeat. So really, the only way to avoid a lot of insecurity, fear, and suffering is to learn how to wear our identities lightly and let go of them easily.

How to Let Go

Step 1: Be still

The process of releasing your labels without losing yourself begins in stillness. If we hold still long enough, we begin to feel what we really feel and to know what we really know—a prospect so terrifying that some people bolt rather than face it.

If you can do this—get used to sitting still until you feel what you feel and know what you know—your labels will start peeling away like onion skins. Oh, it won't be easy. Your anxieties and neuroses will come yammering out of the walls like the Hounds of Hell. Your older sister's voice will mutter constant criticism. The person who broke your heart

in 1987 will show up, more vivid in memory than in the flesh, to do it again. But just...sit...still.

Like anyone who doesn't run from stillness, you'll find that your mental demons have less staying power than you thought. Eventually you will begin to sense a very deep self that defies all labels, a calm soul who has experienced your whole life—even that regrettable incident involving baked beans, a goat, and your mother's favourite hairpiece—without ever being dominated or extinguished.

This is the you who wears your labels, who can toss the ones you've outgrown (or that never fit in the first place), who will always find another identity to wear when a familiar one disappears.

Step 2: Become the experiencer, not the experience.

All great wisdom traditions point to the knowledge that the essence of our true selves is not any fixed label but the capacity to experience.

In the Biblical tradition underlying Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the One God of Israel tells Moses that His name is simply "I Am." The word Buddha means one who is awake, one who is aware.

As heavy as this philosophy sounds, it has a very simple and practical application. Try this: Go back to the first sentence of this article, remembering the label you gave yourself. Now repeat it, but instead of saying "I am a big fat loser" or "I am a powerful executive," say "I am one who calls myself a big fat loser" or "I am one who calls myself a powerful executive."

This wording may feel a bit awkward, but (1) it happens to be true, and (2) it helps you detach from both negative and positive labels by inserting a layer of language between you and whatever identity you happen to be wearing at the moment.

Step 3: Practice truth in labelling.

Our belief in labels, not the labels themselves, is what gives them the power to influence our behaviour. Knowing how to let go of any given identity without losing our essential selves yields a security we'll never get from fame, power, money, beauty, or any other personality prop.

By stilling our bodies and minds, becoming the One Who Experiences, and playing with labels the way we might play with costumes, we can remain ourselves no matter what happens: loss or gain, pain or pleasure, fame or disrepute.

Take these steps whenever, as the Indian poet Kabir wrote, "you are tangled up in others and have forgotten what your heart once knew." When the bad labels come at you glue-side up, or the positive ones are stripped away, remember to answer poet William Stafford's simple question: "Who are you really, wanderer?"

Why not remember today?