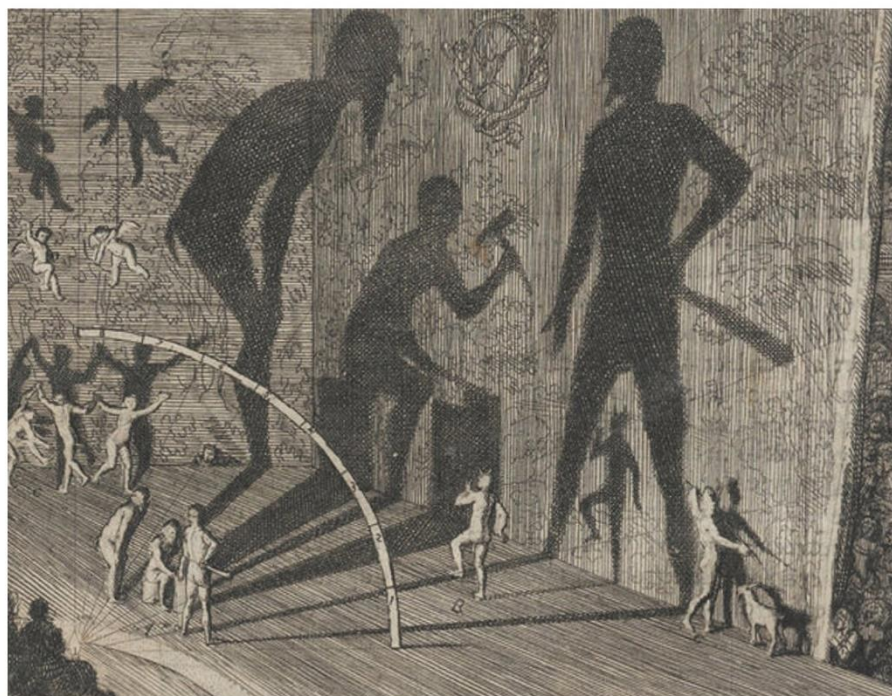


Not a table, a dog or a pencil

PIECES ON IDENTITY, THE SELF,
AND THE RESULT OF IT ALL

BRAND SMIT



Not a table, a dog or a pencil

Pieces on identity, the self,
and the result of it all

BRAND SMIT

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INTRODUCTION

What is this collection of notes about?

A few quotes from the text:

“Imagine the following situation: Bob X from B. Town meets John Z at a barbeque. John Z introduces himself as ‘John Z from Pretoria’ and holds out his hand. Bob X smiles politely, shakes John’s hand and introduces himself as ‘John Z from Pretoria.’”

“When this happens, when you are confronted with the reality that you do not know anymore how and where you fit into the Larger Landscape, you will find it difficult to commit to anything other than what provides you with immediate comfort in the face of a world that you will find increasingly hostile.”

“‘Choose a name from a magazine,’ I continued, ‘and make it your own. Make up a story about where you come from – you can say you’re from outer space, but people don’t take that seriously anymore. Say you’re from the Balkans,’ I suggested, ‘or Northern Ireland or Arizona or some other place.’”

“In 2000 I was confronted again, this time in Taiwan, with people to whom I had to identify myself after once again functioning for a year in relatively obscure anonymity – where the most basic information about my person was good enough.”

“In many cases, who and what we are supposed to be, with a splash of paint here and there to make ourselves unique to some extent, is good enough, and this identity is then presented as an answer to who we are.”

“After we are born we become aware of the fact that we are *something* among other *things* and *someone* among other *someones*, and that it is expected of us to function as the *something* that we are (don’t act as if you’re a table or a pet) and also to function as *someone*.”

“What is a human being then but a highly developed mammal? And why, incidentally, is it important to be more than just another mammal? I mean, rather a mammal than a reptile, right? Or am I being snobbish?”

“Some people end up as caricatures of the information they receive from the environment about what they should be and how they should act. These puzzle caricatures are seemingly unaware of how clearly the seams show between the sometimes hackneyed parts from which their socially functioning personas are compiled.”

“To confront what you’ve been given, to recognise it, and to believe in the astonishing possibilities that are within the reach of a relatively intelligent person are vital elements of the Process of Rebirth – and possibly, albeit not necessarily, the birth of the ENLIGHTENED SELF.”

“Is there a qualitative difference between my ‘1’ and the average ‘1’? Possibly so, and possibly not. What is important, is that I changed my classification from ‘problematic functioning’ to ‘satisfactory functioning’, not necessarily from ‘functional’ to ‘better’.”

“Fact is that people sometimes burn up decades trying to sort out what they are supposed to do. They spend years looking for ‘true’ answers, their ‘real’ selves, their ‘right’ place in the world, where they supposedly ‘really’ belong ... without realising they basically have two choices: *accept* to a large extent your given self and function as such, within the

particular framework of given place and time, or *choose* who and what you want to be, and where.”

“Identity that is recognised and to a degree approved by the community is therefore primarily required for APPEARANCE. Considering this relationship between identity and appearance at specific time and place, what would be the value of *not* appearing?”

“It should instil confidence to know you can change environments and ~~still remain the same~~ ... ~~still be “me”~~ ... ~~still retain the same identity~~ ... continue to *function* as a person who is essentially *related* to the “I” of yesterday, and ten years ago, in a half-dozen places on two continents.”

“Perhaps the purpose of this life is not to go where the dragons lie, that is, to ‘lose’ yourself, but to get involved, to take sides, and to offer yourself, as it were, for a ‘good cause’.”

“By now, I have accumulated enough information on myself to recognise myself when I pass a mirror, and to respond (most of the time) when the name my parents chose to call me 33 years ago is uttered; a name I have accepted over the past 33 years as good enough for everyday use.”

“You get tired of explaining yourself to other people. You also become increasingly aware of your own caricature in appearing to the world. You increasingly start to experience a need to withdraw.”

“If a primary objective of the SOURCE is to enable people to develop a good idea of who and what they are and to make functioning possible, what is the primary purpose of human existence? To establish identity and to function successfully? What is ‘successful functioning’? Survival? I don’t think so.”

“When you do not appear, you do not feel embarrassed; you do not need to explain yourself; you do not need to apologise for aspects of your life or the state of your living space.”

“These are but a few questions for which you can pinch off an hour or so if you have the time – if you find yourself in a place where you know no one, where for the moment there will be no familiar voices to echo your own, or to talk you down, or to offer support.”

“If you do not know what you want to do with your life, what do you do with your life? How do you function? Why do you live as you live, where you live and with whom you live? Why do you do the work you do? Why do you wear the specific clothes you wear?”

“What would a person discover if they enter the wilderness for any length of time, without the comfort of a dentist or a doctor, or the luxury of running water and a flush toilet and toilet paper, or the entertainment provided by TV, or the internet, or newspapers and books, or friends, or movie theatres? Indeed, what would you find without love – if you have a vague idea how to find what you cannot necessarily articulate?”

“If you do not know who you are as a money-maker, you will find it a challenge to make money. Also good to take into consideration the opposite: If you have gone through the process of sorting out, discovering, and choosing how you want to make money – and then in a way or ways that suit your personality and talents, you will most likely find yourself placing fewer obstacles subconsciously in your own path.”

“This information about my cultural, ethnic and linguistic origins did not tell me who to be or what to do, it simply told me where to look for ideas on what to do or who to be. It does not say: Be this. It says: Search here.”

Who is the writer?

Born on 29 June 1971 in Pretoria, in the Republic of South Africa.

Went to South Korea in June 1996 to work as an English teacher.

Worked in Johannesburg for six months in 1998.

Departed for Kaohsiung, in southern Taiwan, in January 1999.

The notes and essays in this collection were written between 1999 and 2015.

Why is identity important?

Sunday, 4 July 1999

Why is identity so important? Because you are an individual entity with a separate consciousness. And to be part of any community, you need to know yourself. You have to make choices in a variety of situations, and you should at least have somewhat of an idea why you make those specific decisions. This decision-making process affects your personality, and your personality is an essential part of this process. The development of a pattern is also revealed. Tomorrow you have to make the same type of decisions, or you have to make similar choices. So as to not completely estrange yourself from other people, there must be some degree of consistency between you-of-yesterday and you-of-today.

Identity is also a useful tool in the process of distinguishing between yourself and your environment. You are, after all, not a tree, and you're not a dog or a garbage truck. You must know how and where you fit in your immediate environment, and in the greater reality, otherwise you won't know what steps you need to take for the sake of self-preservation and survival.

Consider the situation in a theatre – people in the audience and the actors on stage. The individual members of the audience know the rules of the situation. They know the limits they can go to, and they know their place in the immediate vicinity (the theatre where the play will be performed). They won't, for example, put their person in danger or put themselves in an embarrassing situation by jumping on stage and start slapping the actors (unless it's an awful piece and you feel you've wasted your money).

To experience a sensation that you belong in a certain place or among a certain group of people means that your identity is most likely acceptable to others in the area. To feel

that you belong somewhere also makes you feel safe, and it gives you a sense of self-worth.

To be part of something bigger

{Background: By September 2003 I was seriously considering leaving Taiwan for a town in South Africa's Gauteng province called Bronkhorstspuit.}

Tuesday, 2 September 2003

I will start this piece with a fact: There are things in this life that are bigger than any single individual.

Now, everyone should already know that their entire existence depends on things that are bigger than them, that they could indeed not even have come into existence were it not for the fact that there were people before them, all of whom also depended on things bigger than they were. Everyone knows these things, right? Everyone knows there are things bigger than any single individual!

My original statement, still amazingly profound despite the fact that everyone knows it, needs a little red pepper to give it sufficient kick to be the focus of an essay.

(Two weeks later. Wednesday, 17 September 2003. Small hours of the morning.)

Regardless of whether or not you consciously think about it, everyone belongs to the Bigger Picture in some or other way – that includes the psychologist, the philosopher, the poet, the preacher, the Hells Angel on his Harley Davidson, the member of the Mafia, the inner city gang member, the president of a large company, the peasant in China, the hobo in the alley, and the politician blabbering into the microphone. Most people have a reasonable idea of how they fit into the Great Puzzle, even if they don't have the right vocabulary to formulate an intelligent thought on the subject.

The way you fit into the Bigger Picture is like a passport you could show to a cosmic immigration officer who wants to

know, “Who are you?” This “passport” contains information on the species to which you belong (“Mr X falls under the species *Homo sapiens* and should not be viewed as a household pet”), your age, and your name, or names (the one your parents gave you, the nicknames your friends call you and/or the name you have chosen for yourself). It contains information about where you were born, where you went to high school (if you ever got this far), and whether or not you attained a tertiary qualification (and if so, where). It also contains data about your likes and dislikes, your talents, your interests, what you’ve done with your life so far, what you still want to do with your life, your dreams, your ambitions and your failures. Other relevant information includes whether you consider yourself a member of any religious community; if so, what particular religion, and even what sub-sect or denomination. Where you live, what socio-economic class you can be placed in, whether you are married or not, your sexual orientation, whether you have children, and what you do on a daily basis to survive, are all further particulars that determine your individual cosmic code that makes you a “legitimate” part of the Bigger Picture. Another determining factor is associations, which include family, friends, acquaintances, business partners, even enemies (“ABC is the son of EDF, husband of GHI, father of JKL and MNO, best friend of PQR, business partner of STU and archenemy of XYZ”).

Two final thoughts deserve mention: You need to know as much as possible about yourself and you need to be this person who emerges from all the bits and pieces of data to be able to legitimately claim to yourself and before others the Unique Cosmic Code that makes you a part of the Bigger Picture.

To not know “who you are” and with that how you fit-in-and-belong to the Larger Reality is to feel alienated from the environment in which you find yourself. This lack of membership, this failure to belong, leads without many exceptions to one or more of the following conditions:

loneliness, a sense of isolation, possibly anxiety, and an aggressive attitude towards your environment and the people with whom you are in daily contact.

Imagine the following situation: Bob X from B. Town meets John Z at a barbeque. John Z introduces himself as “John Z from Pretoria” and holds out his hand. Bob X smiles politely, shakes John’s hand and introduces himself as “John Z from Pretoria”. The real John Z will probably shoot a quick and somewhat annoyed smile in response to what he’ll assume was an attempt at humour, but he will quickly move on to the next group when he realises that Bob X is quite serious – the latter is convinced that he, too, is “John Z from Pretoria”. Later that evening Clare K from Cape Town introduces herself to Bob, and once again he replies with genuine sincerity that he, too, is “Clare K from Cape Town”.

By the end of the evening everyone, except perhaps Bob X, will be convinced of the fact that Bob is in big trouble. Why? Because you have to know who you are to survive and to function in an environment outside institutions for dysfunctional people.

* * *

What do these insights have to do with whether I’ll go back to South Africa early next year, or stay in Taiwan? Everything.

If I’m “Bob X from B. Town”, I want to introduce myself as “Bob X from B. Town”, and I want to be convinced of what it means to be “Bob X from B. Town”. I also want to know if “John Z from Pretoria” feels good about what it means to be “John Z from Pretoria”, I want to feel good about who I am. And if “Clare K from Cape Town” introduces herself to me, and I come to the realisation during the conversation that follows that she is convinced that she’s not “Linda Q from Johannesburg” and she also does not want to be Linda Q, then I want to know deep down that I display the same belief about myself.

Am I currently convinced of who I am? Am I furthermore convinced that “Brand X, formerly from Taiwan and Korea, but now from B. Town” will be able to proudly recite his Cosmic Code at church meetings and sport gatherings? Or is it more valuable to maintain my membership, for now, to a group of people who live ... outside?

(Still Wednesday, 17 September 2003; late afternoon.)

So, it seems that I’m currently experiencing one hell of a Bronkhorstspruit backlash. Fair enough, I did not spend seven years in the Far East to just suddenly jump on a sentimental bathroom mat one day, and whilst the mat flies out the door, to wave at everyone like some crash course Zen guru and say, “OK guys, I’m bugging off then ... come fry some meat with us in Bronkhorstspruit!” No, this whole idea should be pelted with rotten cabbage and old eggs like any other plan. If the plan does get up the next morning and, with a cabbage leaf still clinging to its forehead like an uncombed strand of hair, appears on the porch and declares, “I’m okay! Howzit?!” then I know, I’m onto something.

I did wonder what has caused the backlash against B. Town. As I dusted off and packed away my fitness equipment, I went through the list of things in my mind that would fill my life as “Brand-of-Bronkhorstspruit”: my commercial projects, visits to the local supermarket, barbecue and dessert with the family, and of course my writing. I could even consider registering for an academic course or two in fields in which I am interested, including the Chinese language.

I asked myself what the difference is between this list and what I’m doing now. Obviously the environment plays a vital role in one’s experience of everyday life, and Benevolent Light New Town in the Mountain of the Phoenix is unquestionably a more stimulating environment than Apartments on the Edge-of-Town in Bronkhorstspruit. But how important is it really when you do your calculations at the end of the day?

Ultimately it was the image of me sitting in my apartment, writing, regardless of where in South Africa, that made an internal alarm go off. My identity as a writer is of utmost importance to me. It is to a large extent who I am. It is what I do. It's not just a noble and meaningful occupation to pursue, it's a life that inspires me to get up in the morning and to face the environment outside my front door – wherever in the world that environment may be.

I took my seat at the dressing table, ready for a bout of serious contemplation. Then it hit me: More than ninety percent of everything I put on paper in the past five years has to do with my life in self-imposed exile! My identity as a WRITER, at least at this stage of my life, is an irreplaceable aspect of my COSMIC CODE, and WHO I AM AS A WRITER, IS INEXTRICABLY INTERTWINED WITH MY LIFE ON THIS ISLAND!

Who am I, in other words, if I'm not "Writer in self-imposed exile in Taiwan"?

(A creepy Japanese thriller in the local theatre later ...)

"Through brilliant detective work, the Internal Service has confronted the prime suspect, and by using outstanding interrogation methods forced him to plead guilty. It is thus my humble privilege to announce to the nation that the culprit is ... the Writer! The Writer, ladies and noble gentlemen, is the one who has infiltrated and polluted the People's morale and willpower with ... ANXIETY!"

Loud cries of shock are muted, as usual, without an ounce of civility. The inspector continues as if he has just cleared his throat.

"After further investigation into the motivation of the writer, it came to light that he has followed the past few weeks of negotiations in deep contemplation. By Monday evening, he was convinced of what he had only suspected at first – that he was going to lose his job in the Planned Return To The Home Country; that he was going to get fired, terminated, get

the axe, forced to go on early retirement. The writer realised that if he was going to bite the dust, he was not going to eat alone.

“Fortunately, our State is decidedly leftist and highly liberal, so the Chief Open Mind was immediately called in for repairs to the writer’s morale. And of course, noble and polite members of the public, to assure him that he is an irreplaceable part of Our Noble State! After all, we won’t be able to formulate a proper purpose for our existence without the profound material that our sensitive and angst-ridden Foot Soldier Number One in the Battle for the Soul so often throws in our faces!

“So, long live the Writer! Long live Our State! Forward Warriors for Our Struggle! Now, if I can just find those cursed keys to liberate the Writer of his handcuffs ...”

* * *

To be part of something bigger than the single YOU is a need central to the human experience of life. It is one of the primary reasons people are attracted to religion, especially the institutionalised version. It’s the reason people prefer to be part of a group rather than to be alone. It’s the reason people are patriotic. It’s one of the reasons people support a particular sports team. It is also one of the reasons a new member of the Hells Angels will appear in certain clothing, and swing a chain at motorists rather than shooting them with dry peas through a straw – the latter choice of weapon will not qualify him as part of the group to which he wants to belong; same goes for riding around on his steel stallion in a suit with a white shirt and a red bow tie.

Because people need to be part of something bigger than just the individual who he or she is in his or her skin, people define their identity – their “cosmic code” – to a large extent according to the groups to which they belong, whether it’s a company or organisation for which they work, a fan group of some sports team, nationality, being part of a family, active

participation in some or other subculture, or a combination of all the aforementioned.

Relationships are a fundamental aspect of this system of identity-by-association, of knowing who you are by knowing how you fit in through membership to something bigger than yourself. Relationships confirm membership: “You’re one of us.” Relationships reduce anxiety: “I’m not the only one.” Relationships confirm identity: “Here’s Bob X! He knows me better than I know myself.”

Relationships also sometimes keep an individual hostage when a person is manipulated to conform for the sake of membership to the group. Sometimes relationships destroy faith in good things. Sometimes relationships lead to destruction of what is good. Sometimes the stubborn maintenance of a relationship – for the sake of the benefits of membership, or presumed benefits in some cases – leads to the death of the self, or to the death of others.

But relationships are mostly good. In many cases relationships lead to a more enjoyable experience of life. Relationships strengthen when the individual is weak. Relationships provide comfort. Relationships create new life. Relationships are irreplaceable in the quest for belonging to the Bigger Picture.

It can furthermore be speculated in this piece that I, the Author of Pieces, am experiencing a serious lack of defining relationships.

End contemplation, part one/The ultimate hope

Monday, 22 September to Thursday, 25 September 2003

I feel as if I'm reaching the end of what I can call in retrospect, my "book". I did not ask all the questions (who can?), and I do not have all the answers (who does?). What I do know, or sincerely believe, is what life outside my apartment windows is about.

What's it all about then, according to me?

At the most basic level, it's a struggle for survival. From the miserable homeless guy in the back alley digging through garbage bags, to Bill and Melinda Gates, the Pope, the Dalai Lama, the President of the United States, back to the baby who was born a minute ago in the slums of Kolkata, everybody is always, from the moment of birth until the moment of physical death, locked in a struggle for survival. This struggle is waged on several levels, and for a limited number of needs that must be met.

One of these needs has increasingly aroused my interest over the past few years. The more I look at my own life, and observe the world outside my front door, the more the importance of the need, the longing, to belong somewhere is confirmed – to know how your life is linked to other forms of life (and even inanimate objects), in terms of the past, present, and future. This includes understanding how you fit in between other species on this planet, and how you fit in between the screaming masses of people, and between conflicting religious traditions and diverse histories of humanity.

All mammals – to take the group of animals under which humans are categorised – instinctively know where they belong. That is, all mammals whose natural life and habitats have not been disturbed or altered to such an extent that they,

too, suffer from the same affliction as so many people in the modern world.

To be confused about your place in the world – to not know where you belong – is usually the result of a variety of causes. One of these is alienation from the environment where at one stage of your life you knew in what ways and to what extent you belonged. This disposition is in turn caused by, amongst other things, disillusionment with what previously defined your identity and determined your place in the larger world. An example of the latter is the alienation that takes place between an individual and the religious community of which he or she had previously been a devoted member – alienation brought on by personal experiences and/or intellectual exposure that sometimes erode the credibility of truths handed down from previous generations.

When this happens, when you are confronted with the reality that you do not know anymore how and where you fit into the Larger Landscape, you will find it difficult to commit to anything other than what provides you with immediate comfort in the face of a world that you will find increasingly hostile.

Identity – to know your own name, your nationality, personality, preferences, talents, interests, fears, strengths and weaknesses, and your ambitions and dreams – makes it easier to at least have a fair idea where you stand with others, and thus to enter into relationships. It is through these relationships that you eventually obtain membership to groups and communities; a factor that will play a significant role in reducing your vulnerability as a single individual. Membership to groups and communities will lessen your anxieties, which will improve your confidence, which will increase the likelihood that your physical and emotional needs will be met. If these communities include a religious community, you may even find it easier to explain to yourself and to others how you believe you are part of a reality that stretches beyond this time and place.

The above description is the ideal of positive and constructive relationships. Negative and destructive relationships also satisfy the need to belong somewhere, but in a way that does not reduce fear and anxiety. Such relationships also sometimes prevent more positive and constructive social interaction. However, even “bad” relationships emphasise the importance of the need to be part of something bigger than just a single individual.

To actively participate in groups and communities, you need to know some basic things about yourself and when necessary to confirm these things (your name, your personality, interests, talents, beliefs, and other things that have already been mentioned). You also need basic knowledge and understanding of the world in which you find yourself on a daily basis.

If your intellectual development exceeds the boundaries of a handed-down understanding of “how things work” (in the community in which you find yourself), or if this understanding loses credibility as a result of certain personal experiences, or after exposure to an alternative philosophical frame of reference or comprehensive view of existence, you will inevitably ask certain questions. Principles will also need to be identified (or redefined) to facilitate your understanding of human existence. These principles and the corresponding understanding of things will be highly conducive to the process of identity formation (or then, the redefining of identity). This process will enable you to know, or discover anew, how, where and with whom you should cultivate relationships.

Ultimately, the hope will be to have a better understanding of how you form part of all that is, was, and may still be, and to continue with your existence, but as someone who does not feel alienated on a daily basis from everything and everyone around you.

Who and what

Wednesday, 1 October 2003

Identity is like an external logo (or collection of badges) that we carry around and display in order to show others who we are. Identity also helps us understand the relationship between us and our environment and everything and everyone that is part of it. *What* we are, on the other hand, goes much deeper than *who* we are. I furthermore believe identity is a survival mechanism that our species have developed in the process of evolution, because earlier mechanisms that had the same function as identity today have to a large extent become obsolete.

Each one of us can run down a whole list of things that can convince everyone who wanted to know that I am not Ronald Reagan, and you're probably not Napoleon Bonaparte. We have names, nationalities, possibly occupations, home phone numbers, cell phone numbers, identity numbers, passport numbers, credit card numbers, addresses, blood types, almae matres, memories of high school, interests, favourite vacation spots, ambitions and dreams ... just to name a few. But none of these things, or all of them thrown together, is more than just information about us.

A plant, no matter how deep its roots go into the soil, is not the soil. The plant remains a plant, and the soil remains soil. Our identities may be somewhat similar. The plant needs the soil in order to survive in the garden. We – flesh-and-blood, mentally alert, animated creatures – need identity to *survive*, in the first place, and beyond that, to *function* properly in the environment where our lives are being played out. All the elements from which an individual identity is compiled are bigger than just the individual and his or her identity: language, nationality, ancestors, history and so forth. The way an individual extracts – as it were – elements of identity from

their environment, is thus, in a sense, similar to a plant that extracts nutrients from the soil in order to survive.

If formulating your true identity is not the end goal, what is? A preliminary response seems to be “place in the world”. No human being can find or define their place in the world without first sorting out who they are in relation to everything around them. Identity is the means to this end.

Why do we want to know where we our “place in the world” is or where we “belong”?

All signs indicate that a tensionless condition is the primary aim of all organisms – including human beings. As we all know, there are more things that cause tension in our lives than we can list in one lifetime. There are things that threaten our physical existence; things that threaten our psychological well-being; the primal fear of disappearing into the nothingness the day we die. Then there’s the cacophony of languages, cultures, subcultures and other differences between us that almost makes one think it must be a miracle that we do not slaughter one another for the sake of our own survival ... or rather, that it doesn’t happen more than is already the case. The primary aim of a tensionless condition manifests itself in the desire to feel safe, in the strong urge to protect ourselves.

One relatively effective way to protect ourselves, to feel a little safer, and to feel somewhat better about the possibility of disappearance, is to be around others “like you”. This principle is as old as life itself, and it manifests itself in nationalism, religion, blood is thicker than water, friendships, subcultures, the way wild animals of the same species cluster together, and the barking of dogs in the night.

The need for safety stimulates the need for belonging. In order to develop a sense of belonging we need information about ourselves – hence the search for identity.

The problem is that this “search for identity” is often a lengthy process, and the desire for security – like the reasons to fear

for our lives – cannot wait until you’re able to shout your real name from the rooftops.

What on earth can help to make this process less traumatic, to relieve your anxiety if you don’t quite know yet who you are and where you fit in? In other words, what can stifle your anxiety while you are still “looking” for yourself and your place in the world? The answer is as close as the nearest wallet full of bank notes: MONEY.

Why does money – or to have access to more than enough money – make you feel better if you are unsure of your identity? Money reduces the necessity for (well-defined) identity because it satisfies to a significant extent the original need for a sense of personal safety and security. Money buys food, clothing, a roof over your head and doors and gates with latches and locks; money buys the services of a dentist when your teeth ache, help from doctors if something else is wrong, and it buys medicine when you’re sick, and a bed in a good hospital in more severe cases; money buys entertainment, companionship, and in more cases than many will admit, it is also conducive to the development of friendships. To have access to sufficient capital in the long term, is to know that all of the above is available when needed; knowing that all of the above is available when needed, is to feel safe.

Does that mean the richer the guy is, the less he needs to know about himself? Not necessarily. The richer the man, the better the possibility that he will feel his existence, for now, is more entrenched than that of the homeless guy in the sewer. And the better he feels about his chances of survival, the less urgent the need for alternative measures to achieve a sense of security – namely the belief that he belongs somewhere, with someone or a group of people. Appearing outside the comfort and protection of his inner sanctum may reduce his sense of security, which will stimulate the need to show where and how he belongs – that he is [X] in an environment where most people have some understanding of what [X] means. Of course, money will prove to be particularly useful in the acquisition of appropriate (and in many cases pre-packaged)

Badges of Identity – widely available on the Internet, from mail order catalogues, or from a choice of conveniently located and gleaming shopping malls.

Whatever the difference between the child of wealth and the children of the rest of society when it comes to identity, nothing changes the fact that, even if you can write a book about your own identity and your personal agenda in this world, it still does not encompass the whole truth about *what* you are.

In terms of matter, you are so many pounds of meat, so many litres of blood and so many metres of skin. And do you really need scientists to show you to what extent you're the same as a dog or a baboon?

The question of WHO you are, is as practical as the correct wrench in a workshop: It serves a purpose, and the purpose is a sense of personal security.

WHAT you are, is more difficult to grasp. If we are just so much flesh and blood and skin and bones less or more than our pets, with (most of the time) a brain that is more developed, then even I must consider whether I'm wasting my time doing what I do. Then it makes perfect sense to shamelessly chase after money and grab as much cash as we can for no reason other than the security, entertainment, comfort and convenience it can buy.

So what, one must eventually also ask, if we are only so many pounds of meat and bone more or less than a wild animal, and nothing more? Or is the fact that our brains are so much more developed, so important that similarities in biological composition between humans and other "less developed" life forms really does not matter outside the laboratory?

Another question: How does it affect our ambitions, our view of society, our dreams for the future, our hopes for the next generation, were we to believe that nothing lies beyond our physical existence, if the meaning of life and definitions for good and evil must be found within what we think and feel

and experience – individually, and as individuals in community with others who have similar experiences? And how does it change the subject if it would seem – beyond a reasonable doubt – that our more developed brains are an indication that humans are part of something that stretches beyond what includes giraffes and cockroaches and spiders?

Three incidents

Thursday, 2 October 2003

Three recent incidents in my life have led to some interesting insights.

The first incident took place on a Thursday afternoon. On my way back from town, I bought myself a box of fried rice at one of my favourite eateries. A quarter of an hour later I was sitting in my new living room, watching *Very Bad Things* – with my mixture of fried rice, vegetables, shrimp and an egg cooked in tea, ready to be devoured. It should be mentioned that this is one of my favourite Taiwanese dishes. Since I was quite hungry from riding around all morning, the first few bites went down extremely well. Chewing with abandonment, I wanted to put the box down on the plastic tray in front of me for just a moment. Because my eyes were focused on Cameron Diaz – and I'm not even a fan! – I failed to notice the precarious position of the tray on the edge of the coffee table.

The next moment it happened. The tray knocked over, and suddenly I was sitting there with hot, freshly fried rice on my flip-flops, between my toes and of course, on the floor. Shocked and instantly despondent my eyelids closed in denial of what had just transpired more than for the usual contemplation.

For a moment, I imagined that it was just a horrible, twisted nightmare; that it didn't actually happen; that I would open my eyes and continue to enjoy my rice with vegetables and shrimps like only a hungry man can. But I had to face the reality that my life is not a fictional story. I had to force myself to get up, shake the shrimps off my flip-flops, and continue with my life.

After a few minutes, I had recovered sufficiently from the shock to realise I could compensate myself with a box of Garlic Chicken Gratin and half dozen dumplings from the 7-Eleven. On the way to the store, I tried to piece together the

puzzle of erroneous actions that had led to the unfortunate Fried Rice Episode. The coffee table on which the tray rested was overloaded with junk, so there wasn't enough room for the tray; the table was too far from my seat; I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing; the electric fan was quietly blasting away at everything that could possibly be knocked over.

Twenty minutes later I was back in my living room with two packs of convenience store food (a pitiful substitute for fresh fried rice) and a valuable new insight to make the whole affair less unpleasant. I figured that some factors lead to a situation where things can go wrong in your life (in this case mainly the cluttered coffee table); on the other hand, certain factors lead to a situation where things can go right (a clean coffee table would have been an excellent example).

For the record, I can also say that I was deeply impressed – perhaps for academic reasons – by my sincere horror and disgust at the sight of fried rice on my floor, instead of on the way to my empty stomach.

* * *

The second incident occurred a few days later, with the Fried Rice Episode classified and packed away as a survivable event.

As I was exploring my new apartment, I discovered a storage space in the ceiling above the hallway between the living room and the bathroom. This space, I found after further investigation, could be reached from a small, partially hidden door in the spare room. I pulled up a plastic stool, opened the little door and scanned the dark, stuffy area. Old clothes, a hat with a feather, a useable looking briefcase, and various other signs of past human occupation of the apartment filled the space. Just as I was ready to step down from the stool – slightly disappointed at the discovery, except of course for the briefcase – I saw a light dimly flashing on-off, on-off against the opposite wall. I thought it might be a gem reflecting light,

so I reached into the darkness. The item was still beyond my reach. I pulled myself halfway into the space, and leaned on a pile of black bags to edge closer. This time I could barely touch the object with the tip of my finger. That I may have stumbled upon something of value was evident, and I decided to pull my entire body in, with only my feet still dangling outside. Reclining on probably a decade's worth of carefully collected junk, I grabbed at the item.

Fate, however, was on my case. As I tried to pull the object closer – which at that moment had developed an almost demonic red glow – the ceiling cracked under my weight. I remember that I uttered a fairly common swear word. I remember a bright flash of light. Then gravity kicked in, pulling me, several black bags, the briefcase and a portrait of two Chinese lovers down to what I had assumed will be the floor.

I was still screaming, with a black bag under one arm and the two Chinese lovers under the other, when I came to rest on a patch of soft, green grass. A waterfall, not far in the distance, pounded out a quiet rhythm on the rocks. I was obviously stunned. For a few moments I gazed straight ahead, trying to blink all the dust from my eyes. Then I got up, put the bag and the two lovers against a tree, and started walking downhill in the direction of the waterfall.

No fantasy could have prepared me for the sight of which I became an appreciative observer the next moment. There, under the waterfall, with bodies like mythical Greek goddesses were half a dozen beautiful young women! When they saw me – hiding behind a bush, they waved at me, laughing gaily, without even for a moment pretending to lay a hand on bosom ...

Okay, not really. My sudden descend ended in a tree, in what I identified soon enough as Hai Feng Gong Yuan (Sea Breeze Park), a few blocks from my new apartment. The inside of the tree was shaped like a funnel, which was a most fortuitous coincidence. I sat for a moment in the middle of the tree in a

place which, oddly enough, almost looked like a throne. After realigning my thought processes, I jumped to the ground.

I greeted some onlookers, mostly old Chinese Civil War veterans, with great dignity – I had discovered the hat with the plume was leaning over my brow, so I slightly touched the tip the way men greeted each other a few generations ago. As I walked back to my apartment, the strangest thought entered my mind: Could it be that the branches of the tree were filled, not with leaves, but with tightly rolled bundles of one thousand New Taiwan dollar notes? A quick recall of the Fried Rice Episode reminded me that my life is not a fictional tale.

Nevertheless, the possibility was enough to stop me in my tracks. Rushing back to the tree, I grabbed the nearest branch. And, lo-and-behold, there it was: freshly printed one thousand New Taiwan dollar notes!

Naturally I stuffed my pockets full of “leaves”, and luckily I also had the briefcase there, which I also stuffed to bursting point. Now a little more wary about the Chinese masters on their bench, I risked a quick glance in their direction. Studiously reciting pieces from the annals of Confucius, they ignored me. More than that, no one in the neighbourhood seemed to be aware of the extraordinary feature of this special tree!

With money bulging from my shirt pockets and a few notes peering from under my hat, I walked home. Halfway I remembered that I didn’t have my keys with me, seeing that I ended up in the tree in the most unorthodox manner. When I arrived at my apartment, though, the door opened by itself, as if it was triggered by my approaching footsteps. Once inside, I immediately took off my shirt. In the process, I accidentally knocked the hat off my head.

The spectacle of money tumbling to the floor and floating around like butterflies in some tropical paradise almost brought tears to my eyes. I had a few quick shots of green tea, and then I started gathering the banknotes. Half an hour later I wrote the number “87,000” on an unopened telephone bill.

“I have to go back,” I said out loud, and looked around for my shirt and hat.

By the time the sun was touching the horizon, I was already halfway between one and two million NT dollars. My day was definitely reaching unprecedented levels of prosperity!

Shortly after my last run to the tree, I had an unpleasant sensation. I suddenly realised I did not know my own name. I wanted to make the unique nature of the day official by addressing myself, but I could go no further than, “Well, um ... Whatsyourname ...” Standing in my living room trying out a bunch of names, hunger pangs stimulated another disturbing thought. I had no clue what kind of pizza I liked! A vague awareness that I had previously also suffered from such ignorance was not in the least conducive to a sense of inner peace. The situation became worse when I suddenly realised I had no idea where I came from – America ... Egypt ... Sweden?! I stared at the pictures on the wall hoping that this would bring forth some emotion or sentimental memory, and perhaps inspire an idea of my identity and where I belong.

Then it hit me like a ton of rotten cabbage: I have an almost inexhaustible supply of financial resources! I could have a little fun! What does it matter that I was unsure about a few minor administrative matters?!

People will sometimes refer in their stories to “some of the best times of my life”. Over the next few days, I experienced what they mean. I picked a name for myself and fabricated a story about a youth in places like New York and Paris. I bought new clothes. The few hairs I have left on my head, I fluffed up in a grand, impressive style. I even tried crooning love ballads in a karaoke bar with friendly and skimpily dressed young ladies. Pizza was of course enjoyed in abundance, even though I had to try out quite a few before I realised I was a Super Deluxe guy.

After a few days of uninterrupted revelry and indulgent extravagance, I began to calm down. I was, however, still very much pleased with the improved quality of my new existence.

* * *

It was during this time that the third incident occurred.

I was busy staring at my television with the sound turned off so as not to disturb my sense of contentment. I had to have been sitting there for quite some time because the wailing of the broken doorbell made me jump mildly petrified from my sofa chair. I pulled a white vest over my bare chest and opened the door.

I recognised the man on my doormat as a creature from another planet even before he opened the orifice in the lower part of his face. Over his shoulders was draped a green gown with beautiful gold patterns, and his feet looked like ice skates from the nineteen twenties. He had a few untidy tufts of hair on what could be described as his upper lip, and a similar amount of hair on his head. He stretched out his paw – it didn't exactly look like a human hand, and I shook it. Then he made a gesture as if he was politely asking permission to enter my home; with a similar motion, I beckoned him to enter.

After we had enjoyed some fresh green tea (obviously of a much higher quality than the kind I always bought at the 7-Eleven), I asked him the reason for his visit to our planet. In perfect English, he answered that he was on a mission. His assignment was to investigate human life on planet Earth: how we live, how we work, how we get on with each other, how we manage to stay so ordered, and how we manage to live our lives in apparent contentment considering the facts of the universe.

I replied that he should not be deceived by the appearance of things. Many people, I assured him, preferred life less orderly. Many people also do not spend their lives in contentment, but rather in troubled confusion. These bits of

information upset my guest. I lit a cigarette, offered it to him and refilled his glass.

He finished off the cigarette with astonishing rapidity, stared at the assorted ornaments on my coffee table, and after glancing over the pictures on my walls, started talking again. He said that he did a course on his planet on Survival in Modern Earth Civilisations; that he had even brought along a manual. He had also attended lectures on more abstract topics like “Identity”, “Commitment”, and a “Sense of Belonging”.

He then told me that the leaders of his planet – learned beings, he assured me – had informed him that he will meet a man soon after arriving who could give him some instructions on how to “fit in”. His craft had apparently dropped him off in a park not too far from here, and a few elderly gentlemen pointed in the direction of my apartment. Could I confirm the accuracy of the things he had learned in his lectures, he asked me with deep sincerity in his eyes, and could I give him a few useful tips.

I thought about my experiences of the previous few days, about the fact that I still did not know what my real name was and that I was still unsure about where I come from and where I belong. What I did know, was that life was a lot more enjoyable if you had access to some decent financial resources! Not only could I satisfy all my physical needs on a daily basis, but when I had a stomach ache a few days earlier, I went to the best hospital in the city. (It is true that my strange appearance initially made people a little uncomfortable – at that point I had not shaven for a few days, but after I had shown them my briefcase with some freshly plucked money, they became much friendlier. To tell the truth, the nurses became embroiled in what could easily be described as a fist fight with the doctors, for the privilege to take care of me.) I glanced at the strange creature in my living room, now seemingly deep in thought, and noticed the way the unusual curves of his rotund figure were emphasised by his tight-fitting bright orange outfit – his gown had been hanging behind the door by this time. The tufts of hair on his upper lip,

along the sides of his face and on his underdeveloped chin, reminded me of my own appearance a few days earlier. In fact, his whole appearance contributed to my feelings of compassion towards him.

Then I looked him straight in his melancholic eyes, took a deep breath and said, “Mister Alien, I must disappoint you. I don’t know much about identity, or about one’s place in the world. What I do know is that if you walk straight back to that park, you’ll come across a tree that looks like a funnel. You might expect the more common earthly type of leaf on the branches, but this tree is unique. It grows money! Now, fill a few bags with this money – make sure you take enough! Then go to the nearest hotel and get yourself a room. Look in your manual on where to buy food and other items.

“Choose a name from a magazine,” I continued, “and make it your own. Make up a story about where you come from – you can say you’re from outer space, but people don’t take that seriously anymore. Say you’re from the Balkans,” I suggested, “or Northern Ireland or Arizona or some other place.

“The money, so I’ve recently discovered Mister Alien, will ensure the success of your mission, no matter who you are, where you come from, or what you tell others who you are or where you come from.”

I moved to the edge of my seat, and as if the alien creature understood the seriousness of what I wanted to say next, he did the same. “Remember!” I yelled. The creature’s eyes doubled in size. “Make sure you always have sufficient funds!” To emphasise the importance of my advice, I started hammering an invisible plank with an imaginary tool in my clenched fist. “It’s the golden rule that you should never disregard, ignore or underestimate! Make sure your bags are always filled!”

The creature started fidgeting on his chair, so I reached for the bottle of tea. We drank a few more glasses in silence, then I walked into the kitchen to fetch a few garbage bags. When I came back, he was already up and pacing the living room. He

took the bags and shook my hand. I opened the door, and he disappeared down the stairs. A few minutes after I slumped back into my chair, I fell into a deep sleep.

That, then, was the third incident that influenced my current thoughts on certain issues.

It should probably also be noted that I muttered what I knew to be my real name the moment I woke up. Nothing could have prepared me, however, for the next shock. I strolled down to Sea Breeze Park, whistling all the way, with my empty briefcase swinging in the air, and the hat with the feather on my head. Real, organic, dirty green leaves on the branches of the magic funnel tree made me weak in the knees. One could almost say it was more upsetting than the spectacle of fresh fried rice on my living room floor.

Credible identity in a new community

[This piece was originally written as a comment at the end of the chronological bundle, *Where you are nobody* – a collection of texts from 1994 to 1999.]

Friday, 13 February 2004

In 2000, I didn't just want to be "Brand" who could play guitar or piano – I wanted to be "Brand the Musician". Critically low self-esteem fuelled a desperate attempt to develop an aspect of a social identity that would have made me feel good about myself.

Unfortunately, my ambitions were hopelessly unrealistic. I wanted to play guitar like John Williams (the classical guitarist, not the composer) in a few months, and play piano at least with both hands within the same period. Inevitable failure plunged me into the most wretched frame of mind I had experienced up until that point in Taiwan. (My work situation added fuel to the fire. I taught most of my classes at an elementary school where half the 7-year-olds ignored me during the class, a quarter paid attention half of the time, and the other quarter could barely wait for me to go outside after the class so they could throw dirt at me.)

The musician issue was of course not about the guitar or the piano; it was about how I saw myself, how my social identity and status were marked in the community, and how I had wanted it to be.

To what community am I referring? In 2000, a flood of other South Africans arrived in Kaohsiung almost overnight. I was again, out of the blue, confronted with the question of who I was – not only in a broad existential sense but among people of my own age, from my own country, who spoke my language.

My love for music, and the esteem and respect that I had always had for people who could play musical instruments

infused me with the idea from the middle of that year that the label of “Musician” was by far the most ideal for my needs. A single track on the Pearl Jam album, *No Code* did not help prevent this fatal view. I was so mesmerised by it that within a week of buying the album I went out to get myself an electric guitar.

* * *

If I never went to Korea, and therefore never came to Taiwan ... if I had stayed in Pretoria from April 1996 onwards (hopefully not for longer than three months in my sister’s living room), I would have been compelled to define my identity as an adult in the more familiar habitat of my own country, among people of my own culture, who spoke my language. It would probably have included factors like my undesirable socio-economic status, and I might have taken other measures to feel better about myself.

What happened, however, was that I ended up in the double alienation of Korea – as Westerner in a city of 800,000 Koreans, and the only South African and Afrikaans-speaking person in the foreign community. My process of identity formation once again entered a period of shock – like the socio-economic shock of being downgraded from “middle class” to “poor white” in 1985.

Would I have become a “different person” if I had gotten a job in Pretoria in June 1996? Of course, but I also believe that the core of a person’s personality is to a great extent fixed and merely responds to different environmental factors. “Korea Brand” was the result of 22 months in that country and the double alienation it had entailed. “Pretoria Brand” never developed beyond the initial three months.

Would “Pretoria Brand” still have become a “writer”? It’s possible. The creative aspect of my identity had after all already started developing by 1994 in Stellenbosch, and it was connected to previous times when the potential for this building block of identity had also manifested itself.

What is important here is credible identity. I was never a credible “Brand the Musician”. I knew this, and tried desperately to develop credibility in a ridiculously short period.

Is “Brand the Writer” a credible identity? Yes, and not because I think my text it worthy of being published or read. What is important – and I have mentioned this a few times before, is that I write, that I write quite often, and that I have written enough by now to have credibility in my own eyes as a writer.

* * *

I was confronted in Korea with an environment where, unlike 1995 and early ‘96, I had to identify myself to a large group of my contemporaries. I was unsure how to do it. I was unsure who “Brand Smit” was, and what it meant to be “Brand Smit”. I searched for clues, answers ... and where does one seek for clues and answers other than the ground where your umbilical cord is buried, so to speak?

In my case, I identified middle-class suburbia as ground zero. What stared me in the face, however, was the failure – personally and that of my family – to fit in and be accepted by the place that had to yield clues about who and what I was. The view of myself as a descendant of a source that had always threatened to abort me made me see the source in an extremely negative light, to put it mildly.

The most ideal alternative to middle-class suburbia in developing my identity could have been the Christian religion. One would almost like to say that my whole identity crisis could have been decided then and there. Problem was, since 1993, I no longer viewed the Church, as I had known and respected it from childhood, as a credible institution. The close relationship between the Afrikaner middle class and the branch of the Christian religion with which I was most familiar further alienated me from both.

To summarise:

1. I was confronted in Korea with the need to identify myself to dozens of my contemporaries; many more people, and on a more personal level than in 1995 and early '96.

2. I was looking for answers and clues in the place where my roots lie. I had identified this place as middle-class suburbia. I was aware of the fact that this place (environment and society, in the broad sense of the word) did not want to accept my and my family's roots – or at least, *could* not accept our roots according to qualifications that any community certainly has a right to expect potential members to meet. What is relevant here is not so much the standards that middle-class suburbia sets regarding financial status, but that this particular environment, with its particular culture, values and ideas, could not serve me as a credible source of identity.

3. The most ideal alternative could have been the Christian religion, but from 1993 onwards I no longer regarded it as a credible source of identity for me because of my increasing lack of belief in the Traditions of the Established Church.

4. Conclusion? I was in trouble. I had to dig deeper for clues and ideas about who and what I was, who and what I wanted to be, and in what environment I wanted to be this person.

* * *

In 2000 I was confronted again, this time in Taiwan, with people to whom I had to identify myself after once again functioning for a year in relatively obscure anonymity – where the most basic information about my person was good enough.

As I have already mentioned, being a “Musician” was in my opinion the most ideal pre-packaged and pre-approved identity I could think of in my uncertainty and anxiety about my own value, but one for which I could not build up sufficient credibility in the short time I needed to.

It would thus appear that participation and membership in a new community – where you'd have to identify yourself in full colour and detail – may lead to increased introspection and renewed definition of identity or the development of new aspects of identity *if* you are not satisfied with who you are in that community.

It also follows that the identity, or aspects of identity, that you would try to develop would correspond with what is highly regarded by the community of which you want to be a member.

The alternative to acceptance and membership in a community is obscure anonymity – where it is not necessary for who and what you are to be accepted by other people in your community, as long as you keep yourself busy on your own, and you cause no trouble.

On personal files

Tuesday, 2 March 2004

We all have “files” on each other. My file on “Yolanda Y” might say she is this or that, that she likes this or that, behaves this way in this or another situation. “She has these strengths and weaknesses. Keep an eye on this or that ...”

We all expect the people we know and call our friends (and on whom we therefore have “files”) to be the persons we think they are in order to facilitate our confidence and trust in them.

Sometimes our “file” versions of people do however tend toward simplistic caricatures, with certain aspects of personality emphasised for the simple reason that they fit us better than is the case with other aspects of their personality.

Beware of this – no one likes to be reduced to a caricature.

It is however true that we sometimes unconsciously encourage this process of simplification of ourselves. If a person is uncertain about his or her identity, it is usually comforting when people say, “You always say (X, Y or Z),” or “You always get angry when someone does something like that,” or even “I knew you’d say that (because you always do).”

It always annoys me when people sketch me in their own minds as a simple caricature. I know I do it myself sometimes (possibly to make who I am more tolerable to people I am with?), so I cannot always blame people if they play along. The truth is that I reserve the right to feel different than I did yesterday, to act differently than I did last Sunday, and to have other interests, or to focus on different activities than what the “files” others have on me dictate.

Of course there must be a degree of resemblance between who you are today, what you say, what you do and how you act, and what the case was the day before. But these things are liquid, and change over time.

A more ideal situation would be one where our “files” on each other remain open, with broad margins for new information and mental pictures that keep pace with changes. The alternative is that we will be “friends” with caricatures who are mainly our own handiwork, and who we may find in the course of time will become “unreliable” because they “suddenly” no longer look like they used to, or say this or that or behave or react in a certain manner in some or other situation.

* * * * *

“What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence?
We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself,
surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards.”

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946)

* * * * *

Be your own SELF | Bad actor

Thursday, 1 April 2004

Be your own SELF

The first two decades of our lives we spend trapped in environments where to a significant extent we are what we are supposed to be (or where the expectation is that we will be what we are supposed to be). The idea is that when we move away from this environment, we will ask certain questions. In the process of formulating answers, we will find or define who we “truly” are, or who we want to be – although realistically speaking who and what we can possibly be has already strongly been influenced by who we are supposed to be and what is expected from us.

In many cases, who and what we are supposed to be, with a splash of paint here and there to make ourselves unique to some extent, is good enough, and this identity is then presented as an answer to who we are.

In other cases, individuals enter a time of personal crisis when they realise what they are supposed to be is not consistent with what they have discovered about themselves, or that it is not who or what they want to be. Changes must then be made, even if it sometimes requires years of uncertainty and intense introspection. In the ideal scenario, these individuals will be able to reappear to the world after a period of so-called identity crisis, albeit this time with a few changes to their personality and/or appearance.

This “new” person will always be constructed on the foundation of the “old” person – early experiences, both positive and negative, are usually already too intimately woven into the psyche of the person to simply reject it as “no longer applicable”. Certain characteristics of the “old” person may still be intact; but even if certain aspects of personality are retained, the “owner” of these characteristics will now

claim them as their own and not simply as the result of pressure that had been put on them in their formative years to manipulate them to be what they were supposed to be.

It is also said that the person who has found or defined his or her “own self”, has become their “own person”. How much of this “self” is really your own, remains of course an open question.

Saturday, 3 April 2004

Just be a bad actor for us, okay ...

It is really impressive how we sometimes make caricatures of people with whom we regularly share our lives so they can be puppets in our own world. Well, we all do it, so no one complains too much about it. (Again a matter of mutual agreement: “I won’t point it out if you do it as long as you don’t point it out when I do it.”)

But when we see someone expects a certain “act” from us, or expect us to be some or other character and this does not correspond with how we feel at that moment, or with how we would actually like to be seen, it can get a tad annoying. Or when it is expected of us to suppress certain aspects of our personality for the sake of being what we are supposed to be in the other person’s view of us – as in, “Be a good friend now and play yourself right, okay?”

The question could also be asked how many people actually know their own nuances. And how many people depend on their friends’ characterisation of them to know who they are and to know how they should act?

The SELF is born (and other notes of a particular day)

Thursday, 8 April 2004

Our physical birth arrives months after a microscopic beginning. Shortly after our birth we become aware of things around us. We become aware of the difference between objects, and the distinction between living and non-living things. Some time later we become aware of the category “human” – and that this label is also attached metaphorically speaking to our foreheads.

A few other insights penetrate our consciousness: each person is physically detachable from their environment, and also from other people (that is, a free entity, not connected to something like the leg of a table is connected to the rest of that piece of furniture); some objects are more important than others (a TV is more important than a spoon); and the hierarchy that exists between different creatures (a human is more important than a dog), and also among people (a strong man is treated with more respect than a little girl, and everyone is more important than the homeless guy).

With the passage of time, our awareness of ourselves intensifies. We realise that we, like other people, have somewhat unique physical features and characteristics, and that we have the ability to make choices regarding our speech, appearance and behaviour. We also learn that all of these things affect how other people in the environment react to our presence. We learn that names are necessary and that we have to constantly identify ourselves to others.

It soon becomes clear that we must also identify ourselves, to ourselves: “I exist, but I do not exist as the lawnmower; I am a man, but I am not the neighbour.” Because these statements are never sufficient, the particularities have to be explained, so to speak, in more detail.

We also learn to define our own identity (or to describe it), to make the process by which we identify ourselves to others, easier. The latter is done with two considerations in mind: 1) our need to confirm our own uniqueness, and 2) we must simultaneously ensure we are not too unique, because that might undermine the fulfilment of another deep-seated need, namely the need for companionship and belonging.

You need to be convinced of your own name and personal identity so that you can function as the separate entity that you are. Yet we also need to be “one” with others “like us” which again influences the process of defining and identifying.

So, in order to function as the separate entity of which you are aware you are, you need to define yourself in terms of your environment – to a large extent in negative terms: “I am not a table; I am not a dog; I am not a homeless person.” You also need to identify yourself to others and to yourself – again there are both positive and negative elements to this identification: “I am fat, not thin; I am academically inclined, not athletic; I prefer heavy metal to superficial pop.”

Ultimately, after years of functioning and defining and identifying our person to others and to ourselves, only the results stay behind from what and who we were – the final products of our blood and sweat, all our efforts and failures and successes, after we once again become part of the Great Invisibility one by one.

I got up 45 minutes ago with the idea that we appear out of *nothing*, that we become aware of the fact that we are *something* among other *things*, and that we must eventually define ourselves as a specific *someone* so that we can, as I wrote between sips of black coffee and bites of mixed cereals, function as a separate Something and Someone.

[And just to make sure I understand it correctly, here it comes again.]

After we are born we become aware of the fact that we are *something* among other *things* and *someone* among other *someones*, and that it is expected of us to function as the *something* that we are (don't act as if you're a table or a pet) and also to function as *someone*.

Superficially, who we are is harder to define than what we are, and the process takes much longer. Ultimately we need to be a separate *somebody* just as we need to be a separate *something*, and because we cannot be a different *somebody* every day, we need fairly constant *identity*.

It is now 10:56. I can now start my day. Many of these things have been said earlier, but to have said it in this way, on this specific day, gives today a particular quality. It also gives me a little result to leave behind ...

* * *

By the way, result is tremendously important for "evangelical" Christians. They expect to be rewarded for their "faith" in the life that follows this earthly existence.

I wonder how many people will still go to church every week and say the things that they say, if they learn from a source that they regard as credible that the results of their lives stay behind in this world, that they cannot take it with them as testimonials for a world and a life that comes after this one.

"Evangelical" Christians are actually good business people. (There is, incidentally, an interesting historical relationship between capitalism and Protestantism.) They say, "I give this, believe that, and do these things, then I get those things, right?" and the ministers and pastors keenly nod their heads (more "believers"). If the potential "Christian" is then satisfied that he or she understands the matter correctly, only then will they say, "Right, count me in. Where do I sign? What should I do or say?"

It would be interesting to know how much people's attitudes towards their religion will change if they must learn

from a reliable source that they have misunderstood it all this time: that an earthly life that glorifies God is the beginning and the end; that it is simply better than an earthly existence where God was not glorified; that it gives you a more fulfilling life while you are on this cosmic speck of dust; when you physically expire, you are dead, and that no further reward awaits you.

I can't make a definitive statement to this side or the other on what happens after you die. I am merely expressing curiosity about the motivations of some people, and what their response would be if it would appear that certain things are not the way they have always believed.

* * *

One final note: you must function as the *something* you are – it will not work if you try to operate as a bread toaster or a fridge. You should also function as the *someone* you are ... but here it gets complicated, because who are you? You should, therefore, initially not attempt to function as someone you are not. In the earliest phase of your life you just know you are not your dad or your grandmother or your sister, so you know it will not do to attempt being one of these other *someones* (even though you may try to emulate their behaviour or their way of speaking or doing things).

To put it differently, initially you just know you are not someone else. You may know you prefer dogs to cats or that you like chocolate flavoured cereal, but we continually seek more information about ourselves, in order to identify ourselves better, and preferably in the positive sense, “I am ...” rather than the negative, “I am not ...”

You often find yourself saying the same thing over and over, revisiting certain themes a dozen times. At the end, it is not only what is said or written, but how. Many of the things that I wrote this morning have been touched upon in earlier notes, but this morning's formulation has a remarkable simplicity.

Two points in our lives: What Was Before Us, and What Will Be After Us, and then of course there's the in-between What and Who We Are. What remains are the results of the latter. Are these results good or are they bad? Why is it important?

New face on the cards (and the phone)

Friday, 9 April 2004

I often feel like a fraud when I am on the phone. I'm aware of the fact that I try to be friendly and pleasant, and to not give the other person offence – unless of course it is light-hearted and entertaining.

This is not who I am. How do I know this? Because I live with myself between telephone conversations, and I know the act I perform on the phone is only because I am lonely and I don't want to alienate people at the moment.

The truth is that it is counter-productive. If you are friendly and pleasant on the phone, people expect you to be so in actual appearances, and if you are not, then you end up alienating them anyways.

I hate this kind of deceptive role-playing. If your social face is more in line with your sometimes unpleasant private face, people will respect you anyway for your honesty, even if it is sometimes a little blunt. More overall respect for you as a person is usually the result.

Each of us has a private face and a social face. It is our own responsibility to ensure that after a conversation with someone else the private face does not look the social face in ... well, in the face and ask "Who the hell was that?"

This entry represents the necessary evolution of identity that is always on the cards.

Is it me, or is it Environment Z?

Wednesday, 14 April 2004

Social identity is more important than I would sometimes like to admit. In the light of this it is appropriate to mention that I am not too comfortable in typical male bonding scenarios; I am not much of a “man’s man”.

Does it bother me? No, I just want to mention it because I thought about it, and I wanted to acknowledge it.

Also important is that if you do not handle this type of situation in the right way, it can lead to a lack of confidence and reduced self-esteem in the type of environment where it happens to be the standard, or the main criterion for esteem and respect.

* * *

This can also be applied to a wider context. Personality Aspect X may not be one that defines you, or one with which you closely associate yourself, but this very personality aspect may be an important benchmark for respect in Environment Z. Because you do not carry a sufficient degree of X, you are not necessarily respected in that environment. It then becomes part of your self-perception in Environment Z, and it might lead to reduced self-esteem.

The secret? In Environment Q you may just be respected for precisely the absence of Personality Aspect X. So, it is quite probably a case of nothing inherently wrong with you, just with you in that particular environment.

I own seven pairs of underwear ...

Sunday, 25 April 2004

Statement: I needed a place, a home, in order to know who I am.

Presumption: Maybe you also need possessions to be able to say who you are – like a collection of nearly 200 movies that say, “I like movies,” or that can confirm what you claim you are, or what you like.

Question: Is the ideal to be able to say and to know who you are without a place of your own and without possessions?

Follow-up Question: What else defines identity? Relationships, how you spend your time each day, what you do for money, what you believe in, the topics you prefer to discuss in social conversations ...

The above leads to an interesting question: If you have no home, no possessions, neither friend nor family, you do not do much while you are awake, you do nothing to make money, you hold no religious beliefs and you never have conversations or respond to what other people say, then who are you? What are you?

If you find yourself in an urban environment, you have no cash or credit, no place of your own, no income, and you just do enough on a daily basis to stay physically alive, in practice, it boils down you eating from garbage cans (which means you’re a “bum”), or begging for food (a “beggar”), and that you sleep wherever you can find some protection from the elements (again a “homeless bum”).

So, if you do not have a home, no possessions, no relationships with anyone, you believe in nothing, the only effort you put in is to find some edible scraps of food and a

few sips of drinkable fluid once or twice a day before you again lie down in any place where you can stretch out your body, you do nothing for money, and you never talk or respond when someone talks to you, your identity is automatically defined by all of the above, and the community takes it upon themselves to define you accordingly.

In most cases, the result will be that you will be called a “homeless bum”, and will be accepted as such in and by the community. Because you have thus failed to define *yourself* in a similar fashion to how most other people define themselves – that is, by placing yourself within familiar categories and by using elements of identity familiar to most people in the community, you will be placed on the lowest rung of the social order.

Can one then come to another conclusion other than to infer that home, possessions, relationships, beliefs, activities (creative and otherwise), and words and reactions are necessary for us to be able to know who we are, and to present ourselves in a recognisable and comprehensible manner to the community in whose midst we find ourselves?

Who am I, then? Let’s see: Possession-wise, I am the proud owner of seven of pairs of underwear, two trousers, a few shirts and a pair of sneakers, a few pieces of furniture, a computer, a notebook and five pens (two blue pens, two black and a red one); I live in my living room; I dream of a relationship with Marilyn Monroe’s Taiwanese cousin; I have no faith in dogmatic religion; I write books that will never make money; I only respond when someone talks nonsense, and don’t say much otherwise ...

A few questions at the beginning of an end

Monday, 26 April 2004

[...]

I do sit with new questions at the end that I [initially] thought I was not going to address in this final chapter [but which have already been mentioned in several notes]. These questions are related to issues that I have thought I had resolved for myself over the years, but which have slipped back through the window in the middle of the night with frightening new formulations.

How, to take one example, does one define the “self”? Do you “find” yourself, or you decide who you want to be, and then become it?

How do I define concepts such as “home” and “place” used so often in these pages, words one always assumes everyone understands in the same way?

And seeing that we are talking about this, what should one do with the idea that the framework and limitations of language are of utmost importance in philosophical issues? Does it mean “I” am much more a product of my cultural heritage and much more dependent on the Afrikaans and English language communities than I have previously thought? Certainly one can have a sense of “self” without language, can’t you? But can you give expression to your self-awareness if you have never mastered a language, if you have never been part of a community that agrees on the meaning of the sounds that make up a language?

What is a human being then but a highly developed mammal?

And why, incidentally, is it important to be more than just another mammal? I mean, rather a mammal than a reptile, right? Or am I being snobbish?

The SELF | Application | Identify

Tuesday, 18 May 2004

The SELF.

“What is a home, the place where you feel you belong, other than a place where you know who you are?”

That was last night. Today I ask, what does it mean to “know who you are”? It means that you know your place among other people with whom you share a particular environment at a particular time. It means that you are aware of your own value in this environment. You also have a rough idea how you are viewed by others in the vicinity.

Interesting for the above definition of “home” is that I did not know five years ago *who I was in context* (having only recently arrived in Taiwan). I can continue and say that it has taken me about five years to know *who I am in context* (particularly among “others like me”, namely other South Africans in Taiwan); also that I wanted to go “home” shortly after I had developed more certainty about *who I am in context*. It can also be argued that I can also know *who I am in context* in a different place, although it will again take time.

In one word, what defines who you are? I would say, more than anything, relationships with other people.

* * *

Incidentally, Nietzsche did not believe that there is a fixed self that can be “discovered”. He wrote, “WILL a self and thou shalt BECOME a self.” [Own emphasis]

* * *

Is there such a thing as a core self that can be discovered, upon which the person who you want to be, develops? Can this core

self in its earliest form be seen as pure and undefiled, something that is then corrupted by exposure to the environment outside the womb? Or is the core self something that may already be compromised in the root because of genetic composition, something that may then be damaged and corrupted even further by early experiences, years before it is “discovered” by the person?

* * *

Nietzsche, therefore, reckons that the self cannot be found but that it should be *defined* and then *become*. (What would he say about the idea of a core self that can be discovered?)

It almost seems as if I am back at the beginning: Who am I and where do I belong? Interesting thing is that Nietzsche’s view almost compels one to ask, instead: Who do I *want* to be? And, where do I *want* to belong?

How does one define the “self” (who you are/who you want to be)? And how do you define “your place” (your home/where you belong)?

(I have to remove myself from the rest of humanity and their sometimes tragic lives, and only become selectively involved.)

If the environment is such a critical factor in knowledge about the SELF (to know who you are, or what it means to be “you”), is it possible to have a universal “I”? If “I, in Fengshan City, Taiwan” am not quite the same as “I” in some industrial town in South Africa, who am “I” then? And if it changes, then it is impossible to know a universal “I”, or to be one! Then to be a functioning, particular “I” in the environment in which you find yourself at the present moment, and to be a similar person to a degree in any other environment, is the best you could ever hope for!

It follows that self-knowledge is relative to your environment. What you do have if you radically change location (Fengshan, Taiwan to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia), or if your situation undergoes radical change, are reference points. You know how you acted in the other environment, or when your situation was different, or you can imagine how you would have acted. This knowledge then provides you with a frame of reference within which you can work out how you should act in the new environment or changed circumstance to remain roughly “the same person” – if it is appropriate at all that there should be consistency.

Can you ever fully know yourself? And considering the vital role that the environment plays in the “knowledge” of who you are, **WHO ARE YOU REALLY?**

Thursday, 20 May 2004

Application of a theory/The SELF and environment

So I don't want to leave this place because I know who I am here. Which also means if I leave to go live in a place like Pretoria or Bronkhorstspuit and I define who I am there, I would also eventually be reluctant to leave there, for the same reason.

You won't want to leave a place unless you are unsatisfied with who you are in that place. Dissatisfaction of this nature will result in you continuing to leave places until you find a place where you will not only *know* who you want to be, but where you can *be* who you want to be.

[The principle: If you know who you are in a particular place and you are satisfied with who you are in that place, if economic and other factors in that place are furthermore of such a nature that your chances of survival are better than in another place where you can also establish yourself in theory, it is understandable and reasonable that you will want to stay right where you are.]

Tuesday, 25 May 2004

Identify your SELF – and how it is identified to you

The SELF – how the person identifies his own SELF to him- or herself, and how the person identifies his or her SELF to the community. The latter is not a one-way conversation – the language in which the individual identifies his or her SELF to the community was not invented by the individual, but is used with compliments of the community, as it were, of which the individual is a member. (Examples of language concepts that are used include “husband”, “wife”, “strong”, “smart”, “leader”, “author”, “rich”, “poor”, “intellectual”, “atheist” and “Christian”, to name a few.)

In my case, a community that consisted mainly of white Afrikaans-speakers identified my SELF to me. Currently I identify myself as an adult to another community – Asian, Chinese – using a language that I am still mastering and through other data that I have become aware of through personal experience.

* * * * *

Tuesday, 1 June 2004

The “current” Dalai Lama was born Tenzin Gyatso. Six decades ago he was enthusiastically busy being just an ordinary boy when one day some monks arrived to tell him he is not who he thinks he is, but rather the umpteenth incarnation of someone else. Imagine that.

* * * * *

Sunday, 6 June 2004

Confidence in yourself
I have found myself
To be yourself
Love thy neighbour as thyself
Know yourself
Unsure about yourself
I laugh at myself

“Ky-malixino-wo.”

“What?”

“Ky-malixino-wo. You mean you don’t know what that means?”

“Nope, no idea.”

“It’s a central concept in the understanding of the human being!”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“You’re kidding, right? How on earth can you function as an intelligent human being without knowing what the ky-malixino-wo is?”

“Well, I do not know. And yet I function ...”

“It is English you know? It’s not Russian or Spanish or Japanese!”

“Can we talk about something else?”

* * * * *

Accept yourself – even if it’s only to save time

Tuesday, 8 June 2004

I accept the particularity of my background. I think and write most of the time in Afrikaans, my skin is “white”, my facial features mainly dictated by the genes I have received from my mostly Germanic ancestors.

I can change how I look. I can even be difficult and abandon my linguistic background – because I have not chosen it, and force myself to think and write only in English. I can be even more radical and choose another language (other than English), master this language, and eventually think and write exclusively in that language. At the end of such a process – that will take years of hard work – I will be a splendid example of a so-called self-made man.

However, I am willing to forgo such a radical process for the sake of time and energy, and largely accept the particularity of my physical appearance, my mother tongue and cultural background as they stand, and to regard these things as good enough instruments to facilitate the process of self-discovery and self-invention.

Small house, big world

Tuesday, 8 June 2004

What is relevant and not relevant to the “owner” of the SELF are some of the most important considerations to take into account during the process of defining the SELF.

An example of this is opinion. Which issues are relevant enough for a person to formulate an opinion on and which not require knowledge of the SELF.

It follows that the smaller the area of which you are aware, the less information you receive, and therefore the easier it is to find/define your SELF.

For example, if I live in a big city and regularly interact with a wide variety of people, and I’m aware of political issues stretching from Northeast Asia to the Middle East to Central Africa, Europe and North America, as well as environmental issues, ethical issues, religious issues and many other topics one can have an opinion on, my process of defining an identity will take significantly longer than will be the case with a guy who grew up in a small town, who lives there as an adult, and who will eventually die there of old age.

One would like to say – because don’t most of us live in the “bigger” world? – that it is better to be aware of more and that it is boring to spend your entire life within a limited area. Arguments can also be made about “knowledge is power”, about the lack of more or better information leading to fears of that which some people may only be vaguely aware of, and lack of knowledge that leads to misunderstanding and prejudice against those who are not “like us”.

This issue of big world versus small town is not what interests me at the moment, and my current relationship with the “bigger” world is of such a nature that I have no incentive to make a case for or against participation and engagement.

The interesting question for me at this stage is whether you can fully define your SELF in a “large” environment

where you regularly enter into new relationships, where issues come and go, and where new data flows in on a daily basis while you're still trying to finish last month's newspapers or current affairs magazines. I don't think so.

Many people will agree that issues you have to take a position on as part of your identity are less important than relationships. The benefit of fewer, but more meaningful relationships, including positive family ties, is thus once again emphasised. (I did not try to work it in. It just emerged as the obvious answer to the question of what provides a solid foundation to the SELF in an ever changing world. Therefore, it would seem that I have once again, after a round of intellectual contemplation, come across a bit of wisdom that the proverbial "everyone" knows.)

A balance can, therefore, be proposed between the "small" world at home, and the "big" world outside your front gate; priority given to the former provides people at the end of the day with a firmer definition and more certainty of SELF.

But now that I think about it ... is this not what most people are already doing? Of course! People are brilliant! (Just a pity they don't know it.)

Traditional knowledge, and old screws

Tuesday, 15 June 2004

Many people do the “right thing” without reflecting on it too much. For me it has taken a long time to learn certain things – the kinds of things that, if I would tell people, “These are the conclusions I have come to after years of contemplation,” they would respond with, “We already know these things. We have been applying them in our own lives for quite some time. Did you really have to sit down and think about it?”

What is wrong with me? Did a screw loosen up somewhere in my head years ago? Am I stupid? No. (I had to be quick with that answer before I could seriously consider the possibility.)

What happened was that I had lost faith in what had been offered as “the truth” and “the way things work”. I questioned everything, and had to reconstruct from scratch my own worldview and frame of reference by which I could function as an adult outside the madhouse.

Eventually I once again accepted some “old” truths – the difference is that I know why. And understanding why I believe what I believe has to make my years of life on the “outside” worthwhile.

Puzzle people

Thursday, 17 June 2004

Some people end up as caricatures of the information they receive from the environment about what they should be and how they should act. These puzzle caricatures are seemingly unaware of how clearly the seams show between the sometimes hackneyed parts from which their socially functioning personas are compiled.

How about myself? I am aware of the puzzle pieces from which my own socially functioning persona has been compiled. I also know that I can choose to reject many of these bits of information about myself at any time (or if I don't want to be that extreme, to at least make some changes).

If I speak and write in Language A, it is not because I believe Language A is a better communication medium than Language B, it is because I am more comfortable with it because of my background, and as a result of a lifetime of exposure that has left me more apt to express myself in this particular language. My preference for Language A is a choice for the sake of efficiency, with sentiment – a common attitude when it comes to the language with which you grew up – of secondary importance.

Are not all of us in the end to a significant degree puzzle caricatures for as long as it remains effective? If we replace one set of puzzle pieces in a more self-critical phase of our lives with a set that fits more comfortably or with one that looks better, we may not be caricatures anymore, but are we not still made up of pieces cut and shaped by those who came before us?

Identity, the SELF, and the result of everything

Wednesday, 23 June 2004

Four years ago, I also thought of myself as a writer, but on a daily basis, from getting up in the morning to going to bed at night, I was, for all practical purposes, my income-generating profession. What was this income-generating profession? I was an English teacher who, in all honesty, mostly failed in the job I was hired to do, five days a week. I thought of myself as a writer, and I did write (the entire “Personal Agenda: Book One” is proof), but I did not have the confidence in myself and my identity that I have now. I was, to a large extent, an unfulfilled, frustrated person, because I was unfulfilled and frustrated in my job.

Five hundred years ago in Europe – during the pre-industrial era, the position of the family in the feudal hierarchy was one of the key determinants of personal identity, at least as far as the community was concerned in whose midst the person found him- or herself. The *economic role* a person had to fulfil (if it were necessary at all for him or her to perform any kind of labour) was also linked, to a significant degree, to birth.

It can therefore be said that identity in Europe 500 years ago was largely dictated by *chance* – where the person was born, and the position of his or her family in the feudal hierarchy, and also by the *needs of the community* – which, together with parentage, determined the person’s economic role.

Since the voyages of discovery and the subsequent economic, political, scientific and industrial revolutions, *profession* has entered the arena as an additional and crucial determinant of identity. People who live out their lives in the industrialised world have, to some extent, a choice of *what role* they want to play in the community, *which specific needs*

of the community they want to fulfil, and even *where* they want to play this role and fulfil these needs, or in *what community*. Financial ability can also be mentioned as a further factor affecting people's view of themselves and how they define their identity. Money is also a great equaliser – stories of people who were born in the gutter and end up in palaces are still rare, but they do occur.

When it comes to the question of *who you are*, most people still look at the cards they were dealt that determine status and role in society – place of birth, gender, appearance and talents, socio-economic status of the family, and specifically in the case of adults, profession.

Most of these thoughts have already been noted in this literary project. What is the point of mentioning them again?

It was until recently a private pleasure for me to believe I expose the “truth” to people who have perhaps believed that a good job and lots of money are the best they can ever hope to strive for in life. I wanted to beckon such people closer, unlock a small antique box, and inside they would see a Greater Truth: “You do not know your TRUE self! What you are at this stage of your life is just a result of fate, your environment, and events that differentiate your life from that of the next person. You live under the illusion that you know who you are; an illusion that nevertheless enables you to function as an Individual in This Time and Place.”

The implication was that only when you look into your own soul and identify your “true self” can you finally claim full humanity, can you declare that you (finally) know who you “really” are. I thought that to discover – or to define – your “true self” was the Grand Prize at the end of a long and intensely personal journey.

However, new insights have started to undermine these views. (These fresh insights have also already been mentioned, but seeing that this touches on the topic of the value of a single human life, I reckon it is okay to revisit the issue.) What then, would I regard as more important than the

discovery and defining of the “true self”? The answer:
RESULTS OF YOUR LIFE.

We all arrive as small bundles of flesh and blood on this planet, we scream out our humanity to anyone who wants to hear, get older and bigger and eventually the day arrives when we leave the show. The question, at the final count, should not be whether you existed and functioned as your own True Self, but what results you leave behind from your time on this planet.

Has your life produced more positive than negative results? Will the world breathe a sigh of relief when you finally utter your last words? Have you only endeavoured to satisfy your own needs, and to be as happy as possible for as long as possible? Is it important for you to leave behind positive results of your existence? What, indeed, are positive results? These are questions that every person can and should answer for him or herself.

I have discovered a few principles and implemented a few measures that make it possible for me to function as a fairly normal adult in the world and time in which I was born. I have also discovered that life outside my apartment door is to a large extent a game and that if you manage to decipher the rules and reconcile yourself to these rules to a satisfactory degree, it may just be possible for you to lead a happy life, and to declare at the end of it that your life was worth living.

Yet, if I have the option, I would want to live my life as a conscious effort to achieve more positive than negative results that I can leave behind, rather than to just know I was happy, and that my life was worth living, or even that I succeeded in finding my “true self”. (What is the value of a highly developed awareness of your own self, if it is not ultimately conducive to leaving behind positive results from your time on this planet?)

Can one go further and ask about the results of every day? Every week? Okay then, the average results of every year? Can you purchase “positive results” shortly before the end of your life? Who determines the quality of these results? And

what is the possibility that the beauty of a single day or even a single moment can get lost in the rush to leave behind a positive legacy of your existence?

Regardless of what you believe about the value and meaning of your own life, or about what makes your life worth living, regardless of the weight you attach to results of your life, one thing remains: **YOUR LIFE WILL ULTIMATELY PRODUCE RESULTS.** Whether these results will be more positive than negative depends to a large extent on yourself and the choices you make on a daily basis.

The GIVEN SELF, and the role of intellectuals

Friday, 25 June 2004

(How little can you know about yourself and still function, as an adult, within the limits of what is considered “normal” by society?)

Without people, no community can exist. Without sufficient numbers of men and women, and people with different talents and abilities, no community can stay healthy and prosper.

The Community – the body of people who share a set of cultural, linguistic and other values in a particular place – provide the individual with a (sometimes temporary) working identity/self-model composed of birth data, cultural data, and as the years go by, needs of that particular community at that particular time. Most people accept this GIVEN model of who and what they are – to varying degrees, but the required minimum quota of acceptance is reached among the population for the community to at least remain standing.

What then of those people who are sceptical and critical, who are always scratching around for answers to questions many regard as unnecessary; people for whom it seems a lifetime ambition to discover the formulas of how things work, people who do not want to accept things as they currently are? Ultimately, the Community can also not remain standing without the contribution of these people – including some scientists, psychologists, sociologists, historians, philosophers and academics from other fields, writers, poets, artists and musicians.

The primary contribution of these individuals is to provide people with ideas through which they might develop a better understanding of their existence. These individuals must also serve as a counterweight to irrational group politics, and associated violent movements that provide people in uncertain

times with a firmer understanding of who and what they are, what their roles in society should be, and how the value and meaning of their lives ought to be interpreted. Of course, there are intellectuals who themselves are guilty of driving destructive ideologies into the minds of people. For precisely this reason, it is vital to promote constructive ideas, and to encourage the advocates of these ideas.

Intellectuals take it upon themselves to make members of the wider community aware of the destructive nature of certain beliefs, ideologies and related movements. They also play a leading role in the process of distinguishing between what keeps Civilised Society anchored in soil fertile for growth and progress, and what causes it to tear apart at the seams.

[How much does the “ordinary” man or woman on the street understand of what causes their community to tear apart at the seams? And at what point should the Intellectual Vanguard in the Battle for Healthy Society jump on their soapboxes?

I believe that if most working adults are too busy to contemplate supposedly more academic issues such as the relationship between language and “truth”, they probably would be too busy to see Rome fall around them – which, as most people know, never happens in one day.

Intelligence is not what is relevant here – a medical doctor is not necessarily smarter than a chemical engineer because he understands why the latter’s stomach keeps aching. So, too, with the Intellectual Vanguard, whose interests and passion for certain issues sharpen their eyes to see things before they become painfully obvious to everyone, and possibly too late.]

On rebirth, and a “new” SELF

[A term had by this time entered my consciousness that had me so excited that I was almost friendly with a taxi driver one afternoon. Before I continue using it, allow me to once again explain the meaning.

The “given self” is a convenient term to describe the significant impact certain factors – such as genetics, cultural background, language, and time and place of birth – have on what and who an individual is, long before he or she learns big words like “identity”, “self-awareness” or “purpose of my existence”. The “given self” is thus a personal reality, years before the individual begins to ask critical questions such as “Who am I?” and “Who do I want to be?”]

Friday, 25 June 2004

To reach the level of personal development I call ENLIGHTENMENT, the specific aspects of who you are must first be confronted and accepted to a large extent. The GIVEN SELF can never fully be replaced with the ENLIGHTENED SELF, or any other form of self that can be regarded as more “my own” and therefore more “real”. The GIVEN SELF – or aspects of it – exists until the moment of physical death.

* * *

The Given Self – the product of, among other things, so-called fate factors like gender and time and place of birth, and strongly influenced by the person-model held up as the most appropriate considering fate factors and cultural values and needs of the community – can be manipulated by alternative person-models.

One example is the young woman from a conservative family who, in her early twenties, leaves her home in a small

rural town for the big city where she transforms herself after a few years into a flamboyant actress. A more radical example would be the person who is born as a man, who then undergoes surgery, marries and lives out the rest of his/her life as a woman. A less dramatic example is the case of a man from a Calvinist background, who at one point was regarded as someone who might serve the spiritual needs of his community as a pastor or reverend, but who then as an adult leaves the country of his birth to seek a better life (and improved identity) on a different continent, with images of ancient philosophers and long-deceased writers who serve as his alternate self-models.

What happens is that the individual confronts the given building blocks of who and what he or she is. If this existential moment is reached, the person can once again look at the world around them and ask themselves (again) two questions: “Who am I?” and “Who do I want to be?” Physical limitations of the Original or then Given Self that cannot be changed, as well as particularity of origin (time and place of birth, as well as socio-economic background and all the other things already listed), must necessarily be accepted.

The moment the person reaches the point when they state that they see their given building blocks, that they accept what they never had a choice about and what they (really) cannot change (whether they want to or not), they will have arrived at a new appreciation of themselves in their particular environment – IF, that is, they believe in the potential to transform themselves, albeit still within the framework of actual given constraints.

* * *

To confront what you’ve been given, to recognise it, and to believe in the astonishing possibilities that are within the reach of a relatively intelligent person are vital elements of the Process of Rebirth – and possibly, albeit not necessarily, the birth of the ENLIGHTENED SELF.

* * *

By the way, what does it mean when someone says he's a "born again Christian"? It means that he has "crucified" his "old self", with a "new self" taking the place of the old. Naturally it is assumed that the "new self" is better and cleansed of the "sin" of the "old self". The faith community also expects that this person – the newly converted – should, in fact, be his "new self", to lend credibility to his claim of being "born again". Philosophically and as a literary concept, it is brilliant, and colourful ...

Prove the SELF | Formula that leads to result

Sunday, 27 June 2004

Prove your ... no, prove the SELF

Two dozen foreigners sit around tables full of beer and food, eyes focused on a big screen with live rugby. The man himself sits practically with his nose pressed against the screen as he thinks with his mouth full of fresh pizza: “It’s good to be around people again. The proof of the pudding is, after all ... no wait, the proof of self is, after all, in the eating ... no, not that either, *the proof of self is in appearing!*”

The formula that leads to result

What is the difference between me and Joseph Stalin, or between me and Bill Gates? The difference is results of our lives.

Joseph Stalin, Bill Gates and I were all born in particular places at particular times, within communities with particular needs. If Stalin were born in 1979 instead of 1879, in the same town in Georgia, with a relatively similar domestic situation (adjusted for 1979 reality), his life would have produced different results. The same can be said if I were born in 1771 and not in 1971. The importance of fate data – where you were born, when, and as whose child, and events later in your life about which you have no control, or did not have control – and the needs of the community can NEVER be underestimated as factors contributing to the final results of a particular person’s life.

The only other factor that plays a significant role is choices. Stalin chose against the path that would have led to him becoming a priest, and chose in favour of joining Lenin and the Bolsheviks. So I have chosen, for example, against whatever employment I could have obtained in South Africa

and opted in favour of teaching English in Taiwan to keep myself alive. The choices Joseph Stalin had made had a dramatic impact on who and what he became, and on the results he produced of his existence. The choices I have made so far in my life have also had a dramatic impact on who I am at the present moment, and on the results that I have so far produced of my existence.

The following formula can thus be suggested: RESULTS OF YOUR LIFE = FATE + NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY + PERSONAL CHOICES.

What is GIVEN, and what you CHOOSE

Tuesday, 29 June 2004

It is my birthday for another 29 minutes, so I believe it's permissible to send more useful, yet unverifiable statistics up in the air: Nine-nine percent of the world population function because they have accepted, mostly uncritically, their Given Selves, and only develop distinguishing identity from the given possibilities and with options directly related to a specific time and place. One percent of the world population, on the other hand, confront their Given Selves, accept what they cannot change (such as that the person was born in Pretoria in the Republic of South Africa on Tuesday, 29 June 1971) regardless of whether they would have preferred it otherwise, and then focus on a Process of Defining Their Selves that will always remain within a particular framework (I cannot become a dog even if I want to), but would nevertheless result in an outcome where the person will be able to announce that he has become his "own" man or that she has become her "own" woman – a poetic concept more than it is technically true.

So, *what* am I?

The beginning: I am a man, born in South Africa, the son of Afrikaans-speaking parents who are descendants of mostly European small farmers, soldiers, servants and artisans who had arrived in South Africa a few centuries ago. I grew up within a particular cultural setting, with particular notions of good and evil, and particular ideas about what you should do with your life, how one ought to live, where, and with whom. This is my **GIVEN** Self.

The story continues: At age 33, I have made myself at home in Kaohsiung, a city on the south-western coast of Taiwan. I earn an income and sustain myself through teaching English classes at a few local schools. I live alone in a three

bedroom apartment in a neighbourhood full of Chinese civil war veterans and their descendants. Sometimes I speak as much Chinese as Afrikaans or English on any given day, I use a bicycle as my primary mode of transportation, and I spend most of my productive time writing. These things are all representative of my **CHOSEN** Self – constructed on the foundation of my Given Self, and remaining within the limited possibilities of time and place.

This is me, at 23:47 on the night of Tuesday, 29 June 2004.

Wednesday, 30 June 2004

00:11

This matter of CHOSEN versus GIVEN self will stimulate interest among the one percent who have already gone through a conscious and active process of self-confrontation and self-definition, and another fraction of people who “think about these things”, but for whom the process is still in a rudimentary stage.

(This process of self-confrontation and self-definition occurs on many levels. The difference in my own case is that I constantly make notes about it; I am therefore very aware of the process; I can also follow my own tracks back and thereby show others how one person – me – has arrived at a certain point.)

11:05

If Absolute Given Self – let’s define it as someone who uncritically views the source of their self, namely the environment in which they were born and formed, as superior to any other source – is at one extreme of the spectrum, what is on the other end? It is to grow out of all you’ve been given as far as possible and to become as much as possible the

product of your own process of self-definition? Is that what all of us should strive for?

Important as it may seem, I do not believe this should be the highest aspiration for any individual. What is more important – and I also expressed this view earlier, is the results of your life. Both (Mainly) Given Self and (To a Large Extent) Chosen Self are *means to this end*.

In some cases, the person-model “given” to an individual is sufficient to achieve positive results. In other cases, the person must go beyond the given model. Why so? Possibly for no other reason than because the person is or was either NOT HAPPY or NOT SATISFIED with their GIVEN SELF!

However, both self-models aim to enable the person to function in the first place, and in the second place to produce (hopefully positive) results of their lives.

* * *

QUESTION: What is the difference between those who are unsure of themselves, and those who are (apparently) not saddled with this type of personal dilemma?

ANSWER: In both cases, the person looks at who they are as a given – gender, appearance, socio-economic background, aptitudes, intelligence and other genetic factors, and particular relationships that determine who and what they are without them having had a choice about it; that is, all the factors that were given to them by chance without them having had a choice about it. Choices that were made over the years do, as a matter of course, contribute to the who-and-what the person is confronted with in their Great Existential Moment, but even choices are always relative to the given factors. (It is necessary to note that positive choices in a context where a negative choice could have been made easily enough, are always to the credit of the person who made the choice, regardless of the positive given factors that increased the probability of a positive choice.)

A person who finds herself in the “sure-of-herself” category, is to a significant degree satisfied with who and what she is, and probably wants to continue to be who and what she is. This person’s confrontation with herself was, and still is, a predominantly positive experience. This person can continue to function as a relatively satisfied who-and-what.

Someone in the “unsure-of-himself” category, goes through a period characterised by a so-called identity crisis – uncertainty about who and what he is, uncertainty about his place in the world, and uncertainty about the value of his particular life. Feelings of alienation from his environment, discontent, and self-contempt are in many cases intertwined with these self-doubts. This person confronts his “given self” and regards it as NOT GOOD ENOUGH.

In better cases, this type of self-confrontation sets off a search for a more satisfying identity, for what will ultimately produce a more satisfying sense of self. However, many people experience this type of self-confrontation as painful and traumatic. These individuals do not always understand the reasons for their feelings of alienation. They easily misdiagnose their discontent as the result of personality flaws: “I don’t know why I’m always so negative about everything. There must be something wrong with me.” Eventually self-contempt intensifies discontentment just as much as it is a result thereof. Further alienation between the individual and significant others – family, even friends – is an almost inevitable consequence.

Thousands, even millions of lives are soured every day by misunderstanding regarding these phenomena. Many lives are also ended far too early and unnecessarily because of negative emotions that overwhelm the person to such an extent that he or she feels it can no longer be contained.

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

1. A further possibility is that you may be relatively satisfied with your given self, and satisfied with your given

environment, but you want more of the good that you already have. The reasons for this may have to do with personal experiences that still leave you hungry, despite your relative satisfaction, for confirmation of your own value, or it may simply be driven by a sense of adventure.

2. There is also the possibility that you are not even convinced of your given self, where even the data that is supposed to give you an indication is so fragmented and inconsistent that even a quest for who you are supposed to be, may take years.

* * *

Predominantly Given Self and To A Great Extent Chosen Self are both self-models that enable the person to function as an Individual Entity. Both self-models enable the person to make choices and to take certain actions that would eventually lead to certain results. A difference can be found between individual manifestations of these two types in the degree of satisfaction with regard to self-functioning, as well as in the quality of the results achieved.

A few days ago I considered myself a “1” and someone who functions as predominantly given self still a “0”, but I now declare that I am finally again a “1” – the same as the person who functions as predominantly given self.

What was I then before – or in varying degrees since I left high school up to a point in the recent past? I was mostly a “0” for the simple reason that I had rejected so much of my given self that I found it difficult to function in the world where I was born and at the particular time when my life was supposed to play out.

I can thus again take my place in the “ordinary current of life” [as Dostoevsky wrote in *Crime and Punishment*] because my CHOSEN SELF (the result of the acceptance of given aspects that cannot be changed, plus self-definition, plus choices) is a viable alternative to what is good enough for a

large percentage of the world population, that is, **PREDOMINANTLY GIVEN SELF.**

I now know who I am, because I defined it myself. I know what I am, because I have sorted it out myself. And I know where my place in the world is, because I have decided where it is.

(Is there a qualitative difference between my “1” and the average “1”? Possibly so, and possibly not. What is important, is that I changed my classification from “problematic functioning” to “satisfactory functioning”, not necessarily from “functional” to “better”.

Has the whole process been worthwhile if I am not better than the average? Of course, because I’m alive.)

* * *

[Highly satisfied with this new insight, I went ahead with its application in my own life. Please excuse any repetition.]

Starting plus-minus 1994 I did not have a functioning self; or, I did have a functioning self, but I was so filled with uncertainty (and anxiety as a result thereof) that I did not have a sustainable functioning self. The difference, in my case, between *who-and-what-1994* and *who-and-what-2004*, is between “functioning self, but filled with anxiety and uncertainty, which means continued functioning cannot be taken for granted” and “functioning self with confidence which means continued functioning is highly likely”.

Are my notes on this process relevant for anyone else – considering that it is so intimately connected with my own particular life and the factors that have made it what it is?

Partly because no one likes to waste time, I would surely want to respond positively. But I am not the only individual who did not (or does not) want to accept certain aspects of my given self. So, I believe that my meticulous notes, regarding a

process that took me years to identify, have value for more people than just myself. Plus, if I bump my head one day and I must start afresh to get to know myself, it will naturally also be of value to myself again.

Why does a teenager rebel?

Saturday, 3 July 2004

I reckon a teenager who is judged by conventional standards to be in a phase of rebellion is reacting against his own self, against the people he holds responsible for what he sees as his inadequate given self, and possibly even against the environment in which this given self was born and raised.

It may be attributed to the fact that I am more exposed to teenagers in a certain cross-section of society, but it does appear that the “rebellious teenager” is a more common sight in developed, industrialised countries, where fragmented communities share a single urban landscape, and rich and poor rub shoulders on a daily basis, compared to communities where a subsistence economy is the norm, with narrower, more traditional connections between individual members of the community, and a closer cultural and socio-economic relationship between different local communities.

One could postulate that teenagers in urban communities in industrialised countries have more reason to feel ill-equipped for the lives they want to live, or even for the lives that are expected of them. Young people in these areas are after all more aware of other individuals in the same community or in other communities – both locally or in other areas – who at least seem to be much better equipped than they are.

I also believe – although I can only risk a humble opinion on this – that the particular *economic* environment in which teenagers indirectly find themselves, or where they know they will find themselves as adults, are conducive to feelings of inadequacy. Socio-economic position – where the teenager finds himself vis-à-vis his parents’ economic activities, and where he believes he will likely end up as an adult, as well as competition with peers in terms of material possessions intensify internal conflict within the teen between his view of

what he is at that moment, and what is *presented to him* as the ideal.

Finally, I believe that too many adults, or then in this case specifically the adults in developed countries who have to fulfil the role of parents of teenagers do not have the slightest understanding of the processes of identity formation, nor do they have any idea of the most elementary philosophical issues that teenagers are confronted with. This lack on the side of the parents contribute to the fact that teenagers try to formulate answers to the questions of WHO, WHAT and PLACE in their own ways, and sometimes in any way that is remotely satisfactory. Ignorance is once again the culprit. Enlightenment is once again salvation ...

“I, now” and related notes

Sunday, 4 July 2004

Is “Person A” the same person as she was five years ago? Despite ageing, and taking into account the effects of lifestyle on her appearance and physical well-being, she is probably still recognisable as the same person. However, psychologically she is merely related to the person she was five years ago. To say she is psychologically the same person, is not too different from alleging that one of my two sisters and I are the same person, just because we come from the same womb.

By law, this person is still “Person A”. She is still responsible for contracts she had signed five years ago. She can also still be held responsible for criminal acts she may have committed five or ten years ago.

She also still carries the joys and burdens of choices she has made, or incidents in which she has been involved any time during her past.

The SELF, however, does not remain constant. “SELF 2004 of Person A” is only psychologically related to “SELF 1999 of Person A”.

It can also be asked whether “SELF May 2004 of Person X” is the same as “SELF July 2004 of Person X”, or just related. The answer is again that the two are only related, but probably more closely than “SELF 1995 of Person X” and “SELF 2003 of Person X” (a particular truth for Person X, which cannot necessarily be applied to Person A).

One can even go further and ask about the relation between “SELF 4 July 2004 at 16:34 of Person X” and “SELF 4 July 2004 at 16:33 of Person X”. The answer is the same: still only related, but there is a high probability that the degree of relation is closer than in the case of, for example, “May SELF” and “July SELF”. (Again, any mention of relation in the case of Person X is not necessarily valid for Person A,

because five minutes – even one minute – can make a dramatic difference in one person’s life, while relatively little may change over the course of a month in another person’s life.)

Origin of the SELF (and do reptiles have souls?)

Monday, 5 July 2004

A short dialogue

“Have you ever wondered about the origin of the self? What could possibly be the origin of the self?”

“Well, birth is certainly a reasonable answer.”

“Define ‘birth’.”

“Biological separation of mother and child. I would say the precise moment is the cutting of the umbilical cord. I think that’s the most dramatic moment of separation between the two physical entities.”

“So, the moment the umbilical cord is cut, is the moment of the birth of the self, the moment the new person becomes aware of his own, separate existence?”

“That sounds sensible enough, does it not?”

“Would you say only humans – members of the species *Homo sapiens* – have consciousness of their own unique existence? Would you say animals have a similar consciousness?”

“What kind of animal?”

“Many people would probably first think of dogs and cats.”

“Pets, but then surely also baboons, chimpanzees, gorillas ...”

“Well, let’s say all mammals, then.”

“Or, all mammals born with umbilical cords.”

“Rats?”

“Well, rats are mammals ... and mice.”

“And whales. But if a rat has consciousness of its own unique existence, what about an ostrich? And if you reckon that an ostrich does not have consciousness of its own unique existence, why not?”

“According to our reasoning, because an ostrich is not a mammal. Because ostriches lay eggs, there is no dramatic moment of separation.”

“It doesn’t sound right that a common rodent has consciousness of its own unique existence, but not as large a ... creature as an ostrich, just because it hatches. This means a giant creature like a dinosaur also did not have consciousness of its own unique existence, just because there is no umbilical cord, or there wasn’t. And what about egg-laying mammals?”

“Well, an egg-laying mammal lays an egg, so there’s no umbilical cord, anyway. Let’s say then for the moment that ostriches and other large egg-laying creatures also possess consciousness of their own existence.”

“What about insects? What about smaller organisms?”

“Amoebas?”

“And parasites and bacteria. How do they fit into the whole thing?”

“It’s difficult to say. Let’s stick for the moment with mammals and the large egg-layers.”

“Reptiles? If an ostrich qualifies, then a crocodile must qualify. And if the largest snake qualifies, then the smallest snake must qualify ...”

“Let’s just first go back to the question about origin ... but wait, what exactly are we talking about? What exactly is the ‘self’?”

“A few minutes ago we referred to the consciousness of own separate existence. Let’s see what a dictionary says ...”

[The following terms and definitions are taken from *Psigologie-Woordeboek* (Dictionary of Psychology), by Gouws, Louw, Meyer & Plug (1979). The original source is in Afrikaans; the quoted definitions are my translations.]

self

A term with a variety of meanings, of which the following are the most important:

1. The person's view of himself, i.e. a synonym for SELF-CONCEPT.
2. All the person's characteristics, i.e. PERSONALITY.
3. The core of the personality, i.e. a synonym for PROPRIUM.
4. The agent or executor of behaviour, i.e. the "I".
5. The substratum of behaviour, i.e. a synonym for PSYCHE.
6. (W. James) Any of a range of aspects of a person as it emerges in different life situations or areas, e.g. the social self, the religious self and the professional self.

self-concept

A person's perception and evaluation of himself. This includes cognitive, emotional and evaluative elements. Synonyms: SELF-COMPREHENSION, SELF-ESTEEM and SELF. Compare. IDEAL SELF and BODY IMAGE.

ideal self

(C.R. Rogers) The totality of characteristics that the individual would want to have. The assumption is that a person has such wishes in order to meet conditions for acceptance.

body image

A person's subjective representation of his own body. It can include one or more of the following aspects: the subjective and more or less conscious idea that a person has at every moment of the position, posture and movement of his body; a person's distinctive experience of his own body; and a person's evaluation of his body or parts of it in terms of aspects such as attractiveness, masculinity, femininity or health.

personality

A term which in its broadest sense refers to the integrated and dynamic organisation of an individual's psychological, social, moral and physical qualities, as it is reflected in his interaction with his environment and especially with other people, and as determined by the interaction between constitutional and

environmental factors. As the personality gradually develops during the individual's life cycle and is therefore never static, the term usually refers to the pattern of characteristics at a given time during the individual's life.

proprium

(G. W. Allport) The core of the personality. It entails those aspects of the person with which he feels himself most closely and intimately involved, for example, his most important values and objectives.

psyche

The hypothetical substratum or carrier of all experience and behaviour. [...] A variety of terms is used besides psyche to refer to the hypothetical substratum of behaviour, e.g. spirit, person, personality, individual and organism. Synonyms: SOUL and SELF.

soul

1. (Theology) The immortal (and non-physical) aspect of the person. [...]

"I like the parts about body image and psyche. What do they say about the ideal self?"

"They reckon you cherish the notion of an ideal self because you want to be accepted."

"Want to be accepted? I have an ideal image of myself in my head, but if more people than the current handful accept me, I'll definitely get nervous!"

"I don't know if you picked it up, but not one of the authors of those definitions succeeded in properly caging their target. It's as if everyone tries to get a grip on a fairly slippery bar of soap."

"Let's see: a person's view of themselves ... a person's characteristics ... the core of the personality ... the agent or executor of behaviour ... any of a range of aspects of a person as it emerges in different life situations or areas ... a person's

evaluation of themselves ... an integrated and dynamic organisation of qualities ... the carrier of all experience and behaviour ... the immortal and non-material aspect of a person ...”

“As I say, a slippery chunk of soap. Let’s first concentrate on a human’s consciousness of his or her own self.”

“Consciousness of self? Just remember, if the self is ‘X’, the self cannot also be ‘consciousness of X’.”

“Perhaps the self is not an ‘X’, perhaps the self is awareness ... of ... something, or everything. Yet, self cannot be equated to consciousness ... Do you ever get the feeling you’re trying to articulate something for which your vocabulary is too primitive?”

“Yes, often.”

“Nevertheless, the awareness of ... own living, physical, separate existence must surely arise from somewhere, at some point it must go from nothing to something, from ‘0’ to ‘1’. If this point does not lie with the cutting of the umbilical cord, what other possibilities are we looking at?”

“Conception?”

“Can’t be ... can you imagine a fertilised egg with consciousness, not to mention a sophisticated consciousness of its own existence?”

“Can it be said that the self does not arise from one moment to the next but that it rather develops slowly?”

“Can it be said that the body does not originate from one moment to the next *because* it develops slowly?”

“Let me see if I understand this correctly. The physical body originates from the mother – and to be thorough it should be mentioned, after the mother’s egg was fertilised with a physical contribution from the father. According to the umbilical theory it can be said that the new-born human’s consciousness of himself or herself also arises from the mother, in the sense that initially there is only one consciousness – that of the mother, then after ten or twenty or thirty weeks brain activity in the foetus is detected, but certainly nothing that could be called consciousness of own

unique existence – there’s no personality, no view of him- or herself, no evaluation of him- or herself, and then the moment the umbilical cord is cut there is undeniably more than one case of consciousness – the mother’s consciousness and the child’s consciousness.”

“Consciousness of own, separate existence perhaps, but still no personality. I mean, no new-born baby has any view of him- or herself, no self-evaluation ...”

“Not yet, but you cannot deny that an extraordinary event occurs from one moment to the next.”

“Doesn’t it make you think of Frankenstein who animates his project, and gives it consciousness of himself, with an electric shock? Except in the case of the new-born human, the electric shock is the severance of the umbilical cord.”

“But in the story the electric shock also stimulated brain activity. From brain activity, consciousness arose. In the case of real humans, the foetal brain is already active weeks before birth, weeks before the cutting of the umbilical cord. Whether the foetus is aware of anything, and if indeed, of what, is of course a different question.”

“Let me make a statement: I am now, at this point, Monday, 5 July 2004 at 12:48 in the afternoon aware of myself as a distinct entity, separate from inanimate objects in my environment (except for the chair on which I’ve been sitting for hours), and physically removed from all other living creatures. If I should die now from sudden seizure, only I would die. If anyone else in the area were to die at this moment of a heart attack, only that person would die – I would continue. I am aware of this separateness. I am also aware of another type of attachment, what we call in everyday speech an emotional attachment to people I have known since I ... well, since I can remember. I am also aware of the fact that I have a fairly unique personality, that I have a particular view of myself and that certain aspects of my person emerge in different situations. I am aware of all these things. My question now, at what point did I become aware, for the first time, of myself, of my separateness, of my existence as a

separate entity? And if this point is not the origin of what can ultimately be referred to as the self, what is, then?"

"It's hard to put a finger on a single point. One must also remind yourself that 'self' cannot be equated to brain activity, and cannot necessarily be equated to consciousness."

"And brain activity also does not necessarily mean that there is consciousness."

"Nevertheless, even if the 'self', or a consciousness of own unique existence is understood as a result of a slow process that happens in small increments, there still has to be a point of origin. There must, necessarily, be a point of origin! Where this point is, when this moment of more than just flesh and blood coming into being occurs, however elementary, touches the essence of human existence."

"Then we don't even speculate about the possible similarity between human consciousness and appreciation of own existence, and what other mammals experience."

"And birds, reptiles, fish, insects ... trees?"

Organs, republics and other subjects

Sunday, 11 July 2004

Coma, amnesia, and consciousness of the self – the relationship between the body and the “psyche”

My sense of self and my ability to think critically about the self whilst my own self remains comfortable depend greatly on the proper functioning of my major organs.

The details of my particular self-consciousness – language, culture, ethnicity – is directly related to the rise of the Dutch Republic to eminent naval power and accompanying economic growth and prosperity and even advancements in art during the seventeenth century.

* * *

Both “sense of self” and “identity” are essential for something to function. What is this *something*?

* * *

Family and friends are important, even essential to our existence, because we think they know us. They – “know who I am.”

* * *

It feels like I am running down the correct lane in the orchard, but I am not barking up the right tree.

* * *

Johnny Clegg said, “Spirit is the journey, body is the bus.” Perhaps one should be more specific and say: The body is the bus, sense of self and particular identity is the driver, and the “spirit” is the passenger that needs both the body, and the self-identity to get where it needs to go. But, go where?

The fuller meaning of the “given self/chosen self” idea

Wednesday, 14 July 2004

I am going to annoy myself if I continue saying it, but I don't think I am fully aware of the full meaning and implication of the given self/chosen self idea.

Fact is that people sometimes burn up decades trying to sort out what they are supposed to do. They spend years looking for “true” answers, their “real” selves, their “right” place in the world, where they supposedly “really” belong ... without realising they basically have two choices: *accept* to a large extent your given self and function as such, within the particular framework of given place and time, or *choose* who and what you want to be, and where.

As I have previously also mentioned, the latter choices will always be constrained by the given self, by fate data and by needs of the community, and particularly to given time. Still, **OPTIONS DO EXIST.**

Some people may always remain a victim of given time and place, but ask yourself an important question: Am I a defeated victim of given time and place, or is there room for me to make choices?

Is “Brand Smit” a workable Homo sapiens model?

Friday, 16 July 2004

Question for reflection: We are what we are (particular “I”) so that we can fulfil our needs. If our needs are not being met, can it be said that who and what we are is wrong?

Why is “I” particular to environment? If the Homo sapiens is in harmony with his surroundings, if he more or less looks and sounds like most other Homo sapiens in the area, and if he manages to function within the limits of acceptable behaviour, he will have a fair chance of satisfying his needs.

What does it mean that Homo sapiens “Brand Smit” migrated from Habitat South Africa to Habitat Taiwan? It means that he was not able to sufficiently meet his needs in the former habitat; even though he had been surviving on a daily basis until his migration, he had seen the flashing red light of impending doom of his personal existence (I refer in no way here to the politics of South Africa and survival of particular ethnic groups – I am referring only to myself as an individual).

What does it mean that Homo sapiens “Brand Smit” wants to stay on in Habitat Taiwan? It means he considers this particular habitat as more favourable for long-term needs satisfaction.

“But,” one would say, “some of his most important needs are not currently being met, and if happiness is primarily a sensory issue, he is mostly not happy.”

What can one do?

“Brand Smit” has become a person who can survive in the particular habitat where he currently resides. Furthermore, he has forged an identity that he believes will make it possible for him to also satisfy his needs in other environments. But

unrest is brewing ... his identity only seems to be a working model!

Is my Homo sapiens model good enough to satisfy my needs in this particular place and at this time? If not, what does one do? And what does it mean?

Saturday, 17 July 2004

Yesterday's point was if a modern Homo sapiens' needs are not being met, then his identity – the way in which he relates to the world around him, which as its primary function should enable the person to satisfy his needs – is insufficient or even wrong.

[Of course, another possibility is that there's simply not enough food and water for everyone in the area to quench their thirst and consume sufficient calories.]

* * *

The primary purpose of identity is to enable the Homo sapiens to satisfy their needs in the particular time and place where they were born, or where they find themselves at a later stage of their life.

A question can then be asked: Is my identity working, or is it not? Is who and what I am (given, or self-defined after critical process) a workable Homo sapiens model that enables me to satisfy my needs? If not, what is the problem? Is who and what I am the problem – that is, do I suffer from some malaise or disorder that hinders my need satisfaction? Or is who and what I am in this specific environment the problem? In the latter case, I have two options: I would either have to modify my identity to better fit the norms and values of the environment in which I find myself in order to improve my chances of survival, or I would have to migrate to another

environment where who and what I am would at least not undermine my chances of survival to any significant degree.

Appearance | Know yourself | Warped world

Wednesday, 21 July 2004

Appearance is the problem

Insights and frustrations of the past week or so, helped by the fact that I am currently reviewing material I wrote about four years ago, have formed a pattern of discontent with how I appear to the world at the moment – the same problem as four years ago, but largely absent when I arrived in Taiwan and did not need to make meaningful social appearances.¹ This appearance problem is directly related to needs (especially for intimate contact) that are not currently being satisfied.

Previously – like four years ago – I wouldn't have properly understood it. I would only have known "I'm not happy" or "I'm frustrated," and I would have wished for more money to buy better clothes and perhaps better transportation and I would have made lists of items that would have hinted at a more ideal self.

Now I know the problem is not necessarily who and what I am, or the specific environment, but how I appear to the world – although my appearance cannot be isolated from other things. I am thus relatively happy with myself, on my own, in my own private quarters in Benevolent Light, but what bothers me is how I appear. APPEARANCE is the problem.

It is an indication of the development of insight, of progress in my own understanding of things during the last four years that I can now identify and express the problem more clearly.

¹ For the reader who did not read the depressing prose of the second half of 2000, or who overlooked or ignored it, briefly: I had to suddenly make social appearances again in 2000, which in 1999 were largely unnecessary because there were virtually no other South Africans in the city.

Just when you thought you knew yourself

Ask someone, “Who are you?” Intensify the pressure slightly by adding, “I suspect you don’t really know who you are.”

The reaction of many an individual to such an impolite question would illustrate the challenge that confronts all of us: Can you *articulate* who you think you are? Can you *express* it?

Wednesday, 28 July 2004

The warped world

Thought at Crooked Town train station: I don’t have a problem with the so-called beautiful world; I have a problem with the price at which people buy membership in this world.

In a consumer society many people sacrifice on a daily basis their creativity and their hours – they deny their true nature, as it were – to enable themselves to accumulate sufficient credit to purchase membership in the so-called beautiful world.

That was my position a few years ago²; it is still my position now.

Beauty without substance is, in the final count, just a pretty shell.

² As expressed in the piece, “The beautiful world,” in “Personal Agenda, Book One”

What would you be if you didn't have to APPEAR?

Wednesday, 4 August 2004

If you did not have to appear, you would not need much of a so-called identity. Or maybe I should say the way you would think about yourself if you did not need to appear would not have required the approval of the community – meaning in everyday face-to-face appearances.

Identity that is recognised and to a degree approved by the community is therefore primarily required for APPEARANCE. Considering this relationship between identity and appearance at specific time and place, what would be the value of *not* appearing?

[Note on 10 August 2007: Identity is primarily needed for appearance? I am sitting alone behind my computer, and I need to know who I am at this very moment.]

[Note on 23 May 2012: I am alone behind my computer and I know who I am. Why? Because I appear to people on a daily basis, and between appearances I sit down behind the computer ... where I can't turn off a button to something that flickers who I am. Plus, perhaps the work I do, like this writing, requires that I have identity. Why? Because what I write is representative of me, and will be absolutely meaningless if "I" don't appear to the reader as a person-with-identity. The reader won't be able to identify with what I write, and as a result won't take anything I write seriously. So, even though I am alone at the present moment, I still need identity because I remember who I was during my most recent appearance, and I need to have identity in case I have to appear at short notice – like if someone suddenly knocks on the door. And even when you are alone, you may be doing work that requires identity.]

Man in the mirror | To grow and develop | Renaissance man

Sunday, 1 August 2004

Who's that guy in the mirror? (And why is he looking at me?)

The challenge, as I have recited by now so many times that some readers probably feel their heads will start spinning at the mere sight of the words is ... to appear as who and what you really are. (There, that wasn't so bad, was it?)

My point at this moment is that we sometimes fall back on old appearances, no longer really valid, but which can be trusted for a good response. This type of situation usually resolves itself soon enough, in a natural way – or hopefully so, otherwise the self-denial will become an open sore.

It is important, though, if you do appear in a particular situation differently than how you see yourself, you need not seek out the nearest bathroom mirror to scream at yourself in sheer panic, “Who am I ... or who are you?!” Know and understand that even if your perception of yourself changes with the passage of time you may still have to appear as your “old self” for the sake of safety, or positive response, or positive result in a specific situation.

The ideal is naturally that your current and hopefully credible self will develop sufficient confidence so you can appear as who and what you are at any particular time of your life.

Monday, 2 August 2004

To grow and to develop and to express – or to choose not to

You experience reality. It is possible to express this particular experience.

You also have an identity. It is possible to improve your grasp of who you are, what you are, and what you want to do with your life.

Your choice, right now, is whether to acknowledge these things, these possibilities, and to continue the process of personal growth and development, or not.

Wednesday, 4 August 2004

In “**Renaissance Man**”, Danny De Vito’s character changes his primary work and living environment from a corporate office and suburban home to a military training camp. He finds out he’s not really an advertising guy but a teacher, suddenly becomes committed to what he does, and feels for the first time in years that he belongs. And, since the formula always works perfectly in movies, he also finds the love of his life.

Identity of God | I am who I was

Wednesday, 4 August 2004

Identity and the identity of God

For many who want to sort out their own identity, it is a prerequisite to first sort out the identity of God. God is the “head” of their religion; religion is a primary tool by which they answer who and what they are and what they need or want to do with their lives. If they are not sure about the identity of God, they cannot be sure of their own identity. Also, if they can be sure of who and what God is, they can find certainty about who and what they are or ought to be.

Friday, 6 August 2004

I-am-who-I-was (even though we’re only related)

Notes from Stellenbosch 1994, Korea 1996 to ‘98, Johannesburg ‘98, and Taiwan 1999 to 2004 indicate that I am still the same person, but it also shows how this “person” has changed. It should instil confidence to know you can change environments and ~~still remain the same ... still be “me” ... still retain the same identity~~ ... continue to *function* as a person who is essentially *related* to the “I” of yesterday, and ten years ago, in a half-dozen places on two continents.

Thought number two + Thought number one

Saturday, 7 August 2004

Thought number two: Identity has to do with the question of who you are. Understanding what happens during the process of identity formation may help to answer the question why an individual is as he or she is, why they do what they do, live where they live, with whom they live, how they appear to the world, how they earn money, and why these particular details and not any other.

Thought number one: It's Saturday, 7 August 2004 at 13:10 in the afternoon. I am sitting on a plane over ... the Indian Ocean.

On 3 May this year I stood for hours at a window writing in my notebook. What I wrote that day ultimately amounted to me having defined a self *in Taiwan* with which I am fairly satisfied. It was also abundantly clear that I was tired of saying, "I'm on my way ... this is not my real life ... I'm working on a few plans ... probably in about six months I'll have a life that I will be able to call my own with some degree of pride ..."

On that Monday, I declared: I have a life. This life is in *Taiwan*. It is not a perfect life, but it's a good life. And it's *my* life.

I have sorted out an identity for myself with which I am comfortable, and in a place where I can be this particular "I am".

Who am I? I am a man in his early thirties who lives in Taiwan, who writes, teaches English, studies Chinese, and who works on long-term business projects. Six months ago I would have attached specific labels to all these things I do, labels particular to the time and wider environment where I live such as "writer", "teacher" or "student". I have none other than Karl Marx to thank for the idea that you should focus on

what you do and leave the labels for those who need them for a variety of reasons.

“For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.”

~ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (1845)

Measures and “true” identity

Friday, 13 August 2004

We take measures to alleviate inconveniences such as loneliness, and these measures become intertwined with how we see ourselves and how we appear to the world. To what extent is “I as result of measures” the “true me” and to what extent is it almost a barrier to who you “really” are? Or, should measures simply be accepted as building blocks of identity in the same way as one would accept the genetic instructions in DNA as building blocks of identity? And yet, measures easily change with environment ... which brings you back to the slipperiness of “true” identity.

Identity, survival, functioning

Monday, 23 August 2004

[A necessary repetition of previous thoughts to clarify the meaning of certain concepts.]

Identity serves a PURPOSE; this purpose is SURVIVAL.

To survive, a person needs to FUNCTION.

In order to function, a person requires IDENTITY.

Why? The reasons include so that he can identify himself to others in the community to enhance the probability that his needs will be met.

Identity is compiled from information provided by a particular environment, at a particular historical time.

Lose yourself, or apply yourself

Friday, 3 September 2004

(Johannesburg)

It is simple, it is obvious, and everyone knows it, but it is nevertheless useful to mention: in order to survive, you need to function. Identity (all those answers to the “Who am I?” question) serves a purpose, and that purpose is to enable you to function in a particular environment, at a particular historical time.

The question is then, is this who you really are?

The suggestion appears to be that to truly find yourself, you should lose yourself. This is a risk in the particular environments we live in and at this particular historical time. In order to survive, we must be able to function, and in order to function, we need to be able to introduce ourselves to others in our environment (we must *identify* ourselves, and for that we need what is called “identity”).

It can further be said that the environment (or environments) in which we are expected to function – and then within certain established boundaries of acceptability – is not conducive to taking such gigantic steps like “losing” oneself. (If there were a map of the psyche, such a place where you could lose yourself would be marked with the warning, “Here be dragons!”)

The only way a person could thus discover his or her “true self” in this life would be to withdraw to a place where they can still survive, but without functioning in fellowship with other people (for which they would need so-called identity).

Interesting to see what two specific religions have to say on this subject.

To some extent this is what Buddhism proposes – to withdraw from society, to not get attached to the material

world, and to focus your energy on preparing for the eventual release of the immortal element of your person from the seemingly endless cycle of life and death.

Christianity tells of Jesus who had a particular identity and who functioned relatively well at the time and in the place where he had been born, as both a carpenter and a preacher – the latter being relatively successful up until his death. He lived according to his beliefs, and ultimately died for what he believed in; or to put it differently, when the choice was put to him to water down his beliefs or die for them, he refused to deny himself or to renounce his beliefs. Jesus then sacrificed himself – who and what he was as a *person*; he died in, and according to the Christian faith, *for* this world, and eventually became, according to Christian doctrine, who he really is – God. According to Christian teachings, he therefore died as a particular man ... and became Universal God.

[Certain theologians and clever preachers might point out that Jesus as Particular Human was concurrently Universal God. Although this point is of great theological importance, this text is not the right platform to give this topic more attention.]

* * *

Perhaps the purpose of this life is not to go where the dragons lie, that is, to “lose” yourself, but to get involved, to take sides, and to offer yourself, as it were, for a “good cause”.

Apply yourself therefore in this life to the realisation of good things, and prepare yourself through that for whatever awaits beyond your earthly existence. (I am aware of the dramatic new direction I am taking here.)

* * *

“I’ve converted to a new faith.”

“Oh? What’s it called?”

“It’s called ... oh heck, I don’t know what it’s called. Does it matter?”

* * *

I repeat what I wrote in a previous note: Perhaps the purpose of this life is not to lose oneself in order to find your truer, purer self, but to apply yourself, who and what you are right now, to a good cause.

[Why not just “apply” yourself to your own happiness?

I know my own reasons, my own motivations, what is good enough for me and what is not. I can therefore not answer this question for anyone other than myself ... for now.]

Some afterthoughts to “Lose yourself or apply yourself”

Monday, 6 September 2004

Fear is the foundation on which the House of Life and Functional Identity is built. The question is, what lies buried beneath the house?

* * *

The options: Withdraw or Get Involved

* * *

“Fulfil your mission on earth through engagement with the world.”

Serve your purpose and leave ... or stay and enjoy the show for as long as your ticket is valid?

* * *

If the answer is to withdraw, what then is the meaning of the way humans are born?

* * *

The Buddha abandoned his wife and new-born child and walked into the wilderness.

Jesus became involved. He gave comfort, relieved pain where he could, and sacrificed himself – his physical self – for a “good cause”.

Muhammad also became involved. He waged war to transform the world so that people can live their lives in the “correct” way (according to his convictions).

* * *

Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) withdrew into the wilderness. Muhammad also initially withdrew – to a cave. Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in the desert.

Both Jesus and Muhammad withdrew ... and then got involved.

Even Nietzsche's hero – the eventual "superman" – withdrew for a decade, and then started with an attempt to redeem people from their ignorance.

* * *

So: Withdraw ... and reappear as a transformed person – one with an agenda, a cause for which you are willing to die?

Lose yourself, or be yourself ...

Tuesday, 7 September 2004

00:40

If anyone should ask me what the result is of ten years of thinking and writing about “things”, I would at first want to mention several themes. In practical terms however it comes down to an increasing conviction that I now understand how things work, that I am ready to move on. Also, that the day-to-day struggle for survival, for satisfying needs is a game in which I do not really want to participate anymore. What almost seems like a suicide wish is rather what I now call withdrawal – to “die” as participant in this world. Although the idea, superficially seen, is attractive – no more arguments or explanations, no more conventions or rules, I still hesitate at the crossroads: withdraw, or get involved?

(And then there is the possibility that the last five or ten years of my life – my last year in Stellenbosch, two years in Korea, and so far almost six years in Taiwan, can in a way be seen as my withdrawal from the world.)

A few months ago, I said: Find yourself.

Now I say: Lose yourself, or be yourself for a good cause.

08:19

What would your personality, your identity, who and what you are, look like if it were not built on fear – fear of want, fear of poverty, fear of death, fear of pain, and fear of loneliness?

14:16

Again, if you eventually get to the point where you declare that you know who you are, and you know why you are this

person and not someone or something else, you may also realise that the search for your “real, anonymous self” has only just started.

You then stand before a choice: reduce the necessity to be who you are now – for the sake of functioning in a particular environment – by withdrawing from the world (relatively speaking); or, choose and start fulfilling a role (with the conscious knowledge that it is a role), and apply your knowledge, your experience, your skills and your personality in a way that gives your life value in a particular environment and at a particular time in world history.

In other words: Be who you are (now), for the sake of a good cause.

Who am I really?

Sunday, 12 September 2004

By now, I have accumulated enough information on myself to recognise myself when I pass a mirror, and to respond (most of the time) when the name my parents chose to call me 33 years ago is uttered; a name I have accepted over the past 33 years as good enough for everyday use. I have fairly recently reached a plateau in my religious-philosophical quest for what it means to be human. I have a decent understanding of what makes me happy. I can act with an acceptable degree of confidence in a variety of situations. And I can explain without too much inaudible mumbling what I want to do with my life, where, and with whom.

Then, as I was bicycling past a nursery late this afternoon, the strangest thought came to me. If I had a lot of money – not necessarily billions, but much, much more than I need to merely keep myself alive, I would buy myself potted plants. Not just one, but dozens. I will rearrange my entire living room; portraits placed upright on bookshelves will be hanged on the walls; guitars will be moved from the corner to another spot; furniture will be moved into the storage room; all to make room for all the potted plants.

The data I have on the subject of me as a person includes the following: “Brand Smit likes plants because he likes nature. Despite this, he does not currently have any potted plants in his apartment because all the plants he had kept in the past died because of a lack of care. The reasonable conclusion can thus be drawn that Brand Smit is not truly a plant person.”

Whatever.

I’ve been having a problem for quite some time now. My emotional landscape is once again relentlessly harassed by a Storm of Scepticism. To my own embarrassment (since I thought I had left behind such amateurish issues way back

in ... July?) I am wondering again what the point is of everything. What is it all about?!

Frantically my fingers again flip, on a daily basis, through the steel cabinet full of answers: Satisfaction of Needs, Mathematics and Science, Find/Define and Be Yourself, Physical Existence as Part of a Very Long Process, Love and Togetherness ... and on and on one file after another shoots past.

It is true that I have just returned to Taiwan after spending four weeks in South Africa. It is also true that I had just gotten used to the charcoal-scented air of the Highveld during late winter, and pecan nut pies for R27 at the greengrocer, and the charming woman who works the till at the supermarket. And, fair enough, I saw my parents, my younger sister and for the last two weeks also my older sister (and her firstborn) every morning on my rounds through the house between reading mass-market gossip magazines and taking smoke breaks under the tree in the front yard.

This is not August 2003. It's not February 2004. It's not 2002, 2001, 2000, '99 or any other period of my life. It's September 2004. I still respond to the same sounds uttered when someone wants to draw my attention, and (except for the moustache that I'm going to shave tomorrow) I still look the same. But my grey matter nowadays dictates ambitions for, and visions of, the future other than "repatriation to the country of my birth, marriage and children" and so on. I know, therefore, it is not the fact that I am back in Taiwan that is clogging my gullet again with lack of faith. The lack of faith was there while I was sitting in the late afternoon sun on the smallholding outside Bronkhorstspuit. The scratching at the hollow part of my soul was palpable while I was considering the value of the Highveld's open spaces for reflective thought processes.

Pleasant, then, was the surprise this afternoon, as I was rolling past the nursery on a wet road, when I temporarily bowled my cynicism flat with an old joke like what I would do with more money.

Since I usually approach these matters with such diligence, it took me a good fifteen minutes before I had qualified the question to an extent where I could answer it. “I would buy myself a helluva lot of plants,” I thought out loud. “I would send my parents money every month, whether they need it or not. Then I will go on holiday in December ... and buy myself 20 VCDs on a single shopping excursion ... and the Alphaville *Greatest Hits* CD.” Later that night (feeling somewhat better about my bookshelves being sorted again) I added that I would also dine at a fine restaurant at least once a week. (“Because I’ve always liked good food,” I thought.) I would also make significant investments in new technology. I would get a new computer, a digital video camera, and the latest generation mobile phone on the market. I would also buy myself a new sound system – my faithful Aiwa Discman won’t allow me to listen to Metallica at a volume that does not destroy my short term memory ... what was I busy saying?

The well-known phrase, “I am”, is usually completed with all kinds of data bits, traditionally including name, date of birth, family and friendship ties, how you make money, where you live and other information that, in the first place, tells *you* who you are, and then also facilitates the process by which you introduce yourself to other people.

Regarding myself, I can say that I, Brand Smit ... wait, let me do this in a different way:

I, Brand Smit, am a man ... 188 centimetres tall, weigh more than 90 kilograms, receding hairline on the forehead, hair on my upper lip ... would prefer to weigh less than 90 kilograms, wouldn’t mind too much if my hair could grow back ... South African ... have no strong desire to be a citizen of another country ... sprang to life in the ethnic group historically classified as either “Boers” or “Afrikaners” ... currently living in apartment number 4~2, Lane 2, Ci Hui Xin Cun, in the city of Fengshan, Kaohsiung County, Taiwan ... want to live here or in Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Beijing, London or

maybe Paris, and I wouldn't mind to own a garden cottage in Bronkhorstspuit ... was taught as a child that belief in the teachings of primarily the Protestant Churches is the only way to continue to exist after physical death in "Heaven" ... happy with my current, vague beliefs about God, Jesus, the Immortality of the Soul, and Life after Physical Death ... earn money as an English teacher ... would rather want to earn money as an entrepreneur in collaboration with other people who also profit from my projects, so I don't have to be too concerned with marketing and distribution ... cannot currently watch TV even if I want to ... would like to be someone who has the option to watch TV rather than write pieces like this one on a Monday night ... don't spend a lot of money, other than on the most necessary groceries, movies, cigarettes, and cheap video CDs ... would like to be someone who has more money to spend when he wants to do something, or wishes to purchase an item ... etcetera ... etcetera ... who cares? If the day were longer, I would probably have smoked myself to death. Just as well, then.

The whole truth | Existential question

Thursday, 16 September 2004

The whole truth, loneliness, and practical arrangements

I still feel lonely, but not as much as a year or three ago. One reason is I now know people need each other for the fulfilment of a range of needs, both emotional and physical. If these needs are eliminated, everything changes.

* * *

The belief in many cultures is that people need other people, is that not so?

Yes, because “many cultures” are trying to figure out how to provide basic comfort to the individual in the face of a terrible reality. It is a practical arrangement, like your name. It is not the Whole Truth.

Monday, 20 September 2004

For the record

For the past several weeks I have been contemplating a choice, in various forms: To live for this world, or to “die” in this world.

If I choose to live, my current half-life is not good enough.

If I choose to “die”, my current half-death is also not good enough.

* * *

Some people find appearing in the world very stressful; naturally they try to avoid it as much as possible. I understand this.

Existential question

The question remains: Should I continue to be what I have worked out I want to be, taken into consideration all the given factors – to cultivate a relationship with the world as “Brand Smit”, and to appear to the world as “Brand Smit” on a daily basis, to hopefully play a constructive role and to make a positive contribution while I function, for all practical purposes, as “Brand Smit” ... OR ... do I pull out of the game, and terminate my appearance and accompanying role and my functioning as “Brand Smit”, and see where it takes me?

Desert or city, and a principle

Tuesday, 21 September 2004

DESERT or CITY?

To lose your identity-for-the-sake-of-functioning, or to accept it and to be that person for the sake of a (good) cause ... say you have walked around in circles and criss-crossed the same areas for many years but you manage a straight path for long enough to finally come to the edge of the CITY, just before you enter the DESERT, where you no longer have to function according to conventions of time and place, and you turn around and walk back, re-entering the CITY, to live your life in pursuit and in the service of a Good Cause with the knowledge that you have about who and what you truly are, and who and what you need to be to survive and to function ... until the time comes when you will enter the DESERT in a different form.

Thursday, 23 September 2004

A principle

Many of us are trapped in a life that is not the best we can achieve, because to make adjustments will require more effort than to merely maintain our current, sometimes frustrating life on a daily basis.

This is why change usually follows a proverbial flash of lightning that shocks us into action – an event or incident that makes our current existence unbearable.

To APPEAR or to DISAPPEAR

Thursday, 23 September 2004

For years I searched for identity and tried to work out how I should appear to the world. I finally came to the realisation that you have to confront your “given self”, accept what you cannot change, and then taking into account the given material and given time and place, define who you want to be, how you want to appear to the world, whether you want to play any kind of role in the world, what role you might want to play, where you might want to play this role, and how you plan to meet your own needs where you currently are considering who you have decided to be and what role you have decided you would want to play, or what contribution you would want to make.

One question remains, however, after you have figured out these things: **DO YOU WANT TO APPEAR?**

If you choose to appear, all your answers to the above questions kick in.

Should you choose to not appear, everything changes. Most of your answers will become useless, with new questions that will need to be answered in order to fulfil a different set of needs (or similar physical needs, but psychologically different).

This is the question I am contemplating at this point of my life. Do I want to be who I am (now), in the place I have chosen to be this “I”, and to fulfil the role I have defined for myself, or do I want to disappear ... or rather, do I only want to make minimal, and mostly anonymous appearances in order to fulfil my basic physical needs?

Sunday, 10 October 2004

Inevitable course of spiritual evolution?

You get tired of explaining yourself to other people. You also become increasingly aware of your own caricature in

appearing to the world. You increasingly start to experience a need to withdraw.

Is this an inevitable part of spiritual evolution? Can the increasing desire to separate yourself from the rest of the world be avoided?

About monkeys and (so-called) originality

Thursday, 7 October 2004

You are born with more or less no identity, except for maybe a name. Within a few months, or maybe a year or three, you start to emulate the behaviour and language of other people in your immediate environment – a simple case of monkey see, monkey do. As you get older, this emulation becomes intertwined with other measures – relevant to particular time and place – to ensure your personal safety.

When a person moves away far enough from what others imitate and regard as good enough for themselves, it happens that the label of “original” is hung around their necks. This label is of course never completely accurate, because even the so-called “original” gets their ideas from somewhere, dressed in a language that they did not invent.

The point here is degree. Some people emulate so slavishly that one can hardly detect a difference between the one who is being emulated and the monkey itself. And then of course, it is possible that even the model is a clone of someone else, who also initially slavishly emulated someone else, who, somewhere in the distant past, did something different to a significant degree from what others at that time and in that place had emulated as Models of Functional Adulthood.

Am I saying people are mechanised flesh-creatures programmed by the sometimes subtle and sometimes explicit instructions from others in the area? Hmm ... not exactly. Just because I am wearing jeans doesn't mean I call myself “Elvis”. Just because the neighbour teases her hair is not to say she knows who Dolly Parton is. My point is rather that someone – who for want of a better word we can call an “original” – decided one wonderful day to, for instance, get into the traditional workers attire of denim pants to go shopping or to go on any outing other than to the nearest factory, and the world was never the same again.

The New Human – toddler, teen or young adult – looks at others in the area for clues on how to act, what to wear, what to say when, and what sounds should be produced to achieve certain results. This is a natural process. Even that first rebel who decided to make an appearance in a pair of denims in an area other than where his hands would get dirty acted after other steps had first been taken – denim clothing had already been designed and manufactured long before that day. His adaptation of this phenomenon, on the other hand, was relatively original (that is to say, if such a mythological First Denim Rebel ever really existed).

A few other examples can be mentioned with which most readers will be familiar: the vocabulary and expressions that people use to bring themselves into other people's favour; the ways in which arms are swung about on a dance floor; the type of automobile people purchase; the labour that people choose to offer to generate an income; the jewellery that people buy to hang from their limbs; the beliefs that people hold about religion, politics, and what a person should do with his or her life.

Is it important to not do what the proverbial *everyone* is doing? To not look and sound like most of your peers? To not do with your life what most of the people you know are doing with their lives? My answers to these questions are intimately intertwined with my own view of things, with my background, my own insecurities and fears, and my view of a significant percentage of my peers.

I believe there are three possibilities: 1) to follow slavishly what is prescribed by your environment for the sake of acceptance by a specific community; by forming Who You Are around the anvil of what is presented to you as the norm of time, place and community; 2) to look at what is presented to you as the norm of time, place and community, to accept some of these things and to reject others in a **CRITICAL AND CREATIVE PROCESS**, and to then appear to the community as a distinctive version of what is generally acceptable, and to function as such; and 3) to look for examples and clues beyond

your immediate time, environment and community, and to define a model of appearance and functioning that differs to such an extent from what was originally presented to you, that you and your life will be seen as a primary example that others will consider in their search for clues and answers to questions that, shall we admit, keep everyone awake at one time or another.

In case anyone has forgotten

Saturday, 23 October 2004

We need to function, and for that we need information – who we are, what we are, what we need, what we want, and how we should and may go about getting what we need and/or want.

We also need to create or assist in the creation of an environment that is conducive to us becoming what we want to be.

This process of “becoming” should however not be confined to people serving only their own agendas, their own needs or wants. The participation of individuals in a larger process which aims at a result that would benefit more than just a single person, or a handful of individuals, should always be sincerely and actively encouraged.

Why? For one reason, as you participate in the improvement of someone else’s environment, so someone else participates in the betterment of yours. We also share environments, both in the larger sense, and in a more domestic sense. If we all partake in the improvement of our common environments, we all benefit individually.

A (new) existence in three essential steps

Tuesday, 9 November 2004

[Not the first mention of these thoughts, but who keeps count if something can be expressed in steps?]

Step One: Confront your Given Self, and accept what you cannot change.

Step Two: Taking into consideration unchangeable aspects of your Given Self, define who you want to be, how you want to appear to the world, and what role you want to play. Decide whether you would prefer to be on your own or with another person. Also decide where you would like to spend your life on your own, or where you would like to spend it with another person.

Step Three: Considering all the above decisions, figure out how you can provide in your daily needs without denying the Self you want to be, and in ways that are conducive to who you want to be, to the role you want to play, and to your ideal contribution to society.

The sins of the SOURCE are paid a visit ...

Tuesday, 16 November 2004

People receive the information that gives them an initial indication of who and what they are or who and what they are supposed to be – the building blocks with which identity is constructed – from a SOURCE, or rather several “agents” of a SOURCE.

My question: What if the SOURCE is flawed for a variety of reasons, or if it is spoiled? (What would it mean to call a source *spoiled*?)

Also, what is the purpose of the SOURCE? Is it not to enable the person to function in a particular place and at a particular time? Then the SOURCE should be evaluated according to this purpose, right?

When is a SOURCE spoiled? How many people’s programming and functioning must be flawed to a large extent because of the SOURCE before the SOURCE can be labelled as *fatally spoiled*?

If a primary objective of the SOURCE is to enable people to develop a good idea of who and what they are and to make functioning possible, what is the primary purpose of human existence? To establish identity and to function successfully? What is “successful functioning”? Survival? I don’t think so.

I believe if the SOURCE is spoiled, it reduces the likelihood that people will realise their true goals. A SOURCE that is spoiled is like cancer that must be identified and removed from the body to give it a chance to survive.

[In the last paragraph I allowed a reference to “true purpose” to slip through. Is there such a thing? Is it furthermore possible that a “spoiled SOURCE” can still lead to a good life that serves a good purpose, precisely because of the life journey on which a person was thrust by the “spoiled SOURCE”?]

Free and unfree appearance

Thursday, 2 December 2004

If you are overly burdened with instructions on what you may say and what not, where certain things may be said and where not, how you should say things and how you'd better not, if you are under prescript of what vocabulary you may utter and what not, then your speech – the primary way in which most people express their experience of reality – is not free. If you are not freely able to express your experience of reality, or do so only in ways that are prescribed to you, you are not free. And seeing that how you appear to the world is determined to a large extent by the way you express your experience of reality, it ultimately becomes part of WHO YOU ARE. Who you are, is then to a significant degree the result of *unfree* self-expression. Who you are, is then a result approved by the dictates of a particular time and place.

Friday, 3 December 2004

“You’re catching me in anonymity. Now I have to become someone again!” says “Brand” to his friend [O] after the latter confronts him out of the blue where he is standing outside a 7-Eleven, smoking a cigarette.

A somewhat messy process

Thursday, 16 December 2004

CONFRONT (yourself)

... Accept (what you cannot change)

... Change (what is within your abilities to change)

DEFINE (who you want to be)

BECOME (who you have defined you want to be)

Naturally the three steps do not neatly follow on each other. You are trying to **BECOME** something or someone. You realise it is not what or who you want to be. You **CONFRONT** yourself ... although you already did that when you realised you did not want to become what or who you were **BECOMING**. You were also already subconsciously **DEFINING** yourself when you realised you did not want to be who you were in the process of **BECOMING**. You continue with **DEFINING** while you **CONFRONT** yourself. And because your life does not stand still for a second, you are busy **BECOMING** throughout this process of **CONFRONTING** and **DEFINING**.

Insights on Friday, 17 December 2004 as they arrived

1) [...]

2) During class, a few minutes later, I am trying to teach the English names of a dozen vegetables to a group of five-year-olds. I ask a child – a new pupil – something in Chinese, and I reckon he doesn't seem too surprised that a Westerner, not one of "his people", can speak Chinese. I also think, "[to be continued]"

* * *

New insight! Is there such a thing as "Satisfied Given Self"? I believe it is a matter of degree of satisfaction, on a spectrum ranging from "absolute self-contempt, danger to self and society" to "convinced she is an incarnation of one or more gods". (Interesting that in both cases the person has a good chance of being locked up in a mental institution.)

In the middle you get ... shall we say, 99% of the adult population? The formula, Confront (accept, change), Define, and Become is therefore valid for more than nine out of every ten people!

Question: Information, options and possibilities still come from a particular source. What is this source? Mostly the Given Source, and in the case of a minority, from More Than Just Given Source.

Another question: What is your Given Source?

Last question: What is given? (Compile a list ...)

* * *

(Back to the previous note)

So I thought: It is quite possible that this child expects that all adults can speak (at least) Chinese, for it is his given language, and so far he has had no reason to question the phenomenon of Chinese as absolute language.

When will he question the absolute value of the Chinese language? When he is confronted with, or when he finds himself in an environment where a different language such as English or Japanese or Spanish is considered by most members of the community as the dominant language.

It is at this moment, when it becomes clear what was previously regarded as absolute is not the only option that the sparks start flying on the work table of identity.

[Another example that can be mentioned is that of a young person who spent his or her formative years in relative isolation, who regards not only particular language but also particular religious frame of reference as absolute. What happens when this young person is thrust into an environment where a different language and other religious symbols are regarded as standard or dominant? Of course, personality and particular situation will play a significant role, but chances are that this person will then start to ask questions of people they regard as authority figures, and will ultimately develop a different identity than would have been the case if their lives continued to be played out in relative isolation.]

3) Next class I thought about some linguists who reckon children shouldn't be taught a "foreign" language at a too early age, as in the case of English in Taiwan.

I thought, if English is offered from an early age as a given especially at home – the main source of givenness, it will not be questioned but wholly absorbed along with all other given data.

I then wondered what information parents – as primary givers of data – do in fact give their children, not only in terms of language, but in terms of moral values, behaviour, and especially for later use, possibilities for an adult life. Of

course, a thousand voices will go up in a hundred different languages all giving different answers, or similar ones, with different details. My point, however, is this: change what is given, and you fundamentally affect the end result. (And do parents know what they give?)

Finally, I realised I did not receive all these informative snippets of data lying in bed or sitting at the computer. I got them in classrooms filled with noisy children, and out in the street on the way to the classrooms.

Conclusion? Outside appearances do serve a purpose, and in many cases act as stimuli for new views and insights.

* * * * *

Why do some Christians sometimes “slide” back to their “old ways”? One possible reason is because they are not comfortable with their new religious identities – identities which they themselves did not define but that was prescribed to them. (Which gives me a new idea: given, chosen, and *prescribed?*)

* * * * *

People sometimes refer to other people who are “full” of themselves. My question is, what are they full of – of what was *given* to them, or of something they themselves have accomplished? Also, what is the opposite of being “full” of yourself?

* * * * *

On processes, phrases and choices

Wednesday, 22 December 2004

Processes that are conducive

Coming to Taiwan, spending a lot of time on my own, thinking about things and writing were all conducive to me formulating what I had been given, defining who I want to be and choosing a role that would be appropriate for me.

For another person parenthood, having a child of their own, can be conducive to achieving similar results – or if not similar, maybe good enough for that person to bring about an existential condition that I will be able to recognise as similar to my own state of existence.

On phrases and choices

“To find yourself” ~ the conventional phrase

“To confront what you have been given; to define who you want to be within the framework of what you have been given as well as particular time and place and needs of the community; to decide what role is the most appropriate for you taking into account all the above, and then to take actions to become this who-and-what” ~ my choice of words

The incessant reappearance of old material ... and of course about appearance

Friday, 24 December 2004

I can say I am overdoing it at the moment; that I have to stop with this incessant revision of old material. But what it is about is the synchronisation of internal and external appearances. If I appear to myself ... if I exist in my apartment, I am a writer – but more than that, I am a writer down of fantastic insights I believe I do not so much think as receive.

The moment I enter the world outside my apartment, and especially if I make *social* appearances, I am just a 33-year-old man of South African origin, Afrikaans in terms of language and culture, who has been living in Taiwan for the past six years, making money – like hundreds of other Westerners in this city – as an English teacher, and who is most of the time not seen with an intimate partner. That's it.

It's no longer good enough. External appearances must necessarily be reviewed.

Monday, 27 December 2004

Another thing: self-observation, self-definition, appearance ... self-observation, self-definition, appearance ... It is an ongoing process. Patterns are established that are repeated; adjustments are made; inaccurate information and appearances that are not in line with your view of yourself are corrected; new aspects of identity, or aspects that are more appropriate for the environment in which you find yourself are defined; more appearances are made; you again observe your "self"; again you consider things, you redefine, you re-appear ...

To become what will take you where you need to be

Wednesday, 29 December 2004

The fact is that I function better now as a human being than was the case four years ago. I am more aware of the rules of the game, and I have learned to play by the rules without betraying myself. I am more convinced of my relative value in the broader community, and also more specifically in the Community of Particular Language and Culture to which I am connected by the proverbial umbilical cord. I am more convinced of who I am and who I want to be. I understand more of where I come from as well as the value of that in answering the questions about who I am and where I am going. I also understand the reasons and motivations for this specific vision. I am therefore more convinced of my place in the Bigger World, and more convinced of my own self when I walk into a local bar or restaurant, or when I arrive at a barbecue with friends and strangers. Finally, because I can now speak and read a little Chinese, I can function better in the particular environment where I live and work every day than was the case a few years ago.

It is ultimately as practical as the difference between a bicycle wheel with a problem and one that works as it is supposed to. Anyone who has ever ridden a bicycle will appreciate the difference between a wheel with broken spokes, a cracked tyre and a leaky inner tube and a wheel with new spokes, an expensive new tyre, and a brand new inner tube. One is simply better. One is simply more suited to taking you where you need to be.

Another year | Pipe wrench

Friday, 31 December 2004

Notes to round off another year

Observe yourself – collect data – confront what you have been given – define who you want to be, where, with whom, what role you want to play, and what results you want to leave behind of your existence.

* * *

Contribute to the process that will allow other people to lead happy, productive, fulfilling lives, and to strive for good results.

* * *

How much of what we do is really choice, and to what degree are we compelled by forces within us that we cannot wrap up neatly with phrases like “free will”?

* * *

Thought of last night on the way to the Carrefour: Writing has, in the end, outmanoeuvred, outsmarted, outgunned, and outlasted every other possibility of what I had ever wanted to do with my adult life.

Pipe wrench in one hand, pen in the other, I remind myself that if one insists that an old apartment in a working class neighbourhood helps to define who you are and want to be, one should not complain too much if your pipes are getting clogged up, or if they start to crumble.

Since we are on this subject, and since I am planning on making this note the last of the current literary project, what else other than residence defines who you are, or want to be?

I would say the music you listen to; how you earn money; what you do – can I put down the pipe wrench? – what you do when you are not busy earning money; clothing, and any accessories you choose to wear; whether you have a car, and if you do, what type of car; if you don't have a car, how you move around if your destination is too far to reach by foot; people you socialise with; how often you socialise, where, and what you do at such times (drinking, dancing, fishing, bowling or other possibilities); what you eat and what you don't eat (pizza, beer and doughnuts every day will say something of who you are and want to be – or who you don't care to be; a vegetarian lifestyle will say something different); how well you manage to meet your own needs, especially when you compare it to the standards of the community in whose midst you find yourself on a daily basis (for example, eating maize porridge three times a day when all your neighbours are accustomed to three balanced meals per day will besides the health repercussions also have certain implications for your self-perception); if you are so fortunate to be able to go on vacation, where you go, for how long, with whom, and what you do while you are on vacation; your active interests (ties in with what you do when you are not busy making money); whether you smoke or use other tobacco products, and if so, what kind of tobacco products (cigarettes, cigars, pipe) and even which brand; whether you use drugs and if so, what kinds of drugs, where, with whom, how often, and in what quantities; in which town, city or country you live in, how long you have lived there, and how often you move (if at all); (and eventually, after thirteen other items), whether or not you are married, and if so, who your spouse is (and even to some extent, how your partner's responses to this list compare to your own); whether you have children; if you are unmarried, whether you are currently in an intimate relationship; if not, for how long you have been single; if you are involved with

someone, how long you've been involved with this person, and even how often you have been in similar relationships during your adult life; whether or not you steal or make yourself guilty of other criminal activities; if you do, what kind of criminal activities and how often; whether you get involved in physical altercations on a regular basis; if you do, with whom, for what reasons, how often, and where; whether you provide assistance to others who need help; if you do, to whom you provide assistance, how often, and what percentage of your time and money is taken up by this assistance; if you spend neither time nor money to provide assistance to your fellow human beings, what reasons would you give for this; (to be continued ...)

Core of a personality | Personal vocabulary

Wednesday 5 January 2005

Can the core of a person's personality be changed?

I believe not, because it is to a large extent a given genetic disposition. It also depends on how change is defined. I believe the essence of a particular personality can be modified, and that it can be applied in certain ways according to will and choice. But whether or not the core can be changed, that is another question.

[According to the website, Mental Health and Fitness, "some facets of our personality are inherited".]

[What do I mean by "core"? In what way is the core separate from the "rest" of the personality? Is there even something like a core of a particular personality, or are there simply aspects? Or are there more dominant aspects of a personality that can arguably be treated as the core?]

Thursday 6 January 2005

14:42

Every person is aware of him- or herself.

The question is, is this consciousness good? If not, why not?

Does your current consciousness have to do with given birth data, or with appearing in a particular place? If the former, what can be changed? If the latter, what can be changed? Also, do you absolutely have to appear in that particular place?

21:06

The point is to develop a personal vocabulary that defines your existence, that defines who you are and what you are

doing with your life. A large part of my writing over the past few years has been about exactly that: building up a particular vocabulary.

* * * * *

Friday 7 January 2005

Human beings, like other animals, use senses – sight, hearing, touch, smell – to know who they are, and to find their place in the world, time and time again.

* * * * *

Prove your identity | Being nobody

Sunday 16 January 2005

In the movie, *Life As A House* the main character says, near the end, something to the effect of “I’ve built myself the house that I wanted to be.”

* * *

“I will not get lost,” says Thibault in the film, *Just Visiting*. “You can only be lost if you have no purpose, and I have purpose.”

Monday 17 January 2005

If you lose your passport, your identity document, your bank cards and all other personal documentation, there is no way you can prove your identity – except of course through other people who can verify who you are, and even to some extent what you are – good person? bad person? reliable? unreliable? criminal? swindler? teacher? artist? dentist? bank clerk? person of faith? liar? truth teller? friend or acquaintance? brother or sister or cousin? If you are in a place where nobody knows you, or where no one can be asked, you are *nobody* ... you are who you say you are. And *nobody* – can have a fresh start.

[Even if you have a passport, identity document, bank cards and other personal documents, if you are in a place where nobody knows you, you are still nobody.]

* * *

Tom Cruise’s character in *Vanilla Sky*: “What is the answer to 99 out of 100 questions? Money.”

Source and function of identity

Wednesday 19 January 2005

“Look at how they dress! This is the seventies! Somebody should tell them. It’s no wonder they get pointed at in the streets, if they go around looking like that!”

“Maybe. But they don’t complain about it, do they? They endure everything – mockery, hate, even disgust. That’s the price they’re willing to pay to remain who they are.”

Conversation between a young woman and an elderly Jewish man regarding ultra-orthodox (Haredi, or more specifically in this case, Hasidic) Jews in Antwerp, 1972 (in the film, *Left Luggage*).

My question: if “ultra-orthodox Jewishness” is a source of identity in the primary sense of the word, something that enables people to function in a particular environment and at a particular time (albeit in a relatively isolated area, and in clothing that reminds of an earlier time), does it have any more value other than functioning to be an “ultra-orthodox Jew”?

Is that the only function of identity?

And if particular religion is to a greater or lesser extent a determinant of identity, and the value of identity is linked to the functioning of the individual at a particular time and place, what can be said about such extreme sources of identity as Hasidic Judaism or fundamentalist Islam, or a similar version of the Christian religion?

I do not necessarily shoot down the idea of conservative uniformity at all times and in all places, but I would like to once again ask: can a source of identity be wrong? When does religion as an important source and determinant of identity and prescribed consciousness do more harm than good?

[Particular Identity X works well in Particular Place X and at Particular Time X. If Particular Identity X fails to enable the individual to function in a particular environment and at a particular time, the individual should either modify their identity, or move to an environment where that particular identity would be a better fit. If time travel were an option, that could also have been suggested.]

Wordless consciousness

Monday 31 January 2005

I was just lying in bed. I was aware of my body. I was also aware of the idea that I was aware of my body. I could also remember that I have been aware of my body at other times, earlier times. I could also remember that I had also then thought, or knew, that I was aware of my body.

Consciousness develops; it is not just suddenly there. Yet, there must be a *critical* moment – a watershed moment in the development of self-consciousness.

Certainly there can be no doubt that a foetus has a consciousness after 30 weeks or so. The consciousness of the foetus and that of the new-born baby (including the first few months) is, however, unique in the history of the person's consciousness: it is wordless.

Difference between wordless consciousness and consciousness where language comes into play ...

* * * * *

Tuesday 1 February 2005

Sexual orientation is an excellent illustration of something you have been given, and then self-observation, observation of the views and so-called values of the community (regarding what you are observing in yourself), and self-definition – that goes along with self-acceptance, with the definition part that is almost a formality (perhaps labelling would be a more accurate term in this case), or ... acceptance, and appropriate self-definition ...

* * * * *

Friday, 11 February 2005

One Greek salad, one pasta salad, half a potato salad, half a pecan pie, and two cups of green tea later (oh, and a three-hour nap and a hot bath): It was a bit of a shock to my inner organisation to be alone in Melville, the battlefield from where I had retreated just in time, seriously wounded and injured a few years ago. It is also amusing to appear as “Brand (you know? [X])”.

* * * * *

Focus on personal reality

Friday, 22 April 2005

For centuries philosophers have been contemplating the question of what reality is – what is real, and what is not.

To a large extent I accept the material world as it appears to me. If I see something I recognise from experience as a “table”, I accept the object before my eyes as indeed a table. I also accept the validity of the sounds related to that specific object.

My own interest lay more with the individual “self”. I accept that statements like, “I know who I am” and “I believe in myself,” and terms such as “self-confidence” only have relative value – that is, relative to the environment in which the person finds himself. Make a radical shift to another habitat, or radically change the environment, and suddenly the person may not “know” quite so clearly who he is; he might also not be so sure of himself, and his so-called “confidence” will probably shrink with his self-knowledge and associated self-belief.

What is true for the person regarding his own self, this is what keeps my attention, not so much whether a table or a telephone or a slice of toast is really real.

I know smarter people can argue that there is a connection – and I believe there is, philosophically speaking. However, because of limited time I choose to focus on what is real for the individual person, about him- or herself.

My personal religion

Tuesday, 26 April 2005

To be “Brand Smit” is my personal religion.

If someone converts to a religion, the event is usually accompanied by feelings of euphoria and an improved sense of personal well-being and security – place in the cosmos, identity, sin and salvation, “Eternal Life” and so on. The New Convert can however not simply convert one Friday evening at a gathering and – voila! – the wonderful euphoria and well-being and sense of security last forever. He or she must, starting on Day Two, regularly follow certain rituals to confirm his or her new identity and cosmic status.

THINGS MUST REGULARLY BE DONE TO CONFIRM IDENTITY AND COSMIC STATUS – YOUR PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ULTIMATE REALITY!

I cannot just know I am “Brand Smit”. It is simply not good enough. The creeping greyness from the past three weeks has once again confirmed what I have also realised in the past: **IF I DO NOT WRITE, I AM NOT WHO I SAY I AM.**

To function well enough | More important than others

Sunday, 1 May 2005

Point 1: [My friend, E.] and I are standing at Dorex's counter ordering drinks. I see the tall guy with the shaggy hair emerges – because he can speak English, and his female colleague steps back – because she can't. I place my order, respond with adequate but not excessive civility, take money out of my wallet, hand it over, receive my change and a receipt and a slip with our order number, and manoeuvre between the tables and some people to where we are going to sit, waiting for our order.

Two thoughts register: 1) I functioned well enough in the environment in which I found myself; I was indeed a reasonable and civilised organic robot; and 2) exactly such a situation and associated functioning could have tipped me over the edge had the right things not clicked at the right moments.

Point 2: In a so-called communist state only 5 to 15 percent of the population are members of the Communist Party. The rest perform their functions, fill up places that are more or less important, and play their more or less important roles. The members of the Party have, in principle, more important ideological roles to play – they are indeed responsible, or at least more so than the rest of the population, for the success of the revolution.

It made me think that I might be like an idealistic revolutionary who tries to preach the message that everyone is equally important, that everyone has important roles to play, that everyone ought to discover or define their true purpose, role and function and then fulfil these roles and functions to truly give value to their lives.

But, maybe some people are more important than others – in the Greater View of Things. Maybe some people’s callings, roles, functions and purposes they aim to serve are simply more important than other people’s.

Transformation | Advantages of not appearing

Monday, 23 May 2005

What is transformation?

I look at myself and I see a functioning adult. When the whistle blows in the morning, I also start jogging along, at my own pace, and at the end of the day when the survivors are counted ... well, so far I have been counted every time. If survival is the primary consideration, I make it as a working adult in the time and place where I have chosen to live out my existence.

However, various factors play a role in my conviction that I can do better, that I can live better, function better, show better results at the end of every day's existence. The steps I decide on after careful consideration ... that is transformation.

[19/06/15: To decide on steps is not transformation; actively starting to implement the steps can however be seen as the *start* of transformation.]

Tuesday, 24 May 2005

Knowing that you have rustled the grass does not mean that the snake is not real.

* * *

When you do not appear, you do not feel embarrassed; you do not need to explain yourself; you do not need to apologise for aspects of your life or the state of your living space.

The benefits of an intimate, honest and serious relationship are well-known. I simply want to mention that there are advantages to not appearing – that is, to be alone.

I am mortal, and immortal

Wednesday, 25 May 2005

I reckon human beings ... or before I get stuck in definitions of what is meant by “human being”, let me be concrete: I consist of two parts. One part is mortal and in turn consists of body, consciousness, personality and identity (given and/or self-defined). The other part is immortal. Because I have command of a very limited range of vocabulary, I will call this latter part “soul”. These two parts are interwoven for the duration of my earthly existence.

What the purpose of this combination is, I do not know. How this combination came into existence, I also do not know (except for the biological part).

I am both parts and yet, if my body stops functioning and my consciousness is destroyed, I cease to exist – even if the other part of me continues to exist.

My earthly existence, the choices I make and the results I achieve in my life, have a dramatic impact on my immortal part – another illustration of how closely the two parts are connected.

The connection of the two parts is indeed something to be discovered – this discovery may even be considered a goal in itself.

What is the difference between this belief and the Christian version (influenced by the pre-Christian philosopher Plato)? The Christian believes that the body is mortal and that the spirit (or soul, self, consciousness, personality, or “inner being”) is immortal. I split the “spirit” or “inner part” in two – mortal and immortal.

I will henceforth refer to the above as the 25 May 2005 Declaration of Faith.

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Friday, 10 June 2005

There are people who will look at a comprehensive account of how humans function – all the psychology, all the choices you have to make that amounts to you being you. They will look at it and say, “Fair enough. But please take the report back. I am a businessman (or a colonel in the army, or an English teacher) – that’s good enough for me. I don’t need to know or understand all that other clever stuff.” Or: “I understand how the brain works, how the psyche works, but I am 100% committed to my role, my position and my work. I don’t need any more than that.”

* * * * *

What was your process?

Tuesday, 28 June 2005

A phrase frequently heard around barbeque fires, on porches or balconies, next to a table in a restaurant or a counter in a bar or other places where middle class mid-twenties spend their time, is this: "I now know what is important in life. I know what I want out of life."

I am in no position to question what is important to them or what they want from life. The temptation does however exist to ask them: What was your process? In what way did you go about working out what is important to you, or what you want? Did you lie awake nights contemplating the possibilities? Did you spend years weighing the possibilities and mulling it over? Did you spend months? Weeks, perhaps? Did it your hit you one morning on the way to work? Was it something someone said at a barbecue, or on TV or in a movie, or at the office, or on campus one day? Did you follow a thorough process of elimination where you considered a dozen, or at least half a dozen possibilities, with all the possible pluses of every possibility weighed against all the disadvantages and all the possible risks? Whose tracks did you consciously or unconsciously follow? Why those particular tracks? What needs do you hope to fulfil with your ultimate choice of what is important to you, a young adult? What goals will be fulfilled in the pursuit of what you want out of life? What is important to your friends, your brothers, your sisters, your cousins? Is there a correlation between what is important to you and what you want out of life and what they want and what is important to them? If you want to follow a different path, what are your reasons, your motivations? If you want to pursue a similar path, what do you think would be the reasons for that? And now that we are on this line of questioning, what was important to your parents, or your aunts and uncles? Did they pursue similar things to what you now want to pursue for

the next forty or so years of your life? Is or were they happy with their choices? For what reasons would you think were they happy with their choices? Did they regret some things? What are these things? Are there dreams or ambitions that you have already written off as unrealistic and unrealisable? How much regret will you have in 10 or 20 years about the things that you considered unattainable in your mid-twenties? What will compensate you for the dreams and ambitions that you would never pursue?

These are but a few questions for which you can pinch off an hour or so if you have the time – if you find yourself in a place where you know no one, where for the moment there will be no familiar voices to echo your own, or to talk you down, or to offer support.

Statements and questions that define

Tuesday, 2 August 2005

Imagine the following scene: 100 people are gathered in a hall. No names are used. Each person has a set of blank cards with him or her – say about 50 tickets. On these tickets people write statements that define them: descriptions such as, “I have a long nose,” “I have a mole on my forehead,” “I like to tell jokes,” “I love gardening,” and also experiences such as, “I fell off my bicycle when I was twelve and lost my front teeth,” “I travelled through Europe with my parents when I was 17,” “In my mid-twenties I lived in South Korea for two years,” and so on. The cards are then thrown together, and each person is then identified by these statements and experiences. Of course, at least half the people would react if the statement, “I am a man” is read. Many will raise their hands when the statement, “I have protruding ears” is read. Certainly the semi-unique combinations of physical characteristics and descriptions of personality will differentiate one person from another, but will personal experiences prove to be the ultimate unique identifier?

Thursday, 4 August 2005

If you do not know what you want to do with your life, what do you do with your life? How do you function? Why do you live as you live, where you live and with whom you live? Why do you do the work you do? Why do you wear the specific clothes you wear?

I am sure there are interesting answers to these questions. Or, most people do in fact have an idea of what they want to do with their lives. If this is the case, I wonder: “What?” And if someone then answers the question, I would still be curious: “Why?”

* * * * *

Sunday, 21 August 2005

Each of us is the result of choices that thousands of people made over the centuries, and actions they took or did not take or took by error – from an impulsive decision to get on a boat to another continent, or not to get on a boat that eventually ended up on the bottom of the ocean, to swords that just missed an important organ, or an ancestor centuries ago that ducked just in time to see a stone fly over his head instead of crushing his skull.

* * * * *

Monday, 12 September 2005

Who, what and why have been prominent questions for me the past few years.

“How?” is another important matter.

Examples: How do you function? How do you know anything? How do you choose?

* * * * *

Friday, 23 September 2005

I am executor of behaviour, constructive and/or destructive, with Objective X in mind, and/or in the name of Person Y, and/or for the benefit of Person Z.

* * * * *

Identity | Circle of life

Sunday, 2 October 2005

A question that is sometimes asked out loud, and sometimes only contemplated in silence: “How should I live?”

Wednesday, 5 October 2005

I exist. I exist as a son, a brother, a friend, a lover, a poet, a writer, a teacher, and as a Westerner in a country in North East Asia.

I did not always exist in all these capacities. In what other capacities am I yet to exist?

Saturday, 8 October 2005

19:08

If you are just surviving, you do not necessarily need identity. Survival often requires only animal instinct. If you want to apply yourself to survival-plus, specific identity will prove to be extremely useful.

19:10

Every moment in a person’s life is a full circle of life data. The circle is constantly buzzing, but it is always full. Circle 081005@19:11:38 is not the same as Circle 081005@19:11:39. Similarities range from 99.99% to far less.

A person’s life is a constant flow of circles – or rather, a constant buzzing as one circle transforms into the next one.

Person X is the axis around which Person X’s circles revolve.

Differences in content of the circles become clearer the more time passes between circles. It is however important to remember that each circle is 100% full.

The more the data and the more diverse the content, the richer the life.

Risk also increases as data increases. More information can also improve chances of survival.

Justifying your choices

Monday, 17 October 2005

15:42

The issue of where you choose to live reminds me of something Ayn Rand wrote (my wording): because you are a free entity and your choices expressions of free will, you need to justify your choices (to yourself).

If I choose, for example, to stay in Taiwan rather than to go back to South Africa, I constantly have to justify it to myself in order for me to continue to believe that this is indeed the right choice. Sometimes this is a problem.

I am also wondering: Why do we need to justify it?

16:18

Is it not true that it would sometimes be easier if we had fewer choices – if we were less free, as it were? It would be easier to justify our choices, because we would only shrug our shoulders and say, “What do you mean? This was the best choice under the circumstances.” Or better yet: “I had no other option!”

However, if you are a free individual and your choices expressions of your free will, you have to be able to justify to yourself that they are indeed, under the circumstances, the right choices.

My question remains: Why?

Tuesday, 18 October 2005

Earlier I wondered why we need to justify our choices to ourselves. I think I now have the answer.

If you are in a position to make choices every day, you need to believe in your *ability* to make choices. If you do not

believe in it, it is similar to a situation where you have to cycle to work every day, but every time you get on the bike you are unsure of your ability to move the bike forward and keep your balance. Or when you have to do a specific job every day but every day you fear that you are going to mess up and that you will need to suffer the consequences.

So it is with free will and choice. You have to nurture confidence in your ability to make the right choice, or the best choice under the circumstances. That is why you have to justify your choices to yourself – you need to prove to yourself that you are able to function as a free individual. By believing that you have the ability to make good choices most of the time (or the best under the circumstances), you gain the confidence to do it again the next day – to again, when faced with important decisions, make the best choice under the circumstances.

[In a note on Monday, 17 October at 09:26 I mentioned that I believe that “free will is not quite as free as we would like it to be”. Nevertheless, we are usually aware of the extent to which we do have the ability to choose between two or more options. If we have to admit that we have, or that we did have, that ability, we need to justify our choices to ourselves.]

* * * * *

Sunday, 20 November 2005

Our flesh and our consciousness last at most decades. Our bones, including the skull that houses our consciousness while life flows through our veins, might still exist a thousand years from now.

* * * * *

Saturday, 10 December 2005

Our existence is to some extent an expression of free will. That we came to exist in the first place was, however, not our choice. By the time we realised this “thing” we were experiencing had a name, and that it was called “life”, we were already fully-fledged beings-in-existence.

* * * * *

Truth, identity, life in the city, and Mr S. Gautama

Wednesday, 18 January 2006

A strange sensation hit me tonight after my tutoring session: envy. Stranger still was the person about whom I felt envious: Siddhartha Gautama, better known as the “Buddha”.

The sensation stemmed from a conversation I had had with a student in her mid-thirties whom I meet twice weekly for an English class. At one point during our session, she told me about the new religion espoused by her ex-husband. I said it sounded like a particular truth, rather than a universal truth.

“Universal truth?” she inquired.

“Yes,” I replied, “something that no person can deny.”

“Like what?”

“Well,” I said, “maybe you can answer that question.” (She is after all the student.)

“Love,” she tentatively replied. “All people believe in love.”

“Love is a virtue,” I corrected her, “not really a *truth*.”

After about a minute, during which she mostly talked about something else, I was ready with an answer. “People are born. People die. Those are examples of universal truths that no one can deny.”

A comment from her about Buddhism reminded me of a tenet of that religion which I have always considered to have a universal value. “All suffering is caused by desire,” I recited. “That could also count as a universal truth.”

Conscientious as she is, she wrote it down in her notebook. “What do you think of that?” she asked.

“I think it’s not that simple,” I answered. “Say I want to assist someone in need and act on this desire, but suffer painful consequences because of my assistance, where did I go wrong? Should I not have helped the person in need? Am I being punished because of my benevolence?”

“The Buddha said ...” she responded, but I couldn’t quite follow the rest of what she was trying to say (she has a tendency to correct herself several times in the course of a sentence, and I started thinking about my dinner that would soon follow).

“That’s interesting,” I said when she stopped talking.

The session ended shortly after our conversation about the Buddha. As I was exiting the classroom, the sensation I interpreted as envy hit my consciousness. “There’s no doubt that the Buddha was much wiser than I am, and certainly a lot smarter,” I thought out loud. “If I could disappear for a few years into the jungle, and grow my beard and hair and never brush my teeth – who knows what a person can come up with?”

On the way back from the vegetables and meat place, I continued my train of thought. “Maybe I should read up about this man, the Buddha, and about the ideas he has given the world.”

The reason I want to learn more about the Buddha is not to ultimately present myself to the world as a Buddhist. My identity, as I know myself at this stage of my life and as I present myself to people is adequate. I have no need to say “I am ...” and then to complete the sentence with reference to some or other religion. Religion for millions of people is an irreplaceable determinant of identity. Religious people also claim that the religions they adhere to are the carriers of universal truths – when in fact they are the carriers of a significant amount of cultural taboos, preferences, prejudices and rules that are presented as “truths”. For many people, however, the search for an identity is more important than truth. Religion X then becomes the truth for Person Y because he is a follower of Religion X, instead of him being a follower of Religion X because, as he might explain, “After careful consideration and years of study, I have found this religion to provide the most comprehensive understanding of life as I know it, and is therefore worthy of my adherence to its beliefs.”

Nevertheless, the reason I want to read more about Mr Gautama is because I am curious to know what ideas a man comes up with if he spends years living in a jungle, with little or no contact with other people. How would your understanding of life and human existence change if you lived in the bush alone for months at a time, never shaving, never brushing your teeth, never washing, never laundering your clothes, sleeping on the ground, drinking water from a river, getting sick but not going to the doctor, developing a toothache but not going to the dentist; if you ate leaves and roots and fruit, and no meat, and you spent your days and nights mostly sitting under a tree contemplating questions concerning human existence?

Some time ago I asked: Desert or City? Appear or Disappear? Considering where I come from and the world I am familiar with, I chose City, and therefore to appear, rather than to disappear like a modern ascetic to contemplate in silence and in my own time human existence.

I also said, if I choose City, if I choose to appear as the person that I had discovered in my head and in my body, and as the person I defined myself to be and whom I choose to be, I can no longer do so alone. I need a partner, I noted down in some journal.

A few weeks after writing the above thoughts, I met a young woman. Within a few months we discovered that we see things in each other that we had not been able to see in other people we had met up to that point in our lives. We also believed we could find something in each other that neither of us had found in another person.

Thus my life was to continue in the City, and my appearance as “Brand Smit” was indefinitely renewed.

Still I wonder: What would a person discover if they enter the wilderness for any length of time, without the comfort of a dentist or a doctor, or the luxury of running water and a flush

toilet and toilet paper, or the entertainment provided by TV, or the internet, or newspapers and books, or friends, or movie theatres? Indeed, what would you find without love – if you have a vague idea how to find what you cannot necessarily articulate?

“I,” and the language we speak

Thursday, 30 March 2006

I think: to my core, I can feel it – the mother and child reunion is getting close.

Then I thought: “My core”? We are taught from a young age that it is wrong to say, “I talk to I,” and “I very core,” but is it?

Language plays a vital role in how we think about ourselves, how we talk about ourselves. But should philosophers or psychologists not have a greater say on this particular issue than linguists?

Is it justifiable that language rules and linguists dictate to us in what philosophical terms we have to think of ourselves and talk about ourselves?

The word “my” is a possessive adjective used to indicate ownership, as in, “my house”, “my book”, “my pen” – but it also indicates relationship, as in “my wife”, “my child”, and so on. Still, “I” and “myself” are not two separate entities – I *am* myself. Would it then not be more accurate to say, “I talk to *I*,” and “*I* very core”?

A few days away from Benevolent Light

Monday, 10 April 2006

Day 9 of my holiday in South Africa

Each person has an environment where he or she functions at optimal level – where you are at your best or where you produce your best work. The environment where I am currently on vacation requires of me a certain appearance – to be polite, to be good company, to be a good guest, and so on. While I reckon I do okay with it, I am acutely aware of the fact that this is not the environment in which I operate optimally. I don't do any work here; I produce nothing; I create nothing. And these are things that I value in order to define myself and to distinguish myself from other people around me.

Thursday, 13 April 2006

Day 12 ...

A week in Cape Town, almost two weeks away from Benevolent Light, sees the following thought as a result:

Religion – ritual – environment with central point – environment changes – ritual cannot be administered because of distance from central point – religion is undermined

Identity – actions that confirm identity – environment with central point – environment changes – actions that confirm identity cannot be performed because of distance from central point – identity is undermined

Result: confidence is undermined, stress increases, potential for interpersonal conflict increases

Short-term solution: faith

* * * * *

Tuesday, 13 June 2006

21:20

Outstanding features that had defined your life at stage X but that have “expired” by stage Y, and features that define your life in stage Y that played no role whatsoever at stage X. This implies that at some or other stage you slowly stopped being X, and started becoming Y.

Thus: stop, and start becoming.

21:23

Certainly there are many people who have never been aware of this process. The intellectually enlightened person is not only aware of this process, they can be deliberate about it.

* * * * *

Tuesday, 5 September 2006

I am becoming increasingly aware of the shortcomings in my understanding of life and how things work – and I don’t think it is because I have forgotten anything that I have previously understood!

It is like reading a book; then you turn the page ... and nothing. You go back: there’s the text and the beginning or the first part of a sentence, but the sentence doesn’t continue on the next page – as if it hasn’t been written yet.

That tells me that I have to go look for the rest of the text, or I have to locate the right author – or I have to wait for the rest of the text to come to me so that I can fill in the rest of the pages myself.

* * * * *

For some people identity becomes a crisis when they realise they have multiple choices, options, and possibilities.

* * * * *

Find, then define yourself

Monday, 25 June 2007

You go on a “search” to “find” yourself because you believe you are “lost” – and then, as many people believe, you get to a point where you discover what you are supposed to be, or you simply see what is left after the “search” has eliminated what you had thought you were supposed to be. It makes one think of someone walking around in a mall full of clothing stores, not really knowing what they are looking for, but nevertheless trying to see as much as possible and then evaluating their reactions to what they see.

To define yourself is more like someone in the same shopping mall trying on clothes, putting together an outfit that will be an outward manifestation of who and what he or she wants to be. How did this person figure out in the first place who they want to be? By walking around, observing as much as possible, and evaluating their reactions to what they observe.

* * * * *

Monday, 8 October 2007

A few days ago I watched two documentaries about North Korea. A few remarks: North Koreans work with the reality with which they were born. They cannot function as if they were, for example, Americans who were born in Chicago, because it simply would not be conducive to the continuance of their daily existence. They speak Korean; they recite their oaths of loyalty to the Dear Leader; they work, eat, sleep, take part in mass performances, marry, have children, laugh, cry, suffer; they enjoy the small things in life, and the fellowship of friends and family; they avoid criticising the government or the authorities, or the Dear Leader's height or weight or hairstyle; and then they die.

* * * * *

Thursday, 21 February 2008

The most honest appearance you will ever make is when you only appear to yourself.

Problem is, if you only ever appeared to yourself, your chances of experiencing what can be described as happiness will be slim. Whether you will feel as if your life has any meaning is also a moot point. So, to experience happiness and give meaning to your life, you appear to other people.

How important is honest appearance – for you? How can honest appearance be defined? Can you experience happiness if your appearances are not honest? Can your life have value if your appearances are not honest? (I think it can.) Can you have an awareness that your life is meaningful if your appearances are not honest? Can you be conscious of your life being meaningful if your life does not mean anything to anyone, but your limited appearances are honest?

* * * * *

Wednesday, 5 August 2009

Certainly there are people who say: “My name is John Smith. I have read and heard people talk about finding your true self, choosing your own name and things like that, and I know my name is not who I am – but it works well enough for me.”

Also: “I’m not always sure what is meant by the idea of having an agenda. I don’t know if I also have what some people call, a *personal* agenda. I do work for a cause I believe in. I do my best to assist people who are struggling to keep their heads above water. Whether my name is John or Tom, or Uncle or Brother, it matters less than my share in this struggle. Personal agenda? I think some people focus too much on themselves.”

* * * * *

Tuesday, 10 August 2010

This has been coming on for several months. A week or two ago I wanted to make a note of it: The Truth.

The Truth is vibrating subatomic particles. This – this is the real, end-result-after-you-have-stripped-away-all-the-rest, as-real-as-real-can-be truth.

What we think and what we do within this “Uber” Reality become *our* reality, *our* lives.

* * * * *

Probably not what you think you are

Tuesday, 6 March 2012

Reading through my July 2004 notes about the SELF reminds me that the concept of the “person” is difficult to capture.

Physically, a person is a collection of cells (more than ten trillion of them), which in turn consists of protein and nucleic acids and other biomolecules, which in turn consist of smaller parts called atoms, which consist of subatomic particles. Most of the cells that make up a human being, which form hair and skin, and nails and blood and a skeleton, are replaced at varying speeds – from every few days to every few years. Physically, a meaningful percentage of you is not really older than a few years. You are to a large extent not the same collection of cells you were ten years ago!

If you think the physical nature of humans is hard to capture, the psychic nature of humans will make you want to hold onto something even more. How exactly does memory work? How do you know who you are? How does personality take shape, and how does it change? How do you make choices? How do you decide on your preferences and your dislikes? Why do you like certain things or certain people or places, and hate other things or places, and avoid certain people like the plague? How much do you actually *decide*, and how much do you *discover*? To what extent is so-called free will an illusion?

Wednesday, 7 March 2012

Possibilities for the source of the SELF:

Possibility one: Within a few moments after the child is born a “wind” blows through the room. The new-born’s consciousness of self is, as it were, activated shortly after that. In this case, it would make sense to ask, “Who or what caused

it?” It would also make sense that one would want to seek answers, or at least clues, about the purpose and meaning of your existence from this consciousness activator (or Consciousness Activator).

Possibility two: It is a slow process that occurs in small increments: initially nothing, or almost nothing; later one could say “somewhere between March and June” the child developed an awareness of himself. It might explain why newborn babies cause such a ruckus. If they knew the words, they would probably scream: “What the hell?! ... was part of something one moment ... and the next moment ... What is going on here? What am I?!” In this case, there is no dramatic moment in which consciousness is activated, so there is nobody or nothing to try to contact for answers.

The man without identity

Tuesday, 1 May 2012

I just read through the 2004 piece, “I own seven pairs of underwear ...”. Again I found the idea intriguing: What would happen if someone – maybe in his teens (younger is too early, later may be too late) – should say: “I see what’s going on here. And I’m not going to play along.”

This person then denies his given name, and refuses to accept any other name. He refuses to answer questions about where he comes from. He does not profess any faith. He expresses no ambitions or dreams. He owns nothing; not even the clothes that cover his body (he would have walked around buck-naked, but he got tired of being arrested). He never utters any words, seeing that almost anything he might say would identify him as part of a particular language community.

Is it unavoidable that he will be locked away and be certified as mentally disturbed?

How would his life unfold in the decades after his revolutionary decision?

One or two points about identity and making money

Wednesday, 4 July 2012

I previously thought that to say, “I’m a lawyer” should not be seen as a statement of identity. It is just how you make money. I figured if you wanted to mention your job, it would be more correct to say, “I make money as a lawyer,” than to say “I am a lawyer.”

Then, over the next few years, it became increasingly clear to me that how you make money is a fairly important part of your identity – sounds reasonable enough, but it is still the kind of discovery that I had to make on my own, at my own time. You can thus not say, “I am X” and “I make money with Y” and expect the one to have nothing to do with the other. “I’m a lawyer” is not a statement that represents a person’s entire identity, but it is certainly an important aspect of who that person is.

The other great discovery was to be expected. If you do not know who you are as a money-maker, you will find it a challenge to make money.

Also good to take into consideration the opposite: If you have gone through the process of sorting out, discovering, and choosing how you want to make money – and then in a way or ways that suit your personality and talents, you will most likely find yourself placing fewer obstacles subconsciously in your own path.

* * *

What to do then with what Karl Marx wrote, that in a more ideal world it would be possible to do one thing today and another tomorrow – to plant vegetables in the morning, catch fish in the afternoon, take care of your cows in the evening, and after dinner make a speech about a political treatise you

have read, without ever becoming a vegetable farmer, a fisherman, a cattle farmer or a politician?

Perhaps Marx assumed that one would not need to make money in an ideal world. Yet someone would still have had to hunt or plant vegetables. Someone would still have had to fish. Livestock and other animals would still have had to be fed. And someone would have had the ability to form an opinion and criticise the opinion of others. So, in Marx's ideal world, if you had been competent in any or all of these areas, you would have done these things, with no focus on occupational identity. Remove money from the story, and expect things to look different.

Monday, 9 July 2012

I believe in myself – or, I certainly have what can be described as positive self-esteem (rather important seeing that without positive self-esteem you are 98 metres behind the other athletes in a 100-metre race). I also know that this is to a large extent a performance, but that it is important because the performance has practical value. In truth, there is much more uncertainty. It must be so if you want to be honest.

Identity and unfamiliar situations

Saturday, 10 May 2014

My identity functions optimally in certain situations. These situations include

- being in a relationship with a specific person;
- being a foreigner in Taiwan;
- specifically being a South African in Taiwan;
- being on my own; and
- working as an English teacher.

Will my particular identity function well enough if I suddenly have to negotiate a deal with someone in Mexico for two tonnes of steel? What if I have to go work on a sheep farm in Australia?

A challenge like this will depend on how flexible my identity is. Perhaps there are aspects of my identity in an intimate relationship that may be useful. Or perhaps there are aspects of my identity as a South African in Taiwan, or as an English teacher, or when I work on my own projects that can be adjusted to a situation significantly different from the environments and situations where my identity functions at optimal level.

If I cannot adapt my identity to a new environment, or to a situation with which I am not familiar, I will be in trouble.

It therefore follows that I must either remain in environments and situations where my particular identity functions optimally, or I will be forced to ... broaden my identity. (How do you broaden your identity? Amongst other things, by exposing yourself to a wide variety of situations, environments, experiences, and to a broad spectrum of people.)

The question is, how well do you want your identity to function in those unfamiliar situations and environments? Would you want to make a good impression on *everyone* you meet? Would you want recognition as an authority in some

area? Or would you simply want to perform a certain task, meaning your unique identity and personality can be suspended for the time being to some extent?

The SELF as millions of bits of data

Sunday, 12 October 2014

A digital video clip consists of millions of bits of data, but these bits of data move so fast and are grouped in such a way that the illusion is created of moving images – that makes sense, and that is familiar to the viewer to some extent.

Consciousness of self is perhaps something similar. There is no fixed point that can be isolated as “the self”. The awareness that you are a person with a core personality that remains more or less the same is an illusion created by constantly changing consciousnesses. However, these consciousnesses replace one another so quickly – like the bits of data of a digital video clip – that for all intents and purposes it feels as if you possess a single consciousness-of-self.

[This idea was inspired by something I read in the book, *Guide to Philosophy*, by C.E.M. Joad.]

On Wednesday, 19 June 2013 I read what the Scottish philosopher David Hume said about cause.

My conclusion that day: “The good news ... no, the bad news is you don’t really exist. The good news is it doesn’t really matter, because you *believe* you exist, and in the strange way that experiences are seen as truth, your daily experiences confirm your belief that you do, in fact, exist.”

A name that tells you where to search

Monday, 22 December 2014

A name, this everybody knows, is more than a sound that is uttered when someone specifically wants to get your attention. It is more than a drawing of lines and curls on paper for administrative purposes. A name connects you to people, and to relationships. I am not just “Brand Smit” – I am “Brand”, son of “Barney” and “Adriana”.

This connection gives you an indication of how and possibly where you should position yourself. For example, are “Barney” and “Adriana” figures in the Russian criminal underworld? Are they Inuit living in a village in northern Canada? Are they wine growers in Chile?

As it turned out, my parents are potters and business people of mostly European descent who speak Afrikaans and who grew up in predominantly Afrikaans communities in Southern Africa. This gives me something to work with, or it gave me something to work with starting a little over forty years ago.

There is an important point that I suspect many people overlook or misunderstand. This information about my cultural, ethnic and linguistic origins did not tell me who to be or what to do, it simply told me where to look for ideas on what to do or who to be. It does not say: Be this. It says: Search here.

You – are a fluid concept

Wednesday, 11 March 2015

Last night I thought how it usually doesn't take much to reignite my interest in the concept of identity. One of the things that makes it so interesting is that many people believe their identity is absolute – that who and what they are have been identified, so to speak, and that is simply how it is.

One example is a 22-year-old woman who works at an electronics store. She might think of herself in a certain way, but change her surroundings, the people around her, the economic needs of the community, and within a few years she may be mother to a few children and married to a poor farmer who tries to eke a living out of a patch of dry land.

Of course it is your own business to contemplate what other roles or identities slumber within you that may not currently have an opportunity to come out. You may currently be a single man or woman in your thirties, but inside you lurks a very competent mother or father. You may currently be struggling in your career, but within ten years you'll be giving talks about career choices and how to improve your chances of success. Or, you may currently be struggling with health problems or even addiction, but hiding inside you is a health consultant and a fitness instructor.

Identity is a fluid concept – don't lock away your best identity before it has had a chance to develop.

* * * * *

Thursday, 3 December 2015

Life is ...

- what was given to you – genetic makeup, socio-economic background, language, culture and ethnicity;
- what other people do;
- your own choices;
- other people's reactions to your choices and actions; plus
- what nature does.

In other words, life as we know it consists of three parts over which we have or had no control, one part where free will makes some difference, and one part that flows from our choices and actions but over which we have little control.

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