

1

Who Am I?

< < < < < < < < < < > > > > > > > > > > > > >

The truly extraordinary thing about the truth is that whenever you hear it you know instantly that you have always known it. Discovery is a process of remembering.

Alegra Taylor

As a child, I loved talking, listening, and interacting with others. I was popular among friends at school, at church and in my own neighborhood. People seemed to gravitate to me and I genuinely enjoyed communicating with them. I was sensitive to other people's feelings and intuitively knew how to say the right things to make them feel better. When other kids were hurting, I would be the first to come to their rescue, sometimes even crying with them over their problems. Because I was mature for my age, I could talk to adults as easily as other children. Grown-ups treated me more like a peer than a child and often told me about their problems.

I recently learned that my mother used me as a sounding board when I was only three years old. When something was bothering her she would take me for long walks and talk to me

about her problems. We'd stop for a soda and I would look at her as though I totally understood, pat her on the back and say, "Everything will be all right, mother baby." She said she actually believed me and would feel better. Obviously, these personality traits were evident early in my life but I had no idea they would be the very natural strengths and talents that would lead me to the work I love.

Growing up in Salt Lake City, Utah, I can remember being in the fifth grade and pretending to be listening to my teacher. I had a tendency to day dream a lot and on one particular day, I was staring out the window, asking myself, Who am I? Why am I here? What is the meaning of life? I had asked myself these questions before but had never uttered these words to anyone fearing they would think I was strange or weird. I even thought maybe I was the only one to ever ponder these thoughts because I had never heard anyone discuss them. I just kept hoping and praying that without asking, somebody — anybody — would see the real me and give me the answers to these questions.

Although I was very confused about who I was, I knew I couldn't look to my own family to help me figure it out. The eldest of six girls, instead of feeling close to any of my sisters, I acted more like a surrogate parent. My father and I have similar personality traits and he was the only one to whom I truly felt connected. Smart, handsome and charming, my dad was often the center of attention and admired by most people who knew him. Unfortunately, I seldom saw my dad. He and my mother separated early in my life and my father moved to another state.

My mother, on the other hand, was different from my father and me. She was a very beautiful, yet modest, woman with a more reserved, practical and serious nature. If opposites attract, this was certainly true in the case of my mother and father. My mother's main concern was meeting our survival needs for enough food on the table and a roof over our heads. Accomplishing that, she focused on disciplining us, keeping us and our house neat and clean, and making sure we went to school on time. She believed that children should be seen and not heard.

Raising six children and working, she had little time to pay attention to any of us as individuals.

My mother took much pride in saying, “I treat all my kids the same.” She didn’t believe in making a fuss or in treating us as though there was anything special about any one of us. The problem with my mother’s belief was that, in fact, we were all different; treating us as though we were the same left my sisters and me feeling terribly confused and out of touch with any sense of who we were.

Our thoughts and feelings took low priority and I learned early not to bother my mother or anyone else with my feelings. When I expressed myself emotionally, she would say, “If you don’t stop that nonsense, I’ll give you something to cry about.” Most people thought I was happy because I was bubbly, smiled a lot and pretended to be okay. In truth, I just kept all my sad and lonely feelings of being misunderstood bottled up inside.

Other people genuinely seemed to like me. They told me I was sweet and kind, and because of my long, black hair and large, expressive, dark brown eyes, they often commented that I was pretty. But I wasn’t even allowed to enjoy a compliment. I could always hear my mother’s stern voice saying, “Now don’t you go and get a big head,” which to me, as a child, meant I shouldn’t believe what other people told me.

School became my refuge, a safe place where I could escape for a few hours a day. I was a good student, always pleasant, and I loved school. The only thing I can remember ever getting in trouble for was chewing gum and talking to other students when I wasn’t supposed to be. Usually I was the bright-eyed child who was staring at the teacher but whose mind was far away in never-never land. Nevertheless, my teachers seemed to like me, and I hoped that someday one of them would see the real me and tell me who I really was. But again, my prayers went unanswered. They also were too busy being responsible for all the children to have time to consider us as individuals.

Although at five-foot-one my mother was a petite woman, she seemed bigger than life to me, and the words that came out of

her mouth left sharp, lasting impressions. She said I “shouldn’t be so friendly,” and that I was “overbearing,” meaning I should tone down my personality, which was “too much” for her. She didn’t appreciate my sensitive and emotional nature either. To her, it was a sign that I was weak and needed to toughen up or, in her words, have a “thicker skin.” The only way I knew to interpret her attitude was to believe there was something wrong with me, especially when her comments were said in an unpleasant tone of voice. My spirit was broken and my self-concept was so poor that I couldn’t see anything positive about myself. I assumed that my character was flawed at best and doomed at worst and I spent a lot of time trying to hide parts of myself for fear of being criticized for the way I was.

The subconscious messages I received early in life manifested themselves in my behavior. When I wanted to speak out and say what I believed, I held myself back, because I didn’t want to be perceived as overbearing. Besides, I now believed I wasn’t supposed to be heard, so, I thought, who would listen anyway? I had difficulty speaking up in classes throughout my school years and later in college. When the teacher called on me to answer a question, I would get a fearful and nervous feeling in my stomach. Even when I knew the answer I was afraid of what might happen if the teacher didn’t like what I had to say. Attending a large university like Ohio State made it easy for me to lose myself in the crowd and I was relieved not to have to worry about being singled out in class by a professor.

The problem surfaced again later when I graduated from college and went to work. In my first job as an elementary school teacher, standing up in front of thirty children was frightening. I can remember my knees trembling and asking myself, “Why am I so afraid of these little people?” Later, when I first became a counselor, I knew I had a problem. One day, while I was leading a group discussion, someone started to talk about her mother and I could not hold back my tears. Feeling so embarrassed and totally humiliated, I just wanted to run away and hide. Already fearful of being overly sensitive and emotional, I was living my

worst nightmare. All of the negative beliefs about who I was became my own self-fulfilling prophecy. Unconsciously, I was creating conditions in my life to validate what I believed to be true about myself inside.

Hearing negative comments during most of the first eighteen years of my life left me with a tremendous case of low self-esteem, pain and confusion about who I was, well into my late twenties. Because I had learned that it was not okay to be myself, in order to please others I pretended to be someone I was not. I constantly asked myself, “If I’m not who I thought I was, and I can’t be who I was told to be, then who am I?” I began a lifelong journey to discover the answer.

Part of my quest included studying to become a counselor. I hoped that by learning how to understand others I might better understand myself.

After more than thirteen years as a counselor, I was looking for a better personality evaluation system to help me in my work. Many students were coming to me seeking direction after they entered college without clear career goals. I used various methods to help them uncover their strengths and weaknesses. Although I used several instruments to assess personality, some placed too much emphasis on what was wrong with people and others were too complicated.

Reading Dr. David Keirsey’s book, *Please Understand Me*, changed my life. Learning about the different temperaments, I experienced a major revelation about my own self identity. Up to that point, I was unaware that I had been trying to live up to who my mother wanted me to be. This information revealed the source of the pain I had experienced for many years. Like the proverbial light bulb flashing in my brain, I now saw that who I truly am — the person I had not allowed myself to be — is different from the person that my mother had tried to reshape and mold me to be. It was like coming home to a comfortable place where I understood myself — the real me.

I also gained great insight into my mother’s personality. I finally understood our differences and how the person she wanted

me to be was simply an image of herself. Like everyone, my mother was not trained to be a parent; and, also like everyone, she did the best she could with the knowledge she had. Like other parents of her generation, she did not understand that children are born with personality traits that are part of their individual nature and cannot be changed. These inner qualities are what make each child unique and special; when understood, these traits provide clues to guide children in the direction they need to take to express their true selves.

Understanding this powerful information in a way I had never before, I immediately recognized the benefit in helping individuals reclaim their true selves. I knew I could spare many like me from the lifelong pain, struggle, and wasted time of trying to figure it out for themselves. Because we don't understand the unique qualities of our children, we often try to bend them to match our own personalities. If parents could be taught to recognize, understand and validate their children for who they truly are, imagine the special gifts that could be nurtured and developed.

What a shame to have to wait for a mid-life crisis in order to understand yourself and what you want to do with your life. Imagine learning early in life how to channel all of your positive traits, natural strengths and talents in a meaningful direction. Finding the work you love would not be the difficult, confusing, and overwhelming task that so many people experience.

Discovering my true self was a turning point in my life that showed me I am an extroverted, friendly, sensitive and emotional person — and, even more significant, that these are positive traits. No one had ever told me these were my strengths. In fact, what I learned from my mother was the opposite. What she called overbearing I now see as being friendly, extroverted and able to talk to anyone. And rather than indicating weakness, my sensitive and emotional characteristics help me connect with others and their feelings, which is my special gift.

I began to realize how I had abandoned the best parts of myself out of fear. My inability to accept my strengths as strengths went against the grain of who I am and created much of

the struggle and most of the low self-esteem issues in my life. It felt as though a burden had been lifted and I could breathe a sigh of relief, relax and be myself. I felt totally validated for the first time in my life.

My low self-esteem made it impossible for me to see what I naturally did well. These talents were hidden from me. Those things I was good at I wrote off as being no big deal and thought anybody could do them. I now know that isn't the truth. I now know how my natural gifts and talents fit into the world.

This information enhanced my counseling skills and clarified the direction of my work. I used to think that becoming an administrator was an option, but now I know that administration would not utilize my best talents and I can focus on what I do best. I specialize in career counseling and help others figure out who they are and the work they love to do. What a joy to use all my favorite skills by motivating, inspiring and bringing out the best in others. As a counselor, educator, and author, I utilize the same skills. Once we know what our talents are, we can see how easily they transfer into various career options.

I have rewritten the scripts for my life and I have a new self-fulfilling prophecy — one which says “I am already good enough just the way I am. The beliefs that created my negative self-image were not the truth. Who I am is perfect to do the work I am meant to do. I need only to have faith — the opposite of fear — and trust in my true self.”

Understanding who you are is the first and most important step in discovering your ideal career. The chapters in this book are designed to help you recognize your true self, while raising your self-esteem. Self-knowledge and understanding will assist you in finding the work that allows you to express who you are and use your natural strengths and talents. Although this information was the catalyst for my understanding myself and healing major wounds I received early in life, it is not a panacea. Once you see your real self, you may still feel blocked by your own fear. I was. Beginning with Chapter Ten, I will share the tools that worked to unblock the fear that initially kept me stuck. Follow your own true self to ultimately create your life's work, which in

Follow Your Inner Hero To The Work You Love

turn will bring more happiness, passion, and excitement than you can imagine. Success is certain to follow.