

## Soul Identity

### *Choosing to Become the Real You*

If I find Him, I will find myself, and if  
I find my true self, I will find Him.

—*Thomas Merton*

Body and soul, I am marvelously made!  
I worship in adoration—what a creation!

—*Psalm 139:14 MSG*

I am often not who I really am.

Image management. It's what we call it when we expend energy, resources, time, and thought in trying to control an image of something, quite often ourselves. Some people hire a public-relations specialist to help them develop the image they want to project. But all of us can try to be our own image management agents by trying to portray to others that we are someone else, someone better or different from who we are really are.

My wife loves to wear an old, threadbare T-shirt that says, "Masquerading as a normal person is exhausting." It's her tongue-in-cheek way of saying, "Love me as I am, even with all of my quirks and

flaws.” Wearing the shirt is her expression of her desire to be accepted for who she really is.

Choosing to become who we are is one of the most important choices we can make in life. When we choose to be ourselves, we honor God’s intent with us. We recognize a holy purpose in our formation. Life becomes an unfolding of our souls that is marked by truth and transformation.

Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard prayed a wonderful prayer I’ve adopted for myself: “And now, Lord, with your help, I shall become myself.” There is no self-discovery that happens apart from God. Whether it is through His behind-the-scenes work or the unlikely “burning bushes” of the twenty-first century, it seems God is passionate about our knowing what He already knows about us. Becoming our true selves is a journey of transformation as we learn to give up all the false selves we have tried to be and accept ourselves—with glory and ruin inside.

## Saint You

“For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and discovering my true self.” These are the words of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, which he wrote while secluded in a monastery in Kentucky, seeking to live his life as a contemplative.<sup>1</sup> His words might sound like navel-gazing—the likes of which you might have little time for. But for Merton, true salvation was far more than being saved from sin. It included being saved from the many false selves he was confronted with even as a monk.

For us, experiencing a deep salvation is necessary due to the world we are living in, a world so taken with airbrushed images of beautiful people, celebrity-status seekers, and social networking that seems more the norm now than the exception. Being saintly while being true to who we really are is our own pilgrimage, though most of us will never see the inside of a monk's cell. We can try to be many people other than who we really are, thus falsifying God's creative work in our own unique and marvelously made souls.

I can try to give you the impression that I am more holy than you, more athletic than the flatfooted runner at the gym, more carb conscious than my overweight neighbor, a more involved parent than the people with the unruly child who sit in front of me at church. The list of what I might want to make others believe about me is endless. The false self clings to this word "more" as a way of making you feel "less" than me.

Spiritual writers down through the ages have spoken about what we call the true self. The journey of life is about taking off our masks and letting our true faces shine forth. It's precisely there, with our uncovered and un-made-up faces, that we stand in great need of soul care. We can live such lies, convincing others and even ourselves that we are more of this or more of that than we actually are. If I am to care for my own soul, then I have to accept myself as I truly am. It is about debunking lies like these:

- "I am what I do." My significance is based on a status job or action I have performed.
- "I am what I have." My significance is based on my accumulation of diplomas and degrees, stock, and square footage.

- “I am what other people think of me.” My significance is based on others’ impressions of me and the energy I expend to improve my standing, whether it is true or not.

These illusions of ourselves create masks that we begin to wear early in life. Some of us hide behind the masks for a long time, thinking that no one could ever really love the true us. I love these opening lines: “Why am I afraid to tell you who I am? I’m afraid to tell you who I am because you may not like who I am and who I am is all I’ve got.”<sup>2</sup>

Pause for a moment and think about your life right now. What does your life tell you about yourself—your true soul? Have twisted lies found a place within you so that you do not believe the truth about yourself any longer? Becoming your true self may mean debunking the lies you have come to believe about yourself and embracing the truth about who you really are—the beloved of God who is fearfully and wonderfully made!

## Making the Choice

An old Hasidic story reveals our need to embrace our true selves. A disciple named Zusya came to a wise spiritual father seeking advice. Zusya found himself struggling because he was constantly comparing himself to others and seeking to be more like them. The old teacher said, “Zusya, in the coming world, they will not ask you: ‘Why were you not like Moses?’ or ‘Why were you not like Elijah?’ They will ask you, ‘Why were you not like Zusya?’”<sup>3</sup> Zusya had something to learn about himself. We do too!

The constant comparison of ourselves to each other, the insatiable longings to be someone other than who we truly are, the feelings of shame in not measuring up to someone else's standards—all of these and more are threats to our souls. These fears make the soul shy. And a shy soul never ventures out into the open for fear of its life.

As I drive through the mountain pass to our retreat center, I go by a vast field that is grassy in the summer and snowbound in the winter. I can see thousands of acres where elk come to the edge of the blue spruce, fir, and aspen forest to graze on the pastures. Often, when I drive by, I slow down and spot them hanging on the edge of the forest. I wonder if they're thinking, *Should I come out into the lush green grass and eat what I see is good? If I do, someone might shoot me.*

Does it take courage for the mighty elk to be an elk there in the forest? How do strength and shyness both reside in the meat and muscle, blood and brains of the elk? I don't know these answers. But I know human souls who are very much like the beautiful Colorado elk. Standing proud in the forested trees but timid about being exposed and vulnerable in the open.<sup>4</sup>

Yet every soul, no matter how shy or how filled with ruin, has glory within. Every soul is an image bearer to God, the great Creator, who envisioned each one of us before the mountains and fields were ever formed. Author Ingrid Trobisch reminds us, "God was himself an unwanted child ... an embarrassment to his parents, unexpected, and unplanned.... And still, there has never been a child more wanted, more loved by God and never a person who became a greater blessing to more people than Jesus."<sup>5</sup> When Jesus was called "the Beloved," everything changed. His true work began. He gave himself willingly to those who would hear him and he freely laid

down his life for us. When we own our beloved-ness and accept our true selves, everything changes for us as well.

Paul reminds the Christ followers at Ephesus of this fact when he writes, “Long before he [God] laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!)” (Eph. 1:4–5 MSG).

How God did this is not the focus of this book, but *that* God did it is. Before the world even existed, God was thinking about our souls—thinking about what distinct markings we would receive, envisioning us physically, emotionally, mentally. He thought us up, and with power no one can ever conceive, our souls were given life. God wants us whether anyone else does or not. And there are no two souls alike—each one bears a certain distinction, a certain aspect of God. When you think about it, this fact alone should motivate us to want to treat one another a little better, be kinder, handle each other with care, and love deeply because of the glory within us.

What I notice today, though, is that there is far more talk about our ruin than about our glory. I believe this should change. When I see a gifted dancer, read a poem by an inspired poet, see a building crafted with the hands of a humble builder, read a book by an amazing author, sit through an eye-opening lecture by a professor, recognize that I am protected in my own country by courageous soldiers, eat the food of inspired cooks, enjoy a vase of flowers arranged by a gifted decorator—I marvel at who really made this possible. I think about the person behind the soul who inspired this dish, this poem, this chair, this clay pot, and then I am led into worship.

Albert Hasse explains it this way: “We have lost our true selves and have gone on a wild-goose chase after false attractions that drive us into a pigpen in a foreign land. We need to come back home and be the people God created us to be.”<sup>6</sup>

Here’s the truth for us: We can choose to become our true selves. We can decide to relax in our own God-given skins and sink into our God-formed souls. We can accept that we are both sinner and saint, comprised of both glory and ruin.

## Finding the Real You

Within each of us there is a civil war raging, and it’s not just about whether to sin or to follow God’s will. It is a battle to be our true selves or live in a guise of pseudo-reality, not being who we are but living life from a false self. We can cover up who we are by our professions, roles, makeup, and clothes. But this is just a sad attempt to hide what we do not yet know, have not accepted, and are unwilling to be for many reasons.

James Martin writes about this in his book *Becoming Who You Are*. Martin confesses of himself, “The self that I had long presented to others—the person interested in climbing the corporate ladder, in always being clever and hip, in knowing how to order the best wines, in attending the hottest parties, and in getting into the hippest clubs, in never doubting my place in the world, in always being, in a word, cool—that person was unreal. That person was nothing more than a mask I wore. And I knew it.”<sup>7</sup>

This was my experience. I tried and tried to be a successful pastor. My mother spoke to me about one church being a stepping-stone to the

next and always larger church. If I were to be “successful” in ministry, I would need to measure my success by the size of my congregation. That message got mixed up with another one that said, “Perform well and you’ll be the beloved of God. Until you do more, you’re really not.”

Richard Rohr has told us, “Our false self is who we *think* we are. It is our mental self-image and social agreement, which most people spend their whole lives living up to—or down to.”<sup>8</sup>

Fueling the false self requires tremendous energy. The constant comparison, the hunger for more, the drive to be the most gifted or most beautiful or most successful can become insane. This effort becomes all-encompassing and consuming.

The soul of the person who lives from his false self always needs something more, someone more impressive, someone more powerful to reinforce his false identity. For me, crowds, budgets, and programs became like an addictive drug that falsely fueled my soul. External voices clamored to tell me who I was, who I was supposed to be. I lived to please those voices for many years, and I see the same thing happening in the lives of many people around me. I had to come to a point where I could hear, trust, and receive the truth about my own identity as being the beloved of God. The love of God had to become personal and specific to me. It was not enough to simply believe “For God so loved the world...” I had to come to the point in my life where I believed, with all my soul, that God loved me—Steve! Until we reach this intersection on the journey of life, God’s love and the search for our own significance will be elusive and fleeting. We will not relax in our own skins. Rather, we will always be trying to be someone else or something more than God fashioned us to be.

My own journey to become my true self meant trying on



clothes—vocationally speaking—that were never me, not made for me to wear, to please my parents. I wore them anyway. But since then my journey has involved taking off the suit and wearing shorts. It has meant leaving the crowds and finding the few. It has meant giving up power and accepting brokenness as true strength. It means not working in offices that are paneled and lacquered but working in a renovated barn at our retreat center that is hidden away from a city.

I visited a friend in her corporate building. Tami's office was spacious, with huge windows looking toward the mountains. It was adorned with plaques, trophies, and framed diplomas she had earned. This was no cubicle, to be sure.

But when the door shut behind me, Tami must have seen my eyes darting around and taking in all of her accumulated accolades. She put her face in her hands and cried, "This is not me. All of this is a lie." She paused, regained her composure, and said, "Don't get me wrong. I'm glad to have achieved this kind of success. But all I want to do with my life is to help people who are suffering. That's what I was made to do."

Tami was headed in the wrong direction. Becoming her true self would mean leaving that world for another world where she felt she could really make a difference. And indeed, after some discussions, Tami did leave her world and join forces with a nonprofit organization through which she helped provide healthy drinking water to remote villages in Africa.

## It's Never Too Late to Become Who You Really Are

Author Susan Howatch said, "We are not here simply to exist. We are here to become." What we are to become is our true selves—the exact

people God intended for us to be and to become! This is why I love the potter metaphor offered us in the Bible to describe the activity of God and our own spiritual formations. In this image we learn many important things about ourselves. Among the most important lessons is this: The potter's wheel goes around many times. We don't just get one chance to get it right; we get many. Every day, every month, every new job, every new relationship offers us the opportunity to become who we really are. Each passing of the wheel allows the potter to pinch here, squeeze there, bring this up, or push that down.

It's a comfort to realize our claylike states and see that God is the potter after all.

## Knowing Self, Knowing God

The voices of church leaders down through the centuries unite in a call for us to enter into times of rigorous self-examination and to know and honor who we truly are. This self-knowledge goes hand in hand with knowing God. Consider this sampling:

- Clement of Alexandria: "If one knows himself, he will know God."
- Augustine: "Grant, Lord, that I may know myself that I may know thee."
- Thomas à Kempis: "A humble self-knowledge is a surer way to God than a search after deep learning."
- John Calvin: "Nearly all wisdom, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consist of two parts: knowledge of God and knowledge of self."
- René Descartes: "I hold that all those to whom God

has given the use or reason are bound to employ it in the effort to know him and to know themselves.”

Most who have gone before us agree: Knowing our true selves helps us know the God who really is. Until we plumb the depths to discover who we are, we can never build a foundation from which to truly know God. This journey of knowing ourselves necessitates a slow, steady knowing of God that continues throughout life.

*Who am I, really?* Asking this question honors your soul and your Creator. By sitting with this question, you accept the fact that you are indeed “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). Most of us have not taken the time to wander into our wonder, explore our claylike souls, survey how God made each of us into a “marvel of conception” (Job 10:9 MSG). But each of us should. Our marvel of conception, our fearfully and wonderfully made souls are unique—never to be repeated, never before made. As “only begotten” as Jesus was described—we are too!

I believe Thomas Merton has said it best: “There is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend; to discover myself in discovering God. If I find him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find him.”<sup>9</sup>

No journey of self-discovery can begin without God as our companion. By encountering God, Isaiah encountered himself. As we get to know God, we get to know ourselves. When Isaiah had the vision of God being holy, righteous, and filled with glory in the temple, he not only saw a vision of God as He truly is, he also saw himself. He said, “Woe to me! . . . For I am a man of unclean lips” (Isa. 6:5). It was his own realization of his authentic self before such a God as he had experienced.

To know God—and not just to know *about* God—is fundamental. I only know about the president of our country. I have never met him. I cannot call him a friend or even an acquaintance. Here’s the truth: Life both here and in the world to come is linked to knowing God. Jesus said, “This is the real and eternal life: that they *know you*, the one and only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent” (John 17:3 MSG). Life is about knowing God, which leads to knowing our true selves.

When we choose to know God, we also choose to learn about ourselves—and we might find that we didn’t wish to know some of that knowledge at all. Seeing our own selfishness, pride, jealousy, deep-rooted anger, and unspeakable shame is never a fun experience. We must view and deal with the ruin before we can make it to glory on the transformational journey of becoming who we really are.

## The Beloved of God

During a layover in Toronto, Canada, my wife and I decided to browse a bookstore. The author in me came out, and I couldn’t help checking to see if this bookstore carried any of my published books. Upon seeing one of them, I smiled and held it up to show my wife.

Her response? It wasn’t what I expected. She said, “Now do you feel like you are the beloved?”

She caught me. I needed public affirmation to feel valuable. My smile and holding up of the book came from some sort of private, secret, and even soul-sick notion of who I was.

Called “my Beloved” at his transfiguration (Matt. 12:18 NLT), Jesus was told who He really was: the delight of the Father. In

knowing His true identity, Jesus was able to love others, to give of Himself completely, and even to lay down His life for others. But remarkably, you and I have the same identity. We are not the Son of God in the same sense Jesus is, but we are God's children by adoption, and we, too, are His beloved. Our identity is set. Paul tells us plainly, "Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir" (Gal. 4:7 NLT).

Until we know this core truth for ourselves—that you and I are the beloved of God—we will never experience a healthy soul. We will always be demanding love, using our own power to prove that we are loved, or feeling so unlovable that we are miserable.

Henri Nouwen reminds us, "The greatest trap in our lives is not success, popularity or power but self-rejection." We reject ourselves when we do not believe who we really are. We choose to believe lies about our identity rather than embrace our core truth—that each of us is the beloved of God just like Jesus was. Nouwen goes on to say, "Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us 'Beloved.'"<sup>10</sup>

Claiming our true identity as the beloved of God is vitally important to having a healthy soul. Until we know this truth for ourselves, we will live in unhealthy ways, chasing anything or anyone that can make us feel loved or who promises to love us. This is why it is correct to say that we *are* the beloved and that we are *becoming* the beloved. We are the beloved as the sons and daughters of God. We become the beloved every time we choose to believe who we are. Here is Nouwen again: "Becoming the Beloved is pulling the truth revealed to me from above down into the ordinariness of what I am, in fact, think of, talking about and doing from hour to hour."<sup>11</sup>

The journey of becoming the beloved is the journey of our lives. It is the quest of our souls. Our beloved-ness is validated, affirmed, and celebrated when we do not close our ears to the voice of God and others speaking into us about who we really are.

We become the beloved every time we rest in who we are apart from what we do, have done, or will do in life. Our beloved-ness does not depend upon accomplishment, goals achieved, or quotas met. Our beloved-ness does not depend upon us at all. Our beloved-ness depends upon the fact that God says we are lovable—worthy of His love, attention, care, and provision for us. That's it.

## The Benefits of Being Me

Caring for your soul means honoring your true identity. When you honor something you protect it, guard it, value it, and care for it. To care for the real you involves the same actions. Recognizing that you are a person of infinite worth simply entails saying, "I matter to God." This thought alone can assuage some of your deepest feelings of aloneness. Knowing that you are the beloved means that you are not alone in this world. You are connected to a sacred family of other beloved sons and daughters whom God loves deeply.

Becoming your true self fosters a deep sense of peace and contentment within your soul. You don't have to strive, yearn, and try to be someone else. You are enough. Hair, complexion, color, physical capabilities as well as limitations are all a part of a sacred design making you an image bearer of God. What you like least about yourself may in some deep way show a God of compassion, creativity, and care at work in your formation. In accepting this, there is great peace.

We are both whole and holy when we become our true selves. Without this, we remain a fraction of who God had in mind, a part—but not the whole—of our true identity. We become holy—a *saint*, as Merton reminds us—when we rest in who we are, knowing that who we are is who God made us to be. No more. No less.

Becoming who we were meant to be is the primary way of knowing the God who really is. By accepting ourselves, we learn to accept a God who is loving, gracious, creative, able to forgive, and willing to extend mercy—all attributes the soul craves to be healthy, free, and alive. Our illusions about God are debunked and the truth of who God really is, not who we have imagined Him to be, allows us to fully worship with renewed hearts and expectant souls capable of spiritual intimacy and true contemplation.



## *Questions for Reflection*

1. Read Psalm 139:1–16. As you read David's words, make his words your own. What words or phrases catch your attention?
2. Make an acrostic of your first, middle, and last name. Beside each letter, write a quality or characteristic that you believe describes yourself.
3. Do you feel it's easier to own your ruin than to own your glory? Why or why not?

4. There are many people trying to become their true selves apart from God. How would you describe what they're doing? How does a follower of Jesus Christ become his true self? What do we need to do? What do you need to do?
  
5. The author states three commonly held lies that people tend to believe about themselves: "I am what I do," "I am what I have," and "I am what other people think about me." Which one of these lies do you seem to struggle with the most?

## Notes

- 1 These words first appeared in Thomas Merton's book *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 2007).
- 2 John Powell, *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* (Allen, TX: Thomas More, 1995).
- 3 As told by Parker Palmer in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 11.
- 4 I am grateful to Parker Palmer for his work on the shy soul in his book *Hidden Wholeness* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009).
- 5 Walter Trobisch, *Love Yourself* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1969), 19.
- 6 Albert Hasse, *Coming Home to Your True Self* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 12.
- 7 James Martin, *Becoming Who You Are: Insights on the True Self from Thomas Merton and Other Saints* (Mahwah, NJ: Hidden Springs, 2005), 19.
- 8 Used by James Martin in *Becoming Who You Are: Insights of the True Self from Thomas Merton and Other Saints*, (Mahwah, NJ: Hidden Springs, 2006), 20.
- 9 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 2007), 36.
- 10 Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 2002), 28.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 39.