

Pondering: “Who Am I?”



By Tomás Agosin

Among Dr. Agosin's papers at the time of his death were several write-ups for spiritual exercises and introductions to those exercises. These were presented to members of Cafh and to members of the general public who came searching for spiritual enrichment.

“Who am I?” is probably the most perplexing, profound, difficult, exciting and interesting question we can pose to ourselves.

Perplexing, because the many answers and definitions of ourselves always leave us dissatisfied. There is always more. No matter how we answer, we tend to feel: “But that's not exactly it!” It seems like such a simple question, maybe the simplest—“Who am I?”—and yet it leaves us baffled and confused.

Profound, because since we have been given the gift of consciousness, of self-awareness, it is of our deepest concern. Ever since human beings could think, we have posed this question to ourselves and pondered it. What can be more important than to understand the nature of being? What has more depth than the question of who is *me*, the consciousness that inhabits this body and lives in this historical time?

“Who am I?” is a most difficult question because it has a myriad of answers, and even more. Just asking the question makes us somewhat anxious and uneasy. We can feel it is a relevant question but something in us refuses to think about it, wants to take distance from its demanded answer. It is such a basic concept that it embarrasses us that we don't have a clear, ready-made answer. But any reflex answer leaves us dissatisfied. When we stop to think about

it more deeply, we realize how complex and intriguing a question it is, and the more slippery and vast it seems. Many people become scared of the question, and therefore drop it as being “too abstract” a preoccupation to give any time to. Or they may say it is for the philosophers to answer, or that it has no relevance to my daily life. But how can it not be relevant! It is so basic, so essential, although difficult and requiring attention, time, thought and a sense of adventure in reflecting on it.

To start asking ourselves this most simple question, “Who am I?” becomes a very exciting proposition because a whole field of personal exploration opens before us. That is, the question is a door to our inner life. When we ask the question seriously, in the intimacy of our being, with total objective honesty, naked in front of ourselves, we start discovering a great deal about who we are. What are our identifications? Where do they come from? What are the limitations we place on ourselves? What are our prejudices?

What are our self-definitions? How do we see ourselves? It is exciting—at times painful, at times exhilarating—to get to know ourselves in depth.

But it is not only excitement that we find in the journey to answer this question. It is also fascination because a tremendous field opens in front of our eyes: the field of inner consciousness. We have a subliminal knowledge of this aspect of our inner life, but we barely relate to it. And as we understand more and more, it becomes clear that there are no limits to the answer, and we discover new horizons of our reality. Fascination and marvel are the only words to describe this process. There really isn't a clear or simple answer to this question. The issue of “Who am I?” is more a tool to explore one's inner life than a question. It can be used as a window (or microscope) through which to look at ourselves and explore the nature of our being.

We can approach the question in a systematic way:

I am a body. We all have a body, and thus this aspect of our being is the most obvious to see. Our body has different characteristics: some strengths and some weaknesses. We need to be aware of its different aspects and to keep it healthy. But we are obviously more than our body because if a part of our body is removed (e.g., a limb), we continue to be ourselves; there still is an “I.” I am a body, but there is more....

I am a person who reacts emotionally. We need to know our emotional responses, our moods, what triggers them. We need to become objective with our emotions, observing ourselves react. I am emotions, but there is more....

I am a historical being. We live in a particular time in history. The world was very different before and the world will change completely in the future. We live in a moment, as part of a historical continuum. We are very determined by the historical times, but there is more....

I am a culture. We are all immersed in a culture. But there is more....

I am part of a nation. National identity is a very strong identification. We identify with a nation's history, its people, its customs. There are symbols that tie us to it, increasing our emotional connection with it. "I am American," "Japanese," "Chinese," "French," "Chilean"—strong identifications. But there is more....

I am part of a family. The family we come from, the family we fantasize about, the family we create. Remember how ingrained our name is in our consciousness, and how much a part of ourselves it is. But there is more....

I am the result of my education. But also....

I am a set of thoughts. But if I can change my thoughts, I am more....

I am a set of defects. But there is more....

I am a routine. All of us have a routine that becomes part of us. Our habitual connection to it makes it difficult to change it. It is part of us. But there is more....

I am a worker, A person who performs a job. This is one of the strongest identifications we have. We easily equate what we do to earn a living with who we are. We spend so much time performing our jobs that we become them. I am a teacher, a student, an engineer, a mechanic when in reality, I am a person who teaches, who studies, who practices engineering, who fixes cars. So there is more to me than my job....

I am someone who aspires to a better life. All human beings aspire to happiness and to make a better world....

I am a set of values....

I am love....

I am spirit....

*I am mystery....*the unknown.

Exercise

Sit quietly for fifteen minutes each morning in a quiet place, comfortably, with a straight back and crossed hands. If possible keep your eyes closed. Breathe deeply three to five times to create calmness.

Repeat aloud slowly: "I am Not...." filling the space with every possible identification you can think of, e.g., my body, my job, my family until exhausted of definitions. Then remain silent,

with the idea that you are a mystery, an unknown

Dr. Tomás Agosin was a psychiatrist in the Department of Psychiatry at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York and a founding member of Cafh in New York. Dr. Agosin died in 1991.