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Who Am I?

Courage to Question, Faith to Find the Answer

“We have all forgotten what we really are.”
—G. K. Chesterton

After being homeschooled for two years, my seven-year-old daughter entered second grade at our local elementary school.

Like any mom, I was an odd bundle of anxieties that first day. *Would she be scared? Would she make friends?* And perhaps more realistically, *Would she be so accustomed to homeschooling that she wouldn't be able to adapt and end would up being the “problem” child?* If I'm honest, I suppose I was mostly afraid that *I* would end up getting called to the principal's office to explain why my daughter expected to take a field trip once a week and thought that math class should involve baking.

But like most fears, mine ended up being largely unfounded and somewhat self-centered. Things went smoothly. Her first day was spent like anyone else's in getting to know the teacher, meeting her classmates, and establishing classroom rules and routines. Everything was flowing along nicely until her teacher turned to

the class and asked, “Does anyone have any questions?”

Immediately my Phoebe’s hand shot up.

“I have a question,” she responded with all seriousness. “Why are we here? I mean, why are we like this? Why do we have hands and why do we sit in desks and why do we go to school? Why do we have feet? And why do we have to listen? Why are we made this way? *Why?* I just want to know, *Why?!*”

So much for keeping a low profile as the new kid.

When my friends heard about it as was inevitable in our small town, there were a lot of teasing comments with most of them to the effect of “like mother, like daughter.” And while it is true that she comes by her philosophical disposition honestly, I think I would have found it funnier if her questions hadn’t hit so close to home. Her questions—her need to understand herself and her place in this world—are the very same questions that each of us wants to have answered too. Despite being grown adults, how many of us wish we could just raise our hand like a little girl on the first day of school and ask, “Who am I and why am I here?”

Searching for Ourselves

This need to understand ourselves, to wrestle with who we are and where we fit in the world, is fundamentally a search for identity. It is a journey to discover, not some foreign land or distant galaxy, but a world much closer—one whose very proximity can make it all the more mysterious, profound, and quite frankly, dangerous. It is a search, not simply to discover what it means to be a woman, but more important: what it means to be a person, what it means to be *you*.

But because this search can be unsettling, we tend to avoid it the same way we avoid looking full-faced into the mirror. Instead of wrestling with the deeper questions of life, we distract ourselves

and find identity in things like relationships, jobs, political causes, or hobbies. We check boxes, make lists, and categorize ourselves by race, religion, and socioeconomic status. We calculate our bodies in pounds, inches, and clothing sizes, all in an effort to gain the security that comes from knowing exactly who we are and where we fit into the grand scheme of things. After all, if I know that I am a married, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, extroverted, mother of three who studied liberal arts, writes, likes to travel, watches classic movies, and enjoys long walks on the beach, then certainly I must know who I am, right? *Right?*

Unfortunately, while roles and categories provide us some measure of stability in an uncertain world, the problem comes when these things change, as they inevitably do. The loss of a job, a broken marriage, unexpected illness, infertility, or churches that fail us. And suddenly the questions we had succeeded in repressing flood back to the surface. For Phoebe, it was something as simple as transitioning from home to school—suddenly her world shifted and she found herself needing to affirm the most basic realities of her life.

Perhaps even more surprisingly, good times can initiate the search for identity as often as bad. When we finally get that new job or finish that graduate degree; when we meet that someone we've been waiting to spend the rest of our life with; when the babies come and we're able to nurture our hopes and dreams with them. Even in these moments, as we come down from the emotional high, we realize that they didn't fulfill us the way we had expected; despite having invested so much of ourselves in what we thought would provide a lasting sense of meaning, we hardly know ourselves in the midst of it. We begin to feel detached and distant, outsiders looking in on our own lives. And the things that we once looked to for stability and identity begin to feel like burdens and obligations instead of blessings.

Just ask Elizabeth Gilbert.

By anyone's standard's, Elizabeth's life was a success; she had graduated from the best schools, had a terrific career that took her around the world, and together with her husband owned an impressive home in New York's Hudson Valley. And yet, she spent most nights crying herself to sleep only to awaken with the persistent awareness that little about her life made sense. She felt overwhelmed by duty and directionless about her future. So at a young thirty-two, she checked out. She divorced her husband, threw herself into a dysfunctional relationship, and eventually quit her job to travel the world. Her journey took her through Italy and India and all the way to Indonesia; she sampled *la dolce vita* in Rome and Tuscany and committed herself to religious asceticism in a Hindu ashram—all in an attempt to find some sense of personal stability, some sense of lasting identity.

Elizabeth shared her journey in a memoir she called simply *Eat, Pray, Love*. Within weeks, it hit the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list, popped up in book clubs everywhere, and went on to sell over ten million copies. And that's when it became startlingly clear: Elizabeth was not alone. Elizabeth was not the only woman feeling lost and directionless. In fact, women today—despite our education, despite our independence, despite our relationships—have yet to *really* answer the most basic questions about our own identities. Worse still, we seem to have very little idea about how to find them.

The Picket Fence

“I’m Jim’s wife, and Janey’s mother, a putter on of diapers and snowsuits, a server of meals, a Little League chauffeur. But who am I, as a person myself? —Anonymous Woman¹

And yet, if there were ever a generation of women who *should* have a strong sense of their own identity, it is ours. We were the first generation to grow up with empowered mothers; we were the first generation to be taught that we could be whatever we wanted to be. We have had more opportunity, more choices, and more autonomy to make those choices than any women have at any time. If it were simply a matter of making our way in the world, we should have no issues. But we do. And so, in order to understand why we struggle with questions of identity, we first need to understand how our mothers and grandmothers struggled with their own. We need to understand what brought us to this point in the first place.

During the 1950s, Western society was finally experiencing a period of prosperity and stability after nearly two decades of hardship. This generation had been children during the Great Depression and had come of age through the atrocities of World War II, so as adults, they pursued a lifestyle of comfort and security, wanting to provide better for their own children. It was the time of the American Dream, Ward and June Cleaver, the quintessential white picket fence. But this was also a generation schooled in Freudian psychology that promoted the subtle (and at times, not so subtle) idea that identity was primarily discovered and fulfilled through

1. Quoted in Betty Friedan, *Life So Far* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 104.

biology.² For a woman, this meant that she should seek her ultimate fulfillment in domesticity, that her identity could be reduced to her “evolutionary” function of being a wife and mother.

But this excessive emphasis on gender couldn’t be completely satisfying because it didn’t address the deeper questions of existence. It also left women who weren’t married, who weren’t mothers, or who struggled with domesticity searching for answers to *their* identities—*were they somehow less human because their lives didn’t play out in the traditional domestic milieu?* Ultimately the problem wasn’t that women devoted themselves to their husbands and children (which itself is *eminently* valuable) but that they were told to look to their husbands and children for their fundamental source of identity.

Hear Me Roar

In response, their daughters (determined, like all daughters, not to turn into their mothers) launched a social movement known as second-wave feminism. They believed that in order to discover full identity, women simply needed to be freed from the bondage of biological roles; personal fulfillment was found in autonomy—whether that meant sexual autonomy in the form of birth control and abortion or economic autonomy through education and a career path. This led them to champion a pro-choice agenda at the same time they were fighting gender discrimination in business and education.

And while there *were* serious societal paradigms that needed to be challenged, second-wave feminism no more successfully

2. Sigmund Freud was one of the first to use Darwinian theory to analyze human behavior. He based his work on the premise that “anatomy is destiny” and heavily emphasized the biological differences between men and women, including the idea that women are intrinsically envious of male biology. His theories were widespread in the United States, and by the 1950s, his psychoanalysis was mainstream.

answered the underlying question of personal identity than the previous generation had. Instead of defining themselves by their homes and family, women were now compelled to define themselves by their education, professional accomplishments, and independence from men. While the domesticity of the 1950s may have truncated identity in one respect, subsequent feminist thought simply lopped it off in another.

Neither fully addressed all that it means to be a woman, all that it means to be human.

So here we are—two generations and a world of opportunities later—still wrestling with the same issues. And the reason we are is because we have never really answered the basic questions of identity. Instead, we've tried to answer *how* identity manifests itself without first answering where identity comes from; we've tried to figure out *where* a woman should spend her life without first answering *who* she should be. We've taken shortcuts, and these shortcuts have led us directly to our present confusion and restlessness.

If we are to find any lasting stability in this life, if we are to really answer the question “Who am I and why am I here?” we must move past these easy categories—we must stop talking simply in terms of home vs. career; we must dig deeper than biology or gifting. We must find something more stable, more fixed, more permanent on which to base our sense of self. We must find a North Star. And not simply because our circumstances change, but because we ourselves are more than the roles we play in this present world. We are large, deep, eternal beings, and only something larger and deeper and more eternal will satisfy the questions in our souls.

We need something—Someone—Divine.

The Unknown God

*“Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God . . .
without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self.”*

—John Calvin

Nearly two thousand years ago, on the rugged hillsides of Athens, the apostle Paul encountered a group of people in the middle of their own search for identity. Hoping to connect to the Divine, these seekers devoted themselves to philosophy and religion, worshipping every life force they could identify—and just to hedge the bet, even one they couldn’t. Among their columned temples to Athena, Artemis, and Zeus, they had erected an altar to “the unknown god.” Recognizing their confusion, Paul stepped forward to remind them of a truth they already knew—a truth that we all in the quiet recesses of our souls already know too.³

He told them that “the unknown god” wasn’t really unknown but was “the God who made the world and everything in it.”⁴ He even quoted their own philosophers, reminding them that “in him we live and move and have our being.”⁵ Simply put, there is one God and He is the Giver of all life. He created the world, and everything in it finds its source, its purpose, and its goal in Him. Including each one of us. Later in a letter to the Corinthian believers, Paul expresses it this way: “There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”⁶

In other words, your identity—everything about you from where you were born to the person you married (or didn’t), to

3. Romans 1:19–20.

4. Acts 17:24.

5. In Acts 17:28, Paul is most likely quoting the seventh century BC Greek philosopher-poet Epimenides.

6. 1 Corinthians 8:6.

what you love to do, everything that you use to define who you are, everything that you see in the mirror each morning—relates directly and unequivocally to Him.⁷ So in order to know yourself, you first have to know Him. In order to know who you are, you must first know who He is. And to do this, you have to go back to the beginning; and not simply back to the beginning of your own individual story, but back to the *very* beginning, the beginning of life itself. Because it is there, in those opening moments of the cosmos, that God first revealed Himself; and it is there that you will first learn what it means to be His daughter.

In the Beginning . . .

But when you do go back, the first thing you'll discover is . . . nothing. Before the ancient hardwood forests, before the vivid northern lights, before the massive heaps of volcanic rock that jut out of the Pacific to form lush tropical islands, Scripture tells us that there was simply nothing. Well, not exactly. Even while our world was empty and dark, even before there was anything on this earth that we would recognize, there was Something. There was Someone. There was God.⁸ At that point, He was still mysterious and unknown, but He *was*. And more than simply being present, Scripture tells us that everything that would eventually be already existed in Him—that He Himself was the source of all life and by His very existence, all life continues to this day.⁹

Yet, He never began, was not made by anything else, and cannot be measured.

And *that* is really hard for us number-obsessed humans to understand. We, who mark our days in weeks, months, and years;

7. Romans 11:36.

8. Psalm 90:2.

9. Colossians 1:16–17.

who track our bodies in calories, pounds, and BMI; and who can only understand the value of something in dollars, euros, or yen, simply cannot grasp this kind of limitless Being. It's easy to understand why many people turn away from this kind of God and why many of those ancient Athenians turned away from Paul's words too; why they mocked him as they went.

But some did not. Some believed.

And that's what we must do too. In our search for identity, in trying to understand who we are, we must start with Him, yes; but starting with Him requires more than simple logical assent, because quite frankly, sometimes He isn't logical—not to our minds at least.¹⁰ No, starting with Him means accepting Him for who He is, not who we can conceive Him to be. Starting with Him means humbling ourselves to recognize that there is Someone bigger than us who often works in ways we can't explain.

Starting with Him requires faith. Faith that believes He exists and faith that honestly seeks Him, no matter who or what He reveals Himself to be. The epistle to the Hebrews puts it this way: “By faith, we understand that the universe was created by the word of God so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible . . . Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”¹¹

Woman Seeking Committed Relationship

Today many of us describe ourselves as seekers much like the ancient Athenians. We question the establishment, critique long-held beliefs, and want proof before we accept the answers. And while doubt can be a healthy thing, we must not trick ourselves into thinking that we are seeking God if we are simply reserving

10. Isaiah 55:8–9.

11. Hebrews 11:3, 6.

the right to decide whether or not we approve of the God we eventually discover. This is not faith.

Instead, God asks that you seek Him “with all your heart and with all your soul.”¹² That you allow Him to penetrate your defenses, that you allow Him to tear down your preconceived notions, that you allow Him to be simply who He is. And if you do, He promises that you will find Him. *This* is the reward that Hebrews speaks about. When God rewards those who seek Him, it is not with wealth or power or privilege but with the very thing that they were searching for in the first place—Himself.

And the beauty, the unmistakable genius of it all, is that in discovering Him, the source of all existence, you will also discover yourself. In finding Him, you will find the answer to the question “Who am I and why am I here?” Because in the infinite wisdom of God, the two are inextricably linked; and in the infinite kindness of God, this search is as much about His glory as it is your good.

Still, that does not mean it will be easy.

Thankfully, He’s the kind of God who welcomes our questions, who can wrestle with us through the confusion and still bless us in the process. He is the kind of God who desires true faith, even at its weakest points, and looks for mustard seeds instead of mountains. He is the kind of God who delights in the plea, “Help my unbelief” and then holds on to us because we can’t hold on to Him anymore. He is the kind of God who can handle all our doubt, all our fear, all our questions if we will simply commit to letting Him.

And that is what faith does. Faith does not pretend that it is easy to believe what God reveals about Himself. Faith does not push aside or deny the difficulties. Faith simply commits to taking the questions back to Him and believes that He will have the answers.

12. Deuteronomy 4:29; see also Jeremiah 29:13 and Matthew 7:7–8.

The God Who Seeks

One of the most compelling things about this majestic God, this God who existed before the worlds began, is that He understands our weakness. As David sang in the Judean hillsides, “He knows our frame and remembers that we are dust.”¹³ So much so, that even back in the emptiness of the cosmos, He knew that we would never be able to truly seek Him for ourselves. He knew that in our confusion, we would stumble about in the darkness, unable to find Him and unable to understand ourselves. He knew this, and so in those moments before He laid the foundations of the earth, He planned a way that He would find us.¹⁴

It’s a plan that has unfolded throughout human history, as massive in scale as it is intimate in detail. It’s a plan that has often twisted and turned, at times seeming to make little sense. And ultimately it is a plan that took its fullest shape when He Himself came to us in Jesus Christ.

And always, always, it has been a plan to make us like Himself.

You are part of that plan. No matter how far you have wandered or how confused you are or how assured you are that you don’t need Him—still, He has planned your life and has been pursuing you since before time began. Before your first breath, before your first cry, before you even knew yourself, He knew you and has been on a mission to make you one with Himself. Because when you finally are, you will finally know Him; and when you know Him, then you will finally be able to *live and move and have your being* as He has always intended. You will finally be free to live beyond the roles and labels and expectations because you will finally be free to live in the fullness of God Himself.

13. Psalm 103:14.

14. Ephesians 1:4.