

Creating, Excavating, and Becoming

By Katie Stanley

"To thine own self be true," Polonius tells his son, Laertes, in the first act of *Hamlet*. But *who is the self?*¹

This is a question many can answer articulately without much thought—this is my role, this is my title, these are my credentials. In different settings, you may introduce or present a different layer of yourself: parent, spouse, family member, attorney, some other noun or adjective. In the past year, you may have unwillingly gained new titles such as virtual teacher or home office manager. Alternatively, you may have lost a title due to shifts in the economy amidst a global pandemic. Or a title might feel as though it's been reshaped following a different type of grief, bringing up questions such as, "Who am I without what I've lost?"

Many people describe themselves in the context of titles, roles, or what they do in the world and how they perceive those roles—an apple is an apple because it's red, round, and the kind of fruit we think of as an apple, and I am me because I'm x, y, and z. Philosopher David Hume describes this idea of self as a bundle or collection of perceptions.² In this context, we can feel entangled with these descriptors and perceptions; we can feel stuck to them. In this state of "stuckness," it can also be hard to remember that to be alive is to always be becoming and that we maintain the power to create a life we want to live and it starts with cultivating an attitude of kind, curious awareness toward one's truest self. Author Elizabeth

Gilbert describes this process as excavating hidden treasure, writing, "[T]he universe buries strange jewels deep within us all, and then stands back to see if we can find them."³ What treasures are hidden within you?

One tool that may help to uncover these hidden treasures and self-truths is a mindfulness practice. Practicing mindfulness can help awaken and reveal this deeper self precisely because it resides within. Although we are touched and shaped by the world around us, we have to quiet our hearts and still our minds to be able to truly hear our own inner voices. It's easy to confuse our own inner voice with the noise of the world around us.

Aristotle discussed this dilemma and the healing value of self-examination and inward determination, asking us to reflect on whether we are acting on the opinion of others or our own.⁴ Augustine later rephrased this same sentiment, asking us to question whether we are acting on our own behalf or judging our actions through the eyes of others.⁵ Sometimes it can be hard to tell.

Harvard educator Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar, creator of a class on positive psychology and the nature of happiness that's become the most popular course in the school's history, came up with a thought experiment to help us consider and reframe the problem. As he describes:

"Imagine that a spell of anonymity has been cast on you. From now on and for the rest of your life, no one will know what you're doing. No one will know

how rich you are, no one will know what amazing works you've completed. No one will know about your success or how good or helpful you are. No one will know about the things you've done but you. In such a world, where you're anonymous, what would you do?"⁶

It's easy to see how thinking this way might help illuminate our most authentic inner values, joys, and self-making substance. In such a world, what would you do? What makes your truest self feel most alive and how can you help create the space for that to expand?

These types of mindful inquiries also invite us to consider the self through a process of discovery, acceptance, and growth rather than a process of arrival, grasping, or stasis. We've all been through periods of life that left us wondering, usually in hindsight, "What was I thinking?" Maybe you're stuck in one of those periods right now. Instead, consider asking yourself, "What was I or am I learning?" In this process of uncovering our own unique truths, we carry all versions of self with us; all a vital part of the "bundle" of who we are today. Moreover, how we treat ourselves often instructs others how we will accept being treated. How are you meeting yourself today?

As part of this process, it's also important to be mindful of our self-talk and the narratives we weave in our thought lives. Critical thoughts or fears like "I'm not good enough" or "I can't do this" can easily become our

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autopilot setting because of past traumas or because we see them as confirmation of a belief we've held onto from our past. Surface categories of right or wrong, good or bad, or worthy or unworthy are also more readily accessible in the chatter of our minds. Simply put, sometimes it can feel easier, safer, or more comfortable to categorize and unconsciously affirm negative self-beliefs and create a restless slumber to our own truth and true value.

As lawyers, we often tend to be especially critical of ourselves. These beliefs become how we view ourselves, how we act, and the lens through which we experience the world around us. In many ways, these unchecked narratives not only hinder our happiness, but also prolong discontent. Buddhism refers to this willing prolonging as the second arrow, with a parable that states, "In life we can't always control the first arrow. However, the second arrow is our reaction to the first. This second arrow is optional."⁷

Mindfulness invites us to grow our awareness of our thoughts and narratives which, in turn, empowers us to interrupt fear with courage, negativity with compassion, and suffering with kindness; it challenges us to purposefully interrupt those places where we feel most stuck and embrace curious exploration and embodied authenticity. We are all imperfect—remember to extend the same level of compassion and openness to yourself that you would to someone that you love—and mindfulness invites you to grow your awareness of the quality of thoughts you are holding about yourself and interrupt them when they are unkind with an affirmation, kindness, or compassion. Even if you don't believe it in the beginning, you are at least starting to give more mental real estate, so to speak, to kindness while monitoring the space you allow for unkindness.

The beauty of mindfulness is that, in practice, it grows our capacity to connect, change the wiring of our neural pathways and thought patterns, and be in greater harmony with ourselves and others. It all starts with an invitation to start meeting ourselves with curiosity, kindness, and compassion right where we are.

To be alive is to exist in a duality of sorts, to embrace an experience broad enough to include both light and dark, spiritual and physical, joy and pain. In many ways, the existence of one enables the existence of another. Author Jessica Honegger refers to embracing this paradox as choosing the *and life*; we can be scared and brave; we can be hurt and heal; we can experience joy and sorrow.⁸ The Hebrew language attempts to capture this ability to hold both realities as one in its translation of "tov," the word for "good." In the Hebrew translation, as author Rob Bell describes, "Good includes both the light and the dark. It includes the seed rising up out of the earth but also the burying of the seed, the sun rising and the sun setting. It's an affirmation that life is good, and it includes all the bad. It's a goodness wide enough to embrace what we could call bad."⁹ Moreover, it is often in our deepest difficulty where the greatest opportunities for self-transformation arise. As Viktor Frankl writes, "when we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."¹⁰

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche compares this ongoing labor of self-creation to making art.¹¹ But as Jack Kornfield describes, the idea isn't to perfect yourself: it's to perfect your love.¹² Our ability to show grace and presence to our authentic selves enables the state of grace and presence necessary to extend it to others. This kind of love isn't just a feeling; it's a practice.

Go ahead and start asking yourself what you truly want. Start trying to live the life you've always wanted and see how it fits. It's yours to create, excavate, and become. ■

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