Six

The Problem of the Self

W e have been looking at things—meaning, satisfaction, freedom— that human beings can't live without. Now we come to another such item known as *identity,* which is to answer the question Who am I?

What is your identity? It consists of at least two things. First, it consists of a *sense of self* that is durable. You live in many spheres at once. You are a family member at home, a colleague at work, a friend, and sometimes you are alone in solitude. To have an identity is to have something sustained that is true of you in every setting. Otherwise there would be no "you." There would be only masks for every occasion but no actual face behind them. What about you does *not* change from place to place? There needs to be a core understanding of who you are that is true from day to day, relationship to relationship, and situation to situation. Besides a sense of self, identity also includes a *sense of worth,* an assessment of your own value. "We each want desperately to matter, to feel a sense of worthiness."[1] Self-knowledge is one thing, but self-regard is another. It is one thing to know what you are like; it's another thing to appreciate it. What about you makes you feel your life is worthwhile, good, and of significance? The sense of self and of worth together compose your identity.[2]

Identity formation is a process that every culture pushes on its members so powerfully and pervasively that it is invisible to us. We may have no idea that other ways to get a sense of self and worth are available. In this chapter I am going to try to make the process in our secular culture a little more visible and then show you the radically

different Christian resources for this fundamental dimension of living a human life.

In ancient cultures, as well as in many non-Western cultures today, the self was defined and shaped by both internal desires and external social roles and ties. Charles Taylor called the older concept the "porous" self, for it was seen as being inextricably connected not only to family and community but to cosmic, spiritual realities as well.[3] Your sense of self and of worth developed as you moved out toward others, assuming roles in your family and community. If you ask people in a traditional culture, "Who are you?" they will most likely say they are a son or a mother or a member of a particular tribe and people. And if they fulfill their duties and give up their individual desires for the good of the whole family, community, and their God, then their identity is secure as persons of honor.[4]

Modern Western identity formation is the very reverse of this. In place of the "porous" self we now have what has been called a "buffered," contained self.[5] This approach to identity formation has also been called "expressive individualism" in the classic *Habits of the Heart* by Robert Bellah and his sociologist colleagues. Our culture does not believe we learn or become who we are by sublimating our individual needs for those of the community or family. Rather, "each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality [or identity] is to be realized."[6] Unlike other societies, modern Western culture believes in "a socially unsituated self from which all [moral and meaning] judgments are supposed to flow."[7] In all former cultures, people developed a self by moving toward others, seeking their attachment. We found ourselves, as it were, in the faces of others. But modern secularism teaches that we can develop ourselves only by looking inward, by detaching and leaving home, religious communities, and all other requirements so that we can make our own choices and determine who we are for ourselves.[8]

The cultural message is: Don't try to get affirmation from others. Affirm yourself because you are doing what you want to do. Be who you want to be, and it doesn't matter what anybody else thinks. That is the heart of modern Western expressive individualism.

Two Different Ways with Identity

The contrast could not be starker. In traditional cultures the heroic narrative is *self-sacrifice*. You are your duties, and your self-worth depends on the honor that is bestowed upon you by your community for discharging them. In Western cultures the new heroic narrative is *self-assertion*. You are your individual dreams and desires, and your self-worth depends on the dignity you bestow on yourself, because you have asserted your dreams and desires regardless of the opposition you may have had from the community.

Anyone who reads older literature cannot fail to see the sea change between the two ways with the self. The examples are innumerable. There is the tenth-century Anglo-Saxon poem "The Battle of Maldon." It becomes clear to the surviving English warriors that they have lost their battle with the Danes. But they believe the glory of their people is more important and would be better served if they took a last stand rather than retreat to save their lives. They are ready, even eager, to die bravely and happy that the privilege is theirs. So Birhtwold shakes his spear of ash wood over his dead captain and says to his companions: "Purpose shall be the firmer, heart the keener, courage shall be the more, as our might lessens. Here lies our lord all hewn down, good man on the ground. . . . From here I will not turn, but by my lord's side, by the man I loved, I intend to lie."[9] Birhtwold was pursuing not his own safety or happiness but the honor of his people.

Contrast this with the song sung to Maria in *The Sound of Music*:

Climb every mountain,
Ford every stream,
Follow every rainbow,
'Til you find your dream.[10]

In no way do I draw this contrast in order to hint that Maria's decision to leave the convent was wrong. (She was not actually a nun under

vows but a postulant, considering entering the abbey.) But the advice given to her in the form of the song is an archetype of modern thinking and is now applied almost universally to all situations. We must detach, leave the community, and go out in order to find ourselves. A more recent and famous example is Elsa, one of the main characters in the Walt Disney movie *Frozen*. She sings:

It's time to see what I can do
To test the limits and break through
No right, no wrong, no rules for me,
I'm free![11]

Rather than connecting with "some source outside us," with family and people, with "God or the some other cosmic Good . . . now the source we have to connect with is [not outside us but] deep within us. . . . We come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths."[12] I find myself not by self-giving to something outside but through self-expression of something inside.

The Great Goods of Modern Identity

Before addressing what is wrong with Western identity formation, we must acknowledge the great positives. In the past vast numbers of people were locked into a given social status in extremely hierarchical societies where peasants were to stay forever poor simply because it was thought that one's identity *was* one's role in society. These hierarchies were justified as reflecting some cosmic order of spiritual and moral absolutes. As we will see in chapter 10 the Christian church has often ignored the implications of its own teachings about every person being created in God's image, about the importance of justice for the poor, and about the

kingdom of God being hard for the rich and powerful to enter. Despite these biblical themes and doctrines, the church largely supported the rigid stratification of society.

Secular thinkers, however, attacked the very idea of a cosmic, normative moral order, and this created major problems we will address immediately below. Yet we must give credit where credit is due and appreciate the good that modern individualism has wrought. For example, while the American civil rights movement was led by the African American church and was justified with biblical vocabulary and categories, it has been argued that the broader society was willing to embrace the movement and implement changes because of American culture's growing emphasis on the individualistic values of self-determination, personal freedom, and equality.[13]

My grandfather was born in Italy in 1880. He lived in a small town outside of Naples. His father was a potter, and his grandfather and his great-grandfather were all potters. In his teenage years he said to my great-grandfather, "I don't want to do pottery. I want to do something else." His father said, "There are only three things you can do: You can be a priest, you can go into the military, or you can be a potter. That is it." When he asked why, he was told that his family made pottery. That was who they were. Nobody was going to give him any other job. That was his place. If he tried to move to another town, the people there were likely to say, "What are you doing over here? You are from over there. That's who you are. Go back." In response he emigrated to America.

This rigid, exploitative social stratification stemmed from the traditional understanding of identity. You *were* your rung in the socially stratified culture; you related to the world not as an individual but through your family and class. Your mission in life was to "know your place" and fulfill your assigned role. There was no way out; there was no mobility at all. So we can be grateful for the ways that the modern Western view of identity has helped so many people escape. And yet modern Western culture's identity formation in very different ways is every bit as crushing, if not more so. How?

Modern Identity Is Incoherent

First of all, our contemporary approach is incoherent. If you look into your heart to find your deep desires, you certainly will discover many of them. And you will discover something else—that they contradict one another. You may very much want a certain career, but then you fall in love with someone whom you also want very much. Because of the particular nature of both the career and the relationship, you realize you won't be able to have both. What are you going to do? You might insist that one of these desires—for career or love—must be deeper and more "you," but that's naive. Why assume that your internal desires are arranged in such an orderly way? Francis Spufford writes that you are "a being whose wants make no sense, don't harmonise: whose desires, deep down, are discordantly arranged, so that you truly want to possess and you truly want not to, at the very same time. You're equipped . . . for farce or even tragedy more than you are for happy endings."[14]

Sigmund Freud is perhaps the most trenchant critic of the idea that our inner desires are coherent and positive. Freud believed that each individual had deep desires that were essentially and unstoppably selfish. He called the inmost instincts the "id." This is the part of the self that "never says *No*."[15] Freud believed that our inmost being was filled with "unsociable chaos" of desires for power, love, comfort, and control, which vie with one another and would trample on others to reach their goals, if they could. Our conscience (or "superego") is society's inner policeman, punishing us with inward pain, shame, and guilt when we transgress cultural moral norms. Freud taught that although we can make some adjustments and navigate better trade-offs and compromises between our desires and our conscience, in general, guilt and shame are the price we pay in order to have civilization or an orderly society at all.[16] "Guilt may be denied . . . [but] it is the secret agent of public order."[17]

Freud was, as Philip Rieff puts it, a pessimist and a "moralist," because he saw human beings as irremediably selfish and largely unable to admit the depth of that selfishness and the cruelty of which they are

capable. Freud would have shaken his head at many of his descendants in modern psychotherapy who have lost his realism about the inner darkness, incoherence, and destructiveness of the inmost desires. "We are not happy because we are frustrated. . . . We are frustrated because we are, first of all, unhappy combinations of conflicting desires. Civilization can, at best, reach a balance of discontents."[18]

Not only do your desires contradict, but they also are elusive. "What *are* the wants of the self?" Bellah asks. "For all its unmistakable presence and intensity on occasion, the experience of feeling good, like being in love, is so highly subjective that its distinguishing characteristics remain ineffable."[19]

And besides being contradictory and elusive, our desires constantly change. As I have said, part of having an identity is having a stable, core sense of who you are, day in and day out, in different settings and times. That is why the traditional way of forging an identity through connection with something solid outside the individual self made sense. But if your identity is just your desires, they are going to be changing all the time. If in every situation you seek your own self-interest, responding in ways that get the approval and control you want at the moment, then identity essentially disappears. "In the work of Erving Goffman . . . [comes the view that] there is no self at all. What seems to be a self is merely a series of social masks that change with each successive situation."[20] Ironically, the emphasis on "being yourself" apart from fixed social roles results in there being no sustained "you" left, which is common to all situations.

Modern Identity Is Illusory

Our culture tells us that you must look inside to discover your deepest desires and dreams and to express them. You must do this yourself, and must not rely on anyone outside to affirm and tell you who you are.[21] A classic description of this understanding can be found in Gail Sheehy's 1970s best seller *Passages*. There she speaks to a person who is heeding her guidance on finding an authentic self:

You are moving away . . . away from institutional claims and other people's agenda. Away from external valuations and accreditations, in search of an inner validation. You are moving out of [social] roles and into the self. . . . Whatever counterfeit safety we hold from overinvestments in people and institutions must be given up. The inner custodian [i.e., conscience] must be unseated from the controls. No foreign [external] power can direct our journey from now on. It is for each of us to find a course that is valid by our own reckoning.[22]

In short, do not look to anyone else to validate you. Use no standards from the outside. *You* bestow the verdict of significance on yourself.

But this is an impossibility.[23] You cannot get an identity through self-recognition; it must come in a great measure from others. Theologian Philip Ryken quotes from a contemporary novel about a young single woman. She writes a New Year's resolution: "Develop inner poise and authority and sense of self as woman of substance, complete *without* boyfriend, as best way to obtain boyfriend." However, she sees a problem. "My sense of self comes not from other people but from . . . myself? That can't be right."[24] Yes, it isn't right. In fact, it can't be done.

In the end, we can't say to ourselves, "I don't care that literally everyone else in the world thinks I'm a monster. I love myself and that is all that matters." That would not convince us of our worth, unless we are mentally unsound. We need someone from outside to say we are of great worth, and the greater the worth of that someone or someones, the more power they have to instill a sense of self and of worth. Only if we are approved and loved by someone whom we esteem can we achieve any self-esteem. To use biblical terms, we need someone to bless us because we can't bless ourselves. We are irreducibly social and relational beings. We need someone we respect to respect us. We need someone we admire to admire us. Even when modern people claim to be validating themselves, the reality is always that they are socializing themselves into a new community of peers, of "cheerleaders," of people whose approval they crave.

Years ago I was watching an episode of the science-fiction TV show

Star Trek: The Next Generation. The captain, Jean-Luc Picard, was talking to a young man who was trying to get into the Starfleet Academy. He professed that one of his reasons for doing so was so that the captain would be proud of him. Picard's response was perfectly in line with Gail Sheehy: "Wesley—you have to measure your successes and your failures within, not by anything that I or anyone else might think."[25] I remembered it because I had recently counseled a man who had parents who always answered him in the same way. He told me: "They never said, 'I would be proud of you if you did this or that.' When I asked them for guidance, they always said, 'We just want you to do what *you* truly want to do—what*ever* that is, it will be all right with us.'" The man complained that this made him feel unloved and rudderless. He doubted that they would be equally happy with any of his life choices, but he could not get them to reveal the kind of life for which they would admire him. He knew they meant well and that they thought they were being open-minded and modern. However, he said, "No one can tell yourself, 'I'm okay.' I needed somebody to tell me, 'That's the right thing to do. I'm proud of you!' I had to go look for other kinds of family, because my family wouldn't be the family I needed."

So, contrary to our cultural narrative, we must look outside ourselves and connect to something else first, before we can descend into ourselves and make any assessment.

Let's conduct a thought experiment to serve as evidence of this. Imagine an Anglo-Saxon warrior in Britain in AD 800. He looks into his heart and sees two strong inner impulses and feelings. One is aggression. When people show him any disrespect, his natural response is to respond violently, either to harm or to kill. He enjoys battle. Now, living in a shame-and-honor culture with a warrior ethic, he will identify with that feeling. He will feel no shame or regret over it. He will say, "That's me! That's who I am! I will express that." But let's say that the other impulse he sees in his heart is same-sex attraction. He wishes that were not there. He will look at that feeling and say, "That's not me. I will control and suppress that."

Now come forward to today. Imagine a young man walking around

Manhattan. He has the same two inward impulses, both equally strong. What will he say to himself? He will look at the aggression and say, "This is not who I am," and will go to therapy or to some anger-management programs. He will look at his sexual desire, however, and conclude, "That is who I am. That's me."

This illustration demonstrates several things. First, it shows it's an illusion to think identity is simply an expression of inward desires and feelings. You have many strong feelings, and in one sense they are all part of "you," but just because they are there does not mean you must or can express them all. No one identifies with all strong inward desires. Rather, we use some kind of filter—a set of beliefs and values—to sift through our hearts and determine which emotions and sensibilities we will value and incorporate into our core identity and which we will not. It is this value-laden filter that forms our identity, rather than our feelings themselves. And where do we get this filter? We get it from some community, some people whom we trust. Then we take this set of values into ourselves and we make sense of our insides. We prioritize some things we find there and reject others. It is misleading to the point of dishonesty to say, "I just have to be myself, no matter what anyone else says." Your "self" is defined by what one set of "anyones" has to say. Our inner depths on their own are insufficient to guide us. To put it another way, identity is determined not by our feelings and desires but rather by our beliefs *about* our varied, contradictory, changing feelings and desires.

Also this comparison of the warrior and the young man shows us that modern people are ultimately no more liberated to be themselves than ancient people were. Why, in the example, does the contemporary person believe that his particular sexual feelings are "who he is," whereas the Anglo-Saxon would think of them as more extraneous or even hostile to his identity? It is because in each case their society is telling them what to believe. We must get our beliefs from somewhere, and most are picked up unconsciously from our culture or our community—whether ethnic or academic or professional or familial. Every community has "a set of understandings and evaluations [about life] that it has worked out over time." This set of beliefs is "an inherent dimension of all human

action" and it is usually invisible to us.[26] So many today say, "This is who I am—I don't care what society thinks; I only care what I think." But then on social media we see what has really happened. One community and set of cheerleaders has been rejected, and new ones adopted. And the person is thinking about him or herself the way that has been dictated.

Robert Bellah says strikingly, "The irony is that here, too, just where we [modern people] think we are most free, we are most coerced by the dominant beliefs of our own culture. For it is a powerful cultural fiction that we not only can, but must, make up our deepest beliefs in the isolation of our private selves."[27] He goes on to say that modern people simply cannot see how much their identities owe to others. "Insofar as they are limited to a language of radical autonomy" and "cannot think about themselves or others except as arbitrary centers of volition," it means "they cannot express the fullness of being that is actually theirs."[28]

Our identity, then, is not, after all, something we can bestow on ourselves. We cannot discover or create an identity in isolation, merely through some kind of internal monologue. Rather, it is negotiated through dialogue with the moral values and beliefs of some community. We find ourselves in and through others. "We never get to the bottom of ourselves on our own. We discover who we are face to face and side by side with others in work, love, and learning."[29] In the end the contemporary identity—simply expressing your inner feelings, with a valuation bestowed on yourself independently—is impossible.

Modern Identity Is Crushing

Ironically, the apparent freedom of secular identity brings crushing burdens with it. In former times, when our self-regard was more rooted in social roles, there was much less value placed on competitive achievement. Rising from rags to riches was nice but rare and optional. It was quite sufficient to be a good father or mother, son or daughter, and to be conscientious and diligent in all your work and duties. Today, as Alain de Botton has written, we believe in the meritocracy, that anyone who is of

humble means is so only because of a lack of ambition and savvy. It is an embarrassment now to be merely faithful and not successful.[30] This is a new weight on the soul, put there by modernity. Success or failure is now seen as the individual's responsibility alone. Our culture tells us that we have the power to create ourselves, and that puts the emphasis on independence and self-reliance. But it also means that society adulates winners and despises losers, showing contempt for weakness.[31]

All this produces a pressure and anxiety beyond what our ancestors knew. We have to decide our look and style, our stance and ethos. We then have to promote ourselves and be accepted in the new space—professional, social, aesthetic—in which we have chosen to create ourselves. As a result, "new modes of conformity arise" as people turn themselves into "brands" through the consumer goods they buy.[32] The irony is that the conception of a "nonsocial . . . conception of reality"[33] actually leaves the person more dependent than ever on outside validation and more vulnerable to outside manipulation. This is why we are far more dependent on consumption of fashion and electronics and other goods and products in order to "feel good about ourselves."

The self-made identity, based on our own performance and achievement in ways that older identities were not, makes our self-worth far more fragile in the face of failure and difficulty. While we claim to have a new freedom from social norms, we now look not to our family for our validation but to our chosen arenas of achievement, where we need the acceptance and applause of others who are already within those circles. This makes us, more than ever, "vulnerable to the recognition given or withheld by significant others."[34] You have got to be brilliant. You have got to be beautiful. You have got to be hip. You have got to be accomplished. And *they* have to think so. It is all up to you, in a way that, in traditional cultures, just wasn't the case.

In Arthur Miller's play *After the Fall*, the narrator sees modern life as a "series of proofs"—arguing and proving your smarts, your sexual prowess, your abilities, your sophistication—all in the pursuit of some kind of "verdict."[35] But this is a trap, because you will have to fixate on some good thing—like work or career or romance or love—and it will become no

longer just another good thing to enjoy. It will become *you*—the basis of your identity. And that makes you radically vulnerable and fragile.

In the *New York Times* Benjamin Nugent writes about the struggles he had when he was a full-time novelist. He says: "When good writing was my only goal in life, I made the quality of my work the measure of my worth. For this reason, I wasn't able to read my own writing well. I couldn't tell whether something I had just written was good or bad, because I needed it to be good in order to feel sane. I lost the ability to cheerfully interrogate how much I liked what I had written, to see what was actually on the page rather than what I wanted to see or what I feared to see." When his identity was based in being a good writer, it made him a worse writer. He announces at the end of the article that he doesn't base his self on writing anymore because he "fell in love, an over-powering diversion."[36] But is the love of someone else a better basis for an identity?

Ernest Becker, in *The Denial of Death*, wrote presciently about the sweeping changes that secularism was bringing to the issue of identity. At one time people got their self-image and self-regard from connecting to something more important than their individual interests—to God, or family, or nation, or some cultural configuration of all three. Now we have to go get our own identity. Some do it through love and romance. He calls this the "romantic solution": "The self-glorification we now need to achieve in our innermost being, we now look for in our love partner. . . . Modern man fulfills his urge to self-expansion in the love object just as it was once fulfilled in God."[37]

Becker goes on to say that this is a doomed project. He explains in detail all the ways that our overdependence enslaves us to the other person so either we end up overly controlling them or they us. "If your partner is your 'All' then any shortcoming in him becomes a major threat to *you*. . . . We see that our gods have clay feet, and so we must hack away at them in order to save ourselves, to deflate the unreal over-investment that we have made in them in order to secure our own apotheosis. . . . But not everyone can do this because many of us need the lie in order to live. We may have no other God and we may prefer to deflate ourselves in

order to keep the relationship, even though we glimpse the impossibility of it and the slavishness to which it reduces us."[38]

Finally, he concludes: "After all, what is it that we want when we elevate the love partner to the position of God? We want redemption—nothing less. We want to be rid of our faults, our feeling of nothingness. We want to be justified, to know that our creation has not been in vain. . . . Needless to say, human partners cannot do this."[39]

If we base our identity on love we come to the same cul-de-sac that we saw with the novelist who got his identity from work. Just as he could not bear poor work, so we will not be able to handle the problems in our love relationships. The writer *had* to believe he is a great writer in order to be *sane*. We will *have* to believe our love relationship is okay—if it goes off the rails, we lose our sanity. Why? If our very identity is wrapped up in something and we lose it, we lose our very sense of self. If you are getting your identity from the love of a person—you won't be able to give them criticism because their anger will devastate you. Nor will you be able to bear their personal sorrows and difficulties. If they have a problem and start to get self-absorbed and are not giving you the affirmation you want, you won't be able to take it. It will become a destructive relationship. The Western understanding of identity formation is a crushing burden, both for individuals and society as a whole.

Modern Identity Is Fracturing

In the last chapter we talked about how the secular view of freedom as the absence of restrictions undermines community. Taylor argues (and Bellah demonstrates) that the secular view of identity and self does the same thing. "This view," argues Taylor, reduces relationships and community to things "purely instrumental in their significance."[40] In traditional cultures our most crucial relationships are more important than our individual self-interest, because our identity depends on honoring the relationships. Therefore they are inviolate and we are solidly

embedded in them. A traditional human community, according to Bellah, was "an inclusive whole, celebrating the interdependence of public and private life."[41] Your private life—whom you have sex with, how you spend your income, how you spend leisure time—was of public significance. It mattered to the rest of your family, neighborhood, and community, because it was incumbent upon you to conduct your whole life in a way that supported the common good and the health of the social whole.

But when, as in the modern approach, you bestow significance on yourself, then your individual interests are more important than any social tie. If a relationship is satisfying to you, you keep it only so long as it pleases you. "It fosters a view of relationships in which these ought to subserve personal fulfillment. The relationship is secondary to the self-realization of the partners. On this view, unconditional ties, meant to last for life, make little sense."[42] Human communities become thinned out into "lifestyle enclaves" or "social networks" in which people connect, flexibly and transiently, only to people like themselves. They relate to one another around similar tastes in music or food or common wealth status (such as in a gated housing development), but their private and public lives are no one else's business. It is well documented that under the conditions of the modern, individualistic self, social ties and institutions are eroding, marriage and family are weakening, society is fragmenting into warring factions, and economic inequality is growing.[43]

The problems of the secular, individualist self are well documented by some of the leading thinkers of our time.[44] We cannot take any longer to explore its impact on our society and culture. But we can compare the modern self with the Christian teaching about identity and imagine the difference it can make. We will do that in the next chapter.

Seven

An Identity That Doesn't Crush You or Exclude Others

What are the alternatives to the modern identity with all its problems? Isak Dinesen, in *Out of Africa*, can help us begin to see a different way forward. She writes: "Pride is faith in the idea God had, when he made us." A person who has grasped this "is conscious of the idea, and aspires to realize it. He does not aspire to happiness or comfort, which may be irrelevant to God's idea for him. His success is the idea of God, successfully followed through, and he is in love with his destiny." In other words, the believer in God takes hold of the divine design and calling and finds him- or herself in it, just "as the good citizen finds his happiness in the fulfillment of duty to the community." But, she writes, many people "are not aware of any idea of God in the making of them, and sometimes they make you doubt that there ever has been much of an idea, or else it has been lost, and who shall find it again? They have to accept as success what others warrant it to be so, and to take their happiness, and even their own selves, at the quotation of the day. They tremble, with reason, before their fate."[1]

In this remarkable passage Dinesen recognizes three paths toward identity, each taken by a different group of people. First there are those looking outward. These are the traditional people who look to their duty and role in the community to find a self. Then there are those who look inward. They do not believe in any cosmic order but, as we have seen, this means they must rely on competition and shifting fashions to find self-esteem. They are no freer than members of traditional society, for they must take "their happiness, and even their own selves, at the quotation of the day." No wonder they "tremble, with reason, before their fate."