

On Being Yourself
Donna Bobin
Upbeat
V.3, n. 7, 1970

Judging from the admiration held by young people for those individuals who are “doing their own thing,” one could conclude that today the emphasis is on expression of self. The often-heard admonition to “do your own thing,” however, bears a little looking into. The stress in the phrase is obviously on being yourself, on doing your *own* thing, on expressing *your* self; and the goal is obviously not a slavish imitation of others --- either those who conform or those who don’t. It is equally obvious that to express yourself, you must know your self, you must know who you are. Paradoxically, the first step to knowing oneself is searching for oneself. It is strange to think that any individual wouldn’t know who he is, but there are countless people who know very little about themselves.

Many people, no doubt, are put off by the idea of searching for themselves, of probing into their values and desires; teenagers especially are because they are often almost obsessed with the idea of spontaneity. To many teenagers, being oneself means doing what one feels like doing. In other words, the expression of self requires no self-examination but only immediate action or an immediate outpouring of emotions. Unfortunately, things are not that simple.

The teenager’s strong need for group acceptance often causes him to respond as the group expects rather than as he wants to, and the result is often not true *self* expression. In addition, the teenage years are marked by many changes in values and emotion; and what seems like a good idea at one stage can be looked upon later as a mistake. Grounded in a firm concept of self, spontaneity has its merits; without knowledge of self, however, “spontaneity” can degenerate on one hand into conformity and on the other hand into self-indulgence. Granting, then, that self-expression requires a knowledge of oneself and a knowledge of self requires a search for self, how do you go about finding yourself and doing your own thing?

Perhaps a good place to begin is with a definition of “self” or what some psychologists call the ego. The ego is defined by Luella Cole as “that sense of identity which provides the ability to experience one’s self as something that has continuity and sameness, and to act accordingly.” The fact that the ego has continuity and sameness, however, doesn’t mean that it is unchanging. The ego is flexible, and it constantly alters as the individual grows and develops, as his experience widens and his interests and values change. Although it alters, the ego does not change too radically; instead it provides a fairly stable framework into which new experiences must be integrated. The importance of the ego or self image or sense of identity is that it provides the goals which motivate individual behavior. The ego is the individual’s sense of the kind of person he is and the kind of person he wants to be, and he acts according to this sense of himself.

The simplicity of the statement, “Be yourself,” tends to obscure what this involves. In order to be yourself, you must know what your goals and needs are, and you must act accordingly. Of course, the goals mentioned are not only occupational goals but character goals as well, the complete concept of the kind of person you want to be. The difficulty in being your self comes from confusion about goals and conflicts. The conflicts can be within one self or with friends, parents, or other authority figures. Perhaps you have already experienced the conflict of wanting to be a sociology major and having your parents insist that you become an engineer or having your friends talk you into doing something that you yourself didn’t think was right.

Teenagers are in an especially difficult situation because they are beset by so many changes: there are the rapid physical changes involved in growing; the emergence of sexual urges; the need to fit oneself into a masculine or feminine role which is none too well defined in our society at this time; the oncoming maturity which presents social, familial, and economic problems; the need for social status; and the need to establish some kind of permanent occupational objectives. All of these add to the confusion and the conflicts and the pressures, and the only road out is that of discovery of self.

Discovery of self begins with a clarification of goals. Rollo May, in his book *Man’s Search for Himself*, observes that many people today are little more than sets of reflecting mirrors. These people reflect what their parents expect them to be, what their friends expect them to be, what society expects them to be; what these people lack is a sense of self that would guide them in becoming what they want to be. In order to avoid being this kind of person and to become what you want to be, it is necessary to sort out what you want to be from the expectations of others. This doesn’t mean that you are to disregard completely the advice and expectations of others. As much as teenagers dislike recognizing the fact, adults have had more experience than they have.

Parents, for example, have been in love, married, and had children; they have worked for a living and been out in the world; and they do know a little of what life is about. It is, indeed, foolish to disregard good advice and to respond negatively just to assert one self. It is equally foolish to suppress completely one’s desires and become a set of reflecting mirrors. The best course of action is to decide what kind of person you yourself want to be, using all the good advice you can get.

Goals and Conflicts

It is necessary, though, to set realistic goals. You have to be honest with yourself in assessing your abilities and your needs, and you must not be overly optimistic in your expectations. As far as job objectives go, this means taking into consideration where your strengths and weaknesses lie. If you never got above a D in math, it is unrealistic to think that you can get through college as an engineering major. You must also be honest in assessing if the job you want to work at for the rest of your life will provide you with the kind of life you want to lead. Of course, salary is important in this assessment, but so is self-fulfillment.

Personal goals require the same kind of realistic and honest appraisal. Overly optimistic personal goals are as dangerous as overly optimistic vocational goals because they create expectations that can't be filled. It is always important to separate reality from daydreaming and wishful thinking. This doesn't mean that goals must be set so low that they can be reached without any effort; it does mean that there must be the possibility that the goals may be reached and are not just idle daydreams.

Once goals are clearly defined, your next step is a realistic and rational appraisal of how to achieve these goals and some honest effort put forth to achieve them. Wishing doesn't make things happen, and there is very little magic in the world. Saying that you want to be a doctor or that you want to be popular or independent won't make these things happen. It is only you who can try to achieve them.

Even careful plans, however, can meet obstacles, which leads us to our next topic, response to frustration. Not all goals people set can be achieved; circumstances or one's own nature can keep one from achieving goals, and it is quite common and normal to encounter obstacles. It is very important how one deals with such situations, for some responses to the frustration of non-achievement of goals can be rather damaging to the individual. The response produced by obstacles to goals is frustration, a feeling of helplessness, disappointment, and inadequacy; and it is not frustration but the response to frustration that can have harmful effects. Obstacles produce frustration which produces tension, and tension doesn't lessen until the individual can adjust to the obstacles.

For minor obstacles, some extra effort can often be the solution. Major obstacles, however, often require some major adjustments, such as compromise of finding substitute means of satisfying desires and goals. There are various means that people use to deal with frustration of goals, and some methods are healthier than others. In other words, some methods, used in moderation, are normal and healthy, for they allow the ego to develop and to attempt a reconciliation of conflicting forces. Some can be dangerous if they are habitually used to deal with problems and unpleasant realities.

Repression is one form of dealing with a conflict and as the name implies, it involves the suppression of impulses and goals which the ego feels are wrong. The individual simply denies the existence of such impulses and goals and excludes them from his consciousness. Since repression involves excluding impulses from consciousness, it is often difficult for an individual to recognize when he is repressing impulses. Repression is not a very good method of dealing with conflicts since the conflicts remain although they are covered up. It is, however, a useful means of gaining time until a more permanent solution may be found.

Distortions

Distortion of reality is a second method of dealing with conflicts, and it takes many forms. A person may rationalize or find other reasons for a situation too painful to accept. For example, a student who doesn't get a good grade on a report may blame the teacher by charging that he or she grades too hard rather than accept the painful conclusion that he didn't write a very good report. There is also segregation or keeping

different values separate so they don't conflict with each other. This method of distortion is evident, for example, in Sunday Christians who go to church on Sunday and who behave in a very unchristian-like way the rest of the week. These people find it impossible to apply Christian principles during the week and are unwilling to give up Christian ideas so they keep both although they must be kept separate.

Another method of distortion is saying that a goal is worthless because one cannot achieve it. The final method of distortion is displacement. One simply transfers a destructive emotion to someone other than the person who generated the emotion. For example, a young boy may be beat up by the local bully and may be unable to retaliate by punishing the bully because of his strength. The young boy may then go home and yell at or hit his younger brother. This allows the young boy to release his hostility against a person who is not too threatening.

Ignoring or retreating from reality is also a means people use to escape conflict. This response involves, among other things, an escape into fantasy or daydreaming. Of course, all people day-dream to some extent, and it is healthy as long as one can still recognize what is fantasy and what is reality. It does become dangerous, however, when one substitutes daydreaming for real activity or when one is no longer able to distinguish between fantasy and reality. One can also respond to conflicts violently. Vandalism and delinquency are common examples of physical aggression; and bitter criticism of others, cruel jokes played on others, rumors started about others and the like are examples of verbal aggression.

The healthiest means of dealing with conflicts is compromise. If you aren't good at sports, find something else you're good at, find a substitute. If you find yourself beset by destructive emotions, such as anger, channel your energies into some other area. Don't hit your brother; take a walk instead. Of course, finding alternative goals or alternative methods of behavior is not always easy. Sometimes it is extremely disappointing to realize that some goals must be abandoned, but you can hardly let your life grind to a halt because certain goals can't be reached. There are alternatives that can be just as rewarding and just as satisfying.

As mentioned earlier, doing your own thing is not as simple as it sounds. It involves probing into yourself and understanding yourself. It involves making decisions and expending effort. It involves encountering conflicts and resolving them. It is easier, perhaps, to accept goals and values of others, to be a set of reflecting mirrors. But one pays for this ease by the loss of self, and it is only through expressing the self that one finds true freedom and happiness.