

The Travelers Within



The Undiscovered Self

“Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.”

— Aristotle

To “know yourself” appears to be an anomaly of the obvious, a natural outcome of observing one’s lifelong preferences, values, opinions and patterns of behavior. But this lackadaisical personal inventory of affects and attributes has nothing to do with who we really are. The wise life traveler who is truly on the way is aware that until they know themselves beyond the obvious self they assume themselves to be, they will know nothing of who they really are. That is to say, there is a deeper dimension of “selfhood” residing within us that beckons to be discovered.

But what is so important about discovering this undiscovered self and why exert the effort and take the risk of uncovering it? Isn’t life challenging enough without adding a litany of philosophical mumbo jumbo into the mix?

Perhaps, but consider this . . . what if there is a much wiser aspect of who you are residing within you that refuses to endorse your reactive and counterproductive attitudes and behaviors? And what if because you’ve ignored its wisdom for so long its only way of getting your attention is to sabotage your goals, thwart your will and infuse self-doubt and even self-loathing into your waking consciousness?

Aristotle, Alexander the Great’s personal philosophical advisor was no lightweight when it came to tapping into the power of undiscovered self so exploring his opening quote is prudent. Let us ask what it means to “know oneself,” and particularly one’s “undiscovered self.” To answer we must first consider that there is a kind of ego arrogance that accompanies assuming we know who we are based on our personal inventory and lifelong experience.

There is nothing wrong with honoring one’s lifelong experience, but it is all too easy from this firm stance to make the mistake of touting our personal experience as fact, rather than as our ego’s preferred interpretation or self-serving view. Taking this notion a step further, there is a

vast majority of people who confuse who they are with what they've accomplished, what they have or do not have, or with positions of self-importance they've inflated themselves into.

Said another way, we humans being have a tendency to define ourselves as “prestigious things” rather than as a “presences of being.” Consider the noun-based label we apply to ourselves called, “human beings,” rather than the verb-based presence of “humans” who are “being.” While the difference is merely a juxtaposition of the letter “s,” this misplacement of plurality ignores the dynamic nature of who we are, which in turn makes way for all sorts of ego-based struggles and miseries to arise in our lives.

It is from this misplaced ground of non-being that the afflictions of depression, anxiety, addiction, apathy and unhappiness arise. And it is the calloused assumption of our obvious self that must be softened before these afflictions can be healed as attempting to do so without first reconditioning the ground from which they arise treats the symptoms and not the cause.

Thankfully life's humbling lessons provide the “moisture” for our softening and reconditioning. Our tears of sorrow, grief, pain and loss while devastating, are vital agents of grace that penetrate the crust of our denial, soften us and open us to the nurturing presence of being.

And while the ideal of living a life of grace and nurturance is attractive, there are many who refuse to venture into the terrain of their undiscovered self to do the necessary work. Carl Jung, the Father of Analytical Psychology and of the revelations of the Undiscovered Self spoke of the refusal in this way, *“It is generally believed that anyone who descends into the unconscious gets into a suffocating atmosphere of egocentric subjectivity, and in this blind alley is exposed to the attack of all the ferocious beasts which the caverns of the psychic underworld are supposed to harbor.”*

The irony is that it's this very refusal to venture deep that calls forth the ferocious beasts into our lives. The more unwilling we are to discover and accept our true nature in all its gentle and ferocious facets, the more we expose ourselves to their unconscious influences; and specifically the ferocious more than the gentle. This is so because we've been taught to “accentuate the positive and suppress the negative,” a Pollyanna approach to living that imprisons our darker urges to the point they must seek twisted venues of expression beyond our reign of control.

Knowing one's self as a “presence of being” is a totally different approach to self-exploration, but one that is vital to living a wise, fulfilling and nurturing life. For just as Aristotle points out, “wisdom begins with knowing yourself,” but with the added caveat of “beyond yourself.”



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