

Who am I

We never fully answer this question, because we are always growing and changing. New experiences and new learning, affects our view of the world and our own understanding of ourselves and others. Even the cells in our body are completely replaced every decade. Yet, despite these changes, our fundamental self remains the same. So 'Who am I?'

We develop all sorts of images about ourselves, sometimes based on our comparison with others or the expectations we develop about ourselves. We carry within our genetic make up all sorts of inherited characteristics, that make each of us unique. Taking all this into account, we are a combination of what we think, believe, value, are scared of and are committed to.

We 'show' a different part of ourselves to different people and most of what we communicate is done without words. Body language conveys things about us that we might not intend to communicate, and at the same time as we know, some of this can be misinterpreted. We can choose to hide some of our inner thoughts and feelings, or reveal them only to certain people at certain times. We receive feedback from other people that can encourage us to disclose more, or incline us to 'close up'.

It is worth asking the question, "Who really knows you?" John Powell, the American Jesuit psychologist suggested we don't really know who another person is until we know how they feel. Without that dimension, we only know facts and details 'about' a person.

This sense of how we feel about ourself is very well captured in the famous poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer 'Who am I'. Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor famous for developing the notion of 'religionless Christianity'. He was arrested by the Gestapo and charged with being involved in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. He was hanged three weeks before the end of the war.

A poem was found among his papers after his death which captures the questions Bonhoeffer asked of himself, and the contrasting opinions of those around him. They saw him as calm and controlled despite his imprisonment, yet he admitted feeling afraid and restless. He asked himself which 'him' was the real one? Was he only what he knew of himself or was he also what others thought of him? In this regard he touched into the experience that each of us has. We sometimes find ourselves a mystery to ourselves and at others times a contradiction to ourselves.

Our impression of others can be totally different to their inner reality. We sometimes learn about or read about people who have lived double lives and have managed to deceive all sorts of people who know them. Some people even manage to deceive themselves and as Richard Rohr OFM suggests, "we are, each one of us, a mass of contradictions".

To reach maturity it is suggested we must negotiate three stages. First, know yourself. Second, be yourself, and third, forget yourself. Being yourself is a struggle and sometimes it is a challenge, especially if it means standing up for 'your' truth against popular opinion. An example of this is captured well in the Les Miserables story when Jean Valjean decides he must declare his true (convict) identity, 24601, to save an innocent man being sent to prison. Even disclosing ourselves to others can be a struggle, especially if we suffer from a lack of confidence.

The Johari window is a helpful model for appreciating the four components of every person's relationships with others. The model uses four words, Open, Hidden, Blind and Mystery to explain how we have a part of these within ourselves. There is a part within us that we are open to revealing and that others can readily 'see'. There are some things we choose not to reveal to others (hidden). There is another part of ourselves that we are blind to, though some others can see this part in us. There is another part that is unknown to us (mystery) and others do not know it either. These realities highlight how hard it is to know and be yourself.

When it comes to life in our Passionist Family Group, it is important not only to consider how we reveal ourselves to one another but also how we can find ways to make this possible. If the environment in which we meet encourages us to be ourselves, we can benefit personally and communally. If we can find ways to help each other to share our stories we will discover new levels of appreciation not only about others, but about ourselves.

Masks and Roles

Everyone at some stage seeks to protect or hide their 'false self' (ego) by putting on a mask. In fact, masks only serve to prevent others from really knowing who we are, so as we mature we should be letting go of our masks. We will always have some because they reflect our 'attachments' and our addictions.

There are all sorts of masks that people wear, such as 'the Always Right' mask. This person never or rarely loses an argument and acts with a sense of certainty, despite harbouring self-doubts. The clown seeks attention and deflects anything serious by making a joke of things. The cynic is disillusioned because things have not worked out as hoped. The cynic smirks and mocks the success of others because of his/her own hurt. The loner avoids mixing with others by preferring to be alone; the bookworm uses the excuse of studying to avoid interacting; the expert always expresses ideas so as to sound impressive and never admits to uncertainties. There are quite a number of other masks people wear.

Another reality that can make being yourself difficult is that we are called on to 'play' roles, whether through the relationships in our family (e.g. parent, sibling, uncle, aunt, grandparent) or at work, in our social and church groups etc.

The roles we exercise can become 'us'. Often people define themselves by their employment (e.g. 'I'm John, I am an accountant'!). Even in their senior years, children will act differently with their elderly parents than their true nature suggests. A referee will act with firmness as will a police officer, and there are occasions when their role can impact on each other. A referee could discipline a police officer during a sporting event and soon afterwards the police officer could discipline the person who had been refereeing!

If you don't know who you are, or you don't try to be your real self even while exercising different roles, it will be difficult for people to know you and love you as you are. If that's the case, what kind of life do you have?

In our Passionist Family Groups, we hope to create an environment where people don't have to perform to win acceptance from others, but instead can be accepted as they are. This is the promise of any true family. Each member, and especially those who exercise leadership should be seeking to find ways that encourage others to share their story so we can know and love one another as we are.

Have you had a monthly get together that has allowed people to show another side of themselves?

Have you had a monthly get together that has allowed people to tell each other not only events that have been important in their life but how they feel about them?