



Image credit: Crystal Kells - Social Media

The Simplest and Most Profound Question: Who Am I?

Published on 6 June, 2017

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“Know thyself.” It was an adage among the ancient Greeks. After all, the reasoning went, what good is knowing *things* if one does not know one’s *self*. Millennia later, as I grew up in 20th-century America, it wasn’t uncommon to hear people speak of finding themselves, or of taking journeys of self-discovery.

Shallow is the person who does not at some time ask, “Who am I?” Sad is the person who is never able to answer it. It is, simultaneously, the simplest, most-profound and perhaps the most perplexing of all questions. In one form or another, it may be the most-frequently-asked question in high school commencement speeches. I ask the question anew as I ponder a photo on Yahoo News of 5-year-old Cian, a boy, dressed in a pretty, red-and-white dress.

It’s Why We Have Religions

Most religions delve deeply into the question of self-identity. Buddhism, for example, can be summed up in its phrase “Atman is Brahman.” Essentially, one becomes fulfilled or complete when he embraces the idea that his individuality is swallowed up in the cosmic entirety. A

Buddhist might say, “One becomes everything when he realizes he is nothing.” And one becomes nothing by denying his desires—if not literally, then at least in abstract terms. By the way, I don’t buy into that worldview.

Christianity’s great apostle Paul struggled with his identity. In his letter to the church in Rome, he wrote:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. (Romans 7:15-18)

Paul’s struggle speaks of the reason we so often grapple with our identity. Essentially, we’re asking, “What kind of a person behaves this way?” Something inside tells us our selfish desires and behaviors are wrong, but it’s also clear that engaging in those behaviors provides a reward.

A bit later in that same letter, Paul added, “Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live (Romans 8:12-15). Paul understood that pursuing selfish desires has rewards—and costs.

Why do I choose to do things that violate my conscience? Is the temporary reward worth the long-term costs? Who am I?

The New Identity Question

While the age-old identity questions dealt with the inner person—the soul—the new identity question also encompasses the body. *What must I do to become the person who can fulfill my desires?* In this view, one is fulfilled not by denying one’s desires, but by pursuing them with zealous abandon. So, if something in my inner being suggests I can find fulfillment in transitioning to “another” gender, then I must do everything possible to accomplish that physical transition.

This view says I should not question my self-centered desires; instead, I must understand that desires are the first step in the pursuit of self-realization. No one and nothing, then, will be allowed to hinder my pursuit of my self-fulfillment.

A Sad Future

If pursuit of desire-based self-fulfillment is good for one, then it must be good for others as well, right? And if those others are children, then so much the better. If little Johnny asks why boys wear pants and girls wear dresses, then why not show him that such ideas are antiquated and repressive? Why not put him in a dress to show him that gender is merely a state of mind? Or—if you’re a true progressive—why wait until little Johnny asks? Why not prompt the thought by dressing him in clothing traditionally reserved for girls? Why not stir up a new desire?

And that brings me back to Crystal Kells, a photographer from Ontario, Canada. Ms. Kells is doing exactly that—arousing a new desire—in her 5-year-old son, Cian, whom she dresses in girls' clothing. She says, "We are teaching him that girls have a vagina and boys have a penis. He doesn't use his penis to be able to wear a dress, nor does he use his penis to operate the dolls and cars he plays with."

He does not use his penis, but he does use his imagination. How will wearing those dresses affect his imagination and his self-perception? Will being dressed in girls' clothing cause gender confusion and turn little Cian into a transgender? Only time can provide the certain answer to that question, but decades of ministry to transgenders and their family members lead me to guess it will. If so, statistics—as well as anecdotal evidence—point to a rough future for Cian.

Transgenders are more likely than cisgenders (people who retain their birth gender) to rate their health as poor, to have a higher body-mass index, to have untreated health problems, to be depressed and to have cognitive problems.¹

No wonder they struggle. More than most, they find it difficult to understand their true identity, and such understanding is the foundation for emotional wellbeing.

No Answer

I grieve at the photo I saw of little Cian playing in the street, dressed in a cute, little red-and-white dress. It is not natural. I suspect that Cian's mother's choice to dress her little boy in girls' clothing—and to celebrate doing so—will raise even more identity questions as the boy grows. I suspect Cian will at least become a lifelong crossdresser—and likely will also undergo sex-reassignment surgery. I suspect that throughout his life Cian will struggle (and never succeed) to answer life's most profound and perplexing question: Who am I?

¹*"Being transgender in America may be hazardous to your health, study shows," Los Angeles Times, <http://www.latimes.com/science/sciencenow/la-sci-sn-transgender-health-disparities-20170530-htlstory.html>*

Denise Shick is the author of [My Daddy's Secret](#) and [Understanding Gender Confusion: A Faith Based Perspective](#).

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