

# Who Are You Really?

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## Reading

from Indian writer and poet, Rabindranath Tagore:

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures. It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and in flow. I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

## Sermon

The American spiritual teacher Ram Dass has over the years in one or another of his books shared this story of his 1970 encounter with a state trooper on the New York Thruway. Ram Dass was driving what he describes as “a 1938 Buick limousine converted into a camper.” It was, he says, a car that necessitated his driving slowly.

And as he drove, he was, he tells us, chanting to Krishna; and he was steering with one hand and counting his mala prayer beads with the other. As he puts it: “I was ecstatically hanging out with blue Krishna and driving along the New York Thruway when I noticed a blue, flashing light in my rearview mirror.” (Ram Dass quotes taken from his book *Polishing the Mirror*.)

It wasn’t Krishna of course – it was a state trooper.

So then came the stop and the usual tight-lipped request for license and registration. But through all of this Ram Dass writes that he “was looking at him as Krishna... Wouldn’t Krishna come as a state trooper?” Ram Dass wonders. After all, “Christ came as a carpenter.”

In that spirit, then, Ram Dass says he would have given the state trooper, aka Krishna, anything: flowers, love, his very life!

Well, the trooper spent some time back at his car, as troopers do in such situations, then returned. Then he asked Ram Dass what was in a box on the seat.

“Mints. Would you like one?”

Then the trooper told Ram Dass he was driving too slowly, and should drive off the thruway if he needed to drive that slowly.

“Yes, absolutely,” replied Ram Dass, who then comments to us: “I was just looking at him with such love.”

Ram Dass goes on with his telling of the story:

If you put yourself in the role of a state trooper, how often do you suppose they get looked at with unconditional love, especially when they’re in uniform? So after he had finished all the deliberations, he didn’t want to leave, but he had run out of state trooper-ness. So he stood there a minute, and then he said, “Great car you’ve got here!”

That allowed me to get out.

So for a while they admired the car together, kicked the tires, and so on.

Then we ran out of that. I could feel he still didn’t want to leave.. I mean, why would you want to leave if you’re being unconditionally loved?

So finally he ran out of digressions. He knew he’d have to come clean that he’s Krishna, so he said, ‘Be gone with you,’ which wasn’t state trooper talk, but what the hell. As I got into the car and started to drive away, he was standing by his cruiser. I looked in the mirror and saw that he was waving at me.

Tell me, was that a state trooper or was that Krishna?”

Well, it *was* 1970 – flower power, beads, love and peace, and so on. But all that is really beside the point. Better to ask how does Ram Dass want us to take this story in 2015? To put it more directly: what might it mean to say the state trooper was, actually, Krishna?

Maybe the answer is as simple (on the surface) as the question: that each of us is Krishna, and usually – maybe always – do not own up to it, not even to ourselves.

Or we could put all this another way. *Something* in that encounter loosened the trooper’s usual way of experiencing himself. Maybe Ram Dass’s friendliness and his lack of defensiveness metaphorically disarmed the trooper, so that he could for a few minutes step out of or let go of his role as state trooper and just be another human being. Something like this might also happen to a trooper (as to any of us) when hanging out with good friends, or holding a newborn – though even in those settings he might just be exchanging one role for another, trooper for friend or father.

So: Who *do* we think we really are? Is there, might there be, some sort of underlying identity beneath all the roles we play, beneath or other than our identities within our families or places of work and so on? Or are we nothing but these shifting, sometimes even conflicting, identities and roles?

We all know, to begin with, how dramatically different we can be, we behave, we even feel in one context or another.

This starts pretty early. I expect most of us remember how differently we behaved, we were, we felt maybe particularly during our teen years with our parents or other adults on the one hand, and with our friends on the other.

The pattern only continues as we display in some sense different selves with different people, in different contexts, and at different times.

So: does this mean that all these roles or selves we play are false or bad?

Not at all. This is all quite normal. But what it does suggest is that the roles, these outward ways that we are, may not be the whole story of who we are.

What, then, is the whole story? Who are we really?

Ram Dass has put it this way, echoing most of the world's spiritual traditions: We live, he says, on or from three different "planes of consciousness":

The first is the ego, the plane of personality. The second is our individual soul. The third is the mystic part of us. Quakers call it the still small voice within, or the inner light. Hindus call it the Atman. We can also think of it as the One.

"Ego" may have a negative ring to it, but we're not talking about "egotism," that inflated, even narcissistic sense of self that can be really unpleasant in others (and not so comfortable in ourselves either), but simply ego as the experience of being an individual separate from other individuals, each of us with unique characteristics, talents, skills, shortcomings, faults, and on and on, each of us playing different roles at different times, all of which is necessary, absolutely necessary as we navigate our lives, day by day – minute by minute for that matter.

This is so important that the first years, even decades of our lives are typically and quite normally devoted to developing and *strengthening* the ego, the individual self. Carl Jung calls it "individuation." Necessary!

But here's the thing. A time comes when ego, individual self, has done its primary work of getting us going in the world as we discover our way of being in the world, our calling, our vocation, our work, our ways of being with family and friends. All good!

*But*... if we continue to believe we are *only* ego, *only* personality, we may be wildly limiting ourselves, putting ourselves quite unnecessarily in a box... which can become a sort of prison.

In this regard, in our Upanishads study group someone once mentioned how at a particular memorial service the person had been beautifully remembered... in lovely and moving ways... but all said and done it seemed as though something had been left out. What? Well, the only word we could come up with for what had been left out was "mystery."

Well, death is surely a mystery, isn't it? I don't know about you, but I am struck, awestruck really, each time – and there have now been many, many times – I experience that someone I've known... *is* no longer, certainly is no longer in bodily form.

The mystery, profound beyond words, of death.

But isn't *life* every bit as much mystery?

And if we don't at least now and then – at whatever stage of life – feel the plain *strangeness* of being alive, the mystery of consciousness, the miracle of lungs breathing and heart beating and brain thinking thoughts... are we perhaps missing the better part of what it means to be human? Seeing only the proverbial tip of the iceberg of our humanness, of consciousness, of who each of us is?

Well, the good news is that at a certain point – often called the “mid-point” of life, though it can be experienced at different actual times for each of us – most of us do begin to suspect that ego, individual personality, is *not* the whole story of who we are. Sometimes this is in relation to some event, some failing or falling, as the Franciscan teacher Richard Rohr has put it, something that pulls us up short. (See his book *Falling Upward*)

Isn't it telling, in this regard, that so many of the world's spiritual geniuses had their awakening experience more or less at a mid-point: Jesus probably in his 30s, Buddha (a little earlier in his life, but after marriage and becoming a father), Mohammed?

Or that closer to our time we see that Thoreau, in his thirties, at a time when nothing else in his life seemed to be working for him, went to live in a cabin at Walden Pond “to live deliberately... to learn what life has to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I have not lived.”

Or that contemporary Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron at about the same age found her vocation as a Buddhist practitioner, teacher, and nun following the pain and dislocation of two divorces.

But this passage to a deeper knowing of who it is we really are is not just for spiritual geniuses or great leaders and teachers. It is for all of us, if we're paying attention when we begin to get inklings, glimmerings, that our personality, our ego, our outward self is not the whole story of who we are.

At which moment we may wonder with a little *more* urgency: Okay, who am I really? Not what are the most genuine parts of my personality – but what might be altogether beneath that plane, that level of our lives – what many call soul, what Richard Rohr and others call “True Self” (see Rohr's book, *The Immortal Diamond*).

Here's one way to get a glimpse of soul. Go to a big city where you are highly unlikely to bump into anyone you know. Walk the streets with no one by your side that you know. Notice what that feels like.

Much as I love the ease and comfort and at home-ness that comes of walking the streets of Hingham and seeing plenty of people I know, feeling embraced by community... there is a kind of liberation in walking the streets of New York City, where no one knows me or what I do or the sort of person I am, no expectations. So... I can more easily just be a soul with other souls – like Ram Dass and the state trooper.

But then the trick is to bring that soul experience back to the world of family and friends and community – “where everyone knows your name.” Because wherever we go,

we are always soul as well as ego, as well as always Atman, child of God, One, Krishna, Christ.

Why might this matter? Well, whereas ego, individual personality, necessary as it is, can also create a negative feeling of separateness, soul softens the boundaries, opens us to just being with each other in love, in compassion, with the kindness that comes when we know we are all kin, all one in the end. Well, this seems more than worthwhile!

And it seems to me that this is, not incidentally, the way of living that the Pope has been inviting us to this past week – but also the Dalai Lama, Pema Chodron... it is a long list of teachers trying to help us get it!

So, here's a little experiment as a way to try to get it: for a day, or even for an hour, just tell yourself – you don't have to *believe* it – just tell yourself that each person you meet is part of the same big soul as you are, so that when you say goodbye to your family in the morning, it is soul saying goodbye to soul; and when you buy a coffee or muffin or whatever and pay the clerk, it is soul paying soul (Krishna paying Krishna).

Or just look around this morning. On one level, undeniably a hundred or so separate human beings. But is that all we are? Might it not also be true that each of us is a soul, and that together we are part of one larger soul? Can we feel that? Taste the possibility if only for an instant?

This might matter quite a lot, for each of us, for our community, for the world.

So may it be.