

Are we really who we think we are?

by Mark Pavilons

Be yourself, but always your better self. Karl G. Maeser

Karl is right, of course. I think most of us do try to be a tiny bit better each day. We have to, but it's not always easy.

We look at ourselves daily, but how often do we ask the hard questions?

When do we stare at our own reflection and ask who am I?

I asked myself that very question and was puzzled, perplexed, even dumfounded.

Who am I?

Well, today I am Mark, the husband of an incredible wife and three amazing children.

I am a homeowner, drive a car and wear jeans. I prefer comfortable shoes. I have a weakness for junk food.

I get up, take my youngest to school, and go to work. I drink coffee from a thermos all day long.

I compose, create, edit and organize in front a computer at the office. I interact with the public. I write articles.

Then, at the end of a day, I dabble in some household chores, whip up a meal then relax, watch TV and escape the madness that is the world sometimes.

But this describes a routine, a bunch of actions, motions, movements. It's almost mechanical.

They are part of me but are they me?

Now, who would I like to be? I'd like to be a better, more responsible partner, all-knowing father, wealthy entrepreneur and captain of his own ship. And yes, I'd like chicken wings, lots of chicken wings.

I don't know if any of us can accurately describe ourselves or be the people we want to be. Maybe only other people can point out who and what we are.

Perhaps our spouses, children, friends and acquaintances have the impartial and spot-on assessment of us. But isn't their judgement also subjective, governed by their own inherent bias?

So, my friends, just how do we peg ourselves, if our own perception, and that of others, can't be fully trusted?

I know I'm getting into the realm of metaphysics and existentialism, but maybe we all need to give our heads a shake now and then.

Consider them shaken.

When we really look into that mirror, beyond the glass, it can be quite revealing. It can be scary and unpleasant. It can also be quite joyful and enlightening.

But exploring the nuances of existence and exerting our free will on the world can be fraught with hurdles.

What are we to do?

Golda Meir once said we have to trust ourselves. "Create the kind of self that you will be happy to live with all your life. Make the most of yourself by fanning the tiny, inner sparks of possibility into flames of achievement," she said.

Ok, but how do we do that?

We're somewhat bound by the limitations placed on us by our culture and society. We often do what's expected of us and not what we really want to do.

Come on, who doesn't want to let their hair down, put on a ratty jean jacket, smoke pot and live off the grid? Who wouldn't love fishing all day long by the dock of the bay, or listening to music as the waves crash to shore? Who doesn't want a dune buggy?

As soon as the temperature rises above 15 Celsius, out come my colourful, Hawaiian shirts. They become my wrap, like the blanket carried by Linus on Peanuts.

They make a statement. Are they a reflection of some of my inner qualities? Yes, I suppose they are. For me, I just like them because they're colourful, loud and shout "summer."

Am I loud, boastful, outgoing and extroverted? Maybe somewhat. Is it my inner rebel trying desperately to get out into the world and scream?

Possibly.

Will Shakespeare encouraged us to be true to "thine self." If wearing such clothing keeps me honest, then so be it.

But our consciousness, inner and outer beings, all require maintenance like our homes, cars, appliances and relationships.

It's been said a change of self is needed much more often than a change of scenery.

Can it get confusing? Sure.

We sometimes stumble, thinking we know what to do, but find it doesn't work. We try something else. That too may be ineffective. We change our shirt.

But if we're constantly changing, moving, adapting and evolving, does anything of our original selves remain? Therein lies the dilemma.

Try as I may to believe it, I am not the person I once was. While that weird, funny, smart kid lies somewhere deep inside, he's been pushed aside by the adult version of myself.

This version, too, went through many iterations and model years, changing with each decade. Some of the improvements worked, others did not. Back to the drawing board time and again.

Just as clothing, music, cars and technology changed in the last five decades, so have I.

I tried to hang on to certain favourites, preferences, behaviours, but it was all in vain.

While 'Hotel California' can still be somewhat relevant, my 20-something self is not.

He is gone and largely forgotten.

My memory isn't what it once was either. I can't recall much from my pre-teen years at all, other than a 'traumatic' kindergarten incident in which I overstayed my nap time and woke up in the middle of a music class!

Many of us like to reminisce and smile about our high school or college days. Life was definitely different 'back then.'

We were different.

I have this black and white photo I took of a group of 'the boys' from school, on a trip up north. The four young men in the photo are now in their late-50s, with families, responsibilities, health concerns, stress and kids to worry about.

Are they the same as those four happy-go-lucky guys, holding stubbies on a ferry?

What happened to them? I would love for those exact individuals to get together for a reunion, but that's impossible. They're gone.

I'm gone.

We are constantly rewriting the rules, the dialogue, the requirements and specifications.

We need to be at the top of our game, because someone's constantly upping the ante.

Out with the old, and in with the new. Where does that leave us?