

Identity – Part 1 of 2

By Minni K. Ang, Ph.D. Autistic Self-Advocate

I find it fascinating how people often like to identify themselves as part of a group. For example, someone might say “I am Canadian” or “I am a Christian” or “I’m Jimmy’s mother” or “I’m in 6th grade”. Each of these introductions, in line with most introductions, defines the individual as being a member of some particular group: Canada, the Christian church, Jimmy’s family or 6th graders in general. I think individuals identify so strongly in this way because we are in essence communal creatures. I’ve yet to hear any individual human introduce themselves as “I am who I am”. The Bible describes God as saying this exact thing though. But if you think about it, saying “I am who I am” is essentially defining oneself as complete and whole, apart from any affiliation to any group at all.

However, no matter how much of a loner an individual may be, the answer to the question “Who are you?” is invariably some form of identification with a group. I think this is because we understand ourselves in context amongst others. It helps to know where or with whom we truly “belong”. When we find our identity within a group, if we take the time to reflect, we discover glimpses of our inner selves as we look into the multiple mirrors that are the other members of the group. Most of us identify with more than one group, typically a handful of groups based on family ties, common beliefs, shared interests, associated work, and geocentric identities such as nationality or ethnicity. Some of us identify with many different and sometimes diverse groups, with the handful of typical groups augmented by a plurality of belonging within the basic set of groups but also by the addition of other types of groups such as those based on shared diagnoses, a shared experience of tragedy or calamity, or some other commonality. By identifying with each of these groups and seeing ourselves in others in the different groups, we begin to better understand and accept our entire self.

My hypotheses are that we are all on our own quests to discover all the groups to which we feel we truly belong and that once we find every last one and gain the fullest understanding of ourselves that we possibly can, we find genuine inner peace and contentment that enables us to quietly say to ourselves, “I am who I am”. For most this will be a lifelong unfulfilled quest. For the few who do manage to piece together their entire unique individual puzzle, I believe they typically go on to have a disproportionate impact on the rest of humanity, a result of having their inner “cup runneth over”.

My story, just like everyone else’s, is unique. We each have our own blueprint that describes us in our own individual entirety. But just like the DNA that uniquely provides each one of us with our own genetic blueprint comprised of fundamental building blocks combined in seemingly endless different ways, the individual threads that anchor us to particular groups that provide us with that sense of belonging are fundamentally similar. Thus, anyone’s unique quest to achieve that state of complete self-understanding and feeling of truly belonging includes a plethora of threads, each capable of resonating with others linked by a similar thread. It is for this reason that certain parts of my story, or anyone’s story, will resonate with someone somewhere, while other parts may resonate with someone else somewhere else.

About the author

Let me introduce myself - my name is Minni, and I was diagnosed with Level One Autism only a few years ago, although I have of course been autistic all my life - autism is not something you catch or develop: it is rather a non-neurotypical wiring of the human brain that some of us are born with. Today I am employed full-time as a software developer by a great Canadian company, Kinaxis. I love my job - it is interesting, sufficiently challenging, and the company culture is amazing and inclusive; I was hired through their “autism at work” programme, intermediated by another great Canadian non-profit human resource agency that specializes in work placements for neurodiverse individuals, Specialisterne Canada.

My backstory is pretty complex. I emigrated to Canada in 2009, although I was here for several years as a young child when my dad did his doctoral and post-doc studies at the University of Waterloo. I have a Ph.D in Computer Applications, but also have degrees in Music and in Physics. I have worked in exceptionally diverse fields including academia, as a professional musician, in broadcasting, as a youth worker, ran my own music production start-up company, as a freelance iOS developer, as a consultant for academic and research development, and even spent a year driving a big yellow school bus!

I live in Ottawa with my spouse Sofia and our three dogs, and I have a teenage daughter who is presently studying abroad. To relax I love doing puzzles of any sort, playing one of my many musical instruments, reading or watching science fiction or fantasy, and woodworking. I have many special interests, but especially love learning how things work and creating new things for others to enjoy.



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