

Weekly Meditation, August 7, 2017

## Identity

Defining what we mean by “identity” isn’t as clear cut as you might think, given how frequently the word is tossed around.

An on-line definition of identity is, “The fact of being who or what a person or thing is.” That doesn’t tell us much, does it? You are what you is. An older print dictionary definition of “identity” says identity is, “The unity and persistence of personality, individuality.”

At present, and particularly in the world of universities and the political left, identity is defined exclusively in terms of race or ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. Who you are is your race, sexual orientation, etc. Sometimes generational labels make it in, as in “millennial.” In the current way of thinking, these categories describe and define our identity, who we are.

Such markers, that I am in my case “white” and “straight” and a “boomer,” do tell us something of course. They aren’t irrelevant. But as the sum of identity, they are reductive. They focus more on the outer than the inner person. Moreover, we moralize all of these, assigning to some positive values and to others negative. A City of Seattle “Diversity Trainer,” perhaps unwittingly, told me at a workshop on “diversity” that I was everything they were against.

Something is missed or lost when identity is reduced to these categories alone.

Identity, it seems to me, is about who we are as persons, as individuals and not just about which sociological category we inhabit. As such, identity is not only assigned it is created by our life choices and story, by the person we become and are through time and experience. Our identity is a hard-won creation and not only a label or box.

For me the older dictionary definition of identity as, “The unity and persistence of personality” comes closer to the mark, and to the mystery of the human being.

I imagine that the perspective I am advancing here would be viewed, and dismissed, by many as that of person of cultural dominance and privilege. There may be some truth in that. But not the whole truth.

Identity isn’t just a given. We aren’t wholly explained by our race or gender, our generational cohort or our sexual orientation. We are unique individuals, mysteries to ourselves and to others.

“Identity politics,” that is reducing people to external categories, is all the rage. But it’s too easy. It misses too much. And it separates us into boxes that are easily pitted against one another. Sociologist Glenn Loury’s observation that, “Those who live by the sword of identity politics, will die by it” is haunting.