

# THE QUANDARY AND IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY

**By Nadine B. Hack, CEO, beCause Global Consulting**

Who am I? *What* am I? Why am I as I am? What can I change, and what aspects of myself have I already changed? And why does any of this matter (to me or anyone else)? Well, if Socrates was right when he said “The unexamined life is not worth living” (and I believe he was), understanding, accepting and sometimes changing one’s *identity* (not personality, they’re not the same things) are the underpinnings of an examined life. I have spent and still spend considerable time examining my identity – not out of narcissism, but in order to be a better, bigger, healthier, happier person, and to increase my ability to be of service to others and contribute to creating a better, healthier, happier, more peaceful world.

Identity is a complex issue for everyone, whether how one sees one's own identity, as well as who/what one identifies with. This can have the positive effect of forming a sense of belonging/community with a specific demographic or common cause, as well as the negative effect of pitting varying "tribes" against each other through ignorance, stereotyping, conflict and lack of empathy for those outside one's own "clan." This is an ancient and familiar combination of human need and behavior since time immemorial, as world history repeatedly demonstrates through tribalism/nationalism, and wars/violent conflict rooted in race, religion, nationality gender, etc.

Personally, my identity as a woman was shaped by the women in my family and social circles. But my sense of value and purpose as a woman was enhanced by my involvement in the women's movement and greatly impacted my female identity. As young feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, my sisters and I were focused on the discrimination, objectification, and limitations placed on women in the U.S. Today, as a more mature person and older feminist, those same issues still concern me. But I have been for some time more keenly aware of and care deeply about the status and treatment of women worldwide. I also have more compassion for men who feel threatened, emasculated and confused by the empowerment of women.

I believe that in many respects, the foundation of human conflict rests on the full spectrum of relationship between men and women on a fundamental level. Today, we see positive changes in some places due to more opportunities for women – personally, professionally, economically, and politically; not complete equity, but considerable improvement. However, we are well aware of continuing discrimination and sexual harassment in virtually all sectors (business, technology, media, academia, etc.) We are also witnessing a tragic increase in sexual trafficking, and the weaponizing of rape, as well as domestic violence. Change has many sides, and a global re-examination of identity by both men and women is a key route for better interpersonal communication between the sexes and the result would be much less gender-based violence and bias.

However, gender is just one aspect of identity. Religion is also very important. A recent Pew study revealed that in the U.S. today, religion is the primary factor in identity for most people – before gender, race, politics, and nationality. Obviously, I needn't detail the faith-based conflicts that exist worldwide. But again, there is also a positive side to the role of religion in shaping identity. I was born and raised a Jew. While my *religious* beliefs have often been in flux, my sense of Jewishness in terms of culture, tradition, and time-honored values (a belief in ethics; a love of learning; the importance of charity and justice) have played a large role in shaping my identity as a person with a lifelong desire to help others and be part of larger efforts for human rights and peace.

During many of the years I lived in NYC, my Irish Catholic husband and I hosted a large Passover dinner every year attended by my Jewish family, his Christian family, and our friends and associates of other religions from around the country and around the world. It was always both a traditional Jewish celebration *and* a general celebration of freedom; a ritual of protest against slavery everywhere, past and present (...accompanied by matzo ball soup!). This is but one example of how I helped people with different religious identities learn more about each other, as well as reveal our common commitment to the importance of human dignity and acknowledge the woeful lack of it in many ways and places.

My family was liberal political activists and philanthropists, as is my husband's. Their beliefs and behaviors both shaped and dovetailed with my own. With them, and on my own, my involvement

with civil and human rights movements in the U.S., South Africa, Northern Ireland, The Middle East and globally helped expand my sense of identity as a human being, as well as increase my sense of responsibility to participate in efforts to effect social/political change. Being an activist became a fundamental part of my identity, and also allowed me to transcend my “born” identity and be more connected to “others.”

My work – the way I've both earned a living and lived my principles (holding myself accountable to walk my talk) – has always essentially been as a conciliator. I've worked with countless individuals, corporations, organizations, and governments precisely to help them clarify their identities *and* communicate/enlarge those identities through cooperative ventures with “others.” They came to see such collaboration as a route to greater cooperation and increased benefit/productivity for all sides.

For the past seven years, I've lived and worked in Switzerland. My work, as it always has done, also frequently takes me to many other parts of the world. Both have served to simultaneously strengthen and *expand* my sense of identity, as well as increase my ability to work and socialize with a broad spectrum of people. We find common ground in our basic humanity and our personal reasons for working to create a greater good – locally (wherever that might be) and worldwide. Gertrude Stein famously said “America is my country, but Paris is my hometown.” I still feel very American, but I also genuinely am a community member of my medieval French-speaking village in Suisse Romande and I primarily feel like a global citizen. Given a little time, I can feel at home almost anywhere. That has become one of the most profound changes in my identity.

Right now in America, there is widespread interest by all kinds of people in researching their backgrounds through DNA testing. They want to learn more about “who” and “what” they are. The positive side is that people who were born and raised to think of themselves as one thing are exhibiting intellectual curiosity about the more diverse and complex make-up of their past. I think, in some cases, this decreases dislike/distrust of “others,” especially when they find out they have a biological link to some of those others. The negative side is that this focus on the “contents” of one's past creates a *false* sense of identity that results in more separation in the present. You can see it in increased political partisanship, racial conflict, etc. There's a saying - and I don't know who said it first: “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human

experience.” We can debate what spiritual means, but I think the message is that we are connected *souls*, each born into a personal, physical body, and our human experience should ideally reflect our *universal connectedness* instead of our individual, tribal *separateness*.

I began by saying that identity and personality are different things. By nature of personality, I’m an optimist, curious, outgoing, those sorts of things. I was born this way. Identity is a construct. It’s about how you’re raised, what you experience, how you learn and grow, what’s important to you, your capacity for change, how you view the world. I will always be a feminist, a Jew, and a conciliator. Those are core parts of my identity. But my identity has expanded through examination, education, travel, time & aging, and a broad variety of experience (good and bad). Every person on the planet has the ability to expand their identity through these and other means *if they’re* willing to move outside the box in which they were born. With a mass expansion of identity we can collectively create a better world. Socrates would be proud of us all.

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Hack, CEO of beCause Global Consulting, named a Top Thought Leader on Trustworthy Business Behaviour globally often enough to earn a Trust Lifetime Achievement Award, advises Fortune 500 company executives, heads of state, and other leaders and organizations. Ethical Corporation shortlisted her Responsible CEO of the Year with CEOs of Patagonia, Danone, Accenture, Yes Bank, Globe Telecom and Firmenich; particularly meaningful recognition to be among the CEOs of multinationals; Global CEO named her nine of Top 100 Corporate Social Responsibility Leaders; SustMeme ranks her 60 of world’s Top 500 Sustainability Influencers. She was first woman Executive-in-Residence at IMD Business School where she maintains an affiliation. She was Board Chair of Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation and served as non-executive director on other for- and not-for profit boards. Hack speaks at meetings, graduations and conferences globally, including TEDx. She’s had articles written about or published by her including in The Financial Times, Forbes, Huffington Post, The New York Times and UN Chronicle. She’s appeared extensively on television, radio, Internet, and is on an on-line database of international women experts, SheSource. She’s accepted numerous awards including Mentor of the Year, International Outstanding Achievement, Woman of the Year, and Inspiration Award for lifetime achievement presented at the Säid Business School, Oxford University. With Master’s degrees from Harvard University and The New School, she’s a Fellow at New Westminster College, created and taught graduate courses at NYU and SNHU, and has guest lectured at many universities.

beCause Global Consulting provides a range of services including strategic action plans, leadership development, organizational change management and executive coaching. Hack is known internationally for pioneering engagement leadership work using her proprietary framework, Strategic Relational Engagement. Creating connectedness is our mission. beCause helps individuals and organizations connect to their core purpose, connect across silos in their organizations, and connect with external stakeholders, friendly and even adversarial, based on building and sustaining trust.