

Passage 1: Don Morgenson writes about why the modern world is having an identity crisis.

- 1 These are tough and confusing times we are living in. People of the 21st century are hurled into these difficult times with few precedents. If only we had a more concrete sense of self, we might be suffering less. Instead, we become obsessed with a quick or even instant sense of identity. We have become addicted to becoming someone, but we want that identity effortlessly and impatiently. We want it now. Our toiletries, our automobiles, our swimming pools and even that latest Botox injection. 5
- 2 In our search for identity, many of us have worn out our lives trying to become somebody. Some of us have twisted ourselves into knots, trying to be that somebody others might want us to be. The more fortunate among us have worked hard at finding out who we are. The question of who we are can haunt us for some time; and there are some among us who find no answer at all. In the American play "Death of a Salesman", the protagonist, Willy Loman, is a salesman who is obsessed with the American Dream, and thinks that as long as he worships the gods of financial and social success, all would be right with the world. When he was eventually lowered into his grave, however, one of his sons remarked, "Poor Willy ... he never knew who he was." His obsession with sales success had ultimately prevented him from knowing who he really was. 10
- 3 We embrace any sort of recognition that promises to give us a unique sense of being, however frail or fragile. We often hear a variety of claims to some minor distinction: having the worst appendix the surgeon had seen in 40 years of medical practice, holding the Boy Scout record for making fire by friction, having the most Friends on Facebook. Each of us needs to feel there is, somewhere in this vast and overwhelming universe, some superlative that just might describe us. And why shouldn't we want a sense of unique significance? Each of us is unique — we happen only once and we have a right to cherish this special nature. 15 20
- 4 Many years ago, in the high school I attended, it was the custom to have schoolwide who's-who contests where we selected the brightest guy and brightest girl, the friendliest, the wittiest, the smartest, etc. There were certainly a sufficient number of awards to give each of us some claim to glory — a title of some sort which might secure our place in the hallowed halls of our alma mater. I used to fret through these contests searching for something for which someone might nominate me. But nothing ever came my way; nothing contrived or even synthetic. I would have settled for that, and I would have been completely in tune with our radically synthetic society. 25
- 5 We eat meatless burgers. Our work desks look more like elaborate coffee tables. We have silicone implants, false eyelashes and suntans from either a pill or a bottle. And we have our bronze sticks to help us retain a tan through the white ravages of winter. Our sons and daughters have developed pleasant relationships that are created not by refining interpersonal skills but by using a certain toothpaste or by chewing a gum promising instant and irresistible attraction to others. We buy certain toiletries simply to exert an erotic power over all others. 30
- 6 Clearly, each of us must define for ourselves (with some help from family and friends) what kind of somebody we want to become; that is our true vocation. We too often look to the outside world to form an idea about our worth and our identity. We study the images in other people's eyes, and for the sake of such images, clothe ourselves in fashionable rubbish, the in-brand of the day, status symbols, and other dimensions of eggshell fragility. Then we wonder why a total stranger is reflected in the mirror. We have tried to invent ourselves from the outside in. We have wanted so desperately to be somebody that we have ended up being nobody where it really counts. And how incomparably sad to glance back, albeit late in our brief walk across eternity and say: "But none of that was me." 35 40

Passage 2: Giuliana Mazzoni writes about how the ‘real you’ is a myth.

- 1 We all want other people to “get us” and appreciate us for who we really are. In striving to achieve such relationships, we typically assume that there is a “real me”. But how do we actually know who we are? It may seem simple: we are a product of our life experiences, which can be easily accessed through our memories of the past. Indeed, substantial research has shown that memories are central in shaping a person’s identity. People with profound forms of amnesia typically also lose their identity – as described by neurologist Oliver Sacks in his case study of 49-year-old Jimmy G, who struggled to find meaning as he could not remember anything that happened after his late adolescence. 5
- 2 But it turns out that our identity is often not a complete or truthful representation of who we are anyway, even if we have an intact memory. Research shows that we do not actually access and use all available memories when creating personal narratives to define who we are. It is becoming increasingly clear that, at any given moment, we unconsciously tend to pick and choose what to remember. Concepts that are rather vivid and rich in detail and emotion – episodes we can re-experience – are more likely to be marked as memories. These then undergo a “plausibility test” to tell whether the events fit within our general personal history. For example, if we remember flying unaided in vivid detail, we know straight away that it cannot be real as logic would tell us that such a superhuman feat could not have been possible. 15
- 3 What is selected as a personal memory also needs to fit the current idea that we have of ourselves. We might only remember the bits that we find more reflective of the characteristics we associate with ourselves. Let us suppose you have always thought of yourself as a very kind person, and your identity was built around memories of you performing kind deeds. After a very distressing experience, however, you develop a strong aggressive trait that now better suits how you see yourself. Not only does your behaviour change, but your personal narrative and identity have too. If you were asked to describe yourself, you might include past events previously omitted from your narrative of you as a kind person, for example, instances in which you acted aggressively. 20
- 4 And this is only half of the story. The other half has to do with the truthfulness of the memories that are chosen to become part of our personal narratives. Our memories can be highly inaccurate or outright false: we often either forget details or make up memories of events that never happened, essentially creating for ourselves an identity which may not even be based on what we have actually experienced. Remembering is not like playing a video from the past in your mind. It is a highly reconstructive process that depends on several things: our knowledge of a topic or event, the image we have of ourselves, our physiological and emotional needs, and even the aspirations that we have. Indeed, brain imaging studies have shown that many parts of the brain are involved in creating personal memories. A crucial area is the frontal lobes, which are in charge of integrating all the information received about an event into a single memory that needs to make sense to us. Otherwise, the memory is either discarded or it undergoes changes, with information added or deleted. 30 35
- 5 Memories are therefore very malleable, and can be distorted and changed easily. Crucially, there are upsides to our malleable memory. Choosing memories is actually the norm, guided by self-enhancing biases that lead us to rewrite our history so that it resembles what we feel and believe now. Inaccurate memories and narratives are in fact necessary, resulting from the need to maintain a positive, up-to-date sense of self. 40
- 6 My own personal narrative is that I am a person who has always loved science, who has lived in many countries, met many people ... And my consequent identity is a scientist, a professor of Psychology, or a wanderer as befits the situation. But I might have made up those memories and narratives, at least in part. My current enjoyment for my job and frequent travels might taint my memories. Ultimately, there may have been times when I did not love science and wanted to settle down permanently. But clearly it does not matter, does it? What matters is that I am happy and I know who I am. 45