

Found [in Paradise]

Mia



Writer's Note:

"We are all just a car crash or slip away from being a different person."

– Paul Broks

Emotional and spiritual growth, maturation, and identity have been constructed and fostered within every student at The Oxbow School. I am thoroughly satisfied with my personal development, including, but not limited to, becoming more socially involved, thinking of myself more highly, recognizing and appreciating the talents and good will I have to offer, possessing the capability to forget my past and look ahead to the future, and, most importantly, loving and accepting myself for who I am, faults and all. I believe this piece is honest; I not only exhibit my growths, but also areas where I have struggled, in order to tell the full story – *my* story. I will be exploring the self: what defines it, what makes each unique, and where it originates, not only biologically in the brain, but socially, emotionally, environmentally, and within situations.

Howard Gardner, a developmental psychologist of Harvard University, has identified seven distinct intelligences that, according to Gardner, "document the extent to which students possess different kinds of minds, and therefore learn, remember, perform, and understand in different ways" (Gardner). A person can possess more than one intelligence, and these combinations produce various personalities and world perceptions. According to this theory, "we are all able to know the world through language-logical-mathematical analysis, spatial representation, musical thinking, the use of the body to solve problems or to make things, an understanding of other individuals, and an understanding of ourselves. Where individuals differ is the strength of these intelligences – the so-called profile of intelligences – and in the ways in which such intelligences are invoked and combined to carry out different tasks, solve diverse problems, and progress in various domains" (Gardner). I believe recognizing these intelligences within each individual is vital for understanding a human being. I possess musical, bodily-kinesthetic, and intrapersonal intelligence, and will present a definition of each intelligence.

Musical individuals show sensitivity to rhythm and sound. They love music, but are also incredibly sensitive to sounds in their environments. They may study better with music in the background, and can be taught by turning lessons into lyrics, speaking rhythmically, or tapping out time (Gardner). I find myself creating music using mundane objects or repeated sounds I hear. Music is a significant part of my life: I have been playing the piano for almost fourteen years and enjoy singing and composing, as well. I am able to experience and express my emotions through listening to and playing music.

Bodily-kinesthetic individuals use the body effectively, like a dancer or a surgeon, and have a keen sense of body awareness. They like movement, making things, and touching. They communicate well through body language and are taught through physical activity, hands-on learning, acting out, and role-playing (Gardner). Working interactively is the method of learning most effective for me – I learn best using my body or working directly with the subject. I have learned to greatly appreciate sculpture and its use of physical space and the sculptor himself; sculpture is an entirely bodily-immersive experience. I work well when I am able to *feel* into what process I am putting my emotions.

I believe I am mostly an intrapersonal being. Individuals with intrapersonal intelligence understand one's own interests and goals and tend to shy away from others. They're in tune with their inner feelings; they have wisdom, intuition and motivation, as well as a strong will, confidence and opinions. They can be taught through independent study and introspection.

Useful learning tools include books, creative materials, diaries, privacy and time. They are the most independent of the learners (Gardner). I like to think I operate in a very unique way. I believe art wraps its tendrils around every aspect of life. It can be found within behaviors, environments, mathematics, music, philosophies, and more, and I intend to discover as many forms of art as I can. Where art and music lie, my emotions lie. I think of myself as an individual whose journey, while sometimes excruciating and sometimes euphoric, has been thought provoking, complex, and, most important, one-of-a-kind. I am grateful for every experience I have had and plan to use most effectively and creatively all knowledge I have acquired up to this point in my life.

– Mia Smith

Our world is ever-changing. Laws, leaders, opinions, technology, interests, mindsets, and appearances are constantly shifting to create a “better future.” At the same time, there is a continuous evolution of self throughout every individual’s life that is composed of every experience. Each “self” is a unique being driven by morals, desires, environments, relationships, and perception. There is no “normal.” Each individual’s emotional and intellectual intelligence develops throughout one’s life to achieve a stage where one accepts and appreciates the uniqueness and individuality of oneself and others.

According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French phenomenological philosopher who lived during the twentieth century, “although the world of perception is very unknown territory, it seems to be the one we know best of all – we do not have to measure or calculate anything to gain access from it” (Ponty 31). Human beings see and experience the world from a limited perspective – *their* perspective. Ponty concludes, “Our experience(s) contain numerous qualities that would be almost devoid of meaning if considered separately from the reactions they provoke in our bodies” (Ponty 46). Similarly to how we conceive everyday objects, human beings “cannot be seen as [they] really [are]; the reality of [them] can only be conceived in the intellect” (Ponty 33). In other words, how someone is perceived in a particular moment is not who they are within – there are many qualities about them that might be expressed at certain times that are not witnessed. A person consists of more than what behaviors, appearances, and opinions are initially seen.

“What makes you, you?” can be answered from numerous perspectives. There is a vast expanse of knowledge regarding identity – when and how one develops. Since the collective knowledge of perception describes it as sensory and emotional, analyzing the uniqueness and spectrum of each individual’s point of view must be unimaginable. No one is entirely sure what “makes” someone’s personality, but one theory describes this phenomenon as a story the brain tells itself. Something particularly special about humans that evolved over time is their possession of introspective consciousness: we are able to examine our own thoughts and feelings (RadioLab: “Who Am I?”). Similar to “thinking about thinking,” humans can recognize and reflect upon their emotions and who they are unlimitedly, always furthering self-understanding and self-knowledge.

Others, such as Merleau-Ponty, claim that self-awareness and consciousness develops as a result of interacting with others: “Today’s psychologists emphasize the fact that we do not start out life immersed in our own self-consciousness. [We acquire this self-awareness] from the experience of other people. I never become aware of my own existence until I have already made contact with others; my reflection always brings me back to myself, yet for all that, it owes much to my contacts with other people” (Ponty 65). While it seems to Maurice Merleau-Ponty that the self develops when others are present, the perception of others’ selves is impossible. He discusses the unfortunate inseparability between one’s projected identity and how others see him or her.

“It is clear that I can only find and, so to speak, touch this absolutely pure spirit in myself. Other human beings are never pure spirit for me: I only know them through their glances, their gestures, their speech – in other words, through their bodies. Of course another human being is certainly more than simply a body to me: rather, this other is a body animated by all manner of intentions, the origin of numerous actions and words. These I remember and they go to make up my sketch of their moral character. Yet I cannot detach someone from their silhouette, the tone of their voice and its accent. If I see them for even a moment, I can

reconnect with them instantaneously and far more thoroughly than if I were to go through a list of everything I know about them from experience or hearsay” (Ponty 62).

According to Merleau-Ponty, there is no way to separate the person’s identity from someone’s subjective view of them developed based on interactions, situations, and judgments. How can scientists confirm these types of mentalities or personalities if there is no true way to “see” someone else’s “self?” Is our perception of others subjective? Do mental states exist outside our experience of them? In other words, are we able to think of others in a way completely separate from any pre-conceived notions we have about them?

Jane Loevinger (1918-2008) was a developmental psychologist who developed a theory of personality that emphasized the gradual internalization of social rules and the maturing conscience for the origin of personal decisions. She devised a system describing the stages of ego development. In these stages, “the ego was theorized to mature and evolve through stages” throughout life, as a result of “a dynamic interaction between the inner self and the outer environment” (Loevinger’s Stages). The “ego” is viewed as the frame of reference (or lens) one uses to construct and interpret one’s world. There are nine stages; the fourth through the ninth are most relevant to understanding from where the uniqueness of an individual originates.

The first through third stages (the presocial, impulsive, and self-protective stages), exist when the individual is too young to have formed any kind of self-concept or self-awareness. The fourth stage, however, the Conformist stage, describes the beginning of assimilating into society. People begin to view themselves and others as conforming to socially approved codes or norms, and being like everyone else suddenly becomes the new focus in life. At this time, individuals must choose their social place and role, and, in doing so, create their own identity. The self becomes divided into this outward persona of social roles and relations, and a private inner self (Sayers).

The fifth and sixth stages (the self-aware and conscientious stages) introduce self-acknowledgement and self-chosen standards utilizing the newly formed inner self. “[These standards are] distinguished from manners, just as people are seen in terms of their motives and not just their actions. The Conscientious subject ‘sees life as presenting choices; [s]he holds the origin of his own destiny...aspires to achievement, but by his or her own standards’” (Loevinger’s Stages). Exceptions to rules and social norms are also recognized. Individuals develop awareness that the remainder of their life can be determined by moral and ethical codes chosen by themselves.

The seventh through ninth stages of ego development demonstrate a greater appreciation and recognition of the existence of others. The seventh stage, the individualistic stage, allows for a growth in respect for both individuality and personal ties. He “shows a broad-minded tolerance of and respect for the autonomy of both self and others” (Loevinger’s Stages). Because of this new awareness of others’ individuality and characteristics, the recognition of one’s own self and needs increases significantly. A concern for emotional dependence develops. “Subjective experience is opposed to objective reality, and inner reality to outward appearance” (Loevinger’s Stages). The eighth stage, the autonomous stage, grants freedom to the person from oppressive emotional and co-dependent demands of conscience in the preceding stage. He realizes that emotional interdependence is inevitable, yet still makes great attempts to achieve individual satisfaction; self-fulfillment becomes a frequent goal. The final, ninth stage, the integrated stage, is the rarest and most difficult to attain. It is most concerned with integrating others into one’s

own life for the betterment of both oneself and the greater public. “The ego shows wisdom, broad empathy towards oneself and others, and a capacity to not just be aware of inner conflicts like the individualistic ego or tolerate inner conflicts like the autonomous ego, but reconcile and make peace with those issues.” There is a great cherishing of individuality and reconciliation to one’s destiny (Loevinger’s Stages). This must be the mental equivalent to reaching enlightenment.

The sources I have chosen pertain to my research, not only at a global level but also one that allows for much self-introspection. I am deeply fascinated by what determines a person’s defining characteristics and what makes him or her different from even the most similar person. For the “self” to thrive, one must experience a progressive and dynamic development that requires not only self-awareness but some confusion about the self as well. “Authenticity resides not in a series of immediate and momentary expressions of instinct or acts of commitment, but in a continuing pattern of activity extending through different situations and relationships and the contradictory pressures they exert and during over time” (Sayers). While the concept of “being oneself” is widespread and familiar, it can be a puzzling notion (Sayers). There is no progression without contemplation.

I have not discovered my full individuality, though I have reflected plenty for as long as I can remember. I have only skimmed the surface; it will be a lifelong journey that will lead me through more worldly and personal research. Creating art that reflects my perception of the world has always provided more than satisfactory results, and my independent and curious nature leads me to use new materials or media. My relationship with music, art, and personal discovery will forever remain a part of my human experience. I have not found the meaning of my existence yet, but I am hoping it serves to not only benefit others, but to make myself proud of who I am.

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