

ARTICLE FOR WELLBEING ARTICLE – AUGUST 2005

Title: Dare to be True

We all want to be happier, healthier and gain a greater sense of wellbeing. Yet how do we achieve this in our busy lives whilst other people have so many expectations of us and we are bombarded with so much advice on how to live?

How do you know what allegedly brings everyone else happiness, will be the same for you? At every turn, there are influences as to how you should be, what you should wear and what you need to do in order to be happy. I call these Myths – or unquestioned assumptions. Myths, created by society, impinge on our choices and, instead of increasing our options, actually reduce them by hoodwinking us into believing that only certain choices will bring us happiness. – the career, a perfect relationship, wealth. In view of this, we frequently look to others when deciding how to live our lives, how to dress, how to spend our leisure time, how many hours to work, whether or not to have children or even what movies to watch! We behave stereotypically and allow fashion and general consensus to dictate the direction of our lives.

It is not these things in themselves that are problematic since these things often provide a source of pleasure and fulfilment. It is the underpinning assumptions that somehow we all want the same things or that the same things will produce the same sense of wellbeing in us all. The media reinforces these messages, seducing us into believing that if only we can learn the formula, we will attain happiness.

A useful way to examine these assumptions is through the language of Myths – unquestioned assumptions underpinning our choices and inhibiting us living our lives on our own terms. Through practical activities, we can explore the extent to which Myths impact on our lives. We can choose from a wider array of options, explore the implications of taking different paths and accommodate the anxiety that results from choosing. Consider a Myth that impinges on our everyday experience.

The Identity Myth – You should be someone other than the person you want to be, or fitting in with others' expectations and desires will bring you happiness

Think of something you do that you can honestly say isn't done with 100% commitment and choice. It may be something you do at work or at home e.g. visiting relatives or drinking with work colleagues on a Friday night.

- Write down as much detail as possible, i.e. how often you do it, how long it takes and for how long you have been doing it.
- What are the actual benefits of doing it?
- Now write the reasons you give yourself and others for doing it.

- Outline the actual cost of continuing to do it. This may be expressed in financial terms but also in emotional, health or psychological terms.
- What would happen if you no longer did it?
- What are the real reasons that you continue to do it?

You may find it easy to identify something in your life that that *isn't* done with 100% commitment. Maybe, it has been too long since you really *did* choose to do something that you wanted to. You may recognise your life as no more than a series of commitments and duties. If so, do not become disheartened. Change is always possible and by challenging how Myths influence your life, you will begin to see that the life you are leading now is a choice and can be changed.

The answer to the last question may have aroused strong reactions in you. Once you have outlined how often you do something, the pros and cons of continuing it and the consequences of no longer doing it, the real reasons for doing it change. Often people use words like 'should', 'must', 'ought' in their answers. Such words echo elements of the Identity Myth – we must do something because someone else expects it, it is our duty, others, e.g. husbands, do it so that's what is expected. Once we get in touch with the real reasons, we find it is not because we fear others' reactions. It stems from a desire to reduce the anxiety that comes from saying 'no' to someone else or daring to be different at the expense of being called abnormal or selfish.

However our inability to trust ourselves means we don't live the life we want and we lose our ability to judge what is right for us. We stay late in the office because it is expected, because others do it; we feel alienated and different if we don't follow the crowd; we are unable to separate ourselves from stereotypical expectations of our role requirements. We also believe that if we are feeling stifled or pressurised, this is normal because others are feeling so too. Thus we relinquish our power by looking to others for what is appropriate and in the meantime our precious life is passing us by. We stay in jobs we don't like because that is what is expected. We stay with partners who make us unhappy because we assume that this is the way all relationships end up. It just isn't so – it is the *Identity Myth*.

The existential writer Rollo May highlights the importance of being true to your own self when he says:

...if you do not express your own original ideas, if you do not listen to your own being, you will have betrayed yourself. Also you will have betrayed your community in failing to make your contribution to the whole. (May 75:12)

In 'making a contribution to the whole', May does not mean going along with the expectations of the majority. He is using this term in the same way as Jean-Paul Sartre, the existential writer, who maintains that we are totally free to create who we want to be. He says that the choices we make *do* impact on others, for in choosing our life direction, we are silently stating the way we believe it should be for others. For example, if we decide to follow a particular religion we are stating how we believe it should be for others, merely because we have acted in this way.

Another element of the Identity Myth is that we expect others to feel and act as we do – they must, because the same expectations and pressures influence them. However this is not always the case.

Consider a stereotypical example. Imagine a wife who observes her husband working undesirably long hours or repeatedly drinking with colleagues he finds boring. She may extend her understanding of his values and behaviour to other situations. She may expect him to behave in *typical* husband manner – when he comes home without flowers to surprise her, she questions his love and commitment. She correspondingly interprets his behaviour as not loving her – this must be so because that's what it means to other wives. Consider how the Identity Myth might operate in your own life by completing a related exercise.

Exercise

Jot down some of the events that have happened in your life where someone else's non-conformity to a given social expectation upset you or made you feel unrecognised, unloved or unimportant. Make this personal, e.g. forgetting an anniversary. Write down as much information as possible in terms of:

Who was involved?

What happened?

What was your response?

What were your thoughts and feelings at the time?

What are your thoughts and feelings now?

Look at your answers. Typical examples include forgetting birthdays, Valentine's Day cards, not having dinner paid for when the other person asked *you* out for a date. Your response may have been to become angry, withdrawn, sulky or aggressively indifferent. Your typical thoughts or feelings may be:

- He was the one who asked me out for the date but when the bill came he expected me to share it.
- I can't believe he expects me to stay home after having children – is this something out of the dark ages?
- He didn't buy me a Valentine's Day card – how could he be so unthoughtful?

Look at these and your own responses. Do you see anything in common? These responses are firmly based on the underlying belief that there are set ways of behaving, being a man or woman, showing our love, expressing our needs or demonstrating our abilities. In allowing stereotypical patterns to dictate how we make sense of our lives and relationships, we are setting ourselves up for disappointment. By not accepting other people's uniqueness, we fall into the trap of making judgements and losing the very things we desire in the first place. The partner who is resented for forgetting Valentine's Day becomes tired and leaves; the man refusing a woman asking him for a date spends his weekends alone and the person who looks no further than norms to interpret others' behaviour becomes more confused and resentful. They might then say 'This is how it must be'. This is the Myth but it

becomes reality because *we make it reality*. We do not see reality as it is; we see reality as we are!

The cost of denying our freedom and living our lives according to some objective rightness leads to more anxiety as we live second-hand lives dictated by the demands of others. Instead we can embrace our choices, create who we want to be and live with the anxiety that meaningful living entails.

Remember, no-one has ever lived your life, thought your thoughts, walked in your shoes or lived your personal story. Why allow other people's behaviour to dictate your life direction? The Identity Myth simply says that it is desirable to be like others, regardless of whether your inner needs or desires suggest otherwise.

I do not deny that it is scary to act in ways which are sometimes contrary to the expectations of others, particularly those close to us. It takes commitment, and as Rollo May (1975:21) says:

Commitment is the healthiest when it is not *without* doubt, but *in spite* of doubt. To believe fully and at the same time to have doubts is not at all a contradiction: it presupposes a greater respect for truth, an awareness that truth always goes beyond anything that can be said or done at any given moment.

Each of us acts to bring about the consequences we desire. Ask yourself, 'What do I really want in my life?' Your answer may be marriage, money, a house by the sea, a fabulous social life. What these things do for us is to raise certain desirable psychological and emotional states. We may desire a car because it will give us the freedom to explore, the status of being able to own a new vehicle or because we believe it is what everyone at our stage of life should have. Beware of wanting something because others at your 'apparent' stage of life have it! The promise of it bringing you happiness is often a Myth.

Take a step back from the apparent benefits of having what you want. Instead, ask yourself, 'What do I want to achieve by having these things?' In general, people do things to achieve a feeling of happiness or to avoid unhappiness. However we often engage in activities that *appear* to bring us more pain. This only points to our uniqueness – we engage in things that we desire or which we are used to. The man who constantly returns to a bullying partner may do so because it is a situation he desires, simply because it is consistent with his image of himself and his worth. It is not until he changes that internal image and accepts that he is free to choose, that he will seek out more meaningful relationships. He may choose to continue with bullying partners – but this time he will question his choice from a position of strength. I imagine, though, that with greater insight, he might choose to change this pattern.

Let us return to the question, 'How can I be happier, healthier and gain a greater sense of wellbeing?' In answering this question, it is my experience that people find it much easier to say what they believe *won't* make them happy. When asked what *will* help, they point to the career, perfect relationship, money or alternatively, flounder and talk in general terms about happiness, respect, freedom and security. However they often

don't know what to do to achieve these states; they only know what they *don't* want to do because presumably this brings about the opposite state of affairs.

Determine what is right or wrong for you. Don't let social pressures define what is desirable or not in your life. You are free if only you can accept this fact. The Identity Myth decrees that you must do what is expected, that you must live up to a certain image and that you are odd or selfish if you don't. When you wear certain clothes, drive a certain car or hold down a certain job purely to stay in line with others' expectations, you are allowing others to determine what you should be.

The issue about freedom is not that you *don't* do many things that others do. The issue is that you fully embrace freedom, consider your choices and make decisions with passion because they are going to bring about a state of well-being that *you* desire. Freedom means that you don't do things merely because they are expected or because everyone else does.

Contemporary films like *American Beauty* or *Duets* encourage us to reflect on society's expectations of what is desirable and the costs and benefits of slavishly adhering to goals set down by others. Who was it that said, 'You should have a career; you must have children; you must have a top-of-the-range car?' Decide what is right for you and then act in such a way to bring it about. Get in touch with your uniqueness and identity. Don't identify with another person, label or expectation of what others think you should be. By all means consider what others do, learn from their exercising their own choices but do so in order to reinforce the fact that you are free to choose your own way of being.

So how can the notion of Myths be of relevance to us in creating a well-lived life? Myths, as unquestioned assumptions, impinge on our decision-making. Within our social and cultural world, we are bombarded with expectations and pressures of how to dress, what to eat, what career to pursue or how to relate to other people. We are constantly told what to expect as we enter different lifestages as if each of us were no more than members of a cloned group. We can conform, withdraw or act as individuals or institutions to bring about social change. However, those unquestioned assumptions are so pervasive that we may never stand back from their stronghold and consider our choices beyond a narrowly defined set of options. Our culture and socialisation inhibits us exploring the vast array of available options. As Rousseau said 'Man is born free but is everywhere in chains'.

What are our choices and how can we live with the anxiety of challenging the status quo or questioning the rightness of our decisions? We have to live in the social world and consider others and the rules, which enable us to realise our choices. The issue is not one of rejecting all that is expected of us – the issue is that we **DO** have a choice. The question is whether we challenge the unquestioned assumptions, expand our choices and live with the anxiety that meaningful living entails. I challenge you to develop a life of freedom and choice rather than one of duty and obligation.