

PART I: Listening (Identity Recognition)

I can only look for something that I have, to some degree, already found. How can I search for beauty and truth unless that beauty and truth are already known to me in the depth of my heart? It seems that all of us human beings have deep inner memories of the paradise that we have lost. Maybe the word "innocence" is better than the word "paradise." We were innocent before we started feeling guilty; we were in the light before we entered into the darkness; we were at home before we started to search for a home. Deep in the recesses of our minds and hearts there lies hidden the treasure we seek.

HENRI NOUWEN

Week 1: Doing Is the Enemy of Becoming

I want to begin by telling you the simplest secret to discovering your truest self. Here it is: *there is no secret*. Because your true self is like a beach ball pushed down deep under the water—you only need to take your hands off it, and it will rush to the surface. The real question is: how are you pushing it down, and how do you take your hands off?

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I awoke on a frosty November morning in the simple solitude of a Franciscan retreat center. No alarm clock, no kids poking my forehead, no breakfast to prepare. No requirements whatsoever. Only the purpose of my weekend: to embrace more fully my truest self.

The morning started simply enough, but as I settled into the quiet space, I felt a familiar and unwelcome pang in my gut. It's a sense of urgency. It's my little propeller of accomplishment. It's my drive to achieve. It's the ghost of shame, haunting my mind, whispering, "Get it done, Kelly. Discover something meaningful and beautiful, accomplish something big. Your worth *depends* upon it." It can devastate a moment or a day or a week or a year.

And it can certainly devastate a whole weekend retreat.

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"Who am I?"

There is an intuitive kind of wisdom implicit in this question uttered in hearts and homes and therapy offices across the globe. Not "What *could* I be?" or "What *will* I become?" But "Who *am* I?" A question implying the answer is *already present*. And deep in our souls we know this to be true: I am already here somewhere—my becoming is really an unearthing, an excavation of what already is. Our true self is here now, but it has been pushed beneath the surface by the hands of time and pain and fear.

We began this life inhabiting a sense of worth, born into light and innocence. But from the moment of our first cries, people were getting us all wrong. The people we loved were like mirrors in a fun house, returning distorted images of who we are, images distorted by their own pain and brokenness. It made us want to hide our true self. On occasion, we cautiously, timidly revealed ourselves to others and, occasionally, they acted like judge and jury. And the pain of that kind of shame can split us in two. The true self is pushed safely into the dark depths, and we quickly, resiliently learn to replace it with a more “acceptable” self. We wear this false self like a mask, all the while sitting on this undulating beach ball of the true self, trying to keep it buried beneath the surface.

We push our true self down with too-thin bodies, trendy clothing, aisles of makeup, the biggest houses and shiniest cars and trophies and crowds and bank accounts and lovers and righteousness and anger and perfection. We push our true self down with so much doing and so much stuff for so long that we eventually forget we’ve pushed it down at all. We mistake what remains above the waterline — the stuff we let everybody see — for who we are.

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As the aching in my gut began to grow on that November morning, I stopped and uttered a simple prayer: “Show me who I am.” Silence. I said it again. More silence. I said it a third time. Several more moments of silence followed, and then, finally, this thought: *There is a beautiful, secluded lake about three minutes away, and all I want out of this entire weekend is to walk the three-mile path around it. I want to walk it slowly, with nowhere to go except back to the beginning. I want to walk it mindfully, with nothing to accomplish but a still, slow breath. I’m quite simply starved for the experience.*

So I put down my reading and picked up my coat. I walked out of the building and I searched for the entrance to the forest path that would deliver me to the lake. I spotted it—a worn opening framed by stark trees and brown-crumpled leaves. I took my first step onto the path, the crunching of leaves beneath my feet, every breath crisp in my lungs. And I felt relief well

up like a fountain within me. *This* is who I am. A country boy, raised in the woods, his winters marked by a stark, barren landscape. An introverted kid, his heart rooted in silence and solitude. An innocent young man, hoping only for peace and joy and simplicity.

This is who I am.

How often am I pushing *this* under the water of life like a beach ball? Pressing it down with insecurity and the need to achieve, the compulsion to prove myself all over again. How often do I clean up one more mess while my children are inviting me to play, inviting me to be *myself*? How often do I make the quiet spaces of life into another final exam, trying to accomplish something that will finally prove my worth? How often is my true self suffocated like a beach ball beneath the waters of life, pushed down by all my hands of shame?

Our truest self is a beach ball submerged by our hands of shame, and it's ready to rise to the surface. Are you exhausted by the games you play? Are you absolutely aching to end the hiding of who you really are? Are you ready to take a courageous swipe at all the falsehood? Are you ready to remove your hands and watch as your true self shoots to the surface?

When we step into the fullness of who we are, it can be really scary— all sorts of mess rushes to the surface with it: deep grief, awful fears, festering wounds, embarrassing truths. All kinds of flaws and blemishes. But with it also comes bravery and belonging, passion and purpose, and relief—sweet relief—from the pressure of the hiding. With it comes the grace of a beautifully broken creature. With it comes people who truly know us and want to be with us anyway. With it comes the freedom to play and love and live.

Are you ready to lift your hands?