



The Importance of Your Sense of Self

When I was around 17 years old I was once sitting in a car with a friend of mine, waiting for another group of kids. My friend was very wealthy and by this age had already inherited several million dollars—and he was very arrogant about this. In addition, he had been raised by his parents to think very highly of himself. He seemed to believe he had done the absolute best in everything he did. Even though he was not a great student, he reasoned that this did not matter, since the best students would one day be working for him. He had an incredible level of self confidence, and people around him could never shake this, even if they tried. He had been beaten up at least a few times that I could remember, but he never seemed to care. His tremendous sense of self was internal to him, and was unwavering. Everyone who knew this particular guy thought he would one day be extremely successful. His self belief set him apart on so many levels from all other kids.

As we sat there in the car, we discussed our futures. He had big plans for himself, which included heading an investment bank in New York, going to a major business school and taking on the world. When it came time for me to share my plans for the future, I still remember quite well what I said:

"I will be very happy if I get a three bedroom house in a nice neighborhood, and can at least afford to travel once in a while," I told him. "I really hope I can get a decent job when I get out of college."

"It's tough out there, but I am sure you will manage to get something," he said.

I never forgot this particular conversation because at that time in my life this was all I expected for myself:

- I thought my biggest challenge would be finding a job when I got out of college.
- I never thought I would be an attorney.
- I never thought I would even go to a good college.
- I never thought I would leave Detroit—and I never really had big plans for myself.

My sense of who I was and what I could achieve was simply not at a high level. At some point, however, based on encouragement from my father, teachers and others I began to develop a stronger sense of self—a sense of self that encouraged me to aim high in my life, and to believe that I was capable of incredible things. Over time, this sense of self began to stick, and it continued to grow for me. A strong sense of self is the most important possible thing you can possess, and developing a strong sense of self will change your life.

Do you think the close friends I had when I was 17 would have helped me develop this strong sense of self? In most cases it is not our friends who will encourage and push us. It is not that our friends are trying to hurt us; it is just that, as much as they like us, they may not want us to change. For example, my friend at the time liked being around people who looked up to him, and avoided people who looked down on him. If I had changed then, the dynamic between us would have changed (and it eventually did anyway, when I changed). People around you may want a certain level of control over their relationship with you in your career and life, and they want whatever makes them look and feel the best. While they may like it if you do well, their doing well is their priority. Please understand this: *If you have a strong sense of self, this will alter the power balance in your relationships with many people around you. This is why so many people never change and reach their full potential.*

Many children develop a strong sense of self starting from the moment they are born, from their parents, who encourage them and help push them to do better and better. But it is not just parents who help us develop a strong sense of self. A strong sense of self comes from many areas in our lives, and from the feedback we receive from the world about various areas of our lives:

- **Our Recognized Abilities Give Us a Sense of Self**-If we are very intelligent and test well we may feel smart, and this may contribute to a strong sense of self. If we are considered interesting or funny by others, or have been called industrious, inventive and so forth, this may contribute to a strong sense of self.
- **Our Various Affiliations Give Us a Sense of Self**-We may be members of a certain sports team, college, or other group that is interested in certain things.
- **Our Religion Gives Us a Sense of Self**-If we are members of a certain religious group, this will give us a sense of self related to the religion.
- **Our Social Standing and Relationships Give Us a Sense of Self**-We have a sense of self based on the people we are friends with, how we are regarded by others.
- **Our Occupation Gives Us a Sense of Self**-Our jobs and what we do for a living is something that gives us a sense of self.
- **Our Families and Family Relationships Give Us a Sense of Self**-Our wives or husbands, our parents and other relatives all contribute to our sense of self.

- **Our Past Gives Us a Sense of Self**—Things that have happened to us in the past, and which people may have said about us in the past may contribute to our sense of self.

1. When you get to know people they will constantly be telling you about themselves and various things they have done. I have heard people brag about being the best free thrower on their basketball team, setting local records for shot put, getting the best score in their school on a standardized test, dating the homecoming queen and more—often forty or more years after all this occurred. Why? These peoples' sense of self is intertwined with things that they achieved decades ago. It is who they are, and who they consider themselves to be.

Most of us rarely develop our sense of self deliberately. As children, we may further develop the characteristics for which our parents give us positive feedback, because we naturally seek acceptance, love and protection from the people that provide us care. As we grow older, we do the same thing with the schools we attend and within our peer groups, where we also seek acceptance and protection. We may have different senses of self with our peers than we have at home. We may have a different sense of self on the athletic field than we have off the athletic field. In addition, our motivation may be affected by our sense of self. If we are told we are very smart by others, we may study more and work harder in school, due to having a sense of self that is strongly related to our academic skills. If we are given the impression that a certain behavior will improve our sense of self then we will likely engage in this behavior.

Recently my wife and I have started watching a television show called *Bait Car*. The show is about the police parking a nice car in a bad neighborhood with the keys in it. The car always gets stolen on the show, and the police have a method for turning off the car as the car thieves are speeding away. In most instances, there is more than one person involved in the theft, and sometimes kids talk other kids into stealing the car. The kid that ultimately steals the car usually does so because he wants to be accepted by the other kids. In the worst neighborhoods and around certain people, our sense of self might be related to committing crimes in order to be accepted.

What is inside of you, what you feel and believe is entirely different from what the rest of the world may be telling you. If you have a strong sense of self, you can overcome every obstacle out there without being concerned with anything—except for what is inside of you, what you feel and what you believe. Everyone thinks about themselves and their lives in a certain way, and this ultimately ends up controlling the future of everyone's lives. Your beliefs about yourself have a tremendous amount to do with what ends up happening to you, what you accomplish, and the quality of your life.

Inside each and every one of us there needs to be an understanding of who we are. Our sense of self underlies our internal strength as human beings and it enables us to accomplish what we desire. Our sense of self needs to give us the ability to power through—no matter what others may say about us, and no matter what sort of feedback we may get from the world.

Developing a strong sense of self enables us to be happier, more successful, and to live better lives. Unfortunately, most of us do not live our lives in accordance with our own sense of self and, instead, our sense of self is based too much on what others are doing out in the world, what others have, and what others say about us—and various externals that are irrelevant to what is really inside of us. If you have a strong sense of self, then what you do for a living, your past, your religion, your parents, your affiliations, your recognized abilities and more should not affect your thoughts about what you can accomplish.

Having a powerful sense of self is going to make all the difference in your life. You need to understand that your thoughts about yourself and your capabilities need to come from what is inside of you, not from societal structures that may have led you to believe who you are.