

# Identity: Beyond Self, Culture, Nation, and Humanity to “LIFEISM”

By Anthony J. Marsella, Ph.D. – TRANSCEND Media Service, 28 February 2011

Summary: This article explores the nature and meaning of identity and its personal, cultural, and national nuances and consequences. In this presentation, I note, as have many others, that meaningful personal and social identities are at the core of a meaningful human existence. But this assertion raises critical questions about what is a meaningful identity, and what is a meaningful existence. These questions assume greater importance and consequence in the context of our emerging global era, in which the development, shaping, and assertion of certain personal and social identities can have life-affirming or life-harming consequences for all of us.

The emergence of a global era — a borderless psychological and physical milieu — confronts us with new and bewildering challenges to identity formation, change, and assertion. Age-old questions regarding identity — “Who am I?” “What do I believe?” “What is my purpose?” “What are my responsibilities?” “How did I become who I am?” — must now be answered amidst a context of unavoidable competing and conflicting global forces that are giving rise to increasing levels of uncertainty, unpredictability, confusion, and fear. Indeed, many of our traditional political, economic, social, and religious institutions — long a major source for shaping individual and collective identities — have become part of the problems we face in identity formation and negotiation. And amidst all of this, we find ourselves as humans beings assaulting life in all its forms — species are becoming extinct, bio-diversity is declining, global warming is occurring, and there is a depletion of our water, energy, and agricultural resources, and wars and conflict are endemic. This article proposes that a solution to many of the challenges we face may be to move beyond our conventional identifications with self, culture, nation, and even humanity, to an identification with life — LIFEISM.

## INTRODUCTION

Each time we as human beings assert our identity, we are challenged to understand the essential principle of separation and connection. Each time we say “I am” in whatever setting, we affirm our existence, create meaning, establish connection and position, and empower our self and others as well. But unless we learn that “I” is never separate from all else, we run the risk of the “I” in our identity becoming a travesty with regard to what is possible and what is necessary. When we separate the “I” from all else, we engage in an affront to the most important cosmic principle revealed across time — we are part of something more than ourselves and if we reject or ignore this essential truth, we face the risks of isolation, disharmony, and conflict. Identity, then, in all its forms — personal and collective — is, ultimately, in my opinion, the pursuit of meaning and purpose, and is best found in those moments of conscious awareness that recognize that separation and unity can never be thought of apart from one another.

The very principle of separation and unity — of fission and fusion — constitutes an awe-inspiring and reverential statement about the nature of life and the cosmos itself. Fission and fusion are, after all, the principles by which the cosmos appears to have originated and to continue to exist. The idea is so profound that it taxes our comprehension because of the limitations in our language, logic, and learning. Long ago, according to myth, revelation, or simply wisdom, an authoritative source said “I am what am.” There are the words before us — eloquent in their simplicity, profound in their consequence, mystical in their appeal; separation and connection, isolation and relation, and independence and dependence are one. This principle of fission and fusion — as represented in the dynamics of separation and connection — is, in my opinion the fundamental challenge of identity formation and negotiation.

### Our Global Era

A decade ago, I wrote the following:

*Human survival and well-being are now embedded in a complex and interdependent global web of economic, political, social, technical, and environmental events, forces, and changes. Their scale, complexity, and consequences constitute an important challenge to our individual and collective well-being by confronting us with an array of complex, conflicting, and confusing demands and/or opportunities. Our response to this challenge will shape the nature, quality, and meaning of our lives in the coming century (Marsella, 1998, p 1282).*

These words now seem prescient in their message and predicted consequences. It is difficult to pinpoint a precise time or date when all our lives — in even the most distant and hidden places — became so increasingly interdependent and thus subject to a new level of forces that transcend location and the immediacy of proximate influences. The answer to this question will become a source of debate among scholars for many years.

Today, in a global era, identity has become even more complex because we are now exposed to the demands of a myriad of choices and pressures that go far beyond those previously limited to our more confined cultural and physical milieus. The entire world is now before us, and we are faced with new responsibilities that are part of the negotiation and management of global interactions and an implicit “world” citizenship. The comfort brought by past simplicities, if there were such a thing, has now yielded to the demands of confusing and conflicting needs, choices, and values that have a global context. And yet, the roots of identity — the locus in which we pursue and define it — remain at personal, cultural, and national levels. And, this for me, is now insufficient. I feel we must move beyond these to embrace life itself as the centre of our identity and I name this view – LIFEISM.

## PERSONAL, CULTURAL, AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES

A sense of identity is at the core of human existence and meaning. It is the self-reflective and dialogical anchor — both conscious and unconscious — that grounds us amidst the constant flow of changes in our settings and situations. It offers us a sense of who we are and what we are. The many and varied forces that shape our identity(s) are determined by both unique and shared experiences. The accumulation of these experiences — their dynamic interactions and their constant appraisal, evaluation, and modifications — form the crucible in which we as individuals and as members of groups claim place, position, and agency.

### Personal Identity

Personal identity has been a topic of interest and concern for many theorists including such notable figures as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Erik Erikson, Erich Fromm, and Rollo May. Among these, Erich Fromm (1900-1980), a social psychoanalyst, is one of my favourites. Fromm (e.g., 1941/1969, 1955, 1973), in a host of books written across his lifetime, argued that identity is a basic human need along with rootedness, belonging, frame-of-reference, and transcendence. The positing of identity as an essential human need creates a timeless context for our human search for understanding our nature. Identity, for Fromm, is at the core of human existence and dominates the endless pursuit for human meaning and purpose.

With Fromm's thinking, our understanding of identity soars beyond a simple description of the characteristics by which we assert identity (i.e. name, age, gender, religion, ethnicity, citizenship, physical features, memberships, traits and dispositions) to a powerful statement of our very nature. We need identity! We are driven to seek an identity and to pursue it constantly through relationships (i.e., relatedness), beliefs (i.e., frame-of-reference), and belonging (i.e., rootedness). And ultimately, we aspire to transcend or to rise above what we are and to move toward ever new levels of awareness, being, and experience (i.e., religion and/or spirituality)

One of Fromm's central theses is that human beings often feel isolated, lonely, and estranged from others and from life itself because as they pursued freedom from the demands of increased individuality and separation, they eventually find themselves surrendering their identity in favour of group, organizational, and national identities that oppress their individuality and their possibilities of connection with anything that challenges the group's goals and ethos. Thus, we neither connect with humanity nor with life. Fromm (1955) stated:

The problem of the sense of identity is not, as it is usually understood, merely a philosophical problem, or a problem only concerning our mind and thought. The need to feel a sense of identity stems from the very condition of human existence, and it is the source of the most intense strivings. Since I cannot remain sane without the sense of "I," I am driven to do almost anything to acquire this sense. Behind the intense passion for status and conformity is this very need, and it is sometimes even stronger than the need for

physical survival. What could be more obvious than the fact that people are willing to risk their lives, to give up their love, to surrender their freedom, to sacrifice their own thoughts, for the sake of being one of the herd, of conforming, and thus of acquiring a sense of identity, even though it is an illusory one (Fromm, 1955, p. 63).

For Fromm and others, understanding personal identity requires an understanding of cultural and national identities. These too are determined by the broad social and institutional contexts in which personal identity is negotiated, defined, and maintained.

### Cultural Identities

Cultural identities are a critical determinant of individual identity because they express the affiliate groups by which an individual chooses to communicate their personal sense of who they are and what they stand for in a confusing world – their ties and allegiances to family, gender, ethnicity, race, religion, and other local socialization contexts. Indeed, at some point and in some contexts, a cultural group identity can become so powerful that there is no longer a sense of pride in individual distinctness but rather a near blind loyalty to the cultural identity.

Cultural identities also bring with them a history of affiliations with specific social labels, roles, and contexts, and their implicit and explicit values, attitudes, and behaviours. Inherent within each of these micro-cultural contexts are the forces for the socialization of “shared meanings and behaviours” that serve to affirm and anchor identities. Amartya Sen (2006), the Nobel Prize winner in economics in 1998, and writes:

I can be at the same time, an Asian, an Indian citizen, a Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry, an American or British resident, an economist, a dabbler in philosophy, an author, a Sanskrit, a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man, a feminist, a heterosexual, a defender of gay and lesbian rights, with a non-religious lifestyle, from a Hindu background, a non-Brahmin, and a non-believer in an afterlife. . . This is just a small sample of the diverse categories to each of which I may simultaneously belong – there are of course a great many other membership categories too which, depending on circumstances, can move and engage me (Sen, 2006, p. 19)

Cultural identities emerge from our construction of reality learned within the daily socialization contexts in which we live. Cultural identities position us in society and help anchor our personal sense of who we are. One can only imagine, then, the difficulty — even trauma — that can accompany identity development and change among immigrant populations, especially those living under conditions of complete powerlessness and marginalization such as refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented workers.

Kwame Appiah (2005), a professor at Princeton University, writes that our identities often become subject to those labels used to describe members of our group. We internalize these labels and then behave according to labels – often pejorative — even when they are imposed by others. We become embedded in a complex of labels and markers that shape our thoughts and actions and the responses to them by others.

Once labels are applied to people, ideas about people who fit the label come to have social and psychological effects. In particular, these ideas shape the ways people conceive of themselves and their projects. So the labels operate to mould what we may call identification, the process through which individuals shape their projects — including their plans for their own lives and their conceptions of the good life — by reference to available labels, available identities. In identification, I shape my life by the thought that something is an appropriate aim or an appropriate way of acting for an American, a black man, a philosopher. It seems right to call this “identification” because the label plays a role in shaping the way the agent makes decisions about how to conduct a life, in the process of the construction of one’s identity (Appiah, 2005, p. 66).

In a global era that is challenging traditional constructions of reality and the roles that support them, personal, cultural, and national identities are under serious challenge. Pressures to conform, integrate, acculturate, accommodate, and assimilate are challenging our sense of who we are, what we are, where we are going, what we can do, and why we can do it. Certain identities are valued, privileged, or empowered over others. Labels and markers must now become negotiated in a new global arena in which differences are more profound and more obvious. At stake is our sense of meaning and purpose. We are finding ourselves unable to anchor or position ourselves because of constantly changing demands for competency and mastery. We shift and change. We are more hesitant to define ourselves in fixed and concrete ways, at the risk of making ourselves vulnerable, protean, and obsolete.

The result is a spectrum of patterns of personal and collective identities including (1) mixtures, blends, and syncretic forms, (2) varied situational displays, and (3) a core or change-resistant patterns. Choice, opportunity, and chance all contrive to create these various patterns. In the process of identity negotiation, meaningful identities can become restrained in choice and opportunity by beliefs and ideas favoured by groups in power, and by the alleged certainties in psychological and social comfort they offer to us.

## National Identities

National identities are a part of the growing challenge we face in our global era. Issues of diversity, opportunity, and the distribution of power become subjects of debate as appeals are made to protect certain identities and to devalue or deny others. This becomes an even more dangerous mix when power and the threats to it become part of subgroup and international conflicts and we begin to hear the clarion calls for patriotism and defence of the homeland — “Your nation needs you!” Under these circumstances, we seek new levels of protection and security that may isolate us from others in our nation, region, and across the world in a protective and xenophobic cocoon of imagined security. Our personal identity becomes extended to a larger national identity reinforced by appeals to fear and vulnerability.

In our global era, replete with all of its contestations of individuals, groups, and nations, a widespread spirit of “versism” emerges in which compassion, cooperation, collaboration are

urgently needed yet denied amidst the felt need for protection. Some of the contestations that characterize the “versus” mentality of our times are listed below:

- Universal human rights versus National rights, laws, and police
- National unity, homogeneity, and conformity versus Diversity, heterogeneity, and counter-cultures
- Colonialism/imperialism via hegemonic globalization versus Sovereignty, self-determination, autonomous identity
- Hegemonic globalization, modernization, westernization versus Stasis and tradition
- Economic level of living versus Quality of life
- Spirituality versus Religious fundamentalism, theocracy, and faith-based power
- Militarism versus Peace
- Distribution of wealth versus Concentration of wealth within and across individuals, societies, and nations
- Human needs/wants versus Environmental protection and sustainability
- Male (Patriarchy) versus Female (Access, Rights, Opportunities, Security)
- My identity (my culture, my nation) versus our identity (Our Culture, Our Nation)

Amidst this global milieu of contestation and the angst its generates, it is easy, indeed, almost reflexive, to identify with a nation as a source of security and protection against the array of opposing forces — to claim, with a sense of national pride and patriotism, that “I am a ----- (Insert a national identity).<sup>2</sup> Come, serve your nation — our homeland — in this time of need.

Yet today, even as unbridled nationalism seems to be growing, the need for nations is being contested as globalization pressures encourage the growth and empowerment of multi-national corporations – entities which hold no national allegiance beyond profit for shareholders. The assault upon our pursuit of identity is endless — from above and below. As nation states collapse, many of the intense ethnic and religious rivalries, previously suppressed by a strong national government, become renewed and emerge again. Further, as the economic, political and social pressures of hegemonic global political economy spreads, new groups, movements, and coalitions form to resist the pressures from above by asserting their local rights, needs, and impulses for recognition. They unite to assert or protect their identity. Yet, for many, efforts to actively shape and control our personal and collective lives seem futile in the face of these overwhelming globalization pressures. Sandel, (1996) writes:

National sovereignty is eroded from above by mobility of capital, goods, and information across national boundaries, the integration of world financial markets, and the transnational character of industrial production. And national sovereignty is challenged from below by the resurgent aspirations of subnational groups for autonomy and self-rule. As their effective sovereignty fades, nations gradually lose their hold on the allegiance of their citizens.

Beset by the integrating tendencies of the global economy and the fragmenting tendencies of group identities, nation-states are increasingly unable to link identity and self-rule. Even the most powerful states cannot escape the imperatives of the global economy; even the smallest are too heterogeneous to give full expression to the communal identity of any one ethnic or nationalist or religious group without oppressing others in their midst (Sandel, 1996, p. 74).

Yet, it must be asked, where is the identification with life? Where is the recognition that we are more than individuals, cultures, and nations? That we are more than humans? That we are part of life! Does our failure to understand that we are more than human — even in all its glorious diversity representations — place us in jeopardy because we are separated from the larger forces that define the very nature of our individual and collective beings — that we are alive, that we are life.

## BEYOND PERSON, CULTURE, AND NATION

### Separation and Unity

Arthur Koestler (1905-1983), the famous writer, theorist, and social commentator, noted in his book *The Ghost in The Machine* (1967), that within all living things from cells to human beings to universes, there are two basic impulses: a self-assertive impulse designed to support independent survival and an integrative impulse, designed to connect independent units with others, and, in doing so, to produce and reveal a new and emergent dimension of being. Koestler call this The Janus Principle, in honour of the Roman God, Janus, whose head faces two ways. Consider this example from Koestler's work: In its simplest form, a liver cell can exist separately in a Petrie dish forever; but when it is connected to other liver cells, it forms a liver – a new and emergent life form that was impossible to experience in its separateness. In other words, the cell now experiences a new dimension to its being that was absent in its individuality. It is, so to speak, now actualizing its full potential by becoming part of something larger.

And so it is with human beings. We can exist separately and unconnected to others, unconcerned about an expanded sense of our nature. But when we join with others, when we choose to serve the common cause, when we advance the collective, there is a new dimension to our being — we are part of something larger. The merger of ourselves with the larger unit helps us actualizes our full potential, it yields something a new nature. From the point of identity, this impulse to be part of something larger may be an inherent characteristic of life itself. The quest for identity is not only a basic human need at a personal level, but also one which is sought at cultural and national levels of organization. And yet, amidst the destruction of life about us, it should now be clear that we have need to identify with something more if we are to survive. We must identify with life.

### The Awareness and Commitment to Life – The Force That Animates the Universe – “I Am What Am”

“We are alive.” We are part of life, the very force that animates the universe and that is present in all things we call living. We are surrounded and embedded in life in a myriad of forms. This is the most important and essential truth. We are alive — we are part of life! By accepting this premise, and by making it the core of our identity as individuals and groups, we can affirm a truth so obvious and so critical to our sense of well-being that it can be the anchor for all of our personal, collective, and national identities. It can move us beyond the borders of these identities that so often keep us prisoner to limited beliefs and behaviours. With this affirmation and acceptance, we can build a foundation for connection to all forms of life. We can move beyond the struggles for identity at individual, cultural, and national levels, in favour of the ultimate identity — life and the ecologies that nurture and sustain it. And with this identification, we can also move beyond humanism — a noble belief itself — to a new philosophy and set of practices that considers humanity as only one reflection of life — LIFEISM.

Identification with life — lifeism — is our most essential and most authentic identity. This identity with life should, in my opinion, be placed above personal, cultural, and national

identities. It is the most important because it implicates all other identities in a far more meaningful way. If we accept the truth that we are part of life, there emerges a new sense of connection and harmony with the world about us. We experience the life affirming impulses of evolving, developing, and becoming. There emerges a sense of humility and wisdom that offers insights into unforgivable carelessness and disdain we have demonstrated for life in all its forms — how much we have done to destroy life and, in the process, perhaps to destroy ourselves.

Lifeism is part of spirituality — that transcendent sense of awe, reverence, and connection in which are moved beyond ourselves and time and place to new levels of consciousness. Spirituality moves us, as individuals and groups, beyond our past to the richness of the immediacy of the moment. And with this comes an experience of attachment and belonging to something much larger than our individual or collective experiential levels. We are part of life, and that means we have ties to all forms of life on Earth and to the mysteries of the cosmos itself.

Clearly, at no time in human history have we been at such a point of assaulting all forms of life about us. We are destroying the complex ecology that generates, sustains, and promotes life in its many forces. We are destroying more than ourselves as humans, we are destroying the very broth of life from which we cannot be separated if we are to survive. We — as humans — possessed of that most wonderful and highly evolved form of being — consciousness — have become the destroyer of life. We are — in a microcosmic sense — acting like a cosmic black hole grasping and abusing all about us in a frenzy of waste, pollution, contamination, degradation, and destruction. We offend and insult life. We seem to have no identification with life itself — the very force that animates our lives and the world about us. And, unfortunately, we seem to be immune and in denial to the consequences of this essential fact.

In our global era, nothing can be more important for life on Earth at this moment than this simple yet profound truth. A meaningful identity for a meaningful life must embrace an identification with life. “I am, what am!” “We are, what are!” “I am the stuff of stars!” “We are the stuff of stars!” “We are part of the very force that animates the universe!” It is essential to identify with “life” and to grasp the responsibilities, obligations, and consequences this imposes upon us. Let us move beyond defining ourselves in more limited terms. Let us acknowledge, recognize, embrace, protect, and preserve life around us — lifeism! Let us respond to life about us with respect, awe, and reverence. Let us embrace the fact that I/we, life, and the universe are one!

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1 Portions of this article were presented as a keynote address to The Forum for Advanced Studies in Arts, Languages, and Theology, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden, April 17-18, 2007. Please cite author, title, *PsySR Newsletter* issue, and date if you choose to use material.

2 And the rest, of course, is the story of history since the famous Peace of Westphalia via the Treaties of Munster (Catholic signing) and Osnabrucke (Protestant signing) in Europe in 1648 that ended the 30-year and 80- year wars rooted in religious hatred and intolerance. The Westphalia Peace is widely cited as being the source for the evolution of the modern nation state and international system including the rivalries, separatism, and antagonisms that abound.

<http://www.globalpolicy.org/nations/nature/westphalia.htm> – January 25, 2007)

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my term for this transcendent state is LIFENESS, the relation of all beings one to another...peace, david inkey

google lifeness, for several references.....

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