

IDENTITY THEFT

This is no newsflash: Pride is the number one stumbling block to spirituality, particularly for us sensitive souls huddled under the drippy umbrella of cleverness.

It is not that we are haughty or even arrogant in the usual way you think of the word. We don't think our stance of godlessness is *better* than that of others, that we're right and they're wrong. That we're smart and they're stupid.

Pride for the clever is more like being stuck in a snow drift. Your wheels are spinning, You're clearly not going anywhere. You really need some stranger to put a shoulder to the car and give you a push.

But you don't like to ask, because that's not the sort of person you are. Your identity is fixed in your mind as someone who works through things on his own. And so you sit there, rubbery smoke billowing from your underbody.

Pride in this sense means identity – who you think you are, and why you cling to this description, even when it clearly ain't working.

Identity is the person you have decided you are. This “person” seems rigid and true to oneself. In good times it serves us well – it gives us someone to be, on the job, at a party.

“I am the intellectual guy with a large dose of kid in him.”

When our feelings are bruised, it is because someone did not get, or did not agree with, or did not like, the personality we believed we were projecting. They were very wrong to do that, we feel. It was very rude and unkind of them not to understand the eloquent nonverbal clues we left strewn about.

And in the midst of any kind of challenge, we revert to it. So in an unfamiliar church or meeting, or confronted with a question like Mike Siglin's to me, we rush to our

identity as the only security we have – even though it is threadbare like a tattered flag or ramshackle like a raft that has seen too much rough water.

The fear is that, without the busted shield of identity, we are truly helpless, and that is too fearful to contemplate.

Things that make us drag our feet –

personal contradictions – It ain't me, babe. What I've been talking about.

cultural contradictions – anything “set” in one spiritual culture that does not feel like home to one's own identity

theological contradictions -- if you've got a fixed idea about God (absentee landlord, grandpa in tennis shoes, cosmic space amoeba), you will likely be unable to swap that in a second's thought for someone else's notion

These issues are important because they inhibit not only healthy spiritual growth (and I suppose some stupidity, buying into every new idea that comes along), but all change.

So how does one set down the shield, stop furiously paddling the raft?

Somehow people have to admit that it hasn't been working all that well, and that it has created a destructive rigidity in one's nature.

But it's like telling someone to jump now, and a safety net will be provided afterwards. Not persuasive! We want the guarantee up front, in writing, and in large type.

But if we had all that, would we really be giving up the shield? No, we would take it along with us, and whatever damage befalls us, we have the option of reverting to our old identity.

In physics there is a principle of irreversibility. It says that in any true change it is not possible to go backward. All change (like a chemical reaction or a thunderclap) is irreversible. Indeed this irreversibility is what defines true change.

When my kids were younger, Joe taught them both how to ride bicycles. It was strange, because I tried many times with both of them, but they just couldn't hear it from me. I had guided them into too many trees, off too many curbs, caused them to tumble over too many handlebars. My counsel had become radioactive.

But Joe was still cool. He put them on the bikes, put his hand firmly behind the saddle, and ran down the sidewalk with them pedaling. Half a block down, he let go of the bike, and the kids pedaled free, discovering in one panicky, wonderful instant the improbable truth of gyroscopic action (what keeps bicycles from falling over).

And now he was trying to teach me how to ride, too. I looked over at him with pathos in my eyes. What my kids could do – put trust in him and pedal into the universe – I was afraid to.

Because my kids were still kids – basically made of plastic, and given to change – but my identity was stuck. Stuck like tar on a shingle on winter day.

For me to make my change, and start pedaling on my steam, I needed to first get unstuck.