

## Who are you?

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Who are you? A rather simple, existential question. It can also be a profound spiritual question. Socrates' basic prescription for wisdom was to "Know Thyself." So who are you? Well, I can see who most of you are because you are wearing those name tags. Our names may not tell much about us, however, because for most of us they were given to us by our parents even before we were born. Unlike the Native Americans, who gave names to their young based on some trait of character or the way their physical makeup reminded them of some aspect of nature, our names may tell more about our parents and our heritage than they do about our own character and spirit. So, who are you? Who do you think you are? Who do you think you are? You know, my father used to ask me that question. He would ask it in a slightly different tone of voice. And I don't think he was intending it as a spiritual question - but he was asking me to reflect on something I had done or said, and usually it would prompt me to do so.

Though most of us do not name ourselves, there is yet a way that we do. I'm speaking of the labels we choose to go by. One of the ways we both discover and determine who we are is by the labels, or names, we choose for ourselves. The names we choose for ourselves determine the way we act in the world. If I call myself a humanist, then I see the potential for human beings to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity - with or without the burdensome concept of God. As a humanist, I invest my life's energy to my own mental and psychological improvement and I may focus on salvation in this world through the causes of social justice. If I call myself Jewish, then I may look around me and see a world caught in bondage and devote myself to leading my people from the captivity of poverty or prejudice or abuse toward liberation as I vow to walk humbly and do justice, and care for the widows and orphans and uphold the precepts of God. If I see myself as a Buddhist - of course Buddhists don't really think they're Buddhists..... Sort of a tricky theological problem. But if I think I'm a Buddhist, then I meditate on the 4 Noble Truths and the nature of suffering and the alleviation of suffering and I may take the vow of a Bodhisattva to work toward alleviating the suffering of all beings. If I see myself as a Christian, I may look about me and see all the suffering in the world. Contemplating that suffering, I might conclude that humankind has fallen short of its potential to provide for one another's needs - shortcomings I call sin. And I may recall Jesus' words entreating his followers to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, care for the sick, and visit those in prison, and know that in these ways I can contribute in some small way to move my little corner of the world from sin to salvation. So it is with all the names we call ourselves by, whether it is a religious name, or mother, or father, or accountant, or doctor, or lawyer, or teacher, or republican, or democrat.... When we wake up in the morning and we take on these names again and again, they shape the course of our lives. They become an integral part of our identity.

So who am I?

Well, I could tell you that I am the son of Leon and Mildred Howard, that I was born and raised in Macon, Georgia, attended Clisby and Lanier, played Little League in Payne City and worked summers at the Macon Telegraph. I could tell you that I am a Presbyterian turned Baptist turned Methodist turned Unitarian. I could tell you that I met Kathy, my wife, while in college in Valdosta, and that she found me lovable even when some of her friends advised her against it. She dated me, and we fell in love, and we married, and we have raised Mandy, Misty, and Dustin - 3 wonderful children. I could tell you that I spent seven years of my life after college training to be a medical doctor, and then twenty years in practice only to have an “identity crisis” at the age of 47 that prompted me to completely reorder my life so that I might return to school again in pursuit of another degree and another profession – that of a minister in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. I could tell you these things – and you would know some things about me. But would you really know who I am?

One of the best ways we tell who we are is by telling stories about ourselves. A few years ago I watched a friend of mine, I will call him Bart (pseudonym), die from malignant melanoma at the age of thirty. As I said, I was his friend and his physician, but he ended up being my minister. I was very blessed to be in his presence throughout the last two years of his life as he valiantly struggled against this disease. By the way Bart met his tragic death at such a young age, he taught me how to meet each day with a renewed sense of the preciousness of life. This is a lesson that I continue to carry with me even though Bart died fifteen years ago.

I know a lot about the science of cancer from my years of studying biology and pathology in preparation for a career in medicine. Malignant cells are those that lose the ability to stop growing and dividing at a certain point like the normal cells in our body – to the detriment of the whole organism. Cancer kills because the abnormal tissue grows so large that it presses against the normal structures so they no longer function normally, or it starves the other tissues by absorbing all the nutrients like a ravenous beast. That is what happened to Bart. His cancer spread to his brain. The cancer cells swelled inside his skull until the part of his brain that controlled breathing and heart rate no longer functioned.

What is much harder to understand about cancer is why. Why did it occur in a healthy twenty-eight year old who played baseball in college and kept himself in great shape? Why did this happen to a young man with a beautiful wife and two small boys who were not even old enough yet to play ball with their dad? These questions haunted me as I watched how the cancer gradually took all this away from him while at the same time it brought him weakness, nausea, and incessant pain. I could only wonder how much more poignant these questions had to be for Bart himself.

It was about three months before he died that Bart got the news that the headaches he was having were due to the cancer having spread to his brain. Not long after that, we had a chance to be alone together. It was a beautiful spring day and he wanted to go out and sit on the porch. Bart said, “I want to feel the sun on my face.” We sat there in silence for quite some time. He basked in the sun with a wearing a sort of goofy smile. Finally he spoke. You know, Fred, I have lived a wonderful life. I got to play the game I loved, to

feel the crack of the bat, and hear the crowd roar. I have made love to a beautiful woman. And she has given me two healthy kids. How many guys get to experience all that? I have had a great life.” Then he started crying. We shared some more silence. After someone has shared such a great prayer of gratefulness, there is not much else to say.

Not too long afterwards, Bart lost the ability to speak. He remained at home and was cared for by family and friends until he died.

By conventional standards of what constitutes a long and happy life, Bart’s life was cut off prematurely. He had every reason to be bitter and yet he managed to express gratitude. When you think about it, that makes no sense. I think cancer had opened him up in some way to what life is really all about. I think he got it. Somehow he managed to communicate some part of that revelation to me on the porch that afternoon. As I said, he became a minister to me. In my training and experience as a physician, I knew a lot about life as a complex set of biological and chemical reactions, but as a result of my relationship with Bart, and other patients facing death with such grace and courage, I wanted to know more about life as a conveyor of meaning.

It was not long after Bart and I were separated by death that I made the decision that my life needed to take a more intentional path toward those whose wounds could not be cured with sutures or salves.

What exactly happened in my encounter with Bart that changed my own understanding of myself and gave me a new vision of the path my life should take? I cannot tell you exactly. Perhaps he helped me really realize for the first time that the aim of life is not to live for a long time, but to live fully in the time we are given. Perhaps he gave me a better perspective on the place of all that scientific knowledge and technology that the medical community prides itself in. Perhaps he just taught me what it means to live intentionally. You know, those of us who think we still have a long time to live, get very sloppy. We do not really live today, because there is always a tomorrow. There is no need to be in the moment. There seems to be plenty of time for that later. But Bart did not have that luxury, yet somehow that scarcity gave him a deeper appreciation for the time that he did have than I had ever had for all my abundance yet to come. I became a bit obsessed with the question - Is it possible for the rest of us to live with just as strong a sense of gratitude and intention from day to day? In some sense, Bart and I both experienced healing on that porch on that spring day. There was no cure of his cancer, yet both of our spirits experienced something very special. And this great act of ministry and healing didn’t require a consult with a specialist, didn’t require a MRI scan, and it didn’t require a quality assurance committee. It didn’t even require prior approval from his insurance company.

The poet and mystic Kalil Gibran, when asked about self-knowledge, said “Seek not the path of the soul, but rather meet the soul walking upon my path. “Seeking the path of the soul.” Somehow, that about sums up what I had thought about life up until that day on the porch with Bart. I had spent a great deal of my life seeking a path that would make my soul content. But in my encounter with Bart, I met a soul that stopped me dead in my

tracks. And that soul met me where I was and influenced my life just by being present to life in all of its pain and sorrow.

Brad changed my life in those few minutes. He made me aware that my identity as a physician was incomplete. And I gradually came to hope that I could find some way to live out whatever time it is that I have left more fully and intentionally and authentically present to others –just as he did in those last days. I still find myself often looking for the path of the soul, rather than looking and listening for the soul that is already there walking on the path with me. Yet here I am in Macon as your intern minister, still hopeful that I am making myself available to meet the souls walking upon my path.

So who are you? Have you also been, like me, spending a lot of energy seeking out the path of the soul, when the soul has been there all along walking along with you? Perhaps the soul's still small voice can still call out to you. It may be calling you to take on a new name – a name that is much larger than the one you have known yourself by in the past. Could you be hearing a call to a more authentic identity? Is there perhaps a story within yourself that is crying out to be heard by the rest of the world? If so, I pray that you will heed its call. We don't have long. What we call a "normal life span" is just a slight extension of our terminal condition. But it is so important that we still embrace life – all of life, and be grateful for who we are.