

The closer I get to retirement the matter of identity looms—how much of my identity is rooted in my career, my job? How will I handle the adjustment? Lately I've been drawn to some ancient wisdom signaling identity as a divine-human mystery. Two portions convey this.

The first is in Exodus, the revelation of one of the Divine Names, when Moses inquired "What is your name" of a strangely burning bush—the reply was a name regarded as so sacred, that Israel had a taboo about speaking it aloud. The Name is also called the Tetragrammaton [Tetra = 4; Grammaton = letters] composed of 4 consonants; In English, those 4 letters are rendered Y-H-W-H. Scholars think this was the designation of a local storm deity before the people of Israel transformed it.

The meaning of the name in Hebrew is mystical—certainly mysterious. Jonathan Sacks chief rabbi in the U.K until his death in 2002, says this about the proper translation of the Name: **Non-Jewish translations read this to mean, "I am what (or who, or that) I am." Some render it, "I am: that is who I am," or "I am the One who is." These are deeply significant mistranslations. The phrase means, literally, "I will be what I will be," or more fundamentally, God's name belongs to the future tense. His call is to that which is not yet. If we fail to understand this, we will miss the very thing that makes Judaism unique.**

I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE is the name of a God of becoming not just a God of being. Rabbi Sacks sees this as a divine accommodation to our being creatures in time with a past/present /future frame. The Divine Name signifies a Being who enters our frame as well as standing beyond it

Rabbi Sacks, goes on to describe how the Hebrew Bible likes to leave us hanging about what happens next. God calls Abram to "go to a land that I will show you" and off he goes into an unknown future. Moses leads the people to the edge of the Promised Land but doesn't go there with them. In the Jesus tradition arising within ancient Judaism, Jesus is portrayed as the coming Messiah (a figure associated with the end of days) but after Jesus rises from the dead (a key feature of the end of days) we're all left waiting for a "second coming." We're always in this space between a known present and an unknown future. I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE is with us on that precipice between being and becoming.

My brother-in-law retired last year so I asked him for a little pre-retirement advice. He said, "Do you remember the 1980s group The Godfathers?" No. "Well they have a great song about retirement." *Oh good, what's it called?* "Birth, School, Work, Death." Bill, Master of the Sardonic. Retirement, or losing a second parent, or hitting milestones like 70 make it harder to distract yourself from the knowledge that your days are numbered. But Psalms in the Wisdom writings says this knowledge is the key to wisdom— ***"Lord teach me to number my days that I may walk before you in the way of wisdom."***

I'm not going to pretend, for me, retirement feels like an epic transition. Pastoring is one of those careers, there are many others, that confer a sense of identity, a "this this is who I am" feeling. We've all gone or will go through transitions that feel epic because they affect our sense of identity. For me, there's something consoling about a God who unveils themselves as I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. *Yes. Me too.* I will be who I will be. There are many divine names of course, but this one has to do with identity as a mystery, which in the ancient understanding of mystery, refers to something to be unveiled rather than something readily apparent.

I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE suggests we don't just express or assert ourselves. We also discover ourselves. Identity isn't static, it's a quality of living things, and thus, dynamic.

When the voice that came from the burning bush when Moses asked, "Who are you? What's your name?" replied, I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE, Moses must have sensed the strangeness of the Voice, but also its kinship with Moses. Moses, at the time was on the cusp of an epic transition, from privileged Egyptian prince to Hebrew of Hebrews, identified with an enslaved people. At this point in his life, Moses' identity must have felt very much in flux, up for grabs, to-be-determined or discovered.

As a very young dad, I wanted to be a good one—involved, guiding my child. I was so eager to do parenting right. What I wish I had known then: every person comes into this world saying, in effect, "I will be who I will be." Yes, there are aspects of identity that we pass on to our children, but the core of identity is theirs to discover and reveal to us. Their job is to say, this is who I am, and our job is to receive that and if we want to be a blessing to our children, to find ways to delight in that.

Genesis 1, gets the ball of creation rolling with a word of permission: *let there be light, let the sea creatures swarm, let the earth bring forth crawling things* and the light, the sea creatures, crawling things present themselves ... and God beholds who/what they are and only then says, "That's good!" God waits for creation *to reveal itself* and then delights in it. God doesn't tell the first human who fits him as a partner; the first human tells God who it is that fits him.

I was affected last week by attending via Zoom a naming ceremony for a friend of mine who I've never met in person, but who played a key role helping me respond to online criticism after I published a book that got some people's dander up. This friend was having a naming ceremony to celebrate –through much struggle –coming to understand themselves as a woman, a different identity than was assigned at birth. And the text that was the centerpiece of this ceremony was from the book of Revelation, a book whose name in Greek is "Apokalypsi" which means the unveiling of something secret or hidden. An amazing text.

Revelation was written by someone named John, but not the John of the gospels. John was part of a Jewish community in the diaspora (spread throughout the Roman Empire) and it was a form of ancient Judaism that was most likely mystical and Torah observant: we see concern for the observance of ritual purity and Israel's food laws in Revelation. John was writing in a time of great upheaval, violence and trauma. Jerusalem had been sacked; its temple destroyed. Jewish revolts had

broken out against Rome in the diaspora. You can see effects of all this in the use of violent images—as though the seer is working out his people’s trauma.

But tucked away in this nearly incomprehensible book (Revelation barely made it into the list of approved writings, and over many objections) we find a gem very much connected to the unveiling of identity such as we have in divine name revealed to Moses, I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. It goes like this: ***Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.*** (Rev. 2:17)

One translation uses the term *amulet* rather than stone; amulets are objects thought to confer protection to the wearer; in the Ancient Near East, often stones conferring a name—popular in the ancient Judaism of this period. Tradition held that when Israel was in the wilderness, manna came down from heaven (white, like coriander seed) along with precious gems. In Rev. 2:17 it’s hidden manna along with a white stone or amulet with a new name, also hidden—from everyone but the one who receives the stone and the One who gives the stone.

In the book of Revelation, which pictures a renewed and transformed city, when this name is called from the throne at the center of the city, only one person recognizes it, the person whose name it is. We could think of it as a term of endearment that might only be known to lovers and not others, because it is only used between them in private.

The amulet translation suggests that our identity includes aspects that need unveiling—to ourselves as much as to others—and that this unveiling of identity is holy and thus something that needs to be protected from hostile outside forces; it’s something out of the reach of those whose knowledge of us is distorted by their own projections and prejudice. This is so important in a time such as we find ourselves where many identities—often the most vulnerable, tender identities—are being targeted, are under assault. Out in the diaspora where this was written from within this mystical Jewish community following a new Messiah figure, the members of that community might have felt the vulnerability of their identity and might have been powerfully consoled by the picture of their identity being protected.

Think how much this would have meant in an ancient culture where so much of identity is static, communally determined, with so much assigned at birth: occupation, social class, and the rest. How many women in the ancient world could avoid become mothers if they didn’t want to become mothers? How much opportunity was there for a person to say, “Actually, this is who I am” let alone “this is who I am becoming”?

After I married a second time, my kids started referring to me as Dad 2.0 because aspects of my personality that were not highlighted before were highlighted now. Different occupations, different friends, different partners bring different aspects of our personality out of us. Trivial example: Nancy’s dad was Mr. Fix-it. And she was pretty handy herself. My skills paled in comparison. To my

surprise Julia was super-impressed when I fixed the simplest thing around the house. Ah the praise was motivating, so I tackled more projects—this time with YouTube videos. Now, I'm like: I've got game!

I think losing a parent, especially a second parent, like losing a spouse through death or divorce, or losing a job, or moving to a very different location can be an identity jolt. I think back to a identity transition I underwent after my second parent died. I'm 47 at the time. I know what I'm going to be when I grow up because I've been that for over 20 years by this time.

I'd been experimenting with silence as a way of praying for the first time in my life. Silence sounds way cooler than what it feels like at first, when silence is mainly a chance to become aware of the noise in your head and all you want to do is reach for your phone. But I remember this rare moment vividly: the room of the house (painted yellow) the time of day (early afternoon) and a surprise moment, minute, three minutes? a little spell of inner stillness came over me. Out of that stillness, I heard with my inner ear, the most surprising words from the Spirit (as I interpret it) inside me, saying, "Ken, meet Ken." It was a little startling, like "What the hey ho? Ken, meet Ken?" Also extremely intimate. It was maybe four or five years before I mentioned it to another living soul. I felt too shy or embarrassed to mention it.

What do I make of it now? Well, it does mean something to me now, but that meaning is private and more a feeling than a word-based something. The one thing I can say is that this sense of discovery, not of being told who one is, but of discovering for oneself, like being introduced to one's self by something beyond outside voices, is a mysterious and good thing. As is the divine name that means "I will be who I will be."

Suggest a practice for later rather than a meditation for right now. Keep your eye out for a stone, a holdable stone, that appeals to you. Or maybe you already have one, or some other object that's meaningful to you. And when you are in the mood, in a setting that's pleasing to you, take hold of that stone or object and imagine that it contains letters that convey aspect of your identity that is emerging, that is to be unveiled to you. You could bring it to your chest and if it helps say "I will be who I will be" or perhaps, "I am known by God, loved by God, and liked by God" or whatever else comes to you. Take a little time to relax into that and see how it feels.