

Personal Reinvention

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I researched how societal ideas of “existential crisis” and “identity crisis” impact my own life. I have gone through many crises of identity. In social settings, I tend to fall into a deeply carved personality groove, and I often feel trapped within the person others expect me to be. Though I talk of reinventing myself, I often fall short when it comes time for action.

My search for identity often leaves me unsure of my true self, but it also reveals the things that remain unchangeable, for example, my love for music, poetry, and family. To show what remains unchanging for me, I collaged excerpts of lyrics from songs that are important to me, and lines of poetry that have had an impact on my life and also reinforce my memories. Mostly, I created this piece as a tool for self-discovery. I am aware that my identity is always changing, yet with this work I am attempting to resolve the discrepancy between the way in which I act publicly and my true inner self.

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The movie opens to a shot of a stereotypical college campus, flash to the main character, here we find out, as we watch his overbearing family attempt to help him unpack, that he has deep running familial issues, as his parents have set high expectations for him in a field that isn't his passion. Through his schooling and a possible near death experience, he decides to follow his passion to the dismay of the parental units. There is an unspoken theme dispersed throughout society, and yet is well captured in film and fiction. It is carried through movies such as, *Dead Poets Society*, *Into the Wild*, *Good Will Hunting* and *Wild*, as well as novels such as *The Stranger*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Outsiders*, and *A Separate Piece*. The theme is easy consumption of an existential crisis for the viewer. The issue that arises from the prioritization of expediency instead of integrity, is that the legitimacy behind the personal revolution found in an existential crisis is no longer intact, and the societal blame is shifted outside of the person. The problem with not taking responsibility over personal behavioral evolution caused by outsourcing critical deep rooted development is the overall lessening in the value of the individual both socially and politically.

Entering high school is a highly turbulent time when pressure is put on to 1) fit in, 2) find yourself, (which are almost mutually exclusive at this phase) and 3) find a passion to lead you through the future. Essentially how this played out on my part, was that through the experience of watching *Into the wild*, I became overly invested in hiking the Pacific Crest Trail, and through *Dharma Bums*, I became devoted to the hipsterism that is romanticizing the adolescent infatuation with running away and escaping to the adventure of the wilderness. At some point, after a few years of perusal through research, I realized that this passion that had been gleaned from a movie, was not quite my own. I began to question the authenticity of my motivations, and eventually pulled away. Though I have set myself back on track to finding a deeper part of myself, others tend to get lost in borrowed passions and never pursue their own. As a society we take a lot of pride in identity, proudly proclaiming Myer Briggs personality types, zodiac signs, and even Hogwarts houses. The problem with idealizing such a steadfast base for personal identity, is that when an individual comes face to face with their own limitations and restricted possibilities, or even their own mortality, their personality returns to its natural state of fluidity and the base of the individual's personality is shaken to its core. This means that when faced with a legitimate crisis, individuals tend to crumble, as they are not used to handling internal crisis for themselves. Then what is the root of a true crisis of personality. Yet when the individual identity is questioned or challenged like this, pride in one's own personality is side stepped, and the resulting crisis is outsourced. What this has come to mean is that the existential crisis that is critical to the personal revolution, is prepackaged for ease of consumption. Essentially, through movies and books like the aforementioned, an individual can quickly and efficiently experience a crisis of identity and come out clean on the other side feeling accomplished and settled into themselves again, without doing any of the heavy lifting or making any real change. By watching the character evolve and find their true self, the viewer feels as though they have also pushed themselves through development by projecting themselves onto the character and absorbing their progress. Through the fictitious platform, they have experienced a crisis via someone else and come out the other side unscathed. The individual may then return to the complacency of their life without changing themselves, as a true existential would permit. But why is the crisis and self-revolution so valued in today's society, possibly even considered necessary to maintain personal authenticity? This connects to the Kierkegaard's ideas on existential angst. When faced with a cliff, one is not only faced with the fear of falling, but also fear of submitting to the impulse of throwing oneself off the cliff. (Case) This reflects the fear of failure, but envy of

freedom present when witnessing others take control of their own lives. The dismissal of the responsibility of the personal revolution has become commonplace in today's society, and therefore man is released from the burden that may be deliberate living.

Is there any alternative way to efficiently pursue change alternate to a life altering existential crisis? My mother likes to say that we become a completely different person every seven years, and while this may be true, the rate of change is miniscule and highly impressionable. It takes a shock to the system in order to wake from the drone, and societal corruption that is day to day life. A slow day to day change, is similar to the way that fingernails grow. Each day the growth is not noticed, but over time, it shows up in hindsight. As the nail is growing, because it takes so long, the natural elements have time to wear down and break the nail. This is similar to the effect that society and peer groups can have on an individual's development. Historically, there has always been value placed on individuality. This can be traced through romanticism, transcendentalism, down to the beat generation, and the cultural phenomenon of the hipster. Hand in hand with the priority on individualism is the rejection of the social norm, whether it be Thoreau's rejection of society in *Walden* or Kerouac's vagabond idealization in *Dharma Bums*. This pressure on individuality in a major way, may be contradictory to the way identity forms. The natural tendency to stay in the middle of the crowd, and not draw attention in the form of being an outlier may have to do with the idea of an ideal tribe member, so as not to be ostracized from society. (Smith) Usually identity forms in one of two ways, either to please the self, or to please society. (Stryker) Often it seems as though our goals are to be more like other people, not to become better versions of ourselves which can leave one feeling dejected and disenfranchised with life. (Art) This means either social structures influence the structure of the self, and therefore social behavior, or internal dynamics such as preferences and values will affect social behavior. (Stryker) This is similar to theories on how we motivate ourselves. Generally the two types of motivation are deficiency based or growth based. Deficiency based motivation is based around not being good enough, or having a lack of, and have the need to prove themselves. However with growth based motivation, individuals just want to reach the full capacity of their ability, and aim to discover themselves. (Strenger) A person may set a goal for themselves and should they fail, will align their identity with said failure, but should they surpass expectations, they will alter their personality to meet the discrepancy. Identity affirmation can become a problem, when it is based around the approval of others as it makes room for a self-schema. A self-schema is an idea about oneself that leads to self-perpetuating behavior based on title expectations instead of desires. This can become an issue when the societal role the individual has fallen into is contrary to their own values. Acting a certain way garners a certain response, but the response itself insures a persistence of the behavior, even if the individual feels a disconnect from that identity. To paraphrase Newton's third law, each social action generates an equal and opposite social reaction. This ebb and flow of responses can result in becoming locked into a personality role. A person may try to veer from the personality traits, but would be socially impacted and reprimanded, thereby falling deeper into conformity with the personality that they don't necessarily like. Essentially social interactions, whether the discrepancy between ideal self and socially perceived self was positive or negative, it would become self-perpetuating because "greater responsiveness to cues related to an identity will increase the likelihood that the behavior related to the identity will be performed". (Stryker) This is why many people are entirely different people in social situations, versus at home.

If there are so many layers to personality, then what is the root cause of an entire crisis? Four issues can cause a crisis, one, death, an inevitable limitation, two, freedom, the existential sense, three, isolation, the idea that no matter how close we come to another, a gap always remains, and meaninglessness, which stems from the first three. This may lead to the investment in causes, such as politics, academics, or cults, alternatively one may become depressed, mixed with attempts to belong and fit into a social group. This pressure to perform can result in doubt in personality. Culturally there are some traits and personality sets that are valued higher than others. A perfect example of this, is the cultural phenomenon of the hipster. Following the principles set by Stryker's structural interaction perspective, There are five tiers of behavioral responses. The first is a behavior that is dependent on a label, and will carry out certain responses due to the expectations held in tangent with the label. For the example of the hipster, being labeled as such puts standards on the individual, therefore they are expected to act in a certain way, and may modify their behavior in order to maintain the title should it be beneficial to them. The second is that among those who receive the title, there are certain symbols that denote status within the group, in the case of the hipster, these symbols are things such as the predominant use of the mason jar and fixed gear bike. Third, those within the group should be able to identify others within a social setting and through identification, have standards for behavior. Therefore, due to peer recognition, one is condemned to perpetuate the behavioral aspects of the group they reflect. There is a discrepancy in this example, in that, one of the social expectations of those who identify as hipsters, is that they may never acknowledge their identity as such. The individual may recognize another but not verbally acknowledge this. There is a slight hitch in the fourth factor as well, being that it is to name himself and therefore internalize the meaning and expectations for their title. This again goes against the code of anti-self-verification, but is present regardless of verbal recognition. Lastly, these social expectations and meanings create the guiding basis for the groups social behavior, such as going against the so called mainstream.

When confronted with crisis, there are two possible outcomes, either the participant will come out the other end stronger and at peace with themselves, or they struggle to keep it together. (Ackerman) When tragedy wipes away our former self, there is great opportunity for change, and unfortunately some individuals freeze up at this idea, which may lead to existential depression. But can this change be equally effective if it is gleaned from someone else? The simple answer to this is no, because it could lead an individual to become more like another, therefore reducing the variance in society, much like convergent evolution. Under the pressure to perform, a person may realize how futile and frugal their attempt to placate their situation is and often become depressed at their own perceived helplessness. Hand in hand with this wave of helplessness is self-doubt, primarily in the form of doubting capability, then evolving to pull worth, the self, and identity into question. When faced with death, our daily choices and chores seem insignificant and pointless. At this discovery many people make great revolutions of their lives, often quitting their jobs, moving, going on vacation, or making some other great change. This crisis of choice leads to an overwhelming responsibility over not only their own personality, but all situations they've come to in life. Many adults are not fully equipped to handle this realization. Being confronted with one's own mortality usually ends horribly, or with a crisis state. Using death as a motivator can be troublesome if one assumes death is forthwith, but when weighed in the future values often change. For example, this paper, if I knew I were to die tomorrow I would abandon this paper as is, and travel to the beach to savor the last of my time on this earth. But, should I die in 15 years, it is worth my while to finish this essay and continue

one with my education. The rationalization of the day to day life depends on where we forecast death to be on our timelines. Socially this self-awareness can make or break the life of an individual. As a result, instead of furthering ourselves, one may attempt to become more like a celebrity that they idolize. The ones that stand out are often referred to as larger than life, but as Catherine McHugh said, how can one be larger than life? The reason they come off this way is because they are the most like themselves and quite unlike anyone else. We simultaneously idolize these people for living out their lives to their full potential, while doubting our own potential to do the same.

I find that a lot of fears about personality and change clear up when the individual is given time to process. For example the phenomenon of turning into the parents, if this is resisted, it is exactly what takes place, but if this is embraced, then it is transcended. I know I will turn into my parents, in fact we already are shockingly similar. I also fall victim to the scheme of the prepackaged, and easily consumed existential crisis. When I first saw *Into the Wild*, I was overcome with passion for the outdoors, and a new sense of self. Unrightfully, I treated the characters life as my own, and felt pride in his hike, inspiring me to pursue my own. The first time I became aware of my own mortality, I was about 10, and instead of being reassured that that wouldn't happen any time soon, I was told to use death as a motivator and live each day as if it was the last, but simultaneously prepare for years to come.

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