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Viewpoint 2: An Insufficiency of "I"

By Linda O'Toole

Introduction

An aspect of learning, relationships and group interactions that seems too often downplayed or even ignored is cultivating an individual sense of self. Taking account of this implies being aware of myself as an individual, and recognizing my own unique qualities and purposes. This is to be understood in the context of Mamphele Ramphela's description of learning as "a quest to identify and define one's mission in life" ... (which) ... "becomes a way of learning how to be human in a world that is changing whilst discovering one's own role as a unique agent in shaping one's environment for the better." [Ramphela, 2015]

For me, discovering, cultivating, and expressing one's unique potential is an extremely critical factor in how we learn, relate and work together. I refer to the lack of knowing and expressing one's unique self as an insufficiency of "I." In this viewpoint I will explore what I mean by that phrase. First, I consider the concepts of individualism and interdependency, which are often experienced in opposition to one another; then, I discuss the importance of acknowledging an insufficiency of "I," followed by what is required to cultivate a *sufficiency* of "I," and the benefits of that stance, as I see it.

Individualism

As an American working in a northern European context, I am keenly aware of the concern among educators and others about what can be termed "rampant individualism." This trend is particularly associated with, but not exclusive to, government policies, economic trends, media and popular culture in the United States. As someone with a deep interest and background in individual differences in how we learn and interact, I am often confronted about the term "individual." On one occasion when I used a phrase describing a facet of self-agency as "learning to be and become me ... in order to contribute to the community and society in a way that truly nurtures the uniqueness of me," a colleague

expressed passionate alarm at the misguided emphasis of “me” being used within the context of well-being and learning.

Individualism is defined as the belief that the needs of each person are more important than the needs of the society or group. It is characterized as encouraging individual freedom and initiative, placing “all values, rights and duties of the individual as ethically paramount to those of an abstract identify such as society.” In this sense, individualism in western societies can be considered as a significant factor in the breakdown of social norms, the fracturing of traditional family and community networks, and the fragmenting of group cohesion and shared values.

But taking account of individual perspectives – acknowledging the value of knowing oneself as an individual – is distinctly different than putting one’s needs or views above those of the group or others. Understanding and expressing one’s sense of self does not require isolation, self-centeredness, or ignoring the needs of others. In fact, I would argue that cultivating a sense of one’s unique self allows you to bring yourself more fully to all those with whom you engage, and contributes significantly to how you are able to participate in your community and social groups.

Interdependency

It has become almost a cliché to point to increasing interconnections among us, across the world – through media, economics, climate, travel, and so forth. Locally and internationally, environmental and social activists have urged a shift in mindset to adopt attitudes and behaviors that focus on the well-being of society as a whole, strengthening local communities, and the interdependency of all living systems. In recognizing our impact on one another, there is a growing demand for collective interventions and to feel more strongly united around “we-consciousness.” For example: “We are all in this together!” is an expression that takes on particular meaning in relation to climate change. If there is ever a time that as humans we need to act interdependently, with an awareness of our relationships and our impact on others, it is now.

Individual and group interdependency

This moment requires more than adopting an either/or stance – it is not a simple choice between valuing the group vs. emphasizing individual consciousness. My view is that our individual and collective well-being requires a balance of the needs of both individuals and the group – not privileging or giving undue weight to one or the other.

As we struggle to find the balance between the individual and the group, what I find most common is an insufficiency of “I” – a lack of paying attention to who I am as an individual human being ... in relation to others and to the environment, but also to exploring, discovering and nurturing my own individual self.

An insufficiency of “I” does not imply that the individual is the primary focus or the only focus of all activity, nor does it imply self-centeredness or a lack of recognizing the ways in which our lives are deeply connected to and interwoven with others and the environment.

Rather, it projects the notion that within the specific context of a particular circumstance there is an insufficiency of self for full development and the unfolding of one's unique potential (or soul's purpose).

The lack of a sufficient awareness of "I" often leads to a situation in which there is too much focus on external points of validation where the needs of each person are no longer taken into account – one is following group norms that are not sufficiently internalized so the individual becomes distant or alienated from the group.

Organizational consultant Roger Schwarz developed a rebuttal to "There's no I in team" which is a common sports slogan adopted by the business world. The idea behind the slogan is that sports and business teams must focus on what's best for the team. If team members do that, then the team will be successful; if team members focus on what's best for them individually, the team will suffer. As Roger points out, and I would second, there needs to be an "I" in team; without each of us bringing our "I" to our teams, individual well-being suffers. For me, the even more critical point is that when I turn myself over exclusively to the goals and ways of working of the team or group, I am compromising the best of what I can offer to the group. When I bring myself fully, with my life-purpose present in my heart and mind, and with the diversity of my own needs and ways of processing, I enrich the groups in which I participate and generate more creativity.

Sufficiency of self/bringing the "I"

There are many ways to describe the core self (the "I"). One phrase that resonates for me is the soul in evolution – the unique and dynamic organizing principles of a particular individual. In my view, every person is born with innate and endless potential to be fully her/himself. In the simplest expression, this is our unique self. A sufficiency of self requires you to be present to the full circumstances of your life; or, to paraphrase Albert Schweitzer: to engage in the process of becoming more finely and deeply human.

I think of the unique potential (core self) as represented through the vital energy and qualities that provide meaning, purpose and direction to an individual's life. Living this definition requires us to encourage self-awareness and the expression of specific talents, gifts and contributions. Instead of defining humankind as "tool makers", Robert Kegan (and others) speak of the most fundamental characteristic of humans as being *meaning makers* – it's how we make sense of our environments and learn about ourselves: "It is not that a person makes meaning, as much as that the activity of being a person is the activity of meaning-making," Kegan clarifies. (Kegan, 1982)

For me this view suggests that our reason for being is to become aware of our reason for being – discovering the particular, specific reason for being which is unique to each one of us. No other human being can substitute for our individual life force and purpose; no one else can take on our specific purpose in the way that we can.

By nurturing the flourishing of the undivided and evolving self within each of us, we are emphasizing the meaning and purpose in every life, and the precious quality of each

individual. When there is an insufficiency of “I,” we fall prey to the two-dimensional material world in which life can be too easily reduced to a series of transactions and a set of standardized responses to our own actions and those of others.

Francisco Varela, a Chilean biologist who focused on studying living systems and applying ecological principles to human cognition and consciousness, asserts that if a living system is out of balance, the remedy is to connect it to more of itself. In a literal sense, his words are easiest to comprehend in looking at systems such as streams or forests which need to function as organic wholes for health (and which falter when parts of the system are separated from other parts, such as by removing a natural predator or building a barrier). But they are equally applicable to humans, individually and collectively: when we find ourselves in unhealthy or unbalanced circumstances, we need to become more essentially who we are – connecting to and expressing our deepest selves – allowing ourselves to experience a sufficiency of “I”.

So many of the attributes that we consider necessary for the next generations are those that require a sufficiency of the self, an individual perspective: critical thinking, the ability to discern reliable and accurate information from that which is worthless, making decisions and choices that are right for me as an individual, being able to stand against peer or group pressure, knowing one’s strengths and talents, being able to use my capacities for development and growth; refining my sensibilities as an instrument of awareness and creativity, and so forth. As environmental activist Joanna Macy wrote: “The future is not out there in front of us, but inside us.” Without the willingness to turn our focus inward, to consciously employ ourselves as an instrument for sensing the emerging whole, and to understand our relationship to each situation as subject – this is who I am in relation to this situation rather than “things didn’t work out” – we are caught in an insufficiency of “I.”

My view is that living in an increasingly interconnected yet fragmented world, we must acknowledge ourselves as individuals while maintaining our connections with those around us. Our balance will never be perfect – because balance is ever changing according to the dynamics of our context – but we can aim for “sufficiency” – enough so that we can know ourselves and connect to that which has meaning and purpose for each of us.

Author

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