

I Am/ I Am Not

Below are three unfinished sentences. Take a sheet of paper and write them down. Now complete the top two with one-word answers that represent positive psychological attributes of yours. Don't put in mere descriptive attributes (e.g., "*I am a male*"). Use terms that refer to your most prized personal qualities.

Reserve the last for the exact opposite. There, list a personal attribute that you fear you have or think you have that is negative.

1. I am _____.
2. I am _____.
3. I am _____.

Let's begin by reviewing the top two "positive" answers. I have a couple of simple questions: Is this true all the time? Everywhere? Toward everyone? Without exception?

You are such a liar!

What about the bottom one. Is it totally true, everywhere? Would someone else say the same thing if they could watch you 24-7?

Now another question: how many of these statements can you turn into a *comparison* with others? Try to do it with each one. If you wrote down "*I am smart*" or "*I am kind*" see if it isn't true that these statements link to the idea that you are smart-ER or kind-ER (or dumb-ER and so on) than at least some other people.

This isn't just your story – it's your story in *comparison* to others. No wonder we begin to feel alone inside our own ego!

The beginning of a solution is to notice your fusion with these statements. Beginning with the first one and continuing through all three, change the period at the end of each sentence to a comma, and then write down these two words: “*or not.*” For example, “*I am smart, or not.*”

Now read each sentence again, slowly. Watch what happens. Take your time. You may be able to sense something opening slightly—as if a little bit of air is coming into a room. You might be able to feel that you somehow have more options about how you think about yourself.

Don't try to hang on to that feeling—it will come and go—and don't get into an argument with yourself about which version is more accurate. The mental process we are cultivating here is reminding ourselves that we can refuse to buy one version of a story as compared to another. We're opening our minds to possibilities.

See if you can notice that this sense of opening happens with both the “positive” statements and the negative one.

Now take the first sentence and cross out all of what you've written after “*I am.*” Who would you be without that content? Pause to consider the answer. Then do the same with each of the other sentences. What would it be like just to let go of that content?

This process begs the question: Who are you without all of your stories and defenses? Who or what are you trying to protect? If you woke up one day and all sentences like this were just sentences – they all had that open sense of “_____ or not!” – would you still be you?

If your mind replies “heck no!” take just a moment to notice who is noticing that mind of yours. Aren’t you noticing that mental reaction? Isn’t the you that is noticing a deeper sense of “you?”

As the final act in this little exercise, circle the two words repeated three times – “*I am*” – and consider them. What if the deeper sense of self we seek is closer to these two words alone? In crafting the story of our lives we lose sight of this powerful alternative: just being.

There is one more step in this exercise, which helps us to become more aware of when we tend to fall under the spell of our self-stories.

Ego-based stories are not just distorted, they also tend to be too general. In actuality, we focus on different aspects of our self-story in different circumstances. For example, when at home with our loved ones, we may focus on our view of ourselves as being caring, while at work, we might focus on our thoughts about being inept.

Becoming aware of how our self-story changes according to different situations helps us stay better connected with our transcendent self, and therefore with our ability to choose among possibilities about how we will be.

So now, we’re going to transform the “*I am* _____” statements, but rewriting each.

First, instead of “*I am*” write “*I feel*” or “*I think*.” For example, if you wrote “*I am loving*” replace it with “*I feel loving*.” If you wrote “*I am smart*” make it “*I think of myself as smart*.”

Next qualify each statement by describing the situation in which you think or feel that way, including how your own behavior is involved, using this phrasing: “*When*” _[the situation]__ “*and I*” [your behavior] *then* [how you think or feel]. For example, “*When my wife is disagreeing with me, and I take her perspective seriously, I feel loving*,” or “*When I have a lot to do, and I take time for self-care, I think of myself as smart*.”

You can also write descriptions of the situations in which you do not feel loving or smart. For example, “*When I have a lot of work to do and I ignore my twelve-year-old son, I do not feel loving*.” (By the way, all of these examples are totally random and have absolutely nothing to do with me. Ahem.)

This is a far more useful form of self-description, guiding us about when and how we are not behaving in accordance with our authentic aspirations for ourselves. You should keep practicing this exercise as you catch your self-judgments to become increasingly aware of their invitation into an over-extended conceptualized self and how many options you have just to notice and to carry them in other directions from a more transcendent sense of self.