

What Makes You Unique?

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One Sunday afternoon when I was in college, my girlfriend's roommate ran into the library, frantic. She was disheveled and seemed very alarmed.

"They've taken her to the hospital in an ambulance!!!" she screamed.

I dropped everything and we ran a few blocks down to the hospital. On the way, the girl told me that they had eaten a leisurely lunch and when they were done, they were walking out on the sidewalk having a pleasant conversation about nothing. All of a sudden, my girlfriend had fallen to the ground and went into spasms, foaming at the mouth and so forth.

As she writhed around on the ground, she told her friend she was in "anaphylactic shock." She apparently was very allergic to nuts and believed there must have been some in her food.

By the time the ambulance arrived, my girlfriend was barely able to breathe. Her airway was constricting and she was grabbing at her neck, unable to talk. The paramedics had stuck a tube down her throat to open up her airway and rushed her to the hospital.

I sat in the waiting room for about ten minutes and was frantic that the end might be near for my girlfriend. I was in a hospital on the south side of Chicago and it was reminiscent of something out of the old television show *ER*. There was a huge variety of people there.

After a short while, a nurse came out and looked at me in a strange way—as if I were a little crazy:

"She's asking for you," the nurse said in a way that seemed overly impersonal.

When I walked into the emergency room, my girlfriend was sitting there on a bed. There were no doctors or anything around her. She was sitting right up in bed and looked absolutely fine.

"I really thought I was in anaphylactic shock," she told me as I tried to comfort her. We were in the critical area of the emergency room unit and all around us—except for where my girlfriend was—all sorts of activity seemed to be going on. Critical ER areas in city hospitals are serious business.

My girlfriend reiterated how she had thought she had been dying and said she did not know what happened.

At the time, our relationship was on very thin ice. She was also flunking out of school and doing pretty poorly in life in all respects. I felt sorry for her. She had formerly been a star athlete and student and was now very down on herself. The previous summer she had been to a doctor who had prescribed her some antidepressants and it had changed her personality for the worse. She had also started smoking. It was very strange.

A few moments later, a doctor appeared and without making eye contact with my girlfriend, he said: "It's okay to go. You can leave now, okay?"

The doctor was a young guy who looked like he had been a college football player. He seemed pretty cool and the sort of guy you could easily talk to and spend time with. My girlfriend was awkwardly getting off the gurney and being helped by her friends. A nurse appeared with a plastic bag that contained my girlfriend's purse and her shoes. As the doctor was walking away, I stopped him. He had turned a corner and we were out of earshot of my girlfriend and her friend.

"What happened with her?" I asked.

"How long have you known her?" he said.

"A few years--we're off and on," I told him.

"Okay, dude—I'll level with you then. She made the whole thing up. She was not in shock and it was all an act."

"That's something ..." I said. I was honestly in a state of disbelief—ambulances, emergency rooms, and so forth, and now this? The doctor could tell I had questions.

"I do not know if she wanted you to come see her in the hospital, or what it was all about, but she made it up," he said. "We're going to notify Mental [Health Services](#) at the school. I do not see this sort of thing a lot."

The doctor was actually a pretty nice guy. In experiencing this episode, though, I found myself a little taken back. The only thing that I could think was that my girlfriend was at such a low point in her life that she needed a way to feel important. She got an instant sense of importance as soon as she was on the ground in front of a group of strangers, when the ambulance arrived, when she was rushed into the emergency room, and when doctors, nurses, and others appeared at her side. Now, she would merit even more medical attention once Mental Health Services got involved. She had suddenly managed to draw a lot of attention to herself, and if she did not have a medical condition to get others to pay attention to her—she sure would have a psychological condition that would merit attention soon.

Every person out there wants to feel important and as if they're unique in some way. In fact, the need to feel as if we are important is something that drives most people's behavior.

- Some people feel important for the things they own.
- Some people feel important for the people they know.
- Some people feel important for the work they do.
- Some people feel important based on being needed.
- Some people feel important for their past accomplishments.
- Some people feel important for how they dress.

- Some people feel important for who their family is.
- Some people feel important by criticizing other people.
- Some people feel important based on the things they learn.
- Some people feel important for their special talents.

In fact, everyone has something they use to feel important. I know people, for example, who spend their spare time learning arcane things—it could be a language or art history or anything at all. They are then introduced to people as someone who knows about this or that—and you can see the person likes being associated with knowing about this special thing. This gives them a sense of importance and significance, as if they have a special purpose.

Imagine what it has taken humans to survive for millions of years in groups. People have an innate need to feel as if they are making a unique contribution to the world. Thousands of years ago, a prized skill might have been being the best at killing animals with spears. The man who could do this contributed more food. Or it might have been the man who could frighten smaller men with his size. Whatever the genetic underpinnings of all this, we are “hardwired” to want to be unique and contribute to the human race in our own way. We absolutely need this and we need to feel wanted. This is one reason that your career and what you choose to do with the course of your life is so incredibly important on so many levels.

Some people I have known “cast off” the identity of saying a career is important, or titles or affluence is important. I have done various spiritual retreats before with Indian gurus. You know what? The sense of importance these people get from their spiritual practice is no different from the sense of significance a Wall Street banker might get by making a lot of money—the spiritual people feel they are making a unique contribution through their spirituality. They most often feel they are “above” and “better than” others due to their relationship with God.

Whether it is the religious person, the person trying to make as much money as possible, the artist—or otherwise—everyone out there has a massive fundamental need to feel he or she has a unique identity and is making a unique contribution to the world.

When people do not feel important based on things you might consider positive, they develop a “negative identity” such as my girlfriend, to feel important based on something negative, like the fact that they have “health problems.” In the case of my girlfriend, she was feeling down on herself, was not succeeding, and was unhappy. Instead of taking responsibility for how she felt about herself, she found another way to give herself a sense of importance. With the medical condition she could say, “I am different from other people. I have this special condition.”

To my astonishment, this fake episode involving going into “shock” had suddenly made her incredibly important. But it was at a grave expense. Her life essentially stood still while she got this mental health condition taken care of.

Right now, at this particular point in your life, I am sure there is something you are using to make yourself feel unique and important. Make sure you are basing your feelings of importance on something positive and that fits the person you are. The key to really achieving a life and career of meaning is choosing something that is right for you.

- Never choose a negative identity for yourself to get that uniqueness—you should choose something positive.
- Never choose a past identity for yourself to get that uniqueness—you should choose a positive one.

Realize, as well, that the identity you choose for yourself and where you place the emphasis will be how others know you and where you end up going. How you choose to define your uniqueness will largely determine your direction in life. In my opinion, what makes you unique should be related to what you do for a living.

- If you choose to have your unique identity related to knowing a lot of people, then this should be an asset in your **career**.
- If you choose to have your unique identity related to being good-looking, then this should be an asset in your career.
- If you choose to have your unique identity related to being exceptional in languages, then this should be an asset in your career.

In addition, your career should offer the best long-term rewards for being this way. For example, if you were a surgeon, a good identity would be to be “extremely meticulous”—this is something that would help you in your career; patients and colleagues would want to hear this and it would be completely fitting for what you do. However, this same identity would not be that great if you were a car salesman. Here, an identity of “outgoing” and “affable” might be more appropriate.

Whatever it is that makes you unique, it should be related to what you do for a living and help you in advance in your career. To some extent, this uniqueness could help you find the right job, one that values your unique trait.

We have a natural instinct to choose some defensible characteristic of uniqueness and importance. You undoubtedly have some characteristics at the moment that you feel make you unique. Make sure this (1) is a positive trait, and (2) helps you advance in your career.