

Why You Need to Love Yourself and When You Need to Change Your Friends, Job and Life

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Recently, I returned home from Asia on a horrible airline ticket that made four separate connections before it finally arrived in Los Angeles. On my trip, I had the occasion to sit next to a series of businessmen also travelling back from various places I stopped along the way. The people were Japanese (1), American (2), Australian (1), and Indian (1).

On trips, I like to start up conversations and get to know the people I am sitting next to. What I noticed was that each of the people I was sitting next to asked me one (or more) of the following questions:

- “What do you do?”
- “Where do you live?”
- “Where did you go to school?”
- “Where did you grow up?”
- “What did your parents do?”

These questions are the exact same questions I am also asked pretty much wherever I go and by whomever I meet. I am usually asked these questions within the first 30 seconds or so of meeting someone; however, sometimes it takes up to 5 minutes. Regardless, these questions are almost always asked.

Typically, others ask these questions because, among other things, they are trying to understand how important someone else is and then make judgments about where they stand in the pecking order. I cannot really be sure if this happens more with men than with women, but I doubt there is much of a difference. What I do know is that it seems pretty universal. These questions are asked across all cultures, races and sexes.

Much of the time, I think, people will ask these questions because they want to volunteer how important they are.

- *If I am asked ... “What do you do?”* the person asking this generally believes they have a very important job and wants to talk about this.
- *If I am asked ... “Where do you live?”* the person asking this is generally very impressed or proud of where they live and wants to talk about this.
- *If I am asked ... “Where did you go to school?”* the person asking this generally went to a very good school they are proud of and want to let me know.
- *If I am asked ... “Where did you grow up?”* the person generally wants to talk about where they grew up and how interesting or important it makes them.
- *If I am asked ... “What did your parents do?”* the person generally wants to talk about how important their parents were and talk about this.

I am not arguing that there is anything wrong with these questions. There is not. This is perfectly legitimate information for people to know about and discuss when meeting to get to know one another. However, this information also serves to isolate people from one another because so many people base their self-worth and who they are on information such as this. If the CEO of a major corporation asks a well-dressed man sitting next to him he assumes is important what he does, and that man says he washes dishes at an Olive Garden the conversation will generally stop.

When the conversation stops, the following will occur:

- The CEO will feel more important and like he should not waste his time.
- The dishwasher will feel badly about himself and as if he is not worthy in the eyes of the CEO.

What is it that makes one person valuable and worthwhile?

- Is it wealth?
- Is it the amount of wealth?
- Is it education?
- Is it the quality of education?
- Is it a car?
- Is it the quality of a car?
- Is it a house?
- Is it the quality of the house?
- Is it a religion?
- Is it how devoted someone is who practices a religion?
- Is it how many friends someone has?
- Is it the quality of friends someone has?
- Is it the profession someone has?
- Is it how successful someone is in that profession?
- Is it the company someone works for?
- Is it how high up someone is at that company?

- Is it the parties someone is invited to?

- Is it the exclusivity of the parties someone is invited to?

You see, all around us, people are typically judging others (and judging themselves) based on these things. There is nothing wrong with being very successful, wealthy, accomplished and unique; however, there is something very, very wrong with the fact that most people end up defining their worth and value based on these sorts of things—and, in turn, defining others based on these things.

If you define your worth and value based on what you have, do not have, have accomplished and have not accomplished, you are never going to be happy. In fact, you are always going to be extraordinarily uncomfortable with the person you are despite whatever you may do. People drive themselves into insanity and rages based on this sort of thing.

I know a woman who is married, does not work and lives a good life due to having inherited a great deal of money. Most of her identity is based upon her ability to excel in a very competitive social environment in an exclusive suburb of Los Angeles. I recently went to a party she was having with my wife. The party was nice enough, and I enjoyed myself. A few hours into the party, my wife rushed upstairs because there was some sort of crisis. I followed. The woman was in her bedroom crying so hysterically that the shirt she was wearing was covered in tears. I assumed she had just found out a parent died, or that her husband had announced he was leaving her, or that one of her children had just been killed.

In fact, it could not have been anything further from the truth. What had happened was that a few of the more popular girls in this exclusive social circle had come to the party and only stayed around 20 minutes. The woman was convinced they had not enjoyed themselves at all and that this reflected badly on her. From a social standpoint, she felt crushed and ruined. It could not have been worse.

Does this sound insane? To many people this might. Many people refuse to play these social games and be sucked in by them. However, if this sort of thing is how you define yourself (based on how important you feel socially and who likes you, or does not) then feeling snubbed can be devastating. In this woman's eyes I can only assume she took a 20-minute visit to her party to mean:

- She was not liked (or thought of highly)
- She was not respected
- She was not part of the exclusive in crowd
- She was lesser than the two girls who did not stay long

She was defining herself (and her worth) based on a 20-minute visit from two socially popular girls who may have left early for a variety of reasons that had nothing to do with her.

Recently a man who sold a large chain business for something like \$800 million dollars moved into my neighborhood from New York, and his children started attending my daughters' school. Since he was new in town, people Googled him and quickly learned about his extraordinary success. The man is nice and very unpretentious. I met him, and he was as friendly, normal and down-to-earth as he could be. I went over to his house to pick up my daughter on a Sunday afternoon, and he walked outside to greet me wearing no shirt, an old bathing suit, some drugstore sunglasses and carrying a beer.

Nevertheless, for whatever reason, the other men at the school avoid him, do not talk to him and keep their distance from him. In contrast, there are a variety of personalities of the fathers of ordinary success levels, and none of them seem to have any issues whatsoever getting along with one another. This man has quickly realized that he is going to have a difficult time with a lot of the fathers in the school. For whatever reason, the other men believe that this man's success reflects negatively on them.

According to his wife: "His success makes other men feel inadequate ... so they avoid him. By avoiding him, they do not have to acknowledge their own feelings of inadequacy. This happens just about everywhere we go—even Palm Beach."

What is so interesting to me about these two examples is that the complex game going on here is all about perceived value. In one case, it is about (1) how someone views themselves and, in the other case, (2) about how people view others:

- **In the first case**, a woman feels horrible about herself because she does not think she is at the top of the social pyramid. She believes that she is not valuable and feels devastated.
- **In the second case**, a man has achieved incredible levels of success and yet he is so valuable, *so far removed from what most other men around him can ever hope to achieve*, that he has been completely isolated in all respects, at least among the "normal" fathers that his children go to school with.

These "evaluations of value" about what is important are all around us and end up defining how we see ourselves in the long run. They are ... to put it mildly, **one of the most significant forces governing what we do, achieve and do not achieve on this earth.**

- Parents will generally give their children a very clear idea about what is important and makes them valuable. In turn, children will absorb these values and base their self-worth and identities on this as well.
- The areas we live in will have a whole set of ideas about what is important and makes people valuable. In turn, the people there will absorb these values and base their self-worth and identities on this as well.
- The people we associate with will generally have a whole set of ideas about what is important and what makes people valuable. In turn, we will absorb these values and base our self-worth and identities on this as well.

You can, of course, keep breaking this down by religions, schools, employers, group affiliations ... the list is very long. People get their identities and sense of importance from the values of the people around them.

Also, not too far from my home is a Jewish Chabad (an orthodox Jewish synagogue). The Rabbis that run Chabads (and the majority of people who attend them) dress in all black, grow beards, wear kippahs and have various dress and other customs and that would greatly confuse people who do not follow them. I am sure you have seen these devout orthodox Jews around when you have travelled. They are very common in various areas of the country such as New York and the Fairfax area of Los Angeles.



The children that are part of this religion all follow these strict dress codes and ways of behaving as well. If they did not and refused to, their parents would become extremely upset, and there would be punishment and, most certainly, profound levels of disapproval. The study of the Torah (the Jewish bible) is generally much more important to them than secular education. A religious existence is more important than professional achievement.

The people that follow this religion, like most religions, become the people they do because of the values and judgments about what is important and what makes someone important that the religion and people around them stress.

In most religions, people judge one another based on how effectively they follow various practices. For example:

- In Catholicism, you generally must go to confession before taking communion.
- In Mormonism, there are various requirements that people need to fulfill in order to be able to enter temples.

Orthodox Jews are generally pretty clear that they are right and other versions of Judaism (much less Christianity) are completely wrong. The people following any religion have a set of customs and beliefs that they get their self-worth from and which they use to define themselves. These rules form the people that they are and become.

In my experience, most of the people who grow up orthodox Jews like this end up staying orthodox Jews throughout their lives. Their customs and beliefs follow them because the social stigma of not doing so is that strong.

What does all of this mean for you? You too have chosen to be part of something in which you perceive that value is coming from how others judge and think about you.

- In your job, you may feel judged. Did not get a promotion? Your self-worth is now lower.
- In your community, you may feel judged. Not following the correct religious practices of the community? Your self-worth is now lower.
- In your social circle, you may feel judged. Not making friends with the right people? Your self-worth is now lower.

We put ourselves in communities, institutions, groups and environments where we are constantly being judged and calibrated by a variety of measures and expected to be a certain type of person to be valuable.

Most of us never get there.

How else can you explain stars overdosing on drugs and having mental breakdowns, politicians risking their reputations and freedom by taking bribes, people cheating on one another, and seemingly well-off people killing one another and harming people to get ahead?

There are tremendous forces, signals and other messages out there that conspire to make people feel inadequate and not up to snuff. Generally, we have to make a choice of whether we listen to this information. It is about what we listen to that controls our lives and how well we do.

I have gone to services at Jewish Chabads before. In all honesty, I have zero idea what is going on, and I look completely out of place. I am not dressed properly, do not speak Hebrew and am at a complete loss for words regarding the customs and other procedures followed there. I endure looks, know I am not approved of (due to my lack of devotion) and am very confused the whole time I am there.

Does this bother me? Not in the least. I am not interested in being part of this group. Their approval is not important to me, and I do not base my identity on it. If I did, I would care very much. The people who do would feel incredibly bad about themselves if they showed up at these services dressed improperly and not conducting themselves in the proper way.

I know someone who is a devout Scientologist and a very active member of this church – so much so that they volunteer there over 80 hours a week (for free), live in a shared bedroom with four other people (to save money) and give all of the money from their job to the organization. They do this because they believe in what they do, but also because their entire self-identity and worth is tied up in making sure that they get the approval of their peers and “higher ups” in this organization. At times when this has been questioned, they work even harder and do even more for the organization.

In reality, this is no different from the woman in the affluent Los Angeles suburb whose life and identity is based upon how “higher ups” in her social circle feel about her. If they leave her party in 20 minutes, she must be doing something wrong and needs to improve.

I live in Malibu, California, and want to tell you a quick story about the woman who is considered by most to be the most

popular person here. Her father is a multi-billionaire you have certainly heard of, and the woman is not particularly attractive, or accomplished, but she is very talented socially. Her father's epic status means she knows many movie stars and other famous people.

She has used a masterful strategy to take herself to the top of the social pyramid. The strategy is very simple: She starts off by being very nice to people and they like her a great deal. She invites them to parties, she takes them with her on vacation, she arranges play dates for their children, and she invites them out to dinner.

She then starts playing games. She stops inviting them to certain things. Then she is very nice for some time, and then cuts them off again.

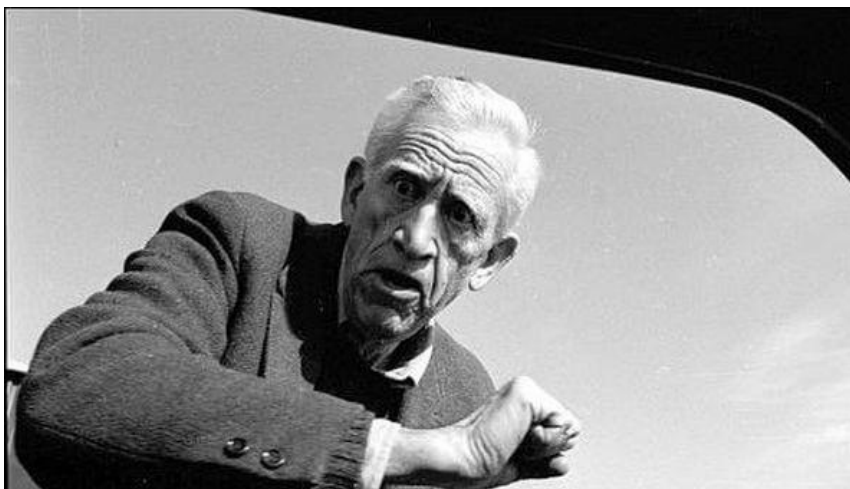
She must have 100+ "games" going on like this with a variety of people all around the area, and she has used this masterfully to increase her perceived worth and standing. She literally does this by alternatively making people feel like insiders and outsiders. People have, of course, figured this out but they do not seem to care. It continues working on everyone.

I am extremely impressed by this. I do not like it, but you need to see it for what it is. It is the same game the most popular people in most high school classes, companies and other organizations masterfully play and work to their advantage time and time again.

The issue, of course, is that people fall for this. People around her are controlled by their own insecurities and the sense of inclusion, or exclusion, she provides (or withholds) and the sense of importance she is able to make people feel when she does include them. She is able to make people feel both important and unimportant.

This ... incidentally, is the same thing that all groups and organizations do to their members.

One of the more interesting stories of a hermit was J.D. Salinger. His classic book, [The Catcher in the Rye](#), is all about people feeling included, excluded and part of (or not part of) and their egos. For Holden Caulfield in [The Catcher in the Rye](#), a phony is simply someone who tries too hard to fit in.



In his classic "[Franny & Zooey](#)" he writes:

"I'm just sick of ego, ego, ego. My own and everybody else's. I'm sick of everybody that wants to get somewhere, do something distinguished and all, be somebody interesting. It's disgusting."

And

"It's everybody, I mean. Everything everybody does is so — I don't know — not wrong, or even mean, or even stupid necessarily. But just so tiny and meaningless and — sad-making. And the worst part is, if you go bohemian or something crazy like that, you're conforming just as much only in a different way."

Presumably in order to avoid being defined and upset and tormented by a constant barrage of others' opinions and definitions of him (and, like any famous person, his ups and downs would have been well chronicled), J.D. Salinger spent the last 60 years of his life **in almost complete seclusion**:

The writer J. D. Salinger, who died yesterday aged 91, was as famous for his five decades of stringent reclusiveness as for his best-known novel, [The Catcher in the Rye](#), which was an instant bestseller when it was published in 1951.

It also marked the beginning of an obsessive withdrawal from the world. This hermit, who guarded his privacy with a shotgun and guard dogs behind high walls, was equally fierce in protecting his anonymity with squads of lawyers who attempted to block anything intimate being written about him.

He was the ultimate anti-celebrity, refusing interviews and insisting his photograph was removed from the dust-jackets of his books. (The Daily Mail, January 29, 2010, "Why Did JD Salinger Spend 60 Years Hiding in a Shed")

Deep down, we all have a need to be connected to others. If we cannot stand being defined by others as more or less important, popular, or significant, we can withdraw, or find new groups.

One solution, of course, is not to be part of groups and become a hermit like Salinger (but this is only an answer for some). What makes Salinger and other hermits I have known and studied (consider the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, who also lived as a hermit while carrying out his mayhem and senseless killing) is that they found the only solution to these games was to withdraw.



- Kaczynski was an incredibly talented, world-class mathematician who was among the best in the world.
- Salinger was an incredibly talented, world-class writer and was among the best in the world.

Both made the decision that withdrawing was their only choice.

I have a better solution: Find new rules and groups with rules that support you and do not keep you down. So many people are unhappy in careers, with where they live, with the people they associate, with their partners, with their sexuality and more. You should never be playing by a set of rules and defined by people you do not want to be defined by. It is punishing and it can literally kill you or cause profound psychological harm.

About six months ago, I was taking an acting class in Rome. At one point during an exercise, an otherwise very composed young man broke down and started crying—so much so that the class literally had to stop while the teacher and others calmed him down. He was upset because he was from a very small village of a few hundred people in Italy where everyone sat outside on their porches every day and gossiped about others and passed judgment on others about one thing or another. He felt it was completely suffocating and the exercises the acting teacher was doing with him were—he claimed—the only time in his life that he had ever felt like he was truly being himself. Until that point, he believed he had to act a certain way for others. He never could be his true self and never be the person he felt comfortable being.

- I've known people who were gay and spent their lives in the closet.
- I've known countless lawyers who worked entire careers never happy and then died right before retirement.
- I've known people that were in cults and were afraid to leave.

We are too afraid of what others think of us and judge ourselves based on what they will think. We live lives we do not want to because we are afraid of how it will make us look, feel and how others will treat us if we do not.

I have three young children. When a child is young we love them unconditionally and think they are the greatest thing in the world. The young child could do probably anything and we would not care. We still love them and care about them a great deal and want them to be happy, to survive and do well. We also do not care what other people think of our 1-year old child. We love them just the same.

The secret to a happy career and life is realizing that we too need to love ourselves unconditionally. There is no other choice.

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