



The Way of Identity

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Life has order.

The myth of personal freedom—the idea that you are at liberty to pick whatever path in life you want—is the unspoken agony of the modern person. It ignores the fact that life has order, and that order bears heavily upon your choices—on what makes sense to do with the time you have. The good news is that although you can't be anything you want to be, you have more potential than you know.

The order in life that affects us all is contained in a code, the identity code. Much like our biological genetic code, our identity code is born into each of us, providing a complete map of how we, as human beings, are designed to function—of how we are supposed to live—when we are living according to who we are. Within the framework your identity provides, life's seeming boundaries melt away. Genuine freedom is yours.

Crack your identity code and the contours of your life will shift. You will not only come out stronger, you will come out larger. Larger in heart, larger in influence, larger in your capacity to love and be loved.

“The order in life that affects us all is contained in a code, the identity code.”

The Eight Questions To Crack Your Identity Code

- 1 Who am I?
- 2 What makes me special?
- 3 Is there a pattern to my life?
- 4 Where am I going?
- 5 What is my gift?
- 6 Who can I trust?
- 7 What is my message?
- 8 Will my life be rich?

While these questions may seem like many you've seen a hundred times before—these eight questions flow directly from the Laws of Identity. Their sequence is crucial to cracking your identity code. The sequence of these questions builds in a way that tells a story about how one's life develops when it is lived through the lens of identity.

In business, clarifying your identity is singularly important in finding the right line of work and getting rewarded beyond your paycheck. I find in my identity work with corporations and with individuals that high levels of employee engagement depend on the identity strength of the organization and the sense of purpose people find when they align with it. (This reality is born out in The Identity Effect report, a quantitative survey conducted among nearly 2,000 participants in 2009. It is available at www.theidentitycircle.com.)

Our identity is an inherently positive force, presenting nothing less than the whole picture of who we are capable of becoming as individuals. It also presents us with the opportunity to contribute the best of ourselves in every relationship we have, from work and family, to friends, community, even our relationship with our partner or spouse.

Identity Is All Around Us

Since the beginning of recorded time, for as long as human beings have existed, our sense of identity has played a central role in how we live, in the decisions we make, and in the outcomes those decisions have on the fates of individuals, including ourselves, on families, on organizations, even on nations.

In our relationships, identity plays a particularly influential role. In families, we instinctively look for signs of how someone is or is not like someone else: a son to his father, a daughter to her mother, a brother to his sister.

In the workplace, we often find ourselves assessing how we fit in. We wonder about whether we share the same values as our employer or our boss. And in turn, whether we actually belong where we are or, even more basically, whether we should be doing what we're doing to make a living.

How often do you wonder whether you actually belong where you are?

Wherever people walk, identity follows, creating a landscape all its own. It is a landscape we all inhabit and it extends as far as the eye can see. In business and in our personal life, identity reveals itself. We see how companies struggle to maintain identity in the onslaught of 24/7 denizens on social media who demand more of those in corporate leadership than ever before. And we see it in our personal lives with shifts of careers, marriages, jobs, and the constant stream of new ways to communicate virtually that often feel empty but necessary to keep up with the demands of technology.

Before we go further, it's useful to identify the 8 Laws of Identity and let them serve as a platform for the questions we will ask to crack our individual Identity Code.

The 8 Laws of Identity:

- 1 **The Law of Being:** An individual's ability to live depends first upon defining one's self as separate from all others.
- 2 **The Law of Individuality:** A person's natural capacities invariably fuse into a discernible identity that makes the person unique.
- 3 **The Law of Constancy:** Identity is fixed, transcending time and place, while its manifestations are constantly changing.
- 4 **The Law of Will:** Every individual is compelled to create value in accordance with his or her identity.
- 5 **The Law of Possibility:** Identity foreshadows potential.
- 6 **The Law of Relationship:** Individuals are inherently relational and relationships are only as strong as the natural alignment between the identities of the participants.
- 7 **The Law of Comprehension:** An individual's various capacities are only as valuable as the perceived value of the whole of that individual.
- 8 **The Law of the Cycle:** Identity governs value, which produces wealth, which fuels identity.

These 8 natural laws are the same for everyone. They shape our lives and fortunes even when we aren't conscious of their presence. They are the foundations of the 8 questions I presented earlier, the answers to which will reveal your identity code.

You are stronger than you feel, wiser than you think, more powerful than you may care to admit. Do not shrink from the opportunity to discover who you are.

The First Question: **Who Am I?**

Who am I? is a question that has been asked in various ways by everyone from great philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle to decidedly not-so-famous people: that jumble of “regular folk” who make their lives in the far-flung cities, towns and villages we call home. Asking the question Who am I? makes kin of us all.

What we see in this turbulent recessionary time is people asking this question often out of growing despair. Their jobs have become meaningless and boring. Or their job is taken from them in yet another round of layoffs. The daily routine can either seem tedious and empty or completely rootless and unanchored. The affiliations with people you've built your relationships on are either no longer sufficient or they're gone.

Answering the question Who am I? brings with it the promise of affirmation—nothing less than the awakening of your spirit. It is no great feat to verify that you exist in physical terms; it is much more challenging to experience yourself as aware and awake, separate from the flesh, bones, and breath we take for granted as standard signs of life.

You are not your labels. You simply are.

“You are stronger than you feel, wiser than you think, more powerful than you may care to admit.”

The most important way to know who you are is by first defining yourself as separate from all others. Separation is finding some space where you can slow down and look at yourself and others objectively. The aim is to see people—yourself included—through fresh eyes. Defining yourself as separate from others is about finding your own integrity as an individual. It will give you a place to live within relationships that is all your own, even in moments of greatest intensity.

Discovering who you are, separate from all others, is the reward of separation. Ironically, when you do this, you can bring yourself back into relationships with others in more meaningful and fulfilling ways.

The Second Question: **What Makes Me Special?**

What makes me special? It is a question that takes up residence inside us at an early age, from the time we start forming relationships that draw us away from ourselves and toward the cliques, clubs, companies and other communities that demand allegiance if we are to be accepted. And yet the more we yield to the pull of acceptance and its alluring comfort, the more the question enters our minds: What makes me special?

Below the surface of your daily life lie aspects of yourself you may not be aware of at all. These capacities hold the key to understanding what makes you special. Unearthing what you love calls for you to suspend disbelief. Allow yourself to consider there may be things about you that you aren't aware of, invisible characteristics that are essential to your identity. Accept that you will not know the answer to this question at first. Give yourself permission to explore, no strings attached.

Identify what you love doing most—in your hunt for those special joys that inform your identity, let yourself be drawn to those things that stir your heart. Rely on yourself to define your passions. No one knows more about you than you do. The responsibility of your future can only be yours. Taking this responsibility to heart will lead you to invest more of yourself in whatever you do. You will become more discerning in your choices. You will sleep more soundly under the blanket of your own integrity.

Don't listen too much to what people say. Don't listen to what other people tell you about you. Be quiet and listen to you. You will know what makes you special when you recognize in yourself strengths and passions that are deeply comforting and yet seem fresh and new. These are the foundation of your identity. Building this foundation is the reward for unearthing what you love. This is where you will realize and then assert: "I am unique."

The Third Question: **Is There a Pattern To My Life?**

Many people don't see the pattern hidden in the experiences of their lives. In truth, many people believe there is no pattern at all, that their lives are composed simply of random events, where they move from job to job, or place to place, as opportunity knocks, or as fate would have it. For them, choice and free will rule. These are people destined to go through life having missed the big picture—their own.

To find the pattern your life contains is to find the path that has been right for you all along. Making this path visible can lead to many things: changing jobs or schools, marrying, divorcing, making new friends and dropping others, converting to another religion or simply reaffirming and celebrating the course you have taken to date. Find the pattern of your life and you will find

the path that has been right for you all along. You will find the meaning in your life, and that your life has real meaning.

Like order, meaning is inherent. It isn't some grand idea that applies only to gurus who meditate while sitting on mountaintops. In fact, the idea that your life has meaning is exquisitely simple. It refers to your intrinsic worth as a human being—the fact that you have value in this world simply as a result of being here. Finding the pattern of your life reveals its order and its meaning. Once discovered, you will be able to say, Now I see.

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In finding the pattern to your life, let your achievements light the way. Your achievements are about giving. They reveal insights about what matters to you, what you love, and where your passions lie. They are vital indicators of how you can make a difference in the world. As much as the idea is greeted with cynicism, and sometimes even denial, the desire to be a productive member of society is hardwired into everyone.

Your achievements both great and small, coupled with the liberating insights your failures often yield, hold the key to finding the pattern of your life. This pattern will reveal important insights into who you are. Only after you've drawn these insights will you be in a position to consider what they mean in terms of your work, your life and your future.

The Fourth Question: **Where Am I Going?**

This is a question we ask ourselves more often than we care to admit. Most people ask it out of frustration; they don't really know, as much as they would like to. Focusing on the future can either be a healthy, empowering exercise or an utter waste of time. Keeping your dreams intact and revisiting them periodically enables people to stay focused in a healthy way.

In reality, all we can really do—all that is really worth doing—is to figure out how to use the special strengths that begin to reveal what our value-creating potential is today. We have control over what we do now and how we do it. Taken one at a time, each of our days becomes our future. That is how future is formed.

Letting go of your future is a symbolic act, a process through which you can begin to release yourself from old ways of thinking and behaving that may have been holding you back.

The answer to the question Where am I going? Isn't simply I don't know; the correct answer

is I don't know, but that is all right. Accepting uncertainty is a measure of your maturity. It is an act of trust in yourself, a crucial milestone you must reach in order to move forward.

The Law of Will asserts that at the core of our beings, we all want to create something of value that flows naturally from who we are. The desire to create is part of what makes us human. Knowing what that creation is, whether it is large or small, will in time reveal the answer to the question Where am I going?

The Fifth Question: **What is My Gift?**

All too often we think the notion of a gift, or a purpose is a lofty one. It is reserved, we believe, mostly for those larger-than-life people whom you read about in newspapers but certainly do not know personally: world-renowned musicians; legendary sports stars, founder of large successful businesses. They were born with a gift, you think, not me.

Steve Jobs lived through his gift. To live through your gift is to find that special place where you feel most alive. The gift flows from, and blends, the capacities that make you special and the passion that the pattern of your life reveals. Just as there is only one of you, there can be only one such gift. Your gift is the practical expression of your identity. Your identity is the gift to the world.

Knowing your gift, and finding ways to give it, brings a palpable sense of peace. Authenticity, and the strength it produces, is yours: nothing about you is made up. Nothing will be fabricated to please others. In fact, finding your gift, and weaving it into your life, affirms who you are—that you are here, alive and have a meaningful role to play in this world.

Answering the question What is my gift? holds out the promise of achieving both power and grace. Knowing your gift gives you the power to make a difference. It also bestows upon you the grace with which to make it. When grace flows from identity it takes on special meaning. The way to find your gift is by following the signs of joy—those aspects of life to which you are instinctively drawn and that stir your soul. Make joy your guide.

Your purpose is there, waiting for you to discover it. The payoff in coming to terms with your gift is knowing your purpose. Call it your gift or your purpose, it doesn't matter. They are one and the same. The sense of purpose we achieve when we know our gift fuels and enriches all of our relationships. In terms of finding peace within ourselves, knowing our gift makes us happy.

The Sixth Question: **Who Can I Trust?**

Trust is everywhere. Although we may not realize it, we ask ourselves the question *Who can I trust?* many times in numerous ways every day. Who can I trust to tell me the truth about how I look? Which past employer can I trust to give me a good job reference? Which customers can I trust to pay me on time?

“When it comes to building an identity-based life, trust is a word that contains a mountain of magic.”

The question of trust permeates our lives, touching everything from the mundane to the serious, from simple matters to matters of life and death. When it comes to building an identity-based life, trust is a word that contains a mountain of magic. At bottom, trusting others—being able to rely on them to accept you for who you are—leads to peace of mind, which can be hard to find in these fast-paced, change-laden times. Where does this “magic” come from? What are its secret ingredients? You know them all: equal parts intuition, vulnerability, and acceptance.

Finding people you can trust is both easier and harder once you have a clear sense of your identity—once you know you gift. It is easier in that your identity acts as a filter, enabling you to weed out people whom you may like, and even admire, but who you know aren't really in tune with who you are.

It is also harder to find people to trust once you understand who you are. It is harder for two reasons. First, knowing your identity makes you infinitely more discriminating about what matters to you in life. The stakes are higher. Your integrity hangs in the balance of nearly every decision. You simply know better what contributes to your happiness and what is merely expedient.

Second, the field of candidates narrows dramatically. Trust is no longer a term you automatically assign to everyone you call a friend, or even family. In fact, trust is no longer even a word; it is a blessing you confer upon people who, by their actions, honor who you are. They alone deserve it.

The key? Trust yourself first. Find sanctuary in your relationship with yourself. When you know who you are, you become more accepting of others. In life and in work make a commitment that you will build relationships with individuals whose identities align with yours. When you know who you are, you become more accepting of others. You no longer gauge your worth by how others perceive you, or how you perceive them.

The Seventh Question: **What is My Message?**

What is my message? is a question that has an outsized impact on our lives, even when we aren't aware of it. We are forced to answer the question frequently, and in all sorts of ways. It comes up in the essays we write as part of our college applications, where admissions officers strain to figure out which candidates to accept and which to reject. The question raises its head again as we succeed in our jobs. You come face to face with the question again as you rise through the ranks to a supervisory or leadership position. What is your message, then, to people who work for you? Not what tasks you want them to do but rather, why they should follow you, beyond the fact that you're their boss.

We know in this economic climate there is no truly "safe" route. Hiding what you stand for takes a toll on everyone. It may make it easier for you to navigate business or social relationships that require chameleon-like skills to maintain, but over time it erodes your sense of self-worth; you know you're faking it. Moreover, keeping your true self hidden makes life harder for others by keeping them guessing—off balance, in fact.

Answering the question What is my message? holds out the promise of liberation—liberation from the fear of being who you are and doing what you know you must. Liberation brings with it the self-confidence to not be deterred by what others may think of you, no matter who they are.

Often in the course of our lives we arrive at a point where we run out of excuses: why not to do something, why not to follow a certain path, why not to take a particular risk. For all of the excuses we've come up with over time, we haven't gained the recognition we've been waiting for, or the money we sought, or the love we wanted. At that point, we are finally ready to tell the world what's really on our minds. We are ready for liberation.

Working to decipher your identity code puts you on a path that leads inevitably to a moment of unguarded declaration. Knowing your gift is the key to declaring what your "major" should be in life.

When you show the world who you are, you become your own force of nature. You become a center of gravity that will inevitably attract some people, repel others, and as a result, orient the world you choose to inhabit.

When you finally tell the world what you stand for, you will declare what you've known all along: to establish meaningful relationships, I must first be recognized for who I am.

The Eighth Question: **Will My Life Be Rich?**

Asking ourselves whether our lives will be rich is one of those questions that make us sweat. Some people sweat from anxiety that comes from simply not knowing the answer. Others sweat from the burning hope that maybe someday they will make it big, cash in, hit the jackpot. Any reference to rich instantly conjures up images of money and the things money can buy.

People are sweating all the wrong things. For all the time you invest in trying to know how things will turn out in your life, what actually happens to you in the future remains a mystery. For all the effort you put into getting rich in financial terms, unforeseen circumstances can derail your dream. For all the energy you invest in owning up to the fact you've left no room in your life for you, regret will accomplish nothing.

What is worth sweating is whether, from this day forward, you do right by yourself and by others. This sequence—first you, and then other people—is deliberate. It is only when you build relationships that reflect who you are at your core that you can “do right” by other people. Your identity is the living lens through which you can safely engage the world, make informed decisions, and thereby fashion a life that you, and others, can trust.

It is also worth sweating how you define rich. There is nothing wrong with money. There is no nobility in your being poor, any more than there is in your being financially well-off. As much as wealth may be about money, however, it is equally about those things that, like a magnet, draw people back to you over and over again.

The question Will my life be rich? isn't just about today; it is equally about tomorrow. It is about how you will be remembered and what you will be remembered for. What you leave as your legacy will produce value long after you are gone.

The answer to the question Will my life be rich brings with it the promise of endurance. The way to realize the promise of endurance is by surrendering to the pull of identity. Surrendering to the pull of your identity is like tumbling into the safety net that has always been there for you, waiting for you to see it and take the plunge into its woven warmth.

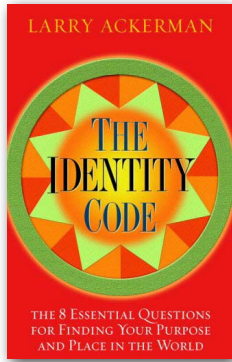
“Your identity is the living lens through which you can safely engage the world, make informed decisions, and thereby fashion a life that you, and others, can trust.”

There is no easy path when it comes to unleashing the remarkable energy your identity contains. There are no shortcuts. Let your commitment to your identity-based life inspire others. Be their guide. On the strength of your success, let them know what's in store.

Look upon your identity as both a beginning and an end. It is the source of your uniqueness and potential. Your identity is equally the beneficiary of its own strength. Embrace the fact that identity organizes life.

Begin your identity journey now. 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Larry Ackerman is a leading authority on organizational and personal identity. He is the founder and president of The Identity Circle LLC, an identity consulting, education and research firm that helps organizations and individuals clarify their uniqueness and potential, and then assists them in putting that potential to work. Mr. Ackerman has been a guest lecturer at the Yale School of Management, Wharton, UCLA's Anderson School and Pepperdine University, is a top-rated speaker for The Conference Board, and a regular keynote speaker for senior management meetings among global companies.

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