Hello Me, Who Are You?

Hello Me, Who Are You?

At Home with Yourself, in Work and Life

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ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used in the writing of this book to assist with brainstorming and refining the wording.

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For Saskia,
with whom I can feel at home
without having to know exactly who I am.

And for you, dear reader,
to find that same sense of home
within yourself.

Turning Back

It was a sunny spring morning in the late 1980s. I was walking into town. The streets were quiet. I could hear birds and smell freshly cut grass.

Across the street, a man was walking toward me. He was wearing a pajama top, underwear, and blue plastic slippers.

I walked past him.

Several thoughts raced through my mind. Where had this man come from? What had happened? What was he doing out here on the street?

I looked around. Apart from the two of us, there was no one nearby.

What now?

Keep walking?

Or turn back and see if there was anything I could do for him?

I turned back.

I made contact with him and stayed with him. He allowed me to accompany him to the nearest police station. They could take it from there and get him the help he needed.

Then our paths parted again.

The encounter stayed with me.

What does a moment like that say about who you are?

Was I the one walking by?

Or the one who turned back?

Who am I?

Introduction

In Doing What Matters, psychological flexibility was at the heart of the discussion. We explored how thoughts, feelings, physical experiences, and circumstances influence what we do, and how we can relate to them while taking action in the direction of what matters to us.

One of the themes that emerged was how we relate to what we encounter within ourselves. We can notice thoughts and feelings, recognize the stories we tell about ourselves, and experience how what we think about who we are can influence what we do.

In this book, we follow that thread further.

Who we are often seems self-evident. We have a name and a history. We know the people we share our lives with, and we fulfill different roles. We can talk about our work, our strengths, what matters to us, and what we have been through. In that sense, we know a great deal about ourselves.

In my work, I met many people who found themselves asking: Who am I? Sometimes this happened after illness, loss, conflict, or a change at work. Someone could no longer do the work that had seemed natural for years. A position disappeared, or a career took an unexpected turn. Sometimes there was no major event at all. Someone simply noticed that what had long felt familiar no longer seemed to fit.

Then new questions arise. Who am I if my work changes? What does it say about me when something doesn't work out? Am I still the same person when a role falls away? And how much does who I think I am influence what I believe is possible?

In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), I found a perspective that speaks to these questions. At the heart of ACT is psychological flexibility: the ability to respond to our experiences and circumstances while continuing to act in ways that matter to us.

Rather than trying to eliminate difficult thoughts and feelings, ACT invites us to explore how we relate to them and how they influence what we do. The same applies to the thoughts and stories we have about ourselves.

What appeals to me is that we do not need a definitive answer to the question of who we are. We can notice what we think, feel, and remember, along with the stories we tell about ourselves. We can explore how we relate to these experiences without allowing them to determine everything we do.

In this book, ACT provides a perspective for exploring our relationship with ourselves, the stories we tell about who we are, and the role work plays in shaping those stories.

This book is about knowing yourself without knowing exactly who you are. About our history, the way others see us, our roles, and our work. About what happens when experiences are given words and those words become stories in which we recognize ourselves. And about the space that can open up when what we know about ourselves does not get the final say.

Hello, Me. Who Are You?

How This Book Is Organized

This book is for anyone who is curious about who we are, how we come to know ourselves, and how what we think about ourselves influences our work and our lives.

Perhaps you are reading this book because something in your work or life has changed and familiar answers no longer seem so obvious. Perhaps you support others as they navigate questions about work, health, change, or identity. Or perhaps the question Hello, Me. Who Are You? simply makes you curious.

Professionals such as occupational physicians, primary care physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, mental health professionals, coaches, HR professionals, managers, and organizational consultants will recognize many of these questions from their daily work. Questions about who we are come into play when our work changes, something doesn't go as planned, health affects what we can do, or a familiar role falls away.

This book is not intended for any one profession. It is written for anyone who wants to explore what they know about themselves and how we relate to what we think, feel, and say about ourselves.

The book consists of seven parts that together trace a movement: from exploring how we have come to know ourselves, through the stories we tell about ourselves, to the ways we relate to those stories, to ourselves, to others, and to our work.

In Part I, Who Do You Think You Are?, we begin with what we know about ourselves. We explore our history, experiences, and roles, the influence of others, and the place work can have in how we see ourselves.

In Part II, The Stories We Live In, we focus on how experiences are given words and how those words develop into stories about ourselves. We explore what happens when a description such as I'm insecure, I'm strong, or I'm someone who always keeps going becomes familiar and begins to shape how we understand new experiences.

In Part III, Who Notices This?, we are introduced to Self-as-Context. We explore how we can notice thoughts, feelings, memories, and stories about ourselves, and the role perspective plays in doing so. Not in order to discover another or more authentic self behind them, but to better understand how we relate to what we experience and know about ourselves.

In Part IV, Making Room for Yourself, we explore what it means to be unsure of who you are, to change while remaining the same person. We also examine what it might mean to "become more of who you are," without assuming there is a final destination or a particular direction in which you should develop.

In Part V, You and Yourself, we turn our attention to how we speak to ourselves and to the different thoughts, feelings, and desires that can be present at the same time. We explore what it means to listen to yourself and be on your own side, without assuming that listening means obeying or that any one voice should determine what you do.

In Part VI, At Home with Yourself at Work, these threads come together in the context of work. We explore the place of roles, talents, performance, and changes at work, and consider what happens when what we do becomes closely connected to how we think about ourselves. We also return to the question of what matters to us and how this relates to the choices we make.

In Part VII, Hello, Me, we return to the question with which the book began. We explore what it might mean to feel at home with yourself without ultimately having to determine who you really are.

The question remains open.

Between the parts are short personal stories. Throughout the book, you will also find background information, examples from practice, and exercises. The examples from practice are based on experiences from my work. To protect the privacy of those involved, names, circumstances, and other identifying details have been changed or combined.

You can read the book from beginning to end, or you can start with a chapter or exercise that connects with a question that is on your mind right now. The exercises are invitations to explore for yourself what you notice when you attend to your experiences, thoughts, and stories. They do not have to lead to a definitive answer to the question of who you are.

We can know a great deal about ourselves and, at the same time, not know exactly who we are. We have a history, and we continue to have new experiences. We fulfill roles, and those roles can change. Our work can matter deeply to us, and what it means to us can change as well.

Amid all of this, we continue to speak of ourselves as I.

That is where this book begins.

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Part I

Who Do You Think You Are?

Chapter 1 – Hello Me, Who Are You?

Who are you?

Most of us can answer that question fairly easily. We give our name, say where we come from, what we do for a living, and who we share our lives with. As the conversation continues, other things come up: what matters to us, what we are good at, and what we find difficult.

There is a lot we can say about ourselves.

We know our history, recognize our strengths and habits, and fulfill different roles. Some descriptions are so familiar that we hardly give them a second thought. We describe ourselves as caring, independent, curious, or persistent. We are partners, parents, friends, caregivers, nurses, managers, or entrepreneurs.

All of these descriptions tell us something about ourselves.

If you describe yourself as caring, for example, there will probably be experiences in which you acted with care. You listened to someone who was having a hard time, made time for a colleague, or were there when someone needed you. There may also have been moments when you had little room for someone else, reacted with irritation, or deliberately put your own needs first.

Both kinds of experiences can be part of the same history.

We readily summarize experiences like these. If we often care for others, caring can become a word in which we recognize ourselves. If we experience uncertainty in different situations, we may soon find ourselves saying, I'm insecure. If we keep going despite setbacks, we may come to see ourselves as persistent.

Language helps us connect our experiences. Things that happen at different times become linked and form part of the picture we have of ourselves.

That picture gives us something to hold on to.

At the same time, we continue to have new experiences. A familiar description may feel accurate in many situations and fit less well in others. Something that seemed self-evident for years can look different in light of a new experience.

And so two things can exist side by side:

knowing who you are

and

not knowing exactly who you are.

What Do You Know About Yourself?

Self-knowledge develops over time. Our experiences show us what we enjoy, what moves us, what comes easily to us, and what asks a great deal of us.

Some of this we discover for ourselves. Other things become visible through our interactions with other people. A colleague notices that you remain calm when tension rises. Someone entrusts you with a task you did not think you were capable of handling. Sometimes we immediately recognize what another person sees in us. At other times, it surprises us.

Other people and new circumstances can reveal something about us that we had not yet noticed ourselves.

A well-known model that helps illustrate this is the Johari Window (Luft & Ingham, 1955). It distinguishes between what we know about ourselves and what others can see in us. Some aspects are known to both, while others are known only to us or are more apparent to others. And there is always something that remains unknown.

That last point touches on an important theme in this book.

We do not know what experiences still lie ahead or what they may reveal about us.

We can know a great deal about ourselves without knowing exactly who we are.

The Roles in Your Life

Much of what we say about ourselves has to do with the roles we have: partner, parent, child, friend, caregiver, colleague, or manager.

A role exists in relation to other people. You cannot be a colleague, parent, or manager entirely on your own.

Different roles can also bring out different sides of us. Someone may find it easy to make decisions at work but be more inclined to wait and see at home. Both experiences can belong to the same person.

This sometimes becomes especially clear when a role changes. Children become independent, a relationship ends, a caregiving role comes to an end, or someone leaves a position at work.

When that happens, it is not only the situation that can change. Something can also begin to shift in how we know ourselves.

And What Do You Do?

Work occupies a particular place in all of this.

When people meet for the first time, it often isn't long before someone asks:

And what do you do?

We understand that the question usually refers to our work. We readily answer, I'm a teacher, I'm a plumber, I'm a software developer, or I'm a manager.

It is ordinary language. At the same time, the way we phrase it shows how easily what we do and how we describe ourselves can begin to overlap.

Work can matter deeply to us. Through it, we develop knowledge and skills, build relationships, and find meaning in what we do. As a result, work can become part of how we know ourselves.

Sometimes we only become aware of this when something changes.

A position disappears. Health makes certain work more difficult. You retire. Or work that suited you for years no longer feels the same.