

On the Corner

Discovering a true self

by Robert Docter, Editor-In-Chief –

So ... how do you perceive your *self*?

What are you like?

What labels do you hold in your mind to describe you?

What energizes you?

Whom have you selected to emulate?

Who emulates you?

How did you get to be the way you are? Do you know?



If you really want to know the answers to that question, look around you. Who is close? What are they doing? Who are they looking at? How much like them are you?

The primary way we build an awareness of our self comes through social interaction. Very early in our childhood we begin to take on the characteristics of individuals with whom we identify. It starts with parents. Somehow, we “catch” the various expectations they send our way. The quality of that relationship is crucial. It begins the process of building an essential foundation on which the self develops. Its construction is much more concerned with what is *modeled* than what is spoken. Verbal lessons, especially those emphasizing the word “should,” fail to have much depth.

Here are some of the essential elements I think are necessary to build a strong foundation. All of these need to happen at the same time—from infancy through to maturity.

First, we must provide for the basic needs of the child. That’s a lot more than food, water, clothing, and housing. The child must feel secure with us. Our behavior must be predictable, but not so rigid that it only communicates ritual or habit.

Second, our messages, both verbal and non-verbal, must be loaded with genuine caring. Things are *genuine* when our non-verbal behavior—how we seem, how we feel, what we do, how we look, our

tone of voice—matches our verbal communication—what we say. Double messages are crazy-making. The child needs to feel our love. It's sensed through the quality of the relationship—touch, warmth, softness, consistency, trust, confidence, praise.

Third, I believe a strong foundation includes parental modeling of consistent, positive moral choices based on a committed spiritual experience. These are belief systems that value all people and send messages of love. Going to church religiously, every Sunday, in and of itself will not accomplish this task.

Fourth, parents must recognize and prepare children for the later reality that the source of the expectations shifts slightly from parents to include other significant people—usually found among peers.

If the foundation is shaky, trouble looms. Values, never internalized, become ignored. To the child, they represent only words. The child adopts the will of the popular. Past lessons fade. Punishment, administered rather than taught, fails. The child is a captive of the peer group. They communicate the expectations. They become the models. They provide the identity. Their values are owned. He or she is trapped in an orbit of influence over which the parent has little or no control.

Does this mean that we limit the development of our self to those who happen to be around us? The answer depends on the quality of that foundation.

The big question concerns whether the child has *self-directedness*—internal controls—or is stuck in persistent patterns of *other-directedness*—external controls.

Parents need to provide the greatest gift any parent can give a child—freedom. This is achieved by parental modeling of responsible decision making. Responsibility, you see, must be both demonstrated and taught.

To be self-directed, we must perceive ourselves as having internal controls with a consistent value base contributing to what we are. We must be aware of the values and attitudes that shape our decision making. Moreover, we must be able to tell the difference between expectations that come from others—from the outside, and our own expectations of our *self* that come from the inside.

This is person-building in action. This is a responsible use of freedom, reinforced by the joy of discovery of a true self.

Charles Schulz put self-directedness this way:

Lucy says to Charlie Brown: "You know what the whole trouble with you is Charlie Brown?"

Charlie replies: "No, and I don't want to know! Leave me alone!" Then he stomps away.

Yelling as Charlie leaves, Lucy won't give up. She says: "The whole trouble with you is you won't listen to what the whole trouble with you is!"