

# Nine Questions

A Curious Person's Guide to the Undiscovered Self

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'You know, what's interesting is, being your own self is kind of a blur.'

- David Chase, *The Sopranos*

## PREFACE

“Know Thyself.”

According to legend, this maxim was chiseled in stone at the ancient temple to Apollo at Delphi, Greece. Daunting in its elegant simplicity, it looms over us with a foreboding authority. To modern eyes, the command seems clear. If you want to live a happy life, a liberated life, a meaningful life, then you need to know who you really are. You need to find your authentic self.

Or at least this is what I long believed.

I think I first got this notion in high school, when Mrs. Malone, my English teacher, wrote “Know Thyself” on the blackboard. Mrs. Malone guessed this phrase would leverage her students’ teenage narcissism into an appetite for literature. And on me it worked, although some of her recommendations (Dostoevsky) proved better than others (Ayn Rand).

I got similar advice in college. All of my classes in psychology, philosophy, and religion seemed to come back to this same theme. If I wanted to find truth, freedom, and joy, I needed to locate my authentic self, otherwise I’d just be living according to someone else’s program.

Yet even after learning this, I still felt lost. Where exactly was I supposed to find this elusive self? I spent much of my 20s and 30s groping for answers. Like a lot of other seekers, I explored Buddhism, existentialism, and positive psychology. I sought guidance from philosophers, gurus, priests, and Turkish rug sellers (who often know a surprising amount about spiritual subjects). I dabbled in self help. I learned yoga and started therapy. I went on long, arduous meditation retreats. I took psychedelics, went rock climbing, and hiked naked in the mountains.

Yet for all this, I was still unsettled. If I wasn’t chasing some peak experience, my life lacked meaning. Even as I was finding professional success, I was less sure of myself than ever. I had met the woman of my dreams but was paralyzed by my own fears of intimacy. I was doing all the right things but I wasn’t finding the deeper fulfillment that meeting all my life goals was supposed to

provide. And my efforts to know my self always seemed to come up short. After a while, I realized there were a couple of big problems with my quest.

First off, it turns out that I was misinformed about what the ancient Greeks actually meant when they said “Know Thyself.” The classical Greeks didn’t even have a word that meant “self,” at least as we know it today.<sup>1</sup> It’s most likely that the inscription at Apollo’s temple was a command to keep in line, just like a sign you’d see outside of any church today. It was a way of saying, “Hey, you’re about to enter a sacred place! Put on your best tunic, put down your wine, and stop fooling around.” Know thyself really meant “Know Thy Place.”

Now for most of human history, “Know Thy Place” was probably the best advice you could live by. Survey humanity across time and you’ll see most people living in very small communities tightly bound by local practice and religious dogma. In these traditional societies, there is little freedom. Social norms are fiercely enforced. Few have the luxury to wonder about what makes them happy or if their jobs are fulfilling or if their marriages are satisfying. In such limited circumstances, knowing one’s self is really about knowing one’s position in the group. There is no “authentic self” beyond what you are told to do. And this is how it has been across most of human history.

But, in western Europe, all of this started changing in the sixteenth century. When Copernicus established that the Earth was not the center of the universe, everything went haywire. Philosophy and science began to supplant medieval superstitions. The western world became disenchanted and disillusioned. Europeans started questioning how they understood reality and their place within it. An autonomous, sovereign *individual* emerged as a subject of philosophical reflection, theological doctrine, and scientific inquiry. And this blew the traditional world apart. As Milan Kundera describes, “the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parceled out by men.”<sup>2</sup>

So the modern era was born and, with it, an existential dilemma. With so many traditions coming undone, how were we now supposed to know ourselves? With so much freedom, where could we find life’s meaning? Now that happiness was something that could be pursued individually, how

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek term we translate as “thyself” (σεαυτόν or “seauton”) has many connotations but it certainly didn’t mean a solitary individual seeking answers to life’s mysteries while sitting naked, high on a mountaintop.

<sup>2</sup> From Milan Kundera, “The Art of the Novel” p. 6.

exactly should this be done? Seeking answers, many Enlightenment thinkers sought clues in their own self reflections. “I think therefore I am” became the foundation of subsequent philosophical knowledge. And, at someplace along the way, “Know Thy Place” got reinterpreted as the “Know Thyself” that Ms. Malone would later write on the blackboard.

Learning all this, I came to realize that my quest to “know” myself was less about finding a way back to some ancient wisdom and more about finding a way out of a modern predicament.

But this led to a second problem: which path should I follow? There were hundreds to choose from. From Aristotle to Zeno, western philosophy offered scores of different theories about what we are and how we should live. Then there was modern psychology and neuroscience, which boasts a real science of the mind and even more ideas about what makes us tick. Meanwhile, there is the alluring wisdom of the East. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism have been grappling with the subtleties of lived experience for thousands of years. Buried in their ancient sutras was a wealth of profundities about our human condition.

All of these different approaches—ancient and modern, West and East— apprehend the self in deep and complex ways. But all this variety was also confusing. It’s not self-evident which path is the most useful or how they compare to each other. Searching for self knowledge today, is like asking a group of fifty people for directions and getting fifty different suggestions in fifty different languages. And no single version seems to have all the answers.

Then, in 2002, I became a professor at the University of Chicago. This was an amazing opportunity and I aspired to do something worthy of it. I wanted to offer the kind of classes that had really engaged me in college, something that went beyond the norm. So I pulled together some of my favorite books and formed a course around them. My wife Thea suggested I should call the class “Shit I’m Interested In” but I decided to go with a more respectable title of “The Intelligible Self.” It was a hodgepodge of subjects and I wasn’t sure how the class would go. But surprisingly, it ended up being a real success and my students seemed to get a lot out of it.

So I kept offering it every year and it kept evolving. It was fun to put all of these great minds of the world in conversation with each other. I led my students in meditation. We even had weekly cheese

tastings. We tried all kinds of different ways to put the wisdom we were reading into practice. We ventured deeper into our own lives. And, as with all good teaching experiences, I learned a lot.

At some point, it also occurred to me that I needed to adjust my expectations about what I was actually looking for. I came to realize that the self was not a thing to be mastered but a process to be explored. There would never be a moment where I was like, “Oh, I have myself figured out, now my life will be great.” Life doesn’t work that way. Instead, knowing one’s self means being open to learning from your experience every day as if it’s your first one. It is what practitioners of Zen meditation call “Beginner’s Mind.” It is embracing the fact that as much as you seem to know about your self, there is always much more to discover. It is about embarking on a journey without any final destination.

This was not a novel insight, but it was still pretty foreign to a rationalistic mindset like mine. If this viewpoint shows up in our culture, it is usually in the form of some fuzzy mysticism or a romantic view of Buddhism. Yet the idea of self knowledge as an ongoing process is very consistent with modern science and psychology, only there hasn’t been much work integrating them together. And for me, this class was a fantastic way of connecting these dots.

Meanwhile, I met a lot of other people who were really interested in the class. They would often say things like “I wish I had taken that in college” or “I could really use that now.” Usually they would ask me for a book recommendation. This was frustrating because I didn’t have one, I had twenty. Yet among all the many brilliant books on the self, there was no single volume that integrated all the things that I was using in my class. It was aggravating to think that there was all of this amazing knowledge scattered about and often hidden in obscure places.

And so here, it seemed, was an opportunity to do something useful. Perhaps I could bring together recent discoveries in physics, biology, and neuroscience and combine them with the collective wisdom of the past 3,000 years. Perhaps I could try to share some of the many insights and lessons I’ve learned in my reading and teaching. Perhaps I could try describing the self. So I wrote this book. I’ve tried to make it thoughtful and entertaining. I hope you find it engaging and informative as well.

## INTRODUCTION

*Live you? Or are you aught  
That man may question?*

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

John is one of the most successful people I know. Whenever he sets his mind to a task, he pursues it with a singular focus until he masters it. In the sharp-elbowed world of New York finance, he co-founded a wildly profitable hedge fund now worth billions of dollars. He took up surfing at age 35 and can still be found, twenty years later, gracefully carving up the hardest waves. The same goes with his art and music. He has written dozens of terrific songs and his paintings are meticulous and stunning. He is also generous, smart, and funny. He's a delight to spend time with and I'm lucky to call him a friend.

But John also suffers a lot. He has chronic joint and back pain. He often goes through dark spells of depression. And, for several years, he was nagged with persistent, dull headaches. For a long time, he didn't pay much attention to these problems. His job was intense and stressful. Success demands focus and focus requires not getting distracted by minor pain. So, like many high achieving people, he would soldier on with various combinations of will power, Advil, exercise, and vodka.

Then, a few years ago, he took a fateful trip to Japan. It was supposed to be an extraordinary vacation, something John and his wife had been planning for years. But after the long flight to Tokyo, his headache morphed from merely annoying to agonizing. He ended up having a miserable trip and by the time he got home, his head hurt so bad he could barely get out of bed. The doctors later told him he was lucky—he had a non-malignant tumor in his brain the size of a small egg. The air pressure of the 14 hour flight had brought it dangerously close to rupture. His later surgery was successful but the tumor was a wake up call. He changed his life. He stopped drinking, retired from his stressful job, and now devotes himself full-time to painting, philanthropy, and his family. He came perilously close to losing it all. And partly this was because, for all his success and achievements, he wasn't paying attention to his self.

I think of John's story as a powerful metaphor for the rest of us. After all, who among us doesn't feel that life is often amiss? Maybe it's an obvious woe, where every moment seems arduous and heavy. Or perhaps you feel stuck in a rut, where even the most reliable pleasures are unsatisfying. It could be a persistent feeling of stress or anxiety, where even simple tasks are overwhelming. Or maybe it's a more quiet languishing, where our existence just doesn't seem to be as good as it could be.

For many of us, life commonly feels this way. We can see it every day as we careen from mood to mood. Sometimes these moods are breezy, lightly caressing us with the faintest distraction. But often they consume us, fully commanding our attention. They trigger a relentless bombardment of intrusive thoughts. Compressed by this unrelenting mental chatter and a profound sense of unease, we yearn for distraction. We reflexively reach for our smart phones, refrigerators, or fantasies, anything to take our minds away from the moment at hand. For many of us, much of life goes by in a blur.

But why is this the case? Why does so much of our life feel onerous and outside of our control? Why is contentment so fleeting and elusive? Why is it so hard to be just happy in the moment?

According to our wisest thinkers, the answers lay within us. Sure, bad things may happen. There are always events that will trigger temporary spasms of anger, fear, or grief. But such things don't cause our suffering. You may lose an arm or win the lottery, but either way, eventually you'll regress back to the same level of happiness you had before these life shocks. Our chronic discontents do not come from the outside, they come from within. It is our self that is wanting, our day to day living that underperforms. And too often, our existence is simply less fulfilling than it could be.

And, here's the worst part, we are usually blind to this fact. As with John's headaches, we may have a vague sense that something is off and that things are not as good as they could be. But that's typically as far as our perception takes us. Most of the time, we are so compressed in our thoughts, so busy just keeping up with life, that we don't see what's really going on. We stumble along from impulse to impulse, unaware of the reality behind our desires. We live according to other people's expectations about who we are or what we should be. Usually it takes a near catastrophe to shake us from our routine and look more closely into our selves; and sometimes this looking comes too late.

And, even if we make it this far, we might not know what it is we're looking for. Either way, we struggle because we don't really know our real selves.

For the past twenty years, I've been teaching a class at the University of Chicago that examines this problem. In the class, we sample from humanity's vast collective wisdom. We read from philosophers and poets, scientists and monks, novelists and psychologists. We spend a lot of time comparing the insights of our most brilliant and perceptive thinkers. We ground all these different perspectives in modern science. And we try to see how these insights translate into our normal lives. *Nine Questions* explores much of what I've discovered, at least so far. It is a book about the hidden aspects of self, why it causes us so many problems, and what we can do about it.

Now most popular books on this subject usually fall under the general heading of "self help." Some of these books are very useful and some are not, but they often follow a similar formula:

- 1) The author, typically someone with a Ph.D., claims some unique insight into what ails us;
- 2) They tell a story of how this insight transformed their own lives, bringing them riches, fame, or true fulfillment;
- 3) They promise that anyone can also find greater wealth, better sex, or deeper happiness by following this same "six-point program" or "eight-week plan" or something like that.

These ideas are so formulaic that, when I finished graduate school in the late 1990s, some friends joked that I should write such a book. My friend Sarah thought up a great title: *Break with Fear, Bond with Love: Seven Steps for Reclaiming the Happiness You Deserve* by John Oliver, Ph.D. She said that my softer-sounding first name, John, would market better than the more bellicose Eric (this was before the comedian John Oliver rose to fame and squelched that idea). We joked about weekend seminars and followup books like *Break with Fear, Bond with Love at Work* or *Break with Fear, Bond with Love in the Bedroom*. Once we started lobbing ideas about, the book just seemed to write itself.

Needless to say, *Nine Questions* is not that kind of book. First off, I'm no guru. I have a Ph.D. but it's in political science, not an area known for its great insights on happiness and spiritual transcendence. I don't have a one-of-a-kind secret formula that will make everything better in your life. Nor can I claim any particularly deep spiritual insights from my own experiences. I suffer from the same

emotional turmoils and egoistic traps of any normal person. Although I may know myself better now than I did in my youth, I am definitely not a paragon of enlightenment.

Second, unlike many self help books, *Nine Questions* is not written to make you feel better about yourself. I don't have a bunch of ready aphorisms that will put you at ease. I won't offer a lot of pseudo-profound bullshit to expand your consciousness. You won't find any dubious "hacks" that will improve your life in five minutes. Instead, this book examines what is happening at the deepest level of your existence. We are going to explore some complicated and counter-intuitive ideas. Self examination is always challenging and I'm going to offer some really uncomfortable truths. My goal here is to point out some complex realities, it is not to offer comforting platitudes.

Finally, there is only so much you can actually learn about your self from a book. This is an unfortunate admission, considering that I'm trying to entice you to read this one. But let's be honest: self knowledge comes in many forms and many of our best lessons come more from our actual experiences than from words on pages. Love, inspiration, and enlightenment usually transcend language. And even if you've found that great book, if you're going to fully inhabit your own lived experience, eventually you'll have to leave its words behind.

There is, however, one really important thing that books can offer those of us on a journey of self exploration: new perspectives. Books help us understand our lives beyond the confines of our own immediate experiences. They take us past the limitations of our own intuitions, the habits of thought that blind us to deeper realities. Books give us a wider vantage point to reflect on our lives. They can upend our most tightly held convictions about who we think we are. They can help us see our selves more clearly.

The aim of *Nine Questions* is to help you gain new perspectives on your self. Hopefully, this will give you some tools to help you renegotiate your contract with your self and get a better deal. At the very least, I hope it will prompt you to follow Socrates dictum that a "well considered life is the only life worth living."

*Nine Questions* is intended to be like an explorer's map for your lived experience. It's less "self help" and more "self guidebook." I won't offer any simple formulas or "seven-step plans," but I will provide some insights about what is shaping this adventure you're living through. I will explain what

comprises your self and self perception. I will point out what keeps our selves from functioning well and how you can change this. I will discuss how we can be more than merely a passive spectator to our own lives. And hopefully, this will help you locate a more authentic and satisfying lived experience.

To do all of this, I start with nine questions. These are nine questions I always ask my students and guests on my podcast. They are designed help you to take stock of your own self knowledge and to begin to interpret your life experience. I invite you to stop and consider them now. I know it's a pain when an author asks a reader to do anything, but in this case, it's really worth spending just a little time reflecting on some basic questions. As you read each of these, take some time to think about your answers. They are:

- 1) What am I?
- 2) What is my purpose?
- 3) Who am I, really?
- 4) What are my dreams telling me?
- 5) What Moves Me?
- 6) Who is writing my life's story?
- 7) Do I own my shit or does it own me?
- 8) How do I find love?
- 9) Where am I going from here?

In each chapter ahead, I'll offer my take on these questions. The answers I give will probably be a lot different than what you came up with. They are not meant to be definitive truths, but simply some new ways of considering your self. I will draw on a lot of ideas that we normally don't think about when we think about our selves (physics, biology, literature, and philosophy) and link them to knowledge that does (philosophy, psychology, spirituality). Hopefully, these bodies of knowledge will give some new perspectives on your own life experience. But, either way, the goal here is the same: how can you see through the obstacles that are keeping you from flourishing?

Ultimately, the answer to this question will be up to you to figure out. What I won't (and can't) provide is a single description of your self, or anyone's self for that matter. Anyone who says they can is deluding themselves. The self is an elusive quarry. It can't be easily represented, much less

known. Each of us is distinct and complex. We all have our own particular quirks and hang-ups. And there is no single way to know our selves. It's a bit of cliché, but self knowledge is an ongoing journey, not a single destination, and there are many ways to travel. Nevertheless, many intrepid explorers have gone before us and they have mapped out some useful routes. *Nine Questions* describes some of these pathways and some fascinating points of interest you'll see along the way. So let me invite you on a tour of your self.