

Personal Essay: Maintaining Identity
By Brenda Kradofer

I didn't know it was a trend. I found myself chatting with a man at a pool at a Las Vegas hotel who was asking me what my top 3 identifiers were. I had never been asked this before. I'd never given it any thought. I considered my roles of wife, mother and daughter, but they were just that, roles I played. I am grateful to play them as they teach me a great deal, but none of them seemed to describe my identity in that moment. Somehow, they seemed secondary to something else. My actual answer was surprisingly clear, yet I found myself feeling strange and unsure about giving the answer that stood out so clearly in my mind. "Disciple of Jesus Christ," I said. A lively conversation followed. His business partner claimed his first identifier to be Jewish, followed by his sexual orientation. We marveled that religion or culture found its way to the top of our lists. This was an exercise I'd never done before. I marveled that I couldn't think of anything else that truly identified me.

A few months later I would hear Russel M. Nelson, President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, speak about identity and our most sacred identifiers: Child of God, Child of the Covenant, Disciple of Jesus Christ. I have to admit that the first 2 did not enter my mind and yet something within me offered the third option and nothing else seemed to be more fitting in that moment.

I can think of times in my life when perhaps I would have answered differently, when the roles of wife, mother, student or missionary would have been my top identifiers. Did the change come with age or experience or a flash of divine inspiration? For me, further truth lies in another talk I heard recently about the difference between the things I do and the things I am. In that sense, I am both a mother and I do a certain amount of mothering but it still doesn't define me. Identity must exist without roles or experience. If I strip away the roles, the experiences, the chosen relationships and am left with nothing but myself, my identity must be found elsewhere.

There was a time when my identity was so caught up in the behavior and personalities of others that I didn't handle life well. If my husband didn't sit up straight at an important event, my anxiety level increased. If I thought someone would find out that my dad was not "normal" fear overtook me. If my children were too loud in a quiet meeting, I needed to put them in line quickly as all of these things were extensions of self, of my identity. At least that is how I behaved. I couldn't have told you that was my thinking at the time. I just knew the world, my world, would be better if everyone followed protocol, the protocol I absorbed and interpreted based on my own insecurities. Interpreting anything unknowingly through a lens of fear and insecurity can never be productive. My efforts and inability to control all of these things and have the life I envisioned for myself was actually crushing my identity. I was losing myself. Not in the roles I was playing as much as my laser focus on where everything fell short, where I fell short. Surely this couldn't be what I had chosen for myself and yet it was. All the blame I placed outside of myself eventually made its way back around to choices I had made. It was a perpetual blame and shame cycle. My identity was wrapped up in the actions of others.

It wasn't until I came to a crossroads in my faith, that I would be presented with some options that begged the true identity question. Was my identity wrapped up in the choices I made and the choices of others? Good friends of mine had left behind our shared faith in favor of a more loose construction of the universe. These were friends I would have never met if it wasn't for our shared faith. In other words, our faith seemed a crucial part of our friendship's identity. One friend in particular had a life that intrigued me. I found myself pondering what life would be like if I followed her path. I was a young mom. I had served a mission for our church and had gone to a church sponsored school. My testimony of the Restoration of Christ's church upon the earth were hard won growing up in a non-religious, tumultuous home. Yet here I was, the culmination of a thousand tiny voices, pain and curiosity urging me to explore a path away from the one that had shaped every decision I had made up to that point.

I was presented with 2 scenarios. As I peered down my friend's path, though appealing, it was hazy and uncertain. To my right appeared another path. This path had a faint, familiar glow. I decided I needed to do again what I had done as a desperate 13 year old and immerse myself in the book of scripture unique to my faith, The Book of Mormon, one last time. I needed to know and feel again. I accepted a challenge to read it in 3 months time. This was no small task for a mom with 4 young kids at home. I read whenever I could. I had to abandon my ideal study scenario, my ideal "doing" schedule. It turned out that my ideals were keeping me from having the life I wanted. I turned toward the path with the faint glow and found that I didn't want to depart from it again. From that time forward I began finding my identity less and less in the roles I was playing and the things I was doing and more in the person I was being. The person I was being was influenced by things I was doing but the emphasis started to shift. I began finding my identity in the things that lit me up, gave me peace and helped me have confidence and patience in myself and others.

I was led from one thing to the next on this path of light. The light led me back to myself, separate from anyone else in my life. I came to identify more with the things that lit me up and less with the things that were draining my energy and will to live. Funnily enough, that is also when those relationships that I had blamed for my lack of happiness became greater sources of happiness. When I began loving what I was doing, I began understanding my identity independent of the world around me. My identity is much simpler than any labels I may attach to it. My identity is simply me.