

IDENTITY CRISIS

OR

"WHAT GOES ON WHEN THINGS GO WRONG"

A description of personal breakdown and transformation

Offered by

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DEDICATION

The "Identity Crisis" term and process were introduced to me during my late 20's, a time of great change, upheaval and pain in my life, by a brilliant therapist, Shirley Gehrke Luthman, of Marin County, California. To my knowledge, there is no other written account of this process. It leads the reader through the three phases of breakdown and rebuilding that you own Inner Self has set out for you, initiated by some type of powerful change, usually unexpected, in life.

For years, psychotherapy clients have shown up at my office door, convinced they are having a "nervous breakdown," and not sure that I can help them. Once I ascertain that they are experiencing most of the symptoms that occur during the Identity Crisis Process, I assure them they are not having a "break down," but rather, a "break apart." Something is definitely happening—and it definitely doesn't feel good, either. But it is not something that is "wrong" with the person. Instead, it is the start of something incredible and wonderful—the reclamation of a person's true self! I have found that once they are assured they are breaking apart, and the reason for that experience, they are comforted enough to tolerate the process. It is for this reason that Identity Crisis has been written.

In current terminology, this process could be called "undoing the ego," a process portrayed in *Take Me to Truth*, by Nouk Sanchez and Tomas Vieira (2007, O Books). Michael Brown, in his CD program *The Radiance of Intimacy*, also alludes to the necessity of ego-undoing. For those seeking greater enlightenment, "undoing the ego" is a prerequisite for progression; and the time for all of us to progress is *Now!*

What follows is a description of the "Identity Crisis Process" as I have experienced it personally, and as I have known it while guiding countless therapy clients through the treacherous waters of personal emotional change over the last 35 years.

When I worked with Shirley Luthman, she quietly supported me with these words: "I believe that people don't go through any more than they have to in order to grow." When you are going through this Identity Crisis process, it seems like we are going through "too much," yet it is what we have to go through in order to grow.

I dedicate this article to Shirley Gehrke Luthman, L.C.S.W., with my deepest gratitude.

Ilene L. Dillon, M.S.W.

"I hope you don't think my whole life has been like this," says Nancy, age 32. "I don't know what happened! Things have always been pretty good, I thought, even after my divorce. But in July, everything started to go wrong. First I lost my job; then my dog was hit by a car and killed. That may not seem very important to you; but that dog was like my baby. I'm still not working, but all I can seem to do is sit at home and cry! My little boy broke his arm in August, and I didn't even care that much. Just patch him up and go back to sitting. I didn't know a person could cry so many tears. I have to force myself to leave the house to look for work. And my friends--they are all too busy to spend time with me. I guess they don't like being with a big crybaby. I don't even feel like calling them, anyway. I am really all alone, now."

Anne, 23, is sitting on the edge of her chair. She looks nervous. "There really is nothing I can put my finger on. About six months ago I just started to feel depressed. I did all the usual things to get over the depression: I signed up for a class, made a list of all the positive things in my life. I even called my minister and talked with her. Nothing helped! Things just seemed to feel worse, even with all that activity. Lately, nothing that used to work for me works out. I don't understand it. I have been depressed before, but never anything like this."

Tom, 46 and a successful person in his field, says, "All my life I knew what I was going to do. I had career goals. I knew once I reached a plateau what I would do next. It all made sense and I could see my life for years in the future. I've reached most of my career goals. I was even given awards for being top in my field. Now, for some reason, none of it is important. It all seems like a joke. I don't want to do those things any more; but I don't have anything new, either. I can't get up any enthusiasm to get something new started. All I want to do is sit, sleep, and watch television. Sometimes I can get myself to job. Most embarrassing is the crying--I cry over old grade-B television movies!"

Marlene, 54, wipes at the tears running down her cheeks. "There is nothing ahead. I have always had trouble making decisions, but this is ridiculous! I can't even decide whether or not to take out a new washcloth to wash my face in the morning. My children tell me to "get out more" so I won't feel so crazy. But where? For what? They don't understand what is happening to me and I think, frankly, they are scared for me. Nobody seems to know what I am going through. I think I am going crazy and nobody wants to tell me because it might make me go over the edge. Other people don't act this way. I never have, either. I really am going crazy! I need some kind of help to get out of this; and I am just hoping and praying somebody can figure out what is going wrong with me."

Though their situations differ, Tom, Nancy, Anne and Marlene are each in pain. For each, life has become difficult, depressing, empty, frightening, without meaning or goal, and above all, hopeless. Things are not going well, and for no apparent reason. Furthermore, nothing better is arising. Even though each has functioned well until now, something has changed so that nothing seems to be going correctly. Life is different; there is no explanation for it. Pain is intense; and there appears to be no way out. No amount of effort or "trying" improves the situation. Thoughts of suicide or death have crossed the minds of each in recent weeks, much to their horror.

What is the explanation? Do these "symptoms" make any sense to anyone? Can anything be done? Who can help?

The pictures presented by Marlene, Anne, Tom and Nancy are very familiar to helping professionals. When old ways of running our lives no longer work for us, the pain we feel drives us to find new solutions, to find out if someone else knows the answer. Usually, people put off seeking help, trying to fix things on their own. They wait, typically, until the pain of trying something new seems equal or less to the pain they are

already experiencing. Then they seek help from a therapist, complaining "I am not myself," or "I am going crazy and I'm frightened."

Traditional psychotherapy addresses the situation of Marlene, Anne, Tom and Nancy as "nervous breakdown" and "personality disintegration." Both labels connote a negative process, one to be avoided or postponed. Traditional treatments include hospitalization (including medication) and outpatient medication. Those passing through this process have frequently felt ashamed, been labeled as having a "sickness" and have been given the information that they are unable to handle what is occurring in their lives. Because of this negative connotation, those experiencing the symptoms have felt themselves to be an "unprivileged few" who have "something wrong" with them.

THE IDENTITY CRISIS

The therapeutic Growth Model employs the term "Identity Crisis" to describe the experience of these four people. This label connotes a positive process, which is to be faced and gone through. Treatment methods include increased support to assist the individual to face and complete this important growth process, and encouraging the individual to treat him or her self gently while s/he goes through this emotionally draining process. Seen as a growth process, it is one which people can feel as a reward and a monument to their own growth efforts. With understanding and assistance, as well as lots of hard work, a person encountering the "Identity Crisis" can emerge joyously victorious, with "everything right" and renewed from their successful encounter, without the aid of hospitalization or medication, in a majority of cases.

Though most of us experience "Identity Crisis" at least once in our lives, most therapists with whom I have talked are not familiar with the process in the terms discussed here. Their clients persist in feeling like their therapist "doesn't understand what I'm going through" or is "scared for me." Often, unfamiliar with the positive nature

of the process, the therapist actually discourages it, causing the client to have to postpone his or her growth and go through it at a later point in life, this time certain that things are worse than ever. Once embarked upon the "Identity Crisis" process, there is no turning back. The process continues until completion. While an individual may get distracted from direct work on the issues of "Identity Crisis," even for years, there is a continuing pull from within to complete the journey.

IDENTITY CRISIS EXPLAINED

In a nutshell, "Identity Crisis" is a process of emotional death and rebirth, wherein the person we have learned to become (as the result of our upbringing, choices and life experiences) is destroyed, so that the true personality (present at birth) can successfully emerge and express in daily life. Because the assumed or "old" self has been thought to be necessary for survival, each individual passing through the "Identity Crisis" wrestles to maintain the "old self." When it is pointed out to such individuals that this struggle is a losing battle, as well as one their inside self wants them to lose, the struggle abates and the rebirthing process is speeded to completion.

The "Identity Crisis" process is a three-stage process: "Innocence," "Cynicism" and "Innocence with Wisdom." Most people present themselves for psychotherapy during the middle stage, the "Period of Cynicism."

Innocence

Young children walk in a special world where each day is similar to the one before, with rules of operation spelled out for us by parents, teachers, coaches and other

authorities. If there are problems, we can go to others to have them help put things right.

It may be, for example, I know if I play quietly when my mother is reading, she will smile and like the person I am being. If I am loud or whiney, I know she will be angry with me. I know that mother will be happy with me, will love me, and will want to be with me, if I play quietly. My father, however, likes me to sit and rub his forehead after a day of hard work. He gives me a hug and says "I love you," and everything is right with my world. I know the "rules of the road;" and as long as I follow them, everything works out right, people love me; and I am wanted.

This Period of Innocence is different for each person, even for siblings. When we are grown, we go back to it as "the way things always were" or "the way I have always been," even "the good old days." In later life, we use the learning (first experiencing) we did here as "givens," assuming that the way things were for us when a child is in fact the way things are supposed to be in the world.

During this period, children also enter into what are known as "survival contracts." If, for example, I am a loud child and my parent is offended by loudness, I will opt to quell my own nature and be more quiet. I do this because of my concern that my parent will not want or love me if I do not behave the way they want me to behave. These contracts are especially common in dysfunctional families. After practicing quietness for a while, I will become quiet, and by adulthood I will say, "I am a quiet person." Even though I was not a quiet person by nature, by practicing quietness for so many years, I will think myself to be the way I remember always being. I will, however, be living a lie. Who I was at birth was a noisy person, not a quiet one. In order to survive to adulthood, I have become the person I think others want me to be. The "real me" is hidden so far inside I don't even remember that person.

As therapists know, even when reality is smashing us in the face, we humans still insist that things are "supposed to be" the way they were in our childhood. Usually, we

do not think much about what we learned in the "Period of Innocence" until our "givens" are forcefully challenged, leading us to the next stage, the "Period of Cynicism."

Period of Cynicism

As long as I am in my family or in a cultural situation with the same rules for living, I remain "innocent." When something happens in my life, which severely challenges at least one of the major rules, which has worked for me, I enter the Period of Cynicism.

Parents may die, my spouse may divorce or die, a child may be born, or I may marry and work to be a good spouse, only to find "happily ever after" is not so happy after all. As a newly wed wife, for example, I may reach out to my work-weary husband to rub his forehead and make him feel better. A very private and quiet person, always sensitive to intrusion, he snaps at me: "Why are you always grabbing at me? Can't you just leave me alone when I come home? I can't stand your intrusiveness." I sit down quietly and smile at him, gazing confusedly into his face seeking clues of how I am to behave. I want him to love and like me; but I do not know what to do. "Don't you have anything useful to do?" he yells at me. "Don't just sit there and stare at me!" Amazed, confused and frightened, I withdraw. I wonder: What have I done wrong?"

As wife, I have done everything I learned (during my "Period of Innocence") that I am "supposed" to do; and all the wrong things are happening. I feel very helpless and hopeless.

As husband, I have learned rules about being strong and not too emotional. Newly married, I come home tired from work, where things have not been going well for me. I am worried about money, security and providing well for my wife and myself. According to the rules I learned in my "Period of Innocence," it is not "right" for me to tell my wife how scared I am. I am "supposed" to puzzle things out and find a solution without worrying her. When I sit down at last and my wife comes to rub my forehead, I feel like crying. But I should not be "weak" and "break down." I will feel guilty to tell my wife

what is bothering me. "Why are you always grabbing at me?" I yell, hoping to keep her from touching me. "Can't you just leave me alone?" Then she stares at me and I have to work harder to cover my feelings, so I yell at her again. When at last she goes off hurt and cries, I am puzzled. I have been doing what a man is "supposed" to do and my wife is not understanding. Why is she not respecting my efforts fully the way she is "supposed" to do? Doesn't she know what she is doing is making things harder for me? I wonder what is happening.

In an effort to steady my spinning world, I try utilizing other ruses and approaches.

As the wife, I may be very nice for several days, making extra efforts with meals, attentiveness, dress and humor, only to have my husband withdraw from me more, accusing me of "bothering" him more than ever. When I seek help from my mother (or best friend), she suggests having a long talk. I know he will not talk when he will not even stay in the same room with me!

As the husband, I may bring my wife a box of candy, remembering too late that she is dieting. I try to have patience with her, but every effort she makes to get closer feels intrusive, and I shove her from me emotionally. I confide in a friend at work: women are impossible to understand or communicate with. They just don't understand the stress a man is constantly experiencing.

One by one, whether wife or husband, the things I know how to do no longer work for me. I begin to notice that *nothing* I have learned in the past really works for me any more. Everything is different. The rules have all changed. I have nothing on which to count; and I have nothing with which to replace the old, now useless rules. Something definitely feels wrong. "I" am not working any more. Am I crazy? What am I doing wrong? Is there something I am not seeing that a brilliant expert can show me?

There definitely *is* something wrong...the person I have until now thought was "me" is breaking apart. I cannot stop this breaking apart; I have nothing to put in its' place.

My pain is excruciating. The symptoms I develop, when I notice them, scare me and cause me to think I am surely crazy or very sick. They may go on for a while, and seem just to "pop up" in my recent past. They can include:

1. Physical symptoms such as lightheadedness, nausea, trembling, backaches, anxiety attacks, irregular breathing, near blackouts, flushes and accidents, both large and small.
2. Extreme mood swings such as happy and invincible one moment, and totally depressed or sad the next. Most vexing is the apparent lack of cause for these mood swings.
3. A concern with death: thinking about death, considering suicide (perhaps for the first time in my life), feeling very afraid of death or being concerned that others may die (sometimes the concern is that I might kill or hurt them).
4. Confusion. Nothing makes sense.
5. Cynicism. Nothing really seems to matter any more. I would like to get interested in something, someone, but I do not really care about anything or anybody. Caring, I reason, would probably only result in more pain and rejection.
6. A conviction that I am crazy (often accompanied by a stated desire to check into a hospital).
7. Feeling totally alone and disconnected, "knowing" that nobody will ever understand the crazy person I have so recently become, and that nobody really cares about me.
8. A desire to make change (with accompanying despair because I cannot seem to make a decision about what changes to make).
9. A desire to withdraw, sleep for days. (Some people use tranquilizers or other drugs or alcohol to achieve this withdrawal during this time.)

10. A compulsion to "understand" what is happening, with accompanying frustration because nothing seems comprehensible and everything is topsy-turvy. Besides, I feel like I'm developing early Alzheimer's, because I cannot make decisions or remember things as I usually have.
11. Panic. Many people describe themselves at the edge of a black abyss or tunnel. Things seem hopeless and unending.
12. A desire to contact family and old friends, to make contact with the past (and it *never* fills the void).
13. Pain...excruciating, with a feeling that I cannot stand another moment of it. Death may be the only way out of this much pain. Because I cannot see light at the end of my tunnel, I despair, thinking this is "the way life is now."
14. Giving up, knowing I cannot tell anyone about this crazy experience. At the same time, I feel like I cannot do all this alone.
15. Loss of interest in physical things, especially sex.

It is easy to see why people in the "Period of Cynicism" are frequently given tranquilizers or placed in psychiatric wards. Merely observing this process is frightening, especially if you have not fully experienced it yourself. (It is horrifying if some behavior or your part seems to have triggered this process!) If you do not understand the process as a positive growth experience, even an experienced helping person will want to help relieve the obvious and terrible pain of the individual in as fast and complete a manner as possible. (Drugs take effect quickly, but usually only mask the process, making the individual's work doubly difficult.)

To date, few helping people operate with the understanding that *the pain itself* is important, and should not be curtailed. In this process, the pain operates like a fire which the farmer uses to burn off his field in the autumn. It is a purifier, vital to the continuing balanced ecology of the field. Emotional pain comes as both a signal and a

release. The signal says "change," regardless of how frightening, you must now make change. The release is of all the feelings, which have been tucked away over the years in an effort to remain the person you have thought others needed you to be.

Another common solution helpers offer during the "Period of Cynicism" is "get out and meet people," "take up a hobby," "get interested in something." This is excellent advice for a person beginning reconstruction and entering the period of "Innocence with Wisdom." Now, however, it offers only to cover the work, which must be done. People in this desperate situation already want to "grab onto" something to make their world stop spinning. Ordinarily, they either "get married, get a job they bury themselves in, or get religion." (Consider, for example the tremendous appeal of Jim Jones' Temple, The Moonies, and other religious sects to which people flock during times of pain and transition, such as when first leaving home.) This solution will alleviate the immediate pain. But the pain will lurk under the surface, only to re-emerge, even more intensely, at a later time. Life's process will offer another major change, such as illness, loss of job, death of a partner, or disillusionment with church or hobby, and the whole process will immediately resume.

The most effective way to deal with the "Period of Cynicism" is to go through it, due to the principle *On Earth, you must go through something in order to get beyond it.* "But what can I *DO*?" people usually demand. The answer is: You can do exactly nothing except go through it. Once started, there is no way to reverse or end it until the process is complete. You can sometimes postpone the process, but like childbirth, once your new self starts to be "born," there is no way to stop the process until it is completed.

What is left for you to do, then, is to batten down the hatches, like a sailboat in the eye of a storm, and experience the storm, which is raging through you. You may hold onto something, but make that "something" a therapist whose contract with you *is* to turn you loose and help you get on your own as soon as you are ready.

Then spend your time experiencing all the many, powerful emotions which tear through your insides. (In fact, the emotions are like a wound, cleansing by releasing its pus to drain.) Cry, scream, feel joyful, hurt, moan, hold your body, and go through the pain. It will come in waves. It usually comes over a period of time, which can be anywhere from six months to two years, depending upon how strong or stubborn you are, how well supported, and how much you have to clean out of your system.

The crucially painful time usually lasts about six months, with the remaining months spent in steadily decreasing cynicism and pain, with steadily increasing wisdom and understanding. Be alone. Let yourself sleep. Let yourself feel vulnerable. Take some time off from work if you can (some people "unconsciously" obtain jobs which are not too demanding while they go through the "Identity Crisis" process). Ask little of yourself, other than to ride through this storm, going wherever your feelings take you.

And remember, ***There Is An End to This Process!*** The "sentence" is not indeterminate.

The "Period of Cynicism" is a period of cleansing. All the old ways, all the feelings, which had to be withheld due to survival contracts you made, which are still inside, flood out of the person to be released into the atmosphere and be gone forever.

In spite of the extreme pain, it is a time for rejoicing. At last, after long years, the feelings, which you developed as a child, but which are not, yours, are leaving. The person you have come to see as "Me," but who is not *really* "me." is dying. Without knowledge, you think it is "me" who is dying. Instead, it is an aspect of "me" which you no longer need. You are cleansing yourself of hearsay and gossip given to you in the past by parents, teachers, and other to whom you gave authority. This hearsay and gossip does not fit who you really are as a person. You are opening yourself to find out who you are, separate from what you have been told or shown in the past. What an adventure! You are freeing yourself from the past, so that you can live with the present as it really is, rather than as you imagine or remember it to be. You are becoming free!

A person *can* make it through this "Period of Cynicism" alone. Very few actually wish to do it alone. Having friends or relatives assist you usually does not work, because old patterns of the past creep in and lead you to hold back, fearing the loss of someone who seems important to you. A therapist, on the other hand, is a paid (though caring) employee, whose job it is to listen and help without extracting an emotional price. It is beneficial for you to ally yourself with a therapist who will be non-interfering, understanding, supportive, respectful and who is not frightened or does not rush in to do your work for you.

This is a job you need to do on your own, ultimately. Inside you know this. That is why your friends seem to have all dropped out or to back away from you. This is a very delicate operation. You are cleansing yourself and are very vulnerable to others. Those others you allow in close to you *must* be willing to make you and your process *number one*. This is a dangerous, uncharted mission. Your base camp *must* operate with full efficiency, and be ready to help you whenever you encounter major obstacles. You cannot ask yourself to hold back any feeling or any part of yourself, in fear, any more.

One last note. Most people become afraid that if they allow themselves to draw inward to this extent, they will not really ever care about others again. They get concerned that they will become totally selfish and withdrawn from the world for the rest of their lives. This is not true. If you let yourself go all the way with this process, and withdraw totally for a period of time (until you *feel like* coming out again), then you will *want* to come out.

And when you come out, you will be glad to be out and will want to stay out. You will not have to go back inside to this painful depth in just this way again. Once you have faced your demons inside, you have filled yourself up. A cup, which is filled up, begins to spill over.

This is what will happen with you. You will begin to feel so good inside, so complete, that you will feel almost driven to share yourself with the outside world. Only this time,

you cannot be knocked off your feet again by what the outside world has to offer you, positive or negative. This time you will be full *from the inside out*. This is what it is like to be in the "Period of Innocence with Wisdom". The curious fact is that *after* you belong to yourself, you give even *more* to parents, lovers, spouses, children, friends and society. The fear we all have of drawing inward and never coming out *does not*, in fact, hold true for anyone with whom I have worked. Drawing inward gives even greater impetus to move outward, and to give to others.

The Period of Innocence with Wisdom

At long last, slowly and steadily, life begins to be your own. Instead of dreading the next day, you begin to look forward to the new adventures coming your way. Instead of things appearing hopeless and gloomy, they begin to take on interest. You begin to become enthusiastic and happy about life again.

At first, many new things appear attractive. You sign up for a class, begin an exercise program, join a group, or take up a musical instrument. After a few meetings, what you have selected no longer feels good or right. You want to quit. It all feels like a mistake. "What is wrong with me?" you ask yourself. The answer is, "Nothing!"

Look at any child between the ages of 11 and 16. Watch them get totally interested in something or someone. They dream about them, talk about them and study the topic. They are totally immersed in what is striking their interest. After a short while, ask them about the coveted person or topic. "Oh, them?" they respond. "I don't like them any more. I like somebody (or something) else now!" Frustrating, but normal, behavior for this age group.

This is the same behavior, which is going on as you explore, in depth, what might fit you. Left uninterrupted, you will explore each new interest or person until you clearly see it does not fit you now. Then, you will want to drop it. This could be after one meeting, after talking on the telephone, or after a semester of hard work. "Drop it" is

exactly the right thing for each person in this period to do for his or her continued growth. Drop it and go on to the next thing. Explore it as thoroughly as you need to (it won't take as much time as the teenager, because you have experience and a mature brain, which they do not have). Then be a "quitter." The "Identity Crisis Process" is not a time in life to make permanent choices and decisions. Being a "quitter" is your job in this process, especially in the "Period of Innocence with Wisdom."

Eventually, over time, those people and those ideals, those "rules" and those things that really fit each of us will be what you have left over. And you will know they fit you because you have found out from *inside* of yourself whether or not they are right. You have not relied upon someone else's teaching or opinion to find out whether people or things fit you.

You have, in essence, rediscovered the innocent, "I know what the rules are" days of childhood. Only this time, you have *wisdom*: you know that the rules can change. You know that you cannot always rely on the systems or presence of others. You know that change is expected. You know that nobody can take away your system for living in the world, because it comes from your own insides. No one can die or divorce or challenge and wipe you out. The base on which you found your life each day is *yours* and comes from deep inside. You are no longer at the command of others or of circumstance. Your life operates as you direct it.

SUMMARY

The experiences we have in our lives are offering us lessons. When we learn the lessons, we can go on from these "same old" experiences and have new ones. The process never stops throughout life on earth. To avoid, put off, tranquilize or get otherwise involved in "other things" does not get rid of any of these lessons; it just builds pain and makes the whole experience take longer. The "Identity Crisis" which so many

of us face, painful as it may be, is one of the most exciting and wonderful processes we can experience in life.

It is never too late to grow. If you see yourself in the process described here, do not despair. You are definitely not alone. You are not crazy--or wrong, bad, or guilty of anything, either. You should not be tranquilized into oblivion or locked up in a hospital. You are growing--growing up!

Accept the process. Seek help with someone who supports your growing up in a clear and helpful way. Do not grab on to anything as "The Answer" everything in this process is temporary.

Then, just feel. And experience. And be grateful that at last your life will be your own. Some morning in the not-too-distant future, you will wake up and ask yourself; "How do I feel today?" "What is right for me to do today?" Without having to consult anyone else, you will *know* the answers, which fit you best -- and, you will live them without fear of who or what you will lose. You will have returned to being the person you were at the earliest moments of your life. You will be your real self. You will be free!



Ilene L. Dillon, M.S.W. (California MFT and LCSW), is not an expert.

This assertion is based on a statement once given to her by a very wise woman.

"People who write books are not experts," she stated, "they are people who have

something to learn.” A California based psychotherapist since 1972, Ilene has taught Continuing Education to California Nurses, Community residents, Psychotherapists and Probation Officers. Her message has appeared in many publications, including *Personal Excellence*, *Women’s Day*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Marin Independent Journal* and *Care Notes*. Ilene is a professional speaker as well as creator and host of Full Power Living, a web-based radio program dedicated to “awakening the world to the power and importance of human emotions,” aired from www.emotionalpro.com/

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If, after reading this article, you want personal coaching in passing through your own Identity Crisis, you can receive a ½ hour consultation FREE by contacting Ilene through e-mail.