

Is discovery of our authentic self the greatest expedition of all?

If I asked you to picture a previously undiscovered, New World, what would you see? Could you imagine a place that no eyes had seen before? What image would you conjure up? Blue moons, and double-stars, hovering in a lilac haze above some dusty orange landscape? It's pretty impossible to imagine what that would look like, without relying on all the things we associate with the idea of 'alien' or 'exploration' or 'voyage'. We visualize distant landscapes stylised in the garish fashion of 1960s Space Race propaganda, or imagine the cool hues and glaring whites of Shackleton's Antarctic, or perhaps we recall the feeling of the sun on our skin as we picture some turquoise-yellow dream of Columbus' expeditions.

It's an idea that's fascinated us from the beginning of time: the great unknown and the many things we still have to discover. We pursue exploration across disciplines; be it maths, science, engineering or the arts. We are all in pursuit of that intangible, unimaginable thing. But what keeps us chasing it? Why is our thirst for knowledge and understanding unquenchable? What is it we're really looking for? Is it intellectual satiety? Satisfaction? Achievement? Or is it simply answers: to What, Where, When and Why? There are many reasons to ask a question – but could our persistent curiosity, our need for an answer – be one less intellectual and in fact much more primal? Is what we're really looking for the answer to, us? Why me? Why am I here? Ultimately, what is my purpose?

Put simply; we explore to discover the reason for our existence.

This can be carried out in careful, calibrated explorations: such as that of an astronaut, dedicating his life to the training and high-risk expeditions required to discover more about life on Earth, and the possibilities of life in space. But I would argue that this exploration can also come in the form of existential crisis; a breakdown, or a glitch, in the fragile structures of our minds, which keep us centred in our understanding of the universe and our place in it. The latter

exploration, I think you'll find, is statistically more likely. And one, I would argue, which is equally, if not more so, profound.

For isn't it the case, that every time we turn our telescope to the sky, or our microscope to the ground, what we are ultimately seeking is that answer to our own existence? Our own truth? Whether an astronaut, or an ordinary person: we are all looking to discover our true self.

So if I ask you again to picture that alien landscape – the great unknown of your true self – what would that look like? Is that something we can visualize? Can we aspire to something we cannot see in our mind's eye?

I am one such ordinary person, and my quest is one that, like most, I have been on for some time. But it was in crisis that I took the first palpable steps towards this discovery of my true, authentic, self. Three years ago, I found myself sitting in the quiet, slightly tense atmosphere of a National Health Service waiting room, with umpteen psychotherapists and counsellors waiting behind the surrounding doors. I was here to be assessed for Attention Deficit Disorder, at my request, due to the fact that I was struggling to carry out my work, often feeling bored and unfocused, and 'foggy'.

It is a strange feeling to offer yourself up for a critical analysis, so to speak, which could hugely impact your life and your understanding of yourself, one way or another. This vulnerability is something we experience on a daily basis: whether by turning up to work in an environment of our peers, or by going to the doctor with some problem. We are all functioning in little feedback loops, of information going back and forth, of perception and understanding. However, willingly seeking an in-depth assessment from a highly-trained psychotherapist, comes with a considerably heavier weight. I'm seeking this out for my own benefit; therefore I need to listen carefully and absorb whatever's coming, good or bad.

I tried to explain my issues rationally and with confidence: I had a biomedical science degree, and was now a marketing and events executive in publishing – and I *had* to be able to work. I ran international events, spoke regularly to large audiences, and was a bubbly, people-person. My struggles and my exhaustion made no sense. We talked for an hour. The psychotherapist left me for a few minutes to discuss her thoughts with a senior practitioner. I tried not to let my thoughts wander. She returned, with the air of bearing bad news. “We think you have generalized anxiety disorder – a pretty severe case.” Suddenly, I felt alien to myself. What? Who am I? How is this possible? And sadly – *this just doesn't fit*.

The therapist explained what the disorder was, how it worked, how it could cause the symptoms that had become so disruptive, and most importantly, what I could do to help myself manage it. It was a lot to process. I'd likely had it my whole life, it could be part-genetic, but most likely it had been environmentally conditioned. That didn't come as a surprise: my mother has crippling anxiety, panic, depression, mania, agoraphobia and PTSD – I suddenly realised it would be much less likely that I should *not* be affected in some way by that. As I processed the logic behind the diagnosis, another, unfamiliar feeling came to the surface. A feeling that I did not associate with myself. A feeling I wasn't allowed to feel: anger. This was too unfair – this was *my* life. It was disconcerting to realise I not only harboured the feeling, but a deep well of it.

By the time I left we had agreed that I would return for the next six weeks to undertake Cognitive Behavioural Therapy with her. I diligently did my ‘homework’, as I knew I would only get out what I put in. She had explained the idea behind the therapy: we are all just a self-perpetuating system of thoughts, feelings and behaviours. And there it was. I was running around, constantly worrying over every tiny little thing, trying to fix things for myself and others twenty-four-seven. And that's a problem.

So here I was, taking the first steps on the unprecedented trajectory into the Great Unknown: Me, Myself and I. What was I hoping to discover? The cause and effect which made me who I am. Why? So that I could know my demons, and call them out. Stand face-to-face with them, and confront their ugliness, to better grasp a sense of what makes me tick.

In the words of Aristotle, “Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.” And it was indeed a beginning; of understanding, acceptance, and love, for myself.

It was painful. I had to recall the worst times of my life and there have been many. I had to face that alien anger, and allow myself to feel it. It hurt, physically, and I was fatigued from the emotional effort of processing these unsafe, unkind things. But gradually the discomfort subsided and in its place came a peace I hadn't know before. I would come to understand this was acceptance; of my past, my present, and myself.

Imagine that foreign landscape again; the one which no eyes have seen. The cosmos of you. I'm not sure that many of us ever look so intently at ourselves, as we are invited to in therapy. It's a strange thing to realise it's a world largely unknown to us, despite being closer to us than any other exterior world which piques our intrigue. The sense of discovery I felt during my therapy, and in the years that have followed, is nothing short of miraculous. With acceptance comes release, and with release comes renewal. I felt like I had become a clean-slate, a blank canvas, where anything was possible. I could begin again.

I had found the Why of what made me, but what about the Why of who I can become? Friedrich Nietzsche philosophised that “He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how.” Through my therapy I identified the areas of need in my life, and where they weren't being met. I let go of a lot of things. For the first time in our lives, my husband was earning enough that we could just about manage on his income alone. I quit my work, which wasn't fulfilling, and focused instead on the simpler pursuits of reading, cooking, sleeping, painting and playing

music. It didn't take long for me to dig out my old art folders, and my old writing. I signed up to life-drawing class again, and experienced a cathartic release through the act of putting paint onto paper. For the first time I didn't care what everyone else thought, and I finally found the 'looseness' of hand that my teachers had been pushing me to discover for years. I found the same with my writing, and my keyboard became a transformative bridge for incoherent thoughts and processes to cross over, where they landed, organised and with meaning, on the other side. I kept writing, and eventually I wrote a novel which I had put in a quiet space in the recess of my mind a couple of years prior. Thanks to the introspection and understanding that came from my therapy, I discovered that I was indeed a writer, because I could give myself permission to be one. A long-harboured suspicion, and one which I feebly attempted to pursue alongside my career for years, became my true and authentic self. I had unwittingly landed in the promise-lands of the New World.

For what bolder voyage is there to embark on, than that of understanding yourself? From the brave astronaut waiting in the air-lock for his first glimpse of real, out-there space, to the lowly writer trying to comprehend the minds of ourselves and those around us: we are boldly stepping into the unknown.

As I sit and reflect, three-years post therapy, and on a much truer path, the words of Carl Jung swim in the forefront of my mind: "He who looks out; dreams. He who looks in; awakes."

Because that's what it is to discover your true self: a brand-new awakening.