

18th August 2023

Identity

**"Spiritual identity means we are not what we do or what people say about us.
And we are not what we have. We are beloved daughters and sons of God."**

Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*

I've just finished reading the transcript of a trial which led to one of the worst miscarriages of justice in Scottish legal history. In the early part of the 20th century, Oscar Slater was charged with the murder of an elderly Glasgow spinster and was found guilty, largely on the grounds of unreliable identification evidence: hat; coat; shoes; spats; walk; twisted nose; skin colour, "foreign-looking appearance". Although his death-sentence was commuted to a life of "hard labour", he spent nearly twenty years in Peterhead prison before his conviction was quashed by the Scottish Appeal process, and he was able to walk from court as a free man.

The case emphasised what is well documented in the annals of crime: how unreliable identification can be. It's well researched that we see what we want to see, and how we describe – or identify – someone may differ radically from the descriptions of others. But it got me thinking about the ways we define each other's identity: how we look; our physical attributes; public behaviour; how we walk; what we do for a living; where we live; what school we went to; sexual identity; marital status; age; country of origin; or whatever? The truth is, we use a combination of all these all the time. We regularly label people, define them, pigeon-hole them, categorise them. But when we read Henri Nouwen's reflection on identity in the quotation above, we are taken to a very different place.

In my early ministry, I learned from *The Ecumenical Institute*, a Chicago-based organisation which did a lot of work around identity, seeking to enhance people's worth and value by taking them beyond society's labelling into the realms of the spiritual. It's that dimension of being where identity isn't defined by what we do, or how people describe us, or what we have, but by our uniqueness, our place in the wonder of creation, and the fact the every one of us can make a difference.

My identify? I am unique; I am a child of the universe; I bend history. I wonder how *that* would be understood if I was defined in these terms in an identification parade?

A prayer for today

Unique in all the world; loved as a special child; bending history? That's me! Amen

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