# Identity – "I am" because "You are"!

A million years ago, when the first Europeans encountered a new creature, they needed to know pretty quickly whether they could eat it or whether, in fact, it might just eat them. In this respect nothing has really changed. When meeting someone for the first time, we all want to understand how that person fits into the 'food chain' of our society. Are they potential friend or foe? Will I get on with this person? Will they like me or eat me?

In our western culture, we place people in our mental hierarchy by asking them what they "Do". We want to know how they earn their money (or spend the majority of their time). We use their answer to place them in society. Whether the person is a doctor, housewife (/husband), police officer, care worker, rubbish collector, supermarket shelf-stacker, lawyer, artist, musician or banker affects the way we view them.

The question "What do you do?" is a cultural one. In Thailand you are more likely to be asked, "How old are you?" and "How much do you earn?" as your inquisitor assesses your social standing (age and wealth being strong indicators of ones social status). My Doctor friend, working in a mission hospital in Thailand was also frequently asked whether he had been sterilised. As a father of two young children, people wanted to know his potential for increasing his social status by having more children.

In Nigeria, where I worked for some years, the primary question was "Where are you from?" This was not to enquire where you live, but what was the name of your father's village. For a Nigerian, your family birthplace represents a big part of your identity.

Our self-identity on one level is about how we see ourselves. How we see ourselves, however, is by no means fixed. It is affected by how we believe other people see us. For example if I am inundated with praise and plaudits at the end of a jazz concert (rare, I know), I may think to myself that perhaps I am a good double bass player. After all, everyone here seems to think so.

Our identity is inextricably linked to our relationship with others – how they see us affects the way we see ourselves. Any part of our identity is determined to a greater or lesser extent by the way we relate to others.

"Ubuntu" is an African philosophy focusing on people's allegiances and relations with each other. In essence it concludes "I am what I am because of who we all are."

Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote: A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others and does not feel threatened that others are able and good. He or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.

12 months ago, I resigned from a busy full time job in the UK that represented a large part of my identity. A year later, I find myself reflecting on my role as accompanying spouse and primary carer for our 2 children. It's a great life. I recommend it. But it does attract a breadth of reactions from friends (old and new), family, former colleagues and people I am meeting for the first time (who naturally ask me "what do you do?")

So what makes up our sense of self in this all-pervading culture where we "are" what we "do"? Here's my list of options in no particular order:

Father of 2 children, primary parent to the same, husband of the local vicar, jazz double bass player of dubious ability, cyclist (ability on par with the bass playing), motorcyclist of 30 years, Christian and member of La Cote Church.

**Questions for discussion:**
What are the principle elements that make up our identity?
What is the balance of power among these elements?
How do we get this balance right?