

**TRUE SELF – FALSE SELF**  
Excerpts from Fr. Richard Rohr

**Part 1 - You Are the "Imago Dei"**

Searching for and rediscovering the True Self is the *fundamentum*, the essential task that will gradually open us to receiving and giving love to God, others, and ourselves. Grace builds on nature; it does not avoid or destroy nature. You are created in the image of God from the very beginning (Genesis 1:26-27, Ephesians 1:3-4).

You (and every other created thing) begin with your unique divine DNA, an inner destiny as it were, an absolute core that knows the truth about you, a true believer tucked away in the cellar of your being, an *imago Dei* that begs to be allowed, to be fulfilled, and to show itself. "You were chosen in Christ before the world was made--to stand before God in love--marked out beforehand as fully adopted sons and daughters" (see Ephesians 1:4-5). This is your True Self. Historically, it was often called "the soul."

Jesus revealed and accepted a paradox in his entire being: human and divine are not separate, but one, his life shouted! I wonder why we so resist our destiny? For most of us, this seems just too good and too dangerous to be true. There is so much contrary evidence! Many clergy fight me on this, even though it is quite constant in the Tradition. Is it because we are afraid to bear the burden of divinity? As Marianne Williamson says: "Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure." [1] I would say *that it is precisely the divine part of you that is great enough, deep enough, gracious enough to fully accept the human part of you. If you are merely human, you will tend to reject your embarrassingly limited humanity.* Think on that!

Maybe we realize subconsciously that if we really recognized our True Self--which is the Divine Indwelling, the Holy Spirit within us--if we really believed that we are temples of God (see 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16), then we would have to live up to it. I am certainly afraid to own--and fully draw upon--that kind of dignity, such deep freedom, and such infinite love.

Paradoxically, immense humility, not arrogance, characterizes someone who lives in this True Self. You simultaneously know you are a son or daughter of God, but you also know that you didn't earn it and you are not worthy of it. You know it's entirely a gift (see Ephesians 2:8-9 and throughout the Pauline writings). All you can do is thank Somebody Else, occasionally weep with joy, and kneel without any hesitation.

The single and true purpose of mature religion is to lead you to ever new experiences of your True Self. If religion does not do this, it is junk religion. Every Sacrament, every Bible story, every church service, every sermon, every hymn, every bit of priesthood, ministry, or liturgy is for one purpose: to allow you to experience your True Self--who you are in God and who God is in you--and to live a generous life from that Infinite Source.

**References:**

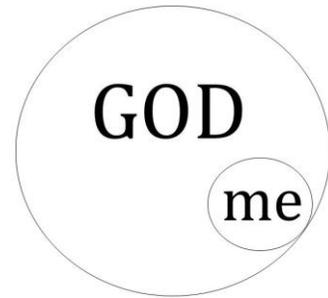
[1] Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of "A Course in Miracles"* (HarperCollins: 1992), 190.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *True Self/ False Self* (Franciscan Media: 2003, 2013), disc 1 and handout (CD); and *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (Jossey-Bass: 2013), 17.

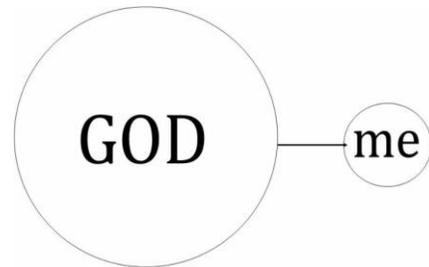
## Part 2 - Homecoming

The important distinction between the true and false selves is foundational, yet it is often overlooked, perhaps because it is difficult to teach. Over the years, I have resorted to almost simplistic geometric images, and for many it seems to help. It imprints in the imagination better than concepts do. Perhaps this could help:

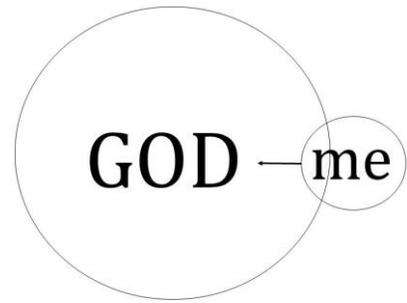
In the beginning, in our original unwoundedness ("innocence"), we live in an unconscious but real state of full connection. Perhaps you've sensed that babies are still in immediate connection with pure being. That's probably why we can't take our eyes off of them. But, I am afraid, we must "leave the garden"; and usually around the age of seven, we increasingly "think" of ourselves as separate. This idea of ourselves as separate is the "false self." This is the essential illusion that spirituality seeks to overcome: "How do I get back to the garden of union and innocence?" Objectively I have never left, but it feels like I have.



Then comes the journey of finding connection and losing it. Picture the small "me" circle being totally outside of the large "God" circle, but hopefully still on the axis of loss and return. This is how we grow. We think we're separate from God for many compelling reasons and we usually search for the correct rituals and moral responses in order to get God to like us again, and for us to learn to trust and know God. This is the dance of life and death.



But of course, it's not about being correct; it's about being connected. It's not about requirements or pre-requisites; it's about pure relationship. It's not so much about what we do; it's about what God does. And what God does--what life does--is gradually destabilize the supposed boundaries of the small self so we can awaken inside of the Large Self, which we call God. This usually happens through experiences of great love or great suffering or inner prayer journeys that allow the private ego to collapse back into the True Self, who we are in God.



The only way that freedom and relationship grow is through a dance between the loneliness and desperation of the false self and the fullness of the True Self, which is ever re-discovered and experienced anew as an ultimate homecoming. The spiritual journey is a gradual path of deeper realization and transformation; it is never a straight line, but a back and forth journey that ever deepens the conscious choice and the conscious relationship. It is growing up, yes, but even more it is *waking up*.

**References:**

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Contemplative Prayer* (CAC: 2000), [CD](#), [MP3 download](#); *True Self/ False Self* (Franciscan Media: 2003, 2013), disc 2 ([CD](#)); and *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (Jossey-Bass: 2013), 189-191.

### Part 3 - Losing Myself to Find Myself

As much as I emphasize the importance of non-dual consciousness, you may be confused or concerned that I use the terms True Self and false self. But remember that wisdom teachers such as Jesus often use seemingly dualistic statements to first ground us and from there draw us into non-dual thinking. Bear with me as I explore these two aspects of ourselves. You might not prefer the term false self. If small self, relative self, provisional self, passing self, or manufactured self help you understand the idea, by all means use them instead. All words are metaphors, and all metaphors are incomplete.

Your "false" self is how you define yourself outside of love, relationship, or divine union. After you have spent many years building this separate, egoic self, with all its labels and habits, you are very attached to it. And why wouldn't you be? It's all you know. To move beyond this privately concocted identity naturally feels like losing or dying. Perhaps you have noticed that master teachers like Jesus and the Buddha, all the "Teresas" (Ávila, Lisieux, and Calcutta), and the mystical poets Hafiz, Kabir, and Rumi talk about dying much more than we are comfortable with. They all know that if you do not learn the art of dying and letting go early, you will miss out on the peace, contentment, and liberation of life lived in your Larger and Lasting Identity, which most of us call God.

It was Thomas Merton, the Cistercian monk, who first suggested the use of the term *false self*. He did this to clarify for many Christians the meaning of Jesus' central and oft-repeated teaching that we must die to ourselves, or "lose ourselves to find ourselves" (Mark 8:35). Jesus' admonition has caused much havoc and pushback in Christian history because it sounds negative and ascetical, and it was usually interpreted as an appeal to deny the body. But the full intent is personal liberation, not self-punishment. Centuries of Christians falsely assumed that if they could "die" to their body, their spirit would for some reason miraculously arise. (Because of centuries of body rejection, and the lack of a positive body theology, the West is now trapped in substance addiction, obesity, anorexia, bulimia, and an obsession with appearance and body image.)

Paul made a most unfortunate choice of the word *flesh* as that which is opposed to *Spirit* (for example, Galatians 5:16-24). I would suggest that you use "ego" or "small self" every time you read the word "flesh" in the Pauline writings, as this would be much closer to his intended meaning.

Our poor bodies, which Jesus actually affirmed, have become the receptacle of so much negative energy. Christians are much more disciples of Plato (body and soul are at odds) than we are of Jesus in whom "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14), where body and soul are willing partners. Jesus even returned to the "flesh" after the Resurrection, as all accounts make very clear, so flesh cannot be bad for us. Our bodies are, in fact, the hiding place for our divinity. (This is why I believe in the necessary physical resurrection of Jesus, admittedly in a new form of physicality.)

If Christianity is in any way anti-body, it is not authentic. Merton rightly recognized that it was not the body that had to "die" but the "false self" which is always an imposter posing for "me." It is no surprise that Buddhism is saying the exact same thing, and often with even greater clarity.

**References:**

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *True Self/ False Self* (Franciscan Media: 2003, 2013), disc 1 ([CD](#)); and *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (Jossey-Bass: 2013), 36-39.

#### **Part 4 - The Illusion of an Autonomous Self**

I am using the terms True Self and false self as they were used by Thomas Merton. In his classic *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton writes:

Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man [or woman] that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him [or her]. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy. [1]

That's why the false self is so fragile. It's inherently insecure because it's almost entirely a creation of the mind, a social construct. It doesn't exist except in the world of perception--which is where we live most of our lives--instead of in God's Eternal Now. When you die, what dies is your false self because it never really existed to begin with. It simply lives in your thoughts and projections. It's what you want yourself to be and what you want others to think you are. It's very tied up with status symbols and reputation.

Whenever you are offended, it's usually because your self-image has not been worshiped or it has been momentarily exposed. The false self will quickly react with a vengeance to any offenses against it because all it has is its own fragile assumptions about itself. Narcissists have a lot of asserting and defending to do, moment by moment. Don't waste much time defending your ego. The True Self is untouchable, or as Paul puts it "it takes no offense" (1 Corinthians 13:5). People who can live from their True Selves are genuinely happy.

Merton continues: My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love--outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion. [2]

Merton says:

We are not very good at recognizing illusions, least of all the ones we cherish about ourselves. . . . For most of the people in the world, there is no greater subjective reality than this false self of theirs, which does not even exist. A life devoted to the cult of this shadow is what is called a life of sin. [3]

What we call sins are actually symptoms of the illusion that we are separated from God. Yet most people attack the symptom instead of the cause!

All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. [4]

You have been given something so much better: "For all belongs to you, you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (1 Corinthians 3:22-23). Your True Self is already home free! To know that is to be "saved."

**References:**

[1] Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Shambhala: 2003), 36.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., 37.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *True Self/ False Self* (Franciscan Media: 2003, 2013), disc 4 ([CD](#)); and "Horizontal Identity and Vertical Identity," Homily, June 19, 2016

## Part 5 - In God's Eyes

In Part 4, we looked at Thomas Merton's explanation of the false self. What follows is part of his description of the True Self. Merton wrote this shortly after his transformative experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville (now Muhammad Ali Boulevard). At this intersection, Merton says, "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness. . . ." [1] This is an experience of universal love, which I would define as recognizing one's self in the other.

A bit further on, Merton writes, "Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes." [2]

Merton--as well as anyone deserving of the title mystic--believes that *God is always recognizing God's Self in you* and cannot not love it. This is God's "steadfast love" (*hesed*) with humanity. That part of you has always loved God and always will. You must learn how to consciously abide there. As Meister Eckhart says, "The eye with which I see God is the same one with which God sees me. My eye and God's eye is one eye, and one sight, and one knowledge, and one love." [3]

There is a part of you that has always said *yes* to God, and that is the Anointed One, the Christ, the True Self that you already are. William McNamara called contemplative prayer "a long, loving look at the real." [4] Within prayer you quite simply *receive and return God's gaze of love*. God is recognizing God's Self in you, and you are recognizing yourself in God. Once the two-way mirror begins to reflect in both directions, it will gradually move you toward a universal seeing. Once accepted in yourself, the divine image is then seen everywhere else too--and just as gratuitously.

Merton continues:

If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. . . . I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other. But this cannot be seen, only believed and "understood" by a peculiar gift. [5]

This is the gift of a contemplative mind that has learned to "shed its thoughts about itself" (how the Desert Fathers and Mothers put it) and which enjoys a much broader, deeper, and more compassionate set of eyes.

**References:**

[1] Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Image Books: 1968), 156.

[2] *Ibid.*, 158.

[3] Johannes Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart's Sermons*, Sermon IV, "True Hearing," <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/eckhart/sermons.vii.html>, 32-33.

[4] William McNamara as quoted by Walter J. Burghardt, "Contemplation: A Long, Loving Look at the Real," *Church*, No. 5 (Winter 1989), 14-17.

[5] Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Image Books: 1968), 158.

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *True Self/ False Self* (Franciscan Media: 2003, 2013), disc 2 (CD).

## Part 6 - A Point of Nothingness

Here is Thomas Merton's description of the True Self as written following his "conversion" at Fourth and Walnut. It is so inspired, I want to quote it at length:

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak [God's] name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship [and daughtership]. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely . . . . I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere. [1]

Most people spend their entire lives living up to their false self, the mental self-images of who they think they are, instead of living in the primal "I" that is already good in God's eyes. But all I can "pay back" to God or others or myself is *who I really am*. This is what Merton is describing above. It's a place of utter simplicity. Perhaps we don't want to go back there because it is too simple and almost too natural. It feels utterly unadorned. There's nothing to congratulate myself for. I can't prove any worth, much less superiority. There I am naked and poor. After years of posturing and projecting, it will at first feel like nothing.

But when we are nothing, we are in a fine position to receive everything from God. As Merton says above, our point of nothingness is "the pure glory of God in us." If we look at the great religious traditions, we see they all use similar words to point in the same direction. The Franciscan word is "poverty." The Carmelite word is *nada* or "nothingness." The Buddhists speak of "emptiness." Jesus speaks of being "poor in spirit" in his very first beatitude.

The Bible as a whole prefers to talk in images, and the desert is a foundational one. The desert is where we are voluntarily under-stimulated--no feedback, no new data. Jesus says to go into the closet or the "inner room." That's where we stop living out of other people's response to us. We can then say, I am not who you think I am. Nor am I who you need me to be. I'm not even who I need myself to be. I must be "nothing" in order to be open to all of reality and new reality. Merton's reservoir of solitude and contemplation allowed him to see the gate of heaven everywhere, even on a common street corner.

A Zen master would call the True Self "the face we had before we were born." Paul would call it who you are "in Christ, hidden in God" (Colossians 3:3). It is who you are before having done anything right or anything wrong, who you are before having *thought* about who you are. Thinking creates the false self, the ego self, the insecure self. The God-given contemplative mind, on the other hand, recognizes the God Self, the Christ Self, the True Self of abundance and deep inner security. We start with mere seeing; we end up with recognizing.

## **References:**

[1] Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Image Books: 1968), 158.

## **Summary:**

Commit to seeing God's presence in someone or some creature this day. If appropriate, you might say, "The Christ in me sees the Christ in you." If it is uncomfortable to speak these words aloud, carry them in your heart. Bring this loving gaze and an inner stance of humility and recognition to all you encounter.