

## Vol. 3, no. 4 (Winter 2004-2005)

### The Rise of the Self

#### *Why the 'Individual' is Becoming Increasingly Paramount*

by Carolyn Swarr Stauffer  
Johannesburg, South Africa



**Kaleidoscope of Self:** The warm summer sunlight streams down on to bleached grass on which young people of every description recline. Skin of every hue is out on display as tattoos and the marks of body piercing repetitively punctuate this ornate pastiche of humanity. Visible nipple rings wink at onlookers as they take pride of place in this parade of self-styled individualism. The location is Zoo Lake, the gathering an African Jazz festival on a balmy mid-day in central Johannesburg. Here one finds an eclectic urban setting which welcomes a 'meeting space' for post-modern young people, a favourite haunt for many, and one that I frequented myself as an emerging adult.

But the trendy vibe that pervades this atmosphere is one that can be found in any number of other global locations, from Tokyo, to Rio, Tel Aviv, Soho or Georgetown on a Saturday night. Young people flood to these centres of emancipated expression in a carnival of public exhibition. In a world where the predictability of Baby Boomers has become redundant, the nascent 'Millennial Generation' leaves its mark, with their canvas being the space they inhabit most vociferously, their own bodies.

In fact, images of individual Self-creation abound in popular culture. As Madonna would remind us, we are always in the process of 're-inventing' ourselves, morphing into a variety of private and public personas that are sometimes as disjointed as the characters in Pulp Fiction. The seamless meta-narratives of the past no longer subsume or leverage very much influence on this experience of diverse personal realities. It appears to be all a matter of joining the hectic dance of random possibilities, with fewer (or possibly only newer) strictures attached.

**Opposites that Attract:** In today's world two distinct polarities leverage against each other, pulling us in opposite yet inextricably connected directions. The one pull is towards a seemingly monolithic (often Westernised) global culture, and the other pull is towards the resurgence of a more localised (often ethnic) identity. In Africa where our historic understanding of collective survival through community ('*letsema*') has been highly valued, it seems we are now trying to straddle the divide between splintered allegiances. Our comfort level has been critically injured because of our preoccupation with the growing cleavage between local identity and an urbanised global mass culture.

In fact, the rise of immersion in identity comes as a response to the need to create some viable form of anchorage in a post-modern world of many choices and few heroes. Nelson Mandela and Mother Theresa are rare public fixtures in a media marketplace where the David Beckhams of this world lose grace with as little as one too many strokes. The shelf-life of popular market attention has become as fleeting as a nanosecond, and this has intensified people's tendency to fixate on the one 'constant' – themselves.

**The Centrifugal Pull of ‘McWorld’:** Entrapment in global mass culture is characterised by seduction into the ‘McWorld’ reality, a whirlwind marketplace of popularised images and name-brand allegiances that seem very disjoined from a rural or village reality. While these pulls may seem like opposites, (traditional identity versus ‘McWorld’ fixation) they are really just two sides of the same coin, two dissimilar twins. At the end of the day, the pressure leveraged by these two forces pushes the millennial generation back into the arms of the almighty post modern arbitrator – Self. With urbanisation has come the disbanding of many close-knit traditional communities, and this has given added power to the commercialisation of the individual persona.

These counter-pulls on the modern psyche serve as the matrix for the dissolution of a cohesive sense of personal wholeness and the creation of multiple identities, which feature in a variety of segmentations of life. More appropriately this article should have been entitled the ‘Rise of the Selves.’ Many if not most contemporary movie and music stars create a myriad of identities and lead multiple lives; our now late South African music diva, Brenda Fassie, being no exception. In the words of Michael Foucault, the father of Post Modern philosophy, “Do not ask me who I am, and do not expect me to remain the same.” Not only do material objects present endless possibilities, but now people, having commodified themselves, are also objects of infinite and unknowable transformation.

Of course we could not have stopped here without mentioning our global celluloid mistress, the old dame Hollywood. No longer does she spin out grand meta-narratives of epic proportion, but in their place we now view sleek individual caricatures with silicon proportions. The ‘individual’ is now the entry point exhibition for the world’s *paramount* cinema of display.

**Liberation or Clear & Present Danger?** What is clear in Africa is that our existence here is being increasingly enshrouded by the cacophony of the all-pervasive influences of the global media, burgeoning new technologies, and the roar of urbanisation. Accompanying this deafening noise is a marked moot silence from the ties, (‘constriction’ or ‘safety’ depending on your vantage point) of family and community, the cornerstones that were previously believed to be society’s hallmarks of stability. From Shebeens in raunchy Rockville, to bars in Johannesburg’s upmarket Melrose Arch, the question is the same; what do we want to keep from the ‘old ways’, and what from the ‘new’ is worth exploring. The answer is well summarised in the caption of a gigantic signboard on the Old Potch road leading into Soweto. It reads: “Your rules. Remember, they are exactly that – Yours.”

Increasingly there are divergent new shapes and configurations of relationship that defy previously held definitions of the structure and texture of traditional social fabric. In the Post-modern age, the sometimes random and often juxtaposed placement of relationships within our lives lack the cohesion that signalled the ‘know-ability’ of previous eras. While for some this brings with it the threat of insecurity, for others it breathes the fresh air of the emancipation of Self.

**Tenuous Pillars:** In addition to family and community, other traditional institutions such as governance have also become partial casualties in the Self’s stampede towards personal ‘rights’ and individuation. In Africa as elsewhere, the issue of migrating individuals (more commonly referred to as the ‘refugee problem’) has visibly impacted assumptions about the ‘separateness’ of nations. We now see leveraged against National Rights the assertion of the primacy of universally held Individual Human Rights. Here again, in the political arena, the individual Self (and their rights) emerge as a formidable force to be reckoned with.

While South Africa in its democratic infancy, may still be cautiously holding on to a certain idealism about governance, many other countries world-wide have lost faith in the ability of the State to provide its citizens with basic commodities and security. Just ask our northern neighbours who live under the tyranny of ‘Uncle Bob’ Mugabe. George B. N. Ayittey refers to such tyrannies as ‘vampire States’, corrupt governments that suck the lifeblood out of their own citizenry. Such examples of patrimonialism have dealt a severe blow to our confidence in a collective ‘African Renaissance.’ At

the end of the day for many the rule still appears to be ‘each man for himself.’ What is debatable is whether that is the most sustainable paradigm to take into our future.

**A Market Fix?** Economic factors also leverage themselves as suitors to our ongoing dance with Self. The paradox is that while today’s vision of economic ‘progress’ beckons us to ever expanding arenas of exploration, convenience and profit, it does not successfully address the problem of personal discontent and alienation. We now intrinsically understand more about the web of interdependencies that envelop all of our human interactions, but this has not counteracted our ongoing affair with the inherent loneliness of navel-gazing. This discontinuity between progress and contentment brings with it the possibility of post-modern psychic ‘homelessness’ and what Carl Rogers refers to as psychological ‘narcissism’. This is the dilemma that acclaimed sociologist Peter Berger refers to when he says that the post-modern era has birthed an abundance of economic opportunities but a death of sacred meaning.

In his book *The Future of the Self*, Walter Truett Anderson asserts that today we are in the process of constructing and deconstructing the Modern Self. Our very core-most conceptions and paradigms are being altered, discarded or reshaped. Paired with Nietzsche’s comment that “God is dead,” comes the knowledge that the early twentieth century’s ‘Organisational Man’ (pardon the innate sexism here) is also dead and/or is being deconstructed. Stripped of such core personal identifiers as traditional conceptions of trade (life-long profession) and faith (traditional religious affiliation), the contemporary person now becomes more easily prey to the whims of market fixations. Anderson calls this trend the ‘New Economics of Identity.’

In a work in progress entitled *The Economy of Icons*, Ernest Sternberg puts it this way:

*“Firms now prosper less by making commodities than by endowing tradable products, whether material objects or human performances, with the heightened capacity to appeal – in short, by making icons. And consumers in turn make their way in this world through heightened iconographic receptivity.”*

**The New (Non) Absolutes:** Another interpretation of the forces at play in our ‘Global Village’ (an oxymoron perhaps?) posits that in fact there is neither a dearth of meaning nor a lessening of community allegiances. Rather there are just *new definitions* that have surfaced. New definitions of family (‘blended’ families and single-sex unions), new definitions of community (interest groups, cyber communities, resurgent homage to ethnic clustering) and with the death of the ‘nation-state’ has come the call for new definitions of ‘globally sustainable’ governance. It should therefore not surprise us, that there are also a myriad of ‘new’ definitions of the Self, each identity parading itself at leisure along the catwalks of life’s multiple corridors.

As they ply the boardwalks and fast begin to fill the boardrooms, the Millennial Generation celebrates this lack of equilibrium in life systems. Endorsing a sort of pre-modern view of Self, this generation relishes the fragmented, earthy and ‘pagan’ aspects of our psyche, celebrating these aspects as the norms in both the work as well as private spaces of our lives. Self-revelation which often courts an ethical relativism, is frequently idolised (sometimes at the expense of social connectedness). The popularity of Bill Clinton’s recently released book *My Life*, highlights the attraction of contemporary society to public displays of lavish introspection.

**Wild Cards:** It is at this pivotal juncture that we are reminded that the eyes of the crocodile, barely visible above water, are but a small part of the beast’s true mass. The story behind the story is that we often do not even understand the nature of the pilgrimage upon which we embark, and serendipitously we discover along the way spin-offs that we could never have anticipated. As renowned theologian and scholar G.K. Chesterton reminds us, “At least five times the ‘faith’ has to all appearances gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases, it was the dog that died.” So too, as the

structures of traditional institutions give way to paramount productions of Self, we may be surprised to see who ends up dead.

The nascent rise of the Self continues to confound us precisely because it reminds us of the incredibly strong and profound human need for identity. Yet Africa contributes the learning that human identity can most fully be realised in relation to others; “Motho, ke motho, ka batho” (I am who I am in light of other people). To balance our contemporary appetite for individuation we may do well to deepen our engagement with the old African adage that says,

*“If you want to go quickly –  
travel alone.  
But if you want to go far –  
travel with others.”*

The rise of the ‘Self’ could be for us a Pandora’s Box, it’s mixed blessings bestowing on us *both* a freeing as well as quelling force in our quest for human meaning and enlightenment.

---

*Carolyn Swarr Stauffer lives in Johannesburg, South Africa. She works for an international relief & development organisation and is a member of the local chapter of the WFS, the South African Futures Society. Stauffer, a futurist and freelance writer, is currently completing her PhD at the University of Pretoria. She has lived for a third of her life in the Middle East, for several years in North America, and for over a decade in Africa.*

She is contactable at: [c.stauffer@global.co.za](mailto:c.stauffer@global.co.za)

**POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM** (send comments to [forum@futuretakes.org](mailto:forum@futuretakes.org)):

- *What else is driving the opposing trends, globalization of culture and tribalization of sentiment?*
- *What will the next dominant culture be? For example, will it be group based or more individual based?*
- *What are the implications of the rise of the self to sense of community? To governance? To peace? To living lives of fulfilment and positive adventure as opposed to lives of maintenance?*