

Who Do You Say That You Are?

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Text from A Woman's Kabbalah, by Vivianne Crowley

Kabbalah is an ancient tradition within Judaism, a mystical philosophy that uses the tree of life to symbolize the laws of the Universe and the nature of Being. This meditation is an exercise to perceive Keter, limitless Light, which is at the crown of the tree. Keter is the realm where all is potential, and nothing is yet realized.

*I have a body, but I am not my body.
I have feelings, but I am not my feelings.
I have fears, but I am not my fears.
I have hopes, but I am not my hopes.
I have thoughts, but I am not my thoughts.
I have anxieties, but I am not my anxieties.
I have ideas, but I am not my ideas.
I have cravings, but I am not my cravings.
I have desires, but I am not my desires.
I am the One,
Who perceives all these things,
Yet is not these things.*

Hymn for Preparation, by Sarah Dan Jones

*When I breathe in, I'll breath in peace.
When I breathe out, I'll breath out love.*

This morning I begin with an unlikely topic, the grand opening of the American Girl super-store in Tyson's Corner, 23,000 square feet. Did you hear about it? Have you been? Ok, no one is admitting it! The doors opened on a recent Saturday morning in June with 700 already in line, some camping since 2:30 the day before. By Saturday afternoon, 6000 people had visited, close to the 10,000 expected for the entire weekend. Children were exploring the \$100 dolls, the many accessories, the six storybooks for each character, plus the doll hair-salon, tearoom, and area to decorate your doll's

t-shirt. Obviously something very attractive was being sold in this store, but I was one person who had no idea what that was. I wondered, what in the world made these American Girl dolls so alluring and exciting for young girls? I admit, I made some snarky comments about the whole thing!

After doing some research, I went from cynical commentator on marketing genius, to impressed fan. I think the 25-year company is on to something big, indicated in their tagline emblazoned on the front doors, "*Follow your inner star.*" When girls choose the American Girl character they want—be it the chill Aloha spirit of Kanani Akina, or the gutsy strength of Molly McIntire--they are choosing more than a doll. They get a full history, a certain personality, and most importantly, a dream of who they want to become. Girls follow their inner star, choosing a wider, more adventurous self, a story they can aspire to live into. Imagine what it might be like for a moment, even if you never did dolls, or think you are too old to care!

Your family insists on calling you Susie, but *you* know inside that you are destined to be more like the brave *Josefina Montoya*. Her American Girl history book tells you "*As a New Mexican girl growing up in 1824, Josefina is trying to preserve what is precious after her mother's passing. Josefina is overjoyed when her mother's sister, Tía Dolores, comes to live on the family rancho, but worries about her new ideas. Can Josefina welcome change and still remember the old ways?*" Suddenly you are living in a different universe, learning about loss, and finding inner strength to go on.

Or perhaps your teacher at school keeps calling you Ayisha, yet you have another vision of yourself, as resourceful *Addy Walker*. Her American Girl book explains, "*Addy's story begins as she and her mother are escaping slavery to find Addy's father and brother, who've been sold away. But their escape means leaving Addy's baby sister behind—her cries could cost them their lives. Once Addy takes her freedom, can she re-unite her family?*" You have some important life questions before you as you imagine your future.

Or, it could be that you really don't know many kids in your own farming neighborhood, so you spend time alone with your doll *Rebecca Rubin*. The American Girl storyline is this: "*As a girl growing*

up in New York City in 1914, Rebecca celebrates treasured traditions passed down through her Russian-Jewish family. With a little creativity, Rebecca learns how to stay true to her heart as she follows her dreams in the big city.” Now you picture yourself living far, far away from your small town, navigating the urban landscape with daring skill.

I know you are wondering by now why I ‘m going on about American Girl dolls! Ok, here’s the connection to our theme today. What struck me about the girls and their adventurous playmates is this: aren’t we are all imagining and living in to a future that we construct? There is the history of where we have been, and the story of where we want to go. American Girl simply markets a more obvious product, with a price tag on the experience of creating a role. In fact, the creator, Pleasant Rowland, sold her original concept and company to Mattel in 1998 for \$770 million dollars—a robust investment in the business of fashioning alter egos for 10-year-olds. Who we say we are comes from the same kind of concrete historical portrait as in the companion books for these dolls—our place of origin, time period, schools, jobs, family. How you tell your story, and whether you believe it’s fixed or mutable, changes everything.

Remember the text we heard from the Kabbalah meditation by Vivianne Crowley:

*I have ideas, but I am not my ideas...
I have desires, but I am not my desires.
I am the One,
Who perceives all these things,
Yet is not these things.*

This can be useful to remember as we explore an essential ontological question—*who do you say that you are?* Using quantum physics, we might say we are each first an energy field, vibrating molecules dancing, matter that is changing and replenishing every second. Connected to the breath, moved by the pump of the heart. Not just a constructed life role, like the doll Josefina Montoya. Not just the role of her little girl owner Suzie either... yes, I just made her up.

Maybe Suzie is known to her family as a red-haired 10-year-old girl in 4th grade in Maryland. Yet underneath that data, beneath the early personal history and the body of a child, we say there is also the spark of the divine, a still, small voice within that helps create the range of choices for our living.

We celebrate this in every child dedication here, each child born has the potential to be one more redeemer. Some call this spark the perceiver within, the witness, or the observer. She is the one who knows there are waves of emotion, but she is not the waves. Knows there are constant thoughts rippling through, but she is not only the thinking.

Suzie is helping to create her own life, using her doll Josefiina as role model for adventure and exploration. The possibilities are wide and open, even within the frame of particular life limitations we each experience. We know this is true for children, yet we sometimes forget it is also true for adults.

So, who do you say that you are? If you live in the Washington D.C. area, you might be forgiven for thinking that what you *are* is what you *do*. Perhaps even more than in most U.S. cities, “*Who do you say that you are?*” is answered with your alma mater or degree, professional title, or the name of your company or branch of government. Work becomes central and defining in D.C., a truly constructed role not that much different than the life of dolls Addy Walker or Rebecca Rubin. Each American Girl shapes her destiny in the way her story is told, and her young owner echoes that creation. Likewise, our own stories of what we do are not constant--they vary wildly. We tell one version to our mother, another to our best friend, and a third tale to classmates at our 30th high school reunion. You know we do! The story is constructed, and we recount it in various ways, shaping the content and tone for the particular listener.

Who do you say that you are? You might also answer with personal identity, coming from history as you choose to relate it. You are transgender, Caribbean-American, or the son of a military family that traveled the globe. Perhaps you are a survivor of trauma, a person living with cancer, a famous tap dancer, or a devout Muslim. You could be a proud New Yorker, a gay man leaving the rural South,

a cultured Lebanese immigrant, or a new Unitarian Universalist. Our multiple identities are subject to shapeshifting, for the way we understand who we are changes over time. We know people for whom the identity “recovering alcoholic” is a short chapter, and folks for whom it is the central book of living, the anchor of practice. What we describe creates our focus, just like the stories of American Girls Molly in World War II, or lively Kanani on the beach at Oahu.

Who do you say that you are? There is a concept in Hinduism, explored in the idea of *avidya*, meaning “without wisdom.” Patanjali wrote in the *Yoga Sutra: Avidya is to mistake the impermanent for the eternal...and the not-Self for the true Self. (YS II.5)* Sally Kempton, an international teacher of meditation, explains that *avidya* is not just ordinary ignorance, but a fundamental blindness about the nature of reality itself.

Avidya weaves through all aspects of our lives---the useful and not so useful strategies we have for survival, our many relationships and cultural prejudices, our intermittent clueless-ness and foggy perception about living. *Avidya* is not simply the lack of information, it is the inability to experience the real nature of life. In this philosophy, your *real* nature, or wisdom, is to remember your deep connection to others, to the Source, and to your true Self.

Sally Kempton writes that this is the linchpin of the whole illusory structure of *avidya*, the state of being without wisdom. You mistakenly identify only with your changing body, each passing mood, every random thought. You think that is *all* there is, completely missing that inside of you is something unchangeable, aware, connected to a larger universe.

Your true Self is vast and brilliant, Kempton says. Vast and brilliant. UUs call this the interdependent web of creation, or the light within that knows the ultimate Light. This is the Holy Spirit, or Buddha nature, or rooted in Earth herself—we are creatures, connected to other creatures in our biosphere and on our planet.

If the true Self is vast and brilliant, then a life story is yours to write. Of course you will face real obstacles, and challenges along the way...but like the American Girl history writer, you gather the

elements, develop the script, and move into the future you want to design. You decide if you want to ride the waves, along with those challenges. Or resist, vent and wail!

As the American Girl tagline says, we follow our inner stars, and choose the roles we yearn to perform. If it's all constructed, we might as well write a story large enough to live in. An adventurous story-- one where we are joyful, creative, and connected. One where we name ourselves as powerful, willing and able to offer deep service, available for passionate living. One where we thrive, instead of merely survive.

May you find this connection to the vast Universe that tells you who you really are. Not just your body or your emotions, your thinking or your history, but the great Light within. Amen.