

Negotiating our notions of self

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I just got back from a few days of speaking and preaching, so it feels good to settle into the kitchen table, surrounded by the colors I love, and sipping out of the coffee mug that fits my hand. I talked a lot in the last three days, so I'm enjoying the silence. I was speaking about church in a new generation-- something about which I'm passionate.

It occurred to me as I was talking about the situation in which many young adults find themselves, that we might need a new definition of selfhood. Right now, it seems that we define ourselves by our independence and our careers.

Sociologists like to think of people in their twenties as living in the "Odyssey years," or "extending their adolescence" because they don't have a marriage certificate or a mortgage. (Believe me, I could go on a full-on rant about this, but I will refrain.) It is as if becoming married and buying a house defines a person as an adult. It's as if we believe that each 18 year old ought to be completely self-sufficient and independent in order to be considered grown-up. As if personhood itself depends on autonomy.

But, our economy just doesn't work that way any longer--and it's not because a new generation wants to extend the glamorous life that they lived as sixteen year olds. It's because this is a time of high unemployment, high debt, a highly educated workforce, and low meaning jobs.

Why are they low meaning? Most young adults work in retail or the service industry. As our restaurants become franchised and our retail stores become swallowed up

by larger and larger chains, workers had a difficult time being creative.

I worked at [Crabtree and Evelyn](#) when my manager saw an empty table in the corner of our store. It was a rare window table. In all the other windows, we were given maps that told us exactly how to display each poster, soap bar and silk petal. So I dutifully set up the displays exactly as I was instructed, day after day. There were secret shoppers who came by the store to make sure that each flower was facing the precise position that someone in Connecticut prescribed.

But there was this table, in the corner of the store with no imposed map, and as my manager was leaving for her break, she looked at me and said, "Do something with this table, will you?"

There I was, a college graduate who worked in retail for years, giddy with excitement that I was actually going to be able to create a window display *from scratch*. I went nuts. I used every scrap of material that I could. I gave it a three-tiered, rippling effect, that poured out on the floor. At the end, I smiled at the creation that could easily be the cover of a *Southern Living* magazine.

My manager came back from her break, looked at it, stared at me, sipped her Diet Coke, and asked, "Why didn't you tell me that you could do that?"

I shrugged, "I never had the chance."

Our store was like most franchise shops--every single bit of creativity was squeezed out of the job. We were cogs in the machine. We put the soap where it belonged. If there was an October wedding expo going on in the mall, but someone at corporate dictated that it our windows ought to be dressed up for Halloween, then our store would be wearing orange and black in the midst of the white calla lilies. There was no deviation. There just isn't much creativity and

meaning in jobs when corporations take bright talented people and tell them where each petal should land, in the name of quality control.

Most

young adults work retail, which usually means that they're not at a mom and pop shop that allows them to decide what would be on each end cap or how to construct the displays, but they're told exactly where to put what. There's no creativity. Which, as people who have studied [*The Courage to Be*](#) can attest, an inability to create can contribute to an anxious sense of meaninglessness.

Our

jobs used to define us. Even in church, we go up to people in the coffee hour and by way of introduction, we ask, "So, what do you do for a living?" Or when a new person joins the church, we give the congregation a quick rundown of his or her vitae. It's the easiest thing to talk about, and it's the way we have been identifying people.

But

in this new time, when people might not have jobs, or they don't want to be defined by their cog-in-a-machine employment situation, how are congregations speaking into people's lives? How are we throwing off the notions of our success defining us? How are we recognizing the value, dignity, and worth of people who may not be able to live independently?

Can

we, as Christians, who believe that we are human because we are created by God, in the image of God, speak out against this paltry understanding of selfhood that pervades our society? Can we begin to talk about a new notion of self? How would you define selfhood, in light of our rich theology *and* our emerging economic situation?