

## ENGLISH: ENCOUNTERING CONFLICT

**“We cannot achieve a strong sense of identity unless we also have a strong sense of belonging outside ourselves.”**

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In order for an individual to achieve a strong sense of personal identity, it is essential to have a strong sense of belonging outside themselves. Each person is simply a “constant in a world of variables”, with our identities constantly being shaped by the different communities we belong to. Family and cultural backgrounds have a significant impact on a person’s sense of self from birth. School, work and other social groups reinforce this development as we continue to grow and mature. Despite this, it is possible for a person to lose a part of their identity through belonging, if they choose to belong for all the wrong reasons.

The first group we belong to, the family, has more influence than any other group in shaping our identity. Living as a part of a family group, and being known as a “Smith”, “Jones” or “Nguyen”, gives a person a great sense of who they are, and who they want to become in the future. Famous youngsters like Bindi Irwin (daughter of ‘The Crocodile Hunter’ Steve Irwin) and Peaches Geldof (daughter of music legend Sir Bob Geldof), are heavily defined by their family backgrounds, both by surname and by status. The countries and communities that we are raised in and live in are helpful in giving an individual the opportunity to form a sense of national identity and pride, as a result of adopting certain values and traditions. Australia is widely known for its common love of sport, especially AFL football. At the beginning of each new season, football fans flock stadiums all across the country “wrapped in club colours”, ready to barrack for their favourite teams. Supporters group together, sharing their love of the “Tigers”, the “Saints” or the “Demons”. Something as simple as attending a sporting match can easily give a person a sense of self, by allowing them to express their interests with those that share them. In the film “Witness”, starring Harrison Ford, Rachel Lapp and John Book are both identified by their social and cultural backgrounds- Rachel as a young Amish woman, and John as a New York city police officer. Their lives are a complete reflection of the communities they belong to and where they have lived all their lives. Despite developing strong romantic feelings for one another, the couple separate, knowing that John was destined to go “back to his world, where he belong(ed).” It stands to reason then that a person’s identity is shaped by the groups that they belong to from the very beginning, and until the very end.

As a person grows and develops, their identities continue to change, as they become involved in various school, work and social communities. In just about every high school, groups known as “cliques” are extremely effective in shaping the identities of the student population. These groups, who associate exclusively with one another based on appearance and interests, can help a person discover where they belong, and in doing so, explore their own identity. The choices that students are given in their final school years regarding their future careers, encourages them to consider their passions and what they are interested in. Later on in life, one’s involvement in a particular occupation says much about a person’s skills, level of enthusiasm and determination. John Book, in his job as a police officer, lived his life ‘by the book’, upholding his beliefs both in and out of work.

Finding friends and other social groups to associate with are also particularly important in establishing one’s identity. By forming friendships, people can discover truths about themselves by sharing themselves with another person. Although having friends can bring out the best and the worst in others, the unique influence that they bring to a person’s life is priceless. In “Will and Grace”, Will Truman’s relationship with his best friend Grace, allowed him to be true to himself, expressing his homosexuality proudly and without fear. As we continue to live our lives, we also continue to discover things about ourselves we never knew possible. Belonging to many different groups in life can help us to find a exciting sense of self that is always changing and developing.

Although belonging is an important factor in determining one’s identity, if a person chooses to belong for the wrong reasons, it is possible to lose their individuality and sense of self somewhat. In this day and age, we all believe that it is absolutely necessary to ‘fit in’ wherever possible. In the

movie “Mean Girls”, starring Lindsay Lohan, Cady Heron sacrifices her old identity in order to fit in with the ‘popular’ group at her new school, regardless of the personal consequences. The media, along with popular beliefs and thinking, have changed the way that people think about belonging. Once, people chose to belong to where they fit in, in groups that suited them. Now, it seems that people only aim to be ‘popular’, neglecting their own values and identity. Maybe we all suspect that “something’s sure to spoil the cloudless day”, and conform to society’s expectations in fear of not belonging. The lack of understanding that some people have about themselves and the world around them can encourage false perceptions of the value of belonging. In “Witness”, John Book was forced to enter into a world he knew nothing about, changing his clothes to conceal his real identity. He simply could not understand the Amish ways, such as the belief that “buttons and proud and vain, not plain”. It is because of this similar lack of understanding in society today that people often try to belong in places they should not. If one does not treasure their ‘inner self’, and establish a sense of belonging where it is not suitable for them, this can result in a loss of identity.

It is true that we cannot achieve a strong sense of identity unless we also have a strong sense of belonging outside ourselves. Being a part of a family and the communities in which one lives can immediately give a person a sense of self and belonging. As life progresses, we continue to find belonging, as our identities change and develop. However, if people are not true to themselves, and choose to belong for the wrong reasons, this can lead to their identity becoming lost.