

## Identity by Association

What would you say if someone asked posed the question: “Who are you?” I would say, I am Bethany, a Christian, a Purdue Student, a member of Purdue Musical Organizations, John and Marilyn’s daughter, Andy and Jeremy’s sister, Kent’s girlfriend, Brenda’s roommate, or Prof. Blakesley’s student. What if the person posing the question challenges: “I didn’t ask what/who you are associated with...I want to know *who you are*.” I think I saw something like this in a movie once, but I can’t remember where, but I’m not sure that I could answer this question; I identify myself by what makes up my, and most people do. I could try to say, “I’m quiet, I’m outgoing, I’m smart, I’m flighty, I like long walks on the beach, I have blonde hair...” That same person might still say, “Don’t describe yourself, tell me *who you are*.”

Burke referred to “the sources of our being” (71), which he calls *piety*. Piety, which I contend is related to identity, gives people a sense of how things should be. Piety provides us with source codes to use to understand life and gives order to the universe, whether in truth or fabrication. If one violates his “sources of being,” he must make amends, cleansing himself. If I go against the codes defined by my relationship with God, I must confess my sins to be cleansed. If I misbehave as a daughter, I must make amends by being grounded, or cutting up credit cards, or something of that nature (depends on the sin). Keeping relationships is important enough to my sense of identity that I will pay penance if that is what I have to do to remain pious. We need to have a rhetorical sense of relationships to explain to ourselves who we are; if we are cut off from our “source of being” (Mom, friend, boyfriend), we lose a way in which we can communicate our identity.

In the movie *Toy Story 2*, Woody could see the word “Andy” on his boot, and that written word communicated that Andy was his source of being. He could identify himself by saying “I am Andy’s toy.” When those letters are painted over and his boot is completely brown, his identity changes: he is now a collector’s item, intended to museum use, an action figure from an old television show. Stinky Pete the Prospector never knew any identity but this latter one; minted in a box, never played with, never forming a relationship with a child, his only source of being was the television show. Separated from any personal relationships, he is cold and does not understand that he is a toy meant to be loved and played with. He is much like Buzz, not understanding that his laser is just a red light bulb. At the end of them film, Woody cleanses himself by scraping the paint off his boot to reveal the word “Andy,” becoming pious once again and returning to his source of being, reestablishing a relationship that names his identity.

Most people are motivated by a desire to “fit in.” Burke wrote: “Piety, as the yearning to conform with the ‘sources of one’s being,’ is shown to be a much more extensive motive than it I usually thought to be. Conversely, even the most conscientious of new doctrines necessarily contains an element of impiety, with a corresponding sense of guilt” (69). Caught between two “sources of being,” Woody had difficulty fitting in. He felt guilt if he turned his back on Andy, who had been his source of being, his primary identifier for longer than he could apparently remember; however, he also felt guilt by not joining the collection of Woody’s Round-up memorabilia. His facial expressions betray his feelings when he sees how his resistance to conform hurts Jessie’s feelings. Woody is convinced to conform by the thought that his sense of being named “Andy” would no longer want him: 1. because Woody is broken and 2. because Andy is growing up and is reforming his own identity away from the realm of his toys; Andy’s source of being is in the process of changing as well, and the toys realize that. However, Woody cleanses himself, becomes pious again, and when reminded that his source of being will soon no longer identify with him, Woody proclaims (in paraphrase): Andy is growing up, and I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Exonerated of guilt, Woody can return to his relationship with Andy (and with the other toys). Prospector Pete, however, loses his identity and is forced to restructure (we assume, we don’t actually see) when he is sent to live with a little girl to finally be a child’s play-thing.

Humans are loyal beings, where their sources of being are concerned. As a Boilermaker, I feel guilty for wearing red. If I were a militant Muslim, I might cleanse myself by participating in a suicide mission, thus cementing my identity by proving my loyalty to Allah, the source of being. Identity is a strange and mutable thing, in constant motion, and without a dichotomy of true and false, right and wrong.