



Sit. Feast on your life.

Feast on Your Life: A New Year's Reflection

By Debra Loftus, Ph.D.

*The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other's
welcome,
and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who
was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you*

*all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.*

~Derek Walcott

The Scene.

Sometimes, the perfect poem finds you. Derek Walcott's searingly beautiful poem "Love after Love" found me recently. And inspired me to sit and write a first blog for 2018.

Last December, I published [a year-end reflection](#) that contained tools to use in thinking over the past year and forward into the new one. This holiday season, as many of us headed out on the roads and into busy airports for reunions with loved ones who awaited us on the other end of our travels, I was struck by the image of homecoming, a *coming home*, to self - to that which is most fundamental, to that which requires no physical travel, yet possibly demands the most of us in the process of getting there. And intrigued by the possibility of what we may find once we get there.

But that imagined journey begs a few fundamental questions: what is a self? And how does one come home to it?

Coming Home to Self.

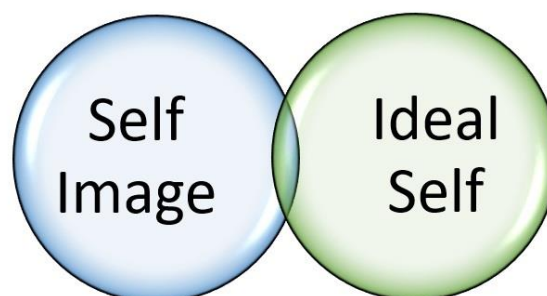
I am aware that I tread on sacred ground. Countless philosophers, psychologists, and mystics have delved into the questions posed above. Few have arrived at a completely satisfactory set of answers. Perhaps we aren't meant to. My interest here is in providing a glimpse into a few meaningful aspects of this topic, followed by a guided reflection to ease you into the new year.

To start, I'll offer a working definition of self: *one's essential being; that which makes each of us unique from another.* Further, for a

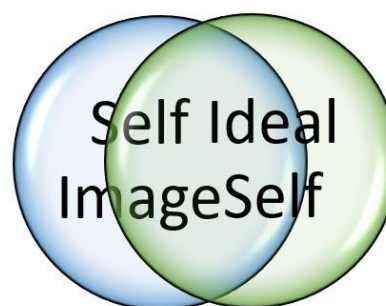
working model of that which comprises an individual's self, I'd like to borrow from Carl Roger's model of the three aspects of self:

- **Self-Image:** the view you have of yourself
- **Ideal Self:** who you aspire to be
- **Self-Worth:** the sense of self value or self-esteem you possess.

The amount of overlap between your self-image and ideal self usually determines the degree of inner congruence you experience: the larger the shared space, the more congruence you feel.



Incongruence



Congruence

And for most of us, the more congruence we feel, the greater our sense of self-worth.

The Inquiry.

So how do you come home to self? Again, many thinkers I deeply respect have trod on this ground, so if you seek a deep experience of this sort, I'd recommend reading the work of Carl Jung, William James, or Ken Wilber (to name just a few). I offer the following process as a simple way to help you on that journey, should you be seeking a way to end or start your year with a useful exercise:

Self-Image. Operative Question: *Who am I?*

This question seems very basic. Yet, its potency is unleashed with thoughtful usage.

A friend of mine sometimes uses the following exercise as an icebreaker with teams:

- *Assemble 8-10 blank index cards (or follow this [link](#) for a worksheet to use).*
- *Write down on each card a different answer to this question: "Who am I?"*
- *Then stack your cards by importance to your sense of who you are, with those cards that are most central to who you are at the bottom, those cards that are less central to who you are at the top.*

What did you discover as you did this? How did it feel to go through this exercise?

You may find that your answers can be arranged into the following categories:

physical attributes, social roles, personality traits and existential statements. As you do that additional categorizing, what do you notice? Do you seem to define yourself more by your physical attributes, for instance?

Additionally, it can be a fascinating variant on this question to ask a close friend or family member to take a second stack of blank index cards and answer the question from their perspective on you. And then compare your stacks in terms of both the descriptions and rankings.

Ideal Self. Operative Question: *What/who do I aspire to be?*

To answer this question, you may simply take a blank sheet of paper and begin listing qualities you'd like to possess, to call your own. Or alternatively, make a second pass at the card sort activity from the perspective of the future self you aspire to be:

- *An opening visualization may help. To do that, sit in a comfortable position, close your eyes and focus on your breathing for a minute. Concentrate on inhaling for a count of four, holding the breath for a count of seven, and exhaling for a count of 8. Repeat this sequence at least 10 times.*
- *With your eyes still closed, visualize a meaningful time frame in the future (2, 5 or 10 years...or perhaps even toward the end of your life). Note: it may help to watch a mental image of a calendar slowly flip from*

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How do you feel about yourself after going through this activity? How similar is that to how you tend to feel about yourself every day?

one year to the next until you arrive at the future point you are interested in using.

- *Next, picture your ideal self in the future frame, who you wish you will have become by then. Invite that self forward in your mind's eye/imagination. Notice how you look, the way in which you carry yourself. Follow this future self as he/she goes about the activities and relationships that are most meaningful to him/her. How would you describe him/her? Quietly sit and be an observer into this future version of yourself.*
- *Now slowly return to a focus on your breathing. Notice the feeling of the ground under your feet and the seat against your body. When you are ready, open your eyes.*
- *Complete the same card writing activity you just conducted for your self-image but this time, describe your ideal future self. What qualities or descriptors would you use to characterize yourself at this future point? Write a different descriptor or element on each card and then rank them, most to least central to who you are in this future [for a tool to help with the self-image and ideal-self card sorts, go here]*

What did you discover as you completed this second activity? How did it feel to go through this exercise? What is easy or difficult to picture about your desired future self?

Self-Worth. Operative Question: *How do I feel about myself?*

Now, compare the two stacks of cards (or descriptors if you didn't do the card sort a second time). What is the degree of congruence between the way you described who you are (your self-image) and who you aspire to be (your ideal self)?

Did you make any adjustments as you compared the contents of the exercises? For example, did you realize you'd been unfairly critical of yourself in the self-image activity? Or perhaps you were surprised by one or more of the qualities that emerged to describe your future self?

Last, how do you feel about yourself after going through this activity? How similar is that to how you tend to feel about yourself every day?

Sit. Feast on Your Life.

It may seem as if the goal of this inquiry is to strive for high congruence, a high degree of overlap between your self-image and ideal self.

It's not.

It's actually about the value of greeting our self, that beloved stranger. Walking through

the door of self-reflection and gazing intently in our inner mirror at who we are and who we aspire to be. Nourishing ourselves on the experience – whatever the degree of congruence may be at any point in time. And then, paradoxically, lovingly letting go of the results of that self-reflection.

Freeing our sense of self-worth from its dependencies.

As Walcott's poem describes, the final work in coming home to self is to "*peel your own*

image from the mirror." We separate our sense of self-worth from whatever we see in that mirror.

Whatever that image may be, good or bad, we let it go. Then we sit. We sit and feast on our life.

Happy New Year, everyone. May you find a time and a space amidst the busyness of resuming your day-to-day lives to feast.



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