

The False-Self-Actualization Syndrome

Case Study

The Case

Larry Burt was an overweight forty-three-year-old financial controller for a candy manufacturer who was brought to the Self-Realization, Actualization, Detonation Center in a state of extreme shock and depression.

It appeared that he had looked into the mirror that morning and felt he had come to a complete understanding of who he was; the knowledge had disappointed him.

Once at our Center, he wept copiously and without pause for three straight days. He was given sedatives and laxatives and told bedtime stories in funny voices but nothing seemed to help. At the beginning of the fourth day, I was consulted and was immediately intrigued at the intensity of the crying jag.

"And did you apply the laxatives?" I asked.

"All four varieties."

I was incredulous. "And no results?"

"He's white as a sheet, drinks a lot of liquids and is heard to whimper *Mama mia* while looking

towards heaven. Other than that, no results."

I asked to see this patient. I marched to Intensive Care, Ward Three, Room Eight, Enter at Own Risk, Third Bed Along, and there he was, Larry Burt.

In appearance, he was unexceptional: balding, plump, a certain bureaucratic roundness to the shoulders. He sobbed, blubbered and moaned, without shame or moderation.

"What is the meaning of this!" I snapped. I have found, in extreme cases of what I term *Self-Knowledge Mania*, that an authoritarian, not to say fascistic intonation, affects wonders. Yet the patient merely raised his head, sniveled, muttered *Mama mia* plaintively, and continued weeping. When I insisted, "What is the meaning of this, sir!" he turned away, retreating in a crouch to a dusty corner¹ in despair.

I pursued him with my questioning, in order to break the spell, bring him around, watch him squirm.

"I have been informed, Mr. Burt, that you have looked into the mirror. Correct?"

He nodded, vaguely. This was the first sign of communication with the outside world he had made in four days.

"And when you looked in the mirror, who exactly did you expect to see?"

He whimpered. He shivered. "My grandfather," he responded hoarsely, "on my mother's side."

"And you didn't see him?"

"No. And I should have known better. He's been dead for years."

"Then who did you see?"

At this, he began to tremble and weep.

"Control yourself and answer my question," I commanded with an impatient stomp of my foot, then added, to increase his trust, "I'm a doctor."

He seemed to shrink further into the dusty corner, sputtering, drooling, emitting unhealthy sounds. His answer came slowly. "*Mm...mm...me ... oh God!*" Larry Burt almost screamed. "*I expected to see me!*"

"And ...?"

And then poured forth a tortured, sob-filled jumble of words from which I could piece together Larry Burt's amazing story of tragic proportions. Here it is, in his own words.

¹ It is our longstanding policy to maintain several dusty corners conveniently located throughout the Center's premises, allowing patients who feel a sudden emotional collapse coming on to find quick refuge and solace in these murky sanctuaries.

Larry Burt's Own Words

Whenever I have asked myself Who I Am?, I've always fallen asleep. I guess whoever I am is a pretty boring person.

My first memory of this happening was when I was a baby and began to speak. Relatives came over and my mother would sit me in the middle of the room and ask me to say my name in front of everybody. She was proud, I guess, like any mother. She would lean over me, her face like a big moon, and say, "Tell everybody your name, honey. Tell the nice people." I gurgled, I replied, "Larry Burt." And I was right, up to a point. Everyone clapped politely, making approving comments to one another. But when my mother asked me, "And who is that, my little sweetie?" I collapsed, plopped right over on the rug like a limp rag doll. They thought it was epilepsy. They brought in doctors, specialists. They pricked and probed. Some of it hurt, some of it I started to enjoy, but they couldn't find a single thing wrong with me, except when asked who I was, I fell asleep.

From then on, my family avoided asking me any awkward questions concerning my identity or selfhood or what I felt like having for supper. I avoided myself, too. I hurried past mirrors, didn't stay too long alone in the bathroom, yet every time I bent down to tie my shoe, I *knew* whose foot was *really* in that shoe. I don't think anyone can possibly realize what agony I was going through. I was continually running away from myself; yet even after sprinting ten city blocks, *I'd still be there*.

So one day, I came to a compromise with me. In place of self-knowledge, I'd study to become an accountant. I have always worked hard throughout my life, kept to myself, said *Yes* whenever I could to anyone who addressed me, and have been frugal by most people's standards. But dear God, my inner soul has always been so barren. I've always had this sneaky feeling that there was not much of me to know. Maybe one, two modifiers at most.

Then, after many, many years, when I thought I'd forgotten all this, forgot about who I wasn't, really just forgot, I carelessly glanced into the mirror, and that's something I *never, ever do*. Did I half-hope to see my grandfather, on my mother's side, whom I have always admired, and that he would be who I was and offer me some good advice? But he wasn't in the mirror. There was just me, whoever that was. At that instant I had a flash of horrible clarity. It was more intense than sex. Well, almost. I saw who I was. I *knew* who I was.

(Larry Burt halted for some moments to control himself, to wipe away a tear as well as some off-color liquids leaking from his nose.)

"But it took such a short time for me to *know* who I was. I mean, within two seconds, I *knew*, positively, absolutely knew, who I was. Only two seconds worth! I had read all those wonderful things in books about the *Self*, where it says it takes some people *years* to know themselves. But me? *A couple of seconds*. I was crushed. The next thing I knew after seeing myself in the mirror, I had blacked out and then woke up here. Honestly, I don't know if anyone can help me now. Really.

Curing Larry Burt

Larry Burt's problem was not so much psychological as fundamental. We at the Center call this the *False-Self-Actualization Syndrome*. Simplified for popular consumption, this syndrome can be explained it thusly:

Just as some women can work themselves into a state of Hysterical Pregnancy that exhibits all the outward, biological signs of real pregnancy where none exists, so may a common form of False-Self-Actualization occur in some susceptible minds. While in this state, the individual exhibits all the outward manifestations of one who has just crossed the border into deep self-knowledge, with all its attendant consequences of euphoria followed by mild disappointment.

With this analysis made, Larry Burt was kept under strict supervision at the Center for five months and given a unique set of daily treatments to reveal to him his fundamental error and how to correct it.² In the end, running out of tears and drugged to the gills, Larry Burt realized his self-defeating blunder. We successfully erased from his memory any and all thoughts of who he thought he once was. When he finally smiled in his third month of captivity, and we knew a breakthrough had occurred.

Answering The Question

Before his release, as a final test, Larry Burt was given a mirror to look into. Gulping, hesitating, flocked by medical students with notebooks, he looked into a mirror. His face at first registered shock, then surprise, then a great big smile.

"What do you see, Mr. Burt?"

He looked up at me, tears welling up in his eyes. "My old Granddad," he replied.

He was subjected to a last, pointed question to discover his capacity to deal with the outside world.³

"*Who are you?*"

He answered without hesitation, "I am Larry Burt, a man like any other. Willing to admit his mistakes. A man who does not yet truly know himself, but who is still willing to give it another try. I am a man who wishes to contribute to society and his community, and only to look for himself in his spare time with the appropriate medication."

The fact that Larry Burt was able to answer the simple question "Who are you" without falling asleep attested to his current mental health, and he was released into society at large.

² The techniques utilized in this process are not yet perfected, and, since it remains in its experimental stages, it must be withheld from public and professional scrutiny at this time. However, a paper is in preparation for delivery at next year's International Psychologists Convention in Zurich, Switzerland, with the working title, *Retrograde Self-Knowledge, or, Who You Are May Not Be Who You Think You Are, a study of the misapplication of identity in limited sensory organs, such as the brains of Contented Housewives or Corporate Middle Management.*

³ In conformance with State Law.

Coda

Larry Burt's cure was of an unfortunate short duration. Some weeks later, it appears he suffered a severe relapse, and it was last reported that he was asking people along Highway 101 in California whether or not they had seen Larry Burt lately, and if so, what did he look like?