

IS YOUR EGO A BACKSEAT DRIVER?

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If your ego is a backseat driver in your life, then you know how annoying that can be. You will also know only too well how difficult it is to get anywhere in life when the ego is constantly looking over your shoulder, providing critical commentary about every move you make and telling you where to go and why. As frustrating as that is, things could be worse. If you suddenly found *yourself* in the back seat and your ego behind the wheel, then who knows where you might end up in life! And because your ego doesn't read maps and doesn't get along with that digital voice in your car's navigation system, then you're pretty much in a jam. The only thing that could make your situation worse is getting caught in a traffic jam as well. Or having to suffer through more out of tune sing-alongs with that really bad music your ego selects on the car radio.

This is what happens when we step out of the driver's seat and hand over control of our automobile to our ego: we lose our autonomy to our ego. *We* become the backseat driver - and then we become that critical voice at the back of our minds: judging, condemning, blaming and assigning guilt to anyone and anything that crosses our path. The road of life is littered with roadkill from thoughtless drivers who weren't paying attention to anything except the music on their car radio - really bad music when our ego is behind the wheel. But by saying that, who do we become? Who's the critic now?

Worse than a traffic jam, this is a double bind situation. You criticize your ego for being critical - and then you do the same as your ego. You judge your ego for being judgmental - and then you become judgmental, just like your ego. You decide to take the high road, the positive route in some situation, because you don't want to be like your ego, who takes the low road of the negative. You think that you're heaven-sent for going this way, while your ego is hell-bent on getting its way. And what do you become by thinking like this? Arrogant, smug, self-satisfied and self-righteous. These are pretty damning words. But there's nothing pretty about this, because this is precisely how *the ego* talks.

Confused? If so, then at least be clear about one thing: you don't want to live in a double bind any more than you want to be stuck in a traffic jam. Especially not when it's your ego behind the wheel. (With that music! Which maybe now you're trying to think differently about). And when the only thing worse than the smog outside is the smug attitude inside. What you want is to be behind the wheel and determine your own choices in life, freely and without force or compulsion from either external or internal influences. And most of all: with no interference from a backseat driver - your own ego in this case.

How did things get this way? Why is there so much confusion about who's in control, who's the one deciding where we go to in life, how we get there and whether our lives are a bad road movie, an ill-fated joyride or a joyous journey of self-discovery and personal transformation? Why are there so many collisions and so much roadkill along the way?

You don't have to look far to find the answer to that question. Just go to your kids' room and take a look at what kind of video games they're playing. Or maybe you yourself grew up playing games like the following one, called "Eat My Dust", on your PlayStation or computer. The following description is from the supplier's website:

"Welcome to Eat My Dust®! Feel the need for speed? Ready to thrash the competition? Park your ego behind the wheel for pulse-pounding, 3D road racing like you've never experienced before. Outrageous cars, crazy characters, wicked driving conditions, and low-down dirty tricks are the rules of the road. So gear up and get ready to outsmart your opponent in a mind-blowing road race. What are you waiting for? Get out there and BLOW SOMETHING UP!"

Can it get any clearer than this? Maybe it's all part of the fun of being a kid and being able to exert some control over what is often experienced as a hostile or overly competitive environment at home or in school. But what happens when these kids grow up and hit the *real* roads of life? Watch out, because you've got trouble coming your way! If the people you encounter - or crash into, as the case may be - during your journey through life have been encouraged to "park your ego behind the wheel", "thrash the competition", "outsmart your opponent" etc., because "low-down dirty tricks are the rules of the road", then *you* could very easily become someone else's roadkill. Even worse: *your own ego* might be parked behind the wheel - and you're out to blow something up!

So what do we do, how can we experience a healthy development of the ego during childhood and yet at the same time enjoy being a kid and make other kids 'eat our dust' etc., without harm to ourselves or others later in life? That depends upon what your parents or primary caregivers, teachers and other influential figures taught you about life, about the 'rules of the road' when you're out there trying to get somewhere in life. If your early-life role models were victims of their own or someone else's ego, unable to develop what is called 'the Witness' or 'Witness Consciousness', then you may have been in the very unfortunate position of being their roadkill. Alternatively, you may have found yourself having to make the very unfortunate choice of running over them yourself, in order to avoid becoming a victim like they were.

Bad choices, like that bad music our ego is fond of playing when it hijacks our autonomy and gets behind the wheel, don't get us very far in life. We end up spinning our wheels, driving into a ditch or picking up hitchhikers who turn what might already be a bad road movie into a very scary movie - and no one is laughing about this.

What is 'the Witness'? People often associate this term with something completely different or a very different type of movie: the whodunit "Witness for the Prosecution", based on the Agatha Christie thriller. This is a bad choice of associations perhaps, but if you're going down that road you might as well find out what it has to offer you. A witness for the prosecution is someone who is called to testify in front of a court by the prosecutor, as opposed to the defendant. This witness has testimony that is favourable to the prosecution and not the defendant, just as a witness for the defendant has testimony that is favourable to the defendant and not the prosecution.

If we think of the ego as something different from our true self - which in fact it is - then the kind of problems that ensue from mistaking one for the other can be as harrowing and bone-chilling as any Agatha Christie novel. In this case, it's a case of *mistaken identity*, the kind of plot line that puts most people on the edge of their seats. (For more on this, see the article "ME, MYSELF AND I: a Case of Mistaken Identity" by Raymond Huisman.)

If you believe that you're nothing but your ego or that there's nothing else to choose between, then life might be either a road movie, a scary movie or a murder mystery like "Witness for the Prosecution", in which you are accused of a crime you did not commit - or did you? (Watch the film if you haven't already - don't want to spoil the ending for you.) Living unaware of your real identity or not knowing that there is any such thing as a false self and a true self, is paramount to inviting disaster into your life. And if you think that this kind of talk is fear-mongering or meaningless psychobabble, think again - but this time with your intuitive *right brain* and not your rational left brain. Creativity and intuition help you get it right in life; analysis and rationality get you into trouble if you don't know how to balance things out. (Your left brain is great, however, at explaining *why* things got as bad as they did!).

So what is 'the Witness', if not a courtroom figure? The Witness is that part of us that 'sees all'. It is the observer function within ourselves, and is distinct and separate from our ego. It is, put simply, our ability to *observe* experience without becoming the experience itself. It is the non-attached and non-judgmental observation of experience. Is this definition too 'out-there' for you? Well, that's actually how some people sense their own Witness. It's not tied in with or caught up in the direct experience of something. It's separate from this, like reading a story written in the third person (he, she) rather than the first person (I, we).

What's good about this? For starters, it helps you to make *good choices* in life - conscious, well-considered ones - instead of bad choices, which are usually unconscious and happen by default, through lack of awareness of other options. When a person is too much *in* the experience itself, for example the emotional state of sadness, anger or apprehension, then they automatically *identify* with that. They say "I'm sad", "I'm angry", "I'm afraid" or whatever the case may be, because that is their experience.

That's good insofar as it helps someone to understand what they're feeling and what brought this about. But it becomes severely limiting, often debilitating, when the person reduces their whole field of awareness to just one particular emotion or the state they experience as a result of this. They lose the awareness of who they truly are, that they are *more* than what they are experiencing at that moment, and *become* whatever it is they're identifying with. This is... *a case of mistaken identity*. And it gets people into serious trouble in life.

But don't you *want* to fully experience emotions, both the highs and the lows, so that you're not some cardboard figure or hollow person, devoid of any feelings? How will you know you're alive otherwise, except by checking your pulse every few seconds? Of course you want to experience the richness of your feelings and to paint your world with both the brightest and the darkest hues. This is what gives life colour, depth and intensity.

But where do you draw the line between experiencing positive and negative emotions? Do you first have to descend into hell before realizing that you took a wrong detour a couple of miles back, when what you were looking for was the way to heaven? If you were distracted by the music playing on the car radio, that really bad music, maybe you had become your ego without even realizing it. Maybe you *should* have listened to the backseat driver in this case. Because that voice at the back of your mind was the voice of your *true self*. And the only question it was asking was: "Why go to hell when you can go to heaven?"

You have a choice - you always do, even though it may not seem so when you're barreling down the highway with such speed that there's no time to read the signs. And you don't in fact actually need to worry about who's behind the wheel, your ego or you, as long as you're listening to the voice of your true self.

Easier said than done? Not if you learn to cultivate an awareness of the Witness in yourself. This will lead to the so-called 'Witness Consciousness', a state of mind that is separate from the endless chatter of the ego, the negative self-talk that doesn't get you anywhere except straight to hell. If you're going to identify with something in yourself - and it's human nature to do so - then start identifying with the Witness. This will make it so much easier to hear the voice of your true self. And the only question it will ask you is: "Why listen to your ego when you can listen to me?"

Just a word of warning, however, before you get behind the wheel of your car and drive off into the sunset, thinking that things will be easygoing from here on. If you start to worry about who's in control behind the wheel, then remember this: it's better to have a backseat driver you can keep an eye on in your rear-view mirror, than a part of you that vanishes from sight altogether. All kinds of havoc can be wrecked, the worst of which being that your automobile gets wrecked.

Loss of autonomy, the freedom to do what you want and go where you want to in life, is for many people their worst fear. Don't make it yours. Don't give yourself a reason to lose your licence for psychological and spiritual freedom because of D.U.I.: Driving Under the Influence of your ego. If you indulge in the whims of your ego just a little more than you should, hopefully that usually 'still, small voice' inside will shout out loudly: "Pull over ego! Let your *true self* drive!" Because what you don't want happening is this:



And what's the best thing you can do if your ego is in the back seat and is clamouring for attention like a cranky child? Just like with your psychological 'shadow', it's best to become *friends* with your ego. (For more about this, see the article "ME AND MY SHADOW" by Raymond Huisman.) Even if you don't always get along or there's a falling out from time to time, you don't want to be the cause of more roadkill because your attention was focussed on your ego rather than on the road ahead of you in life. And neither do you want to become the roadkill of someone else's ego. When you become friends with your ego, you can expect a lot of fun times ahead. In the best of times, you might even see this from your side-view mirror:



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