

The Self You Became to Belong

Making Room for Your Own Life Without Giving Up Connection

Brian Kennedy, LMFT | Marriage & Family Therapy Associates
Olympia, Washington

There are people who can tell you what everyone around them needs but struggle to answer a simpler question: What do you want? They know how to make an evening comfortable, anticipate disappointment, carry a responsibility, or become the person a difficult situation requires. Ask whether they would prefer to stay home, accept help, change direction, or admit that something hurts, and they may pause. Sometimes there is a preference they hesitate to express. Sometimes they genuinely do not know. A life spent becoming recognizable to others can leave us less recognizable to ourselves.

This does not mean we have been living a lie. The dependable person may truly be dependable. The generous person may love giving. The person who keeps things together may have developed real judgment, courage, and skill. The difficulty is not that these qualities are false. It is that they can become the only qualities we feel permitted to have. We may know how to be useful without knowing how to be tired, how to be admired without knowing how to be uncertain, or how to be independent without knowing how to need someone.

Becoming more fully ourselves is not necessarily a project of leaving these roles behind. It may begin by asking whether there is room inside them for a larger life. Can I remain caring and have a limit? Can I be competent and receive help? Can I belong without making every part of my experience acceptable before I allow it to exist?

Learning What Keeps Us Close

Children do not enter relationships with equal bargaining power. They depend on adults for protection, care, and a place in the world. Within that dependence, they learn something about what brings a response. In one family, achievement gathers attention. In another, being funny interrupts tension. Elsewhere, the child who needs little is praised for maturity, while the child who expresses anger is treated as the problem. These are possible pathways of adaptation, not explanations we can assign to a person simply because they are successful, humorous, quiet, or angry.

Some expectations are explicit: Be good. Do not embarrass us. Think about what your mother has been through. Others are conveyed through who is listened to, what changes the atmosphere, or which experiences repeatedly receive no response. A child may not formulate a rule in words. Years later, however, an adult might recognize something like this: I can be loved when I am helpful, but I become difficult when I need help.

Research by Avi Assor, Guy Roth, and Edward Deci examined parental conditional regard: affection or approval experienced as contingent on particular behavior. Their studies linked perceived conditional regard with internal pressure, fluctuating self-esteem, and resentment, even when the desired behavior occurred. These findings do not prove the history of any particular adult. They illuminate how doing what earns approval can come with an emotional cost (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004).

The longing to belong is not the problem to outgrow. Baumeister and Leary's influential review placed the formation and maintenance of interpersonal bonds among central human motivations. A more useful question is what happens when belonging seems available only on terms that make important experiences difficult to express. We do not need to stop wanting a place with others. We may need more room within that place (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

When a Strength Becomes a Requirement

Consider an illustrative situation. Alex has become the reliable person in a family: organizing visits, checking on relatives, remembering what needs to happen. Alex enjoys some of this work and values being someone others can count on. But when another task is added to an already crowded week, the familiar answer arrives before any consideration of capacity: Of course. Later comes resentment, followed by shame about feeling resentful.

Calling all of this people-pleasing would miss something important. Alex may be expressing love, meeting a real duty, anticipating criticism, and following an old expectation at the same time. There may also be practical reasons no one else is doing the work. The question is not whether caring is authentic or defensive. It is whether Alex can notice the different reasons for saying yes and participate in deciding what happens next.

A strength becomes constricting when it is no longer available as a choice but required as a condition of worth. Dependability may become an inability to admit exhaustion. Sensitivity may become constant monitoring of other people's moods. Independence may become refusal of care. Even being the person who never compromises can become a role that makes honest reconsideration difficult. Self-loss does not always look agreeable. Sometimes it looks fiercely self-sufficient.

The work is to preserve what we value while loosening what has become compulsory. Alex might still organize a visit, but ask someone else to arrange transportation. Or Alex might recognize that this particular responsibility matters enough to keep, while making another commitment smaller. Becoming more fully yourself may sometimes produce a clearer yes, not a more frequent no.

What Winnicott Helps Us See

Donald Winnicott's distinction between the true and false self offers a clinical way to think about compliance and the loss of spontaneous experience. In his account, a compliant organization can protect something more personal from an environment that does not adequately receive it. His language concerns a developmental and psychoanalytic theory, not a test that can separate people into genuine and counterfeit selves (Winnicott, 1960/2016).

Used carefully, this perspective invites a question: Is there space for experience that has not already been arranged to meet someone else's expectations? A spontaneous laugh, an unexpected interest, a refusal, a moment of tenderness, or an admission of not knowing may matter because it comes before the question of how it will be received. It need not be dramatic. The person who always has a plan may discover that not having one is an experience worth allowing.

But the language of a true self can become another demand. We can start searching for a pure person underneath all our relationships, as if everything learned through loving, working, parenting, or belonging were contamination. We can also make an impulsive wish into evidence of who we really are. Neither conclusion follows. An experience can be genuine without determining an action. A role can be deeply ours even though we learned it in relationship.

Research by Susan Harter and colleagues explored adolescents' reports of behavior they experienced as not reflecting the real me, in relation to perceived parent and peer support. That work offers an empirical perspective on felt authenticity in relationships; it does not establish a hidden essential identity. The useful distinction is between having different expressions in different settings and feeling unable to bring important aspects of yourself into any of them (Harter et al., 1996).

When You Do Not Know What You Want

Not knowing can feel embarrassing. Asked where to eat, what to do with an afternoon, or what would make a relationship more satisfying, a person may search the other person's face for clues. They may be accustomed to choosing whatever creates the least friction. Alternatively, several preferences may genuinely compete. Sometimes fatigue, depression, illness, financial limits, or an unfamiliar situation make desire harder to access. Uncertainty does not, by itself, reveal a childhood wound.

It helps to make the question smaller. Instead of asking who you really are, notice whether you want another conversation tonight or some quiet. Instead of deciding what your whole life should become, explore whether a particular activity interests you enough to try it once. A preference may be faint, provisional, or inconvenient. You can give it attention without promising to build your life around it.

Your body may contribute information: a tightening stomach when another request arrives, a little more breath when a plan is canceled, or an unexpected sense of liveliness while making something. These experiences deserve curiosity, not automatic

obedience. Relief might indicate a needed limit, avoidance of a difficult responsibility, or simply the end of a tiring day. Sensation is part of the conversation about what matters; it does not settle that conversation.

Desire, value, and action also need to remain distinct. I want to leave this gathering is different from I believe showing up matters, and both are different from what I decide to do. Having a self includes making room for this complexity. You may choose to stay without denying that you wanted to leave. You may leave without turning the gathering into proof that everyone there rejects you.

Belonging Is Not the Opposite of Autonomy

In self-determination theory, autonomy concerns the experience of volition, not simply doing things alone. Ryan and Deci place it alongside relatedness and competence rather than treating closeness as its enemy. This distinction matters clinically: accepting help, honoring a commitment, or participating in family life can be deeply chosen. Independence can also be driven by fear, shame, or an inability to tolerate receiving influence (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Çiğdem Kağıtçıbaşı's work similarly distinguishes agency from interpersonal distance. She argues that autonomy and relatedness can coexist. Becoming an adult with a position of your own need not mean becoming emotionally remote from your family or community. The question is whether connection allows meaningful participation in your choices, not whether those choices look sufficiently individualistic (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2005).

Culture shapes what personhood means. Markus and Kitayama's work on independent and interdependent understandings of the self challenges the assumption that one model of individuality fits everyone. These are broad frameworks, not descriptions to impose on a person because of nationality or background. A family commitment may express identity rather than erase it; a wish for greater separation may also deserve respect (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Power matters as well. Gender expectations, racism, economic dependence, disability, and religious or social sanctions can affect what is safe to express and what happens afterward. Someone who chooses privacy in a hostile workplace is not necessarily betraying themselves. Someone who cannot reduce caregiving may need practical support more than encouragement to assert a boundary. Advice about authenticity becomes shallow when it ignores the conditions under which people are living.

The Trouble With Becoming Yourself Against Someone

When a long-suppressed preference finally appears, it can arrive with force. After years of accommodation, every request may begin to sound like control. A person may feel that any compromise would return them to the old arrangement. This reaction can be understandable without being a reliable guide to every present relationship. There is a difference between being pressured to disappear and being asked to consider how your choices affect someone else.

Selfhood includes responsibility. If you have agreed to care for a child, contribute to a household, or complete a shared task, recognizing that you do not want to do it does not erase the commitment. It may begin an important conversation about capacity, fairness, and change. But another person's needs do not become illegitimate because you are learning to notice your own.

In Alex's situation, a different response might be: I want to help with the visit, but I cannot manage every part of it this week. Can we divide the work? This makes a preference and a limit visible while retaining care. If others are disappointed, Alex can listen without immediately surrendering the limit. If they reveal information Alex had missed, reconsidering can be an expression of judgment rather than self-abandonment.

The other people involved may need to change, too. A relationship organized around one person's constant availability may resist a more reciprocal arrangement. Repeated contempt, threats, or punishment are not simply discomfort with a new boundary. Where expression risks violence, coercion, or retaliation, do not use disclosure as an experiment. Confidential support and practical safety planning matter more than proving that you can speak openly.

The Grief of What Had Little Room

There can be sadness in recognizing how much attention went toward becoming acceptable. Perhaps play felt irresponsible, ambition disloyal, vulnerability dangerous, or anger incompatible with being good. You may grieve particular opportunities or the ease of expressing something without first preparing a defense. This grief need not depend on discovering a complete explanation for your childhood.

It is possible to appreciate what your family gave you and recognize what was missing. It is also possible to understand another person's limitations without using that understanding to cancel your own loss. Conversely, present dissatisfaction does not prove that your upbringing was entirely harmful. A more honest account can make room for protection and restriction, affection and misattunement, genuine values and expectations that became too narrow.

McAdams and McLean describe narrative identity as an evolving life story through which people connect their reconstructed past with an imagined future. This offers room to revise our understanding rather than fix ourselves permanently inside one account. The story I have always been the one who carries everyone may reveal something, but it can also obscure times when you received care, chose contribution freely, or found a relationship with more room (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

We do not need to replace a painful story with a cheerful one. We need a story that can keep learning. Nor do we have to manufacture memories to make the story complete. What you remember, what you infer, what others recall, and what remains unknown can stay distinct. Present experience is enough to begin considering a different possibility.

Making a Little More Room

Return to one ordinary encounter rather than trying to remake your personality. Notice what happened, what you did, and what your response made possible. Include the part you value. If you kept the peace, perhaps you protected a tired child from another argument. If you took charge, perhaps you had the necessary skill. Then consider the cost and whether there was room for a different response.

Choose a small variation where it is safe and appropriate. Express a preference before asking what everyone else wants. Admit uncertainty rather than supplying an answer. Accept one piece of help without immediately offering repayment. Or explain why you want to keep a commitment that someone else assumes you should abandon. The point is not to perform a new identity. It is to learn whether another capacity can participate.

Before trying, name what you expect: They will be annoyed. I will feel guilty. I may discover that I actually prefer the familiar arrangement. Afterward, compare the prediction with what occurred. One welcome response does not establish safety everywhere, and one difficult response does not prove that there is no room anywhere. Private rehearsal, a smaller step, practical assistance, or deciding not to try can also be useful outcomes.

The self you became to belong does not have to be rejected for your life to become more your own. You can keep the generosity, competence, loyalty, or resilience that matters to you while allowing tiredness, dependence, pleasure, uncertainty, and difference a place beside it. The question is not whether you can finally become someone who needs nobody. It is whether the person who belongs can become more fully present in the belonging.

Clinical Foundations and Further Reading

This essay accompanies BKL's Selfhood and Individuation pathway. It brings psychoanalytic ideas about compliance and spontaneity into conversation with research on conditional regard, felt authenticity, motivation, cultural understandings of selfhood, and narrative identity. These sources represent different theories and kinds of evidence, not a single validated method. The everyday examples and suggested practices are educational applications; they cannot establish a childhood cause, uncover a hidden identity, or determine what someone should do in a particular relationship. The example of Alex is illustrative and does not describe an identifiable client.

Assor, A., Roth, G., & Deci, E. L. (2004). The emotional costs of parents' conditional regard: A self-determination theory analysis. *Journal of Personality*, 72(1), 47-88.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3506.2004.00256.x>

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497-529.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>

Harter, S., Marold, D. B., Whitesell, N. R., & Cobbs, G. (1996). A model of the effects of perceived parent and peer support on adolescent false self behavior. *Child Development*, 67(2), 360-374.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1996.tb01738.x>

Kağıtçıbaşı, Ç. (2005). Autonomy and relatedness in cultural context: Implications for self and family. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 36(4), 403-422.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022105275959>

Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98(2), 224-253.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.98.2.224>

McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22(3), 233-238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413475622>

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68-78.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>

Winnicott, D. W. (2016). Ego distortion in terms of true and false self. In L. Caldwell & H. T. Robinson (Eds.), *The collected works of D. W. Winnicott: Volume 6, 1960-1963* (pp. 159-172). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1960.)
<https://doi.org/10.1093/med:psych/9780190271381.003.0023>