

The
Mystery
of You

Clues to Your True Identity



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People Of Christ With The Message Of Hope

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Clues to Your True Identity

by Melanie Wilson, Ph.D.

Have you ever played the board game, CLUE®? The object of the game is to determine the crime scene, the weapon used and, most importantly, the identity of the murderer. The process of looking for the real you is a lot like playing this classic board game. To come to any conclusions about yourself, you must consider the rooms (where you've been), the weapons (what you've done), and the witnesses (who people say you are). Winning at CLUE is somewhat satisfying, but unraveling the mystery of your own identity is truly rewarding. Ready to play?

The Rooms of Your Life: Where You've Been

Playing CLUE involves rolling the dice and moving from room to room. Even if you're still living in the same home you grew up in, you've been places. These places form the basis for how you see yourself as well as how others see you.

One clue to your true identity can be found in the places you've called home. When we meet someone new, the question, "Where are you from?" is a common one. The answer gives the asker some important information. For example, I am a native-born American. I am proud of my nationality, but my self-image as an American is much different than my friend, Mavla's, who is a new American.

Our national heritage can give us a sense of pride, shame, and even vulnerability. War refugees, like Mavla, may experience all three with regard to their nationality.

I am not only an American, but a native-born South Dakotan. Many people tell me they've never met anyone from South Dakota. I could allow those comments to make me feel different in a negative way, but I enjoy feeling unique. I spent several of my childhood years living in the country. My farm background also gave me a feeling of distinctiveness once I moved to the suburbs. Not everyone has collected eggs, picked chickens, or eaten meat from animals in their own backyard. Living in the country also taught me I was trustworthy, while city people weren't. The first time I traveled to a big city, I clung to my purse, certain it would be snatched from me at any moment. Obviously, my idea of city dwellers wasn't completely based in fact.

The places I lived as a young person taught me I was unique, trustworthy, and less than rich. I lived in a trailer for a year, and I knew "trailer people" weren't the same as those who lived in the area known as "snob hill." I knew very early on that even the houses we reside in tell others something about us. My parents loved to rehab dilapidated houses.

As a teenager vulnerable to teasing, I cried when I saw the house my parents planned to buy: its porch was falling off.

Our identity is formed not just based on where we're from, but also on where we've been. My parents moved many times within the same state as I was growing up. As a result of changing schools frequently, I developed the identity of a "new girl." This identity had both advantages and disadvantages. Sometimes I was viewed as an interesting person and sometimes I was simply viewed as a threat. After being mistreated at more than one school, I became withdrawn. I started to see myself as someone uncomfortable in new social situations.

When I was in high school, I got to see my new girl status from a different perspective. A young lady who had lived in Sweden and California joined my high school class of 53 students. I saw Tami as exciting and exotic because she'd been so many more places than I had. Before graduating from college, I had never been out of the country. I had only been on an airplane once. Using financial aid and college graduation money, I went on a seminar in Europe and the Soviet Union to study Eastern versus Western Psychology. My month-long trip added "world traveler" to my identity. I felt exotic like Tami.

But I stopped thinking of myself as poor. As a foreigner in the Soviet Union, I was able to shop in nice stores that sold soda, candy, and souvenirs, while grocery store shelves were almost completely bare. Their department store windows did not display the latest fashions, but rather a collection of pens—a rare commodity.

The places we're from and the places we've been have a powerful influence on the formation of our identity. Our experiences in work, school, and recreation are also places that give us clues as to who we really are.

One of my first jobs in college was as a dishwasher. I wore a dining service t-shirt that seemed to advertise my needy financial status. The work was not pleasant. I removed scalding-hot dishes from an industrial-sized dishwasher over and over again. Although my job was important, I didn't feel important. I looked for another job and found one as a secretary in the foreign language summer camp department. Even though I was still doing menial tasks like stuffing and labeling envelopes, I felt better about myself. I thought what I was doing was a small part of an exciting process.

You will see yourself differently based on whether you earned a GED, worked full time following high school, or attended college.

The kind of jobs and education you've had will also affect your opinion of yourself. If you've worked at a fast-food restaurant since leaving high school, you will likely have a different self-concept than someone who attended an Ivy League college. Your status in your school or workplace can also have an impact on your self-image. Imagine how you'd feel if you'd graduated from an Ivy League college with honors versus how you'd feel if you were fired from McDonalds. Self-image gets really complicated when you have both of these experiences!

The places we've experienced in the past shape our identity as do the places we spend time in today. The more hours we spend in places like a gym or a bar, the more likely we are to label ourselves accordingly. We might think of ourselves as "gym rats" or "bar flies." Those labels can have both positive and negative implications. If we spend most of our time in a country club or in a soup kitchen, we may take on the stereotypes associated with such places-whether or not they are true of us. The activities we engage in while at the gym, bar, country club, or soup kitchen will also determine how our sense of self is affected. If you're a waitress at a country club, you may make assumptions about yourself a woman who plays tennis at the club wouldn't.

If you serve at a soup kitchen, you probably attribute different characteristics to yourself than someone who eats at the soup kitchen.

Of course, the places we've been, experienced, and continue to spend time in don't automatically determine our identity. Our attitudes and beliefs about these places are vitally important. For example, some people might feel it reflects badly on them to live in a trailer or be from the country. I see it as developing my character—as something to be proud of. Although we can choose to see the benefits of having been where we've been, it's important to recognize not everywhere we've been has been our choice. I've often had people tell me, "You like cold weather; you're from South Dakota." I honestly don't remember lining up for the "I-want-to-be-born-in-South-Dakota" option. I happen to hate cold weather! We sometimes take credit for the places we've been when we're not responsible for going there. For example, we might assume we brought abuse on ourselves when we didn't or, conversely, we might falsely assume we've been fortunate to be safe because we're great people. Keep in mind our strong tendency to take credit inappropriately when you complete the following exercise.

If you've used a word to describe yourself in the past you no longer think fits, put a question mark next to it.

Clue #1: Where You've Been:

What words have you used to describe yourself based on where you've been?

List positive words:

List negative words:

The Weapons: What You've Done

In CLUE, the weapons players are interested in are common items like a rope, a wrench, and a candlestick. In real life, the weapons that tell us more about ourselves are our words, actions, and thoughts. In CLUE, the weapons aren't real. In life, the weapons of careless words and deeds cause real suffering, not only for those victimized by them, but also for those who use them.

Most people, when asked if they believe they'll go to heaven, will say something like, "I'm not perfect, but I'm a good person. I've never killed anybody. I help people when I can." We often use our record of good deeds as a way of shoring up our image. We like to focus on the kinds of things that would be listed in our obituary. You've never read "had a really bad temper" or "was a terrible gossip" in an obituary, right? Instead, obituaries recall the kinds of things memorialized in our photographs: achievements, hobbies, community involvement, and good relationships. I have photos of me receiving my doctorate in psychology, working at church events, and cuddling with my husband and kids. I don't have photos of me sitting in a filthy, roach-infested apartment in graduate school; I have no pictures of me spending too much money at the mall; I do not have a single photo

of me yelling at my family. That makes it easier for me to think I'm a good person.

Yet, I, like everyone else, have said, done, or thought things I'm not proud of. We just don't celebrate or advertise the negative stuff. We even try not to think about these things. Nevertheless, we can't forget. For many years I tried to hide the fact I was extremely disorganized. If you had come to my home for a get-together years ago, you'd have never known I wasn't the hostess with the mostest. The boxes and baskets piled with stuff were hidden behind closed doors. I was often late and forgot appointments. I got away with it using creative excuses and apologies. Meanwhile people complimented me for how organized I was. My cover-up fooled others, but I couldn't fool myself. I knew I was a phony, and I was miserable being one. I suffered with terrible guilt about my deceitful life.

I was depressed and very confused about who I really was. Was I the organized have-it-all-together woman people saw on the outside? Or was I the slovenly liar I saw come out in private? I didn't know, but I'm sure one of the reasons I was drawn to psychology was so I could find the answer. I thought maybe if I understood myself more, I could get control of the many things that felt very out of control.

One of the strategies I learned for improving self-esteem in my psychology training was to change my self-talk. The idea is, "Positive self-talk will make you feel better about yourself." So I would use affirmations like, "I am thin. I am organized." Supposedly this self-cheerleading was going to turn me into a thin, organized woman. Meanwhile, I was binge eating and letting dishes pile up for days. It's hard to believe you're thin and organized when you see empty Taco Bell containers and roaches everywhere. In *Christ Esteem*, Don Matzat argues that traditional thinking on self-esteem is flawed in this way. We simply cannot buy into the notion we are good when we know our every shameful thought, word, and action.

When we do admit to wrongdoing, we often try to wriggle out of responsibility for it. We might blame our overeating on genetics, our disorganization on poor parenting, or even our poor self-esteem on the last person to break our hearts. Like an obituary, it puts a positive spin on the situation that can comfort us for a little while. But the one human being you can't lie to forever is yourself. We know the truth and our responsibility for what we've done. We know there was no gland misfiring when we ate the whole pizza. We know Mom wasn't the one who kept piling the bills on the table without opening them.

We know we didn't have to believe we were worthless because of one man's mistreatment. Admitting to the truth of what we've done without excuses is scary. We risk being ridiculed and rejected. But owning up to the truth can also be liberating. More often than not, people appreciate the honesty and humility required to show the real you.

Years ago I wrote the booklet, *Not Too Hard, Not Too Soft*, for Lutheran Hour Ministries. In it, I describe what a mess my life was during my graduate training. I cried while I wrote it. It was so painful to admit I wasn't the organized woman people thought I was. That admission, however, made it possible for me to really *get organized*. The denial had kept me trapped in my destructive habits. My confession also enabled me to help others. I began speaking and writing on the subject of organization, sharing my slovenly history. I found people were more interested in hearing about what I train wreck I was than how I was speeding through life without fail. In my book, *So You're Not Wonder Woman*, I describe how I made peace with my dual nature; I am both a brat and a super heroine. Sharing your flaws and failures with others may lead some to reject you. But most people will embrace your vulnerability, which allows them to be real, too.

As you complete the following exercise, put a question mark after any words you think may not apply to you today.

Clue #2: What You've Done:

What words have you used to describe yourself based on what you've done?

List positive words:

List negative words:

The Witnesses: Who People Say You Are

Players in CLUE investigate the mystery by moving from room to room and making suggestions about the where, what, and who of the murder. When playing the board game, players are quick to point out when the suggestions aren't merited. But in our lives, we are often too quick to believe the suggestions are true.

Sometimes people's suggestions about who we are can influence our lives for the better. From the time I was a little girl, I can remember my mother telling me there was nothing I couldn't do. I believed her. My belief in my capability played a significant role in what I achieved in school and my confidence continues to affect me in a positive way today.

A classic social study done in 1968 provided evidence that people live out the labels others give them—even if they're not spoken. Students equal in ability were divided into two groups. Teachers were instructed that one group was composed of bright students while the other students were characterized as slow to learn. Although the teachers never told the students their label, their behavior affected students' test scores just as the false labels would predict.

This effect of expectation on behavior is the Pygmalion Effect or self-fulfilling prophecy.

The power of encouragement cannot be minimized. When I was a high school student, my English teacher, whom I greatly admired, wrote on my writing notebook that she expected to read one of my books someday. I have held onto that notebook all these years and just recently had the pleasure of sending her a copy of my first book. Her words made it possible early in my education for me to see myself as a writer. It's not unusual for people to hang on to written words of affirmation their entire lives. It seems the good words are harder to remember than the hurtful ones.

Positive labels can motivate us even when they aren't entirely accurate. I once counseled a young college student who had an IQ barely above mental retardation. I continued to be in awe of this young man's C average. He worked long hours for those grades. I believe he had a parent or a school counselor who suggested he was college material. It wasn't exactly true, but his belief in his ability made his achievement a reality.

If your identity had only been described in glowing terms, you probably wouldn't be reading this booklet. Odds are one of the reasons you want

to understand the real you is because you've heard conflicting messages. Some people have said great things and others not so great. So what is the truth? The truth is those negative labels really hurt. The "slow" label in the classroom experiment hurt children's performance. There's no data on it, but I believe those children were also hurt emotionally. They may have wondered, "Why won't my teacher help me?" We have a natural tendency to not only strive to be the wonderful things people say we are, but the terrible ones, too.

When one of my sons was two, he was unable to speak. When he couldn't communicate, he got angry. When he got angry, he screamed. The screaming was very wearying for a mother with three kids who were ages three and under. I tried to de-stress with a little humor and began calling him our "little terrorist." I don't know if he ever heard me say it, but he didn't have to. I thought it and was treating him like he was an out-of-control maniac. At the recommendation of a friend I read *Raising Your Spirited Child* by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka. I realized I couldn't continue to label or even think of my son this way if I wanted him to stop meeting my expectations. I started referring to him as "spirited" instead.

This tendency to meet others' expectations is the explanation I often give for women continuing in a cycle of domestic violence. Often women who are victims of domestic violence were also victims of child abuse. Although physical abuse leaves its marks, the emotional abuse leaves ugly scars that may never disappear. Being told you are "good for nothing," "stupid," or "ugly" as a child makes it easier to believe a man who tells you no one else would ever want you. Unfortunately, the emotional impact of such words can't easily be influenced with the facts.

People's opinion of us is often wrong because opinion is based on outward appearance or to meet the opinion-giver's emotional needs. We can't get to know everyone well. We only have the opportunity to observe their dress, expressions, and habits. In order to make sense of a world filled with so many people, we make certain assumptions about people based on what we see. We do this even when we know people well because we do not know the thinking and motivation behind their behaviors. Sometimes we refuse to change our opinion of someone even when we're told the motivation doesn't match what we see.

When I was in high school, we had "Bag Day" to celebrate homecoming. Everyone was encouraged to wear clothing made of plastic bags. I was decked out in my Hefty finest, which included wearing yellow plastic "earrings" made from the bag handles. For some reason, I decided my dad's old tennis shoes were the perfect complement to my trash bag dress. I drove quite a distance to school, so when I noted that the car's gas tank was on E, I asked my dad for gas money. He explained that E really meant I still had a quarter of a tank. I didn't need any gas money, he told me. So I drove myself to school, not worrying about the empty tank. That is, until the car quit running, and I was stranded on a country road. Fortunately, a utility truck soon pulled up behind me. I was thrilled the driver had a five-gallon tank of gas in his truck he was willing to give me at no charge (he said he'd charge my parents). I tried to explain my crazy appearance by telling him about homecoming and "Bag Day," but he seemed to think I really was crazy. All he would say to my passionate explanations was, "Uh-huh."

You're supposed to be able to judge a book by its cover, but you'll never be able to get the real story until you look inside. No one we know can look inside our hearts and minds, so no one's opinion of us should be accepted without question.

Others people's suggestions about us are based on outward appearance, but also on *their* personal needs. Let's return to the abusive man who tells his wife or girlfriend no one else will ever want her. Is his statement based on fact or does it reflect his fear she will leave him? His need for security motivates his cruel and misguided assessment of her.

Witnesses testifying at a trial are always reviewed and questioned about their motivation for testifying. We tend not to trust witnesses who are benefiting in some way by what they say. Yet when it comes to our trust in others' testimony about us, we tend to be less skeptical. I had close friendships over the years with several women who were very insecure. Each friendship seemed to go along just fine until she would accuse me of being a terrible friend. Evil motives were suggested for some of my words and actions that I had never had. Even so, for many years I took on the label of "terrible friend" and did everything possible to counteract it. I was really bending over backwards to be kind to people who were really very unkind to me. Today I understand these women wanted to feel better about themselves by seeing me as their problem.

When CLUE players are confident they can solve the mystery, they make an accusation. If they're correct, they win the

game. But if they're wrong, they're thrown out of the game. Have you ever been falsely accused? I have. It's an awful feeling! But for me, the most upsetting accusations are those I can't defend myself against—the accusations I know I'm guilty of. Whether you've ever been accused of wrongdoing by someone you know or not, we all share an accuser. His name is Satan.

Although Satan doesn't know our thoughts, he's been privy to all our words and actions. He knows more than enough to prosecute us and unfortunately, he has the evidence to find us all guilty. The Bible calls all of our wrongdoing sin. In CLUE, the crime is murder, but the Bible makes it clear that sin encompasses more than major crimes like violence. Sin is selfishness, laziness, pride, anger, dishonesty, and more. Not one of us can claim innocence. In CLUE, Satan wouldn't be thrown out of the game. He would win because his accusation of us is spot on. Thankfully, God's courtroom doesn't allow Satan to win his case. In fact, Satan is the one who will be thrown out of court in chains, not us.

In God's courtroom, His Son, Jesus, is in charge. Though Jesus has been hurt and disappointed by all our sins, He rises to our defense. It isn't that He doesn't think we're guilty; He knows better than Satan that we are! It's that He has already paid the punishment for our crimes.

He died a horrific and unjust death on a cross because of the Law God established from the beginning: the punishment for sin is death. Though He had to execute justice, He couldn't bear to have us be separated from Him forever because of our sin. So He took the punishment Himself. In our courts of law, we can't be tried for the same crime twice. In God's court, we must be found innocent for the same reason. Jesus defends us because he knows this trial has already happened and He has paid the debt.

Friends, family, and co-workers who make suggestions (or accusations) may be mistaken because they focus on our outward appearance and their suggestions are often self-serving. Jesus, however, knows everything and His suggestions are self-sacrificing. Author and speaker, Sheila Walsh, asks, "If there were a movie of everything you've ever thought, said, and done, would anyone who watched it still love you?" My answer to that question was "probably not." The good news is Jesus has seen this movie. He knows absolutely everything about you. And He still loves you.

The Bible's book of John, Chapter 4, tells the story of a woman Jesus loved. Her identity was built on the place she was from. She was from Samaria. Samaritans were people the Jews looked down upon. Her identity was also built on what she had done.

She had been married five times and was living with a man she wasn't married to. Even in today's liberal culture, she would not be highly regarded based on her relationship skills. It's safe to surmise this woman didn't think of herself as a success. The woman's identity was also built on what others said about her. She was a woman in a culture that did not value women, especially women who were divorced. Most likely she was ignored or gossiped about by the people in her community.

Then Jesus spoke to her at the well, and she was astonished. He was speaking to a Samaritan and a woman! That was unheard of. Then He told her He knew she had been married five times and was living with a man. Yet, still He spoke to her! He told her the good news that He was the Messiah who would save her and her people from their sins.

She believed Him. He really knew her and loved her. Jesus would have been justified in criticizing her; yet He knew what she needed was love, forgiveness, and acceptance.

Because Jesus is without sin and has no self-serving bias in assessing us, we can believe what He says about us.

When Jesus is our Defender and Savior, the Bible says we have a new identity:

“To the Church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, and called to be saints, with all those in every place who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours” (1 Corinthians 1:2).

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

“So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away-look, what is new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

“For He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world that we may be holy and unblemished in His sight in love” (Ephesians 1:4).

“For we are His workmanship, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared beforehand so we may do them” (Ephesians 2:10).

Through Jesus Christ, we become saints, but we also remain sinners while on this earth: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense-Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (1 John 2:1).

One of the speakers in the *Sonship* Bible study series summed it up this way: "Cheer up! You're worse than you think!" We are worse than we think, but that makes what Jesus has done for us on the cross and His continuing love for us all the more worth celebrating

As you complete the following exercise, put a question mark after the words you think no longer apply to you today.

Clue #3: Who People Say You Are:

What words have you used to describe yourself based on what others have said about you?

List positive words:

List negative words:

Solving the Mystery

You've examined the evidence. You've seen the rooms, the weapons, and the witnesses in the case against you. Now who do you say you are? Will you put more weight on the places you've been, the things you've done, or on eyewitness testimony? I hope you will value the testimony of the Witness who has been there since before you were born: Jesus. He knows how bad you are and yet He still loves you. Jesus is not only your Eye-Witness, your Defender, and your Hero (He gave up His life for you), He's also your Rehab Counselor. With Jesus, you can start a new life, leaving the past behind. Philippians 4:13 says, "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength." Sounds a lot like the encouraging words my Mom gave me years ago, doesn't it? This is God's encouragement for all of us!

Review all the words you've written under Clues 1-3. Put a cross over the negative words. These descriptions no longer have to be true of you because of Jesus' victory in your trial. Put a heart around the positive words you've written. These things are true of you when Jesus, the Counselor, lives in your heart.

In the board game, CLUE, players move from room to room looking for the identity of the murderer. In the same way, we search high and low for our true identity.

We look for clues in the places we've been, the things we've done, and the ways others describe us. But solving the mystery of our true self can only be found in Jesus. He paid the punishment for our crimes and has thrown our accuser, Satan, out of the game.

Trusting, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in what He says about us in the Bible is the way to a winning identity.

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The Mystery of You

Clues to Your True Identity

Using the popular board game CLUE® as a template, author Melanie Wilson guides readers to a deeper understanding of their real selves. It's when an individual considers where he's been (rooms); what he's done (weapons); and who people (witnesses) say he is—that a fuller grasp of identity can be acquired.

We all have backgrounds filled with an assortment of experiences and people. Throughout our lives it's easy to build our perception of self—good or bad—on these variables. We do this at our peril; however, for we are flawed by sin from the beginning, unable *on our own* to fully discern our true identities. But there is One who knows us best, understands us fully, and loves us anyway. Whether our self-image is inflated by pride or beaten down by self-accusation, our identity—our fullest identity—is found in Jesus. He alone has paid the price for our sins and redeemed us to be new creations in Him.

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