

Samuel Klein

Personal Statement, offered as background to the SEA Forum to be held on 21 May, 2009

“ I was nineteen years old when I first met my birth-mother in 1997. That meeting and the course of events that unfolded thereafter challenged my deepest assumptions about identity, self-knowledge and belief.

Having been raised in an observant Jewish household in London, I was aware from a young age that I was adopted. Dark-skinned yet with Caucasian parents; their likeness was reflected in many of my peers, at school and in the Synagogue. My birth mother had come from a long line of distinguished Yemenite goldsmiths and court dancers from Sana'a, where the family lived until Operation Magic Carpet took them to Israel. My parents' families on the other hand, came from the Cities of Hamburg and Vienna on the European continent. The contrast was absolute. And it was within the latter lifestyle that I was schooled.

There were three areas of life: the family, the Synagogue community and professional work. Work itself was a means to support the family and if possible, enable an individual to give funds to charitable causes. My parents, from as far back as I can remember, placed epistemic importance on the practice of Jewish religious law and observances. These were the sine qua non of Jewish culture without which, the rest was window-dressing. To be Jewish was to live every moment framed by religious experience, not merely to affiliate vicariously through the holidays, festivals and life-cycle events. This may sound incredibly intense, but it didn't seem so at the time. To the contrary, as a result of this approach, my Jewish identity was wedded to security, dependability, and consistency and throughout my childhood – cultural uniformity.

However, in the close-knit, warm, yet insular community of North West London, cultural homogeneity did extend, sometimes invasively, into the private sphere. I believe that the fact of my adoption meant that the need for 'congruence' between thought and action, between modes of 'being' and 'becoming' were bound up for me in the positive regard or approval I sought and received from others in the community and from my parents in particular. This is not to say that my need to conform was experienced as a negative. Rather, sometimes, the 'thickness' or 'tightness' of the community structure meant that what I authentically believed and what I was prepared to say publicly were not necessarily aligned. Certainly, there have been moments in my life where I have experienced the community as highly censorious or judgemental. Unfortunately, I too, have had more than my fair share of guarded opinions of 'Others' who did not belong beneath the sacred canopy of authentic Jewish observance.

In my teens and early adulthood, I looked to attach myself to an Orthodox Jewish community and participate in the activities of that community. This included daily and weekly prayer and learning and being fully kosher, both in and out of the home. I would not engage in challenging received authority or traditions. But I could not limit my inquisitiveness and intellectual curiosity. Consequently, I did not surrender my interests in theology, philosophy, art, music, dance and the performing arts and was always looking for ways of involvement in these pursuits. Nor did I seek to prevent myself from engaging those of other non-orthodox Jewish or non-Jewish faith communities on matters of faith.

It was this last fact, which proved the most problematic. I would not agree that there was one absolutely and objectively right way of living. I could not agree to see organized religion as having a response to all of life's complexities or see religious figures as in some way morally superior to those who were not. Human beings are complex: psychologically, emotionally, existentially - not everything a person does needs to make 'sense' objectively, or referenced to Faith.

My cultural identity is now informed by the belief that at the deepest levels of their consciousness, a person, no matter of what background, has a basic drive towards self-actualization, an instinctive movement towards the accomplishment of their inherent potential. My Jewishness is still central to whom I am but it is not boundaried in the way it used to be. Such a view based on a profound and genuine respect for the legitimacy of a person's subjective perceptual world, whatever this may be, with the proviso that what emerges brings goodness rather than harm to others. My identity has many sources and references and I remain open to living as fully present in any given experience, challenging or otherwise, so that the experience is trusted rather than being manipulated to fit some rigidly safeguarded self-concept. Uncertainty and doubt are part of life's' bittersweet struggles, not to be denied, but to be embraced. "