

To find yourself, commit to others

The self isn't waiting to be discovered through introspection. It is waiting to be created through commitments.

By **TONY CAMPOLO**
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It's usually the beginning of May when I'm confronted with a student who says, "Oh Doc, I'm not coming back next semester."

Why? "I need time to find myself." I'm tired of playing these roles that society has prescribed for me, the role that the church has played, that the school has played for me, I'm tired of playing the role my parents have prescribed, my friends have prescribed. I've got to peel away these socially generated identities and come to grips with the core of my being, the essence of my selfhood."

To which I always respond, "But Charley, after you peel away each of these socially generated selves, suppose you discover you're an onion?"

You peel away all the skins of an onion, what days got left? Nothing. The onion is nothing more than the sum total of its skins. It may be that the human personality is nothing more than the sum total of all the roles that society has prescribed for him or her to play.

The self is not an essence waiting to be discovered through introspection. Rather, the self is an essence waiting to be created through commitments.

Commitments create our identity. Commitments tell us who we are. And if you say I am uncommitted, then — in fact — you have no identity.

Too cool for passion

Soren Kierkegaard said it well. "This age will die," he said, "not because of sin but from lack of passion." This a time when being cool has become a virtue. I mean, people go around saying, "I'm cool. I'm really cool."

Coolness. I look for a generation that is hot with passionate commitments. Commitments that are worthy of their humanity. In the end, spirituality must be translated into commitments or it has no value at all.

I am tired of churches that are filled with believers. Jesus never said, "Go unto all the world and make believers out of everyone." He said, "Go unto all the world and make disciples." There's a big difference between a disciple and a believer. Believers accept certain theological propositions and truths. Disciples are people who commit themselves to a lifestyle, who live out visions and dreams.

I grew up in the context of mission. My parents told me, from ever since I can remember, that I was brought into this world for a mission. Families now are afraid to define mission for children. My father and my mother had no problem with that.

My mother said, "When you were a child like Hannah in the

Hebrew Bible I took you to the church and I offered you up to God, and to service to other people in the name of God. Do you understand that? That's what your life is about." People sometimes ask me, "Reverend, how were you called to the ministry?" I never was called. My mother decided.

I know what you're going to say. Parents cannot decide these things. Why not? Everybody else is telling your kid what to do. The media do. The peer group does. The school counselor tells the child what to do with his or her life. So what is wrong with parents standing up and saying, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord?"

Of course, they'll rebel. That's what kids do for a living. That's their thing. They rebel. Out of the tension between what the parents have prescribed and what the children in their spontaneity embrace as their own calling comes a synthesis that brings together the best elements of both.

That's what I want for my children. I don't want them to be clones of me, nor do I want them to do their own thing.

Better than being happy

A sociological study compared mothers in Japan with mothers in the United States. When Japanese mothers were asked a simple question — "What do you want your children to be when they come of age?" — the answer was almost universal: "We want our children to be successful." And no country has produced more successful people.

When American mothers were asked exactly the same question, there was one standard answer: "We want our children to be happy." Happy. Now isn't that cute? My father really didn't care whether I was happy. If you asked my father "What do you want your son to be when he comes of age?" he would have said this: "I want him to be good."

Now there's an interesting word: good. Success is wonderful, happiness is enjoyable but what transcends goodness as a cultural value?

Commitment translates into very simple terms. For me it's a commitment to Jesus, but it's no theological postulum or God in the sky. For the Jesus that I believe in is a Jesus that presents himself in every human being that I meet. Jesus is the sacredness that I find in other people. Jesus comes to us through people in need.

Sacredness in the least

I'm walking down Broad Street in Philadelphia. A bum. Filthy, dirty bum, covered with soot from head to toe, wearing a heavy overcoat — although it's the middle of July — sweating profusely, huge beard with rotted food in it, holding



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Tony Campolo at Wake Forest: "There's a big difference between a disciple and a believer. Believers accept certain theological propositions and truths. Disciples are people who commit themselves to a lifestyle, who live out visions and dreams."

a cup of McDonald's coffee in his hands, moving down the street, looked up at me, he said, "Hey, Mister? You want some of my coffee?"

I looked at him, at the coffee and said, "That's all right." Then I realized it was the wrong thing. I said, "Gimme a sip." He handed me the cup. I took a sip of his coffee. I gave it back.

I said, "You're being generous. Giving away your coffee like that. What's gotten into you?" He said, "Well, the coffee was especially good today. It was really delicious. And I think that when God gives you something good, you oughta share it with people."

I said, "Is there anything I can give you in return?" I figure he's going to hit me for \$5. He said, "Yeah, you can give me a hug." I was hoping for the \$5.

He put his arms around me, I put my arms around him and as I hugged him and he hugged me, I realized something: He wasn't going to let me go. And as I stood on this busy, busy city street with people passing me on either side, holding this bum, this bum holding me, it suddenly dawned on me. This wasn't a bum I was holding. I heard the voice, so ably echoed in the 25th chapter of Matthew: "I was hungry. Did you feed me? I was naked. Did you clothe me? I was sick. Did you care for me? I was the stranger. Did you take me in? For if you did it unto the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me. But if you failed to

do it unto the least of these, you failed to do it unto me."

Ours is an increasingly religious society, not because we want some rigid theology, but we want increasingly to become aware of the sacredness that waits to be embraced in the lost and the last and the least.

The student that is worthy of his or her humanity does not use education as a ladder to upward mobility but uses education as a means of equipping himself or herself to meet the needs of others who are less fortunate. And if you fail in this, you have not had a commitment that is worthy of your humanity.

Tony Campolo is an evangelist, professor and author. This is an edited excerpt of a speech he delivered at Wake Forest University Jan. 22. Read the full text and get more information about the university's Year of Religion in American Life at www.wfu.edu/wfu/news/yer.htm

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