

Who do you want to become?

I invite you to reflect for a moment on the people who have had the greatest influence on your life. Taking a piece of paper and pen to jot down your thoughts will help you to focus. Maybe you will think first of your parents or your partner. As you continue to think back, perhaps certain teachers, friends or mentors will come to mind. Whom have you admired in your life? Whom do you emulate? Who has inspired you to become more the person you want to be?

Two of the most influential figures in my life were a teacher and a minister (both men) who served as beacons by which I oriented myself in my adolescence. I did not aspire to follow either of them professionally, but they were powerful examples of my deepest values, and modeled the qualities I believe are essential to a happy and fulfilled life: integrity, compassion, love, inquisitive intellect, acceptance of the human condition (humility) while seeking the divine in everything around us (gratitude). Both were willing to take time to listen to me and to help me work through thoughts and problems. To both I am deeply grateful.

The influence of role models is subtle and profound. Some role models can be negative and when one is not aware of them, these can be damaging. My husband realized in the process of quitting smoking six years ago (with the help of the book Allen Carr's *Easy Way to Stop Smoking*) that all the people he had admired as a young man were smokers and that the people he did not want to resemble were non-smokers. Without realizing it, he had vested the personal power of his role models in the act of smoking.

Every culture has its icons, often in the form of historical figures and anecdotes (George Washington's "I cannot tell a lie," Wilhelm Tell's shooting of the apple as a symbol of the fight against oppression). Religion, mythology and literature used to be the main sources of icons, providing a common foundation of role models and values. Today, there seems to be an endless range of possibilities to which we can aspire. Especially since the advent of television, the media shower us with suggestions of who we want to be, and what we want to have and do. Advertising dazzles us with promises of making our lives happier, more successful, more fulfilled — as though the acquisition of material goods alone could transform who we are.

Part of being human is that we can imagine a more perfect life, a more ideal self. Perceiving the gap between our current reality and our vision can be inspiring, but is often also painful. I believe that fulfillment comes from working towards our potential, but this is not possible without facing the pain of our imperfection.

Trying to evade this pain can lead to addiction in which we may try to fill the gap with numbing substances, food, work or things. Marketers are the modern Sirens of the Lorelei, luring us off course, promising a shortcut to happiness, progress without pain. Consumer culture thrives on creating an attitude of scarcity: "What I have is not enough," "Who I am is not enough." The celebrity cult, particularly powerful in both the US and the UK, also perpetuates the illusion that "having"— money, fame, success, beauty — is the route to fulfillment. Stars have become something like gods, vested with incredible, and for us unattainable, powers. Californians seem to believe that Arnold Schwarzenegger will be able to solve the state's problems. After all, he is the Terminator.

Idolizing of this kind tends to lead us away from taking responsibility, for ourselves and the state of the world we live in.

With each thought and action we are continually creating who we are. Every moment offers the opportunity for choices that define us and our values. To make these choices consciously, we need to step back and listen within to our own truth. We need to face the pain and challenges that life throws in our path in order to grow. We ourselves need to decide what beacons we set our course by.