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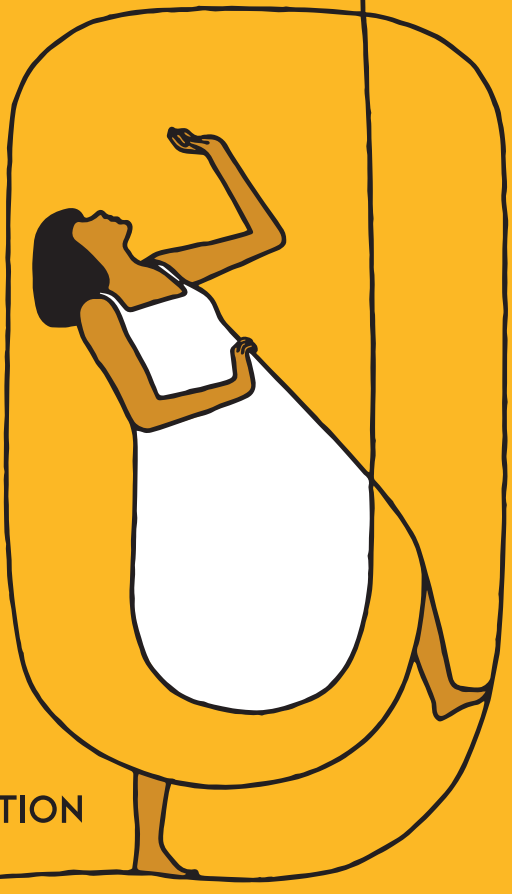

REFLECTIONS ON THE AGE OF HYPER-REINVENTION

PATRICIA MARTIN

WILL THE FUTURE LIKE YOU?

Reflections on the Age of Hyper-reinvention

Patricia Martin

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"Our very life depends directly on continuous acts of beginning."

About the author

Patricia Martin is the author of four books, a researcher, and speaker. Her work has been featured in *Harvard Business Review*, *Huffington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *Psyche Magazine*. For over 25 years, influential brands and non-profits sought her insight as a consultant, including American Express, Oracle, and the New York Philharmonic, among others. She holds an MFA in non-fiction from Bennington College, with post-graduate work in medical narrative at Duke University, and Jungian theory at the C. G. Jung Institute of Chicago, where she gives workshops and hosts the popular podcast *Jung in the World*.

Introduction

In a world that is too much, too fast, and too foggy, much of what we believe about personal identity has not kept up with the speed of change and the influences of technology. The gap leaves us ill-equipped to confidently address the most fundamental question of human existence: Who am I? That question haunts every culture. Bodies of thought and faith, century after century, hold out the promise of an explanation. This book is about how we answer that timeless question in an era of hyper-reinvention and nonstop connectivity.

What is it that makes us a person? Who stays at the center of the story of our lives when everything familiar falls apart? When the wider world tilts and time speeds up, what part of us endures and what transmutes?

Complicating these questions is a belief that the person we know ourselves to be is somehow uniquely ours and ours alone. When we use the word "identity" in conversation, we tend to mean something that is stable within us. Other aspects may come and go, but identity implies continuity. When we say that something affected us on an "identity level," we're saying something fundamental about us is now altered. We're not the same person.

I hit a point in my life when the things anchoring my identity suddenly sprang loose. After 19 years together, my husband and I confronted

our estrangement and resolved to split in the kindest way possible. The following school year, I moved to another town with my children, only to move again months later. That winter, my mother took a nasty fall and was killed instantly, and in a flash I lost my primal anchor. A few years later, my youngest child sat me down and told me about wanting a name change. Molly no longer fit; Henry would be his new name. Next, a major project I was leading got canceled. Sometime later, I awoke, staring at the ceiling, asking myself the iconic question: Who am I?

When my life changed, so did my research agenda. What began as a straightforward examination of the impact of technology on the self morphed into something more personal. I lit out in search of what it means to build, or rebuild, one's identity in a frenetic, tech-driven society. As I pored over more than 3,000 pages of notes I'd gathered for this project, I began writing this book.

How can we know ourselves?

Identity is an idea we construct as a culture, personalize as individuals, then draw meaning from throughout our lives. The scientific literature describes identity as a set of physical and psychological characteristics that belong uniquely to an individual, apart from others. Some theorists contend that identity is inborn, nested within the self. Others see it as a construct built from social influences. Even if experts argue about the pecking order of what constitutes identity, there is some agreement on the three aspects of personhood—how we see ourselves, how we present ourselves to the world, and our will to define who we are. Across a lifetime, we acquire features that make personal identity concrete to ourselves and others. But what part of us maintains a sense of the person we are now, and yet will be different in the future? After a decade of researching the matter, I came to see that personal identity is more than a core aspect of the self.

Identity contains a mysterious quality, an innate essence of who we are. Prying open that mystery drew me into many late-night philosophical discussions. At first, more questions came to me than answers. Eventually, I took it as a rule of thumb that, like most mysteries, I'd only get glimpses of the truth. One facet of the truth, in particular, is woven throughout this book: Identity is an active, creative

energy that we possess that helps us adapt as human beings. Despite the ferocity of change in the outside world, this vital energy urges us to make progress through life, while maintaining some constancy within us. Paradoxically, identity can be fluid like water and solid like stone.

The era of post-identity

I gradually came to see that our culture is shifting away from a focus on a smaller number of features that mark identity, and toward a spectrum of types and constructs. In an era without constraints on features like gender, class, geography, work roles, and family ties, the social construct around identity is under revision.

We are entering uncharted territory of what it means to know ourselves and be known by others. It all points in the same direction. We're entering what I consider to be the era of post-identity. Collectively, that translates into seven themes of our age:

1. The forces of technology continue to disrupt real-time social systems that previously laid the foundation for one's identity.
2. The structures of family life and job security—once powerful sources for defining ourselves—are destabilizing.
3. Institutions that once marked important rites of passage—social clubs, organized religion, political parties—have dwindling reach and efficacy.
4. Lived experience gives us reasons to develop identity, yet human development now occurs in a hybrid environment—partially virtual and partially natural.
5. The internet has made the self a consumer commodity, and social media is the supply chain.
6. The ordeal of hyper-reinvention has emotional costs that show up as symptoms we feel but cannot pin down.
7. The fragmentation of the self that occurs from our use of technology poses psychological barriers to self-knowledge.

Seen broadly, we're living in a time when the old systems that gave meaning to our existence—including identity—are crumbling. Simultaneously, a new system is forming that is not so easy to see, let alone navigate.

The three forces disrupting the self

Looking deeper into these themes, I wanted to understand the energies compelling them. What took shape were forces with the power to disrupt self-development, so that instead of the culture buttressing our personhood, the inverse is happening—certain features of the external world are breaking it down. In particular, I see three forces upending our understanding of who we are:

Persona fog: Persona is the social part of us. It helps us interact with the world. We've come to rely on it heavily in the cyberworld. The emotional cost of generating and spreading multiple versions of our selves shows up as a set of symptoms that I call *persona fog*. Those symptoms are often misunderstood but can be traced back to defining ourselves chiefly by the impression we're making. Over time, I saw how persona fog drapes itself over people's lives and obscures their sense of self.

Chronic self-doubt: Deception is a subtle but persistent undercurrent in the digital culture. Believing we are who we say we are online also gives rise to self-doubt. Validation from the outside world does not seem to soften the unease of self-doubt. Circular self-doubt is the internal script written by the digital age, and it speaks a language of self-undoing.

Cascading crossroads: Work and family life provide roles that give shape to personal identity. When those roles become ambiguous, or abruptly end, it's often because we've hit a fork in the road. In the 21st century, crossroads are no longer a predictable set of milestones. They arrive more often across our extended lifetime, becoming a persistent source of flux.

Across the scope of this research, I saw how the three forces affecting selfhood arise from a much larger transformation in society. When the present social systems that give shape and context to selfhood seem to be dying off, and the emergent social system is barely visible, the tension between the two radiates an energy of chaos.

Social chaos is disturbing. Personal chaos is terrifying. People don't know what to rely on any longer, and it falls on the self to sort out the confusion. As we face the next wave of technology arriving with AI, it's a good time to re-examine the matter of identity, and not trivialize the impact of massive ambiguity on the self.

Listening to experts and everyday people convinced me of the power of perspective in such times. Namely, that having it helps. I looked for examples of people successfully using digital tools to explore new facets of themselves. Along the way, I saw how technology can strengthen our hand at shaping a future self or how it can cut us off from our inner lives. From what I gathered, using personal technologies more consciously will not only be an essential life skill in the future, but a crucial attunement for the collective going forward.

Flight to the moon

In the spring of 2012, I sat at my desk staring at a spreadsheet when my cell phone juddered. On the other end was a soft-spoken gentleman from a space observatory affiliated with NASA.[1] He was seeking advice on how to stir up excitement for space exploration among young people.

My work as a cultural analyst often finds me investigating big shifts in society that foreshadow some kind of disruption or hidden opportunity. Experience has taught me that clients already know part of the answer. Wasn't TESLA's venture into space evidence that there was keen interest? What about the enduring popularity of movies like *Star Wars*? But no. NASA had done its homework on millennials and Gen Z, he said. Rising generations felt *meh* about funding space exploration.

"What do *you* think the problem is?" I asked. After a heavy sigh, he said, "I guess I wonder if being ambitious, like going into space, is who we are anymore?" That last phrase, "who we are anymore," stirred something in me. After 20 years of researching cultural phenomena, I've learned to take seriously what Joan Didion called the shimmer around the edges of a good topic.

By the time the call ended, I could feel questions rustling inside me. He had a point. Just a half-century ago, the entire world watched in awe as the first human being set foot on the moon—a feat that inspired a communal sense of adventure. On the ground, we were the people who chose to go to the moon to expand the boundaries of the known. It was an untested ambition big enough to organize a nation and its people toward the future. Do we still strive to become something better, braver, and more expansive? What we strive to become is an act of will that also shapes who we are, but by how much, I wasn't sure. But I wanted to know.

Admittedly, identity is a vast terrain. More so since we live in a moment when scientific advances put gender change within reach of the average person, and the American population grows more ethnically diverse every day. The scope was intimidating. So much so that I kept picking it up and setting it down in between assignments from other clients.

This project became my moonshot. I spent a decade observing and charting how social transformations and the churning forces of change affect the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and—just as important—who we want to be in the future.

On methods

Seeking to understand the physics of these forces impacting our sense of self, and how they work in our lives, I went back and forth through time, exploring philosophy and neuroscience with equal curiosity to see what *is* influencing identity formation now. I used a variety of ethnographic approaches, including online and offline participant-observation; semi-structured, long-form ethnographic interviews; digitized content analysis; and a practice that anthropologist Clifford Geertz called "deep hanging out," which involves immersing oneself in a cultural group or social experience on an informal level. Out of what I hope is an excess of caution in an age when privacy is assiduously exploited, I have changed the names of many people, except for those whose identities were already widely public.

Pushing into new methods of inquiry, I hung out in chat rooms and on Listservs, where people gave voice to topics ranging from impostor syndrome to their career ambitions. I downloaded breaking research by the gigabyte. But the analysis of larger samples required a sophisticated algorithm to be custom-coded for the project, enabling me to scrape the web and sort the sentiments of 15,000 online users across 500 million posts. I tracked down psychologists, evolutionary anthropologists, and neuroscientists to gain an added dimension to what I was uncovering.

To appreciate the depth and drama of the situation, I took to the fringes of society by interviewing a radical priest, a game developer, a dominatrix, a shaman, and a tattoo artist—all people who witness the yearnings of others. Using social media, I recruited a group of Americans willing to

correspond and be interviewed about their moments of truth, personal transformations, and who they wanted to become in the future.

As our rapport grew, people began confessing their emotional struggles from living so much online. To help me make sense of their anguish, I turned to Carl Jung's canon of individuation. I entered the sprawling landscape of psychoanalysis and poked around the hidey-hole of the unconscious. Reading Jung's work, I saw that he'd grappled with the same quandaries I was facing, and he felt an urgency to take them on, in the way they felt urgent to me.

Over time, I started to see something new emerging. It was a form of identity confusion, fatigue, and a feeling of being weakened by shadowy threats that did not quite fit the frame of standard ideas about identity and the self. I also found patterns in the way people maintained the thread of self, and where it slipped from their grasp. This book uses their journeys of individuation to reveal how some of them faced their crossroads, built resilience for uncertainty, and fed their souls during periods of radical transformation.

What set some of the people in this book apart was how they came to know themselves from those experiences. When they could dig beneath the surface, many saw in themselves something that had previously been hidden, and whatever they discovered gave them the vitality to stay curious, embrace the mess, and keep going. The idea here is that giving voice to their stories will make their triumphs over the furies of our age—persona fog, chronic self-doubt, and cascading crossroads—available to us for our own growth.

If identity and the self are big concepts, that also means they can't be entirely grasped in one handful any more than life can be. Constructing a solid sense of self is tough to do, and even harder to do consciously amid tectonic change and when so much else wants our attention. We are bound to underestimate the task. Knowing ourselves, like much of life, is equal to a rough draft. We can't make the process perfect. But each revision makes the whole of us better.

So let's lay into it. The future wants us to.