

EXPERIENTIAL MONTAGE: THE INTERPERSONAL SELF

Sunnie D. Kidd

Perhaps there is no other search for treasure, hidden or otherwise, which has found so many people expending more energy than the search for personal meaning. The self has been an elusive, apparently difficult to locate entity which has defied description, made learned persons ponder and young people seek the answer to the age-old question of “who am I?” The assumptions supporting the struggle to be a self already suggest that there is one there. All psychological balance implies is that we must find the self, examine it and finally, accept what is found as our own treasure for it is my own self.

I suggest that we each are already this self and that the search for one that is lost or hidden is a pure waste of energy. The question is, how can we see it? Our lives have been lived by a self, our names attest to its existence and our meaning as we understand ourselves already exists in our relationships shared with others from the time we are born. An experiential montage provides the comprehensive and singular meaning of our already lived life as well as our hoped to live futures. This is the interpersonal self, an image of singular reflection as unique as the snowflake.

Experiential montage refers to the image of one’s personal meaning as it has arisen from and will continue to emerge from the inescapable fact that we live with, grow from and are even inhibited by, our contacts with other people in the routine of our daily lives. It changes through time and experience. The term “montage” comes from the world of photography and art. It is described as the art or process of making a composite picture by bringing together into a single composition a number of different pictures or parts of pictures and arranging these, superposed one upon another, so that they form a blended whole while remaining distinct. To superpose is to lay or place on, over or above something else. An experiential montage is an ongoing, developing image/scheme of single composition that consists in an arrangement of different experiences with others that overlay one another.

A montage composition shares several commonalities with the process of personal/social development of an interpersonal self. Personal meaning arises from experiences with others through time that is juxtaposed and superposed one upon the other, sort of an experiential overlay. These experiences never lose their relativity to the person’s own self-understanding. They become engrained in memory, feelings and a sense of who I am.

Continuity in the experiential montage comes from the time that runs

through a person's life as water runs through the stream . . . providing continuity in meaning and experience, as it is mine. The form emerges and blends into a whole while certain images of other people who are significant to my own meaning remain distinct. This means that all the different potentialities of each person may be reflected in the montage like light through a prism. The developing image/scheme of the present may be strong while others shared with someone special in the past always remain as a foundation to the overall congruence yet shifting space of the montage of who I am at this time or who I was some years ago . . . to the who I aspire to become.

The impact of our interpersonal experiences affect each participant but not necessarily in the same way or to the same degree. Experience carries existential weight for each of the people involved. Influence by another upon one's development can be determined in one's experiential montage through the impact it has made upon its shape, its emotional coloring and its intellectual arrangement. This means that as someone comes into my life, my meaning and self-understanding shift as that person touches me at a dimension which calls me to reflect upon values, beliefs, intellectual thoughts or something happens which throws me into reflection upon who am I?

William James once said that we are as many social selves as there are persons who recognize us. An experiential montage is a way of looking at the patterns of impact upon personal meaning that have blended into the continuing wholeness of a person's meaning. This is revealed in four dynamic ways through the experiential montage: 1) It *locates* a person, in time and space, "this is me right here right now." 2) It *shows* the extent of interpersonal influence by any one person. As one reflects upon the arrangement in terms of importance certain significant events of a change in self come forward. 3) It *gives* identity. One that was already there which is specially mine, it cannot be duplicated by another or given to another. 4) It *opens* the person for the possibility of reflection. It is a reflection of "what I have lived and what I aspire to live."

One practical example illustrates just what the montage means for the person, already exists in the photograph album. An experiential montage is in that album, it is composed of already developed images that stay within and help create the bounds of personal meaning. Each image says something about and to the person who has taken the image and mounted it in a personal book. Leafing through the album reveals quick reflections of a self, of who one is. Usually pictures are of significant moments, seemingly insignificant moments to others perhaps but each is important to that person. The montage in the album shows how personal meaning emerges, how it has been condensed and how it is re-lived, changed, added on to and how it is saved and savored by the person. It is an ongoing life-line describing and

illustrating the always emerging meaning of who am I?

The experiential montage, like the album, is not-yet finished, at least as long as one is alive. Like the album, it may contain those who have lived before us or those who will come after us. It is always open, always shifting and always in flux. It is open ended too as it is possible for others to influence us when we are not aware of it whether they are near to or far from us.

People in one's experiential montage are usually significant in that they have been influential in personal ways. Once included in one's own way of being oneself, the other's specific meaning may not be fully present, except in reflection upon why you do things the way you do. It maintains the thread of continuity essential for the human experience of "this is me."

As a way of showing others and myself who I am the experiential montage is a therapeutic tool, teaching method or self-taught way of taking one more step on that treasure hunt for the mettle that is more precious than gold. It helps gain a fuller understanding and acceptance of the fact that I am who I am with others, that the people in my experiential montage are the keys to unlock the doors of doubt about the who that seems always hidden or lost from my own knowing.

When one begins to place a name at the heart or center, a personal by-line of life begins to emerge. The arrangement of others in relation to personal meaning, both positive and negative, live close to that center. They are put in the space closest since their impact has carried the most weight as defined by the client or participant.

As each space is named by another's meaning the montage grows, takes on superposed meaning and begins to reveal the discrepant, juxtaposed nature of our experience. It shows even the incongruent and conflicting aspects of one's own world of experience as it begins to reveal who I am. Each person's life is a living montage whether raised as an orphan, a child in a large family, a person alone at 74 or someone who is a corporate executive officer involved in political dealings with hundreds of others.

When a person draws the experiential montage there occurs a certain inner understanding which seems to light up from within, "yes this is me." Like it or not in some cases but this is definitely mine. I cannot write in others' experiences not shared by me. I cannot counterfeit or rationalize just who has become a part of my own being . . . since the experiential montage includes what is important for me to be . . . or not to be.