

RETHINK YOUR SELF



TREVIN WAX THE POWER OF LOOKING UP
BEFORE LOOKING IN

Trevin Wax is an insightful thinker and skilled writer. In *Rethink Your Self* he shows that following our own dreams and desires won't work; we must look to God to learn who we are and are meant to be. Nothing less can bring us purpose and delight.

Randy Alcorn, author of *Happiness and Heaven*

Trevin is a gift to church, and his book reflects this reality. In *Rethink Your Self*, you are going to discover your true self—self created in the image and likeness of a God who cares for us and cultivates our character to reach its redemptive potential.

Dr. Derwin L. Gray, lead pastor,
Transformation Church; author of *The Good Life:
What Jesus Teaches About Finding True Happiness*

The common advice to “be yourself” is easier given than taken. In the modern age, shaping our identities and orienting our lives is more complicated than at any time in human history. With clarity, knowledge, and wisdom, Trevin Wax explains the unique challenges this particular cultural moment presents us in being ourselves, and places these challenges into the context of an eternal design—one that can equip each of us to be who God created and called us to be.

Karen Swallow Prior, author of *On Reading Well:
Finding the Good Life through Great Books* and
*Fierce Convictions: The Extraordinary Life of Hannah
More—Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist*

Rethink Your Self is a guide for people who long to soar in life. Trevin Wax exposes unproductive frames of mind, tackles big questions, and sorts out the complexity of the human heart in amazingly clear prose. Highly recommended!

René Breuel, author of *The Paradox of Happiness*

We live in a society that is obsessed with identity and yet filled with people who have no idea who they are. In this book, Trevin Wax gently persuasively questions the common sense of our day of “being true to yourself” and points to the paradoxical beauty of denying yourself and following Jesus. In a culture that says “look within,” we would do well to follow Trevin Wax’s advice to look up.

Jeremy Treat, PhD, pastor for Preaching and Vision at Reality LA; author of *Seek First* and *The Crucified King*

RETHINK YOUR SELF



RETHINK YOUR SELF



TREVIN WAX THE POWER OF LOOKING UP
BEFORE LOOKING IN

B&H
PUBLISHING
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Copyright © 2020 by Trevin Wax
All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America

978-1-5359-9563-4

Published by B&H Publishing Group
Nashville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 248.84
Subject Heading: HAPPINESS / SELF / CHRISTIAN LIFE

All Scripture quotations are taken from
the Christian Standard Bible®, Copyright © 2017 by
Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian
Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered
trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

It is the Publisher's goal to minimize disruption caused
by technical errors or invalid websites. While all links
are active at the time of publication, because of the
dynamic nature of the internet, some web addresses or
links contained in this book may have changed and may
no longer be valid. B&H Publishing Group bears no
responsibility for the continuity or content of the external
site, nor for that of subsequent links. Contact the external
site for answers to questions regarding its content.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 • 24 23 22 21 20

For Timothy, Julia, and David

*May you be renewed in knowledge
according to the image of your Creator.*
Colossians 3:10

Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Looking In, Around, and Up	7
Chapter 2: Looking Around, Up, and In	21
Chapter 3: The Challenges of Defining Yourself	33
Chapter 4: The Challenges of Displaying Yourself . . .	49
Chapter 5: Look Up	65
Chapter 6: Our Original Purpose	79
Chapter 7: Our Unavoidable Flaw	95
Chapter 8: The Ancient Wisdom of Jesus	109
Chapter 9: The Hinge of History	131
Chapter 10: Your New Self	147
Chapter 11: Retraining Your Self	165
Conclusion	187
Acknowledgments	193
Notes	195

Introduction

This is not a self-help book.

If you're looking for tips and strategies to improve yourself and feel fulfilled, you can find plenty of books with commonsense wisdom geared toward that end. This is not one of them.

My goal isn't to help you *help* yourself, but to help you *rethink* yourself. And the only way you will rethink yourself is if, before rushing too quickly to commonsense answers, you encounter a different set of questions. The first step in rethinking yourself is when you decide not to accept so easily the most common answers to the most commonly asked questions.

One of the best places to see what passes for common sense is the graduation ceremony—commencement services where young people stride across the platform, celebrate their achievements, and toss their caps as they step into a world brimming with possibilities. You're probably familiar with the inspiring words you

hear at these events, even though you can't remember the specifics because, unless they were out of the ordinary, they offered up the usual commonsensical fare about the future:

Follow your heart.

Chase your dreams.

You are enough.

You do you.

No matter what, be true to yourself.

If you were to discern a main point from graduation ceremonies across the United States, you'd come up with something like this: *the purpose of life is to discover yourself by looking deep down, and then express yourself to the world, no matter what anyone else—family members, friends, colleagues, previous generations, or religious institutions—might say.*

Common sense, right?

If you're going to rethink yourself, you'll have to question those slogans and the ideas behind them. You'll need to stop assuming that the world works the way you've always thought it should work, or that your purpose is whatever you've assumed it to be, or that your road to happiness must follow the well-tread paths of everyone else.

INTRODUCTION

A warning: rethinking yourself means first *re-thinking*, and rethinking can be unsettling. It requires you to put things on the table that you've never thought to examine. It means probing your inner motivations and the desires of your heart in ways that may bother you and upset your priorities. It means coming face-to-face with some of your deepest fears and anxieties. It will open your eyes to things you've taken for granted while making you doubt things you've considered to be basic truths about the world. Rethinking yourself means more than just looking inward to your heart; it requires you to see yourself in relation to the world in a different way.

Rethinking yourself also means rethinking your *self*. It means figuring out what it is that makes you *you*. How do you discover who you are—what constitutes the core of your being? What is a “self” anyway, and what makes your “self” different from everyone else?

I assume you're not reading this book because you want me to tell you everything you want to hear, or because you want me to reaffirm everything you already believe to be true. With a title like *Rethink Your Self*, you've probably picked up this book for one of two reasons.

The first is that you may be facing some important decisions and you want to get them right. You want to be the best version of yourself you can be, and you want

to fulfill whatever calling you feel is most important in your life. But you know how easy it is to fail to reach your potential, or to fail to discern your purpose in life, and the big decisions down the road frighten you a little (or maybe, a lot!). You want to be authentic and to make choices that align with the deepest part of yourself, but you wonder if the commonsense wisdom you hear everywhere else is adequate in equipping you to find and follow the best path in life.

The second reason you may be interested in this book is because you're on the other side of some decisions you've made in the past, and as you look back at your life, you feel the weight of more than a few regrets. You've always gone along with what passes for common sense (*be yourself, follow your heart, chase your dreams*), but it hasn't led to the happiness you expected to experience by now. You're anxious. You're irritable. You worry you're missing out on something better. It looks like everyone else has found the secret to the good life, while you're just muddling through the day trying to keep up appearances. In fact, you wonder if you'll ever get what you want out of life. In bleaker moments, you wonder if you even *know* what you want out of life. On the other side of life throwing you some curveballs, you're not sure you even know what it means to "be yourself" anymore.

INTRODUCTION

Whether you're the first reader or the second, the point is that you're ready for self-examination. You sense the need to take a step back, look at your life, take stock of things, and get a fresh perspective on your identity and purpose. You're ready to examine things you've always taken for granted, and you're wondering if what passes for common sense really makes sense.

If that's you, you've already taken the first step to rethinking yourself. The world needs more people who ask questions no one else thinks about, who doubt the ideas everyone else assumes to be true, and who are courageous enough to become unsettled and uncomfortable in challenging their once-cherished beliefs. It takes guts to put yourself on the table and invite scrutiny about who you are and what your purpose is.

So, as we start our journey together, we're going to take a closer look at the usual way people in our society think of themselves. We'll see what works and what doesn't in this framework for thinking about our purpose. Next, we'll consider another way of seeing ourselves—what passes for common sense in other cultures and societies. Then, we will consider how the ancient wisdom of the Bible describes our purpose in life and how this perspective challenges the commonsense wisdom of our day.

RETHINK YOUR SELF

Even if you don't consider yourself religious or spiritual, I hope you'll be open-minded toward that ancient perspective. There's wisdom to be found there, and it has stood the test of time. Let's get started.

CHAPTER 1

Looking In, Around, and Up

There's something exhilarating about being told you can be whatever you want to be. With enough hard work and determination, you can achieve anything! You are free to discover your identity and purpose and then display yourself for the world to see.

It's no wonder that self-help books and feel-good movies and some of the biggest pop songs rely on this message of inspiration. We love stories of people who overcome the odds, who remain true to themselves no matter the obstacles, and who succeed in life at being whatever they set out to be. *You can do whatever you want!* There's something exhilarating in that message of freedom.

But the message of freedom delivered to someone in their teens sounds different when directed to someone

in their fifties. Once you chase your dreams for a few years, experience some of life's big setbacks, and regret some decisions that didn't get you where you thought you wanted to go, you may hear that inspiring talk a little differently. It sounds more exhausting than exhilarating. Instead of making you feel good about yourself and your future, it makes you feel bad about yourself and worse about what may lie ahead.

Just think what the message implies: if you're not where you want to be in life, something must be wrong . . . *with you*. After all, if anyone can achieve anything and you've not yet reached the pinnacle of your success or the fulfillment of your dreams, then you've failed somehow. It's all on you.

How do you deal with such disappointment? Some people choose to see themselves as a victim of circumstances. *The world is out to get me, everything is rigged to keep me from being myself, and there's no point in pursuing happiness anymore. Everything has conspired against me.* Other people blame themselves. *I'm just not good enough. I can't keep up. Maybe everyone else is doing better than me because, deep down, everyone else is better than me.* Bitterness and resentment fill the heart of the first person; guilt and anxiety, the second.

In both cases, discouragement sets in because none of the cheery promises came true. If you alone are

responsible for finding yourself and fulfilling your purpose, and if it's within your grasp to become and do whatever you set your heart to, and you've not succeeded, what else can you conclude except that you're a victim because the world has wronged you, or you're a failure because you've not overcome the obstacles to your happiness? Whether you failed to overcome the odds or failed to find happiness, the point is *you* failed. Life beat you up. You lost.

At this point, the commonsense response in our society is to double down on the original promise. *Time to get back up and try again! Your disappointment and failure is just one more obstacle to overcome. You can achieve anything you want and reach your dreams if you refuse to give up.* But what if returning to the promises that disappointed you just sets you up for bigger failures and more discouragement in the future? What will it take before we ask if the original message was even true?

Here is where we need to step back and take a closer look at the way most of us see the world. Before we can *rethink* anything, we need a clearer vision of how we think without thinking. Most of what we assume to be true about our lives is unconscious. We gravitate toward a certain way of understanding the world without ever calling it into question.

We don't always know why we're inclined to make certain choices, because our view of life isn't something we consider all the time. We don't wake up every morning wondering about the meaning of life, or our deepest source of identity, or what our purpose is. We get up, eat some breakfast, brush our teeth, and get dressed for school or work or whatever we've got going on that day.

Your life is formed as much by what you *unconsciously* assume is the purpose of life as it is by any book you've read or talk you've listened to on the matter. That's why, in order to *rethink* your self, you've first got to *think* about yourself.

Why does everyone just nod along to the idea that the purpose of life is to "be true to yourself" and "chase your dreams" and "follow your heart," as if the message is so obviously true that it would be silly to question it? Because most people in our society view themselves and the world like this: you look *in*, then *around*, and then *up*. The default setting for people in our society is to figure out life according to these priorities. In, around, and up. In other words, we first look inside ourselves, then look around to others, and then (usually, but not always) look up to God or some higher power. Look in, around, and then up.

Look In

The “look in” approach to life means that your purpose is to look inside yourself in order to discover who you truly are—to find what makes you unique—and then to take hold of your authentic self and emerge with it intact and uncompromised. Who are you? Only you can figure out the answer, and the way you find out is by looking deep into your heart to discover your uniqueness, to come to terms with what you want most from life.

To “look in” means you first look inside for the answers to life’s biggest questions. Another way to describe this orientation to life is through what I call the four D’s: definition, desires, display, and design.

Definition

Definition refers to the way you define yourself. Who are you? What are you? What is your identity? What is your purpose in life? We must decide the answers to these questions for ourselves—or so we’re told. The way to find fulfillment in life is to look inside yourself as an individual and determine what is unique about you—who you are deep down. You are responsible for defining yourself. No one else can do this for you. It’s a deeply

personal act. *You do you. Be true to yourself. Be you.* You define your identity.

Desires

Defining yourself may not be as easy as it sounds. How can you know if you are defining yourself authentically? Here is where *desires* come in. Defining yourself requires you to get in touch with the deepest desires of your heart. You must dig below the surface until you unearth the answer to what you really want most out of life. Who do you want to be? What do you want to accomplish? What will it take for you to be happy? What are the desires that drive you? It's only when you discover your deepest desires that you can be assured of your identity and purpose in life. Until you know your desires, you can't truly follow your heart or chase your dreams. Your desires determine your destiny.

Display

Once you've discovered your desires and defined your identity accordingly, it's time to put yourself on display. You're ready for the world to see who you really are. Now you *look around* to find people who will celebrate what it is that makes you unique. You look for people to affirm who you are and what you want out of life. You

gather friends who cheer you on in your quest to follow your heart.

It's never been easier to express yourself now that we all have opportunities online to develop a persona through what we write, what we wear, what pictures we post, or how we present ourselves. People care deeply about their public image not because they're just faking it or trying to impress people, but because their self-expression is so tightly connected to their self-definition. At least at some unconscious level, we connect affirmation to personhood. To not affirm someone's true self is, in some sense, to deny their personhood—which, in the scheme we've been following, means to not affirm someone's *desires* is to not affirm their *identity*.

We look *in* to discover our desires and define ourselves, and then we look *around* for people who support our quest for authenticity.

Design

Definition, desires, display, and finally *design*. As you go through life, you find yourself changing, and whenever your desires shift, the image you want to put on display for other people may shift too. You may reach a point where you feel inauthentic, like you've been putting on a show for people and aren't truly expressing the essence of who you are. Or maybe you feel insecure

because people don't seem to like the person you've presented, and you want to get in touch with yourself at a deeper level and see if others will accept a more attractive version of yourself. Or maybe you once felt special and unique but now you see that you're a lot like everyone else and you don't really stand out.

What happens next is a process of redesign. You reinvent yourself. You see yourself in need of an upgrade. When you experience a period of self-stagnation where you worry about failing to reach your greatest potential, you begin a process of reinvention by looking deep within yourself once more until you come up with a new design—a new *you* to be true to.

We used to make jokes about the “design” phase by calling it a mid-life crisis, but nowadays it can happen to anyone at any time. Tired of your old self? Try on a new image! Artists and musicians do this in order to stay relevant—to maintain the element of surprise for their fans, or perhaps to gain some new ones. But now that most of us have become broadcasters of our lives online, we feel similar pressure. Redesign your life. Reinvent yourself.

Looking In Before Looking Up

Those are the four D's, and they demonstrate the “look in” approach to life—the priority of looking *in* to

find ourselves and desires, and then looking *around* to express our identity to others. But many people find that only looking *in* and *around* is unsatisfying. They believe something is missing—a spiritual dimension to their life. They long for something transcendent, and so they look *up*. They look for ways to incorporate that deep spiritual longing or religious impulse into their lives.

What does this look like in practice? You add a spiritual dimension to your life through adopting certain exercises, such as meditation, or fasting, or prayer, or attending a religious service, or a certain kind of exercise and dieting regimen intended to rid your body of toxins. The “look in” approach to life isn’t opposed to spirituality; it borrows spiritual practices that help you get better at looking inside your heart. People often sense the need to get in touch with their spiritual side, and so after they’ve looked *in* to discover who they are, and after they’ve looked *around* to gain the support and approval of others, they look *up* to a higher power to provide a spiritual dimension to life.

In, around, and up. For most people in our society, this is the set of priorities that gives shape to how we view our purpose and identity. Sociologists and researchers have done studies that show the prevalence of this way of thinking in North America—where the purpose of life is to be true to yourself, to find happiness, and to be a good

person. It transcends many cultural and political divides. It is the default way of thinking for young people, even across different religious groups.¹

Despite the differences in our religious views or political affiliations or geographical location, there's a common thread throughout our society: the purpose of life is to *look in* (first and foremost), *look around* (for support and affirmation), and then *look up* (for inspiration). That's how it works. You define yourself, pursue your desires, put yourself on display for others to see, and then occasionally, when necessary, design a new *you* as you move through life.²

Put your own life under the magnifying glass for a moment. Is this approach to life true of you? How do you make decisions? How do you determine what you want from life? Where do you turn when you're in trouble? What do you expect your friends to do for you? How do you define yourself and grow in authenticity? What do you expect out of your faith tradition or your relationship with God?

If you're like most people in our society, you discover your purpose by looking in, around, and up. Not surprisingly, then, it's just common sense for people to say you've got to be true to yourself, be real and authentic, follow your dreams, and express your uniqueness.

Such a deeply personal journey, isn't it? That's why it's going to be difficult to put it on the examining table. But the process of *rethinking* yourself requires us to ask some tough questions. Does the "look in" approach actually work? Does it give the happiness and satisfaction it promises? Does it make for a healthy society? We are living through an era of increased polarization politically and culturally. Is it possible that the "look in" way of life is one of the causes? Does this way of thinking bring us together or drive us apart?

Consider how we handle disagreements or criticism. When someone questions your choices in life, you get defensive, don't you? Especially when you've done the hard work of looking deep within yourself to discover who you are and what you want out of life. The moment someone questions your values or beliefs about yourself and the world, you're likely to receive that challenge as a personal attack. No wonder it gets harder to have dialogue in society!

When people look inside themselves in order to define their purpose, and then look around in order to receive support for their decisions, they find it hard to receive criticism of any kind. Criticism makes us feel condemned, as if someone has called into question our deepest desires or the contribution of our uniqueness to the world. Not

only does it feel like people are critiquing our actions, it feels like they are condemning our very identity.

The problem is, our values and beliefs do not always align with others, and theirs don't align with us either. And so we feel trapped. On the one hand, if we're going to be true to ourselves, we ought to be able to say whatever we think about anything. On the other hand, if we question or critique someone else, we know we may be hindering their attempt to be true to themselves. What a strange cultural bind! We're supposed to express ourselves, but only so long as we never call into question someone else's self-expression.

As you're starting to see, there are some issues that arise in societies where the "look in" approach is widespread. We'll explore other problems in more detail later on, but first we need to be reminded that what passes for common sense in our society isn't common sense everywhere. There are alternatives. Throughout history, most societies have not seen the world this way at all. If you're going to rethink yourself, you should be acquainted with the way people in other parts of the world think of themselves. And for many, looking *in* first leads to loneliness and societal disintegration. According to these cultures, we should start by looking *around*.

Reflection Questions

How do you deal with disappointment, when things don't turn out the way you hoped?

In what ways does the “look in” approach describe your overall outlook on life? In what ways is your outlook different?

Have you ever gone through a “redesign” where you tried to reinvent yourself in some way?

Follow your heart. You are enough. You do you.

We take these slogans for granted, but what if this path to personal happiness leads to a dead-end? In *Rethink Your Self*, Trevin Wax

encourages you to rethink some of our society's most common assumptions about identity and the road to happiness.

"...a guide for **people who long to soar** in life."

RENÉ BREUEL, author of *The Paradox of Happiness*

"...you are going to **discover your true self**—created in the image of a God who cultivates our character to reach its redemptive potential."

DERWIN GRAY, author of *The Good Life*

"Trevin Wax is an **insightful thinker and skilled writer.**"

RANDY ALCORN, author of *Heaven and Happiness*

TREVIN WAX is a vice-president at LifeWay Christian Resources, and a regular columnist at The Gospel Coalition. A former missionary to Romania, he has contributed to *The Washington Post*, *Religion News Service*, *World*, and *Christianity Today*, which named him one of thirty-three millennials shaping the next generation. He is the author of *This Is Our Time*.

B&H
BHPUBLISHING.COM

RELIGION/Christian Living/Spiritual Growth
978-1-5359-9563-4 \$17.99 USD

