

# Character and . . .

# Identity

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*Introduction: Character and Identity*

## Articles

LINDSEY M. WARD

*On Becoming a Better Failure: How Failure Stories Can Shape Our Identities*

JOSEPH SABIN

*Shifting Our Mindset: Sports, Character, and Identity*

TIMOTHY MATTHEW  
SLEMMONS

*Co-Authoring Your Story in Light of God's Epic: Human Identity and the Divine Word*

## Response

WALLY METTS

*Humility and Story: Connecting Identity and Character*



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*The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.*

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# Humility and Story: Connecting Identity and Character

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Wally Metts

*Would it have been worth while,  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
. . . . If one, settling a pillow by her head  
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all;  
That is not it, at all."*

T.S. Elliot, "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock"

My athletic career ended in the early sixties, when, after attending every Little League practice for two years, I only played in one game. We were ahead by a dozen or so points, and the coach let me off the bench. My mom insisted that I finish what I started but when the season was over, I quit. My athletic *career* ended, but not my athletic experience.

In 10<sup>th</sup> grade I had a PE teacher (high school coach) who would tell rowdy classmates that if they didn't shape up, he would put me on their team, a real threat since every class consisted of playing different team sports. The final exam always consisted of a fitness test, and I could never do chin ups. I finally got an A in a PE class in college when I took a beginning swimming class, without telling anyone I was a certified lifeguard. The teacher was very impressed by my "progress," and by the end of the term I was even helping others.

If some high school administrator, or even my mother, had read Joseph Sabin's essay "Shifting Our Mindset: Sports, Character and Identity," I would be a different person than I am today. But as Sabin so thoughtfully notes, not necessarily a *better* person. I was undoubtedly shaped by these experiences, and I share my failures, and to some degree other people's failures, as a way of understanding who I am—a critical process described by Lindsey M. Ward in "On Becoming A Better Failure: How Failure Stories Can Shape Our Identities."

For a long time, the tension between how I was perceived by others and how I perceived myself was huge, but I somehow managed to see myself as both better than them and better than they saw me. I was not overweight or cross-eyed or short, just a little awkward in elementary school, a perception that carried over with the same kids in the same school system until I skipped my senior year and went to college. Like Prufrock I often felt no one was listening or cared. But I had read more books than my peers. A lot more.



*Wally Metts, fifth grade*

One of those books, the focus of Timothy Matthew Slemmons' essay "Co-Authoring Your Story in Light of God's Epic: Human Identity and the Divine Word," was the Bible. I grew up in a conservative Baptist home where it was taken quite seriously. By the time my Dad, a pastor for over 50 years, was in his 60s, he was reading it through four or five times a year, but all my life it flowed out of his lips and through his life. It taught him about grace, which he extended to everyone, including me, his "intellectual," prideful son.

In responding to this set of essays, I will make some general observations about the nature of identity and character as framed by these authors, followed by a brief discussion of similarities and differences between the authors' views. I will then return to the issue of identity, drawing the conclusion that our conception of identity is often too simplistic to account for the diverse and complex influence of culture. And I will finish the story with which I began.

## Character and Identity Are Difficult to Define

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This issue of *Character and . . .* is an ambitious project, since relating character and identity is made more challenging by the ambiguity of both terms. We do have some idea of what each of these authors mean by character. Sabin points us directly to the Wendt Character Initiative, rooted in the classical virtues such as truthfulness, justice, fairness and service, and he points to Christian B. Miller’s description of traits that lead people to think, feel, and act in certain ways. His essay then directly and indirectly relates to how these traits may or may not develop in athletes. While noting that many believe teamwork, loyalty, and other traits can be developed through sports, he observes, “[n]otably absent from the . . . list [of those developed through sports] are traits such as honesty and moral reasoning” (32). He spends a great deal of time relating lapses in moral reasoning to a pervasive win-at-all-costs mentality.



Illustration by Diane Fraley, [dsfraley.com](http://dsfraley.com)

But the other authors treat character more by inference. In Slemmons we see Augustine’s moral lapses, for example, and Johann Georg Hamann confronts his arrogance in contrast to divine humility. For Slemmons, to the degree our character is rewritten by scripture, it is as a *better* character with an eternal perspective. This is a reasonable inference, but an inference, nonetheless.

Ward requires even more of an inference to get to her understanding of character. We can infer, for example, that some of the failures Ward encourages us to share are moral failures. Perhaps most of them are. But Slemmons does not deal with the moral issues directly, although certainly the growth we can experience as we share and embrace failure is understood as a positive growth, one that leads to making better choices, not only in our actions but in the way we think about ourselves.

The relationship between character and self-understanding is central to Ward and Sabin and begins to point us toward how all three of these authors understand the issue of identity. None of them make any attempt to define it, but it is loosely understood by all of them to mean “who we are,” which is, unfortunately, not very helpful. I will return to this issue at some length, but first we will look at their limited discussions of identity as a concept.

Early in her essay Ward says, “failure sharing has a positive impact on who we are, our very identities” (12). Our selfie culture, she argues, has “detrimental effects on our identities,” resulting in “under-confident, depressive identities” or “overconfident, know-it-all identities,” and not being able to talk about our failures “has fundamentally shifted our understandings of who we are and aspire to be” (14). She concludes that “[f]ailure sharing is an essential part of understanding our identities” (27).

Slemmons is interested in our self-concept, too. Hebrews 4.12, he says, explains “how the friendly God who understands you reveals and interprets you to yourself—that is, to your willing self” (56). This eventually becomes his framework for identity as he understands it, a Christian identity in which the Word of God transforms us into “fully-orbed, well-rounded characters” (66).

Sabin also sees identity as self-understanding, and sports has the potential to improve it. Or destroy it. Or at least reveal it. He cites coach Mike Krzyewski, who said in a speech that as an athlete on the field, “you have to instantaneously react, be instinctive, who you are, what character do you have. . .” (qtd. in Sabin 32). But Sabin recognizes the limitations of this, referring to the Japanese notion of *ikigai*, roughly “the reason you wake up in the morning” (44). You need a better reason than practice so you can win, he argues. You need a better purpose so you can live.

## **Character and Identity Are Related . . . But Complicated**

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However loosely defined, taken together these authors argue that identity formation, experienced in different ways or through different channels, is related to character formation. This is a case worth making

## Character and . . . Identity

and supports the goals and mission of the Wendt Center, suggesting both how identity formation leads to character formation and at least one character trait that might emerge.

The how has to do with intention. And the trait is humility. We have to do certain things on purpose for character to develop and grow. We have to read our Bible with intention and faith, Slemmons says, which results in a supernatural outcome. We have to change the way we think about sports and train athletes, which results in a more realistic view of one's life and purpose. We have to talk about our failures in intentional ways, which result in hopeful and helpful self-knowledge.



Illustration by Diane Fraley, [dsfraley.com](http://dsfraley.com)

Both Sabin and Ward use the term *mindset* in this way. For Sabin, developing better people rather than just better athletes will require coaches and parents to shift their mindset about winning and life. “What may be a bit more pragmatic [than eliminating the profit motive] is a simple mindset shift for all parties interested in building character through sports” (46), which he shows does not occur by just playing sports.


Ward connects us to Carol Dweck’s understanding of attributional tendencies as either fixed or growth mindsets. How others receive or profit from our failure stories depends on how well we help them think about what those stories say about us and about them. “[F]ailure sharing is much more effective when done with a bit of intention,” Ward suggests, while cautioning against oversharing and indiscriminate sharing (25).

Slemmons argues for intentional, even daily, reading of scripture, with a willing suspension of disbelief and a partnership with our divine Co-

Author. This is deliberate action with predictable consequences, almost all of which involve the kind of person we are or become. The Word of God, he says, “encounters people, reorients their lives for the good, invests them with a new identity, shapes their character and vocation, and even continues to ‘author’ their lives afterward” (52). But you have to pick it up and read it, as Augustine and a countless stream of faithful Christians have done.

So, character formation through identity development is intentional, but these authors have, unwittingly I suspect, arrived at the same effect. In every case a primary consequence is humility. Slemmons addresses this directly, as does the scripture itself. Each of the examples he cites, from Augustine to

Kanye West, learned or are learning to set aside self-interest to know and understand God’s purpose. He cites Hamann on this point: “The humility of the heart is therefore the unique frame of mind which belongs to the reading of the Bible, and the most indispensable preparation for the same” (qtd. in Slemmons 62). This would be the result of Slemmons’ own testimony to reading the Scripture as a 25-year-old, reading about Abraham’s thwarted sacrifice of his son and God’s willing sacrifice of his own. For Slemmons, “history and truth had converged in a flash and everything of ultimate importance was present and accounted for” (63). The work of God in our lives is humbling. And justly so.



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Sabin addresses this from a different angle, specifically the hubris which sports can often inculcate. He defines this as “pride-driven arrogance that leads one to feel separate from and superior to others” (40). Unchecked this leads to major struggles adjusting to life when it turns out our sports “careers” are short lived. This is not a modern problem. In his 1898 poem “To an Athlete Dying Young,” A. E. Housman wrote:

Now you will not swell the rout  
Of lads that wore their honours out,  
Runners whom renown outran  
And the name died before the man.



Sabin's solution is less dire than Housman's—an intentional mindset about priorities and realities. But this requires setting aside hubris, which is what humility looks like.

Ward never addresses the issue of humility directly, but what can be more humbling in our success-oriented selfie culture than admitting our imperfections? She treats it in a different way—as humiliation, which Marte Otten and Kai Jonas found to be more mentally demanding than anger or shame. The emotions she relates to failure diminish our ability to evaluate our failures and leave us detached and isolated. This is precisely her case for sharing our stories in the first place—it helps normalize something we all do. Fail. In effect, we humble ourselves by talking about our failures so that we feel less humiliation.

In different ways these authors have argued that intentional character development will, among other things, leave us with a more realistic view of who we are and what we can be, provided we approach these questions with humility.

### **In Some Contexts, Identity Can Be Essentially Meaningless**

We are, however, no closer to understanding what identity is, perhaps an unrealistic expectation from the start. As used here it is simply “who we are,” but so many questions remain unaddressed. How do we become who we are? Is it how we see ourselves, or do we understand ourselves in terms of how others see us? Or both? Does our identity change? If so, under what circumstances? Is this a concept derived from philosophy or psychology or sociology or theology?

The answer to that last question is clear. Yes. It derives from all those fields and some others; they all use it in different ways for different purposes, which is why we can't answer any of the other questions. In none of these essays is it considered in the way we most often see it used, as a reference to tribes or political affiliations or gender identities, social constructions which may or may not be useful. Identity can be used in so many ways in so many contexts as to be meaningless. Or else, as may be the case here, it is so simple as to require no definition at all.

I certainly have no better definition to offer. Ever since “know thyself” was carved on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, philosophers and prophets have been trying to explain how to do it. By the 1950’s it was diffused in the social sciences, as seen in Erik Erikson’s notion of an identity crisis, but, according to Roger Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, since then it might refer to:



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- A basis of political or social action
- A consequential sameness of members in a group
- A core aspect of individual or social being
- A process leading to a collective self-understanding or sameness
- A product of multiple and competing discourses (6-8)

But if identity can mean practically anything, it can finally come to mean nothing at all. By confounding categories of practice with categories of analysis, we ultimately treat constructivism with the essentialism it sets out to destroy. The term cannot do two things well. They write, “whatever its indispensability in certain practical contexts, ‘identity’ is too ambiguous, too torn between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ meanings, essentialist connotations and constructivist qualifiers to serve well the demands of social analysis” (2).


As a category of practice, however, people use identity to make sense of their similarities and differences. Political actors, with varying degrees of integrity, may use it to help people understand themselves and their interests. But treating identity as a category of analysis runs the risks of using it without adding understanding, so that in the end we argue that because identities exist, we must therefore have one. When scholars are both analyst and protagonist, as is often the case, Brubaker and Cooper assert that the term is not helpful, or even necessary (9).

Given this confusion, it could be argued that Ward, Sabin and Slemmons are treating identity as a category of practice, rooted in classical

frameworks of permanence and memory. But we do well to say so, or risk being scolded by the thought police.

Definition, however, is not the only problem with identity. It may also be true that identity has become a more scholarly way to stereotype people. Although Kwame Appiah is more committed to the concept than I am, and much more sympathetic to intersectionality and other modern variations on the theme, his new book, *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity*, plows fertile ground in examining the flaws inherent

in our current understanding about identity (29). The lies of which he speaks are the misconceptions and the deceptions we tell ourselves, particularly about some inner essence that explains the way we are. He still says, however, “identities matter because they give us reasons to do things, reasons we think about consciously” (25).



*Identities matter  
because they give us  
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about consciously.*

Appiah examines, each in turn, creed, country, color, class and culture, noting the inconsistencies and overlaps that contribute to the complexity and confusion, making the case that nations, for example, are invented, and we make assumptions (or even laws) that have little to do with individual tastes or values. Efforts to create a national identity in Singapore, for example, have had some success but at the cost of linguistic and religious diversity, which are themselves nevertheless rigorously enforced. Appiah calls this the Medusa Syndrome: “what the state gazes upon, it tends to turn to stone” (90-98).

But doesn't any “identity,” consciously or even unconsciously conceived and embraced, tend to have this totalizing effect? It naturally leads to the kind of hubris, Sabin noted, which in athletes “can lead to the belief that non-athletes or even non-teammates do not deserve their respect” (40). In the absence of uncommon humility, identity becomes a minefield, not just for high school athletes who are prone to such generalizations, but even seasoned diplomats who make similar assumption, based on over-simplified assumptions about the identities of those at the negotiating table.

Kevin Avruch, in *Culture & Conflict Resolution*, says diplomacy is often frustrated by inadequate ideas of culture, since, in his view, “culture always comes in the plural” (15). In mediation, deep-rooted and protracted conflicts often represent the interest of minority identity groups at odds with the interests of more powerful, often majority, interest groups, with example after example of identity-bound passion and unreason on both sides, even different ways of reasoning. Sometimes, unfortunately, the result is war. He concludes that we must “never mistake the simplification function of culture for the world it represents” (108). I would argue the same about identity, which, despite our efforts to understand it and articulate it, is too messy to be of any real value.

## We Are All Looking For a Story to Define Us . . . and Explain Us

But if the term identity is too broad, the dangers of using it too great, and the claims about it too simple, can it in some practical sense help make sense of my failed athleticism or prideful intellectualism? Only as it emerges from my story and contributes to my character. In his book, *On the Road with*

*Augustine*, James K. A. Smith notes that by listening to people in recovery groups, novelist Leslie Jamison observed that every story is essentially the same story—and that’s OK. The point of these stories is not the tellers’ “look at me,” but the hearers’ “that’s me.” We find our people, and they are the people whose stories sound like ours (158).




Illustration by Diane Fraley, [dsfraley.com](http://dsfraley.com)

Smith argues that in his *Confessions*, Augustine does not share his story to reveal something about himself. “To the contrary,” he writes, “there is a sense in which his own particularity is diminished, his biography

eclipsed. The point is to share a story that is generic enough for any and all to imagine themselves in it” (162). In this sense, Augustine’s identity, and ours, is storied. All of us are looking for an orienting narrative that gives us lines to say and roles to play and with which, on our best days, others can see themselves.

So, I return to my story. Whenever you can say “that’s me,” we share an identity.

I often joke that real men write sonnets, which is a way of distinguishing myself from the athletes who surrounded me. I can write a sonnet in about half an hour, although not a very a good one (that takes a lifetime). But I likely spent as much time as a youth playing with words as some of my peers did playing with a football. Nevertheless, I wouldn’t call myself a poet. Likewise, I learned to play golf when I was in my 40’s because my dad liked to play, and it would be a way to spend time with him. He died of a heart attack before we played a dozen games, and now I play two or three times a year with one of my sons. I wouldn’t call myself a golfer either.



*Is my identity how I describe myself and what I love? Or is it how you perceive me and what you call me?*

I would call myself a writer, a pastor, a husband, a father, a teacher—these are things I spend more time doing and thinking about. I’m also a white, Southern male who is learning conversational Nepali and likes Polish sausage. But is my identity how I describe myself and what I love? Or is it how you perceive me and what you

call me? How does any of this determine the moral choices I make? The answers to these questions come when we humbly connect description and narrative, giving our identity and character context.

I am shaped as much by not playing sports as by playing them and have learned more by failing than by succeeding. But it was from what I could do well that I learned what I could not do at all, at least not in any satisfying way. As a 16-year old in college I came to face the pride that

*The answers come when we humbly connect description and narrative, giving our identity and character context.*

made me no different than the most arrogant jock I knew. A lot of things were not going well. I was intellectually competent but Prufrock-awkward (this means girls didn't like me.) I was a church youth director

who knew what to say but not what to do. I was overwhelmed and discouraged, filled with doubt and even self-contempt. And then I read this in 2 Corinthians 3.5: "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God" (KJV).

Even my ability to think was a gift, and the only proper response was humility. It was then that I began to bend out the grace that I had received and seen in the life of my father, a Baptist preacher who actually understood grace. He believed it had changed him and could change anyone. Until that moment, I did not. Until then I never imagined it could change those 10<sup>th</sup> grade boys who mocked me every Tuesday. Or did I imagine it could change me.

In Slemmons' terms, I welcomed my Co-Author and began to become what I am today. It is moments like these that shape our character, and not the labels we wear, or the stereotypes others give us, or the identities we profess. The authors in this series have reminded us that this is intentional and humbling work, framed by the moment we realize football is not our life, or that failure is normal, or that God is speaking to us.



*Wally Metts today*

These are plot points in our story, and in such moments, we learn who we are. By telling our stories, others begin to understand us, and we begin to understand them. It is not perfect. Neither is the idea of identity.

But story may be a better place to start.

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