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Why you must know who you are

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A friend of my late father, who is now in his nineties, lamented about the failure he saw himself as, when I met him a couple of weeks ago. I was struck by his sadness, for, when I was a child, this gentleman always came across as positive.

I have frequently encountered such a mood in the elderly, and to me, this is a saddening aspect of old age.

When people look back on the lives they have lived and concentrate on failures and mistakes they have committed, the wrong roads they have taken, it is then that shame burns them and they feel they have done little or nothing with the time they were given. Wallowing in this sort of shame is often pointless.

Knowledge of our failings is important if we are to live an examined life, yet complete honesty involves finding the balance between our good points and our bad.

The real motive for self-examination is not to beat ourselves as being miserable sinners but to grow in self-knowledge and manage our lives wisely. We should be honest about what we have done badly, yet we should also acknowledge what we have done well as we journey through life. It is important to look at ourselves with compassionate impartiality.

If forgiving ourselves is difficult, finding the energy to forgive others can be almost impossible.

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