

Being everything to everyone

Set in the 1920s and 1930s, the 1983 mockumentary and comedy film *Zelig* is about Leonard Zelig, a nondescript man who has the ability to totally transform himself chameleon-like to that of someone near him. While mingling with the rich at a party, Zelig sings their praises in a refined, snobbish way, but in the kitchen with the servants, he, in a thick working-class class lingo, seethes indignantly at the fat cats. One moment he is a renowned actor, the next a learned doctor; then a baseball player; and after that the son of a famous jazz musician.

When Zelig is admitted to a hospital, he is treated by a woman psychiatrist, Eudora Fletcher. She tries to heal him of his strange disorder. Under hypnosis, she discovers that Zelig has no personality of his own. So strongly does he yearn for security and approval from others that he physically changes to assume the personality of the greatest ego near him.

Through sheer perseverance and love, Eudora cures Zelig, but not without complications. She elevates Zelig's self-esteem so high that, for a while, he swings to the other extreme: he is violently intolerant of other people's opinions, no matter how simple! In psychological terms, we can say that Zelig is switching from the defence mechanism of identification to that of aggression.

Eudora, in due course, realizes she is falling in love with Zelig. Through the media, both doctor and patient become famous. Ironically, this very fame is what separates them. In fact, the same society that made Zelig a hero, then destroys him. Numerous women claim that he married them, and legal proceedings ensue. Zelig's disorder returns as he tries to fit in once more, and he disappears.

In due course, Eudora finds him in Germany working with Hitler and the Nazis before the outbreak of World War II. On seeing Eudora, Zelig's memory returns, and together they escape in a war-plane. When Eudora faints in the plane, Zelig, mimicking her flying skills, flies back across the Atlantic upside down. Back in the US, he is welcomed as a hero again.

Those familiar with the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta (D 16) will see what a remarkable parallel the *Zelig* story has with the Buddha's declaration on how he fits in perfectly with the "eight assemblies," that is, those of the nobles, the priests, the householders, the recluses, the Four Great Kings, the Thirty-two Gods, Mara's host, and the host of the High God himself.

"Ānanda, I recall having approached such an assembly of many hundreds, assembled with them before, and conversed with them before, and engaged in discussion with them before. Whatever their complexion was then, so was my complexion, too. Whatever was their voice then, so was my voice, too. I instructed, inspired, roused and gladdened them with Dharma talk."¹

Is the Buddha here being a *Zelig* personality? Appearances, of course, can deceive, but here the Buddha's actions and their effects are just the opposite of what *Zelig* does. The Buddha is clearly not a hollow attention-starved personality. Indeed, he is

¹ D 16.3.21-23/2:109 f = SD 9. Link: <https://sites.google.com/site/dharmafarer/home/digha-nikaya/SD9MahaparinibbanaSd16piya.pdf?attredirects=0&d=1>

the awakened one, well known for his love of peace and solitude. The Buddha is a supremely compassionate and effective teacher. Indeed, while Zelig tries to reach *up and out* to what he sees as the desirable qualities of the greatest egos near him, the Buddha skillfully reaches *down and into* those who will benefit from his wisdom.

The lesson here is clear. We can never be truly happy, not to say normal, by merely trying to collect and clothe ourselves with what we see as success or happiness in others. Simply put, we are then simply not ourselves. We may have a social, professional or public personality, but this can never be permanent. We must fill ourselves fully with happiness and goodness: this is what we truly are, or, at least, what we really would like to be.

Often enough, our external lives distract us so that we completely forget to fill ourselves up internally. Instead of looking outwards, we need to look within. We need to look deep enough and carefully study what wholesome qualities we really have, especially qualities that are of mutual benefit to others and to ourselves. We need to do this before the walls of success we have built around us collapse, or the floods of reality overwhelm us. It might just be too late then.

The best way to fill our inner true selves, to live fulfilling lives, is to feel inner peace and enjoy inner beauty. We need to get to know ourselves really better. If not, we will Zelig-like keep looking for approval from others and patterns to mimic. The reality is that we are painfully hollow, helplessly trying to echo and enchant others.

Ultimately, this never satisfies us because this is not our true self. We need the courage to be, to be true to ourselves. Only then we can be true to others. In the Buddha's teachings, we have thus become true individuals.

A very happy new year and many more to come.

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