

**On Seeing and Being Seen, The Quest and the Question:
How We Make, Maintain, and Widen the Frames in Which We See and
Are Seen**

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Abstract

This essay explores the dialectical relationship between knowing and being known across the roles and identities that structure human life, and asks a question an earlier version of this work left largely implicit: if our seeing of one another is always partial, what actually produces the particular shape of that partiality, what holds it in place, and what, if anything, can widen it? Beginning with two personal scenes (a father seen by his son only as “dad,” and a parent attempting to integrate the contrasting faces of the same child), the paper distinguishes two levels of partial seeing that are easily run together. The *fact* of partiality is constitutive: a structural feature of finite, embodied, role-bearing existence that no effort finally overcomes. But the *shape* of any particular frame is constructed, by a single self-reinforcing loop operating across three nested levels: the rational interactions of cognition, by which the mind construes the other through categories, constructs, and attributions (Bruner, 1957; Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Heider, 1958; Kelly, 1955); the relational dynamics of interaction, by which repeated encounters confirm and harden those construals into self-fulfilling patterns (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Merton, 1948; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Snyder et al., 1977; Watzlawick et al., 1967); and the family systems that assign and defend positions in the service of managing the unit’s anxiety (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Drawing further on sociological role theory, developmental psychology, brand strategy, and seven counseling traditions (each reframed as an intervention at a particular point in the loop), and working from a Confessional Lutheran theological framework, the paper grounds its synthesis in Luther’s *simul justus et peccator*, the doctrine of vocation as *larvae Dei*, and the eschatological promise of 1 Corinthians 13:12. The decisive move is the distinction between the constitutive and the constructed: because the fact of partial seeing is given, it can be accepted rather than fought; and because the shape of any frame is made, it can be remade. The “answer” offered is not the resolution of partial seeing but a sustainable posture toward it: frame-stepping, differentiation of self, daily forgiveness, and an identity anchored in being already fully known by God. The work of love, the paper concludes, is not the perfection of seeing but its faithful, patient widening across a lifetime.

Keywords: partial seeing, frame of reference, social construction, self-fulfilling prophecy, differentiation of self, role theory, forgiveness, vocation, Confessional Lutheran theology, *simul justus et peccator*

On Seeing and Being Seen, The Quest and the Question: How We Make, Maintain, and Widen the Frames in Which We See and Are Seen

We are each known only in part, and we know others only in part. It is a prism, or a kaleidoscope, of sorts: we catch glimpses of one another, refracted at angles, never the whole light at once. Perhaps only God truly comprehends the full complexity of a person. Some of what we show is intentional, the face we curate, the version we want projected. Some of it is wholly unintentional, shaped by how others have come to know us over time, by the biology we carry, by the environment that has formed us, by our tradition, our history, and by the substances, rhythms, and pressures that color a given day. This is not a failure of attention or of love. It is the ordinary architecture of human relationships.

But to call it architecture is to invite a question an earlier version of this essay left mostly unasked: who builds it, and how is it kept standing? Architecture does not assemble itself. If the partial frames through which we see one another are structures, then some processes raise them, processes that maintain them, and (this is the hope the essay finally turns on) processes by which they might be widened. The pages that follow, therefore, distinguish two things that are easy to confuse. That we see in part *at all* is a given: a constitutive feature of being finite, embodied, role-bearing creatures, resolved fully only on the far side of the mirror the Apostle Paul describes (1 Cor. 13:12, New International Version, 2011). But the particular *shape* any frame takes (that this son sees this father as only “dad,” that this colleague is read as only the role she performs in a meeting) is not simply given. It is made. And it is made, I will argue, by a single self-reinforcing loop running across three nested levels: the rational interactions of cognition within the person, the relational dynamics of interaction between persons, and the family systems that organize the wider field of persons. Naming that loop and drawing the line between what it constructs and what it cannot, is the work of this revision.

What we hold in mind about another person is rarely ours alone. Charles Taylor (2004) describes the *social imaginary* as the shared, largely tacit understanding through which a community makes sense of itself and its members, the background frame that lets us know, without

thinking, what counts as normal or “in role” for someone in our midst. Bowen family systems theory (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) extends the point inward: the family is not a collection of individuals so much as a single emotional unit, and within that unit each member’s perception of every other member is shaped by longstanding patterns of fusion, reactivity, and triangulation. Positions get assigned (the responsible one, the sensitive one, the strong one, the difficult one), and the system labors to preserve them because preserving them is one of the ways it manages its anxiety. *Differentiation of self*, in Bowen’s vocabulary, is the developmental work of holding one’s authentic identity against the gravitational pull of the family’s imaginary of who one is supposed to be. The version of me that lives in my son’s perception, then, is not only his private construction. It is partly the family’s construction, sustained by years of small interactions that have rehearsed and reinforced it.

This is a lesson I have spent much of my professional life teaching in a different register. The discipline of brand management holds that a brand exists not in the marketer’s intentions but in the consumer’s mind (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2013; Ries & Trout, 2001). What the company believes itself to be is almost beside the point; what matters is the position the brand occupies in the audience’s perceptual map. The same logic governs people. We do not get to dictate the version of ourselves that lives in another’s mind. We can attempt to shape perception (through what we say, what we do, what we let be seen), but the perceptual ground belongs to the perceiver, and once a position has been established, it is remarkably sticky. Repositioning a brand requires sustained, deliberate effort against the inertia of an audience’s existing schema. The same is true, often more painfully, of repositioning a self in the eyes of those who already think they know us. Why that stickiness exists, what holds a position in place once it is set, is precisely what the loop described below is meant to explain.

Humanistic psychology has long pressed a parallel claim from inside the person. Adler’s individual psychology held that what shapes a life is not the objective conditions one faces but the subjective interpretation one makes of them, what he called the *private logic* that gives coherence to a person’s style of life, lived out within the wider claim of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, the social feeling that binds the self to community (Adler, 1956; Mosak & Maniacci, 1999). The perceiver, in this view, is not a passive recipient of information but a creative agent assembling a usable

picture of self and world. Rogers (1961), May (1969), and the broader phenomenological tradition extended the point: we do not respond to the world as it is, but to the world as we have constructed it. If this is true of us as we look outward, it is just as true of those who look at us. The version of me that lives in another's mind is their creative construction, fashioned out of the raw material I have given them and the private logic they bring to the assembly. Each of us, in this sense, is a co-author of the partial picture between us, and neither of us can sign the finished work alone.

Scripture names a final dimension of this asymmetry, and an unexpected consolation. In *The Prodigal God*, Timothy Keller (2008) reframes Jesus' best-known parable as the story of two lost sons rather than one. The younger brother misreads the Father as a source of inheritance and license, a means to a freedom he believes is waiting on the other side of the gate. The elder brother misreads him as a master to be earned from, a ledger to be balanced through dutiful service. Neither son sees the father as he is. The Father, meanwhile, sees both sons clearly (the rebellion of the one, the resentment of the other) and runs to meet both with a love neither has correctly perceived and neither has done anything to deserve. The asymmetry of seeing is also an asymmetry of forgiving: we forgive one another partially, conditionally, with mixed motives, while the One who sees us in full forgives us in full, and forgives first. Luther presses the same point in his own vocabulary: *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously righteous and sinner, fully known and fully loved (Forde, 1997). Our knowing of one another will always be a refraction. The Father's knowing of us is not.

We meet one another, then, through roles, through histories, through the angle our shared life has carved over time, and what we see is real, but never complete. Most of the time, this partiality goes unremarked. It becomes interesting only when something prompts us to notice it: a child who sees one face of a parent and not the others; a person whose home self and public self seem to belong to two different people; the quiet realization that some receive us as a fraction of who we take ourselves to be. The pages that follow begin from two such moments (close to home, both of them) and try to think carefully about what they reveal, and about the machinery that produced them.

Scene One: How I Am Seen

My son sees me as dad. Not as a businessperson who has spent nearly three decades building brands and businesses. Not as a professor who teaches marketing and management theory. Not as a mediator who has sat between people in their worst hours. Not as an aspiring counselor learning to help those in need. Not as a man with a faith, a history, and a set of convictions hard-won over years. He sees dad, the man who knows where the spare batteries are kept, who drove him to practice, goofy and playful in turn, who can be counted on to weigh in on whatever decision is in front of him today.

This is not a complaint. It is a phenomenon, and an interesting one. The way my son perceives me reveals something fundamental about how human beings construct the people around them. We do not interact with people in their fullness. We interact with the roles those persons occupy in our field of vision, and we interpret those roles through the particular frame of reference our relationship has built up over time.

Sociological literature has been telling us this for nearly a century. Linton (1936) gave us the foundational distinction between *status* (the position one occupies in a social structure) and *role* (the script of behaviors expected of someone in that position). Parsons (1951) extended the move into a theory of role expectations: every position carries a set of normative scripts, and we evaluate the persons occupying those positions partly by how faithfully they perform the script. Merton (1957) added the idea of the *role-set*, the constellation of role-partners attached to any single status. A father has a role-set that includes children, a spouse, sometimes parents and in-laws, and sometimes coaches and teachers who see him through that lens. My son occupies one node in that set, and the node is structural: it does not include the professor, the executive, the mediator, or the parishioner.

Symbolic interactionism sharpens the picture further. Cooley (1902) named the *looking-glass self* (the self we come to know through the reflection of who we are in the eyes of others), and Mead (1934) developed this into an account of the multiple “me’s” we each become across our significant relationships, since each relationship has different expectations and a different history. Goffman (1959) carried the insight into the dramaturgy of everyday life: we are always

performing, the performance shifts with the audience, and none of those performances is fraudulent. They are partial expressions, faces turned toward particular audiences. My son sees the face I turn toward him. He does not have access to the others, not because I am hiding them, but because the structural reality of our relationship is that it calls forth the father, and only the father.

The cognitive layer reinforces what the sociologists describe: the mind is a categorization engine. Confronted with the impossible task of perceiving every encounter as if it were the first, we reduce one another to schemas, scripts, and stereotypes (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). The schemas we hold for those closest to us are richer and more accurate than the schemas we hold for strangers, but they remain schemas. They still simplify. They still leave out a great deal. Exactly how that categorizing, and the interaction and the family system around it, hardens a schema into a durable frame is the subject of the central section of this paper.

This is, I think, where consumer behavior and brand strategy quietly intersect my counseling work. The discipline I teach in a marketing course, that a brand exists in the perceptual field of the consumer, not in the marketer's intentions (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2013), applies just as cleanly to persons. My son's "brand" of me is not the totality of me. It is the version of me his perceptual field has assembled, and it is the only version on which he will act.

Scene Two: How I See

Now turn the lens around.

I know my son, perhaps his authentic self, or at least the core of his instinctual resting behavior. I see the light and the love in him: the smart, caring, supportive, protective, charming person who warms my heart. I also see the unfiltered moments: the snarky comment, the moody silence, the short temper, the deliberate closing of the door between us. And beneath all of it I see the residue we all carry: the trauma each of us inherits from our own upbringing and circumstances, and the guilt and grief that ripple, in their own ways, through every participant in a shared life,

child and parent, friend to friend, family to family. Forgiveness, in such a context, is not a single event but an ongoing posture, what we extend and what we receive as the price of remaining in one another's lives. Meanwhile, his interactions with others show the inverse: gracious, present, and considerate. The contrast raises an uncomfortable question. Who is he, really, and where is he with me when I weigh how others see him?

To be clear: I would not want it the other way around. The home should be the place where the filter comes off, and the fact that he can rest in his less curated self with me is, in some real sense, a gift. But the gift does not dissolve the puzzle. Which version is the "true" one? Is the gracious version at school a performance, with the irritable version at home being the underlying reality? Or is the gracious version of the authentic self, with the home self being the noise of fatigue and adolescence and proximity? Or are both formulations mistaken, and the better question is something else entirely?

Rogers (1961) would press here on the difference between the real self and the ideal self, and on *congruence* as the alignment of inner experience, awareness, and outward expression. But Rogers alone is insufficient for the question I am asking, because the question is not only about my son's congruence; it is about how I, the seeing parent, integrate two faces of the same person without collapsing one into the other.

That move requires a dialectical frame. Kegan (1982, 1994) describes development as a sequence of shifts in what we are *subject to* and what we can hold as *objects*. At earlier orders of consciousness, we *are* our roles; we cannot see them from outside. At a later, more dialectical order, we can hold our roles as objects of reflection. The fifth order, the *self-transforming mind*, is fundamentally dialectical: it holds contradictions without collapsing them into a winner. This is the same logic that animates dialectical behavior therapy, which, following Linehan (1993), insists that "I am doing the best I can" and "I need to do better" are simultaneously true. As I have argued elsewhere, the Hegelian roots of this move are not incidental: Hegel's (1807/1977) phenomenology builds on the conviction that contradiction is not a defect of thought, but the engine of its development: thesis and antithesis are not erased by synthesis but preserved within it, *aufgehoben*.

For a Confessional Lutheran, this dialectical posture is not merely a developmental achievement or a clinical technique. It is an anthropology. Luther's *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously righteous and sinner, is the original both/and (Forde, 1997; Wingren, 1957). The Christian is not partly righteous and partly sinful, as if the two could be averaged into a single moral score; the Christian is fully both, at the same time, and the gospel does not resolve the tension so much as locate the person inside it. If this is true of the self before God, it should not surprise us that it is also true of the self before others, and of the others we ourselves try to see.

The Quest and the Question

The two scenes converge on a single quest. From the inside out: how do I live with being known only in part? From the outside in: how do I know another person across the partial selves they show me? Stated together: what does it mean to know, and to be known by, another person across the roles and faces that structure our shared life?

To that original question, this revision adds a second, more mechanical one, without which the first cannot finally be answered. If I am seen only in part, what *makes* the part the particular part it is? Why this frame and not another, and why does it hold so stubbornly once set? And if the shape of the frame is made, can it be remade, can it be widened, and if so, by what? The question, more pointedly, is how to navigate this dialectical relationship: how to move it toward wholeness, toward a person-to-person relationship in which each wants to know and to be known. Or, short of that, how at least one of the two might come to understand and to be understood, regardless of whether it is parent, child, family member, or friend.

This is not a fool's quest nor an idle question. In conflict mediation (where I spend some of my time), resolution begins precisely when each party can see the other as more than the role the dispute has assigned them: debtor, plaintiff, betrayer, victim, ex-spouse. Conflict flattens people into their function within it. The mediator's task is, in real measure, the work of restoring

fullness, or at least glimpsing it. The same discipline applies to teaching, the mental care of others, branding, and, as both scenes above suggest, parenting. Practice is constant: to hold the role lightly enough to remember the person inside it, and to hold any one face of a person lightly enough to remember the person across the face. But before we can hold a frame lightly, we must see that it is a frame, and to understand how it came to be the one we hold. To that we now turn.

The Manufacture of Partial Sight: Three Levels of a Single Loop

If the fact of partial seeing is constitutive, its shape is manufactured, and the manufacture is not mysterious. It happens on three levels at once, and the three are not separate machines but stages of one continuous loop. Cognition supplies the categories through which a person is first construed. Interaction takes those categories and, over many small exchanges, confirms and hardens them, often by quietly drawing out of the other person exactly the behavior the category predicted. And the family system, the densest field of repeated interaction most of us will ever inhabit, assigns the resulting positions and then labors to keep them, because keeping them is one of the ways the system manages its anxiety. Each level feeds the next, and the last feeds back into the first. What follows traces the loop one level at a time, then watches it turn.

The Rational Level: Construing the Other

Perception is not a recording. It is, as Bruner (1957) argued in his account of perceptual readiness, an act of categorization: the mind goes “beyond the information given,” sorting each new encounter into the readiest available category rather than meeting it fresh. Confronted with the impossible task of perceiving every encounter as if it were the first, we reduce one another to schemas, scripts, and stereotypes (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). Kelly (1955) gave this its sharpest formulation in his psychology of personal constructs: each of us moves through the social world as a kind of working scientist, construing other people through a personal system of bipolar constructs (warm or cold, reliable or flighty, strong or weak), and then treating those construals as

though they were simply the people themselves. Heider (1958), founding the modern study of attribution, showed how readily we infer stable dispositions from limited behavior, assigning to a person an enduring character on the strength of a few observed acts.

And once a construal is in place, it does not yield easily. Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance explains the stickiness from the inside: information that contradicts an established view of someone generates discomfort, and the cheapest way to resolve the discomfort is usually to discount the new information rather than revise the settled view. This is the first level of the loop, entirely internal to the perceiver. My son's mind, like every mind, is a categorization engine. It met me early, sorted me under "dad," built a rich construct around that node, and now reads each new thing I do through the construct it already holds. The schema is richer and more accurate than the one he holds for a stranger, but it is still a schema, and it still resists the data that would complicate it. Recent work in predictive social perception sharpens this picture. Rather than passively recording the other, the mind runs each perception as a kind of hypothesis, generating expectations about how the person will behave and testing them against what unfolds, updating the prior only when the prediction error is large enough to force the issue (Bach & Schenke, 2017). On this account, the construal is never wholly closed (every encounter is, in principle, an occasion for the prediction to be corrected). However, the same architecture that makes correction possible also explains its difficulty, because a confident prior quietly filters the very evidence that might overturn it. The mechanism that hardens the frame is thus also, faintly, the mechanism by which it might later be widened.

The Relational Level: Interaction That Confirms Itself

A construal held privately would be a small thing. What makes it consequential is that it does not stay private; it is enacted, and the enactment changes the other person. Cooley (1902) named the looking-glass self, and Mead (1934) developed it into an account of the multiple "me's" we become across our significant relationships, each relationship calling forth a different self. Goffman (1959) carried the insight into the dramaturgy of everyday life: we perform, the performance shifts with the audience, and the audience's expectations shape the performance

available to us. Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) made the mechanism precise. Every exchange carries not only a content message but a relationship message, and over time, the relationship messages settle into a pattern that each party “punctuates” differently: she nags because he withdraws; he withdraws because she nags, each convinced the sequence begins with the other. The pattern becomes a closed circuit, and the circuit confirms the construction that started it.

The most striking demonstration of this is the literature on behavioral confirmation. Merton (1948) coined the term “self-fulfilling prophecy”: a false definition of a situation that evokes behavior that makes the originally false definition come true. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) found the effect in classrooms, where teachers led students to expect that certain pupils would bloom, and treated them in ways that produced the very blooming they had been told to expect. Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid (1977) showed it in ordinary interaction: perceivers who believed they were speaking with an attractive partner behaved more warmly, and the partners, knowing nothing of the belief, responded with more warmth in turn, confirming an expectation that had no basis to begin with. The perceiver’s frame does not merely interpret the other; it reaches across the space between them and elicits the behavior that proves it right. Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe the larger version of this process: reality, as a community experiences it, is socially constructed and then maintained through the patterned conversation of everyday life, until what was built by interaction is experienced as simply the way things are. The mechanism has since been mapped with increasing precision. Darley and Fazio (1980) traced it through the interaction sequence itself (the perceiver forms an expectancy, acts on it, the target interprets the behavior and responds, and the response is read back as confirmation), identifying the several junctures at which the sequence can bend toward the original belief. A later synthesis synthesized the accumulated evidence on how such prophecies operate, how far they can actually influence behavior, and how they feed into wider social problems (Madon et al., 2011). And recent experimental work shows how little it can take to set the loop running: given nothing more than others’ purported ratings of an experience they were about to have, participants found those unreinforced social suggestions reshaping how the experience itself was felt (pain, vicarious pain, cognitive effort), with the induced expectations proving durable, sustained by learning that weighted confirming evidence more heavily than

disconfirming (Yazdanpanah et al., 2026). A bare suggestion, in other words, can become a felt reality that then quietly defends itself.

Two cautions keep this from overreaching. The first concerns scope: the present essay integrates these empirical literatures rather than testing them, and the loop it describes is a conceptual synthesis drawn across disciplines, not itself a measured effect. The second is substantive. The loop is real, but it is not omnipotent. A considerable body of evidence argues that, across many ordinary judgments, social perception is on average more accurate than biased, and that self-fulfilling effects, though genuine, tend to be modest and context-bound rather than the engine of social reality as such (Jussim, 2012). The claim here is therefore the narrower one: that in the particular, high-stakes, long-running relationships with which this paper is concerned (family above all), the loop runs strong, and the constructed shape of the frame is correspondingly durable. And the same accuracy that limits the loop is quietly good news, for it is also what makes widening possible: where perception can track another truly, a frame pressed by patient new evidence can, in time, give.

This is the second level of the loop. My construal of my son, expressed in a thousand small interactions, invites a son-shaped response; his construal of me, expressed in his, invites a dad-shaped one. We are each, without meaning to be, gently training the other to confirm the frame we already hold. This is the deeper truth behind the earlier observation that each of us is a co-author of the partial picture between us. We do not merely co-author the picture in our descriptions of each other; we co-author it in the behavior each of us draws out of the other, day after day.

The Systemic Level: The Family That Keeps the Frame

Interaction reaches its highest density within the family, and there, something further happens: the patterns are not merely repeated but organized, assigned, and defended. Bowen family systems theory (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) holds that the family is not a collection of individuals so much as a single emotional unit, and within that unit each member's perception of every other is shaped by longstanding patterns of fusion, reactivity, and triangulation. Positions

get assigned (the responsible one, the sensitive one, the strong one, the difficult one), and the system labors to preserve them, because preserving them is one of the ways it manages its anxiety. When one member begins to step outside an assigned position, the system typically responds with pressure to return to it; the change disturbs an equilibrium that the whole unit has an interest in keeping. Contemporary Bowen scholarship describes this equilibrium-keeping in finer detail. Papero (2024) characterizes the family emotional system as governed by opposed forces of togetherness and individuality and powered by anxiety, the organism's response to real or imagined threat; ordinarily its regulating mechanisms engage and disengage quickly, but under prolonged disturbance the system resets toward greater togetherness, and one or more mechanisms becomes chronically engaged, a standing adaptation that stabilizes the new, more sensitive set point, sometimes at the cost of a symptom. A narrow frame, defended well past the point of usefulness, is one form such a chronic adaptation can take.

These assignments are transmitted across generations, Bowen argued, the perceptual frames of one generation laid down as the starting categories of the next. This is the third level of the loop, and it is the most powerful because it recruits an entire emotional field to maintain a frame that began as one person's private construal. The version of me that lives in my son's perception is not only his private construction, but also the product of our two-person interaction. It is partly the family's construction, sustained by years of small interactions that have rehearsed and reinforced it, and held in place by an emotional system with its own reasons for keeping it where it is.

The Loop: How the Three Make and Keep a Frame

Set the three levels in motion, and the loop becomes visible. Cognition construes; interaction enacts the construal and elicits a confirming response; the system organizes the confirmed pattern into an assigned position and defends it; and the defended position becomes the ready category through which the next perception is formed. The output of each turn is the input of the next. This is why frames are, in the language of my other vocation, so remarkably sticky,

and it is worth pausing on that word, because it has carried more weight in my teaching than I once recognized.

A brand exists not in the marketer's intentions but in the consumer's mind (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2013; Ries & Trout, 2001); what matters is the position the brand occupies in the audience's perceptual map, and once a position is established, it resists revision. Repositioning requires sustained, deliberate effort against the inertia of an audience's existing schema (Ries & Trout, 2001). The reason, I can now say more precisely, is that a market position is held in place by the same three-level loop: consumers construe the brand through a category, their purchasing and talking enact the construal, and the wider market system (reviews, word of mouth, shelf placement, the expectations of retailers) organizes and defends the position. The same logic governs persons, often more painfully. Repositioning a self in the eyes of those who already think they know us is the work of running the loop backward, and the loop does not run backward on its own.

Constitutive and Constructed

Here, the essential distinction must be stated plainly, because everything practical in this paper depends on it. The loop I have described constructs the *shape* of partial seeing. It does not construct the *fact* of it.

The fact that we see in part at all, that no finite mind can hold another in full, is constitutive. It is not a cognitive malfunction, a failure of interaction, or a family pathology. It is the condition of being a finite, embodied creature among other finite, embodied creatures, and it is the truth that the existential tradition names as isolation and that Scripture names in the dim mirror of 1 Corinthians 13:12. No amount of frame-stepping, therapy, or love dissolves it. It is lifted only eschatologically, only when the mirror itself is taken away.

The shape, however (that my son sees me as only a dad and not also as the man who built businesses, taught theory, and sat between people in conflict), is constructed by the loop, and what is constructed can, in principle, be reconstructed. Not completed; the constitutive limit forbids

completion. But widened. This is the hinge of the entire essay, and it cuts in two directions at once. Because the fact is given, it can be accepted rather than fought; the demand to be seen whole by another person is a demand no person can meet, and releasing it is not resignation but realism. And because the shape is made, it can be remade; the narrowness of any given frame is not fixed, and the slow work of widening it is neither naive nor futile. Every practice this paper finally recommends lives in the space this distinction opens. The traditions I turn to next are, each of them, a way of working on the shape while making peace with the fact.

Frame of Reference: The Standpoint of Seeing

The loop produces something more specific than a category. It produces a standpoint. The roles and schemas mapped in Scene One describe what is seen and how the mind organizes it; what they do not yet name is the deeper question: where the seer stands when the seeing occurs. To say that my son sees me as “dad” is not only to say that he places me in a particular category. It is also to say that he sees me from a particular *frame of reference*: a standpoint, a vantage, a set of assumptions and prior experiences from which everything I do and say is interpreted. A category answers the question “What is this?” A frame of reference answers the deeper, prior question: “From where, and through what, am I looking?”

The phrase has an unusually rich pedigree across disciplines. Sherif (1936) used it to describe how social norms shape perception; in his autokinetic experiments, individuals’ judgments of a stationary point of light shifted to align with the group’s collective frame, demonstrating that even basic perception is socially anchored. Schutz (1962), building on Husserl’s phenomenology, described the *lifeworld*, the taken-for-granted background of assumptions and relevance against which every encounter is interpreted. Goffman (1974), late in his career, gave us *frame analysis*: the proposal that we make sense of any situation by asking, often unconsciously, “What is it that’s going on here?”, and that the answer is shaped by frames we typically did not choose and rarely examine.

Two further lineages bear directly on what I am describing. Rogers (1961) placed the internal frame of reference at the center of his theory of empathy. To listen well, Rogers argued, is to enter the other person's frame of reference, to see the world, however briefly and imperfectly, from their standpoint rather than one's own. Adler (1956), in a parallel idiom, spoke of each person's *private logic*: the often-unspoken inner framework through which experiences are organized and assigned meaning. What looks irrational from the outside is almost always rational once you understand the private logic, the frame, from which it issues.

What all these traditions share is the recognition that perception is not a passive recording of the world. It is an act of interpretation, and the interpretation is shaped by the standpoint from which the perceiver stands. The frame of reference is, in the terms of the previous section, the loop's sediment: the settled vantage that the rational, relational, and systemic levels have jointly deposited and now jointly maintain. Contemporary social-evaluation research suggests something more specific about what a frame tends to foreground. Across several competing models, perceivers organize their judgments of others largely along two dimensions (agency or competence (the vertical axis, "getting ahead") and communion or warmth (the horizontal axis, "getting along"), with a person's beliefs sometimes entering as a third), and which dimension takes priority shifts with the relationship and the perceiver's goal (Abele et al., 2021). A frame, on this reading, is partly a standing decision about which of these axes to weight. My son's "dad" frame foregrounds warmth and reliability. It leaves the agency of the executive or the scholar largely out of view, not because he has judged that agency absent, but because our relationship has never made it the relevant axis.

My son's frame of reference for me was set in early childhood and has been continuously confirmed by every interaction since. The frame says: "This is the man who is Dad." Within that frame, my words and actions land in particular ways. When I offer advice, it is heard as fatherly advice, which is not the same as the same words heard from a professor, a consultant, or a mediator. The frame does not just categorize; it modulates everything that passes through it. Tone, intent, weight, even the meaning of a pause: all of it is interpreted in light of the frame.

This has a particular bearing on the conflict work that is part of my own vocation. Mediators learn early that the parties to a dispute are not, in fact, disagreeing about the facts. They are interpreting the same facts through different frames of reference, and until those frames are surfaced and respected, no resolution is possible. The frame is often more decisive than the facts.

Known in Full

The loop accounts for the construction. It cannot touch the fact. And the Christian tradition has its own word for the fact of partial seeing, one of the most quietly luminous lines in the New Testament. Writing about love at the end of 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul names the limitation of our present knowing and the promise that meets it:

For now, we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.
Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. (1 Cor.
13:12, New International Version, 2011)

Three truths in that one verse hold the heart of what this paper is trying to say. First, where we are now: we see only in part, like a face glimpsed in a dim mirror. Paul does not pretend this is a small inconvenience that will soon pass; he names it as the ordinary shape of life until Christ returns, which is to say, he names it as constitutive. Second, where we are headed: this is not the final word. The mirror will be lifted, and we will see each other face to face. The roles and partial glimpses that shape our seeing now will not be erased but completed, finished in a knowing that no longer needs partial frames. Third, the comfort that makes the waiting bearable: even now, we are already fully known. The two verbs Paul uses are not equal. Our knowing of God is partial. God's knowing of us is total. Whatever our spouses, children, colleagues, and friends can piece together of us, the One who sees finally counts already sees us in full and has chosen to love us anyway.

Psalm 139 puts the same truth in the first person: “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar ... Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain” (Ps. 139:1-6, NIV). And 1 Samuel 16:7 turns the camera around: “The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7, NIV). Our seeing is structurally outward and partial. God’s seeing is structurally inward and complete. The hidden person whom even our nearest can only glimpse is not hidden from the One who made and named that person in the first place.

Luther’s doctrine of vocation extends this consolation into the realm of roles. Wingren (1957) and the broader Lutheran tradition (Berg, 2021; Deutschlander, 1998; Kolden, 1983; Veith, 2002) read the various stations of human life (parent, child, professor, mediator, employer, parishioner, neighbor) not as costumes obscuring some “real” self beneath, but as *masks of God* (*larvae Dei*) through which the Creator continues to give daily bread to the world. He works through both of His kingdoms (Deutschlander, 1998): the kingdom of the left, in which He governs the temporal life of families, callings, and civil order, and the kingdom of the right, in which He rules through Word and Sacrament for the life of the soul. Each role we inhabit belongs to one or both of these kingdoms, and each is a place where God is genuinely at work. The father who knows where the spare batteries are kept is not a diminished version of the executive, the professor, or the mediator. He is the form God’s hand takes in that household, on that evening, for that child. Each role is partial because it must be (a father cannot be a professor while he is being a father), but the partiality is not a failure. It is the shape of love embodied in time.

This reframes the central anxiety of partial seeing, and it does so along exactly the seam this paper has been cutting. Yes, my son sees only dad. Yes, I only see some of my son's face. Yes, the outside-world version and the home version do not perfectly reconcile, and there are days when the reconciliation feels far off. But the meaning of these roles does not depend on either of us perceiving the other in totality. It depends on the God who sees us both in full, who has bound himself to us through Word and Sacrament, and who is, even now, working through our partial seeings to serve the people he has placed beside us. The loop builds the frame; grace holds the person the frame can never fully contain.

This theological account of being fully known and daily forgiven has lately found a counterpart in Christian-sensitive psychology. A relational-spirituality model of personal sin describes reconciliation with God as a network of interrelated appraisals involving the self, the sin, God, and others, an account that converges with this essay's interest in how being truly seen reorders the self (Cook & Cowden, 2025). More concretely, an incident-anchored Reconciliation with God Scale, validated across seven Christian samples, renders two processes this paper has been treating pastorally (engaging in repentance with God and experiencing absolution from God) empirically tractable, understood as stress-regulatory mechanisms that follow a felt transgression (Cowden et al., 2026). The overlap is real and worth claiming. Yet a Confessional Lutheran frame also marks its distinctives. The believer is *simul justus et peccator*, righteous and sinner at once, rather than progressively repaired; absolution is not chiefly an inward state to be measured, but a word delivered from outside the self, in Sacrament and in the spoken forgiveness of sins; and vocation locates the whole drama within the stations God has assigned rather than in a private spiritual interior. What such instruments can measure, the theology insists, ultimately rests on a promise that does not depend on measurement.

The Counseling Traditions: Interventions in the Loop

The frame-of-reference idea sits at the intersection of social psychology and clinical practice, and several major counseling traditions have extended it in distinct directions. Read against the loop described above, each tradition turns out to be an intervention at a particular point in it: loosening the rational construal, interrupting the relational confirmation, or differentiating the self from the systemic assignment. Each offers a different angle on how roles shape identity, how identities become constricted within particular relationships, and how the self can be held intact even when it is seen in part. A short tour through several of these traditions may help.

Bowen Family Systems: Differentiation of Self

Bowen's tradition intervenes at the systemic level of the loop. Its clinical category for psychological health within the family unit is *differentiation of self* (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988): the capacity to maintain one's own identity, principles, and emotional center while remaining meaningfully connected to one's family. The undifferentiated self collapses into the family's emotional field; the differentiated self can stand within that field without being defined by it. When my son sees me only as "dad," I face a choice. I can let the narrowness of his view collapse my own self-understanding into the same frame (accepting "dad" as the whole of who I am), or I can remain a differentiated self: continuing to be fully the father in the warmth of that role while also continuing to be the whole person whose identity is not exhausted by it. Differentiation is not distance. The differentiated self is more connected, not less, because it can engage from a stable center rather than from reactivity. In terms of the loop, differentiation is what keeps the systemic assignment from becoming my own self-definition. This pastoral use of differentiation rests on substantial empirical grounds: a scoping review of nearly 300 primary studies found consistent support for differentiation of self as a predictor of psychological health and marital quality, with further associations with physical health and the quality of intergenerational relationships (Calatrava et al., 2022). Intellectual honesty, though, requires noting that the picture is not uniform. Longitudinal work on married couples has found that a husband's differentiation predicted later reductions in triangulation while a wife's did not, and that anxiety failed to mediate the relationship Bowen expected it to, evidence of real but partial support, shaped by gender and still short of the causal, intervention-based designs the construct most needs (Calatrava et al., 2022; Willis et al., 2021). The concept is sturdy enough to lean on, in other words, without being settled enough to lean on uncritically.

Adlerian Psychology: Significance, Lifestyle, and Social Interest

Adler (1956) placed the *striving for significance*, the deep human longing to matter, to be seen as someone whose existence makes a difference, near the center of human motivation. The grief that can accompany being seen in part is, in Adlerian terms, partly a signal that one's

significance feels undercounted in a relationship that matters intensely. Adler also gave us the concept of *lifestyle*: the unified pattern through which a person moves through the world, shaped early by what he called the family constellation. Both parent and children bring their lifestyles into the relationship, and each interprets the other partly through that pattern. Most importantly, Adler placed *social interest* (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*), the felt sense of belonging to and contributing to a larger human community, at the heart of psychological health. The lonely demand to be fully recognized by any single person is, in Adlerian terms, often a signal that social interest needs to be cultivated in a wider field. The parent who feels unseen at home is often best served not by fighting harder for recognition there, but by extending themselves more deeply into the web of community where their other selves are met and used.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Self-as-Context

ACT (Hayes et al., 1999) intervenes at the rational level, loosening the grip of the construals both the construals others hold of us and the ones we hold of ourselves. It distinguishes *self-as-content* and *self-as-context*. Self-as-content is the catalog of identities, roles, achievements, and stories we use to describe ourselves: I am a father, a professor, an executive, a mediator, a husband, a believer. Self-as-context is the observing awareness that holds all of those contents, the “I” that notices the roles rather than being identical with any one of them. This is a quietly liberating distinction. The roles are real. They matter. They are not, however, the deepest layer of who one is. When my son sees only “dad,” he is seeing himself as content. The self-as-context, the one who is doing the being, is not visible to him, but it is also not threatened by his partial view. The observer remains, regardless of which role is in the foreground. ACT also offers the practice of *cognitive defusion*: noticing painful thoughts as mental events rather than identifying with them. “I am invisible to my son” becomes, in defused form, “I am noticing the thought that I am invisible to my son”, a small shift that loosens the thought’s grip without denying its presence.

Narrative Therapy: Thin and Thick Descriptions

White and Epston (1990), in narrative therapy, developed the contrast between *thin descriptions* of identity (reductive, single-storied, often imposed by others or by dominant cultural narratives) and *thick descriptions* (rich, multi-storied, holding contradiction and complexity). The work of therapy, in their view, is often to thicken the descriptions of self that have become too thin, which is, in the vocabulary of this paper, the work of widening a constructed frame. The child's perception of the parent is, almost necessarily, a thin description. It is not a moral failing of the child; it is the structural condition of being a child. The therapeutic and pastoral question is whether the parent's own self-description can remain thick when the descriptions reflected by significant others are thin. Narrative therapists also attend to *unique outcomes*, those moments when the thin description does not quite fit, when the child catches a glimpse of the executive, the scholar, or the mediator. These moments can be honored and gently extended, not as campaigning for recognition but as co-authoring a thicker shared story over time.

Existential Therapy: Isolation and Acceptance

The existential tradition, from Yalom (1980) and May (1958) back to Kierkegaard, names what it calls *existential isolation*: the truth that, however close any two human beings become, neither can fully enter the inner life of the other. This is the tradition that speaks most directly to the constitutive fact rather than the constructed shape. We are, in some final sense, alone in our own consciousness. This is not a failure of love. It is the condition of finite, embodied existence. To accept existential isolation is, paradoxically, to be freed from a demand we sometimes place on our closest relationships: the expectation that they will provide what no human relationship can: total recognition, total understanding, total visibility. Once we accept that being partly unseen is the ordinary condition of being a person among persons, the partial sight of those who love us becomes less wounding. It is what it has always been. For the Christian, the existential limit is also where theology enters: the One who sees the whole is not finally another person at all.

Forgiveness Therapy: Releasing the Demand

The clinical literature on forgiveness, most fully developed by Enright (2001; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015) and Worthington (2006, 2020), identifies forgiveness as a learnable process by which a wounded person releases the resentment, the demand for what cannot be given back, and the wish that the past had been different, while remaining clear-eyed about what occurred. Forgiveness, in this literature, is sharply distinguished from reconciliation: forgiveness is intrapersonal work the wounded party undertakes for their own healing; reconciliation, if it occurs, is interpersonal work that requires the willing participation of both. When a parent is read narrowly by a child, when a colleague is misjudged in their role, when a spouse is held inside a frame that no longer fits, the wound is real, and so is the temptation to nurse it. Forgiveness names a third path between the false alternatives of pretending we are not hurt and demanding that the other widen their frame on our terms. It is the slow, often repeated work of releasing the demand without abandoning the longing, and, as the closing section will argue, it is what makes every other practice in the loop sustainable over time.

Internal Family Systems: Parts and the Self

Schwartz's (1995) Internal Family Systems (IFS) model takes the multiplicity of the self even more literally than ACT. The psyche, in IFS, is composed of many distinct *parts*, sub-personalities, each with its own history, intentions, and emotional charge. At the center of the person is a *Self* (capital S): the calm, curious, compassionate, courageous core from which the parts can be witnessed and led. Health, in IFS, is not the elimination of parts but the restoration of *Self-leadership* over them. The various roles I occupy (father, professor, executive, mediator, husband, friend) are not unreal, and they are not interchangeable. They are something like parts. Each has its own voice, its own developmental history, its own way of carrying weight. The Self is the one in whom they are all held and from whom each of them is, ideally, exercised. The parent who feels narrowed to a single role is, in IFS terms, encountering a moment in which one part has been amplified in a particular relationship. In contrast, the others have receded, foregrounding the loop that has been produced and now sustains.

Logotherapy: The Role as a Source of Meaning

Frankl (1946/2006), writing out of his experience in the Nazi concentration camps, argued that the deepest human motivation is not pleasure or power but the *will to meaning*. He identified three avenues through which meaning is realized: *creative values* (what we contribute through work and service), *experiential values* (what we receive in love and beauty), and *attitudinal values* (the stance we take toward unavoidable suffering). For the parent who feels constricted by being seen only in one role, Frankl offers a quietly powerful reframe. The role of father or mother is itself a profound source of creative meaning. Whatever else one does in the world, the meaning realized through being a parent does not depend on the child's perception of one's other achievements. It is meaningful, given through the relationship as it exists. And even if the longing to be seen whole is never fully met, the parent can take an attitudinal stance toward bearing partial sight, which itself becomes meaningful.

Taken Together

These traditions are not in competition; each illuminates a different facet of the same complex reality, and read against the grain, they fall into a kind of division of labor. ACT works on the rational construal, loosening identification with the category. Narrative therapy and the self-fulfilling prophecy literature work at the relational seam, thickening thin stories and interrupting the interactions that confirm them. Bowen works at the systemic level, differentiating the self from the assigned position. Adler points the whole person outward into a wider community where the loop has not yet narrowed them. IFS recovers the Self that holds the foregrounded part. Existential therapy names the constitutive limit that the loop cannot cause and cannot cure. Logotherapy reframes the partial role as itself a place where meaning is realized. And forgiveness therapy names the ongoing release that makes any of the rest sustainable. Taken together, they describe both the difficulty and the dignity of being a self who is known in part and yet remains, beneath the parts, whole.

Frame-Stepping in Practice: A Note from the Mediation Table

If the analysis so far has been theoretical, the mediation work that occupies a substantial part of my professional life is where the theory becomes craft. The mediator's central discipline, in the end, is *frame-stepping*: helping each party in a dispute step temporarily into the frame of reference from which the other party is acting, while remaining anchored in their own. Frame-stepping works precisely because frames are constructed. If the shape of a party's seeing were a fixed fact rather than a built thing, there would be nothing to step into and nothing to widen.

This is harder than it sounds. Parties at a mediation table have usually arrived because they have been treating their own frame of reference as the obvious one, as simply the way the situation is, and treating the other party's frame as a distortion, a manipulation, or a willful refusal to see things rightly. They are not normally aware that they have a frame at all. The first work of mediation is to surface the frame as a frame: to help each party see that what they have been treating as "the facts of the matter" is in fact "the facts as I am organizing them through my particular standpoint."

Once both frames have been named, the second movement becomes possible. Each party can be invited to step, briefly and provisionally, into the other's frame. Not to agree with it. Not to abandon their own. Just to enter it long enough to see what the other is actually seeing. This is the same move Rogers asked of his therapists, the same move Adler asked of those wishing to understand the inner logic of behavior that looked irrational, the same move Bowen asked of those trying to differentiate within a family system. Across the traditions, frame-stepping is the master move.

I notice, as I write this, that this is also the move I am hoping my son will eventually make, and the move I am being asked to make in his direction first. The parent who wants to be seen more fully by their child cannot demand the widening; they can only model it. To step into the child's frame of reference, to see, briefly, what the world looks like from a fifteen-year-old's vantage, is itself an exercise of the discipline that mediation makes explicit. The kitchen table is, in this sense, a smaller and gentler version of the mediation table. The same craft applies.

Mediation has taught me one further thing. The goal of frame-stepping is not for everyone to end up in a single shared frame. That goal, when pursued, usually fails. The actual goal is for each party to hold their own frame more lightly, more reflectively, while honoring that the other party's frame is just as real and just as logical to them. Reconciliation, in this sense, is not the merging of frames but the recognition of their plurality. So too in the parent-child relationship. My son does not need to see the world the way I do, and I do not need him to. We need only to honor that each of us is operating from a frame the other did not invent and cannot fully enter, and to extend, from inside our own frame, the curiosity and patience the relationship deserves.

The Special Case of Parents and Children

The parent-child relationship is a particularly striking instance of frame-of-reference and role-constriction, and the loop explains why: in this one relationship, all three levels conspire to make the frame unusually durable.

First, at the rational level, the role has been fixed since before the child can remember. From the moment of awareness, the parent is the parent. There was no prior phase in which the parent was encountered as a peer, a stranger, or a colleague. The category was laid down before the child had any capacity to examine it, which makes it the readiest construct of all and the most resistant to revision. In general, we are least able to question the frames we received earliest.

Second, at the developmental layer of the relational level, the scaffolding required to perceive a parent as a person (with their own inner life, history, and struggles) does not arrive early. Children inhabit a world in which the parent is, for years, more a function than a person: the source of food, safety, comfort, discipline, guidance. Developmental theorists from Piaget (1954) to Selman (1980) have traced how the capacity to take another's perspective, including that of a parent, matures only gradually. Even in late adolescence and early adulthood, it is rare for children

to fully grasp that their parents are continuing to develop, to suffer, to question, to grow. Until that capacity matures, the daily interactions can only confirm the function, not complicate it.

Third, at the systemic level, the parent has often colluded, frequently without thinking, in keeping the other selves invisible. We do this for good reasons. The child does not need to carry the weight of our professional anxieties or theological wrestling. We curate ourselves for them, often appropriately. But the result is that the curation becomes the only thing they see, and the system, parent and child together, closes the frame around it.

So my son does not see, except in glimpses, the man who once built a marketing strategy from scratch and watched it succeed. He does not see the professor working through a knotty problem in role theory or attribution. He does not see the mediator who has held a room of people back from saying something they could not unsay. He does not see the husband, the brother, the parishioner, or the friend.

This is not a tragedy. It is the ordinary condition of being a parent. The same is presumably true in reverse: I see my son through the lens of my own role-set, and there is much about him I do not perceive because the relationship does not call it out. The clerk at the coffee shop encounters him as a customer. His friends encounter him as a peer. His professors will encounter him as a student. None of us, including me, sees the whole. But it is worth naming. It is worth knowing. Because the frame, while it makes seeing possible, also bounds it, and the bounds shape what is possible between us, and what may yet become possible.

Practical Implications

A few practical things follow from all of this, provisional, not yet the answer the paper is moving toward, but useful work for the meantime. Each is, in effect, a place to put one's hands on the loop.

For Parenting

There comes a time when it becomes possible to let our children see more, to gradually widen the frame. When my son asks me about a decision he is facing at work, I can answer not only as dad but, if invited, as someone who has navigated similar terrain. The invitation matters. Pushing the other selves on a child who has not asked to see them is intrusive; offering them when the moment is right is generous. The skill is in reading which moment is which.

For Self-Knowledge

We should be cautious about taking any one person's perception of us as the whole truth about us. Each person's frame of reference for us is shaped by the relationship through which they encounter us, and no single frame captures the whole person. The colleague who sees only the executive, the student who sees only the professor, the son who sees only the father: each is right about what they see, and none has the whole picture. The temptation to collapse our self-understanding into the dominant view of any single relationship is real and should be resisted.

For Relating to Others

We should be slow to assume that the person in front of us (the cashier, the new acquaintance, the colleague we know only from meetings) is exhausted by the role we encounter them in. They have other selves, and they bring their own frame of reference to the encounter as well. Curiosity about that frame, and about the selves it does not yet contain, is one of the simplest forms of respect we can extend.

For Conflict and Reconciliation

Conflict is rarely resolved by proving one party right and the other wrong. It is usually resolved by each party coming to understand the frame from which the other is acting, and then,

sometimes, by being willing to step temporarily into it. The same discipline required at a mediation table is required, in lower-stakes form, at the kitchen table.

For Future Research

Although this essay is conceptual rather than empirical, the loop it describes implies claims that could be tested, and naming them marks where the synthesis offered here might be put to the test. If frame-stepping and differentiation genuinely loosen a hardened construal, then practices that cultivate them ought to reduce the confirmation-biased learning by which unreinforced social suggestions become self-fulfilling, an effect now demonstrable in controlled social-cue paradigms (Yazdanpanah et al., 2026). Reconciliation, as this paper construes it theologically, might likewise be operationalized: the two factors of the Reconciliation with God Scale, repentance and absolution, could serve as outcomes for interventions that pair frame-widening with a Lutheran practice of confession and absolution (Cowden et al., 2026). And because the empirical basis for differentiation still calls for longitudinal and causal designs (Calatrava et al., 2022), the relationships this paper treats pastorally, between differentiation, anxiety, and the narrowing of a frame, remain genuinely open questions rather than settled ones. None of this is the essay's own task, but the conceptual bridge it builds is one that empirical work could, in principle, walk across.

A Word to Parents Who Find This Hard

Not every parent experiences what I have described as curiosity. For some, it is a quiet grief, a sense of being known only in fragments by the people they love most. The accomplished professional whose teenager shrugs at her work. The veteran whose son cannot fathom what he carried home. The widow whose grown daughter still sees mostly “mom” and not the woman who has rebuilt a life from rubble. The longing to be seen, to be known whole, is one of the deeper longings of the human heart, and it can ache most where we love most. If you are reading this from inside that ache, a few thoughts.

Name the Grief Honestly

The wish to be seen by your child is not vanity. It is a piece of the desire that runs through every loving relationship. Do not bypass the feeling or scold yourself for having it. Sit with it. Counselors and contemplatives have long agreed on this much: the way through a difficult feeling is rarely around it. Sit long enough to know what it is telling you.

Resist the Temptation to Campaign

Many parents, sensing that their child does not see them in their fullness, try, subtly or not, to set the record straight. They drop achievements into conversation, recount accomplishments, and insist on being taken seriously in their professional or intellectual identities. This almost always backfires, and the loop explains why: a frame pressed against from the outside tends to defend itself. A child asked to expand the frame on the parent's terms tends instead to entrench it. The frame widens when it does, on the child's terms and at the child's pace. Be available when the door opens (a question at the kitchen table, a request for advice that reaches beyond the day-to-day), and walk through it gently, offering what is asked for and no more.

Locate Your Sense of Self Somewhere Other Than the Child's Perception

This is harder than it sounds. The relationships we have with our children are so weight-bearing that it is easy to make their view of us load-bearing as well. This is the work Bowen (1978) called differentiation: remaining a self within the family's emotional field rather than being defined by it. No single relationship, not even the most precious, can carry the whole weight of who you are. For me, the Lutheran conviction that my identity is ultimately grounded in Christ, not in any creature's perception, is what makes this possible. For others, the grounding will look different. The point is that the grounding has to be somewhere, and it cannot be in the eyes of a fifteen-year-old.

Develop Your Other Vocations Fully, but Not for Your Child's Sake

Pour into your work, your friendships, your service, your faith community, because those vocations matter and serve their own neighbors. Adler would call this the cultivation of social interest, letting one's life extend outward into the wider community, where the other selves are met and used. If your child eventually sees more of you because of it, that is a gift. If they do not, the vocations are still worth pouring into. Cultivate, too, the people who do see you whole, or as whole as anyone gets to be seen. A spouse, a close friend, a mentor, a small circle at church or at work. Tend those relationships carefully.

Forgive the Small Slight, and the Larger Ones, in Time

When your child treats your professional knowledge as irrelevant, dismisses your experience as outdated, or rolls their eyes at your hard-won convictions, the urge to take offense is natural. In most cases, it is also developmentally fitting. Children, especially in adolescence, are doing the work of differentiating from us. The slights are usually less about you than about that work. Forgive them quickly. Keep the door open from your side, even when the door from theirs is temporarily closed. The larger wounds (the ones that come, in some relationships, when a child grows into actively misunderstanding the parent rather than simply not knowing them) call for a deeper practice. Worthington (2020) and Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) describe forgiveness as a process rather than an event: a repeated decision to release the demand for what cannot be given back, while remaining clear-eyed about what occurred.

Honor the Role You Are Actually In

Being “just dad” or “just mom” is not a lesser thing. It is, in Luther's terms, a holy vocation, perhaps the most consequential one many of us will hold. The same impulse that makes us long to be seen in our other identities can, if we are not careful, lead us to undervalue the identity our child

does see. The father, preoccupied with his child's failure to recognize his executive accomplishments, may be missing the very vocation God has actually placed before him.

Trust the Long Arc

The child of fifteen who cannot see you is not the child of thirty-five who often can. The frame widens with time, with experience, and especially with the child's own encounter with the kinds of life you have already navigated. Patience here is not passivity. It is faith that the frame is not the final word.

For some parents in some seasons, none of these dissolves the grief. The longing remains. It is, perhaps, one of the costs of loving a being whose perception of us is so heavily shaped by a role we did not entirely choose. But grief, held honestly and grounded in something deeper than the relationship itself, can become workable. It can even, in time, become a kind of teacher, drawing us deeper into the vocations God has actually given and into a self that does not depend on any single mirror for its shape.

The Answer, In Part

The answer this paper has been moving toward is not, in the end, an answer at all, not in the sense of a settled doctrine that closes the question and lets us move on. The question of how to know and to be known, across the partial selves that structure our shared life, is not the kind of question that yields to a single resolution. It is a question we live inside, return to, and re-answer with every season of every relationship that matters to us.

The answer begins with the distinction this revision has tried to make: load-bearing. We will not know one another in full on this side of the mirror (that fact is constitutive and is not ours to fix). Yet, the particular shape of our partial seeing is built by a loop we can learn to work with,

and so we are genuinely called to the labor of knowing as fully as we can. Both at once, in the same lived breath. The dialectical move that runs through this paper, from Kegan's self-transforming mind to Linehan's both/and to Luther's *simul justus et peccator*, is not merely a clever piece of philosophy. It is the actual shape of what is being asked of us. We accept the limit we cannot move, and we keep widening the frame we can. We accept that we will be misread, and we keep extending our hand. We forgive the narrowness of the frames through which others see us, and we keep showing up inside them. The synthesis, if there is one, is the practice itself, *aufgehoben*, preserved, and fulfilled rather than erased, by the daily refusal to let either pole collapse the other.

What that practice looks like, in any given week, is plainer than the theory suggests. It looks like the discipline of frame-stepping, which a mediator's table sharpens and a kitchen table softens, entering, briefly, the vantage from which the other person is seeing, then returning to your own to act with more understanding than you started with. It looks like the differentiation Bowen described: remaining yourself within the gravitational field of people who see only part of you, neither fusing with their view of you nor cutting yourself off in protest. It looks like Adler's social interest, letting your life extend outward into the wider community, where other selves are met and used. It looks like the narrative therapist's patient work of thickening descriptions, the IFS practice of leading from Self rather than from a foregrounded part, the logotherapist's reframe of the partial role as itself a place where meaning is realized. The traditions converge, in the end, on a small set of repeatable moves, each working on a different point in the same loop. The answer is their doing.

What underlies all these practices and ultimately makes them sustainable is the work of forgiveness. Not as a single dramatic act of pardoning a grave wound, but as the daily, repeated release of the small, ongoing demands that our partial seeing produces in us: the demand that the other see us more fully than they currently do; the demand that they recognize parts of us they have not yet had reason to notice; the demand that the frame widen on our timetable rather than theirs. To forgive in this sense is not to pretend we have not been narrowly read. It is to release the grip of that narrow reading on our well-being and to keep extending the hand anyway. Smedes (1984) put it simply: to forgive is to set a prisoner free, and to discover the prisoner was yourself. For the Confessional Christian, the practice is not invented from nothing. We forgive because we

have been forgiven, not as a moral fee owed in exchange, but as the spontaneous overflow of a knowing and a pardoning that arrived before we asked for either. That this daily practice can be deliberately supported, and not merely hoped for, is suggested by recent applied work: a self-directed Christian workbook designed to help believers move through repentance toward a felt reception of God's forgiveness, developed with input from clergy, clinicians, and lay Christians (Cowden et al., 2025). The present essay is not such a manual; it offers, rather, the conceptual and theological groundwork on which a distinctly Lutheran version of that practice, anchored in absolution rather than achievement, might be built.

None of this works without an anchor outside the relationships being navigated. The temptation that besets the parent who feels unseen, or the spouse, the friend, the colleague, is to make the perception of those closest to us the ground of our being, letting our self-understanding rise and fall with how we are read by those we love. This is, in Bowen's language, fusion. In Luther's view, it is something closer to idolatry: making a creature bear the weight only the Creator can bear. The answer the paper has been pointing toward is theological at its base. Our identity is grounded not in any single mirror but in the One whose seeing is total and whose love is not contingent on being correctly perceived. We are already fully known. The mirror will be lifted. In the meantime, the partial sight of those who love us is not the verdict on who we are. It is just the partial sight of those who love us, real, precious, and never the whole story.

What I want, today, is a relationship with my son in which we both keep widening the frame. Not because he owes me a fuller perception of his father, and not because I am owed a fuller perception of who he is. But because we love each other, and the practice of love, over time, is the practice of seeing more. I want him to eventually encounter the businessperson, the professor, the mediator, and the believer, not as performances to be impressed by, but as parts of the man he has always known. And I want to encounter, in him, the grown self that is still becoming: the friend his friends already see, the worker his colleagues will one day see, the husband and father he may himself one day become. We will not get there by demanding it of each other. We will get there, if we get there, by extending the curiosity and the patience the relationship deserves, and by trusting the long arc.

And in the meantime, to be known. Being known requires the courage to let down the curation, at least sometimes, with the people who have earned the right to see further. Answering the unexpected question at the kitchen table with the truer answer rather than the easier one. Allowing oneself to be visible in the parts of life the role does not normally call forth: the worry, the doubt, the joy, the conviction hard-won at some cost. The frame widens when it widens, partly because we have offered something to widen it with. The risk is that the offer will not be received as we hoped. The greater risk, perhaps, is that we never make it at all.

The Quest and the Question are not yet finished with me, and I am not yet finished with them. What I have offered here is where I am standing today, what I think I have learned, and the horizon I am walking toward. The paper began with the prism, the refracted glimpses through which we catch one another, never the whole light. It ends with the same prism, the same partial glimpses, and the same longing to be known and to know. What has shifted, I hope, is the posture in which we hold them, and the understanding of how they are made. Not as the cost of an inadequate love, but as the shape of a love still on its way. Not as a wound, but as a vocation. Not as the final word, but as the long, slow practice of inhabiting a knowing that will, one day, be face to face.

A Final Thought and Prayer

My son will, in time, see more of me. I will see more and understand more of him. The frame will widen for both of us, not because anyone forces it open, but because life and our own continuing development will bring us into encounters that call for it. The work, while he is still seeing mostly “dad” and I am still seeing mostly the son I am raising, is twofold: to be the kind of father whose other selves are of a piece with the one he already knows, so that when he eventually glimpses the businessperson, the professor, the mediator, the counselor, none of them feels like a stranger, and to be the kind of father who is already paying attention to the friend, the colleague, the man my son is becoming, so that when those selves arrive, they do not arrive as strangers either. We will recognize each other as continuous with the people we have known all along.

In the meantime, being seen as dad and being given the gift of seeing him grow into himself is, all things considered, not a bad way to be seen.

Heavenly Father, you have searched for me, and you know me. You see what no one else sees, and you love what you see. Grant me patience to be a faithful father in the frame my son sees today, courage to be seen more truly when the door opens between us, grace to step into his frame as gently as I would have him step into mine, and the daily forgiveness that keeps the door open from my side. Widen the frame in your time, not mine. Keep my identity rooted not in any single mirror but in you, who know me in full and love me regardless. On the day the mirror is lifted, and we see face to face, may we find that the love we practiced in partial sight was the love you were giving us all along.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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