

# Where Do I Anchor the Understanding of My Identity? On achievements and relationships in *Grey's Anatomy*

by  
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## Media analysis on *Grey's Anatomy*

Popular culture is to a large extent dominated by visual media. Films and television series play a central role, especially among the younger audience. Popular cultural texts are not neutral, but convey various perspectives on what is true, good and right, what a human being is, how we view reality, and what may be worthy of our deepest faith and trust. Because of this, it is important to take a closer look at what worldviews can be conveyed in popular television series. Consequently, Damaris Norge has, on behalf of Familie & Medier (Family & Media), analyzed season 3 of the highly popular television series *Grey's Anatomy*.

*Grey's Anatomy* is a hospital series where the main characters are a group of young interns. The interns are both colleagues and close friends, most of them share a house, and some of them are dating, living together, or are married. We also meet several of the other doctors and surgeons at the hospital. In this soap opera universe a number of interesting themes are in focus. One example is identity, especially regarding the role that achievements and relationships play concerning how people view themselves.

Our view of – and the basis for – identity are central issues in our time, which is reflected in this television series. The fact that popular cultural media products contribute to reflect and shape central aspects of how people view themselves, make these products relevant and worth studying. For this reason it was interesting, based on the internal universe of this series, to see to what extent identity seems to be linked to career or to private life, that is, whether the understanding of identity is anchored in career achievements or in relationships.

The analysis has been performed using an analytical tool developed by Margunn Serigstad Dahle, taking as a starting point what can be observed of people's way of living, and from there looking beyond to possible underlying worldview perspectives. A concept central to the analysis is *identity dependence*, which is borrowed from the psychologist and theologian Dick Keyes<sup>1</sup>. This concept is an indication of where identity ultimately is anchored.

## A focus on achievements – a longing for relationships

The main impression *Grey's Anatomy* gives is that the main characters first and foremost anchor their identity in their role as surgeons. As they are interns, and as the setting primarily is the hospital, it is natural that there is a considerable amount of focus on their achievements. However, it is interesting that achievements seem to form the basis for how they perceive their own identity (cp. identity dependence), despite the doctors also being close friends and/or in more intimate relationships. Who you are, who you would like to be, and what gives you a sense of worth, is in the series to a large extent linked to the characters' defining themselves as doctors. In other words, career and achievements dominate their understanding of identity.

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1 Dick Keyes *Beyond Identity: Finding Yourself in the Image and Character of God* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003) pp. 5, 230ff.

Christina is a clear example of this. She and her colleague Preston are planning their wedding, but this repeatedly has to give way to Christina's career focus. She says, *I'm not a bride, I am a surgeon*, which is a good illustration of Christina's understanding of identity. The fact that she primarily anchors her identity in her career also becomes evident when the career of her fiancé, Preston, is at stake. The reason for this is that he and Christina have lied about an injury to Preston's hand in order for him to be able to continue operating. Preston later regrets this, and threatens to reveal their secret: *...I can't be chief, not now, not like this. Do you know how long I've wanted this? My entire career, and when I finally get it, there's blood on it. I had a tremor and I didn't say anything about it. It's unimaginable. It's unethical. I crossed the line.* Christina's answer to this is: *I did what you needed me to do. You were standing there looking at me telling me your whole life was your hands, if you couldn't operate, if you couldn't be Preston Burke.* It is evident that career and professional identity are of major importance to Christina and Preston (although they emphasize it to different degrees), and seem to play an important role in relation to their understanding of themselves and of their identities.

Richard, the leader of the surgical ward, exemplifies this as well, as he chose his career instead of the relationship to his wife. He defends his choices by referring to the important objective of his career: *But I stayed. I worked. [...] If I'd quit, all I would have had is that life that I lost. Instead I get to save lives. Every day, I get to save lives.* Richard to a large extent admits that his career is his first priority, but his defence of this is that he saves lives. It may appear as though he is hoping for his accomplishments as a surgeon to make up for him not saving his own family life; meaning that he may find his identity in his role and his achievement as a doctor when he has lost his identity as a husband and a private individual.

With the concept of identity dependence as a starting point, we can see that identity seems to be anchored in, and understood in relation to, career achievements.

Private life and relationships to other people, on the other hand, seem to play a less important role, in which private life almost becomes an integrated part of the career-related sphere. This often entails that the two spheres overlap or merge, and it subsequently becomes difficult to keep a balance between the different roles. Meredith and Derek try to obtain this balance throughout the season, but it often ends by both roles, as a couple and as colleagues, being acted out in all situations. Derek describes the challenge like this: *The relationship, the chief thing, how to juggle them both without getting distracted.*

### **Have it both ways**

The way identity is perceived in *Grey's Anatomy* seems to have as an underlying aspect the balance between achievements and relationships – how to succeed in one's career and in the private arena, especially regarding love, at the same time. Simultaneously, the main focus seems to be on career achievements, so that this largely constitutes the basis for the characters' understanding of identity.

Here, as well, Christina is a good example. Although it looks as if she lets her identity primarily be based on her career and her role as a surgeon, she does in some situations reveal an underlying search for something more, for relationships. In a conversation with Ellis, Meredith's mother – who is an acclaimed (former) surgeon – Christina asks: *Will it get in my way? Can I have both? Can I be a great surgeon and have a life?* Ellis replies: *I didn't try hard enough.* This displays a part of the dream shared by several of the doctors of *Grey's Anatomy*. They try to realize their dreams, in all areas of life, but this turns out to be difficult,

perhaps impossible. Meredith expresses it like this: *No one believes their life will turn out just kind of ok. We all think we're going to be great. And from the day we decide to become surgeons, we are all filled with expectations. Expectations of the trials we will blaze, the people we will help, the difference we will make. Great expectations of who we will be, where we will go, and then we get there... [...] The dream is this, that we'll finally be happy when we reach our goals.*

The main characters of *Grey's Anatomy* seem to a large extent to reflect the postmodern idea that each individual is free to – and has a responsibility to - *create* their own identity. They are apparently influenced by the attitude that one can *shape* one's identity through one's achievements. At the same time they reveal a longing to *find* their identity in their relationships. This may be interpreted as a possible indication of a wish or a hope that they have been born to something specific and special – that something or someone outside themselves has given some directions regarding their identity. It thus seems that the understanding of identity in *Grey's Anatomy* is marked by a tension between two typical contemporary worldview perspectives, namely existentialism (I can create myself through my choices) and the postmodern (I am one person today, another one tomorrow).

### **True identity – complete human being**

The tendencies we find concerning identity understanding and the perception of career and private life in *Grey's Anatomy*, are also found among many people in our modern Western culture. We can recognize both the sense of having the responsibility to shape our identity, and the longing to «find oneself».

In the Christian faith, identity is understood as something rooted in and given by God. If God is our creator, then he is also the key to the meaning of life. Christian faith claims that the ultimate meaning and purpose of life is found in Him. Keyes describes it like this: “A person with a strong and true sense of identity will experience peace with self, others and God”<sup>2</sup>. This leads us back to one of the basic concepts of this analysis – namely identity dependence; we must not let our identity rely on something that cannot support its weight. According to Christian belief only the Christian God is great enough to do this.

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*Translated into English by Ingebjørg Hitland.*

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2 Keyes *ibid* p. 4.