***Student’s Context Essay: Identity and Belonging***

**Prompts:**

[A] "A person's sense of individual identity is always changing in response to their experiences in life." Discuss.

[B] "The individual's sense of personal identity is dependent on their sense of belonging." Discuss.

[C] "A solitary life is an unfulfilling life." Discuss.

[D] "Who we are often depends on where we are." Discuss.

[E] "The groups to which we belong provide us with our identity." Discuss.

[F] "With a strong sense of belonging comes a strong sense of identity." Discuss.

A person's sense of individual identity is always changing in response to the experiences in life. How we feel, how we act and how we perceive ourselves and our surroundings can influence change in identity. Identity can be defined as a set of personal or behavioural characteristics by which an individual is recognized or known as by a group. The horrific and heart breaking story of what my friend experienced is a perfect example of how our circumstances and experiences can alter our identities. About two years ago, my friend began to change. Not just how she acted but her appearance too. She looked upset all the time, was skipping school, drifting away from friendships and spent a lot of time in one of the teacher's offices. It took a while for her to admit there was something wrong, but with enough persuasion she opened up. She had been diagnosed with anorexia nervosa. She described it as a “a monster in my head” who had taken complete control. The girl I used to know was no longer around. In Carson McCuller's novel, *"The Member of the Wedding",* Frankie is captured at a time in her life when her identity is fragile because it is forming and changing. It is also the time when she lacks a strong sense of belonging to a group or the wider community. In the collection of poems by Bruce Dawe entitled *“Sometimes Gladness”,* he presents the reader with the idea that people can attain an enduring sense of both identity and belonging. He believes that many life experiences compel us to alter our sense of self. Both texts and the story of my friend suggest that our identity changes depending on experiences.

Things began to turn upside down half way through year 10. It was clear to see that my friend was experiencing some difficulties at school and her home situation was beginning to bother her. Adolescence can be a difficult period because it brings about changes in the way individuals see themselves and the way they want others to see them. Their sense of identity seems fluid and uncertain as they face the confusion of being caught between childhood and adulthood. It was a period of time when school and our futures became serious. We were trying to find what it is we want to pursue, the work load was becoming unbearable and my friend was having a difficult time adjusting. For Frankie in *"The Member of the Wedding",* her circumstances were changing the person she once was too. Frankie became distant from a group of girls she used to talk to as she started to feel like she did not belong. Frankie is a tall girl for her age and her demeanour and appearance marked her as an outsider. She is gangly and socially awkward, too tall to play with children, but " ... too young and mean" [page 17] to join the teenage girls. It is clear that the life of a person, and what they deal with, has the biggest control over their sense of identity and belonging.

In addition to the daily trials faced on the journey of life, many people live with personal problems or difficult experiences that prevent them from growing into the people they would really like to be. For my friend, she had wanted to become a teacher for a very long time. When the "monster in her head" came along this changed. She began to believe that she would not be able to pursue any career or do anything right. The circumstances were interfering with the person she wanted to become. She did not know who she was anymore. In Bruce Dawe's poems, *"Sometimes Gladness"* the poem entitled *"Migrants"* explains the story of newcomers to Australia trying to adapt and find a new sense of belonging. A person's sense of self is always changing according to the changes or experiences in life. The new migrants displayed personal problems that were preventing them from becoming the person they want to be. Both the old and the new aspects were getting in the way of the transformation. In the case of my friend, anorexia was in the way of her future and her life at present. She did not know the person she was becoming, and neither did the people around her.

When things began to deteriorate even more than they already had, the one person she confided in knew that something else needed to be done. An initial visit to the doctor turned into weekly therapy appointments and even group therapy for girls the same age with similar issues. For a long time before commencement of treatment, she was constantly preoccupied with the unknown and what was going to happen in therapy. In *"The Member of the Wedding"*, Frankie's longing to fit in was what she could only think about. As badly as she wanted to belong, the fear and anxiety of actually being around people intensified. For both my friend and Frankie, the thoughts of a new change scared them. Frankie was afraid she would have to change herself drastically for people to like her and my friend was afraid that her identity was unknown and she had no clue of what was going to happen. The anxiety experienced by both caused an extra stress that was definitely not helping the circumstances. The mental state of my friend was worsening and she became as distant as ever. The problems had almost consumed her and her sense of who she was and where she belonged had almost completely drifted away.

Often, people who confront traumatic experiences need to adapt to find a new sense of self in order to integrate those experiences and move beyond them. Many life experiences may compel us to alter our identity. Some experiences forcibly change us and others do it naturally. My friend became held up in the control of the illness and she changed who she used to be and she did not even know the person she had become. The past two years have been an emotional roller coaster and the circumstances changed my closest friend. We hear about people changing all the time and we can just assume we know why depending on what we see. However, a person's sense of identity and belonging relies mainly on circumstances and life experiences.

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