

# Caroline McHugh on The Art of Being Yourself (Full Transcript)

Chief Idologist Caroline McHugh on *The Art of Being Yourself* at TEDxMiltonKeynesWomen – Transcript

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## **Caroline McHugh – Founder and CEO of IDOLOGY**

So, the chances are you've looked in at least one mirror today. You've had a shave, or you combed your hair, or maybe you checked your teeth for spinach after lunch. But what you didn't know is that the face looking back at you isn't the face that everybody else sees. It's a kind of reversed, distorted, back-to-front image.

So some years ago, I was on a flight to New York and I read an article in the FT, and it was an article about a phenomenon called a *True Mirror*, and for the Americans listening, that's a mirror. So the True Mirror was actually invented by a brother and sister team in New York called John and Catherine Walters, and what they discovered was that if you take two mirrors and you put them together at right angles and you take the seam away the images bounce off each other. And what you see when you look in a True Mirror is exactly what other people see when they look at you.

So I land in New York and I phone John up and ask him if I can go and see him, and I end up in his gallery in Brooklyn, and it was like being at a sideshow in the circus. There were True Mirrors full length, face sized, all over this gallery. And when I walked over to the True Mirror for the first time and I looked in the mirror, it was one of the most disorientating experiences I've ever had in my life.

The first thing you notice when you look in a True Mirror is that your head's

not on straight. So yours is kind of going that way, and yours is quite straight actually, and yours is going that way a wee bit. So, apparently most of us tilt our heads one way or another, so when you approach a True Mirror the first thing you try and do is fix your head, but, of course, because it's reversed you go the wrong way. So it's very, very disorientating.

But more importantly, I had a flashback. I had a flashback to when I was a wee girl. So I grew up in Glasgow – in case you haven't noticed, I am Scottish. But I grew up in Glasgow, and my mom, when she was putting her makeup on, I used to love sitting and watching my mom putting her makeup on, you know, with my chin in my hands.

And I would tell her occasionally, *"Isn't it funny how one side of your top lip is higher than the other side of your top lip?"*

And she'd look in the mirror and she'd say, *"It is not."*

And I'd say, *"No, it's only a couple of millimeters, but that side of your cupid's bow is definitely higher than the other side of your cupid's bow."*

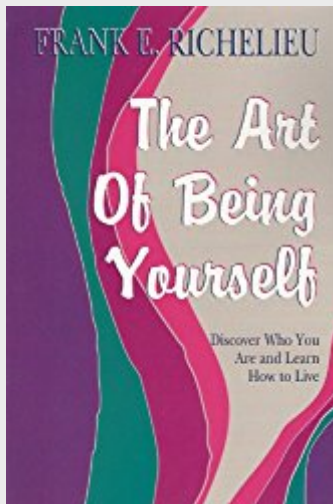
She'd say, *"Caroline, you're hawering."*

And when I looked in the True Mirror, there was the lip that I had been wearing, at that time, for maybe 45 years, and I'd never seen it. So the difference is *when you look in a regular mirror you look for reassurance*. You look for reassurance that you're beautiful, or you're young, or you're tidy, or your bum doesn't look big in that.

But *when you look in a True Mirror you don't look at yourself, you look for yourself*. You look for revelation, not for reassurance. And this was deeply interesting to me because what I do for a living is I help people be themselves. Not in any narcissistic or solipsistic way, but because I believe that social reformation begins – always starts with the individual.

And when you look at remarkable individuals, and when I say remarkable, or successful individuals, I don't mean monetarily successful. I mean people that have been successful at achieving whatever they set out to do. You'll find that the thing they have in common is they have nothing in common. These are people who work in many of the fields that I work in. I work with people in corporations, I work with captains of industry, I work with selected politicians. I've worked with geophysicists. I've worked with chamber orchestras, and ballet dancers, and pop stars, and opera singers.

And I've identified the thread that links them. These are individuals who have managed to figure out the unique gift that the universe gave them when they incarnated, and then put that at the service of their goals. I think that we all come complete. We come complete with one true note we were destined to sing, and these are people that have managed to figure that out. And it doesn't dictate your choice of job; what it dictates is how you do it.



And when we see these people we invariably call them *larger than life*. You know, you'll see somebody like Roberto Benigni and you'll say, "*Oh my goodness*". Eve Ensler, she's larger than life, which always makes me smile because how could you be larger than life? Life is large. But most of us don't take up nearly the space the universe intended for us. We take up this wee space around our toes, which is why when you see somebody in the full flow of their humanity, it's remarkable. They're at least a foot bigger in every direction than normal human beings, and they shine. They gleam, they glow. It's like they've swallowed the moon.

And all the work I've done has led me to believe that individuality really is all it's cracked up to be. In fact, people who are frightened to be themselves will work for those who are unafraid. Now your job is not to be anything like any of the people that I put up behind me. In fact, your job is to be as unlike them as you can possibly be. Your only job while you're here on the planet is to be as good at being you as they are at being them. That's the deal.

So I want to start today by asking you an incredibly personal question. Not the one that says, "*Why are there so many syllables in the word 'monosyllabic'?*", no. Not even the one that says, "*Did you know that Britney Spears was an anagram for Presbyterian?*," no. Something a wee bit more pivotal. In fact, this is a question that's been looking for you your whole life. It's probably the simplest, and the most complicated question you'll ever ask.

And yet how many times in your life has somebody offered you that well-meaning piece of advice that you should just be yourself? How many times have you said it to somebody else? One of your kids comes to you, or one of your team comes to you, and they tell you they're nervous, they're scared. They have to go and do something and their bold goes, and you say to them, "*Darling, just be yourself, because when you're yourself, you're fabulous*".

Now it always resonates, because it's all we want to do. If you tell John to be himself, he doesn't want to be Mary. He's quite happy being himself, but it's the use of the word "just" that I find interesting because it would imply two things. Number one, that that was an easy thing to do. Number two, that it was an original piece of advice. You know, John had never thought about it himself.

When it comes to being yourself, when it comes to being in the world, the minute you showed up, the minute you incarnated, you were given a life sentence. Now, you don't know how long you got. Maybe you got 70 years and I got 62. We've no idea how long we got. Although, where you're born, when you're born, to whom you're born, all these things have a certain influence, or impact on how you become who you become. So if you're born in Switzerland, chances are you've got a long time to figure this shit out. If you're born in Zimbabwe, or some parts of Glasgow, and I'm not kidding, you've got significantly less time.

So what I want you to think about is not what your life expectancy is, but what do you expect from life? And what does life expect from you? Those are more interesting questions. And the two places in life where you are awesome at being yourself, you're fantastic at being yourself, one of them is when you're a kid.

When you're a kid, you're fantastic at being yourself because you don't know how to disguise your differentness. That's why you see kids on the beach, you know, naked up until the age of five, and then suddenly at the age of six or seven they want a bathing suit, they want a bikini. Who's got a four-year-old boy? Anybody got a four-year-old boy? I'll take a three-year-old. Jose, you've got a three-year-old boy.

So I want you to imagine I go into Eduardo's class in school, and it's a class of three-year-old boys, and I say to the boys, "*Who's the strongest boy in the class?*" What's going to happen? Every hand, right? Every single hand in the class will go up. They'll be competitively strong.

If I go into the same class, but it's full of seven-year-old boys, and ask the same question, they'll say, "*Him,*" because they know by time they're seven. He's the strong one, he's the fastest runner, he's the funny guy, he's the bully. Society archetype emerges round about the age of five, six, seven, eight. That's why the Jesuits say, "*Give me a boy until the age of seven, and I'll show you the man,*" because that's the birth of consciousness. And from then on you become more self-conscious, and by default less good at being yourself.

The other place you're fantastic at being yourself is when you're a wrinkly, because you can't be arsed. You get to that stage in your life where you realize there are more summers behind you than there are in front of you, and everything intensifies. You become more honest; you become less compromising. So you're going to tell people, "*I don't want the spinach, I'm not going to eat it, I don't like it. And I don't like jazz, so you can shut that noise off. And while I'm at it, I don't like you!*" And we call these people *eccentric*. We call our oldies *eccentric*. In fact, what they're doing is being authentic.

So it's kind of like an hourglass effect. When you're young you're great at being yourself; when you're old you're great at being yourself; but the bit in the middle is sometimes the most problematic. That's the bit where you

have to socialize; you have to accommodate; you have to adapt.

So I've developed the "*I complex*," and the "*I complex*" is a model to help you figure out which "*I*" you mean when you say "*I*." You're very familiar with the superiority complex. If you have a superiority complex, you pretty much think you're the most important person in the room. If you've got an inferiority complex you suffer from an over-modest self-regard. Now these are both signs of a fragile ego. One of them is about delusions of grandeur, and the other one delusions of insignificance.

There's a third way of being in the world, and I call it "*interiority*." This is one of my made-up words. So the word "*interiority*" describes a particular disposition, and there's two reasons it might be useful to you. Number one, it's completely uncomparative. If you have a superiority complex or an inferiority complex you need other people around. For a superiority complex you need other people to be smaller. For an inferiority complex you need to suffer from the I'm-going-to-be-found-out syndrome, so somebody needs to find you out.

Interiority is entirely unrelative, so to operate from this position of interiority, it's like a perceptual vantage point. It's a sensibility. It's an orientation. And it's the only place in your life, the only place in your life, you have no competition. Try and find a comparison to yourself, and you'll draw a blank.

So I could talk to you about interiority till my tongue bleeds, or I could just show you what it looks like. So I want to introduce you to a woman called Jill Scott. You might have her on your iTunes playlist, but Jill's a singer, and she's just about to go on stage and perform, and in case you missed the question, there's a French filmmaker who's filming her. She's going on stage after Erykah Badu, and he says to her, "*Are you nervous going on after Erykah?*" And I want you to listen to what she says. –

[**Voiceover** – "*That chick right there has definitely led the way for me and a lot of other sisters. Now, I appreciate it*".

*Interviewer:* Are you nervous you're going to perform after her?

*"Have you ever seen me perform? I am the Lady Jill Scott. I am a poet, and a singer, and a lot of other things. We all have our own thing – that's the magic– and everybody comes with their own sense of strength, and their own queendom. Mine could never compare to hers, and hers could never compare to mine". ]*



See, you didn't even know you had a queendom. That's what it looks like. When you figure out how to be yourself it's an incredibly liberating, untragic way to go through life. So you don't develop an identity that's predicated on being a patchwork personality. You're not a composite, an amalgam, of all your experience and influences. You're not just somebody's boss, or somebody's mum, or anybody's anything. You're yourself.

However, the chances are, there are at least four of you sitting in each of those chairs, so let me introduce yourselves. The most visible "you" that you represent to the outside world is what everybody else thinks of you, and there are as many opinions of you as there are people. I want you to imagine you're like a big USB stick that you plug into the world. You show up on the desktop of the world. And that's the power of context. If you don't understand that bit, being yourself can be an ill-advised strategy. So of course it's important that you understand perception, but one of the things I've noticed, in terms of gender, and I'm terribly, untragically woman by the way. I don't find myself tragically woman. I describe myself as a womanist, rather than a feminist, but I'm also a card-carrying feminist.

There are very few things that I think are gender-specific, but one of them is something I call "*approval addiction*." The need to be liked, the need for approbation, or recognition, or for somebody to tell you it's okay. I find more woman suffer from that affliction than men, and I think it's one of the most debilitating things. When it comes to being yourself needing other people's approval, loving somebody else's opinion, and mistaking it for your own is one of the most debilitating things you'll do on the road to being yourself. You will never, ever be perceptionless, but it's important to be perception free.

One of the things that's going to help you to be perception free is to tune into the next circle of the "*I complex*." So this is your wish image. This is what you would like everybody else to think of you, and it's not about being fake, or bad, or pretending. It's about moving; it's about possibility; it's about potential; it's about supposition.

So, whilst there's a part of you that's like your backbone, this part of you is like your wishbone. This one is your adaptive personality, your construct self, and even that's unique, because nobody in the world has had the same experiences or influences that you have. But this is the you that keeps

moving, that keeps changing all the time. And it helps you avoid being one of those people. You know the people that say to you they have 15 years experience when they mean one year 15 times? They literally repeat themselves year, after year, after year.

What I want you to think about is with every passing year your job is to be better and better at being who you already are. This is not a cosmetic exercise. You're already different. Your job is to figure out how, and then to be more of that. Now, there are certain times in your life that lend themselves to change, that make change quicker, deeper. And I call them *intervals of possibility*.

Now, they're not always as well sign-posted as this one, but you know those times in your life when you come to a bifurcation on the path, and you sense that the potential for change is heightened? You meet a stranger in a bar; you get to decide what you're going to do. Your boss comes to you and offers you a new job. You know, what do you want, you want to keep doing the same thing, or do you want this job? And you know that if you make that change, the speed of your life will change.

Now, unfortunately, some of these interventions – some of these intervals of possibility – are catastrophic. In fact, most of them are catastrophic because most of us would rather sleepwalk until something happens to wake us up. And what will happen is somebody you love will get sick, or you'll get sick, or you'll get fired. Or maybe it's something impersonal. Maybe 9/11 happens, or the tsunami happens, or the Kashmiri earthquake happens, but something happens that rocks you back into that inner self, and makes you ask the question I asked you at the beginning of this talk. And the problem is when it happens catastrophically is you're vulnerable, you're weak.

And my question is, why wouldn't you ask yourself these questions when you're strong, from a position of health? When you're in a job, when you're loved. That's when the questions become most useful. So the question on this one is, *"If you could be the woman of your dreams, who would you be?"* And my tongue's nowhere near my cheek when I ask you that question.

The thing that might stop you being the woman of your dreams is the next circle, and that's what you think of you. So now you've got what everybody else thinks of you, what you would like everybody else to think of you, and this is what you think of you. And you have good days and bad days, right? There's days where you wake up and you think you're the bee's knees. And other days you wake up and you can't even say your name. Even your cellphone feels too heavy.

So on the days when you wake up and you feel like you're the bee's knees, it's not even like you've got a reason. It's like free-floating joy in your body just looking for a target, and you know how it feels on those days because – (pitches]. You just think, *"Somebody give me an audience; I'm on fire! Quick, point me somewhere!"* And your hair's fabulous, and everything just works, everything works on those days. But the other days nothing works.

Your legs don't work, your mouth doesn't work. You – the word thief comes and steals your entire vocabulary. Those are two extremes of your ego, and one of them is about self-congratulation, and the other one is about self-castigation.

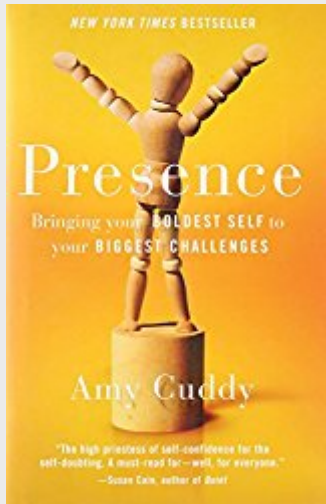
Now your entire life, I don't care who you are, I don't care how old you are, your entire life, from birth up until now has been about building a stable relationship with your ego. You need an ego to live in a Western, capitalist world. If you didn't have an ego you'd be toast. But your challenge is to take the ego from its dominant position and pull it back so that it's in service to yourself. That's when it becomes useful, and in order to do that you've got to find the still point right in the middle of those two extremes. So that's what I would call equanimity, or equilibrium, and it's the kind of state of mind that cannot be perturbed in any way by anything that happens outside you. This kind of confidence that comes from there is like the confidence of the sky. All right, and now it's dark outside, but you know if you went up in a plane, even in the stormiest of days the sky is brilliant blue underneath.

So when you look at the sky and it's made a rainbow and it's absolutely gorgeous, there's no question that the sky is up there going, *"Ha, did you see my rainbow?"* Or when it's a terrible, bleak, you know, gray, gloomy day, that the sky is going to apologize. No, the sky just is, because the sky sees the impermanence of the clouds, and the impermanence of the rainbows, and you have to develop an inner state of mind that's as impervious to all the good shit and bad shit that happens to you as the sky is to the weather.

Now, we would also call this, in a Western context, we would call this feeling a feeling of humility, and I worked last, one day last week where I got to work with UK Sport, and particularly I got to work with the amazing coaches who worked with the amazing Olympic athletes who got all those amazing results at the Summer Olympics. It was incredible to be in the same room as 400 of these people.

And the woman who runs UK Sport is a woman called Baroness Campbell, and she gave me a definition of humility that's as good as any I've ever found. She said, *"Humility is not thinking less of yourself; humility is thinking about yourself less."* And I remembered learning that lesson when I was a wee girl and probably no more than seven or eight, and it was actually the woman with the squinty mouth that taught me the lesson. She had no idea, my mother, what she was doing to me as I was growing up, but when I grew up in Glasgow, particularly working-class, steel-industry Glasgow, nobody had any money, so nobody could afford to go out and be entertained. Everybody's social life happened in a house, so at the weekends, all the wrinklys and all the kids would show up at people's houses, and they would, you know, drink 'til their kneecaps were on backwards, and all that kind of stuff, but everybody at some point in the evening had to perform.





And it was a riot, because these people were bus conductresses, and welders, and carpenters by daytime, but then they'd show up at nighttime and come at you Frank Sinatra, and Dean Martin, and Sarah Vaughan, and Billy Eckstine. They were all – my house was – it was like a star-studded affair, living in my house, and all the kids were taught to perform as well. And so, I'm the oldest of four girls – my mother had four daughters. So did my father, interestingly enough. But we were brought up from any age to perform, and we'd be wheeled out at these family parties, me with my guitar and my sisters around me, and we'd have to sing. And we'd be literally positioned, Jose, like the Von Trapps. You know, my father would say, "*Beneda over there, Louise over there,*" and then we would sing, and we were terrible. We were absolutely rubbish.

So one night my mother came up to get us and we were all upstairs having pillow fights and everything, she showed up and she said, "*Right lasses, everybody's ready. Go down and give them a song.*" And this night I was just overcome. I said, "*I don't want to sing.*"

She said, "*Why do you not want to sing?*"

I said, "*I'm shy.*"

She said, "*What're you shy for?*"

I said, "*Well, everybody is going to be looking at me,*" and I'll never forget her face.

She looked at me, she said, "*Caroline, don't flatter yourself, darlin'. You think anybody down the stairs is interested in you? They're not. Your job is to go down there and make them happy, so go and sing.*"

I said "*Okay*", and I picked up my guitar and I picked up my sisters, and you know what? That advice has never left me. But what it has left me with is spectacular disregard for where my abilities end, and spectacular disregard for being the center of attention. In fact, since that day, I have never been the center of attention. You're the center of mine, and that's a very different feeling.

So last, the last you, and the opposite of least, is the ever-present

unchanging you. This is the you that you've been since you were seven, and the you that you'll be when you're 107, please God. I spend a lot of time in India, and in India you're raised with this feeling that you're a spiritual being who happens to be in a physical body, whereas we in the West are much more into our physical bodies, and then if we get old enough, and long in the tooth enough, we kind of get interested in spirit.

But, if you've ever been to the Gandhi museum in Delhi, you'll know that this is the line that is above the door, and it was actually a response by Gandhi to a question from a journalist. So Gandhi was getting on a train and the journalist called after him, "*Gandhiji, Gandhiji, what's your message to the world?*"

And Gandhi turned around and said, "*My life. My life is my message.*" And your life is your message too. It might not be as big a message as Gandhi's – mine certainly isn't – but your life has to be your message. Otherwise, why are you here? It's not like you've got a spare.

So when you think about your identity, when you think about what it means to be alive, when you think about why you deserve to exist, you're not your thoughts because you think them. And you can't be your feelings, because otherwise who's the you that feels them? You're not what you have; you're not what you do; you're not even who you love, or who loves you. There has to be something underneath all that, and when you look at people who have managed to transcend all these judgements that we put upon them – You know, this man here, he couldn't be judged as a man, or a black man, or young, or old, or Democrat, or Republican, nor a gay, or a straight. It really, really wouldn't have mattered, because he knew why he was here. Yes, we can.

So you see, he seemed to be a verb. And even when you're born without many of the attributes that some of your peers may have, even when you're born in a way that may lead you to feel impotent. If you can tap into that voice, if you can tap into that inner voice that I've been talking about, you might just end up being, at 12 years old, the youngest person ever called to the National World Champion Swim Team. You might even end up at the age of 13 being the youngest Olympian gold medal winner, ever. You might even end up at 14 being the youngest person ever to get an MBE. That's what happens when you dial in to the personal pronoun.

So if you can do this, not only will the speed of your life get quicker, not only will the substance of your life get richer, but you will never feel superfluous again.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.