Speech from Vivek Shraya

As a kid, I grew up surrounded by a plethora of Hindu gods. This was thrilling. Unlike other boys, who collected hockey cards to learn about their favourite players, I mentally gathered data about each god—their different names, functions, powers, aesthetics, animal vehicles, and legends. But in Sunday school, I was eventually corrected. Hindus actually believe in only *one* formless god--who takes on different exteriors to provide humans with different entry points, different options to elicit attraction and devotion. If you weren't into the blue bro with the bow and arrow, maybe you could connect with the ethereal swan-riding, veena-playing goddess.

This is how I explain the appeal of being a multidisciplinary artist. It creates multiple opportunities for connection. If you have an aversion to poetry, may I move you with music or provoke you with photography?

But unlike Hindus, I don't believe in a single, stable, true self. This defiance against the idea of the true self is at the core of my upcoming book, *People Change*. One of the reasons why I have always found the popular advice to "be yourself" confounding or intimidating is that we're vast and immeasurable. When you consider all the people you've been this year, this past decade, this life, can you easily pinpoint which self was most true? Most authentic?

The problem with understanding the self as singular is that the only way a new self can be legitimized is by disavowing one's past self. I'm my true self *now* because I realize that the person I was before was false. This feels akin to the way I've heard friends say, after a breakup, "I don't think I ever really loved him." What if it was that their defini- tion of love had changed, or that they themselves had changed and were unable to continue being the person they were in their relationship? What if in that previous relationship, in that moment, it *was* love? A past love doesn't render a future love less true. Multiple loves can be true. Multiple truths can coexist. How often do we embrace the narrative of a true self simply because it's expected of us? No one advises you to "be yourselves." There's only ever oneself to be.

There's another self I want to address: the ideal self. The person you imagine you would be if you had more time and resources.
Meet my ideal self: she has a regular meditation and yoga practice, reads every day, and flosses every night. A seemingly simple list, and yet this version of myself has remained elusive for over a decade—until this past year. Largely owing to the flexibility of my teaching schedule, I've managed to successfully incorporate yoga, meditation, reading, and flossing into my life. At long last, I have become my ideal self. Hooray!

And yet I don't feel any happier. My life doesn't feel more meaningful. In fact, I feel much more fulfilled when I slack off from crossing out tasks on my idealized to-do list and go see a friend or a movie. It turns out there's more to life than living your so-called best one.

Our ideal self is actually holding us back, not propelling us forward. Like our true self, the notion of the ideal self once again limits us to one ultimate self, instead of giving us room to grow and explore as our circumstances and desires evolve. It limits our future. Once we've arrived at destination Ideal Self, there isn't anywhere else to go. To some, this might be an achievement. To me, it's stifling.

I hope that I'm *not* actually my ideal self now, because I want to know who else I can be, what other layers I might shed or add.

What if, instead of trying so hard to find our true selves or to become our ideal selves, we thought of each of our selves as valid in its own right, a necessary stepping point to the next one?

What if we were to alleviate the pressure of aspiring to be our ideal selves (or using our inability to become our ideal selves as a way to berate ourselves) and instead focus on creating ideal experiences each day?

I want to imagine a world in which we can change, shift, and play as often as we choose, and where this multiplicity is honoured instead of viewed with suspicion. I want to wake up in the morning and ask myself not "What do I have to do today?" but rather "Who do I want to *be* today?"

This is how I want to live.