Describe yourself in three words. It’s a pretty common request that one can come across on applications, interviews, reality tv auditions, etc. But if you asked me what my three words are, I’d tell you: I don’t know.

Because it’s hard. But why? Why is it so hard? Maybe it has something to do with physics. Things usually do right?

See, in physics you’re introduced to the concept of virtual images. Standing in front of a plane mirror, the image you see of yourself isn’t real. It physically doesn’t exist, yet, we as people stare at our images in the mirror as if they do physically exist, as if they are real, as if they tangibly represent us.

But truthfully, in the mirror the person staring back at us is often times who we want to be, not who we really are. The person staring back at us is a sculpture of our imagination, carved using the tools of perception, desire, and fantasy. Ask me to describe the person who stares back at me in the mirror using three words and it’s easy: confident, witty, and happy. He’s ultimately ideal. But walk away from the mirror and the image disappears, leaving us with only… ourselves. Our real, physical selves that somehow we know less about than the image in the mirror.

That’s a scary thought isn’t it? So what do we do? How do we not let that happen? How do we learn to understand ourselves? Well through honesty. Now I’m not talking about the kind of honesty you have... or you should have with your parents, friends and others. Those are important. You should have them. But I’m talking about the kind of honesty you have with yourself.

But being honest to ourselves is, in my experience at least, one of the hardest things to do as a human being. Ever since we were young, we’ve been taught to strive to be the person we want to be. But this person that we want to be is dictated by society— influenced by concepts like pragmatism, materialism, success, and prestige. And throughout the years, we’ve slowly constructed this person. That’s who we see in the mirror. But doing all of this, constructing this perfect person, it takes a lot of time, preparation, and effort and it leaves us with no time to know and be the person we actually are. Sure, bits and pieces of this perfect person might indeed be very true to ourselves, some will have few that are, others will have many, but no one the entirety. Nobody’s perfect.

The thing is, being honest to ourselves requires a lot of self-reflection. And that takes a lot of time. It’s never ending really. That self-reflection might be hurtful, it might be visceral, who knows? But it’s necessary. Because we can’t always be what we want. We can’t always be that person in the mirror.

As we’ve lived and continue to live, we go through experiences. Not just the ones we want to go through, but all of them. It’s inevitable. And being honest to ourselves, applied to those experiences, is how we understand. Continuously identifying our shortcomings, our strengths, our interests, our emotional tendencies, our favorite kind of mac n cheese, our everything as is through each experience and being honest to ourselves about them—that’s how we know and be the person we actually are. That’s experiential learning.

So while the person in the mirror still exists, understand he or she isn’t real as dictated by physics. What’s real is us. You and me are the people that exist. So experience, be honest with
those experiences to yourself no matter how difficult it is, and just do you. It’ll take time. But it’ll be worth it.

So to start, describe yourself in three words. It’s okay if those three words are: I don’t know. Just be honest and you’ll be on your way.