

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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For Real

“To be nobody-but-yourself – in a world [that] is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else – means to fight the hardest battle [that] any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.”

That’s poet (and Unitarian) e.e. cummings, giving advice to poets ... whether or not you know you’re a poet: Be yourself.

There’s a debate about the power of authenticity. Some argue that acting in a way that’s consistent with our values is critical. Others say that learning to obscure our truth is a crucial adaptation. Both are true. But today, I invite you to join me in considering the possibility that the former is truer: that being true to ourselves; acting on our convictions in thought, word, and deed; and owning our actions makes for a life well-lived. Mythologist Joseph Campbell said, “The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.”

Psychologist and author Dr. John Amodeo writes, “Many of us pride ourselves on being authentic, but authenticity is a tricky term. It points toward an ongoing process of uncovering what’s percolating deep inside us. We may pride ourselves on being authentic when we express our ‘honest’ opinion about what’s wrong.... But judging, ... blaming, [and] attacking others is not [being authentic].

“Authenticity requires two things of us: a sincere effort to go inside ourselves and uncover what we’re ... experiencing, and then to communicate from the heart; being mindful, and being kind.

First, being mindful:

Mindfulness is “attending to our experience just as it is, without judging ourselves.... [Perhaps] we imagine that something is wrong with us

for having particular feelings. We try to fit ourselves into some image of how we think we need to be in order to be respected or loved. We judge ourselves as weak ... if we experience ... sadness ... or fear. [We imagine] that if we [show] vulnerability to others, they'd be so horrified ... they'd think less of us, [or] reject us. But vulnerable feelings are simply a part of being human, [and] it's a great strength [– not a weakness –] to embrace our humanity....

“Bringing a gentle mindfulness to the full range of our human experience, and disclosing this to people [to whom] we want to be close ... creates a climate for rich connections. By being mindful of what we're experiencing from moment to moment, we stay connected to ourselves. This intimacy with ourselves creates a foundation for being more intimate with others. Noticing and sharing our authentic experience invites people toward us. Allowing a person to see what's real for us, we invite them into our heart.”¹

Years ago, I organized a conference and made the very questionable decision to place a talk by a well-known psychotherapist and elder Zen practitioner after a wildly charismatic young storyteller. The storyteller finished her performance – a tour de force. The crowd was on its feet, all riled-up and ready to dance, when a quiet, unassuming gentleman took the stage. Off stage, I had offered him the option of having them take a break before he asked them to settle down, drop into silence, and follow their breath. He declined, and used the moment in a way I have never forgotten.

Sitting down and folding up his legs, he closed his eyes and began a monologue, one of the most extraordinary dharma talks I have ever heard. “Feeling old,” he said, cataloguing his feelings. “Obsolete. Heart hurts. Lonely. Sad. Not good enough. Not enough.”

The room quieted down. He continued with his interior inventory. “Breathing fast. Palms sweaty. Face hot. Fear. Shame. Fear. Shame.”

People were sitting down. The room was absolutely silent.

¹ John Amodio, *Two Authentic Ingredients of Authenticity*. Please see psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2014/05/18/2-essential-ingredients-of-authenticity/

After a long time, he said, “Zen is being absolutely authentic, true to ourselves, living the unvarnished truth in this very moment. We only become more fully ourselves when we open our minds and our hearts, and start exactly where we are.” A few people began to weep. His teaching had already begun.

Authenticity requires of us two things: being mindful, and being kind.

Second, being kind:

“... ‘Right speech’ is one part of the Buddha’s Eightfold Path. Before speaking, we [are directed to] pause and ask ourselves, *Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?* ...Mindfulness wedded to kind communication is a powerful force...” Again, this is Dr. John Amodeo: There are “people who are kind but emotionally dishonest, ... leaving us to guess about how they [really] feel or what they want.... However, the attempt to be real without the softening ingredient of kindness can [be brutal].... Human hearts are tender. People become less defensive and more receptive when we communicate our feelings, not only genuinely, but with a gentleness that takes to heart how vulnerable we all are.

“We “[yearn] for ... genuine connection; ... for less ... pretending [and] manipulation.” We weary of hustling and being hustled.² “What’s the greater risk?” asks research professor and speaker Brené Brown. “Letting go of what people think, or letting go of how [we] feel, and what [we] believe, and who [we are]?”³

American folksinger and songwriter Bob Franke wrote,
 There’s a hole in the middle of the prettiest life
 I only face it ’cause it’s here to stay
 Not my father nor my mother nor my daughter nor my lover
 Nor the highway made it go away
 And there’s too much darkness in an endless night
 To be ashamed of the way we feel
 Let’s be kind to [each other]
 ... for real⁴

² John Amodeo, *op cit*

³ Brené Brown, Special to CNN, *Take a risk and put your true self out there*. Please see cnn.com/2012/04/15/opinion/brown-authentic-self/

⁴ Bob Franke, “For Real,” on *For Real*, 1986. This is a mash-up of two refrains.

Authenticity is a spiritual practice, “a conscious choice of how we want to live.... [and] a collection of choices ... we make every day. It’s the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to [be vulnerable, and] let our true selves [shine through].... [To] be authentic in a culture that teaches us that being imperfect is synonymous with being inadequate” demands courage. As we cultivate the courage and the skills to be more mindful and kinder, our true selves are surfaced. As we choose “being real” over “being liked,⁵ authentic connections are made that are deeper and sweeter.

Here is my favorite passage from Margery Williams’ *The Velveteen Rabbit*, a story for children of all ages.

“The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any of the others. He was so old that his brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath, and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces. He was wise, for he had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and swagger, and by-and-by break their mainsprings and pass away, and he knew that they were only toys, and would never turn into anything else. For nursery magic is very strange and wonderful, and only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse understand all about it.

“‘What is REAL?’ asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. ‘Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?’

“‘Real isn’t how you are made,’ said the Skin Horse. ‘It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.’

“‘Does it hurt?’ asked the Rabbit.

“‘Sometimes,’ said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. ‘When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.’

⁵ Brené Brown, *op cit*

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,’ he asked, ‘or bit by bit?’

“It doesn’t happen all at once,’ said the Skin Horse. ‘You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.’

“I suppose you are real?’ asked the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.

“The boy’s uncle made me Real,’ he said. ‘That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can’t become unreal again. It lasts for always.’”

Beloved spiritual companions,

“The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.”⁶

Authenticity is a spiritual practice:

May we be mindful.

May we be kind.

May we be real.

Amen

⁶ Joseph Campbell