

June Theme

Self: The Practice of Authenticity

“This above all: To thine own self be true.” –Shakespeare, Hamlet

This couldn't be simpler, right? We are steeped in a culture of self-reliance, revering an idea of the authentic self, which rises above the vicissitudes of daily life, resists social pressures to conform, and which captures our true essence. Authenticity—from *authentic*, meaning “of undisputed origin” or “genuine”—is typically understood as being honest and having an absence of pretense. It's often, then, contrasted with inauthenticity or, put another way, being “fake,” or even a “fraud,” either in our own view or the view of others.

It is tempting in times of ease and contentment to look at my state and say that this is my natural, real self. But if I am the source of all of my actions, where do I find the dividing line between my authentic self, and... something else? In new, different, and possibly difficult situations, I might find myself doing things that feel unnatural. I might feel subsumed or adrift—required by circumstance to be and act in ways that seem inauthentic. But if this is the case, does it then follow that our authentic self lies exclusively in what we might describe as our comfort zone? Could it really be the case that change and growth are not authentic acts? These questions begin to reveal fuzzy boundaries between our environment and our self, and within our self, more fuzzy boundaries between what we might describe as our *authentic self*—which we feel comfortable taking ownership of—and parts of us with which we may feel at odds. At times when we are in difficult situations, these questions and observations take on a heightened level of urgency.

One way to approach this urgency can be found outside of western thought. In Buddhism the entire notion of self seems far less distinct than what we've likely grown accustomed to. The Buddhist concept of “no-self” refers to an idea that the self, as we think of it, is an illusion. From this standpoint, the discussion of authentic versus inauthentic and the self versus the environment is an attempt to pin something down that cannot be pinned down. For some, this may provide a certain degree of peace.

Western philosophy recognizes this as well. While the idea of an essential self, independent from context or environment figures far more significantly, there is also the notion that authenticity and the self are not independent from inauthenticity and the environment. They are instead interdependent and in constant interplay. Furthermore, we do not exist in stasis. We don't find ourselves in a state of authenticity, but rather who we are springs from a continuous process of becoming. We find authenticity—and ourselves—only in choosing and acting. In this way, authenticity is not a destination, but a journey, a practice. Ultimately, each of us has our own way of being human, and thus the journey will be unique for each individual.

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Questions for discussion and discernment on your own, or with each other:

1. How do you identify, reveal or define your authentic self?
2. Has this changed over time?
3. How does your identity coexist with others and your environment?
4. Do you think you can compartmentalize parts of yourself for certain situations? Is this authentic?
5. Have you ever encountered something you considered a threat to your sense of self? How did you respond?
6. How does our faith help you to find your authentic self?
7. How do you practice authenticity?

Quotes and Short Readings

“You are growing into consciousness, and my wish for you is that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable.” — **Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me***”

“Responsibility to yourself means refusing to let others do your thinking, talking, and naming for you; it means learning to respect and use your own brains and instincts; hence, grappling with hard work.” — **Adrienne Rich**

“When I was born I became the visible corner of a folded map. The map has more than one route. More than one destination. The map that is the unfolding self is not exactly leading anywhere. The arrow that says YOU ARE HERE is your first coordinate. There is a lot that you can't change when you are a kid. But you can pack for the journey . . .” — **Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Normal When You Can Be Happy?***

“A self is not something static, tied up in a pretty parcel and handed to the child, finished and complete. A self is always becoming.” — **Madeleine L'Engle, *A Circle of Quiet***

“If you feel lost, disappointed, hesitant, or weak, return to yourself, to who you are, here and now and when you get there, you will discover yourself, like a lotus flower in full bloom, even in a muddy pond, beautiful and strong.” — **Masaru Emoto, *Secret Life of Water***

“Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.” — **Rumi**

“We have to dare to be ourselves, however frightening or strange that self may prove to be.” — **May Sarton**

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