

Authenticity: Virtue or Catch Phrase?
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If you were here a few weeks ago you heard your senior minister preach a sermon on Authenticity. If you heard it, have you been contemplating his words? I had the privilege of reading that sermon and I have been pondering his message. In particular I have been thinking about the links he made to our Unitarian Universalist faith. One of my absolute favorite things about Unitarian Universalism is that each and every one of us has the right and the duty to find our own paths as we journey together in community. I used the word duty because as Rev. Dr. Snyder stated “whatever it is that you believe, it should be reflected in the life you lead. Unitarian Universalists are less interested in the content of those beliefs, or at least the details, so long as you are called to live a good life as a result of those beliefs. To be our authentic selves, we need to always strive to have those two things, beliefs and actions, congruent with each other. One slogan from our Unitarian heritage put it very starkly, “Deeds, not creeds.” I have been reflecting on that phrase for a while now. We are called to live an authentic life and as I thought about the word authenticity I wondered what the response would be if I asked some random person what being authentic means to them.

As I was in this questioning space, I saw an interview with a popular star promoting her new movie. In the interview she detailed the challenges of the role and that she brought her authentic self to the part and breathed that into the character. As I listened to her, I wondered what her definition of authenticity was. What part of her beliefs was she breathing into this character that was morally defunct as a human being? That spurred me to seek out the truth according to the internet. A New York Times article stated that on dating sites like OkCupid, the word authenticity pops up with remarkable frequency in people’s self-descriptions; on eHarmony.com, users can browse dating tips where they are advised that in a healthy relationship, “both individuals feel free to be authentic.” Authenticity seems to be the value of the moment, rolling off the tongues of politicians, celebrities, Web gurus, college admissions advisers and reality television stars, among others. In recent months it’s been cited by the likes of Katie Couric - who said “I think I love to be my authentic self,” Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said “I believe in being as authentic as possible,” and former Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania who described himself to Fox TV as “being authentic”.

One website screamed that it was all about Authenticity, it featured a woman dressed in a white gauzy dress, go go boots and a pink boa and her website declared that she was living her authentic life. I could easily imagine someone rolling their eyes at this type of “authentic” overload. I dug fairly deep into the website to discover the story behind all of the pink flamboyancy. Three years ago her life came crashing down around her and she was left to wonder what had happened. She was a doctor with a thriving practice, a handsome husband, friends who loved her. One morning after a few too many glasses of wine, she found herself looking in the mirror, and instead of seeing the perky, pretty twenty-four year old who had been the internal vision of herself, she saw a sallow-skinned, pudgy, divorced middle-aged woman with puffy eyes, and she wondered what

had happened. It took her quite a while but she eventually came to the realization that the answer to her issues in life, lay in Owning Pink. Shortly after her Perfect Storm happened she started wearing pink and a lot of it. She chose to believe that we may not be able to change our circumstances, but we can change our perceptions and our actions. This was her way of living authentically.

With everyone stating emphatically that THEY are authentic I have to wonder if we are all using the same definition? Maybe we are. But I do suspect maybe we aren't. Regardless of the definition we use, what is the effect of living an authentic life? In my travels through the internet I came across Rev Brady Cooper who asks us to look beyond ourselves to those around us. Using a boating metaphor and talking about the wake of waves that a boat leaves behind as it moves through the water, Rev Cooper asks how our wake impacts others. Imagine you are driving a speed boat- if you travel slow and steady and when you look behind you, the water is fairly calm. If you hit the gas and floor it, the front of the boat pops up, and away you go. If you look behind you now, what's happening with the water? Its churned up and there are white caps. Someone could very easily drown in that. As you live your authentic life, what kind of wake are you making?

When I read this I was immediately reminded of a conversation I had with the Regional Subcommittee on Candidacy. The announcement today stated that I am Paula Brayden and I am a Candidate for ministry in the Unitarian Universalist faith. Part of that process is having a few conversations with panels of people who assess whether you are ready to move forward in ministry. The first conversation you have is with the Regional Subcommittee on Candidacy. I had mine several years ago and part of the conversation was about my ability to multi task. I can get a lot done in a short amount of time, this is a basic part of who I am. Their question to me was, "and if you're a minister who can really multi task, what happens when you move on and the next minister comes along and they can't? What does that do to the new minister and to the congregation?" I had not previously thought in those terms. At the time of that conversation I was a Director of Religious Education. A year later I was moving out of my role as DRE to do an internship with a different congregation. That conversation with the committee came back to me when I was explaining to the new DRE what I did with my time each week. Watching her jaw drop and her eyes get huge, I got exactly what the committee was asking me. On Sunday, as she and I were interacting with the congregation, again I saw the wake I was creating and this new DRE was definitely drowning in it. I realized that in this instance my life, although I was living authentically, I was definitely not sustaining anyone.

Rev Cooper recommends that you ask yourself these questions to determine the size of your wake. Are people better off when I move through their life? If they had the choice, would the people in your life do the relationship you currently have all over again? Does my wake leave people encouraged or drained? Does my wake encourage growth in others? A wake can be positive or a wake can be negative, as I found out. Does my wake leave people inspired or insecure? Does anyone ever come to me with a

problem? High wake people don't have people that come to them and open up with them because it's really hard to get to them, and they're afraid they might get hurt. Is your life helping to grow and sustain or demolish and bury? I do not believe anyone would readily say 'oh yeah, my life is about destruction', but there are times when destruction happens even if it's not our intent. I certainly did not intend to make that new DRE miserable in her job or for the congregation to think she was inept. But that was the fear everyone had when I left. I was glad to find out that she didn't drown in my wake, she just swam harder and the congregation ended up falling in love with her too. But had I been aware of my own wake that may not have had to play out the way it did. Authenticity reflects the truths in our lives. Relationships in our lives do not exist in a vacuum state. Each relationship must be cared for, no matter what the relationship is. We are all a part of the interdependent web and even the smallest movements we make have a ripple effect on those around us. Now, I do not mean to suggest that you need to dial yourself back in order to accommodate others. I do believe that as we live in community with one another it is our duty to understand our place within and impact upon the interdependent web of all existence. How do your beliefs and actions impact those around you? Do you grow and sustain or demolish and bury? How does your life change the web we are all apart of?

One way that my life impacts the interdependent web is that I have cared for over 130 children who for whatever reason found themselves in foster care. No matter where life has taken me, or what I have done, caring for children has always been a source of great pride and pleasure for myself and my family. Children crave stability and love. It is my honor to stand steadfast in the middle of their personal storm and be a safe harbor for them for however long I get to love them. Children have come and gone from my home, touching and enriching my life. Many times I don't know what happens once they go home to mom or dad or grandma, but every once in a while I get to peek into their lives after they leave my home. Elizabeth came to me as an 18 month old who weighed just 17 pounds. She cried constantly due to the severe malnourishment and the neglect and abuse she suffered. She didn't trust anyone, including me. She took one look at me and screamed bloody murder. I was just another adult who was not going to give her what she needed. But I did give her what she needed. Slowly over time, with great patience and love we fed this baby, snuggled her when she would let us and showed her how to play. Six months into her placement our family met a childless couple who were looking for a baby to adopt. By this time we knew that Elizabeth was not going to go back home. One day my family and I went to visit these new friends. I was holding Elizabeth in my arms at the front door, and when the couple opened the door, Elizabeth took one look at them, threw her arms wide open, gave the biggest smile I have ever seen and said MAMA!!! We had located the family she was meant to be with. Our family was hoping to adopt this little girl, but after that how could we? This was obviously the family she was intended to be with. It was instant love at first sight for all three of them. These people immediately started working on getting licensed and eventually we were able to transfer Elizabeth so they could be her foster parents. In the short term I had to sacrifice the desire and hope of adopting a child but by loving her, I helped her to find the parents she needed. In this instance, the wake I created was calm, loving and sustaining. Elizabeth is now 7. She and her brother, who was placed with her after his birth, are

happily living in Louisiana surrounded by family who think these children are the best things ever.

Nearly two years ago, in Jan of 2011, as I was in my last semester of seminary I received a call for a newborn baby who was addicted to meth. He was born on my partners birthday so naturally I wanted to go get him. We had him two weeks and his social worker called me and said “well he has a sister, would you like to have her too?” I firmly believe siblings should be together if its safe to do so. Lily was 11 months old when we got her and she was unable to walk, didn’t talk and never smiled. I know there is a recipe for making happy children and I was determined to show these babies that life is meant to laugh out loud just to hear the sound of your laughter. As a family we decided that these two would be our last placement. We didn’t think they would stay to long, as infants typically don’t stay in the system very long. We realized that our dream of adoption was not going to happen. Sacrificing that dream was very hard to come to terms with, but eventually we all did in our own time. This past May our two little one’s case went to trial and much to our surprise the parents rights were terminated and the children were officially placed with us for adoption. At that time all visits ceased. Our babies had us all the time now. Since getting Lily she was never a demonstrative child. She didn’t liked to be hugged, wouldn’t give kisses, except when she wanted one. As summer progressed we noticed that Lily changed. One day I came in from outside and she turned and looked at me and this giant smile came across her face and she launched herself into my arms, grabbed my face and kissed me. She wrapped her arms around me and squeezed soooooo tightly and said “my mommy”. Something changed in her world and she realized she was home. Caring for children and the impact I have on their lives is the best way I know to show my heart to the world. This is how I live my authentic life. It is this wake that I pray sustains and nourishes other in my life. In closing I would like to read A Poem about Honesty and Authenticity by Neil Patterson called

Honesty's Kin

Sacrifice to beauty
worship at the altar of love
Surrender to charity,
wear integrity like a glove

Stand up for what you believe in,
in essence know for what it is you care
Wherever there may be disharmony validate change
aim to be aware

Strive to be steadfast
do what it is that you must
Take time to recover from the realities of life
with an amour of trust

Laugh for no good reason

other than it wells up from within
And spills over with affection,
to be real is never a sin

Be honest but seek truth
as it is honesty's kin
Show your heart to the world
and let your journey recommence or begin
Amen. Blessed Be.