

The Value of Authenticity

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Since I wrote my book “The Authentic Parent,” the idea of authenticity has become a mainstay in my personal and professional life—one that is continually developing. The word *authentic* implies trustworthiness and reliability. Behaving authentically is about representing yourself as genuine, real, and believable. So, how do we become authentic and how do we use this in our lives?

Every one of us grows up with ideals externally imposed upon us—rules—spoken and unspoken. We learn these rules and expectations from our parents, our teachers, coaches, pastors, and really any other human being in our lives. These human influences become introjects, setting up an internal environment of cognition, affect, projection, and identification based on our perceptions of things from without. Our schemas and maxims are born from them. They become who we are in how we conduct ourselves.

Some of these rules are realistic and some are not. For instance, not long ago, a friend was telling me about one of the unspoken rules in her house when she was growing up. The rule was, “don't do anything to upset your mother.” Because her mother had difficulty self-regulating and keeping her anxiety at a manageable level, the entire household was in fear of her mother’s increased anxiety and what might happen if it was ‘allowed’ to escalate.

One of the spoken rules was, “don't talk back. Respect your elders.” I'm sure many of us recognize that one. But what my friend learned from this was that she should always be aware of what came out of her mouth. One unspoken rule built upon the first, and then another, and another, structuring who she learned to be and how to behave—“Be careful what you say. Don't question.” What she carried into adulthood was the idea that she *shouldn't* question authority and that somehow, she was not as good as, or important as, people who were older than her.

When she began to question these beliefs as a young adult when becoming a manager with employees who were older than her, she realized that this belief did not serve her well. She was then able to take a closer look at this maxim (belief system) and turn what she discovered into something that worked for her and others around her. She realized that her elders were to be respected as human beings and that those who were older, had a lot to teach her through their experience and wisdom, but not that they were somehow better than her. This shows how important it is to examine who we are and what we believe.

We don't come into this world with a sense of self. We experience things, learn from others, absorb from our surroundings, and constantly add these things to ourselves. In other words, we are discovering, developing, and creating our authentic self throughout our lifetime. But as we grow through adolescence, developing our identities, and into adults, we have to look inside ourselves and discover what we believe based on what we have learned and then decide how we can best use those discoveries. As we hear echoes from the vast sea of our past and pull those things out that are buried deep within us, truly challenging ourselves, the ripples can expand outward, propelling us into positive action. As we look at ourselves in the moment, we can choose and create whatever we want—comfort, creativity, honesty, loyalty, dependability, et cetera.

We can also create things from what we discover. I remember, even as a child, of carving bars of soap and finding how much more I could create for myself through that simple task. Regardless of the turmoil churning around me, I found beauty and an appreciation in the movements of the soap, especially when I used “Irish” soap. Every new cut, every slice changed in the blue-green swirls which swished things aside, lengthened the bar, expanding the view, like the influence in my world swishing around me on a daily basis. I learned from this how anything could be made affirming and encouraging. And of course, I learned that I was an artist.

So, the fact is, you are the expert of your own life. You inspire yourself. You give yourself hope. You create your own differing viewpoints. You can use your *self* as a reference point for you. As you learn more about what you assume about yourself, you can begin to change your modes of thought and behavior. You don't need to reinvent the wheel, just figure out how to most efficiently utilize it. What are your capabilities? You have the power and ability to weave things the way you choose. I'm sure you have heard the adage that the measure of a person's integrity is what they do when no one's looking. Well, I think that to be a great at what you do and a human being with integrity, that's what you have to consider—**who you really are when no one's looking**.

Through intellectual observation and evaluation, a person's inner life can become one of internal harmony, something you can share with others. If we can reach inside of ourselves and practice authenticity with our friends, family, co-workers, always remaining genuine, then we can experience memorable and transformational moments in life.

By consciously knowing and understanding who you are and what you believe, your unconscious is prepared to follow suit. It also means that while you are consciously aware of the valuable interplay between you and those around you, you must also elect to stay open, utilizing unconscious guidelines to be in-tune to your's and other's needs.

By remaining aware of yourself and genuine, you can escape the trap of blurring self/other boundaries and are more capable of being careful and not reactively disclosing more than you or they can tolerate. Genuinely relating to another is not about making them like you. It's not about avoiding their anger, or even your's, for that matter. It's not about meeting your own needs for gratification. It's about truly *being yourself and being with* another human being in a lifelong learning experience of great depth and mutual respect.

So, get to know yourself. It will keep you grounded and focused on what's right, what's of value. It will lead you on a path to contentment.

—*Dr. Jamie*