

## **Authenticity: Finding Your True Voice**

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At my sermon last year, which was entitled: "Continuing to Recreate Your Life Anew," one of our members said he would like to hear a sermon on how you reconcile all the voices in your head – that is, how you have internalized influences from parents, school, religion, society - to know what your true purpose or calling is. When I proposed to Darlene that I do a sermon on "Authenticity: reconciling all the voices in your head," she thought it might convey that I was talking on schizophrenia or mental illness.

I wanted to make sure I was conveying the accurate message of my talk – and it's not that far off. I was originally trained as an expressive therapist and received my clinical training at day treatment centers serving chronically mentally ill adults. They were certainly some of my greatest teachers. I soon realized that those who are deemed to have a mental illness reveal extremes of thoughts, feelings and emotions that we all experience, just at different degrees of severity and durations. As I was bouncing around possible subtitles, my daughter, who had just turned eleven at the time, helped me come up with: finding your true voice. So, even in finding my voice for the sermon, I allowed myself to be influenced by those around me and went with what "felt" right for me. Finding one's voice is a sorting and discerning process as we interact with our environment. Sometimes we can go off into the mountains to hear ourselves. Other times, we don't have the luxury and need to sort it out in the moment.

I heard someone say once that "Who you become at 60 is who you were at 9 or 10." Appropriate that my daughter should help surfaces this title... A soul can be described as an immaterial, immutable essence of who you are. You have the same soul throughout life – it is the personality that develops and changes over time. Finding your voice appears easy, but it can be a difficult and complex process that requires persistent and ongoing support, courage and compassion. It can be a messy process that brings up a lot of strong feelings for you and other people. We all have had seemingly innocuous experiences that we realize later had a profound impact on either bringing us closer or further away from our truth.

One of my earliest memories venturing outside my home was during one of the first days of kindergarten. My teacher, Mrs. Hoagannauer gave us an assignment to make an Indian headdress out of oak tag paper. Who

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hear remembers that material? Remember it was sturdier than white paper and was stiff and similar in color to a manilla folder? I never knew why they didn't just call it manilla or vanilla paper.

Well I think she gave us a stencil and we made a band to go around our heads for the base and then we had to make probably 8-10 feathers that were then stapled on the band.

As most young children do, I quickly became completely immersed in this project. You know what it is like when time stands still and all the noise around you fades into the background? That is what happened to me. I loved all the colors and smell of the crayons. You know that waxy smell? I also liked the feel of the crayons on the sturdy oak tag. I discovered that if I pressed the crayons hard enough and went over the paper a couple of times in one spot, I could create a shiny earthy-like substance with the waxy crayon. So, this is how I colored each feather. I took my time and made the color as opaque as I could get it. What fun. How cool was this?!! I was absolutely enthralled with this project!

At a sensory distance, I vaguely became aware of the other children finishing and playing with toys around me. I didn't care - I was in heaven! Then I heard a voice from the teacher say, "Susan, hurry up, every one else is finished." I said, "I will. I only have four left." Just as I was finishing the second of the last four feathers, I heard Mrs. Hoagannauer say to her aide, "Go help her finish, we need to move on."

I can't remember the aide's name but I remember what she looked like clear as day. She was a woman in her mid-to late-fifties (or so my five year old mind thought - she may have actually been 30 or 35!). She had short brown hair just below her ears and curled in a sixties hairdo. She came over and immediately grabbed my feather and lightly put a number of crayon strokes on the paper. I am remembering a red color. Then she took a green crayon, I think, and did the next one in two seconds flat. There was space between the strokes so I could still see the oak tag and the color was so light the oak tag that was covered still shone through!

AAAAAHHHH. Gasp!  
Ruined!-

My breath stopped. How could she?! What a violation!! That was my special project!!! I wanted to scream to the top of the ceiling - "You ruined it!! How could you??!! You are a monster!!"

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But, I choked down the words as tears welled up in my eyes. I looked down so the other children wouldn't see me crying. I could feel my heart pounding up out of my ears as my body trembled. I felt trapped – my body exploded inside but there was nowhere to release it.

And in that moment...

With a few strokes of the crayon, a part of me was swallowed and buried with my trapped breath. ...The part that didn't care about time and HOW I did things.

While I am glad it didn't effect my love of color or sense of myself as an artist and creative person, I suspect it may have been the genesis for what I call "fast perfectionism" – for many years after that – I always felt like I had to rush to get everything done, like I could never go fast enough and like I couldn't get things perfect or "right". I am sure many other "moments" of feedback or input from my environment reinforced these feelings as well or maybe it was that I grew to interpret them in this way.

Needless to say, despite this, I still went on to love Mrs. Hoagannauer and with the help of my yoga practice now, I am regularly breathing through other more significant life challenges. ☺

Did you ever have a situation where you were so immersed in something, you lost track of time? Did you have a voice interrupt you? What was the impact on you and how did you resolve it? Did it get repeated in other scenarios in your life?

How difficult it is in any time, but particularly the times in which we are living – to filter out all the voices in our heads – to get to that place of peace and knowing that is the essence of who we uniquely are, why we are here and what our contributions can be – it is that place of your core, your true nature.

The challenge is to allow ourselves to live in the world and be effected by it – in this way we know we are truly alive and living – and yet not lose ourselves or be overcome by what effects us. We need to be enlightened warriors of protecting our own voice from the elements. Even as I say this, I am aware that it is our Western minds that even create duality of the self and environment. Many eastern traditions would say it is all part of one. We are all a part of everything inside and outside of us. I am not claiming to have the answers or to be an authority on "how" to do it – find your truth, but to share some questions, insights and thoughts I have about the subject. Ultimately, it is up to anyone to decide for themselves what resonates with their truths. ... and there have been volumes written and

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said about this by philosophers and theologians for thousands of years. I am merely allowing my voice to add to the mix.

It is particularly challenging today to figure out who one is at the core or what one believes because we have little time to hear our own internal voice - our larger societal culture infiltrates our lives like never before - with the availability and speed of communication via various technological platforms - email, TV, Tivo, Cell phones, pagers, DVDs - even in the car, fast cars, airplanes, trains... While in Jefferson's time it could take several days to travel on horse or via carriage from Washington to Boston, and it took days for the postal service via pony express to deliver mail, we now can travel from between those cities in an hour or afternoon and have access to our mail and international news in mere seconds....we can receive what we now call "snail mail" or "express mail" from anywhere in the world overnight. The volume of information and demands that are hit on us everyday profoundly impact our filtering mechanisms.

We have access to more resources and technology than ever before on the planet. And we have more choice about what to do with these resources - individually and collectively - than ever before.

And yet, we also have the most pain and unrest.

I propose this is because we are disconnected - first from ourselves and then from each other - in an authentic way.

I am aware that the medium needs to be my message with this sermon. In other words, if I am to talk about authenticity in an authentic way, I need my own voice to come out - and I hope it is - and I thought it might be helpful to share some of my own story - my journey with finding my own authenticity and truth and why this topic is so important to me.

I grew up in a large, noisy and very busy family. I have a brother 3 ½ years older, a sister 20 months older, a sister 15 months younger and a brother 3 plus years younger. So, I am exactly in the middle of the first five children with one of everything - older brother, younger brother, older sister, younger sister. And I have a sister much younger than the rest of us - 10 years younger than me. So, I played dolls with my sisters, baseball with my brothers, and had the chance to take care of my younger sister while growing up. I suspect this contributed to my having many interests.

I don't know if it was Buddha or some wise street sage who said, "Wherever you go there you are." As with all of us, my experience

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shaped who I am and who I have become. ...and as I continue to filter and peel back the onion of my consciousness it continues to shape me.

I had early training in wrestling with literally getting my voice heard, searching for validation, support or a response or dialogue amidst the chaos of such a household. I remember when I was about 10 yelling something at my mother and her response was, "I hear you." I said, "Yes, but you aren't listening to me." I already had a sense at that age in my own crude way of trying to communicate the distinction between hearing and really listening to the meaning of the message. My footnote to this is, as an adult and a parent, I clearly understand the first level of response my mother had in that moment with six noisy children, one crying louder above the din.

While I didn't always get all of those needs met – maybe some days I was heard, others I wasn't validated, etc... it gave me the gift of understanding what the search is like to discern what is true for me, how to get heard and how to respect my own truth while honoring another's and working toward the collective good, however one defines that. The frustration of not feeling heard by others was one of my greatest teachers at that time. Ironically, one of my greatest lessons has been learning how to listen to myself. Only in doing this, can I truly listen to another or be heard by them.

I think both are equally important and just as hard – to know what truly resonates with ourselves AND to express it in a such a way that we are not overly aggressive about it but also we do not too readily allow our truth to be superseded by another's. This balance is an art that gets played out in the choice point of a moment's interaction, constantly daily. I think we all tend to land on one side of this equation or the other at times. I believe the opportunity is for us to speak our truth with awareness rather than from a reactionary mode of our conditioning - What has been programmed into us by our parents, educational system, religion or broader culture. Who has heard themselves say something and then say, "Oh my I sound just like my mother or my father!"

All we need do is to look to our own congregation to understand the challenge of "allowing" self-expression within the context of the world – or in our case - community. For those of you who were not around, we had what I call a "debate" a couple of years ago about what to do with milestones, which you now see as part of our service. Many felt we were getting too big to have folks stand up and talk. They were in support of just the quiet part of milestones. We had a congregation meeting where we opened up the floor to hear points of view. I must admit I was shocked

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and surprised to hear that some people say they didn't care to hear people's milestones. Their truth was that it was private or that they would find out in coffee hour, but they didn't see it necessary or didn't want to hear the variance in how peoples' milestones were conveyed. All points were valid. It really hit home for me how we often don't know what the real truth is for someone. You can be sitting here looking like you are listening and supporting something, but something very different may be going on inside your head – on a conscious or unconscious level. You may be thinking about your vacation to the Bahamas or what you are going to have for dinner or what your sister said to you last week.

To be authentic in the moment while navigating the complex web of our daily interactions is at the heart of our human challenge.  
(SLOWLY/REPEAT)?

Merriam Webster's Dictionary says authenticity to "a technical term in existentialist philosophy, and is also used in art and psychology."

"Authenticity is the degree to which one is true to one's own personality, spirit, or character, despite" outside pressures and influences....perhaps the earliest account of authenticity that remains popular is [Socrates'](#) [thought] that 'the unexamined life is not worth living'." Authenticity "concerns a person's *relation* with the world, it can not be arrived at by simply repeating a set of actions or taking up a set of positions."

Being authentic is our most natural state though often contrary to our conditioning. What is authentic for each of us is something only we can know and say to be true. It's a living 'on purpose'. It has been said that achieving authenticity in one's own life is possibly the most profound and rewarding occupation any of us can engage in.

Finding meaning and purpose is a lifelong process, one through which we are constantly journeying and discovering. What is true for us changes as we mature and so change we must.

I suggest, in order to know what is true for us in the context of our very loud world today, we need filtering mechanisms to get at our core and understand what has meaning or resonates with ourselves.

So, I ask you to think about what are your filtering mechanisms? How do you filter your life experiences on mental, emotional, physical and spiritual levels? For example, a mental filter can be how you sift through different thoughts – how you determine your criteria for decision making – how do you clean house mentally? On an emotional level – what is suppressed,

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pushed down – versus what gets expressed or excavated? Do you get out “stuff” to see what is underneath?

On a Physical level – what is trapped in the cells in your body? All energy, whether it be thoughts or feelings eventually gets set in the body if not expressed and moved out in some way.

On a Spiritual level how do you get space to hear and let live and grow the core of what you consider to be your essence, spirit or God source - however you define it? Are you so stuffed, you can't make room for new things?

At my house this summer we have been undergoing what a call a massive decluttering or excavation project. Physically getting rid of stuff we have held onto for years. I am noticing it is making me feel lighter on all levels as well. It was also interesting to note, when we had a tag sale recently how some people were attracted to some of our discarded items and others not.

How do you discern voices in your head? What are they saying? What are the messages? Do clear words come to you or is it a felt sense – feeling, or Intuition? What is the tone or tenor of the messages? Where do they come from? What source, person or cultural influence do you attribute them to? How do they serve you? Do they bring you closer to your truth or more disconnected?

I call this discerning process - getting conscious. It is actually a paradox – you become conscious of voices or messages – the ticker tape you have running either in the foreground or background in your head – But then you need to make room for non-thinking for new messages to come through. This can be done through disciplines like meditation or more free and spontaneous vehicles like letting the water flow over you in the shower, or driving on the highway, going for a run – other ways to let your non-linear versus analytical mind take over.

Sometimes exercising another aspect of our selves (like body or spirit) lets our minds take a rest. It allows for other thoughts to come in. Then we must hear and listen to the thoughts and what they are saying, at multiple levels of meaning – the actual words, the tone/feeling of the words and the emotions they evoke in you.

It was in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BC that Syrus (a Latin writer of Mimes) said, “Our ultimate freedom is the right and power to decide how anybody or anything outside ourselves will affect us.”

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It fits nicely to say that we come in as babies connected to our true nature, then we spend our childhood and youth getting conditioned, our young adulthood sorting through that conditioning and our mature adulthood living back to our true nature and imparting that wisdom to give back to our society. It may happen in a linear fashion like this for some people...and I suspect for most of us, it is more of a non-linear process where we are constantly back and forth between being more or less authentic making choices in the moment and sorting through our conditioning – we are never completely done. And there is also the bigger picture of significant choices we make such as career, life partner, children that can be tied to our truths in a more significant way.

Our challenge as children and youth is to stay close to our true nature while we navigate our way in the world. Our challenge as adults is to nurture ourselves, each other and our children to support and validate our true natures.

To live your truth requires both love and power. Love for yourself and others. It can be an act of love to speak your truth allowing others to grow in ways they otherwise might not. Power in the sense of being empowered - feeling the power of the uniqueness of you and the need for it in the world. No one, not even identical twins have the same fingerprints – your mark in the world.

Some of us may never speak our truths because we are too scared – of our power, of disloyalty or reaction from others or something else. Others are able to have the support and validation they need at a young age to retain the seeds and buds of their voice and nurture it to grow so spend less time searching and sifting and more time speaking from an authentic voice and living their true purpose ...which ultimately has to benefit society in some way.

I see essentially three aspects necessary to working with the process of authenticity...competency, courage and compassion. Competency – the know how – one needs certain tools, support and validation needed to discern and know what our voice is. Then having or cultivating the Courage to speak it and let it live and grow. Some can find their voice and know it but suppress it out of fear – fear of failure, fear of success, etc. whatever it is. Compassion – for yourself for what you went through in discovering it, for others who did their best at the level of consciousness they have to support you and for the world who needs you to listen to your voice. It's like one instrument in an orchestra. If they all are playing

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and in alignment and in tune, we will have a beautiful sound – whether it be an improvised jazz ensemble or a formal classical piece.

Well now, the hard part – how do we “do it”?

A key is finding ways that you filter or process your life experience so you can make more conscious choices about how people, experiences or things will effect you – it is a sorting and discerning process of what gets incorporated and how. I imagine there are as many tools and processes as there are people. Journaling is a great vehicle and there are many ways to do this... via a tape recorder, therapy, talking to someone, making or taking pictures, making collages. Ultimately these are all ways to get at words and images that help you process your life.

Personally I have found it helpful to have a record to go back to. I have kept a journal since I was fifteen. At times I will just grab one and pick it up and read it. There are no rules to my journals – I may not write for six months then write everyday for weeks. It is what it is. I write as need to.

These are all criteria for our voice as to how much airtime do we give it? How much breath time do we give it?

You need to have some safe, sacred space – either mental, physical or otherwise – that allows you to express and sort through your internal world – some do this without anyone’s knowledge, others need to in the context of another relationship – you need to be in dialogue with another human – to hear yourself talk.

Once, when I was going through a particularly heart-wrenching emotional period in my life – getting divorced while I had an infant – I needed to express a lot of anger, sadness and just gut-wrenching grief – I took a tape recorder and just yelled, screamed, cried, and talked into that. This served as a container and gave me something else in addition to traditional therapy. I had the ability to play back the tape and listen to it – not just read the words on a page but to hear the raw emotion and sift through the emotions in that way. When you hear yourself – literally hear – you have the ability to tap into the tone, tenor and underlying meanings and levels of what you are sorting through in a way that you don’t when using others as a sounding board or reading your own words. It is like another way to go deeper into yourself by getting outside yourself and observing in another way.

I was also able to have compassion for myself, like I would with a friend, in a way that another person or paper would not allow me to do.

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A way to get at your core or true nature also, is to ask those who knew you growing up: parents, teachers, friends... What they remembered most about you – as a baby, at 5, 10 and 15. When were you happiest, saddest? How did you spend your time? What are their funniest memories with you? With all these inputs themes start to emerge that are like constant gentle whisperings in the wind...the inner voice – authentic voice is not one that bangs down the doors and says, “I am here.” But one that stays and remains in the background but keeps gently nudging at you – like a child that pulls on your coattail at a party and says, “what about me? I need you now.” It keeps tugging or whispering through the trees... And gets joyous when you turn your head and tilt your ear to listen and then gets ecstatic when you respond and take care of its need – to be heard, listened to and responded to – to give it what it needs – to feel recognized, validated and given room to grow.

I think one key is that the ego and the soul must dialogue. You need to create a context and forum for this dialogue to have a healthy sense of self which gives you your foundation and strength – but then you must learn how to step out of it and let it go. This is one of the greatest struggles and paradoxes of the human condition – common spiritual folklore is you need to have an ego but not have an ego and that is how you grow spiritually? Who made up these rules? Wouldn't anyone be confused?

Sometimes how I know I have heard my authentic voice – is that it is a persistent, peaceful, quiet message. No fanfare, no strong emotional charge – except that one of energy enters my mind and body. Something that just feels right and like a coming home – “it all clicks.”

When you become aware of how you have been influenced by key people or events in your life you can cull out and choose what you will incorporate in your life – to live your life on purpose. Awareness gives you the power to choose to respond versus rebelling and living very differently from your parents or teachers or whomever; or following what has been prescribed by them out of your love or loyalty. When we do not live authentically, there is the potential for dis-ease to enter the body. The body doesn't lie – it is your life barometer for alignment and always wins out.

Some of you believe you picked the time of entering the planet and all who you encounter in life – it's your design. Some of you believe you just ended up here by accident and didn't choose any of the characters in your play – you didn't even choose the plot or setting. Regardless, all those influencers I mentioned – society, religion, education, parents, etc.,

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have all gone into molding and shaping your belief systems, perspective, how you think, how you feel about things. The amalgamation is what makes you uniquely you – in terms of how you process these influences and your life. Some would say this is the spirit that comes in. Your authentic voice can be an integration of how you process these influences.

In the chakra system, the sense of truth and voice is literally housed in the throat chakra...which rests between the heart and third eye charkas. This is where your wisdom and your heart get expressed. Interesting to note that the soft spot at the base of your throat is also the most vulnerable place in your body. This is why it is the target for many martial artists. This says to me it is the place that requires the most protection but also has the most power. Just as this spot on your throat requires protection for your voice to be used and heard, so too your truth requires protection to live and grow.

Ultimately, I think the essence of finding our true voice lies at the intersection of our being and doing. Who we “be” and what we “do” about our beingness – how we allow and support it to be expressed in the world.

A UU minister, Edward Everett Hale said it this way: “I am only one,  
But still I am one. I cannot do everything, But still I can do something.  
And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the  
Something that I can do.” (SLOWLY/REPEAT)?

James Earl Jones, a famous actor said, “One of the hardest things in life is having words in your heart that you can't utter.”

And I leave you with this: So...be courageous and take the risk to dance with your truth in your life, it brings untold grace.