

Why Being Authentic is So Difficult

Why do we find ourselves struggling so often to be who we really are? Why is it so challenging to show up authentically? Why do we wear masks, and assume personalities of actors that hide our True and Real Self? What brings us to be fake and phony so much of the time?

The kicker is that everyone is born authentic. What happens is that, beginning with childhood and moving through adolescence and into adulthood, we spend countless minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and years separating from our innate, authentic, natural and spontaneous self. And, along the road, we become confused. "Who am I, really?" becomes the operative question.

We spend a vast majority of our time and energy wearing one mask to ourselves, and other masks in the various groups, settings, events and circumstances we encounter along the way — at work, at play, at home, and in relationships. As a result, we become confused souls. Acting is stressful, bewildering and exhausting on many levels — mental, physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual. The truth is, many of us don't really know who we, ourselves, are.

Growing up, everyone experiences some degree of insecurity. Why? We are not born knowing how to please mommy and daddy to get their love, approval, and acceptance. We are told we should act one way and not another; we should be one way and not another; we should speak one way and not another; we should think one way and not another, etc. So, when we behaved in ways we felt were OK, but were not OK to mommy and daddy, we were punished in some way — usually verbally or emotionally with an admonition of some type, sometimes physically.

The result is that as we grew and matured and ventured out into the world, we were not sure how to be, not sure what to say, not sure how to behave in order to gain the acceptance, approval and acknowledgement of others. So, instead of being our natural, true, real and authentic self, we began to live according to some ideals, or images, of how we thought we should be, images we learned at home — images we knew would keep us safe and secure.

Because of this inner insecurity around not behaving according to our parents' wishes and demands, an insecurity we internalized in childhood, many of us have grown up to be actors "trying to appear as our selves", rather than just "being myself." This constant efforting to "play a role", live up to an "image", usually leads to nothing but self-deceit and much stress. The irony is that, as adults, many folks then spend huge amounts of time, money and energy searching for who they really are, often without arriving at an answer.

Becoming (consciously or unconsciously) obsessive over how we appear to others, and wanting and needing others' approval, admiration and recognition, we "do what we have to do" — often resulting in showing up as a fake and phony, acting according to the images that were "imprinted" or "hard-wired" into our brains and into our emotional bodies. We learned to behave in ways that are grandiose, false, inauthentic, and reactive.

So, what is it really that gets in the way of being authentic, natural, and spontaneous? The greatest obstacle in being authentic is that most folks have come to identify with the self-images they have taken on from their parents, their friends, their schooling, the media, etc. and these "images" are who they take themselves to be. These images are not "me"; they have been cultivated in me.

Suppose you had a room in your home, a gallery, where you had, say, 25 portraits of yourself. Under each, was a blank label. If you were asked to provide a label, a 3-4-5 word phrase, to describe you in each of these portraits, which labels would you choose? (e.g., superwoman, best mother, excellent leader/manager, smart and well educated, life of the party, great lover, spiritual, wealthy, ...)

Most of these labels are self images we created for ourselves (really, created for us when we were young), not from a place of authenticity, spontaneity and naturalness, but out of the need for others' acceptance and approval. The more we exhibited this behavior or that image, the more we received acceptance and approval from, first our parents, then extended family, teachers, friends, and clergy, etc. Unfortunately, when we expressed our true selves, and our true self did not sync up with our parents' expectations of who we should and should not be, we were denied love and acceptance. The solution? Jettison our true and real self, our essence, our authenticity and role-play the child our parents wanted us to be so we could feel safe and secure, i.e., loved.

So, very early on we became actors and remain actors to this day. The downside is that if we forget our role, fail to act, "forget our lines", so to speak, we think we will lose out on the accolades, the recognition, the approval. And, because of our conditioning, our ego feels it needs others' approval and recognition to survive, to feel like a "somebody." The problem? We have to be "on", 24/7, 365. This is how we become fake and phony. This is how we begin to obsess with our self-image and need to constantly be someone we're not. Our fear of not gaining others' approval, acceptance and acknowledgement is just too great for most to bear. So, we don't show up as our True and Real self, our authentic self, for fear of not being "seen" or "heard". We fear we'll become "invisible."

When we let go of these "mental" self-images, do the "inner personal work" on ourselves to re-discover our True and Real Self, our Essence, and allow our real self to arise, we can be authentic, natural and spontaneous.

Few, however, are able or willing to do the deeper exploration of our selves or to look at the "spiritual" truth of who we are. So, for them day-to-day life is another mask, another persona, another attitude, another new expensive car, another new outfit, another in-your-face, overbearing, controlling, egotistical, self-centered, superficial and narcissistic "me" – a "me" I really don't know at all. All the while faking authenticity, faking natural and spontaneous expression.

So, when we separate from our Core self, our authentic self, this disconnect manifests largely as our ego leading to a loss of self-esteem, self-value and self-worth which we then try to recover from outside ourselves. We shore up our self by being phony and fake - in thought, word, and deed, and by failing and fearing to be authentic.

The difficulty is that discovering one's authenticity is the work of the soul – and most folks "think" they can do it "in their heads", that authenticity is something one "figures out." Most have yet to "figure it out."

Because our parents were unable or unwilling to allow our spontaneity, our aliveness, our juiciness, our authenticity as a child was repressed, suppressed, and snuffed out.

One of the reasons honest, safe, trusting and conscious relationships are so challenging at work, at home and at play is because many folks are living an "image" of themselves and are not showing up as real and authentic. Living the "ideal " is impossible. What is possible,

however, is living a life from a place of who we really are, being authentic, and allowing others to be authentic as well.

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