

Authenticity and Success

I. Introduction

It became immediately apparent to me that a suitable answer to the question, “What is authenticity?” would not come from any single source. My own reflections are limited, the definitions of my friends untested, and the writings of academics too impersonal. Thus, I set out to find answers from all three sources and synthesize them into my own actionable definition. I first conducted primary research, asking seventeen friends to provide definitions. Simultaneously, I reflected upon my own experiences and writings to understand my unconscious understanding of authenticity. Lastly, I turned to academic writings to give structure and credibility to my thinking. A synthesis of the three led me to the following definition: authenticity is a meditation on one’s truest self. Moreover, as I considered the relationship between authenticity and success, I determined that application of this definition could have profound impacts on achieving personal success, regardless of how success is defined.

II. Authenticity as Meditation

I define authenticity foremost as a meditation because I believe that authenticity is an active process. This thought came first from one of my friends, who defined it as, “the attempt to act in a way through which your truest self becomes manifest...it is a verb more than a noun.” She also noted that reflecting on one’s actions is integral to the application of this definition. Thus her understanding really involved three components: intention, action, and reflection. In this definition, failure to be authentic is accounted for in the intention and reflection upon one’s actions. If failure is recognized and reflected upon, the entire process is still authentic, even if the act is not.

The notion of authenticity as a process reminded me immediately of meditation. While a broad and widely varied term, my personal practices of meditation align most closely with Buddhist practices of concentration and awareness (Bhunte Gunaratana). In meditating, I seek to become objectively aware of all sensations in my body and all stimuli in my environment. I am centered upon something simple, like my breathing. But as I pay attention to the rise and fall of my stomach, my attention is often pulled away to the sound of a car alarm or to an itch on my neck. This break in attention is not a failure to meditate. Rather, it is part of meditation. Meditation is the acknowledgment of that interruption, the letting go of its importance, and the return to the central focus on breathing. It acts as a cyclical process just as my friend's understanding of authenticity does. It focuses on the act of attention and awareness, and allows for human error as a fundamental element of that process.

The notion of authenticity as a process is in fact a recognized one in the field of psychoanalysis. In "Authenticity and the analytic process," Boccara, Gaddini, and Riefolo present authenticity as, "a process rather than an outcome" (348). They propose that the self can be "represented as an ongoing process of the fertile merging of sensations and vital thoughts that become continually complex, rather than as precise, circumscribed, static entities" (349). Through this definition, they unite the self and the larger world in a dynamic, changing relationship. Similarly, Claudio Neri interprets authenticity as relative rather than absolute (326), and as an individual process of achieving self. Jaspers likewise says that, "The authentic does not have a concrete existence, is not an object to be understood, but a direction. Authenticity is not the goal of understanding, but a way of behaving towards oneself" (66). These various understandings of authenticity all conceptualize it as a process, a journey rather than a destination.

Uniting these two ideas, mindful awareness and the psychoanalytic process of authenticity, I thus define authenticity as a meditation. Specifically, I want to highlight two elements of this union. As Bhunte Gunaratana writes, “all Buddhist meditation aims at the development of awareness, using concentration as a tool.” Thus the meditation of authenticity is first about heightened awareness and concentration. It focuses, however, on the content elements discussed by psychoanalysts. In this case, it is concentration on the development of an individual’s relative authenticity and the convergence of stimuli and thought. In application, a meditation of authenticity might look like the following: placing attention on inner self, acting to align with that self, failing to act in the desired manner, being aware enough to recognize one’s failure, reflecting upon why and how one has failed, and then returning again to the intention to act authentically. This entire process, including the failed action, is authenticity. But in order to be actionable, this definition relies on an understanding of the true self.

III. Understanding the “Truest Self”

As a starting point for understanding the self, I sought to unearth my own innate understanding of authenticity. I realized that I first grappled seriously with this notion as a junior in high school, although I did not give it the name of authenticity explicitly. My English teacher assigned us to write personal essays – any topic, any focus, and any message. I chose to write about a friend, mentor, and role model who had passed away the previous year. His name was Matt. He was three years older than I, a senior when I entered high school. He served as a Peer Advisor, a counselor and guide of sorts who helps freshmen adjust to the new environment. It was through that relationship that I first came to admire Matt, but it was through performing together in the school’s production of *Beauty and the Beast* that I really came to love and look up to him. Matt passed away the year after he graduated, and his death shook the entire school. I

wrote my personal essay about grappling with his death, and through that experience came to confront the idea of authenticity.

In my personal essay, I wrote directly to Matt. I wrote, “The special thing about you, Matt, is that you are truly yourself...naturally and effortlessly.” But my admiration was also tainted with darker feeling of jealousy. I was jealous of who he was, and most of all of how I watched my community grieve for him. Such incredible memories were recollected and so many people grieved so deeply that I began to obsess in comparing myself to that legacy. I admitted to myself that:

The love, the sadness, the pain...each sincere emotion I’ve seen speaks to your memory, speaks to the kind of person I want to be. And it begs the thought; will I be missed as much? If I were to die today, would I be missed as much as you? It terrifies me to realize that the reason I strive to be like you is not to be as selfless and kind. Instead, it is to attain the same love. It terrifies me because it means I am not as good as you, and at the same time I think I am. It means that I’m failing both at emulating you, and by trying to emulate you. If the thing I admire most about you is your ability to be yourself, why am I trying to be *you*?

This last line has stuck with me. It was my first real stab at trying to deconstruct authenticity.

What was I seeking? Who was I trying to be? To what or whom did I want to be true? The final line of my essay read, “I have discovered to honor you not by copying you, but by learning from you. Your spirit is with me, reminding me to dish out smiles and winks in my own, unique style.”

I had finally come to the simple (and yet then difficult to digest) truth that I could honor Matt’s memory not by emulating who he was. Instead, I had to emulate how he was. I had to emulate his brave and honest truth to himself. His authenticity. As I consider the meaning of authenticity five years later, I recognize that I have this strong core understanding deeply engrained from this experience. Authenticity, at this point in my life, meant loyalty to and expression of one’s core identity.

Collecting definitions from friends helped to expand and add depth to this simple idea. I discovered that a majority of friends defined authenticity using, in various fashions, the Shakespearian understanding of “To thine own self be true.” They expressed honoring the self in terms of comfort, originality, genuineness, natural, and honesty. One friend defined authenticity as, “Being so comfortable in your own beliefs and ideas that you do not change or modify your thoughts or words to accommodate others.” Another focused on honesty in, “Saying that you’re having a bad day when you’re having a bad day.” In various forms, many people sought to ground authenticity in listening to, being true to, honoring, or expressing one’s true self. Another form this took related to thought processes, wherein authenticity was about the automatic nature of thought. For example, one friend said that, “the only authentic thought is the first thought you have in response to a given stimulus.” Another said that it is “acting without the recursive worries of others’ interpretations of your actions...eliminating the idea of reasoning your actions based on the response and thoughts of others.”

Other definitions recognized that listening to your inner self is not so simple as it sounds. Several sought to identify tensions that interfere with acting authentically. One tension was that authenticity is suspended between influence from an individual voice and his society. A friend noted how authenticity is often equated to originality, as per the example of an individual wearing a blue shirt in a room full of red shirts. That person is often called authentic for being true to his own desires and ignoring the social norms. However, what of the man wearing a blue shirt in order to stand out, and not because he cares for blue? Or what of the man wearing a red shirt because he loves red, and not because others wear it? There is an inherent problem in labeling authenticity, because of the tension between individual will and socialized behaviors. Another friend similarly posed that the very idea of authenticity is a social construct that doesn’t

have any real meaning. He argued that all behavior in life is performed, and thus authenticity is always manufactured.

Lastly, several friends used music to demonstrate tensions in the act of being authentic. This was done in three ways. One was to acknowledge the tension between commercial and underground hip-hop music, and how authenticity is or isn't applied to music within each sphere. Often times, mainstream commercial musicians are seen as having sold out, and thus are not authentic. Conversely, musicians who don't make money, don't have fame, and don't cater to popular influences are deemed authentic. The broader significance here is again how societal pressures affect individual actions, and consequently affect our application of the term authentic. Secondly, the use of authenticity to describe music depends on the timeline in question. An up and coming band with a grunge sound, for example, might be called authentic early in their career. As they progress and their music changes, perhaps influenced by popular musical forces, they are criticized for selling out and changing to meet the expectations and desires of the general public. Are musicians then not free to change and evolve? And do popular musicians play no part in pushing the boundaries of what popular music is, thus qualifying them as authentic? More broadly, these questions ask if authenticity means to be true to your past, present, or future self. Lastly, one friend explored authenticity as it relates to jazz and blues music. Race, class, and time period have all influenced the use of the term authentic for both types of music. Within these two worlds, opinions on what is authentic are split between new and old. Some are even split as to whether the word authentic has any meaning in music at all. From this confusion he ultimately proposed that, "authenticity is something we construct and isn't quantifiable...if everyone just chilled out about categorizing music forms, we'd be a lot happier." According to him, authenticity doesn't ultimately matter and thus we shouldn't consider it at all.

Synthesizing such varied definitions is messy, but it reveals several key characteristics about understanding the true self. Firstly, it is important to recognize the difficulties that cloud one's true self. Societal influences, growth over time, and even the attempt to standardize definitions can get in the way of listening to your inner self. Secondly, the idea of 'listening to one's true self' is not the same for everyone. For some, it means being an individual, original in thought and action. For others, it means following your gut no matter what others do. Regardless, key identifiers of authentic behavior include genuineness, honesty, being comfortable, and being original. If one feels in violation of one of these ideas, it might mean he is being inauthentic.

Altogether, I believe that authenticity is a meditation on my true self. It involves concentrating intently, being aware of my self and my surroundings, and continually reflecting. The focus on the true self should seek to discern between my gut emotions and thoughts, and those placed on me by setting and society. In practicing authenticity, I should always seek to be kind to myself and forgive my failures. I am human and will make mistakes and act unlike myself. I believe that the key is to recognize, reflect upon, and learn from those failures. If diligent in this process of meditation, I will achieve authenticity.

IV. Authenticity and Success

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment." Like most other people, I am yet to achieve this great accomplishment. But unlike most people, I don't actually believe that this can be achieved. What does it mean to be yourself to an extent where you can designate the challenge accomplished? And what happens afterwards? Instead, I prefer to think of being myself as an ongoing quest and challenge – a process. That is why, when my friend offered her definition of authenticity as a verb, the notion stuck with me. From there I put my own twist to conceptualize

it as a meditation. As I turn to consider how authenticity relates to success, a simple answer comes to mind: in every way.

Authenticity, as I have defined it, is about knowing, seeking to improve, and forgiving yourself. Success, while yet undefined specifically, to me implies overcoming challenges and attaining goals. I find it impossible to think of a single challenge or goal that is not more easily confronted with a greater sense of self. Whether the attainment of wealth, the development of relationships, or the pursuit of happiness, I believe that each step in any pursuit of success becomes easier when one can act on his strengths and stick to his inner compass.

Moreover, having surveyed a sample of the significant success literature through this course, I am confident that authenticity is critical to four points in the pursuit of success. First, it allows individuals to cultivate their own definition of success as a starting point. Definitions and pursuits of success are widely varied, with each person prioritizing different elements in their own vision. For example, in his book Springboard, Richard Shell offers an exercise called “Six Lives” in which he asks the reader to rank a group of individuals from most to least successful based on short bios. Each of these characters has lived a successful life according to a certain goal of success: achievement of status, money, meaning, relationships, or other. The ranking of these individuals by the reader reveals his prioritization of those different goals. Because of this wide variability, my definition of authenticity is key to determining one’s own personal balance. Being mindful of your true self can help you select which goals to prioritize. Secondly, it allows individuals to revise and maintain a current definition of success. In static conceptualizations, you are forced to stay true to a set of fixed principles. But with the meditative process, you can continually reflect upon how your inner values align with your behavior and goals. It will force you to come to terms with misalignments, and allow you the space to make adjustments.

Thirdly, meditation of authenticity can help develop individuals' strengths and confront their weaknesses. Ben Franklin's virtue practice, for example, relied on an ongoing process of intention, action, and reflection. He sought to develop his character rigorously, and was able to do so in part because of his ability to connect with his own flaws and reflect upon his failings. Lastly, once skills and virtues are developed, practice of authenticity can help guide the use of those tools in pursuit of success. In class, we discussed the danger of using Dale Carnegie's tools towards bad ends. We acknowledged the danger that becoming hyper-focused on the social approach to success brings, such as fakeness or loss of identity. But we also acknowledged that he merely provides tools (smiling, listening, being interested in others), and it is up to the individual to pair those tools with appropriate motives. Authenticity is critical in this regard, as it puts you in touch with your core values, and alerts you when you deviate from them.

V. Conclusion

The experience of grappling with Matt's death was a formative experience for me. It forced me to confront perceptions of my self, and more importantly to think intensely about who I wanted to be in the future. As I confronted my admiration for Matt, my desire to attain the same levels of love, and the guilt I felt at such a selfish desire, I began to crystallize the self that I wanted to be true to. I realized I had to be like Matt by emulating his faithful expression of self. And most importantly, I realized how important it is to do that. The most confused and emotional times of my life have been when my sense of self has been diminished, questioned, or thrown off. When I begin to judgmentally doubt my motivations and behaviors, I lose confidence, happiness, and self-efficacy. But when I listen to my inner voice and am kind to myself, I rise to my full potential. My 2016 investigation of authenticity is really an attempt to find an actionable definition to help me pursue that already closely held desire to be myself that formed after Matt

passed away. Ultimately, I believe this process of authenticity will help me achieve success by serving as an ongoing practice to continually better myself.

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