

# 1

## The Call of an Authentic Life

It is a paradoxical fact of modern life that despite unprecedented accomplishment, apparent happiness and more wealth than the world has ever known (despite recent economic setbacks) many people feel a sense of emptiness or unease deep within themselves. The pursuit of success, happiness, wealth, love and satiation isn't enough. There is a profound need to place the challenges of living within a more fulfilling and meaningful context.

We are conditioned to accept and look for easy solutions to the problems we face. The media and advertising in particular promise that if you buy this or that product you will get an emotional reward. But life is more complicated than these simple solutions suggest. When you get what you want you always want more.

Consumerism drives you on to buy things you don't need, because you are going to buy the necessities anyway. You are encouraged to associate products with attractive personal qualities such as beauty, success, status, taste and satisfaction. The aim is to help you feel good which feeds our desire for pleasure. Feeling good is now an end in itself rather than a by product of pursuing a superior common goal. Feeling good about our selves has become almost a 'fundamental right.'

In contemporary culture identity often comes from the clothes you wear, the music you listen to, the people you espouse as celebrities, and the teams you cheer for. For too long we have been living on the basis that affluence was all that mattered: "Rich people have it all, if we all get rich, or richer, we'll all be happy." But now the bubble has burst and the cold winds of economic hardship are everywhere.

This is a real shock to a society that has been conditioned to believe in the god of consumerism. We have been encouraged to work longer and harder so we could buy more things, but now we are faced with the hollowness of that idea.

The spectre of unemployment and the loss of a business for so many is not just a personal financial crisis, but a potential long-term life altering situation. With unemployment comes a range of challenges all of which are linked to meaning, self-worth, and self-identity. How can we fulfil our true potential when we find it difficult to match our experience of life as it is today with our hopes and basic values?

Many struggle to cope and turn to alcohol, drugs, gambling, overeating, sex, and all forms of obsessive behavior to alleviate the pain. Many feel their lives

are out of control because they can't lose weight, can't make a decision, can't catch-up, consumed by anger, burdened by debt or caught in unproductive or damaging relationships; or can't find that special someone to form a relationship with. Others are numb to their own existence—busy working, buying, doing, and accumulating. They have an increased need to escape and insulate themselves from life.

People feel lost and unsure about the future, unable to establish a clear and consistent life-plan. For those in successful careers there is renewed uncertainty not only about the future but of the worth and meaningfulness of the career they have chosen. Others struggle with relationships, faith, community or family and constantly ask whether they are being “true” to themselves.

For many, regardless of their economic circumstances, there is an inexplicable unease or longing, a barely perceptible feeling of something missing, of not feeling complete. In others it is the experience of a lack of satisfactory human relationships in the midst of a highly technological, fast-paced, mobile society. And sadly for too many it is the pain of alienation and loneliness, a lack of human understanding and warmth.

The age-old questions of the human condition still seek answers: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? Who will accompany me? How am I going to get there? The longing for meaning, purpose and fulfillment in life is as intense as at any time in human history.

Most people seek freedom as a response to something missing in their lives. They have some gaps that they need to fill. At some level their lives are flawed or imperfect—they want more from life. This “more” varies from person to person. However, particular needs seem to be linked to our stage in life or what we call our *Lifetimes*.

Over the period of your life you have five ‘life-times’:

Playing Time: 0-17 years (carefree, full of fun, life is mostly play).

Getting Time: 18-30 years (getting qualified, getting jobs, getting married).

Giving Time: 31-50 years (rearing kids, working, investing, striving).

Being Time: 51-70 years (thinking, taking stock, life-changing).

Taking Time: 71+ years (retiring, relaxing, reflecting).

As you move through these lifetimes we come to way-points which challenge us. These are wake-up calls to find our own truths and start living authentically. Adaptive Freedom is helpful for people throughout all these stages.

In the later stages of the Playing Time and early part of the Giving Time young people examine what they would like to do with their lives, what they want from life and how they plan to go about it. But this is usually a secondary consideration at a time when carefree enjoyment of life is paramount.

In the later stages of the Getting Time people start questioning what life is all about. Their confidence in previous life choices may be wavering and issues linked to purpose and definitions of success and happiness become important as they experience challenges in relationships and marriage.

Much of the Giving Time is spent in service to others, especially for many in the nurturing of the young to help *them* create a successful life. In the later stages of the Giving Time people may have a sense that in all the giving they

have lost sight of their own life—that time is starting to run out and their earlier life-goals may be unfulfilled. Their career, relationships and lifestyle may not be up to their original life-plan so they begin to either redouble their efforts or change course or perhaps do both.

The transition from the Giving Time to the Being Time is often described as the “midlife crisis”—a period of instability, anxiety and change. During this period people tend to review past choices and think about their final years. Awareness of death is usually a feature of this period as is a sense that despite accomplishment life seems to lack meaning.

For men this can often mean appraising their career in a new light and coming to terms with their past, facing reality perhaps for the first time and examining what wealth truly means. For women this can be a time of discovering their personal identity beyond the partner-wife-mother roles, and seeking self-reliance and independence.

The good news is that your circumstances, environment and conditioning have brought you to the place you are and the choices you make *now*, can bring you to a new and better place. Experience changes the physical structure of the brain. And since you can choose the kinds of learning experiences you have, you actually have power to affect the structure of your own brain, and life, both for good and for ill. All that is necessary is to exercise that choice—to choose to live a free and authentic life.

However logical it may appear this is undoubtedly not as simple as it seems. If it were there would be hardly any need for a book like this. The call to authentic living is a challenging one because it essentially means to believe in yourself and you may find this too risky. It may be easier and safer to be like others—part of the crowd, or to be what others have consistently told you that you are, to conform to the “you” that gets the approval you crave.

To answer the call of authentic living is risky because it means stepping out, standing up, and saying no, when most of your life up to this may have involved stepping aside, standing down, and saying yes even when your inner spirit wanted to do otherwise.

You may have become conditioned to stay quiet rather than speak out through the harsh lessons life has taught you. Nothing ventured nothing lost. The safe thing is not to venture beyond the comfort zone you have created for yourself.

We find it easy to deceive ourselves. Despite its obvious shortcomings we are good at convincing ourselves that our life is good, that we are living to the limits of our potential and see no need for change. But perhaps we haven't counted those little bits of passion, intensity of feeling or flights of fancy that we have lost along the way. We may be secure, settled, sincere, satisfied and that may amount to a deep sense of a fulfilled life in which case it is authentic or it may amount to a barely perceptible sense of loss, unease, anguish or anxiety in which case it is a stagnant life.

### The Challenge of Authentic Living

All ideals of humanity and all the concepts that describe the essential nature of the human person derive from social interaction. They gain general acceptance

and become part of our own worldview because of their roots in social, political, religious and cultural history and tradition.

The problem is that in unsettled times these ideals become blurred. In our time the situation is compounded by the seismic shift created by the breakdown in trust and respect for the traditional sources of wisdom and leadership.

The values, solutions and vision for the future of society offered by many of the traditional social, political and religious sources seem for many people to be dated and lacking in credibility. Humankind needs the highest vision of personality, and needs it clearly and vividly. Without it the foundations of our social structures—personal responsibility and accountability—will be hard to sustain.

The most lasting impression on our ideals is always made by leaders and teachers who embody their idealism in the actions of their lives not just in their rhetoric; leaders who are models of their own beliefs. Regrettably they are now hard to find.

The challenge then for each of us is to embark on a personal journey of establishing what it means for us to live an authentic life. We must be responsible for our own life rather than responsive to what others say our life should be. Rather than lament the passing of stern leadership and the imposition of ethical standards from on high we can see this era as the next stage in the maturation of humanity. We are no longer children or adolescents but have come into adulthood and must now shape our world with the tools of reason and intuition, science and tradition.

This requires clarifying and testing our personal values in the fire of our lived experience; coming to terms with our personal power and defining what it means to achieve success and wellbeing in life. We are called to face the challenge of simultaneously living our life and exercising our freedom and power in accordance with those values.

We have become accustomed to taking our values and ideals much like our breakfast cereal—out of a box. The box is that of culture and tradition, family and tribe and nowadays the social conditioning peddled by a voracious media under the guise of ‘public opinion.’

The surrender of so many leaders to the alleged primacy of public opinion has been a central feature in the collapse of credible leadership at all levels in society. To be authentic is to have a belief, a position, a view and then to stand-up for that view until convinced by others that it is misguided or there is a better alternative.

The challenge for a free and authentic person is to create your own vision or ideal of what a modern, valuable and authentic society might be, and be willing to stand-up for it. And in the process, not to be unduly swayed by what the media present to you as ‘truth.’

This is no easy task. If for instance, you hear that politicians are responding to public anger over some issue or that a certain percentage of people in a poll believed ‘X’; you may well be subliminally influenced to take those ideas on board. It is even possible that you will accept them as truth, or take them for

granted and so in time build up a range of data sets that can quickly morph into beliefs and even values.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard had a dislike for public opinion and was suspicious of the media. This was surprising in his day (he died in 1855) when the media was a bare glimpse of what it is today. He famously coined the phrase “the crowd is untruth.” The crowd meaning public opinion in its broadest sense or “the ideas that a given age takes for granted; the ordinary and accepted way of doing things; the complacent attitude that comes from the conformity necessary for social life.”

In Kierkegaard's view public opinion insinuates itself into your own sense of who you are, relieving you of the burden of being yourself. In his words: “If everyone is a Christian there is no need for me to “become” one.”

The choices presented to you in social life and by public opinion are unsure and not always credible. This forces you to look for answers in the experience and action of your own life *as lived*, with all its baggage and beauty.

You won't, nor should you, jettison the values imbued from your family and friends, your religious and cultural background (even if you are no longer committed to either), your education and professional formation or your past experience.

Rather than looking to them to establish a value or meaning which speaks authentically to your life today, look instead directly at yourself to create a life that is authentic on the basis of your actions and interactions with others. Such a life will be grounded in awareness and reflection not in social conditioning. It will be committed to being responsible for, and accepting the consequences of your actions.

An authentic life is unique to the person who lives it. Your authenticity is your own. That authenticity may be inextricably and exclusively linked to your religious observance or belief in the will of God, or your adherence to norms established by social, cultural or political authorities. In either case these are valid choices only if you make them freely and out of a sense of commitment rather than conformity.

Perhaps you don't have a belief in God, or you did but no longer do, or you may now doubt the wisdom of the authorities you once trusted. In which case all you have left is yourself and your friends, and mentors. You must look then to yourself to shape your own unique authentic life. This process may be informed by many sources but it is *shaped* by you and you are more than adequate for the task.

The call of an authentic life is the manifestation of the natural drive towards individual maturity and harmony with the whole of humankind. It creates its own dynamic and doesn't wait meekly for you to get on with the job. If you delay, the frustrated natural urge towards fulfillment may surface in an inner sense of unease or dissatisfaction with the state of your life.

The psychological term “daimonic” was described by the psychiatrist Rollo May as the elemental force within us which contains an irrepressible urge not only to survive but to thrive. It is the *dynamic unrest* that forces us into the unknown, leading either to self-destruction or self-discovery. He described this power of nature as capable of both positive and negative outcomes, and as a

naturally occurring human impulse or urge within everyone to affirm, assert and achieve their highest potential.

This inner urge can arise out of a personal crisis or trauma, a psychological illness, or simply neurotic or unpredictable behavior or an aching desire to find meaning and purpose in your life. It is a ‘calling’ however well disguised, to become your authentic self and it can be nurtured and supported, directed and channelled. Therefore, to set-out on this journey is hardly optional. In fact it’s imperative, urgent and critical to your wellbeing.

### The “Ideal You”

Your authentic or aspirational identity is what you hope to make of your self, the type of person you want to become—the “ideal you.” It is a vision of the personality traits, character, and patterns of behavior you wish to personify.

The ideal you is formed, shaped and ultimately realized not in the world but in your imagination. It is the expression of absolutely everything you wish to be. Your imagination is the ultimate source of your authentic nature.

The focus on what you aspire to be is more an activity rather than an end in itself. You are not trying to capture a pure, original or pristine identity that exists separately from the stream of your experience—that lies hidden waiting to be discovered.

The development of an aspirational identity in this context is what the philosopher Richard Moran has called ‘self-constitution.’ He believes that we are uniquely able to constitute ourselves. Therefore, you don’t search for your authentic self, it exists right here right now. You don’t discover your authentic self, you shape your authentic self in a way that gives meaning to the life you lead.

The philosopher George Herbert Palmer described the process by using the analogy of an elm tree. When the seed of an elm begins to sprout, it is adapted not merely to the next stage, but to every stage beyond that. The whole elm is already predicted in its genetic make-up when its seed is planted in the ground. For it to become an elm it must have a helpful environment, but still a certain plan of movement “elmwards” is already contained in the seed.

But what if the seed already knew the shape and size of elm it had the potential to become? Every time it sucked in moisture or basked in sunshine it would be gently adapting this nourishment to the fulfillment of its ultimate goal. It might be asking itself for example, whether the strength gained from the environment would be better sent to the left branch or the right.

Such an elm would be entirely different to its fellow elms in the forest. Because if it could envisage what it might look like as it grew to maturity it wouldn’t be an elm but a human person. Unlike the elm we are entrusted with our own growth. The basic plan is in our genes but the environment we inhabit and the choices we make ultimately decide what we become.

Your authentic or *aspirational identity* is what you hope to make of yourself, the type of person you want to become—the *ideal you*. It is a vision of the highest potential that you aspire to fulfil in your life—the true, free and authentic person you wish to become.

Your aspirational identity may emerge in a moment of great insight but it is more likely to be the result of a gradual process of awakening, or self-sculpting. It can also be revealed through the yearnings that you feel from time to time—the hopes that excite and energize you. Generally though it will be the result of some combination of these:

1. **Ambition:** This is the will to succeed, to aspire to some high ideal or cherished desire, to realize a dream, acquire positive power, to equal or excel.
2. **Habit:** This is a subtle motivator which reminds you to keep things the way they are. In its most positive form it's your desire for peace and contentment. In its most negative form it is your resistance to anything new or different.
3. **Crisis** can act as a catalyst for change and leads to healing, growth, or transformation. It shatters your comfortable, often automatic patterns of thinking or behaving. Divorce, mental breakdown, career change (or loss of career), loss of a loved one, serious illness, trauma, burn-out, all these can constitute significant crises in your life.
4. **Contrition and guilt** are an essential impetus for positive change. 'To really do something *for* yourself you have to start by doing something *about* yourself. Until you experience the need to do so, nothing will really change.'
5. **Values** can be a powerful motivator. Some things have value to you, and some don't; some are relevant to you, some aren't.
6. **Inspiration:** Persistent and disciplined use of inspiring methods and techniques such as meditation can give rise to greater awareness leading to a simplification and focusing of your desires and wants.
7. **Society:** As social beings we rely on each other for mutual support. This creates a need for positive regard: to love and be loved, in both intimate and non-intimate relationships, and the need to belong (to a place, a group, a social connection) and have the opportunity to work and contribute in meaningful ways. These can also be powerful motivators.

This last idea—that others shape us—is known in psychology as the *Michelangelo effect*. The Italian Renaissance sculptor Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) is said to have described some of his greatest works, such as the sculptures of David and Moses as already existing inside the blocks of marble before he started working on them. All he did was to liberate their true form.

There is an authentic self—an ideal you—inside you waiting to be revealed and those who are close to you and who care about you are well placed to help you realise it. Therefore the exploration of the ideal you is not a solitary art or wholly within your control. Environmental and interpersonal forces help with the sculpting process. Parents, friends, teachers, and colleagues all play a part. Role models are also a vibrant source of aspirational fuel. But few sculptors are likely to exert as powerful an influence as those of our close partners.

The strong interdependence that develops in close relationships makes it inevitable that partners mutually influence the shape of each other's lives. The social psychologist Caryl E. Rusbult who developed the Michelangelo theory said that "Each person's dispositions, values, and behavioral tendencies come to reflect the particular conditions of interdependence experienced with the partner."

You can get a very clear view of yourself through the helpful feedback of those who are close to you. Therefore, the hopes and vision you cherish for the growth of your authentic personality will be worked over and refined in the conscious and nonconscious interchange with your partner and theirs with you. But that must always be on your own terms, not theirs.

Your aspirational identity should represent some direct and measureable improvement in yourself—responding to your needs, desires, dissatisfaction, questioning, or issues arising from self-acceptance. This sought after improvement must be in some sense your own. If it is an image of the gains of someone else then it is unlikely to be a strong action motivator.

What does this mean? If you see the ideal you as bound up exclusively, or even primarily, with the advancement of your fellow humans (or other animals or Nature), it is still nevertheless both about them *and* you. The issue is not in the purpose you envisage but how you *see* that purpose.

The ideal you must be in some sense a selfish one. This does not deny the existence of altruism as an innate human trait. Nor does it endorse the view of Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*, among others, that good deeds are merely a cover for reciprocal altruism—that our self-interest is *always* at the top of our agenda and we only display generosity to gain an advantage or get something back.

Altruism does exist and as the philosopher David Skrbina reminds us by helping someone you are also helping the larger social body, so that helping that body is helping yourself. And by describing the ideal you both in terms of benefitting yourself—in the pleasure of knowing you have served—and benefitting others, you are stating your ideal in a true and realistic way.

Staying in the real world is crucial to the process of working on the ideal you. Michael Foley in *The Age of Absurdity* reminds us that our yearning for authenticity is not found only in novelty – a new place, a new lover, a new job. “More effective is to see the familiar with new eyes...to smash the crust of habit and see life anew.” Foley exhorts us to “begin a new job in your current post, enjoy a holiday where you actually live, and most thrillingly, plunge into a tumultuous affair with your own spouse.”

The vision of the ideal you more often emerges from pain rather than from pleasure, from a sense of weakness or possibilities unfulfilled. We are more usually driven by a sense of limitation, want or need and a desire to do or be better. Our aim is improvement rather than perfection.

We may also be attracted by the example of others or wish to improve ourselves to appear more acceptable to others for whom we have a high regard. Undoubtedly the ideal you is a social you. It is “the product of constructive imagination working with the materials which social experience supplies,” but with you as the final arbiter.

And it is never complete. The ideal you is always a goal, an aspiration never a final destination. We come on our authentic nature piecemeal and do not, like an architect, have a detailed blueprint from the outset. There is no static, unchanging you. Rather there is a “you” in the process of constant change, unfolding ever deeper layers of power, potential and beauty.

Indeed as we get glimpses of what we might be we can often be put off. The vision can be overwhelming and daunting and we may feel that we are not up to the task. All we have to do is sustain the vision, and take action now, however tiny it may be. Slowly we get a feeling of kinship with our authentic nature, the realization of our potential comes into clearer focus and we become comfortable with the free, unique and magnificent person that we are.

Whatever is good and true in life that is rightly yours must essentially be of your own making. You cannot own yourself till you are largely the author of yourself. The process is never ending, but from time to time you catch sight of what might you might be or can become. Then you are restored and reinvigorated and the journey begins anew. The sculpting of the authentic you is never finished. It is a gloriously exciting and satisfying life-long activity—but it can only thrive where personal freedom exists and is allowed to flourish.