

Save the world by becoming your authentic self

We all want to be better people. We all want our own leadership skills to be more effective, whether it is leadership of a large team of people or our family unit. And many of us are (maybe grudgingly) aware that greater self-knowledge is very important for transcending the aspects of our own behavior that trip us up. Yet that doesn't mean we are willing to go sit on a mountaintop and learn to meditate in order to become more self-aware. If that's what it takes ... forget it, I'll do the best I can with what I have.

In my explorations into the effectiveness of flow for solving problems of both a personal and professional nature, I have learned that we don't need to sacrifice part of ourselves in order to gain more self-knowledge. What we are after is our *authentic self*. If you are in a position of influence, whether in business, politics, education or otherwise, *stay there!* We need you in that role, not on the mountaintop. When we talk about self-knowledge, we are really just saying "be your authentic self." The challenge is that our authentic self is typically buried under many layers of rubble. Removing that rubble is like looking at the world through a new pair of glasses.

What is an "authentic self?"

Our authentic self is who we would each be if there were no other factors influencing us to try to be different. Rather than discussing the deep psychological factors that might influence our individual personalities, just think of it this way: our authentic self emerges as we discover and *unchoose* each habitual fear we've adopted over time.

In my experience, ego-habits¹ seek to control my choices of action in order to keep me safe within my cultural surroundings. Ego-habits arise in response to fear, but I try to distinguish between "imaginary fears that hold me back" and "fears of potential that push me forward." What I am calling ego-habits are imaginary fears about things that never end up occurring. These have a tendency to hide my authentic self. Our job as leaders is *not* to overcome or dissolve our ego;

Our job is to maintain enough mental control so as not to automatically obey our ego-habits.

Our authentic self is what emerges when we don't do what our ego-habits tell us to do. While many of us may need to practice letting go of control in our lives, having more control of our own mind, or "mindfulness," is generally a good thing. Who wants to be at the whim of a reactive program inside their own minds? Who wants to surrender their ability to be in control of their own choices? It doesn't mean we never listen to the voice of caution, only that we are not compelled to automatically do what it says.

The task of self-awareness is to have choice over our actions, and when we retain choice over our actions, our authentic self emerges. The ego never goes away, so we should not seek to dissolve it. Instead we learn to recognize it, and then choose responses from the full range of creative choices we have available to us.

¹ I loosely name these ego-habits, since they are certainly related to Freud's concepts of ego and super-ego, but as a physicist and not a psychologist I will not venture into discerning how.

It's just You, undiluted.

I could spend the rest of this article listing out techniques to identify the ego and to engage will power to make different choices. But that approach is so BORING!

You see, your authentic self is *rad*. It's not some dry practice of analysis and critique; your authentic self is someone that everyone would love if they saw it. It's simply composed of the things you truly love, of the personality traits you genuinely embody. It's who you are when you're not thinking about what other people are thinking of you.

Because we are all seeking to express our authentic selves, we are attracted to others who are expressing their authentic selves. That's why we love rock stars and movie actors. The more you are able to express your authentic self, the more like a rock star you will become.

Some of us worry that underneath our facade exists the desire for dark, inappropriate behaviors. If you were truly yourself, would that be disruptive? I don't believe so. As you remove layers of inauthenticity you become clearer on what really matters to you. Your intense concentration on what really matters allows you to appreciate social norms and function normally in the world, for the sake of focusing on your purpose. Your authentic self is not going to make a scene everywhere it goes, but it *will* make waves where it matters. Your authentic self is not afraid to speak up for what it believes in.

This is why the world needs your authentic self. This is why we need our leaders in business, public service, education, academia and every other discipline to uncover our layers of reactive programming from wherever we got them, and choose instead to be our authentic selves. Once our ego-habits are not running the show, our authentic style and beauty comes through naturally, and our capacity to create incredible experiences and solve important problems blossoms.

Being authentic doesn't mean becoming a better listener or better at dealing with HR issues. It's not some person you could become if you worked hard enough to perfect yourself. Being authentic is just being *you*, undiluted.

How to access your authentic self

Recognize when you convince yourself that you want something different than you actually do.

When someone asks if you want a donut, maybe it's a good thing to have restraint. But what if somebody says "Do you want to bring your kids to the water slides with us on Saturday?" The response "That sounds nice, but I've scheduled Saturday to organize my files for my tax preparer" may not be what you authentically want.

Our authentic self knows what it wants, yet many of us have been conditioned to be "responsible" and choose the things we don't want instead of those that call deeply to us. It's important to distinguish our cravings from those things that call deeply to us. That's the difference between the donut and the water slides. The day at the water slides with the kids will create an incredible experience; the donut, not so much. Choosing to say "yes!" to our authentic self makes us more powerful and effective in the rest of our lives because it recharges us.

We can practice noticing what is "calling to us." One way to practice distinguishing donuts from water slides is to spend time with distractions turned off. Quiet reflective time allows the pre-programmed reactions to fall away and we can begin to see what it is we truly want. However, this does not need to be on a meditation pillow. You can practice this during your commute or at your kids' soccer practice. Simply turn off the radio or your cell phone, walk a few feet away from other parents, and keep your mind from straying to pointless topics. Allow the bigger

picture of recent experiences to come into focus, and notice any automatic reactions you've had. These can be clues to where your authentic self is being hidden.

Go from seeking "freedom to check-out" to seeking "freedom to create."

The desire to let go and relax arises in contrast to the exhausting world of effort and work we have created. If we remove this polarity by making the work we do in the world align with our authentic self, every day is a steady stream of soul-fulfilling experiences that never ends.

I can ask myself "if I didn't have to go to work today, what would I do?" When I am stuck in the cycle of mundane employment, my answer is likely "I would finally clean up the kitchen," or "I would go on a bike ride," or "I would space out and watch YouTube." These activities are not wrong. However, they are likely a reflex against the repression I feel from my burdened life. They are donuts I crave because I've filled my life with what I "should" do. If we can gradually come to recognize and then un-choose the burden of "should," we might first live out the need for house cleaning, YouTube and donuts, but then we begin to have enough space to uncover an underlying sense of authentic purpose. Creative urges arise that are more meaningful to us than the donut, and we find there are not enough hours in the day to accomplish everything we want to create.

Come from your heart

Your authentic self knows what it *loves*. If you're like me, trying to overcome your ego-habits can be very scary, because you'll have to stand up to intrusive fearful thoughts. Yet you are not without tools in this: this is what your heart is good at. The part of your intelligence that resides in your heart is not scared of anything, whether it's the critical attention of your peers or the threatening crouch of a tiger.

Discovering the courage of my heart has given me a new lens to look through. Looking in this way, I no longer have an ongoing internal dialogue about whether I said or did the right thing. My authentic self shows up in the best way it can, and it sometimes makes mistakes by being overly forward or saying the wrong thing. Yet in the language of the heart these mistakes are not the problem we think they are. The authentic connection created by vulnerable "mistakes" creates the very fertilizer that helps us grow in community.

Recently I performed a couple songs at an event before the keynote speaker. The host had said they would call me up to make an announcement, but I misjudged the timing and stepped onto the stage too early. Oops! I sat back down and noticed my reaction to this very visible mistake. Instead of the embarrassment I would previously feel, I focused on keeping my heart open and not overanalyzing the situation. I had made a mistake in my judgment, but my internal dialogue was quiet. A tremendous amount of psychic energy was freed up by not having that internal struggle, and this available energy actually uplifted my subsequent performance!

Coming from our heart may result in us saying and doing things that feel exposed. Yet this is an important quality to bring into our environments. When each of us comes from our heart, we encourage others to do so as well. This level of authenticity has a greater chance of finding real solutions in the world, since (in the language of Patterson et al, "Crucial Conversations") everyone feels safe to contribute to the "shared pool of meaning." Information is not withheld, and we can make the most informed decisions possible. When we come from our hearts, we forgive our own awkward actions and can appreciate others' actions more readily.

The solutions come from the network

The solutions we seek to global or local problems are no longer the result of single individuals sitting in isolation to come up with new ideas. Solutions that address the needs of our diverse world community will emerge naturally from the network; in other words, the combined ideas of people working in collaboration will create something

that didn't exist before and solves the problem more effectively. The network I am referring to is whatever network of people we are engaging with on any project. Authenticity allows us to engage with our network in a manner which is non-confrontational yet non-acquiescent. We each need to show up fully and pitch our piece of the puzzle. It's Us, undiluted.