

Living Authentically
By Rev. Meghan Cefalu
August 23, 2009 – UUCM

The reading this morning tells the story of a hypothetical African tradition of helping people in the tribe remember the essence of who they are through the singing of a song unique to each individual. The most remarkable part of the story, I think, is that any time a person behaves in a way that is hurtful the community-wide singing of the person's song is deemed an effective means to get them to stop. There is so much power in simply hearing your own song in the voices of your friends and family that you are in essence called back into your true self.

What is also implied is that when a person is living from a place of authenticity and integrity they would never cause harm, and that we are essentially, in the depths of our core, *good*. When a person becomes inclined to commit some evil it is considered out of character and caused by a loss of their integrity, a forgetting of self.

I think this story resonates with us because, although it offers a fairly simplistic solution to one of society's greatest problems, on some intuitive level we sense that it reflects some essential wisdom.

Like a good Unitarian I believe that all of us come into life with perfectly formed souls. You all know that with a baby, what you see is what you get. Babies are incapable of being inauthentic, of hiding their true feelings. If Samuel is unhappy he cries, if he is delighted he squeals and kicks his feet. There is nothing false, no hidden agenda. He is a pure and unencumbered soul.

But as we each grow up there are forces from without and from within that begin to assail our perfect souls, situations and events that threaten to pull us off-center from our authentic selves. As children sooner or later we get our feelings hurt and we learn that we need to wall off the more vulnerable parts of ourselves in order to stay safe. As we mature, social pressures like racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic injustice begin to chisel away at us from the outside; while jealousy, fear, self-doubt and resentment begin to gnaw at us from within.

There are times in some people's lives when they have a sudden realization that they have grown completely out of touch with who they are – they have an "identity crisis". Parker Palmer, the Quaker author, shares his theory about how this happens to us. He says,

"Most of us can make a long list of the external enemies of the soul, but often we conspire in our own deformation. For every external power bent on twisting us out of shape, there is a potential collaborator within us. When our impulse to tell the truth is thwarted by threats of punishment, it is because we value security over being truthful. When our impulse to side with the weak is thwarted by threats of lost social standing, it is because we value popularity over being a pariah.

“The powers and principalities would hold less sway over our lives if we refused to collaborate with them. But refusal is risky, so we deny our own truth, take up lives of "self-impersonation," and betray our identities.”ⁱ

Palmer lists some examples of ways we may be living an inauthentic or divided life: when we remain in relationships that steadily kill off our spirits; or when we hide our true beliefs from those who disagree with us in order to avoid conflict; or when we conceal our true identities for fear of being criticized, shunned or attacked.

I can think of several situations in my life when I denied my own truth because I wanted to avoid an argument or an uncomfortable conversation. I’m pretty sure that is something most of us have done from time to time. But I know, at least for me, that it is not at all comfortable. I’ve discovered that my body knows when my words or actions do not match how I am feeling inside. I get a gnawing sensation in my stomach that serves to warn me that I’m not being authentic; I’m not in my integrity.

I think the danger comes when we lose touch with this discomfort, when we have lived divided so long that we can’t even tell what our truth is anymore.

Perhaps some of you already knew this, but I am just learning that horses are very sensitive to emotional subtleties in humans. They are known to pick up on inauthentic behavior in people. In an essay Jill Neimark talks about her experience getting acquainted with horses at a ranch in Arizona. She discovers that, “Horses are perfectly willing to accept us as we are, as long as we are ... emotionally congruent: honest about our emotions, rather than masking them. Even when we are "incongruent," these animals don't judge so much as retreat.”

Horse trainer Linda Kohanov explains how horses are able to sense this incongruity. "Emotions are the messengers of authenticity," she says. "If you mask your real feelings, or override them with logic, you're conflicted. At that point the horse will usually walk away. That's what I call horse wisdom, the ability to feel incongruence and lack of authenticity, and not to engage with it." She goes on to say that, “People can still fool me and mesmerize me with words and a really fine résumé. Anyone who wants to do a business deal with me has to come meet my horses.”ⁱⁱ

Rachel Naomi Remen is a doctor and a pioneer in the mind/body health movement. She sees the importance of living authentically from a medical standpoint. She says, “Healing may not be so much about getting better, as about letting go of everything that isn't you and becoming who you are.”

I love the phrase ‘becoming who you are’. On one hand it evokes an effortless inevitability. So that if we just stop striving to become some perfect image of who we think we should be, or who our parents wanted us to be, we can relax into who we already are.

But on the other hand, there is a certain level of acceptance that it demands. What if we let go of everything that isn’t ourselves and discover that we don’t really like who we are underneath?

I have a friend who dated my best girlfriend in high school. While he liked her a lot, looking back now I think the real reason he took her out was because it was what was expected of him. When he went away to college he began to slowly come to terms with the fact that he was gay. Becoming his true self was an agonizing process because he had internalized so much homophobia from the environment in which he was raised. We are still friends and now he and his husband have been together ten years. These days he is the happiest I’ve ever seen him.

One of the added benefits of this radical self-acceptance is that as we grow as unique people, we also learn to respect the uniqueness of others. We increase our capacity for compassion.

As I draw to a close I have to confess that I had much less time and energy to put into the writing of this sermon. A great deal of my last week was spent at John’s hospital bedside with Maybelle, in Keith and Alice’s living room, and on Leal and Lloyd Portis’s sofa as well as exchanging email with Sherry Everett. Every conversation was about living and dying. I was witness to unbearable grief and tremendous courage, gratitude, loneliness, fear and overwhelming love.

It was the kind of week that leaves me wrung out emotionally, but also brings me so close to the tender truths of what really matters in life. And I am grateful for that. In these heightened life-and-death circumstances there is an inherent opportunity for authenticity to manifest. There was no pretense, nothing false.

Sometimes people only find themselves, their true selves, at the end of their lives, or with a near death experience or when faced with a terminal diagnosis. They suddenly realize that they had better speak what is in their hearts to those they love before it is too late. I am glad to say that for John this was not the case.

On Thursday afternoon he had asked me to pray with him and afterwards he wrote on his clipboard the words, “I love you.” And then he wrote, “Maybelle, I love you.” As tender as that moment was, the real beauty lies in the fact that these were not new revelations. We know he loved us. Everyone John loved knew that he loved them. His children and grandchildren knew how proud he was of them. John was a man who lived his truth. His last words were the same things he had been saying and living all along.

That is the way we should all leave this world, unencumbered by fear, our love shining through us into all we say and all we do.

But you and I don't have to wait until we get a life-threatening illness or are on our death bed. When we feel disconnected from our true selves let us go to those people who love us, those people who reflect our soul's song back to us. And let us begin to listen very carefully. For in that song unique to each of us is our key to living authentically in joy and in love.

Amen.

ⁱ "Finding Your Soul" by Parker J. Palmer. Spirituality and Health. Issue: 2004 September/October

ⁱⁱ "Tapping into Horse Sense" by Jill Neimark. Spirituality and Health. Issue: 2004 September/October