

'The Authentic Self'

Hucklow Summer School 2014

Monday 18th August 2014 – Jane Blackall

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The Authentic Self: Who Are You?

When someone asks 'who are you?' - What do you say? Where do you start?

I suppose it depends a bit who's asking, and when they ask, and what mood you're in at the time. So let's say I'm asking, right now, this morning (because I just did, & now I'm going to do it again): **who are you?**

There are a number of ways you might approach this question. You might choose to start with your roles in relation to others (mother, daughter, father, son, brother, sister, friend, lover, partner, husband, wife). Maybe your occupation (teacher, minister, carer, gardener, bus driver, lion tamer...) Maybe you would choose to prioritise your nationality, race or ethnicity. Maybe your religion. Or perhaps you would choose to highlight your sexual or gender identity (gay, straight, bisexual, male, female, cis, trans, gender non-conforming). You might name some political aspects of your identity (feminist, socialist, activist – naming causes that are especially close to your heart). You might mention your age, your education, or particular special interests you have.

Your choice of labels and their order of priority says something. Firstly, of course, it says something about who you think you are, and secondly it says something about how you want to be seen by other people.

About a week ago I decided to try a little experiment. I put a message out to my friends, on Facebook and Twitter, asking for their responses to the question 'who are you?' in the context of our theme of 'The Authentic Self'. I gave them the rather cruel constraint that their responses would have to be no more than 160 characters in length – characters, not words, so that's just the length of a tweet or an old-school text message – and most of them managed to meet this requirement. When I made the call for responses I told them that I would read a selection of them out today, unattributed, (though of course it is possible that some of you will recognise some of them from their self-description).

I was totally fascinated by the variety of these responses. With assistance, I'm going to read about a dozen of them out, and then I'll make some observations that lead in to our theme. I should say that this we're only going to read out about half of the replies I received. I've written them all up on coloured stars though and I will put them all up on the wall in the corridor later with yours later on this afternoon. I'll start with me, I think it's only fair that I read my own one out, but the rest can stay anonymous-ish.

- Peace-loving mystical Unitarian; old-fashioned leftie; amateur philosopher; armchair activist; maker; baker; birder; bisexual; romantic; soft; sensitive; slow.

- Male, product of genes, history and environment, with a deep longing for God yet only too aware of my sensual and selfish nature which leads to a lack of integration of who I am.

- *Fortunate soul, eager to give back to the world; enthusiastic about life; aware of pain, my own and others. Asking what life's about - more than we'll ever know.*

- *Poet, pastor, father, brother, northerner, beachcomber, reader, walker, worshipper, big girl's blouse.*

- *I've never been able to describe or even imagine my authentic self, other than in relation to other people. Without them I seem to have no centre and no boundaries.*

- *Shy but people-loving, singer, swimmer, book-lover, geekish, sensitive, bi, poly, genderqueer, Yorkshireperson, Quaker. Attached to ever-increasing family.*

- *I'm female but not feminine. I'm an introvert and I love people. I'm a Trekkie, a seamstress and a lover of cats. I'm married and I'm incubating a little boy.*

- *I am a human being, a child of the universe, finite and eternal. A husband, lover, brother, son and friend. I am a writer, a reader, a thinker and an athlete.*

- *I am a middle-aged woman, doing the best that I can, to live in the world lightly, with compassion, simplicity and integrity as watchwords. Work in progress!*

- *My true self, a black fat woman who's a survivor of abuse & violence. All the other things I am stem from that & what I do to get by.*

- *Father, husband, son, Friend, brother, teacher; Walker, cyclist, music lover, amateur photographer, cook, fettler; Worrier, lefty, liberal, geek, Unitarian.*

- *71, and much the same as in my childhood. Serious minded, happy, lazyish, rarely angry.*

- *[And someone offered a fragment of Rumi:] Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing? I have no idea. My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that, and I intend to end up there...*

I should acknowledge in passing that the responses are undoubtedly skewed by the fact that I just asked my friends who do not represent a perfectly sampled cross-section of humanity. But as I received these varied responses I noticed several different strands. People took the question in different ways, at different levels, and responded accordingly. I should say that a lot of people were keen to point out that their response was provisional and 'of the moment' and could have been quite different if I asked tomorrow.

Some people took the question as primarily being about identity, in the sense of roles they identify with, and quite a few emphasised their relatedness to others as a key part of who they were. Others picked out a selection of labels they would choose to claim for themselves. I want to throw in as an aside here that there's a perhaps a general tendency to be down on labels and labelling, and people can be very resistant to using labels, but from my point of view they can be very useful as long as they are applied accurately and in a non-derogatory way. For example, for certain minority groups, labels can be politically useful (when self-applied), and they can help people to find each other, form communities, and become more visible.

Back to the 'who are you?' responses: Of those who did not identify themselves with roles and labels, many chose to characterise themselves in terms of their way of being in the world, naming key qualities, virtues (and occasionally vices), whether these are qualities they already possess or ones that they value, which are important to them and which they aspire toward. Others chose to mention passions, enthusiasms, and hobbies that mean so much to them that they are tied up with their sense of self.

And a few nodded towards something else entirely – a kind-of cosmic, eternal self, beyond the worldly, everyday sense – perhaps a self that remains when all the roles, labels, and doing are stripped away – a self that is constant through all of the day-to-day changes, and throughout the course of our finite lives.

I was delighted that people had engaged with the question at these different levels:

Firstly: identity, roles, and labels in relation to others (our loved ones and society at large). Maybe this is a political dimension, in the broadest sense, asserting our position in the world we find ourselves in.

Secondly: qualities, virtues, and aspirations (arrived at by self-reflection and the feedback of others). Perhaps this dimension is related to the formation of the self and issues of self-development / authorship.

Thirdly: a more mystical sense of something bigger, deeper, and harder to articulate, that transcends all these worldly aspects of the self. What we might call the spiritual, philosophical, or religious dimension.

When we talk about the authentic self it feels important to me to honour all of these dimensions. I can feel a small tug of temptation to privilege the spiritual version as somehow 'higher' and to gloss over the more mundane details of our day-to-day existence as if they were 'lower' things of lesser importance. Alternatively there can be a temptation to focus on the things that are more solid and certain, the familiar qualities we can put a name to, and avoid looking at the mysterious stuff that's harder to get a grip on.

For me the reality is that we are a mixture of all these things. We are our roles and relationships, our conduct and our aspirations, and a part of something larger contained in a human body with lumps, bumps and wobbly bits. We are formed by a mixture of genetic inheritance, environmental factors, cultural influences, chance encounters and cosmic revelations. We are shaped both positively and negatively through our relationships with others – marked, moulded and carved out – and thus our selves are interconnected.

Closely connected to authenticity, for me, is integrity, in the sense of being whole and undivided. Part of our life's task is perhaps the integration of these different dimensions of the self. We might aspire to live in a way that is as coherent and true an expression of our authentic self – our many selves – as possible.

We are full of contradictions. Personally, I am quite capable of being nice and nasty, clever and stupid, generous and tight (possibly all within the spell of about ten minutes). From time to time we might be painfully aware of the gap between the person we would aspire to be and the person we are right now. Yet, if we remain open, the self will continually evolve and expand as we encounter new experiences and challenges. Walt Whitman's famous words come to mind – and I bet it won't be the only time we hear them this week – 'Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)'

Revealing Our Authentic Self

Being 'my whole self, wherever I am, whoever I am with'.

Authenticity is about being real. About avoiding pretence, going without masks, being sincere. I want to say a bit about revealing our authentic self to others in everyday life. We all make choices, which may be made quite self-consciously or quite unconsciously, about how we present ourselves to others. The way we dress, the way we speak, the places we go, the people we associate with, our possessions (our shoes!), all contribute to the impression we make on others. There are certain situations where we might cultivate our public image more carefully – like writing a personals ad, a profile for a dating agency, or crafting our CV – generally in situations where we are attempting to stand out and seek approval (or at least interest) from others... though on other occasions we might put on a front to fit in, and go unnoticed, for a quiet life.

I imagine most of us can think of occasions when we have buffed up, or toned down, some aspects of ourselves to get along in social situations. And, up to a point, that's just a necessary part of getting by.

Yet I also imagine authenticity, and integrity, is something many of us aspire to. Personally, the ideal I'm aiming for is to be **my whole self, wherever I am, whoever I am with**. Perhaps this aspiration is a bit hardcore! It seems reasonable enough that we

would choose to share different levels and aspects of ourselves with different people in different circumstances as seems appropriate. But I don't want to be a chameleon.

I have a number of different circles of friends. As I am such a devoted Unitarian, many of my closest friends are people I have met through the church, and through past summer schools over the last 15 years. I am still in touch with a few physicists and computer scientists from my previous life as a researcher. Lately I've been back at college, studying philosophy, religion and ethics in a Jesuit institution, which has led me to befriend a few people who are half my age, with very different life experiences, and very different theologies and moral frameworks. These days an increasing share of my friends are people I've met on the internet, some through shared interests such as comedy, cycling & craft, and some fellow activists in the bisexual, feminist and general-purpose leftie communities. So (I'm sure I'm not alone in this) I live at the intersection of quite an interesting Venn diagram. That's before I even consider all the people whose lives bump up against mine by chance rather than choice. And there could be a temptation to present a different version of myself depending on who I've got in front of me.

But like I said, I aspire to be *my whole self, wherever I am, whoever I am with*. This means repeatedly 'outing' myself, one way or another, in communities where some part of who I am goes against the norm. By 'outing' myself I mean 'coming out of the closet', as the saying goes, consciously choosing to reveal an aspect of my identity to the world even though I know I might get grief and aggravation for it. I'll offer an example of this which is one I don't hear mentioned often by others. I wonder how many of us present here at summer school are fully 'out' about being Unitarian, or even being in some sense religious or spiritually-orientated people, with our non-Unitarian friends. When I first started going to church I couldn't bring myself to tell anybody so I would say I was going to meditation classes instead. Many people I encounter outside of our Unitarian bubble are at best uninterested in religious matters. I have often got the impression that us religious types are generally regarded as unsophisticated, gullible, maybe even a bit dim and dull. Quite often a chill will descend on the conversation when it emerges that I work for a church. Conversely when talking to people who *have* got a strong religious faith, it seems that I'm *not religious enough* for them, that I barely count as religious in their eyes! So this is just one example where it can seem like too much trouble to reveal an aspect of my authentic self. In so many situations there is a pressure to go along with the herd, or just keep our head down and our mouths shut rather than speak our truth and end up being judged for who we are.

In my life, being religious, being Unitarian in particular, is quite a visible part of my identity. As soon as anyone asks 'what do you do for a living?' or 'what did you do at the weekend?' my answer is going to give it away. But there are other parts of my identity that are just as important and not, by default, so visible. And I often make a positive choice to bring these invisible aspects of my identity to light. For example, I often 'out' myself as bisexual, and 'out' myself as having somewhat fragile mental health. Sometimes I get the impression – and on a few occasions it's been said to me directly – that people are thinking 'why are you going on about being bisexual AGAIN' (or 'why are you going on about your mental health AGAIN' or whatever it is I happen to be 'going on about' at the time). Well, I'm going on about 'it' (whatever 'it' is) partly because psychological visibility is vital for humans. It is important for us to be seen, acknowledged, and valued for who we are. So partly I'm asserting my own identity for self-centred reasons because I want these aspects of my authentic self to be seen. But I'm also speaking up in the hope of challenging the stereotypes and negative judgements that exist around those less visible identities. Bringing to light the infinite variation of our human experience, making it real for others, giving a face to these hidden sides, can help to give strength to others and contributes to the liberation of all.

The forces of normativity can have quite a stifling impact on human diversity, flourishing, and happiness. The power of convention is so strong that it can limit people's options in life without them even being aware of it. Certain possibilities become unthinkable – not even in the sense of 'taboo' – but literally so far outside the sphere of what people can imagine that they never cross people's minds. On top of this, our society is set up in such a way that the loudest, most privileged and conventional voices dominate. In all spheres of public life – in the media, online, in academia and government – there is a tendency to scorn and mock anyone who exists outside quite tightly constricting norms, and to bully them back into conformity. There is quite an adversarial, antagonistic culture, which excludes all but the toughest souls who are willing and able to engage and endure it. This is cruel and tragic, not just for those who are directly excluded, but for all of us. The wisdom, creativity, and insight of the sensitive and different can end up being crushed altogether and lost to society as a whole. Or at the very least it goes underground. This isn't just a problem for a minority of people on the margins of society. Normativity, convention, and the harshness of the world can combine to constrict our view of what's possible or 'allowed' for *us*, to squash *our* potential, prevent *our* full flourishing, and suppress the expression of our authentic selves.

Another challenge to our authenticity comes from the societal pressure to keep up appearances. Many of us would like to give the impression we're more-or-less in control of our lives, we're on top of things, we've got everything together, everything is cool, we're 'sorted' (whatever the underlying reality). On top of this, we might like to show everybody how full, exciting and purposeful our life is, and perhaps make all this activity look effortless while we're about it. That's a bit of a caricature, I know, but it's the ideal, anyway. When someone asks us how we are, a common response these days might be, 'Oh, I'm fine, just busy'.

This pressure to put on masks and hide the more complex reality of our lives, our selves, is a sad thing. Wearing a mask of 'everything's OK' places a barrier between us. If we are always comparing our secret inner reality, including our imperfections, struggles and pain, with everybody else's perfect, shiny, façade, we are likely to feel increasingly alienated and ashamed. These masks ultimately isolate us from each other. And perversely, sometimes we might feel unable to share our hopes, dreams, and pleasures with others, for fear that these precious aspects of our lives might be mocked, scorned, or just met with indifference.

Many years ago, here at summer school in fact, I learned from a dear friend that the word 'sincere' originated from the Latin words meaning 'without wax'. It referred to the practice of using wax to make marble look flawless, and of a higher quality than it actually was, so that it could be sold for a higher price. Coloured wax would be rubbed in to conceal the flaws and imperfections in the stone... so to be 'sincere' is to be 'without wax', without concealing your flaws. To be 'sincere' is to be vulnerable and real. [I should mention as a footnote that this is now thought to be 'folk etymology' and so not necessarily the true origins of the word but I still reckon the story contains wisdom that is worth sharing].

We can give a great gift to others, by sharing our struggles and brokenness, showing our vulnerability, revealing our particular, unique, authentic self to the world. Often this can open up a point of connection. Authenticity can be contagious. Your openness and sincerity can give others permission to shed their own masks. By unilaterally practising this way of being you can teach it to others (and to the next generation).

I spend a lot of time mucking about on the internet, particularly on social media (twitter and facebook), and over time, as part of my attempts to be '*my whole self, wherever I am, whoever I am with*', I have evolved an online policy of being what I like to call 'militantly boring'. By 'militantly boring', I mean that I have decided that I am going to share the ups and downs and general mundanity of my life, and I refuse to limit myself to sharing just jolly, buoyant, celebratory moments when I am feeling witty and upbeat, and when I want to show off. There is a need to be visible and to have all my different facets affirmed and acknowledged by others.

I've been rattling on for a while now about how marvellous and desirable it is to be *your whole self, wherever you are, whoever you are with*, BUT I've got to acknowledge that it requires great courage or at least a certain amount of self-confidence to be fully authentic in this way. The prospect of revealing your authentic self can be quite terrifying, in some circumstances. Self-revelation makes you vulnerable. As I've said, this can be a good thing, as it opens up the possibility of connection, inviting and enabling other people to be themselves too... but you can also get hurt. What if people see the real you and then reject it? People might betray the trust you have put in them. It's an understandable urge to hunker down and stay safe and unseen. We often – legitimately – put on masks and disguises for self-protection.

In case it isn't clear, I'm not just talking about the possibility that we'll be upset, our feelings will be hurt. The power imbalances that exist in our world mean that it is often not safe to be authentic. Indeed, for most of human history, the pursuit of individual authenticity probably wouldn't have been an issue for most as people had to focus on survival, just getting by, in the tough circumstances of harsher times. Even now, authenticity may seem like a luxury for those people around the world who are stuck in situations where being themselves is likely to put them at risk of physical brutality, economic consequences, emotional abuse and bullying of all forms. A particularly powerful example of a group who are facing exactly this is the group of Ugandans who held their first ever pride march last week in a country where homosexual sex is still illegal (the proposed law, which initially threatened the death penalty for so-called 'aggravated homosexuality', has now been struck down but it seems they are still living in an exceptionally hostile environment). Yet some of you may have seen the beautiful and moving photos of the colourful and defiant Ugandan pride parade. Another relevant case that came to mind, a few years back but

closer to home, is the attack on Sophie Lancaster and Robert Maltby back in 2007, up in Lancashire. A couple of quiet, sensitive, intelligent young people – they would have called themselves goths – were beaten unconscious by a group of teenage boys, while walking home late at night, singled out just because they looked and dressed differently. Sophie never regained consciousness and she died from her injuries.

I offer these two examples – and of course there are so many more we could name – to underline the fact that when I advocate authenticity, I'm not taking it lightly, I know there is a cost. I think it is good to reveal more of our authentic selves, and that this is part of making the world a better place, but just because of the way the world is right now, there's a balance to be struck between self-revelation and self-care.

Making 'safer, softer, kinder' spaces.

I think there's something we can do – as individuals, and collectively in our congregations, as Unitarians – to help support and encourage people in the process of being their authentic selves. **We can create safer spaces – softer spaces – kinder spaces.** We can create communities – or just small moments – of refuge and sanctuary. I'm imagining something almost like a nature reserve for authentic selves: a protected space, a carefully cultivated habitat, set apart from the harshness of the prevailing culture, where people are free to flourish. As Unitarians we sometimes refer to ourselves as non-conformists and dissenters. Although those terms have a particular meaning in relation to our church history, I think a lot of us tend to claim the terms more broadly, and are rather proud to think of ourselves as a little bit different. I'd like to see us harness that tendency and be really intentional about doing something counter-cultural here. Let's strive to make generous spaces, truly welcoming of all, where people are nurtured and encouraged to grow.

In a way this might sound obvious. There's a temptation to say 'well aren't we doing that already?' – isn't that part of the point of church? – indeed at our best I think we are creating something like this. We do it more explicitly here at summer school, and particularly in engagement groups, where we often use a group covenant to help intentionally cultivate a *safer, softer, kinder* space and to support people in being real with each other. But to do it well, day-in-day-out, in a church community, or in our everyday lives is bloody hard work (and it's a process that requires constant review and course correction as there can be a tendency to rest on our laurels).

There's a phrase that Danny Crosby uses at the start of every service: 'All are welcome here; come as you are, exactly as you are, but do not expect to leave in exactly the same condition...' This is a strong statement of intent, and a reminder for everyone, to put upfront in your worship each week. Church is a place where you are received as you are, and supported to grow, in your own way. If this is true, then it's radical.

I want to say in passing that I'm not sure we Unitarians are generally as good at welcoming everybody as we like to think. We make quite a big thing of our commitment to diversity and yet, while we are quite diverse in our opinions – and can tend to be quite vocal and argumentative about them – in many other ways we're really not that diverse at all, and our communities can be quite conventional. We can't sit back and think we've 'done diversity' just because we came down on the right side of the equal marriage issue (laudable though that was). We can end up making casual assumptions, often quite unconsciously, about other people's lives – about their beliefs, their domestic circumstances, their level of education or income, their health issues (especially things like mental health, chronic illnesses, invisible disabilities, and addiction issues) and all manner of other things you can't tell by looking at someone – and these sort of assumptions may lead us to make unintentional slights or behave in ways which inadvertently exclude others. Continuously examining our assumptions and consciously working on greater inclusion is a necessary part of making our communities *safer, softer, kinder* spaces which are truly welcoming to all. Challenge and questioning of ourselves and others is part of the deal in a community of growth.

What I'm advocating, I suppose, is a conscious and sustained attitude of openness, curiosity, and respect. If someone courageously opens up to you then be ready to receive the gift of them, of their self-revelation. I'm not even primarily talking about the sort of massive personal bombshell that you might get just before the credits roll in an episode of *EastEnders*. I'm talking about people sharing their everyday struggles and uncertainties, their dreams and passions, as well as the relatively mundane ups and downs of their lives. Opening up about this stuff, being real, might be a big deal for any one of us. Do your best to hold a *safer, softer, kinder*

space. Taking these tentative steps, even taking them unilaterally, as an individual in conversation, can be the starting point of a virtuous circle where we build trust and confidence to be real with each other.

I spotted these words, by Roselle Kovitz, posted on the website of the Fetzer Institute, following the death of Robin Williams last week. I found them quite moving, and thought they resonated with what I'm trying to say here, so I thought I'd share them with you before we move on:

*'Like all of us, were we to pull back the curtain on his life, there are spaces and places that were tender, ill, broken, imperfect. Yet, it's easy to see each other as what's most visible, most talked about—our "daily performances" in life. Sometimes we miss those tender places in each other. They may go unspoken. They are the places that need a moment to surface, do best in soft light, don't want to take centre stage, but appreciate a compassionate presence, one that will allow silence to fall like a gentle rain... We need those spaces to allow each other to fully inhabit, experience, and be who we are—and to heal. Behind our cursory greetings or newsy conversations are the spaces where we live, where we try to integrate all the pieces of ourselves, our joy with our pain, and our achievements with our brokenness.'*¹

The Unfolding of God / the Cosmic Self

Just a few closing thoughts left now before we finish at about ten past ten. To recap: So far, I've invited you to reflect on your authentic self, and to reveal more of this whole, real, self to others. And I've suggested that we ought to make a conscious effort to make our congregations – and in our conversations, as individuals – *safer, softer, kinder* spaces, refuges from the world's harshness, where people feel able to engage in this sort of exploration. And now I'm going to get a little bit theological with you... (just a little - I'll be gentle).

For me, nurturing, cultivating and sharing the authentic self – our own, and others' – is a central spiritual task, something each and every one of us is called to engage in. Here's how I'd choose to put it, theologically: **our lives – my life, your life, everybody's life – our lives are part of the unfolding of God.** We are each a fragment of the divine and God is revealed in everything that lives. We are part of a larger self – a cosmic consciousness with many centres participating in the divine life – each of us lending our unique perspective. That's how I see it, that's my theology (for the time being anyway). Another way of putting it, if God-language doesn't work for you, might be to say that each life is a unique expression of the potential of the universe. The philosopher Wittgenstein wrote that 'there is really only one world soul, which I for preference call *my* soul.'² There is only one cosmic soul. We are one.

There's one strand of religious thought (associated with the early Church Fathers, particularly Irenaeus, and developed in recent years by the philosopher John Hick) which proposes that we humans are part of an unfinished process of creation. Our life's task is to gradually develop in virtue as we respond to the struggles and challenges that we encounter along the way. In this manner we come closer to fulfilment and to the 'likeness of God'.³

There's a challenge in this to each of us to pay attention to our own flourishing and support the flourishing of others.

Each person has an unrepeatable opportunity to contribute to the unfolding of divinity. Each person has a unique perspective and valuable insights to share. Each person has gifts to use in the ongoing process of creation. When society suppresses or distorts the expression of a person's authentic self this is, for me, a kind of sacrilege. Their potential is squashed and their contribution is lost or lessened when it should be celebrated and cherished.

¹ Roselle Kovitz, 'The Spaces Between: A Reflection on Robin Williams' in the Fetzer Institute Blog <<http://www.fetzer.org/blog/spaces-between-reflection-robin-williams>> [accessed 12th August 2014]

² Ludwig Wittgenstein quoted in "Whose House is That?" Wittgenstein on the Self' in *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein* ed. by Hans Sluga and David G. Stern (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1996), p. 330

³ John Hick, 'An Irenaean Theodicy' in *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions* ed. by Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 222-227

Our authentic self is both the person that we are in the here and now, and the larger, more fulfilled, and flourishing person that we have it in us to be. I'm going to suggest a little reflective exercise you might try later. Reflect on the qualities that you – you as you are, here, right this minute – bring to the unfolding of the world. I've put a list of one hundred virtues the back of your hymn booklet in case you need help getting started! Try to get a sense of the gift you already are. If you find it tricky to big yourself up in this way then I suggest you as a trusted friend to help you write a list of, say, seven virtues that are particularly characteristic of you. I think a lot of people find it quite hard to see their own good qualities and it can be quite heartening to have them affirmed by someone you trust. Once you've done that, then try to identify a few more virtues that you admire and aspire to, but which perhaps you don't embody just yet. You might want to meditate further on these qualities and try to consciously cultivate them in your life as part of your ongoing self-reflection and spiritual practice.

I chanced across these words, by the contemporary Zen teacher Ezra Bayda, which seem especially pertinent:

*'We identify with such a narrow part of who we are, our small self, when we identify with our thoughts, stories, drama, bodies. We miss out on the freedom of connecting with a bigger sense of Self. Finding our authentic way doesn't mean we have to have a [sudden] deep realisation of the connectedness of all and everything. We can find it in increments... Just as our difficulties can push us in our spiritual quest, our aspiration can elevate and pull us. This dual motivation is required to help us find our authentic way... Develop a sense of purpose, a bigger view of what life is about. Without this it is difficult to commit to living genuinely. Reflect on who you most admire and ask yourself what qualities in them you find most inspiring. These are the very qualities in you that are calling out to reach fruition. These are the qualities that will inspire you to become who you most truly are.'*⁴

Here's what I want to say. You are part of something bigger. Your life is wrapped up in the unfathomable process of the unfolding cosmos. The flourishing of your unique, beautiful, authentic self is an expression of divine potential. So let us celebrate who we are now, right this minute, and keep looking towards the horizon, and the greater selves we could yet be.

Jane Blackall, 18th August 2014

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⁴ Ezra Bayda, *The Authentic Life: Zen Wisdom for Living Free from Complacency and Fear* (Boston: Shambhala, 2014), pp. 7-8