

## THE AUTHENTIC SELF

Simon John Barlow, friend and colleague, and now, sadly for those who knew him and enjoyed his company, reunited with the great Universe, once asked me on a beautiful summers afternoon, if I had noticed how often little children lift up their clothes to show us their tummy buttons, their umbilical knot; and if so did I realise why they did it. I said, yes, I had noticed, but no I didn't know why. So he told me, and I shall tell you. It is because they still remember that they are connected by their umbilicus not only to their mother but through that link connected to the Universe, to the source, the beginning of all things, the great and numinous spirit. And while they still remember, they try to tell us while they are still sure who they really are.

As a counselor who follows, in the main, the teachings of Carl Rogers, I believe that when we are born we do have an instinctive sense of self, and how to maintain that self; our needs at that point are basic, food, shelter, warmth, love – but we seek them, for they are essential, to our very being. If there is authenticity in our 'self' it begins here. As we grow up those who nurture and teach us place conditions upon us, our needs grow more complex and varied, and so we bend to change our 'self' to suit others – big boys don't cry, little girls don't shout, etc.. During my life-time there have been some seismic shifts in the understanding of the authenticity of what the 'self' is. When I was young, the majority of women stayed at home, their role was to keep house, to maintain the wellbeing of their husband and children – their authenticity was founded on their ability to fulfill this role, and men were expected to be strong, brave, unemotional, they were brought up to be the bread-winners; perhaps these conditions were the most widely placed upon the worth of any person.

Now our expectations of 'self' are so much less limited, girls and boys are not quite so conditioned, men and women are beginning to find the boundaries of expectation less solid. So what is the Authentic Self' if it is not our gender, role, or our 'station in life'? Maybe if we knew what or who our 'self' was we could tell if it were authentic or not. Knowing what our 'self' is, gets tricky when we leave the stage of knowing we are part of the great universal whole, joined by our umbilicus to all that is. And though we may

retain some vestige of that understanding it gets vague as we get older and find we need to conform to the needs of others, to the laws of the land, to the needs of those with whom we live and work. Adults have great difficulty in really knowing what their 'authentic self' is – they have trouble knowing who they truly are. If you are asked the question, 'who are you' what do you offer as an answer. Let me ask me.

I am 'Celia' – that's my name. I have a second name and a surname but 'Celia' is how I am best known.

'I am a mother', a 'daughter', a 'sister', a 'cousin', a 'friend'. That covers a lot, but its not all.

I'm a 'minister'. I'm a 'counsellor'. I have certificates on the wall of my office that testify to these.

But is this who I am, is this my real, authentic, 'self'?

My character and personality are surely a large part of who I am, my 'self'. I am, for instance, a talker, a teller of stories, I am a lover of words, I frequently use far too many, I can be boring when I get on a private roll (my apologies)!

I like music and laughter, knitting and sewing, and eating and, well I was going to say occasional, but honestly I like frequent tipples!

I am also a lover of sweet things and soft fruits and crunchy apples and sunshine and summer rain and thunder and lightning, to tell you just a few.

I like walking and climbing but my older self is hampered by various aches and pains which is making my 'self' rather more reflective than I remember in the past and my self is now while not quite reclusive, quite happy to shut my front door and be by my 'self'. I like to go to quiet places and just simply let the quietness deafen me to all else. I like to be by my self...

Sorry, what did I just say? I like to be by my 'self'. Just me and my 'self' on our own.....Wait, hang on, if I am by my 'self', who is the I and who is my 'self'? Goodness, then there are two of us – well, who knew! Is my real, authentic 'self' the one I sit with in the quiet? 'Now', as Shakespeare said, 'there's the rub!' When I am not being chatty

and charming and entertaining, who am I. What lies beneath my roles, my likes and dislikes, who am I when I am **alone**?

I invite you to think about this question. Either sit with a friend and have them ask you, over and over for about five or ten minutes, that one question 'who are you', or sit with a piece of paper and on it write 'who are you', and note down the answers which pop into your mind. Remember the answers begin with 'I am....' (not I am 'a' ...). Answer with a word or a phrase not a sentence or paragraph.

So you've sat and let the answers to the question come up and be recorded. You don't have to share these with anyone or you can discuss them at length. You may question some of the answers you recorded, and I suggest you spend time in contemplation doing just that, you may find it illuminating. You may ask if the 'you' you have been recording is the same you as you were last year, when you were young, or if that you will be the same you in ten or twenty years. These are good questions – but I wouldn't advise you lose yourself in them, stick to the question until you discover more than your role, your pastimes, your place in society, but come at last to the deep answers. Some years ago I did this, and after about 10 minutes with the question, the thought popped into my mind 'I am laughter'. It sounded odd to me, but on reflection, I do laugh a lot, and it is certainly an essential part of my being, being light hearted.

I was talking to a colleague a few months ago at the GA and she commented that in the last 20 years I have changed a lot! Have I? I have all the same component parts; creaking a bit but still in basically the same place, gravity notwithstanding! So what are these changes that other see? I know I have gained experience, and a modicum of acceptance that no one is going to turn up on day and say 'Ha Ha, its all a joke, and take away my sense of place and position in the world, strip away much of that which I consider my 'self'. The change is I suspect that I have gained a confidence in whatever my 'self' is, I have grown more comfortable, less nervous, in the offering of my 'self' to the world, I have learned, at least in part, to separate the grain of real self from the chaff of conditional self. What I am certain of is that over the last twenty-five years I have

deliberately searched for clues to who I am, why I am, where my purpose, if there is a purpose to my life, lies. But has my 'self' changed. Or is it that my 'self' awareness changed?

I don't believe our 'authentic, real, original self' changes, for we are surely that self we were born with? And if I was born with this 'self' how can it change? Certainly we do take on, or remove all kinds of habits, mannerisms and defense strategies throughout our lives. For myself I can see that I have the scratches and dents from 63 years of living, and that like an old car, (vintage if you will) I bear the marks of time, some of them honourably, some of them from things I wouldn't try again, some that are surrounded in gladness and others in sadness. I am no longer the eager child who ran excitedly through the woods and paddled in the sea, who leaped like a mountain goat across rocky terrain and loved to abseil forwards down high cliffs. (.....well, maybe I could still abseil.....) Gone too is the gaucheness of adolescence. I think I've given up flirting, well, almost. I still nest every once in a while, but I don't brood any more. I got educated, I have bits of paper with fancy signatures and seals on that I have hung on the wall in my office, in a corner behind a standard lamp, because I keep them there for me not others – and sometimes I am almost sure that I believe they are actually mine. But has any of this truly changed the authentic 'self' I was born with? I don't think so. I feel the same, and have grown to acknowledge that feeling, rather than hide it because it didn't fit – but it's the same feeling. We are conditioned to believe that looks, behavior, academia, status, income are what make us who we are, but aren't these are just the trappings of our kind of society? I read a quote recently, which may sound cynical but still, in my experience, appears to have more than a grain of truth; John K Galbraith, an American economist, just a year younger than I am, is quoted as saying, 'The modern conservative is engaged in one of man's oldest exercises in moral philosophy; that is, the search for a superior moral justification for selfishness.' It makes it very hard on anyone's authentic 'self' to blossom in an atmosphere of judgment, greed and self-aggrandizement, which may feel like the prevailing trend.

Jesus is recorded as saying 'love your neighbour as your self'. Perhaps that's why we fight so much, we are treating our neighbours just as we treat our selves – with random abuse! I wonder why? What happened to that absolute security of our baby self that had an instinctive knowledge of what we needed as we were becoming a part of the universe. Our self is a part of the whole, the wonder and the mystery of life.

As adults we have lost this absolute certainty. We have learned that trust is not honoured so we are cautious, we have learned that kindness is not a given and we are put off balance, we have learned that some love is like a will 'o' the wisp and often vanishes in the sunlight. Then when we talk about our 'self' we talk about who we have learned to be, who we appear to be on the outside, 'I am this body, and all that this body, with its mind in tow, does. I am tied or not to family of some kind. I am tied, or not to a job or vocation of some kind. I have aspirations and despirations of some kind. I may be energetic, or lethargic, crippled or fit. I may be an academic, or an artisan or a bum. I may be happy or depressed, or confused, or angry. I may be a leader or a follower, a wallflower or a dancer.' But I recognise my 'self' in these things I am and even if I don't like bits of my 'self' and get angry with bits of my 'self', or try to change with concentrated effort, bits of my 'self' I might think I have a pretty good idea what my 'self' is. I am all the roles I play; I am my physical make-up, I am my age, my station in life, my position in the pecking order.

But then sometimes my self finds the key to unlock the closet door that lets me enter that place in me that knows it is at the core a religious, spiritual, being; that sees the wonder and beauty of the heart of my self, the part I call my 'soul'.

I wonder if this is the self I am 'by' when I am alone but also 'by my self'.

I took my religion very seriously as a child, though I don't think I every considered my soul. I loved RE lessons where I was wont to ask questions and then often have to find the answer too! (I generally came top in RE). I don't think my teachers quite knew what to do with a Unitarian, especially the nuns at the convent school I went to for a

while, I bet they were glad to see the back of me and all my questions and my determination not to say the creed out loud, because frankly I didn't believe..... I was giddy with the delight in creating religious waves though! In retrospect, I'm not sure I'm proud of that, but I cannot deny it was fun. A friend recently called me wayward, like one of my favourite flowers the tulip which, when dealing with as a bunch to be put in a vase, I refuse to stab, wire or otherwise force to go the way I want them to but rather delight in watching them stretch and straggle and stray where they want to. I think I will add 'wayward' to my list of 'self' attributes.

But I digress, I was talking about spiritual stuff. As a child, and well into adulthood, I had a nice comfortable God, kind, compassionate and loving; I had Jesus, a great man, a prophet, life coach and teacher,(and a terrific talking point in RE). And the Holy Spirit, which was something I considered rather nebulous and I hadn't really worked out a purpose for it yet. Still, I was comfortable in my faith. I went to church and Sunday School, and even to Great Hucklow, and had a great time.

Church meant family and fun, and I loved the Sales of Work and Jumble Sales we ran and felt part of a great community. But looking back, I don't think I was conscious of being spiritual and I'm not really sure which bit of my authentic self was sitting on the pew, and which making tea or selling tat, sorry recycled garments and bric-a-brack?

One part of my 'self' was certainly the one who grounded my 'self' in prayer each Sunday with the first verse of Dear Lord and Father – after I realised that if God didn't know about the starving children in Biafra, then he wasn't much cop as an Almighty and as I still considered 'him' to be the Almighty in those days, I reasoned that he didn't need me sitting on a pew telling him his job. Looking back, I wonder if that's where the first glimmers of recognition that I had an essential spiritual self began – with Biafran children and asking the dear lord and father to forgive my foolish ways, reclothe me in my rightful mind and let my purer life give service and deeper reverence. Looking back it was quite inwardly challenging for a 12 year old all of that! But it brought me comfort for many years, actually it still does. And perhaps that prayer was answered, in

full, for my life has a far greater purity now than during the first four or five decades, and it has brought me a great deal of peace.

However, the getting to this place was not easy, there was a huge But in it. Life often has a huge 'but' in it somewhere, some cataclysmic event, some great shifting of the tectonic plates of our 'self' that, if we have failed hitherto to do, makes us look up and take stock of our lives, and shatters our complaisant sense of 'self'.

It was twenty eight years ago that a personal catastrophe shook my life, my knowledge of self, my very soul, to the core. My twenty seven year old brother died in a car accident and I lost not just him but my understanding of 'God', the 'Almighty', the other, the greater, the beyond, the ineffable, the all that is, and much of my 'self'. In the wake of the tragedy I lost so much of that which prior to his accident I would have known as my 'self' I lost my 'self' for a long time. The journey from that point, was up, down and way, way out. Now, after nearly thirty years, I am just beginning to get a handle on what my 'self' might actually be. Well, when I say I'm *getting* a handle, what I mean is that I can see, if somewhat dimly, that there is a handle and I have been, like an enthusiastic, but old, blind dog, rushing about to find it. Quite recently I discovered that if I actually sit still, let go, and wait, 'it' is gently coming to me. I am beginning to get the first faint glimmer of what my authentic 'self' is, that is to say my 'self' without ego, without barriers, without the walls, without the falseness. I am beginning to believe that I am in the process of discovering the fold in the fabric of my 'self' through which I am beginning to engage with my 'self' as part of the universe, part of the divine, not a doer not a bundle of roles and feelings, not a job or a status, but what's still there when all that is put to one side.

As part of the creation of this morning's talk I took time for meditation and contemplation. Part of that was to attempt to just let go of everything but the moment and simply 'be'; and I realised that what I had to do was not to abandon that which is my ego, the stuff that lets me live in this world in relative ease and comfort, but rather to acknowledge it's worth, give it a comforting cuddle and send it off to play quietly,

while what I am about to call, tentatively, my 'authentic self' could stretch out a bit from its usual confines, stuffed behind my generally necessary ego. My contemplation continued to watch and learn. I want to share that meditation with you now.

MEDITATION: I received this from the teachings of Ram Dass. I've been giving it some practice so it's getting easier, it is easy enough to carry in your memory and I hope you too will find it useful in your future.

For this moment, I want you all now to relax, and for the next five or six minutes we will meditate together. Sit comfortably, on the floor, or on a chair, lie down if you like and can find a space, so long as you stay awake! Let your legs relax. Let your arms and hands relax.

Take three deep breaths and focus on the air as it enters and leaves your body. Now breathe naturally, but focus on your breathing. Now I want you to bring your focus to the place on your chest that lies above your heart, and I want you to breathe into and out of your heart.

Focus on breathing into and out of your heart.

In your next breath I want you to breathe in love, the universal love that is everywhere in the universe, and exhale the negative things you have in you at the moment, the negative things you have brought with you, the negative things you have left behind to come here. And again breathe in love and breathe out your negatives. And again breathe in love and breathe out all that is not the breath of love. Breathe in and breathe out all that is not the breath of love. Breathe in and breathe out all that is not love, empty yourself of all that is not love.

Now breathe in love and breathe out love. Breathe in love and breathe out love. Feel the unconditional love that is of God, The Universe, Great Spirit, Great Mystery, enter into your body - and send your unconditional love back out into the universe. Continue breathing in love, breathing out love. Breathing in love, breathing out love. 5 mins. Breathing in love, breathing out love, let this be the way as you refocus on being present in this room, being part of this group, this blessed community, and your own blessed 'self'.

I have been practicing this meditation for a while now and when I start to get anxious or distressed about just about anything, I find if I close my eyes and even for just a couple of breaths remind myself that I am breathing in love and breathing out love – my stress levels come down and I can take a clearer look at what is going on in my life. I cannot swear to it but I think that this vessel of love, unconditional and connected is my ‘authentic self’. For when I am in the place where love is, unconditional and connected, I feel whole. I need my ego, I am human, but I am also the spirit of love, I was born as love and I will die as love. It was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who reminded us that ‘We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.’ It is often something we are unaware of or forget.

It’s a hard truth to acknowledge, our ego’s are dead set against the idea, but actually, most of the stuff we think about as our ‘self’, we can lose, and still retain our ‘self’ intact, because those are the things which come out of our ego, our drive to define our ‘self’ in a society that needs to know where we went to school and or university, and what job we do, and how substantial our bank balance is, and where we holiday and how many times we holiday each year, and what music we like and what books we read and have read, and what newspapers we take and whether we are IT savvy or not. These are not our ‘authentic self’, they are the layers of armour we have put upon our original and authentic ‘spiritual self’ in order to play our human part.

We can lose our health, our job, our family, our fitness, our abilities and even our friends; we can get dementia, we can have serious accidents, we can get clinical depression or get cancer and still have, be, our ‘self’. We can be denuded of just about everything we might think of as our ‘self’ and still retain our ‘self’. For we are connected to, are part of, inside and embracing the Universe, God, Great Spirit, Great Mystery, World Soul, that which is Love, pure, unconditional love. We were born with nothing yet we were in that moment of birth, our ‘self’, our truly authentic and incredible ‘self’, joined to the very fabric of the universe and solidly and needfully to the world. Some of us get to realise that we **need** not just to feed our bodies but our souls, that we need to rediscover that precious fragile seeming yet indestructable ‘self’ and seek to reconnect our ‘selves’ to the universe that is

so much love, unconditional, life affirming, and upliftingly enlightening. So much of our life we spend hanging on to the merry-go-round of the life we know and think is essential, so much is about achievement, getting a better job, building bigger muscles, changing our body shape, using the right make-up, wearing the right clothes, choosing the right car, house, furniture; conforming to a world that we are out of step with. We can get off the merry-go-round, open the door to our soul and let go, bathe in the flow of love and light that fills our authentic self. If we choose to. If we have the courage to start. We don't have to stop being human, that's what we are here for, but we do not have to stop being spiritual either, remember, 'We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience.' Let us not be afraid to connect with the spark of divine within us, that spark that is love, and let that love flow through us; for by self exploration we may discover that fold in the fabric of our being where our authentic self has been waiting all along to be welcomed into the light of our understanding; and we shall know our self as the part of the Divine.

So let's not be afraid to show our belly buttons, metaphorically or physically, to the world. Let's wake everyone up and smile and intriguing smile that says 'I know who I am – I am an enigma wrapped in I am love just waiting to be explored. – and so are you, so show me your belly button and let's get exploring.

Celia Cartwright

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