

Let the Real You Shine Through  
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Around April each year, I start asking the graduating teens in our community - "what's your plan for next year?" The answers vary, but many wish to go to college, and likely made the choice to do so many years before.

Even in communities as privileged as ours, rich with resources and opportunities, the process of applying to college is often a stressful and difficult time for everyone involved because there is so much that is unknown, and because it feels like there is so much on the line - so much at stake. Many teenagers feel like they are saddled with the seemingly impossible task of proving themselves worthy of acceptance to a college or university based on little more than a portfolio with essays, grades, test-scores, and recommendations, which are meant to distill their merit into a coherent resume that will stand out to admissions offices.

The parents of these teens will often share with me the struggle they face in helping to support their child on this journey, and most specifically in helping their child to stand out from the crowd. After all, many of the most selective schools accept less than 10% of their applicants.

So what does it take?

The Public Radio program *This American Life* explored this question at Columbia University, where out of 33,000 applicants only 2,000 are accepted. Reporter Phia Bennin asked students, "Why did you get accepted here? What was it that worked?"

One student ventured a guess, saying "I think it's because my application was very focused on physics, and especially females in physics, because obviously that's a problem."

Another said, "I was a rhythmic gymnast, and I competed for the US national team."

Yet another was unsure, saying, "I don't know. I'm pretty diverse, I guess-- Hispanic, disabled, good grades."

These were all good guesses, but it quickly became clear that the honest answer for each of them was "I still actually have no clue whatsoever."

With so much effort over years and years focused on simply getting to that acceptance letter, I sometimes wonder if those teens ever get the chance to figure out who they are inside. Many resume-building activities can be enriching and life altering, but if we're honest, some are undertaken with surgical-like precision with the express goal of padding an application, rather than for self-growth or enjoyment alone. It reminds me of the conversation I often have with couples in premarital counseling, when I tell them that all the planning they have done up until now has been focused on the single day of their wedding, but I want to help ensure that they think about the day after the wedding, and who they want to be as individuals and as a couple in the days and years to come.

There is one simple thing that underlies all of the tools and qualities that not only make a relationship strong but can also stand out on an application, and remain relevant as the story of our life unfolds. And that is authenticity.

As we gather here on this Day of Judgement, we commit ourselves to a time of reflection and introspection. We often spend so much time thinking about ourselves in relation to others around us and in relation to God, that we sometimes lose sight of who it is we are meant to be on the inside. This is the time to recommit to the values that shape who we are and ensure that our actions reflect those values; not because anybody expects it of us, but because the honest path of our life depends on it.

Few life-stories typify that more than that of Senator John McCain. McCain's story is one for the history books, a story that will be told for generations to come for his service to our country and his passion for the United States of America and all that she stands for. As the news reports unfolded after his death and moving eulogies were shared, I was struck that the accounts of his life focused more on who he was as a husband, a father, and a man of our country, and less on the politics and policies that shaped his later career.

At one of the many memorials held in Senator McCain's honor, Arizona Cardinals wide receiver Larry Fitzgerald took the podium. About a minute and a half into his eulogy, Fitzgerald explained the following:

"Many people might wonder what a young African-American kid from Minnesota and a highly decorated Vietnam War hero-turned-United States senator might have in common," Fitzgerald said. "Well, I thought of a few. I'm black. He was white. I'm young. He wasn't so young. He lived with physical limitations brought on by war. I'm a professional athlete. He ran for president. I run out of bounds. He was the epitome of toughness, and I do everything I can to avoid contact. I have flowing locks, and, well, he

didn't. How does this unlikely pair become friends? I've asked myself the same question. But you know what the answer is. That's just who he is."<sup>1</sup>

McCain was lauded for his bravery and service, and for his character more than all. Many could relate to him because of his openness and willingness to engage, even with those who were different than him. Yet, the eulogies were not uniformly filled with platitudes alone. So many of the speakers were quick to highlight McCain's many flaws and imperfections alongside his accomplishments, because that was the honest reflection of who he really was.

Ever the maverick, he was not afraid to admit his mistakes and stand up as a sole dissenter when he believed he was ultimately in the right. And while I don't necessarily agree with some of his policies, I deeply respect this example he set, and it was this quality of his life that moved me to speak about this topic today. It is so deceptively simple to live our lives with true authenticity, yet McCain's example shows that it actually takes great tenacity to act this way in a world that seems to conspire against us achieving this goal or passing this life lesson on to our children.

Take for example a moment out of my life a few weeks ago. Getting ready to take our son Noah to his first day of preschool this year, we attempted to do what so many parents do - we printed a cute little sign for him to hold, and asked him (nicely) to stand still and smile. After 20 failed attempts for the perfect first-day-of-school shot, our photos had captured tantrums, mischiefs, arguments, and tears instead. We chose to share online the one where he sort of, kind of played along, with his goofy little smile that nonetheless melts my heart.

I wanted to share the perfect photo that really captured this milestone in his life. But looking back on it, I realized that had that sentiment actually been true, I should have shared a slideshow of all those other terrible moments we captured; because that is what living with a 2-year-old is really like. And while I may be generous in saying that I did not want to bore anyone with this kind of display, the truth is that I don't particularly care to share the less-than-glamorous reality as it truly is.

In a world that encourages us to selectively curate our lives and only highlight our best moments, how do we maintain an authentic and balanced view of ourselves and our surroundings?

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<sup>1</sup> Cancian, Dan. "Cardinals WR Larry Fitzgerald Delivered a Moving Tribute to John McCain." *Newsweek*, 3 Sept. 2018, [www.newsweek.com/larry-fitzgerald-john-mccain-funeral-i-was-black-and-he-was-white-cardinals-1098645](http://www.newsweek.com/larry-fitzgerald-john-mccain-funeral-i-was-black-and-he-was-white-cardinals-1098645).

The old saying goes, “the grass is always greener on the other side.” But in the age of social media, the photos and moments in our news-feed seem to prove that our friends’ grass *is* greener, the pool is bluer, the kids are happier, the face has fewer wrinkles, the house is cleaner, the vacations are calmer or more adventurous or more relaxing or more effortless than ours ever seem to be. We are not only chasing our own tails with an endless effort to “keep up with the steins,” but we are all perpetuating a cultural bubble that undermines our ability to experience our lives unselfconsciously or unencumbered by the perceived judgement of others. That is the struggle of maintaining our intrinsic “realness” in this moment in time.

This is not a metaphysical or philosophical dilemma - you are you, and you know who you are. But are you always the realist you? As author Brené Brown explains, “Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen.”<sup>2</sup>

It sounds so simple - just be yourself everyday - but clearly that is easier said than done. We are not only beset by outside forces that try to shape us into something or someone else; many of us find ourselves in a constant and evolving journey of self discovery at any age. How are we ever supposed to find the time to stop and really ask - who am I inside? What makes me *me*?

As we discover year after year at this time of introspection and self-reflection, that answer isn’t necessarily so simple. In fact, researchers have yet to come to one single answer about what defines authenticity in its most basic sense. But a recent meta-study in the field highlighted three prevailing approaches:

- (1) “the positive feeling associated with fulfilling one’s personal expectations or commitments”
- (2) “the unobstructed operation of one’s core or true self in one’s daily life,” and
- (3) “expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings.”<sup>3</sup>

While each of these definitions highlights a different aspect of our own authenticity, the consistent thread running through each is the recognition that within each of us there is a true inner core that only we can define and follow. We may be tempted to associate the focus on authenticity as a by-product of our modern sensibilities, but in fact, it seems that moments of true authenticity shine through our ancient heritage as well.

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<sup>2</sup> Brown Brené. *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Stets, Jan E., and Peter J. Burke. "Self-esteem and identities." *Sociological Perspectives*, 2014.

The TaNaKh, the Hebrew Bible, is famously lacking in female representation among its key characters. So it is remarkable that on these High Holy Days in one of the traditional Haftarah readings for Rosh HaShanah we read the story of Hannah. Sure, it is also a story about her famous son the prophet Samuel, but the drama and urgency of Hannah's story is painfully compelling; especially when we consider how rare it is in our canon. Hannah is introduced as a barren woman who pours her soul out before God as she prays for a child. Her action is so deeply moving that it startles the priest who watches and judges her emotional outburst to be drunken behavior instead. Yet the profound honesty of her words remain indelible in our heritage as one of the only recorded instances of true prayer from the heart. Hannah was not cowed by the imposing judgement of the High Priest, and she was not afraid to express what was truly in her heart.

Her example may seem extreme, or perhaps difficult to relate to our lives, but I suspect we have all experienced a moment where we decided to hide our true selves in order not to be judged or rejected. That is inherently the struggle we face each day when we try to be something that we are not, perhaps because of our fear of judgement, or perhaps because we don't know who we are in the first place.

So how do we figure out who truly are - as individuals living in this complex world? Social psychologist Rebecca Erikson suggests that we must also keep in mind "the importance of relationships," because "the postmodern challenge to authenticity becomes one of context. It is no longer a question of being "true to self" for all time, but rather of being true to self-in-context, or true to self in relationships. In other words," she continues, "the importance of the particular self-values that are implicated in any two situational contexts or relationships may differ. Yet this diversity is nonetheless structured and influenced by one's biographic self and one's more transsituational system of self-values."<sup>4</sup>

Our individual system of values, which are informed by our tradition, our upbringing and our life experiences, must be defined and clear in our own minds and in our hearts before we can hope to act with authenticity in this world. If we stand on these values, we will be grounded in our truest selves, and have something to measure our actions and our decisions against. That is true at any point in our life's journey - whether seeking our path to higher learning, making our way through career and family decisions, or finding ways to give back and make meaning later in our lives.

Being your authentic self doesn't mean always being the same person. Rather, it means being open to reevaluating and reexamining yourself in relation to the world. Isn't that the essence

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<sup>4</sup> Erickson, Rebecca J. "The importance of authenticity for self and society." *Symbolic interaction*, 1995.

of Yom Kippur? The process of soul-searching culminates with these words: *"Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha v'nashuvah, chadeish yameinu kekedem,"* "Return us, Adonai, that we may return. Renew us as we were meant to be." Return us to You. Return us to our true selves. Give us the strength to stand up to the judgement of others, and the courage to embrace who we are inside and let it shine through.

*Ken y'hi ratzon.*