

Authenticity and the Gospel

Authenticity is less a goal to achieve and more a way of being one's best.

Yet our authenticity is insecure. We are prone to wishful thinking, avoiding questions, embracing myths about life, preferring what is less than our best, and fearing to lead our lives by love.

In the Gospel message about Jesus and the Spirit, God promises to heal our unauthenticity and open our lives far beyond we imagine as our best.

I. Authenticity

About authenticity, Canadian philosopher-theologian Bernard Lonergan does not give a definition. He presents an exercise to recognize our desire for it in ourselves. He points to how persistently we seek to transcend ourselves: "Man achieves authenticity in self-transcendence." ¹

WHAT OCCURS IN US WHEN WE'RE BEING AUTHENTIC?

How might we recognize these events? Every morning, we feel impelled transcend ourselves by opening ourselves to be more fully authentic selves.

1. *Being attentive.* When we wake up, we notice sights, smells, tastes, sounds and our bodily sensations that we were unable to notice while asleep. We transcend our sleeping selves to become noticing selves.
2. *Being intelligent.* Soon enough we begin wondering Why and How and What-for. We want to understand the things we notice or recall or envision for the future. When we reach some understanding, we can explain things. We transcend our noticing selves to become intelligent selves.
3. *Being Reasonable.* When we reach some understanding, we naturally start reflecting: What I think: is it really true, really possible? We are not satisfied with what we imagine or think or wish. We want to know what is really so regardless of who says so. We transcend our understanding selves to become reasonable selves.
4. *Being Responsible.* When we grasp what is really so, we wonder about what is really good: What is good about this situation? What is the better thing to do here? An inner voice says we should take responsibility for our actions and engage the people around us. When we are being

responsible, we become a source of good in our worlds. We transcend our knowing selves to become responsible selves.

5. *Being in Love*. Being responsible opens us to the love that binds us to others. Openness to love, in turn, becomes an actuality when one falls in love. Being in love is neither just loving someone nor just being loved by someone. It is being *in* love, being part of a friendship, a family, a society. It affects the entire life of a person:

"What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the mornings, what you will do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything." – Pedro Arrupe [2](#)

Being in love establishes a new and more effective source of being authentic. It lifts one's precious self into a shared selfhood. Self-consciousness becomes a we-consciousness. "Our" concerns include "my" authenticity.

If you are in love, perhaps you recognize how it makes your authenticity more likely. It energizes you to being more fully responsible. Being more fully responsible turns your mind away from the illusions of untruth and toward being reasonable about reality. Being more fully reasonable focuses your intelligence on understanding reality. Being more fully intelligent drives you to pay attention to evidence more fully.

If you are in love with God, perhaps you also recognize how fully you are grounded in authenticity. You are a "we" with God. And because God loves the world, your heart is open to loving all that God loves. Perhaps you feel awed that you, all friendships, and the universe are a lover's gifts.

One final observation: To recognize our self-transcendence each morning at these levels of our consciousness is not an ascending achievement. It is an ascending awareness of the fullness of the reality in which we already live.

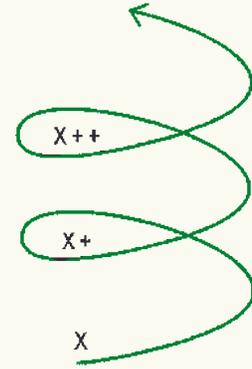
WHAT OCCURS IN HISTORY WHEN WE ARE BEING AUTHENTIC?

Being authentic drives life-giving movements in our situations, our society, and our history.

Imagine Situation X, where some aspects need improvement. We experience urges to notice, to understand, to reflect that we understand correctly, to take responsibility for seeing what should be done, and then for doing our part.

These urges are what convert a Situation X into Situation X+, an improved situation. An improved situation is the evidence that we were being authentic. Moreover, each improved situation has fewer irrational elements than the previous, so being authentic even more readily spots and solves problems. As long as we continue being authentic, Situation X+ becomes Situation X++, and so on.

In other words, authenticity improves situations.



II. Unauthenticity

WHAT OCCURS IN US WHEN WE'RE BEING UNAUTHENTIC?

Being unauthentic is the opposite of being authentic. It is being inattentive, unintelligent, unreasonable, irresponsible, and disinclined to be in love.

What makes us prone to being unauthentic? The major drivers are bias and irrational decisions.

BIAS

Regarding "critical thinking," the most illuminating realization I know of is that we can be biased against thinking. This is especially evident in five areas:

1. A neurotic obsession fixates on a specific matter and avoids thinking about more important matters. This bias is difficult to overcome because it works subconsciously. Without realizing it, we do not let certain bothersome questions rise to consciousness: Is something more important for my life right now? Is my fixation a serious problem?

2. Egotism is a tendency to avoid thinking about what benefits other individuals and about one's personal shortcomings. The ego is a good thing. It relies on our thinking to manage the various demands coming from our subconscious and our society. But human thinking is naturally inclusive; it

includes the egos of others. The bias of egotism renders our thinking exclusive.

3. Loyalism is a refusal to think of what benefits other groups and what may be irrational in our own.³ Loyalty is a good thing. It enlarges our awareness beyond ourselves and considers the well-being of our group. But the bias of loyalism confines this enlargement of our awareness to our group and no further. In an ironic twist of human affectivity, the very camaraderie that can liberate the egotist imprisons the loyalist.

4. Commonsensism is a bias that assumes that common sense is capable of meeting any problem and disregards the value of studying anything. Common sense is a good thing. It looks to the practical, the interpersonal, the immediate, and the palpable. But the bias of commonsensism assumes that situations can always be improved through simple principles and strategies. It sees little value in studying anything that might require the hard, often unrewarding work of digging for deeper insights.

5. Secularism is a bias for thinking about the space-time world of our experience and against thinking about issues of faith, hope, and divine love. Secular awareness is a good thing. It enables us to deal with anything within the horizon of "this world." It expresses awe over human tragedies and victories. But it suppresses questions of whence, who, and why we are. It assumes that religion is irrelevant if not dangerous. Its horizon has no room for a faith that sees values with God's eyes, for a hope in troubled times that leans on God's confidence that all shall be well, for a love in one's heart that is God's own presence as actively loving.

IRRATIONAL DECISIONS

We are also unauthentic when we act against our better judgments. We recognized this humiliating fact of our lives in St. Paul's remark, "Wanting the good is in me, but not the doing. I do not do the good I want, but rather the evil I do not want."⁴

WHAT OCCURS IN HISTORY WHEN WE ARE BEING UNAUTHENTIC?

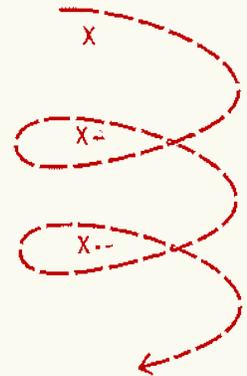
Being unauthentic drives life-diminishing movements in our situations, our society, and our history.

Again, imagine Situation X. And some aspects of the situation need improvement. But unauthenticity fails to notice important data, or to understand what is going on, or to verify one's understanding, or to take proper responsibility, or fails to regard oneself as part of a larger "we" with those one loves.

Acting on these failures makes things worse. Situation X declines into Situation X-, a situation that has more things going wrong. And as long as participants are being unauthentic, the worsened situation will worsen further to X- - and beyond.

Moreover, the problems that beset situations at each level of decline are increasingly complex. This makes it more difficult even for people being authentic to notice, understand, verify, and decide on how to reverse the decline. Authentic persons often do not know what to do; all they know is what they should not do. As Lonergan points out, authenticity "is ever a withdrawal from unauthenticity" ⁵

In other words, unauthenticity worsens situations.



III. Authenticity Enabled by the Gospel

The Gospel is good news from God.

Earliest Christians received this news not first as information about God, nor as commandments for moral living, nor as the appearance of Jesus as a hero to champion their cause, nor as insight into the purpose of life. They experienced it first as a liberating invitation to enter the drama of living in God's love. This drama is the Paschal Drama.

WHAT OCCURS IN US WHEN WE WELCOME THE GOSPEL?

To hear the Gospel as the Paschal Drama, it is essential first to recognize that everyone imagines his or her life as an unfolding drama. Adults realize that all of human life is a drama in which each one's personal story is but a scene in a world drama. There are four world dramas evident among cultures today:

1. Drama of Fate: This drama pictures whole world and every human life as dominated by the stars, by a gang of fickle gods, by ghostly ancestors, by the government, or by just dumb luck. It omits the scenes of people

taking responsibility for their collective lives and dealing seriously with the questions of faith in a loving creator.

2. Drama of Human Autonomy: In this world drama, humanity is the highest form of existence. The futures of all nations and cultures are completely up to us. Life has no mystery, only problems; and science has made unprecedented strides in solving them. Religions are just "belief systems;" they are not about anything very relevant or even real.

3. Drama of Religious Morality: God is the highest form of existence. A God who created everything. A God who endows us with reason and good will, but leaves us on our own to use these gifts to do good and avoid evil until the day we die and enter an afterlife. The world drama is a morality play. A Day of Judgment fixes one's eternal destiny in heaven or hell based on the morality of one's earthly life.⁶ God is the Divine Finger-Shaker, ⁷ the Divine Clockwinder.⁸ This drama has been referred to as Deism—the belief that once God created the universe and gave humans minds and hearts, no further involvement was needed in its daily workings.⁹

4. Drama of Religious Love. Humanity is not sufficient unto itself for authentic living and for improving situations. Humans in love with God experience an abiding sense of human insufficiency combined with an abiding awe regarding the mystery of God's love, a love with no exclusions for pre-existing faults or offenses. God desires to redeem individuals, situations, societies, and the unfolding of history. This is a central feature of all monotheistic religions.

When we welcome the Gospel, we let the Paschal Drama be our own. It is the historical reality of God's love expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, in whom God is personally present to humanity, and in the outpouring of God's own person into human hearts as the Holy Spirit of love. New Testament writers are unanimous that the coming of Jesus in our history and the rising of love in our hearts are communications to us of God in person for the express purpose of liberating humanity to be a living, historical community of love—the "Kingdom of God."¹⁰

Martin Luther King described this love as an *agape* love:

. . . a willingness to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times, to restore community. The cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community. The resurrection is a symbol of God's triumph over all the forces that seek to block community. The Holy Spirit is the continuing community creating reality that moves through history. He who works against community is working against the whole of creation.¹¹

Falling in love with God involves loving God with all one's heart and loving all that God loves. Most awesomely, the Gospel calls all people to open their hearts to make guest room for God's own Spirit of love to take up permanent residence. One wholeheartedly welcomes the Gospel message of God's love made physically present in Jesus, the founder of the Christian community, and as healing the biases and irrationality that lie at the root of our unauthenticity. It re-enables the authenticity that had become compromised in our lives.

WHAT OCCURS IN HISTORY WHEN WE WELCOME THE GOSPEL?

New Testament writers speak of being redeemed by God. We can now explain key aspects of *how* and *what* God redeems.

In the graphic, the upward blue arrow represents the improving movement in situations when people are being authentic. The downward, dashed blue arrow represents the worsening movement in situations when people are being unauthentic. The gold arrow going up and down represents the redeeming movement when welcoming the Gospel message heals unauthenticity and recovers authenticity.

In any actual situation, all three movements go on simultaneously. This is true of any imaginable situation: situations that are private, among friends, among family or at work; situations that are political or economic; situations that are secular or spiritual or religious; situations past, present, or likely to come.

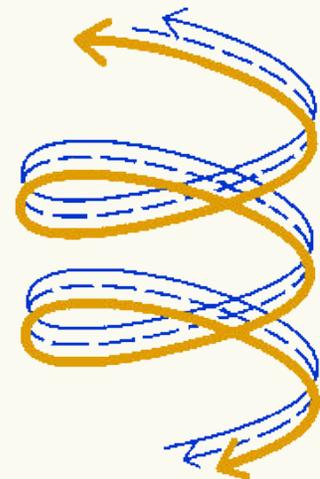
In other words:

God redeems by actually liberating people in their individuality, their societies, and human history itself.

God redeems unauthenticity through the self-emptying mutual love among humans in union with the self-emptying Spirit of Jesus.

At the same time, God desires to abide in every human heart and to give three gifts that no human can create:

- A clarity of faith to recognize God's self-gift in Jesus.
- An enduring hope based on God's confidence that all shall be well.
- An energetic love—the Spirit of Jesus within—to love God and neighbor as ourselves.



1 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972) 104. He is recognized internationally as a leading philosopher and theologian. He died in 1984.

2 See <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/prayers-by-st-ignatius-and-others/fall-in-love>.

3 Examples: Unions, military units, police departments, sports teams, and company departments enjoy trashing their counterparts in other units. Dedicated Christians, Jews, and Muslims spontaneously defend their practices and priorities—despite evidence that greater spiritual depth is found in other congregations. Earnest patriots measure their commitment by how effectively their nation dominates other nations. "What we all know": What White People Do. How Muslims Act. What the Real Problem is with Homosexuals. The simpler the picture, the stronger the myth and the more unrelated to actual lives.

4 Romans 7:18-19. Similarly, in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (7, 21), Medea complains about an ailment that affects us all. She was heartsick in love with Jason and, being married, convinced that she would do wrong to pursue him. But she realizes, "I see the good, and I approve it too. Condemn the wrong, and yet the wrong pursue."

5 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 110.

6 Commonly found among both Christians and Muslims. It is also found among many American teenagers, whose spirituality has been described as "moralistic therapeutic deism": God wants us to be good; God heals our sinfulness; God is one person, not a trinity, who watches us from a distance as history unfolds. The "National Study of Youth and Religion" (2003-05), directed by Christian Smith of Notre Dame, describes the faith of most American teenagers as "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." See Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 7. I have found this view among at least half of my students who identify themselves as Christian.

7 Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) 17-19. See also Eugene Webb, *Worldview and Mind: Religious Thought and Psychological Development* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2009) 132-37.

8 Edward Dolnick, *The Clockwork Universe: Isaac Newton, the Royal Society, and the Birth of the Modern World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011) *passim*.

9 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) 117. He finds a major source of religious morality in 18th-century deism, prominent in England and France as part of an effort to find in human reason a common ground among religions at war with one another. Enchanted by recently-emerging laws of physics, deists proposed that once God created the universe, the system was all in place; God will not tinker.

10 The NT presents Jesus the Nazarene, giving up his life for the sake of others, as God's "only begotten Son"—a metaphor for the most complete love imaginable to the early Christians. At the same time, it presents God flooding human hearts with the Holy Spirit—

God's personal and divine way of being. God is unable, so to speak, to come to humanity more completely. (The realization that God gives the divine self to us in Jesus and the Spirit is the realization on which is grounded the later teaching that God is a trinity: God's self-living as a source expressing a word and a spirit—a Father, a Son, a Holy Spirit.)

11 Martin Luther King, "An Experiment in Love." *Jubilee*, September 1958, pp. 11ff. He distinguishes *eros* as love that seeks an end, *philia* as friendship love, and *agape* as God's presence in human hearts as an overflowing love for God and for all whom God loves.