

Are You for Real?

LIFE WOULD BE HORRIBLY BORING IF WE WERE ALL THE SAME. DON'T STRESS YOURSELF—JUST BE WHO YOU ARE.

Aware of the public's increased demand for authenticity, advertisers today are placing a fresh emphasis on the "real thing." They sell drinks that have "no artificial sweeteners," bread that contains "no preservatives" and fabrics that are "100 percent cotton." (I have yet to figure out why 100 percent cotton is such a big deal. My iron and I have huge fights with it at least once a week!)

We all have a basic craving for the real rather than the phony. Yet more often than not we maintain a veneer of acceptability in our daily lives that belies who we really are.

In his book *Do I Have to Be Me?* Lloyd Ahlem says, "In nonauthentic living, there is a behavioral recipe to know in nearly every social situation." We figure out where we are going to be and what is expected of us, and then we follow the approved behavior for that situation.

There is something in me that has often resisted behavioral recipes. If we all follow the various recipes too closely, we become like little cutout figures, looking and behaving alike. That kind of conformity is stifling to our spirits; it produces dry bones by robbing us of our uniqueness and individuality.

PERSONAL AUTHENTICITY One of the most refreshing persons I know is a woman who has spent 30 years in Ecuador as a missionary. My husband, Ken, and I were at a social gathering one evening where this woman was present. I was captivated from the first moment we were introduced.

She had none of the mannerisms or phrases so common to our

image of “missionary.” But her commitment to her calling and her genuine love for God were unmistakable.

After she had gargled, with a throat full of water, a hilarious rendition of “Jesus Loves Me,” I asked her if some of her antics were criticized by her supporters or co-workers. She laughed heartily and said yes, many people felt she should be less uninhibited, quote Scripture more often, and not be so prone to fun and laughter.

“But you know,” she said, “for years I tried to play a role for my parents. To them, serving God was heavy business. When I was a child, I was constantly reprimanded for my fun-loving nature. The implication was that sincere piety and lightheartedness didn’t mix.

“When I entered college, one of my Bible professors became my mentor. Through him I began to realize that I was stifling not only who I was but also the God-given gift of fun and spontaneity. He encouraged me to be the person God created me to be.”

This missionary lady modeled for me the joy of being released from restricting behavioral recipes. In a wonderfully positive way, she’s different.

There is something exhilarating about variety. A garden is much more appealing if it contains flowers of more than one species, color and shape. A symphony needs all the instruments for a rich, full sound. Similarly, we achieve a full, rich sound in life when there is variety among us, when our uniqueness is encouraged so that we have a different sound or look from that of everyone around us.

The inevitable result of rigid conformity is a phony approach to ourselves, to others and to life’s experiences. God did not create any duplicates in nature or in humankind.

Then why is it that so many people feel uncomfortable about

being real? I think the freedom to be real is often squelched in childhood.

The child who continually receives negative messages about himself begins to feel he is not loved and accepted as he is. Therefore, he strives to become like someone else who appears to have the love and acceptance he desires.

Sacrificing personal authenticity to the tyranny of behavioral recipes results in living behind various kinds of masks. Fear of rejection and judgment dictate the masking of who we are, how we feel and how we think.

How do we come out from behind the mask? We begin the process by asking ourselves, Who am I?

I love the simple profoundness of the response given by ascetic Thomas Merton to that question: "My deepest realization of who I am is that I am one loved by Christ." It is the internalizing of this incredible truth that enables us to emerge from behind whatever has hidden us from the view of others as well as ourselves.

If Christ loves me, then I must have merit. Such a foundation of divine security leads us to necessary further steps, and those steps lead us to each other.

THE HUMAN NEED FOR ACCEPTANCE It is impossible to become real in isolation. We need to be loved, affirmed and made to feel significant. That is a fact of our relationship with Christ, but we are human creatures who need the human touch as well.

I believe God ordained our need for one another. Scripture encourages us to love one another, forgive one another, support one another and, if necessary, lay down our lives for one another.

When we are accepted, understood and made to feel genuine caring, we cease to be so hard on ourselves for our

shortcomings. Genuine acceptance often provides the strength we need to make some changes in ourselves.

Where do we find such a wonderfully healing environment for our growth and development? I would love to say it's in the church, among our fellow Christians. Unfortunately, that is too often not the case, and that is not the fault of the gospel.

The New Testament concept of love is unconditional acceptance, understanding and genuineness. The frequent inability of the Christian community to replicate that kind of love may be due to the fact that we all struggle with inadequacy and failure from time to time.

We recognize we are not living up to the Christlike standard we wish to. There is a battle between who we really are and who Christ calls us to be. We fail to remember not one of us can live up to that standard; it is the risen Christ living his life through us that enables us to accept rather than judge and embrace rather than flee.

Our lack of authenticity prevents our ministering to one another in those crucial times of raw hurt and need. It also has implications regarding our most important relationship.

TRANSPARENCY WITH GOD One of the serious consequences of perpetually being phony is that it affects how we relate to God. How many times have we approached the Lord in prayer, careful to put our best spiritual foot forward? It's as if we think God doesn't know that in reality we don't feel like praying.

Psalms 51:6 says, "Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts" (NKJV). God is asking us to approach Him as we are—truthfully, honestly, without a pious mask.

I experienced the refreshment of transparency with Him in the midst of one of the major heartbreaks of my life. Our second

child, Joanie, was born with very severe spina bifida.

To learn that in all probability Joanie would never walk, would have repeated kidney infections, and risked spinal meningitis and perhaps death was overwhelming to us. She looked so perfect (except for the ugly boil-like growth at the base of her spine); how could all those grim possibilities apply to her?

When the first jolt of shocking reality hit me, I determined that God would heal her. I would not accept any other alternative.

By the 10th day of Joanie's life, she developed spinal meningitis; on the 15th day her fever reached 106 degrees. The doctor called us and said the prognosis for her recovery was minimal. With that news I went into the bedroom, closed the door and started to pray. I praised God for His goodness, His unfailing mercies and His promises. I quoted reams of Scripture to Him and finally, when I got up off my knees, I thought to myself, God couldn't help but be impressed with that prayer. I reflected such a vast knowledge of Scripture, and I exhibited a great spirit of faith. He will surely acknowledge the sterling quality of that devotion.

I was convinced that we would be hearing from the doctor soon to say that for reasons that defied his medical knowledge, Joanie's temperature had dropped and his fear of brain damage had not been realized.

I wasn't prepared when, several hours later, the doctor called to say that Joanie had died. But I had just prayed an exemplary prayer! How could that be?

After Ken and I had cried together, talked and cried some more, I returned to the bedroom to pray. Once again I thanked God for His goodness and mercies. But the words began to stick in my throat.

For the first time in 15 days, I became real with God. I dropped my phony mask of affected piety and poured out all my confusion and hurt; confessed my faltering faith in His love and goodness; and cried out for a sense of His presence, which had eluded me since Joanie's birth.

Gradually, with all my anger and hurt honestly expressed, God began to heal my soul. I saw myself as He saw me: one who was frightened but refused to admit it; one who had attempted to win God's favor with her spiritual prowess; one who refused to allow God's sovereign will if it went contrary to her own.

When I approached God as I truly was, I experienced the sweetness of Isaiah 66:13, "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you."

I still do not understand the why of Joanie's brief little life, but I do have much more peace in not knowing than I once did. I also have an appreciation for the imperative of coming to God with an honest heart rather than a mask.

ENDING THE MASQUERADE God doesn't minister to the phony front. He sees behind our masks, and He longs to love, comfort and sustain us. We need to be real with Him.

We need to be real with others, too. Trying to look and behave like everyone else, fearing we might "stick out in a crowd," produces tension and isolation.

Anyone who has lived many years behind a mask will testify that it is a lonely place. There are few smiles there—even fewer laughs.

And such inauthentic living is stifling to our spirits because it robs us of our uniqueness and individuality. It reduces our inclination to relax and have fun.

So get real! Remember that Christ loves and accepts you as you are. You can drop the mask and the phony approach to life.

There are wonderful people “out there,” too, to whom you can relate in mutuality and honesty. But you may need to search for them. Perhaps you are in a study group that could be encouraged to a new level of intimacy and support. Or you may have an existing friendship that, by your example of openness and vulnerability, might foster a climate of mutual growth and trust.

Just remember to go slowly. Many people find it hard to be real with one another and with God because masking has become a habit.

Psychologist and theorist George A. Kelly warns that “masks have a way of sticking to our faces if worn too long.” Won’t you peel yours off today?

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