

## **RECLAIM YOUR AUTHENTIC VOICE: DRINKING FROM THE WELL OF YOUR ENTIRE BEING**

Lynda Klau, Ph.D.

We all yearn to be real, to feel connected to ourselves and to others. Often, however, we lose this connection. We're not living from our deepest passion, but we cannot find a way to bring it into our lives. We yearn to be more successful at work, but we lack the courage to take the necessary steps. Or perhaps a personal crisis, such as divorce or illness, has shaken our foundations. To survive, we let fear push down our true feelings, so that the creativity and wisdom we long to bring forth remains buried and unborn. In this way, we remain unconscious of and avoid our entire spectrum of emotions and beliefs, from fear to anger to loneliness to love, and we never transcend them to discover the authentic self within that is filled with wisdom beyond convention.

Paradoxically, to live from our authenticity means two things: on the one hand, to connect with our innermost "core" truth— that unchanging place in us that receives our deepest inspiration, intuition, and insight— and on the other hand, to honor the feelings and beliefs of our personal self, ingrained in us by our parents and society. In other words, to live authentically means preserving an openness and natural harmony between our hearts, our bodies, and our minds. Once we have aligned with our truth at this "core" level, we can embrace our personal self from a perspective of understanding, compassion, and freedom—in other words, from our "wholeness." To be authentic, therefore, involves honoring all of who we are: our thoughts and feelings and bodily sensations.

### ***How Do We Lose Our Connection to Our Authentic Self? Envision three concentric circles.***

Let's call the largest, outermost circle the "persona," the public mask we show to the world. This is the part of us that seeks approval for our achievements in our daily and professional lives. Trapped in our "persona," we define our value based on our surface level of "success": the kind car we drive, the size of our house or television screen, or the amount of power we have in our job.

The second circle can be called the "shadow," the private self that we are afraid to show to others and often even to ourselves. This is the part of us that we suppress for fear that it would be met with disapproval if acknowledged and expressed. The "shadow" is the voice in us that judges and fears our anger, our sadness, and even our love. It feels shamed or guilty by what it construes to be our weaknesses and failures. In the depths of the "shadow," we suffer from a fundamental belief that we are "bad," or at least "not good enough."

The more we fixate upon or overly identify with these first two circles, the more we lose connection with the third, innermost circle, our “core.” This is the intuitive “gut” self that knows our own intrinsic goodness and self-love, and also recognizes it in others. Our “core” remains unaffected by either our perceived achievements or our shortcomings. Rather, it is the place in us that follows our deepest passions in the face of enormous social and psychological pressures. Think of the dissatisfied student who leaves business school in order to become a photographer, or the computer expert who quits her corporate job to start her own business. History provides many examples of individuals who have had the courage to speak out beyond conventional rules and to follow the song of their souls.

To the extent that we stop listening to our center, however, our center stops communicating with us clearly and succinctly. We either become stuck on the surface of the “persona” or we sink into the depths of the “shadow,” and we believe that either one or the other represents the real Truth about us: “I’m great because I have a Mercedes!” or “I’m a failure because I don’t have a Mercedes.” These types of beliefs profoundly affect our minds, our hearts, and our bodies. When we define ourselves by such extreme voices, we become nothing more than a “good” learned-self and a “bad” learned-self, but never a true, authentic self.

### ***How Can We Reclaim our Authentic Voice?***

Our Western culture teaches that the personal self is the center of our universe, the place where all of our competing, conditioned voices live. In this model, the rational mind of the personal self reigns supreme. The first step toward reclaiming our authenticity, however, is to embrace a more expansive model of who we think we are and of how we view the world. In truth, the whole of who we are is more than sum total of our personal self, our “persona” and our “shadow.” It is necessary to deconstruct the old hierarchy that places our ego above our core self, our heart and our body. Once we realize that all parts of us deserve to be listened to, we can begin to refocus our intentions and our attention upon reclaiming our authentic voice.

Our ability to impartially observe any part of us has been called our “witnessing presence.” This refers to a place within us that stands apart from our conditioned beliefs and self-judgments. It allows us to differentiate between, harmonize, and ultimately transcend them. To develop our “witnessing presence” just as we would any other muscle is the key to emerging from our obstructions into an authentic way of living. From this perspective, we enter a space in consciousness that is separate from our identifications with the personal self’s thoughts and feelings, but which also respects them. This allows us to experience these beliefs fully without becoming lost in them. From here, the authentic adult in us surfaces, the person who can successfully integrate all of his or her conditioned voices and selves, as well as open to fresh inspirations.

Imagine that you have been in business for fifteen years and you've just been downsized. Your savings are minimal and your expenses have not changed: the monthly bills keep piling up in the mailbox, and no new business is coming in. A common response to such a situation would be to automatically respond with negative thoughts, beliefs and feelings rooted in fear: "I will never be able to recover financially. What am I going to live on? I will never be able to support myself and my family." Harsh self-judgments and blame typically accompany these beliefs: "This is my fault! I must have done something wrong!"

It is crucial to realize that these beliefs, whether coming from the "persona" or "the shadow," are just that: beliefs. Rather than representing the entire truth about us, our beliefs account for only one way of responding to a difficult situation. In reality, our deepest wisdom does not speak to us judgmentally.

When situations challenge us, it is the authentic adult in us, supported by the "witnessing presence," that keeps reminding ourselves that our negative thoughts and feelings are not based in actual reality, but in our default, conditioned beliefs.

### ***An Exercise: Developing Your "Witnessing Presence," the Key to Unlocking your Authentic Voice***

The following exercise is designed to launch you on your journey toward reclaiming your authentic voice by helping you to develop a strong "witnessing presence":

1. Think of a situation that is currently a source of stress and conflict in your life. For example, this situation could involve a frustrated desire to move forward professionally or personally. It could also involve difficulties in your family or in your romantic life.
2. Take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle. In your left column, make a list of concrete facts describing this situation. In your right column, list your feelings and beliefs about this situation.
3. Often, we are so entrenched in our feelings that we mistake them for facts. Carefully examine each item on each list and ask yourself, to the best of your ability, whether the "facts" are actually objectively true, or if they are your subjective emotions or beliefs. Facts, for example, don't tell us "The sky is falling!"— only feelings do!
4. Based on your findings, reconfigure the two lists so that you have a more accurate reflection of what information is purely factual and what is based in your own personal and subjective reactions.

5. Without judging, look at the column on the right, where you have listed your feelings. Do they seem disproportionate to the facts? If so, try to listen to them with the knowledge that these are your subjective beliefs and feelings, not objective facts that define the situation or who you are.

6. Give yourself the space to inhabit and express these feelings on the page. You are now beginning to witness your feelings without becoming entirely identified with them.

7. Return to the “facts” of the situation with this new perspective. Having developed our “witnessing presence,” and having realized that our subjective responses to a situation are not a direct reflection of reality, we are in fact developing our authentic voice, a tool of extraordinary power. The feelings and beliefs rooted in our “persona” and our “shadow” suddenly become less daunting. Their power over us is diminished profoundly because we see them in their proper light. This offers the adult in us the ability to address challenging situations from a more knowing, creative, and proactive place.

### ***Final Thoughts***

The power of possessing our authentic voice applies to virtually every aspect of our lives, from relationships, to our self-image, to our careers. The power of increased authenticity creates a larger perspective of hope and possibility, profoundly transforming our sense of who we are.

Aligned with this greater perspective, we have a second-chance to overcome the limitations of our upbringings. There emerges a space for our authentic self to flourish, manifesting our deepest inspiration, creativity and wisdom. Having reclaimed our real power, our freedom, and our choice, we can truly drink from the well of our entire being.

By rooting ourselves in our authenticity, we not only shift our personal sense of self, but we radically transform our ability to communicate with others. We can respectfully honor diverging opinions, whether they agree with us or not. In this way, we even become a vehicle for enacting larger changes in the world. Just imagine the possibilities of a group of individuals joining to express their authentic voices together.