

Authenticity: When it Matters Most

Ty Zepp

Keuka College

English 110-01

Professor Reed

November 6, 2021

Authenticity: When it Matters Most

The Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) gives multiple definitions of the term authenticity, all in accordance with being true, real, or original. This could be in the expression of an object, belief or person. In terms of a personal value, however, I believe the best definition of authenticity it gives is the “mode of existence arising from self-awareness, critical reflection on one's goals and values, and responsibility for one's own actions; the condition of being true to oneself” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Based on this definition, I find that “critical reflection on one’s goals and values” sticks out when discussing how well people hold true to their values. Maintaining authenticity thus allows us to live fully into our most dear values and make the choices that mean the greatest to our own conscience, even if they go against the grain. It has allowed me to feel gratitude in the decisions that I make, especially when they matter most, such as in choosing a career path, and in relationships with family, friends and significant others. In Brene Brown’s (2018) book, *Dare to Lead* she exemplifies this idea when she writes,

This of course, is the challenge of living into our values; those moments when our values are in conflict with the values of our organization, our friends, a stranger in line at the grocery store or polling station, or even our family. (p. 1)

Being authentic to oneself doesn’t always make one popular, and sometimes it even turns one into the opposition, but in doing so, life feels much more fulfilling. I can see this throughout numerous choices that I have made throughout my own life, whether they be in terms of school, family, friends or personal matters. One historical figure that I find stays authentic to themselves, even when their choices go against the grain, is President John Tyler. He held on to his personal political ideologies firmly and never budged, even in the face of unpopular opinion and possible ruin of his political career.

Throughout his political career, he often made choices (some extremely controversial) that went against his own party, and even against the nation's own interests, in order to stay authentic to his own political and moral values. In Christopher Leahy's (2020) book, *President Without a Party, The Life of John Tyler*, Tyler is shown to have "demonstrated remarkable ideological consistency throughout his political career. His political values were deeply ingrained and deeply held" (p. 20). Early on in his life, he took hold of the values that his father taught him and maintained them well throughout his life. Whether it be in his beliefs of a weaker national government and stronger state governments, which goes against the idea of being president in the first place, his support for more liberal and universal education which went against his own political party's, the Whigs, belief of only wealthy white men having access to a formal education, or his eventual support and defection to the Confederate States of America during the Civil War (which I do not condone, but is an example of Tyler staying true to his beliefs), going against his own nation for what he believed was for the betterment of his home state of Virginia. This would eventually lead to him rightfully being labeled as a traitor and being ousted from American politics thereafter.

Staying authentic to himself allowed Tyler to achieve an impressive political career that included numerous senatorial and representative terms in Congress, the governorship of Virginia, the vice presidency and eventually the presidency. He also managed to run a successful plantation (not to ignore his ownership of slaves, which is unforgiveable). After a first failed marriage, he also managed to bounce back from the mistakes of this one and raise a successful family, having eleven children that went on to have successful careers such as politics and education.

Being authentic to oneself doesn't always bring benefits, however, and the choices he made later in his career to maintain his level of authenticity, most notably his defection to the CSA, would eventually tarnish his reputation (justifiably) amongst historians universally, being called a party-less president and a traitor to the United States. This view slightly changed with Leahy's (2020) release of his book, showing just how exemplary a life Tyler led for himself. Yes, he did tarnish his career and make some unpopular decisions, but he stayed true to himself until the end.

In terms of my own life, I can cite a great example where I stayed authentic to myself, even when it went against the grain. The first example I showed in my life is also what I consider to be the greatest as it was quite the struggle for me. Both of my parents wanted me to go into an engineering field, as they both knew that I was intelligent enough and had the dedication to do it. However, I never enjoyed mathematics, and even though I knew that I would be up to the challenge if I chose that path, I felt as if it didn't truly embody who I was. Staying true to myself, I realized that my love of history and the passing on of its stories to others couldn't be more embodied than in becoming a history teacher, so I defied my parents' expectations and applied to numerous colleges that offered teaching degrees. Now after starting college, I feel, at this point, that I made the right choice, as staying authentic to oneself is one of the greatest ways to maintain gratitude in one's life. Even my parents have come to accept that fact and believe, after numerous discussions that I had with them, that I made the right choice for myself.

Being the most authentic version of me allowed me to achieve numerous accolades in my short 19 years of life so far and to feel extremely proud of them in hindsight. Finishing in the top ten of my graduating class (seventh to be more specific), holding two state titles for varsity Air

Rifle (which I consider to be kind of unique as it isn't a very widespread and publicized sport in the State of New York). Holding membership in the National Honor Society, student government, and the Pioneer Giving Tree (which I am more proud of the volunteer work that I have done through my memberships in these organizations than the actual memberships themselves) and being accepted to Keuka College for my dream career path of teaching have been a large sample of achievements that being authentic to myself has brought. Finding who I feel as my authentic self, for this stage in my life, has not only allowed me to earn these accolades but to also find my place in the world and to live my life to what I feel as the fullest. It has opened many new doors in places such as extracurriculars, jobs, friend groups, and where to attend college, that before, when I didn't quite know who I was, weren't accessible or recognizable. I have discovered the people with whom I can bond and be accepted with. I can also explore my interests to their fullest capacity and find joy and excitement around every corner. I have found that after discovering myself, I have lived a much happier life in recent years. Authenticity has made darker hours such as my parents' divorce and numerous recent deaths of friends and family easier to cope with and to recover from. I have also found that I have a much more positive outlook on life and can have much higher levels of appreciation for the authentic versions of the people around me. This then allows me to be much more supportive of people for who they are and how they enjoy spending their time. However, as life continues down its path, I will grow and change, meaning that the authentic version of me will as well. This makes it my responsibility to recognize who that is as times change and to adjust to it, while also remembering to stay as authentic as possible to whom I believe I am or can be at those specific times.

Whether it be the most basic daily decision like what to wear for the day, or one that can affect one's entire life story such as career path or choice of partner, choosing the decision that remains as authentic as possible to who one is as a person is the key to living a fulfilled and content life. A person doesn't have to be successful like people such as John Tyler to live life to the fullest and to make authentic choices, they just have to understand, appreciate and live into the person that they believe to be the most authentic version of themselves, even if the choices one makes go so far against the grain such as Tyler's, and as long as they do not affect others negatively. They need only to make these important decisions when they matter the most.

References

- Brown, B. (2018). Living into our values. *Dare to Lead* (pp. 1-3). Random House.
- Leahy, C. J. (2020). *President without a Party, The Life of John Tyler*. 1 ed., vol. 1, Louisiana State University Press, pp. 20-21, 1 vols.
- Oxford English Dictionary. (2021). Authenticity. In *Oxford English Dictionary*. Retrieved September 24, 2021
from [authenticity, n. : Oxford English Dictionary \(oed.com\)](https://www.oed.com)