

# *Authenticity Authorship Authority*

Michael Lyngstad

E-mail: [mlyngsta@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:mlyngsta@lakeheadu.ca)

Received September 2024

Accepted for publication September 2024

Published May 2025

## **Abstract**

Drawing inspiration from the ideas of Parker Palmer, this paper serves as a personal exploration of a pathway to genuine authority as an educator through embracing authenticity of self and writing the story of one's own life.

**Keywords:** *subjective adulthood, personhood, Authentic Educational Experiences*

---

The words authenticity, authorship, and authority as assembled by Parker Palmer (see Palmer, 2017) are related by more than their common roots in language for me. They represent a cumulative progression of ideas that make for a life worth living; a life that moves through the desert and puts me in touch with my true soul. With these three words, I feel that I can summarize the struggle for meaning and direction that has dominated my consciousness for most of my life. This struggle is one of the things that I believe defines us as humans living in the modern age, perhaps as humans living in any age. I would like to explore what each of these words mean to me, how their power has shaped and moulded my life for better or worse, and how this has brought me to where I am now as a teacher and student on the doorstep of the rest of my life.

## **Authenticity. Authorship Authority**

I remember a time in my distant youth when I was listening to myself talking to someone and became puzzled about the words that came out of my mouth. I don't remember the place or the time,

or even what I said, but I distinctly remember the feeling that what I had just uttered did not come from *within* me. It had come from somewhere else *outside* myself. A television show maybe? A song lyric? Something that my mom or dad or sister said? It didn't matter who or what the source was; that source was not me. It was at that point I began to realize that there was a difference between who or what came from within and who or what came from without. This early realization of what I considered to be inauthenticity and a desire to find authenticity within myself has had a profound impact on my sense of who I am and of how I interact with others. Palmer (2017) discusses finding integrity, which he describes as a pursuit which "requires that [he] discern what is integral to [his] selfhood, what fits and what does not – and choose life-giving ways of relating to the forces that converge within [him]" (p. 14) and I believe I am on the same path in my pursuit of what I consider to be authenticity of self. I know that it is a process that will never find a culmination or moment of epiphany where I finally find out who I really am. That is the beauty

of it all. I am constantly being created and reworked and worked on by society which adds onto the core of my being.

This continual reforming of the self has generated ideas of paradox between static and dynamic elements of life as they pertain to finding an authentic way of living. I know that there is a static core to my personality that has built up over time, like a ball made up of all different shapes and sizes of rubber bands. These elastic strands are being covered up all the time by the dynamic interaction with the world around me, obscuring the centre and even the most recently added layers. Although obscured, they still make up the form of the self. It is important to me to not just let the ball remain static. It is only through adding strands, trimming recently added ones, and cutting deeply and precisely into the mass that I can grow as a human.

I feel that this pursuit and discovery of personal authenticity is a precursor for everything that comes afterward in leading a life of meaning. It has been apparent to me that to really direct my life it is necessary to know what I want out of it. This requires a knowledge of self that goes beyond knowing my favourite colour or what brand of shoes I like. It goes into the core of my values and what I believe is right and wrong, just and unjust, beautiful and terrible. This requires an honest look into the authentic core of my being. This quest for authenticity does not come without its perils. More than once, I have been drawn into dark places in my life that were born of me trying to pay attention to the desires of what I thought was my inner self. This inner self, although authentic, is a dangerous force that can be driven by selfishness and pursuit of simple pleasures. As Csikszentmihalyi (1993) puts it “only through conscious reflection can we determine how much of what seems good is actually good for us and then adopt a discipline that makes it possible to stop at the threshold” (p. 45). This reflection is

what points the way to true authenticity as it draws upon not only natural inclinations, but values and rational measures of tempering what is not good and would lead, ironically, to inauthentic behaviour.

Without authenticity, how can one have truly meaningful relationships with other human beings? Even if others are not engaged in a pursuit of authentic experience, I feel that by being open and honest with others, it offers the potential for developing deeper and more resonant bonds and could possibly help others to be more authentic themselves.

In pursuit of this honest engagement with others, fear of conflict is always lurking as a source of inauthenticity. The need to put on a professional face or assume a predetermined role to fit a particular situation to ensure a peaceable interaction has been a common theme in both my professional and personal lives. This role-playing has led more than once to my betraying my values for the sake of avoiding conflict. This fear of conflict has allowed me to mould myself to others’ expectations and to repeatedly lose my sense of self in playing the role I feel is required to peacefully interact with a person or situation. The outcomes of this have at times been internally embarrassing and at times catastrophic for all parties involved.

How to escape from these cycles of fear and not feel the need to create a persona to avoid conflict? I believe that the solution comes back to cultivating a strong idea of one’s authentic self. As my authentic self is clarified, it is easier to develop and practice resiliency in facing up to fear of conflict because I am more sure of who I am and what I want from life. Through this ever-expanding sureness and control of my fear, I see the importance of engaging in conflict in a way that allows me to have a hand in shaping my own life.

**Authenticity. Authorship. Authority**

I am always of two minds about the idea of taking authorship of my life. It feels like there are very real and very strong limits to this authorship and my ability to control the outcomes of my actions. Coming from a relatively advantageous position in society, I am afforded the luxury of considering this, at least in a limited sense, in my life. I recognize that not everyone can craft their own path and that some people have full power over most aspects of their destinies. I discuss this idea of authorship from my position as a white male from a middle-class background and recognize that it does not apply to the experience of others.

I feel that a life lived authentically naturally opens opportunities for authorship of one's life. First, knowing oneself naturally encompasses knowing what you want out of life and what you are willing to do to achieve it. With this in place, a process unfolds whereby one can live by Louis Pasteur's attitude that in the fields of observation chance favours only the prepared mind (Pasteur, 1854). When I am sure of what I believe and what I want, the opportunities to reach those goals present themselves over time and it is simply a matter of recognizing these opportunities and following the signs to the destination. This would not be possible without a pursuit of authenticity.

Authorship that is built off authenticity also creates a stable foundation of existence. I believe that if my life is directed and formed to develop habits and structures that are imbued with authenticity, maintaining authenticity in my life will be a self-sustaining venture. By establishing and authoring my personal life in an authentic way, it seems to me that this personal growth will naturally expand outward to include others. My ideal for an authentically authored life experience is summed up perfectly by Csikszentmihalyi (1993) in his description of a life that "resembles an ascending spiral, where concern for the self

becomes steadily qualified by less selfish goals, and concern for others becomes more individualistic and personally meaningful" (p. 235).

Along this spiral path, so many distractions and false alleys present themselves and I have ended up at the end of quite a few of these. Sometimes years have been wasted following expectations of others and giving myself over to pursuing goals and ideals that, upon reflection, did not align with my inner values. These experiences are hard lessons in life, but they are necessary in refining the path that I should be on. As with refining the authenticity of the self, crafting a life worth living is riddled with fear. Fear of making the wrong decision, fear of power structures bringing down retribution for standing up for what I value. In the realm of teaching and creating a meaningful life as a teacher, I have long been held back from full participation in the education system out of fear. My largest fear was that I would not be able to make change happen and that by trying to enact change, I would be singled out and punished. Parker's words are encouraging however, as he states that,

if we were to turn some of our externalized reformist energies toward exorcising the inner demons of fear, we could take a vital step toward the renewal of teaching and learning. We would no longer need to put our lives on hold while waiting for structural change (Palmer, 2017, p. 37).

This addresses fear from both sides. Both a personal fear of failure and the fear of a system that is not working toward holistically beneficial goals for students and for teachers. This ability to confront fear, embrace it, and master it lies at the core of all meaningful change including the change that drives the story of one's life. This challenging of fear and obstacles through small acts of continual personal development is not a

new idea. In the Dao De Jing, Laozi (1997) advises that...

In the universe the difficult things are done as  
if they are easy

In the universe great acts are made up of small  
deeds

The sage does not attempt anything very big,

And thus achieves greatness

Easy promises make for little trust.

Taking things lightly results in great difficulty

Because the sage always confronts difficulties

He never experiences them

Through facing fear and using my will and authenticity to take authorship of my life in the direction that I intend, my authentic self is further revealed to me, which empowers me further in having the courage to create the life I want. This strange loop leads to a self-reinforcing scenario that is building authority within my life. The more that I am authentically creating the life that I want, the more I can reach out to others and be included in a circle of people who are imbued with the authority that flows from authoring an authentic life.

### **Authenticity. Authorship. Authority.**

For as far back as I can remember, I have looked forward to getting old. I always viewed age as the great *authority maker* of life. The belief went something like *once I reach X age, people will take me seriously* and this thought persisted for quite a while.

First the magic age of authority was 18, then 25, then when people still didn't take me seriously, I thought that it must be when I reach 30. When authority did not materialize at this age, I set my sights a little further into the future. I moved the

bar up to 55 thinking that by that time, I will have lived long enough and amassed enough knowledge that surely by then, with the grey hair and wrinkles that go along with reaching middle age, my desire to finally be taken seriously would be realized. Since then however, I have had a chance to reflect on these erroneous beliefs. Observation is one of the greatest helpers in looking at the patterns of life and I began to look around me at people who I admired and who I felt possessed the type of authority that I was aiming at. Age, it seemed, had nothing to do with it. My slow realization was that it wasn't how old I am, or how much I know about a subject that gives me authority, but it is the fearless embracing and expression of my own personality that creates it.

On the rare occasions where I let my guard down and just relaxed into being myself, people, including my students, listened to what I had to say. The more I spoke from an honest place inside me, the more they listened to what I had to say and the more they were rapt with attention when I said it. It was at this point that I fell into an idea like Palmer's observation that

[e]xternal tools of power have occasional utility in teaching but they are no substitute for authority, the authority that comes from the teacher's inner life. The clue is in the word itself, which has the author at its core. Authority is granted to people who are perceived as authoring their own words, their own actions, their own lives, rather than playing a scripted role at great remove from their own hearts. (Palmer, 2017, p. 34).

Reading this passage from Palmer's book had such an impact on me that it has formed the basis of my exploration of self in this paper. In my mind, this passage perfectly summarizes my own personal "hero's journey" to the underworld of my inner self, the struggle to form my own experience

of life and to continually consolidate my sense of self during this experience of life, and of my desire to bring this evolving self into the world to share who I am and what I know with anyone who will listen.

## Conclusion

Some say that life is the greatest teacher. I would have to agree with this when it comes to learning about living. This journey towards discovering what it means to be human certainly means something different to everyone and this self-discovery is perhaps the most important learning task for everyone engaged in making sense of living on this planet. Many of us are not afforded the opportunity to reflect on what makes for a life that is truly well lived. Some of us pursue material wealth. Some pursue fame and glory. Some simply pine after these things and spend their life hoping and dreaming of a future that they are not willing to take a chance in pursuing. Some have no chance of pursuing anything beyond basic survival. Others look for deeper meaning but embed themselves in hedonism and narcissism. The lucky ones stumble through the desert of the self in pursuit of engaging with the depths of what really makes us human.

## References

- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1993). *The evolving self*. Harper Collins.
- Jung, C. G. (2009). *The red book* (M. Kyburz, J. Peck, & S. Shamdasani, Trans.). Philemon Foundation and W.W. Norton & Company.
- Laozi. (1997). *Dao De Jing* (J. English & G. Feng, Trans.). Vintage (Original work unknown publication date).

Palmer, P. (2017). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. Wiley.

Pasteur, L. (1854, December 7). *Untitled Lecture*. University of Lille, Lille, Haut de France, France.

## Author Bio

**Michael Lyngstad** is a Ph.D. candidate at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. His research interests revolve around alternative education and the history and philosophy of education for adulthood. He is especially interested in the influence that alternative education experiences in adolescence have on alumni's persistent ideas of what it means to be an adult. He currently works as a contract lecturer, teaching masters level courses in foundations of graduate studies, history of education, philosophy of education, and character education. Michael is also a musician and music teacher, focusing on classical, jazz and rock guitar.