This fall, we held Identity Groups on three consecutive Thursday evenings. On one night, we met in separate groups based on religious heritage, another night on gender, another night on race. On the night of the gender groups, when I walked into the Women's Group, I immediately felt a sense of freedom, relaxation, joy. In a word, it felt liberating. And the feeling surprised me. There is something liberating about meeting in homogenized or same groups around identity.

The immediate feeling of ease and comfort is not something we feel all the time. Within our larger societal context of privilege and oppression, those who carry marginalized identities often have to translate or mitigate their identity in order to “get along.” My surprise at that feeling caused me to reflect on the ways that our identities can be under pressure more than we realize. We normalize it.

As we dive into the theme of authenticity and what it means to be authentic, it is important to acknowledge the role of power and privilege in the conversation. Even as I felt liberated in the women's group, as a cis-gender, white woman, I was in the clear majority in the room. The feeling of liberation may not have been as strong or clear for women of color and transgender or gender queer women because even in that room there were aspects of identity at the center and others on the margins.

As 2017 begins, mindful that we will have a transition in leadership at the national level in our country, this theme of authenticity has more caveats and more questions. The language and imagery of the Presidential campaign and the background of some of the people being tapped for executive leadership in the cabinet reflect explicit ideologies of white, Christian, patriarchal, hetero-normative supremacy. Some people are feeling more afraid about the consequences of their identities. And we must not ignore or normalize the acts of violence and discrimination happening in the wake of the U.S. presidential election results, especially toward Muslims and people of color.

This raises the question of the relationship between authenticity and privilege. Do some people have more freedom, more privilege, to express themselves fully, authentically, without fear of violence or detrimental consequences? And if so, it is important that we look at authenticity this month not just in an interpersonal context, but also socio-politically and systemically.

At the same time, we must talk about the spiritual courage not to silence or hide ourselves. Something happens when people are not afraid. When people throw off their fear, they show a powerful, beautiful, authentic and liberating path forward.

As a faith community with power and privilege, we too must find ways to live our inclusive values more fully and explicitly in the larger community. We must not silence our voice of love, compassion and justice. For there are important ways in which the voices of those with privilege can be leveraged and are needed to be heard alongside and in solidarity with communities on the front lines of the struggle for justice and equality. May we especially take this month to consider the courage that is needed to live and work and act authentically, true to our values and to our best spiritual selves.

Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray
What does it mean to live a life of Authenticity?

Questions to Contemplate

1. What does authenticity mean? (consider these synonyms: original, true, genuine, real, legitimate) Does it have different meanings in different contexts?

2. When do you feel most authentic or inauthentic? How do you experience that feeling?

3. Was there ever a time that you found out that something or someone you thought was real or authentic was actually fake or a fraud? Have you had to “fake it ’till you make it?”

4. What are some circumstances where authenticity might be dangerous, unhelpful, or undesirable? How does privilege effect authenticity?

5. Do different cultures place higher or lower values on authenticity? In what ways?

6. In Buddhist philosophy, the concept of “self” is understood to be an illusion. Western philosophers wrestle with this as well, trying to see whether or not we each have some unique, authentic core within ourselves that we should try to live from. Is personal authenticity just an illusion or a cultural phenomenon?

7. What lessons or teaching can you derive from nature about authenticity?

8. As a UU, what do you think are the most authentic aspects of our religious tradition and beliefs?

9. Is there a different role for authenticity in the arts versus in our personal lives?

10. How does authenticity relate to individualism? Is it a desireable personal virtue?

11. How do structural forms of oppression, such as sexism, racism, or classism, impact how authenticity is understood, or the value of authenticity?

12. In social media where we can curate our identities, especially in Facebook or online dating sites, how does authenticity play out?
What does it mean to live a life of Authenticity?

Quotes and Thoughts on the Theme

Man, sometimes it takes a long time for you to sound like yourself.
—Miles Davis, jazz musician

If you trade your authenticity for safety, you may experience the following: anxiety, depression, eating disorders, addiction, rage, blame, resentment, and inexplicable grief.
—Brené Brown

Only the truth of who you are, if realized, will set you free.
—Eckhart Tolle

What if the question is not why I am so infrequently the person I really want to be, but why do I so infrequently want to be the person I really am?
—Oriah Mountain Dreamer

When emerging from humble beginnings, those around you tend to underestimate your authenticity because they knew you before you were ‘somebody’.
—Criss Jami, Killosophy

Beauty of style and harmony and grace and good rhythm depend on simplicity – I mean the true simplicity of a rightly and nobly ordered mind and character, not that other simplicity which is only a euphemism for folly.
—Plato

Honesty and transparency make you vulnerable. Be honest and transparent anyway.
—Mother Theresa

Today you are You, that is truer than true. There is no one alive who is Youer than You.
—Dr. Seuss

Truth is a point of view, but authenticity can’t be faked.
—Peter Guber

The privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are.
—C.G. Jung

Contemporary African-American resistance struggle must be rooted in a process of decolonization that continually opposes reinscribing notions of “authentic” black identity. ... Part of our struggle for radical black subjectivity is the quest to find ways to construct self and identity that are oppositional and liberatory.
—bell hooks, “Postmodern Blackness”

How desperately difficult it is to be honest with oneself. It is much easier to be honest with other people. What is true is invisible to the eye. It is only with the heart that one can see clearly.
—Antoine de Saint-Exupery

There is no reason to suppose that it is any better or any more valuable to be authentic than to act inauthentically.
—Jacob Golomb

Soul is about authenticity.

Soul is about finding the things in your life that are real and pure.
—John Legend

To Join a Small Group, email: SGM@phoenixuu.org
What does it mean to live a life of Authenticity?

In many ways, the structural violence of settler colonialism continues to dominate the lived experience of Indigenous populations, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in contemporary Australia. One aspect of this structural violence concerns the regulation of Indigenous identity, today perpetuated through state monitoring of the ‘authenticity’ of Aboriginal people. This article argues that the contest over Indigenous identity perpetuates a form of symbolic political violence against Indigenous people. It considers the ways in which structural violence against Indigenous identity has featured in Australia’s settler colonial regime and examines the particular violence faced by urban-dwelling Aboriginal people, who endure much contemporary scrutiny of the ‘authenticity’ of their Indigeneity.

—Sarah Maddison: abstract of “Indigenous identity, ‘authenticity’ and the structural violence of settler colonialism”

Authenticity, it is almost needless to say, consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks it involves, in accepting it … sometimes in horror and hate.

—Sartre

How would your life be different if … You approached all relationships with authenticity and honesty? Let today be the day … You dedicate yourself to building relationships on the solid foundation of truth and authenticity.

—Steve Maraboli, Life, the Truth, and Being Free

What it means to be authentic:
• to be more concerned with truth than opinions
• to be sincere and not pretend
• to be free from hypocrisy: “walk your talk”
• to know who you are and to be that person
• to not fear others seeing your vulnerabilities
• being confident to walk away from situations where you can’t be yourself
• being awake to your feelings
• being free from others opinions of you
• accepting and loving yourself.

—Sue Fitzmaurice

Authenticity is not something we have or don’t have. It’s a practice -- a conscious choice of how we want to live. Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It’s about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen.

—Brene Brown

We need to find the courage to say no to the things and people that are not serving us if we want to rediscover ourselves and love our lives with authenticity.

—Barbara De Angelis

Quotes and Thoughts on the Theme

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What does it mean to live a life of Authenticity?

Quotes and Thoughts on the Theme

The authentic self is soul made visible.
—Sarah Ban Breathnach

To be what we are, and to believe what we are capable of becoming, is the only end in life.
—Robert Louis Stevenson

Authenticity is the alignment of head, mouth, heart, and feet—thinking, saying, feeling, and doing the same thing—consistently. This builds trust, and followers love leaders they can trust.
—Lance Secretan

Perhaps the day will come where the validity of one's spirituality will be judged not by the correctness of one's theology but by the authenticity of one's spiritual life. When at day comes, an authentically spiritual Buddhist and an authentically spiritual Christian may find that they have more in common with each other than they do with those in their religions who have failed to develop their spirituality.
—David N. Elkins

It's challenging to be authentic (on social media) when you are not in the majority. It's challenging to be authentic when your love, your political views, your citizenship status, etc. could have a real impact on your career and relationships. The challenge of authenticity is that you have to live in a world that is okay with the authentic you, and that, unfortunately, is not the world that a lot of folks live in.
—Marci Walton, Blogger

“Real isn't how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don't mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn't happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.”

—Margery Williams, The Velveteen Rabbit

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**Choice vs Authenticity**

Excerpt from a blog post by Alex Kapitan, a transgender UU

Is who I am—my sexuality, my gender—a deep and real part of me, close to my soul? Yes. Are there choices involved? Of course there are.

I have made one choice after another to feel more at ease, more vibrant, more alive. I chose to change my name. I chose to allow myself to open to the idea that I might be attracted to women. I chose to open myself to the idea that first of all genderqueer people exist, second that I might be one, and third that I might be attracted to other genderqueer folks. After all of this, I chose to remain open to the idea that I was still attracted to men and might actually like being in a relationship with one. If I hadn't made these choices I never could have lived into my full authentic self.

From *The Four Agreements*

By Don Miguel Ruiz

1. Be impeccable with your word - speak with integrity and say what you mean. Avoid gossip or other unnecessary communication.
2. Don’t take anything personally - understand that nothing others say or do is because of you, but it is a projection of their own reality.
3. Don’t make assumptions - ask questions and clarify intentions, be clear in your communication and avoid misunderstandings.
4. Always do your best - in your own circumstances and your own context, put your best effort into all you do.

**From Exorcising Preaching**

By Rev. Nathan Walker

I’m serious. I want to see you move. I want to see you root yourself in a community built on moral complexity and to hold one another to the ethic of intellectual honesty.

I want to see you move beyond the religious hang-ups of your broken past and use your regenerative spirit to seize the day.

I want to see you flex your moral muscles. I want to see you exercise spiritual practices to the point of training your mind and body and spirit to collaborate as a single, integrated, and dynamic entity.

I want to hear you articulate your beliefs. I want to hear you articulate your faith to the point of having some moral relevance.

I want to know that you are engaged in the moral issues of our time. I want to know what makes you afraid.

I want to know if you are cultivating your doubts and your questions so that when you do take a stand, we can all trust your authenticity.