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Living an authentic life - but authentic to what?

Joe Ferullo | Jul. 1, 2013 NCR Today

Authentic. It's a word that gets tossed around a lot: We use it to describe politicians we admire, food we like, experiences we value.

But as Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster write about in a New York *Times* column called "The Gospel According to Me [1]," it also describes the life people say they want to live.

And, the authors argue, that is not a good thing. The question they ask is: authentic to what, exactly? The answer: kind of just authentic to, um, myself, thank you very much.

Critchley and Webster say in the past, we strove to be authentic to a set of shared Judeo-Christian values. These guideposts were developed in a world of scarcity and struggle and centered on social bonds, the common good, charity and justice.

But in the West today -- at least among a certain elite, I would argue -- scarcity and struggle are not everyday concerns. So the idea of authenticity has turned inward to a sort of vaguely spiritual, vaguely defined form of navel-gazing.

This is, actually, nothing new. The original "Me Generation" was identified in the 1970s: people who had surrendered the naiveté of the '60s, abandoned broad social change and just focused on making themselves the best people they could be. This sometimes involved drugs, free love and charlatans with beards and beads.

Today's "Gospel according to me" serves a different function, which the *Times* column touches on. It is a modern version of the Gilded Age's favorite theology: social Darwinism. Back then, this view forgave the titans of industry of their social sins by placing them firmly within nature's inalterable plan: They were the strong, and they were thriving to create a better tomorrow.

Now, the turn inward, toward creating an "authentic self," seems to be a clever way of escaping the widening divides in our society. If the only thing you can really do in life is just focus on making yourself happier and more successful, it nicely frees you from bothering with society at large and those less fortunate. As Critchley and Webster write: "If one believe there is an intimate connection between one's authentic self and success at work, then the experience of failure and forced unemployment is accepted as one's own fault."

Like the social Darwinists of a century ago, the authentic can view life's unfortunates as people who simply have failed. For Darwinists, they are losers in the struggle only the fittest can survive -- or, in today's language, losers in a game only those "deep" enough to discover their true selves can win. In this world, what room is there for charity?

Too often, people seeking new paths away from old values -- like Christian ones -- are really seeking a way to free themselves of a responsibility toward others, free themselves of the need to look in the rear-view mirror and look at the hurtle ahead to some bright future shaped only by their own desires.

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[1] http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/29/the-gospel-according-to-me/?_r=0