



The Lie of Authenticity by Chris Swanson

Stories have a powerful influence. They tap into our deepest hopes, fears, and loves. They bring to the surface feelings from our inner emotional core and allow us to experience those feelings in the safety of an armchair rather than in our lives. They lay the foundation for our beliefs and commitments about what is important, worthy, and valuable. They form culture, and they form character. It is no coincidence that the Old Testament is full of stories.

One of the stories that touches our humanity is the story of the downtrodden underdog who rises above limitations and becomes who he was intended to be. It is the age-old battle of external forces that constrain versus internal forces that seek freedom and self-expression. It touches us because every one of us faces external constraints that we desire to overcome. We seek to find and achieve our true, authentic selves and not be enslaved by expectations, customs, or circumstances. In our stories, we root for the hero who overcomes the most severe and pernicious coercion. We see shucking off control and finding one's true, authentic self as the greatest act of bravery. Or so our culture has led us to believe. I am not convinced.

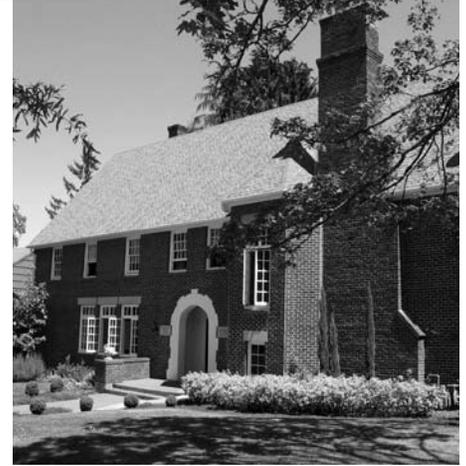
Don't get me wrong, I love these stories as much as anyone. Many constraints are harmful and wrong; some authorities misuse their authority, and some customs are rife with injustice. I exult with everyone else when the brave underdog overcomes those who try to take control out of evil, selfish

motives. Something deep within us yearns for justice.

But rooting for the underdog can be taken too far. In our culture, what originates in freedom from injustice has morphed into self-expression for the sake of self-expression and freedom for the sake of freedom. We do not stop at tearing down bad constraints but seek to tear down all constraints. In our culture, "authenticity" encourages us to freely create our identity independent of *all* authority or compulsion.

Unfortunately, the belief that we can find such freedom and independence is a cultural myth. The reality is that no one is free from constraints. Such independence is utterly impossible. Further, if it were possible, such an existence would not be liberating; it would be terrifying and debilitating. I can't imagine a worse childhood, for example, than to grow up with absolutely no discipline, parental expectations, or beliefs and thus have to figure out everything for myself. We are not built for absolute autonomy.

The constraints on our lives are pervasive and deep. We are born with physical limitations regarding size, strength, length of life, and so forth. We have no choice over our personality, appearance, and inborn talents. We are born into a family, not free to choose parents or siblings. We also grow up in a subculture that exists within a larger culture with language, customs, mores, and laws. Our lives are heavily influenced by personal and social accidents as well as environmental factors. Even the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology restrain our freedoms (and give



rise to comic-book heroes who surpass those laws). I could fill a tome with our limitations and constraints, and it would only scratch the surface.

Yet, while we all live with these constraints, most of us aren't conscious of them. We are like fish in a lake that take water for granted. Youth cultures, for example, which are most eager to throw off the constraints of their forebears and culture, are often oblivious of the powerful social impulses to which they conform. A rebellious act only rebels against some authorities. It conforms to other, less apparent authorities, such as peer pressure or pleasure.

But youths are not the only ones who rebel against the constraints on their lives. Adults who have passed through the rebellious years are no longer rebelling against the previous generation. Instead, they may push against restraints on the appetites. Adults feel the draw of satisfying their needs, whether they be emotional, social, or economic. For many, constraints in the form of a resistant spouse, a restrictive social norm, or an ethical rule are considered binding only so long as they don't interfere with one's needs. If they do interfere, then some people will seek to remove them rather than live within their confines.

There have always been, and will always be, a myriad of constraints on our lives. In some areas of our lives, these constraints are very restricting, and in other areas they are lax. It turns out that our society, for better or worse, has fewer limitations than most societies have had. In most times and places



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in history, cultural constraints have been more severe and, in some cases, all-encompassing. We take the freedoms of our own social and economic situation for granted and tend to think that the restrictions of previous cultures were stultifying and miserable, that people in those times could not be authentically true to themselves because of the narrow culture. The son of a blacksmith was expected to be a blacksmith, for example. A peasant grew up to be a peasant. And women were stuck in roles that excluded them from traditionally male roles and authority.

It is not clear to me, however, that these cultural constraints themselves were always a source of discontent. Undoubtedly, many people were content in the role and life they were given, even if it was not glamorous. No one writes the story of the peasant who lived an unremarkable but happy life tilling the fields and raising a family in a community of friends. That story is not interesting to us. We assume that previous cultures had our current sensibilities, and therefore every poor peasant necessarily felt miserable and oppressed. Only the story of a brave peasant who overcomes oppression interests us now. Certainly, some peasants did feel miserable, but I suspect many did not. They knew what their life was going to be and got on with it as best as they could.

Our culture, however, idolizes freedom and opportunity and chafes at restrictions. To suggest to young people that they cannot be anything their hearts desire if they work hard is almost un-American. Opportunities are endless, we tell them; they must only select a path and pursue their dreams. Get into a good college with good career options, we suggest. Or pursue a desire to weave baskets or travel or be on the Olympic team. Do whatever works, as long as you create an “authentic self.” *That*, we tell them, will fulfill the desires of their hearts. As the years pass, however, and reality begins to settle in, they realize that their opportunities have narrowed to a single thin line. They begin to feel the lie of limitless opportunity, of finding their authentic selves. The mid-life crisis ensues.

Am I arguing, then, that we all should simply conform to cultural, parental, and

economic expectations? Certainly not. Rather, I am arguing that our culture over-emphasizes individual freedom and self-expression. Freedom from all constraints promises a kind of satisfaction that it cannot deliver. We cannot solve our problems by overcoming these sorts of obstacles and inhibitions. To believe that is to believe the lie of authenticity.

We cannot solve our problems by pursuing our culture’s view of authenticity because it ignores the greatest constraint on our lives: our sinfulness. Sin, both ours and that of other people, is what most limits us and prevents us from attaining fulfillment and satisfaction. A peasant, a king, a slave, or a member of a commune could all live satisfied lives if they and their fellows lived without sin.

Our decisions about career, family, hobbies, and friends matter less to God than our moral decisions. God’s view of our lives is very different than the one we carry in our heads. Whether a person is a huge success or a financial failure, whether a mountaineer or an accountant, whether married or single, whether living in the inner city or on a farm makes little difference to God. God is interested in whether we are pure in heart, merciful, loving, and repentant. Who we are ultimately depends on these things, on the choices we make day in and day out about how we treat others.

The Bible talks about righteousness incessantly. The Old Testament stories are about the righteous and unrighteous and how God interacts with them. The New Testament is all about who God is and how He desires a response of repentance and righteousness. If God cared about our intelligence or athleticism or marital status or career success, then you might think those things would be major themes in the Bible. But they just aren’t.

Wait, someone might respond, David became a great King of Israel and was favored by God. Doesn’t the Bible laud this sort of success? But all the stories and Psalms related to David are about his standing before God as a sinner and a creature. David is not great because he killed Goliath and became King. He is great because he desired what God had to offer and believed God’s promises.

Throughout history, people have been obsessed with something. Ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle were obsessed with rationality. Medieval rulers were obsessed with power. Nineteenth-century scientists were obsessed with knowledge. Twentieth-century men like Freud and Jung were obsessed with the inner personality. We twenty-first-century Americans are obsessed with freedom. But God is obsessed with righteousness. God will not be even mildly impressed by the accomplishments of all the great movers and shakers of the world if they do not love Him first.

This is where both the irony of our situation and the good news come in. We are obsessed with freedom from constraints, which we cannot obtain largely because we ignore the sin in our lives, yet God offers us true freedom from sin—not by our obtaining sinlessness in this life but by His forgiving us through Jesus.

The gospel is indeed good news. Not only does it promise us true freedom, it also frees us from the need to overcome the constraints of the world. It frees us to make mistakes in our life choices and see them in perspective, as learning experiences rather than life crushers. It frees us from the fear of failure if we don’t live up to expectations. So then, while the gospel puts before us an impossible task of living a righteous life, it also brings us the good news that even though we cannot achieve what God demands, God mercifully gives us grace anyway.

Does freedom to make mistakes and freedom from others’ expectations mean that we should ignore our biology, our environment, and our lifestyle choices? Should the shy, reserved person try to pursue a job as a motivational speaker? Should a person with minimal aptitude for mathematics try to become a software coder? Should the person who loves and adores small children pursue a job as an offshore oil-rig worker? Probably not. It makes sense to evaluate one’s strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and limitations. It makes sense to follow one’s passions. It makes sense to develop one’s natural aptitudes. It makes sense for a businessman to try to make money in business.

God created us and knows that we are all different. There are many members of the body of Christ, Paul says. There is a great

deal to be learned in accepting the aptitudes and personality God has given each of us and finding contentment with them. Indeed, to desire to be a different creature than the one God has made us to be is to rebel against our Creator; it is to deny His hierarchy of values, which puts righteousness at the top of the list. If God plants someone in a family that obsesses over sports, there is a great

deal to be learned in figuring out a good way to live in that family, whether you like sports or not.

Our pursuits, genetics, inclinations, circumstances, talents, and culture are part of who God has created us to be. But by themselves, they do not make us “authentic.” They are modes and avenues through which to live our lives and struggle with our selves

before God. True authenticity is living life in accordance with God’s commandments, to be who He intends us to be.

Chris Swanson is the president and a tutor at Gutenberg College where he teaches science and leads discussions in *Microexegesis*, *Western Civilization*, and *the Great Conversation*. He has a Ph.D. in physics.

Gutenberg College Welcomes New Board Member



In October, the Gutenberg College board of governors welcomed new member Larry Barber. Larry has been part of the Gutenberg

Community for many years. For several years, he served as an associate staff member of Gutenberg’s McKenzie Study Center, where he participated in classes, seminars, and wrote articles for this newsletter. He currently facilitates Community Classes for Gutenberg College and also teaches some of them. His teaching and writing (available on Gutenberg’s website, www.gutenberg.edu) have focused on the gospel and its relation to intellectual and emotional health and personal responsibility.

Since 1994, Larry has been employed by Charis Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to meeting the needs of the community through professional and compassionate

psychological assessment, psychotherapy, and pastoral counseling. At Charis, Larry offers faith-based pastoral counseling and support for pastors. He has served as a pastor himself in both California and Oregon.

Larry is also a veteran, having served with distinction in the US Navy during the Vietnam conflict.

Larry holds a B.A. in Biblical Studies from Biola University and an M.A. in Counseling Psychology from the Professional School of Psychological Studies in San Diego. In addition, he completed a rigorous two-year biblical-exegesis program, “Scribe School,” at Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California.

Gutenberg Honors Students at the Junior Tea

Gutenberg awards juniors who successfully completed all their two-year exams at the end of their sophomore year a Greek New Testament. The tradition began in 2000, when the classes of 2000 and 2003 purchased New Testaments to give to the class of 2002 at the end of their sophomore year. The faculty thought rewarding the sophomores was a great idea, and since 2001, the college has given Greek New Testaments to all the students who complete their two-year exams. In fall 2003, awarding the New Testaments was combined with a tea to honor the recipients.

The 2017 Junior Tea honorees (left to right) were Madelin Woodrum, Emily Dunnan, Audrey Barton, Elyse Baker, and (inset) Jonathan Heredia, who was not able to attend the tea.



Gutenberg College Community Classes



Gutenberg offers community classes on a variety of topics during the academic year to enrich students, residents, and learners in the community. These classes are free and open to the public. Classes meet on Wednesday nights at Gutenberg College from 7:00 to 9:00 PM.

To sign up for email notification of upcoming classes and other events at Gutenberg, go to www.gutenberg.edu/home and click the blue "Subscribe" button.

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