

Gabor Maté on Authenticity

Post by “Julia” of May 29, 2024 at 5:10 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

he makes a quick comment that suppressing your authenticity leads to body illness

I think in that regard one needs to keep context in mind: He is compressing “a whole chapter of [his new book]” into a few sentences. He strikes me as a smart guy, so I don't think he means to imply that when you don't say what you mean today you'll have a tumor tomorrow. I think what he means to say is more general, more along the lines of an overall theme of «chronic psychological distress weakens the body» which then gets a somewhat disproportionate weight by his spontaneous use of worst-case rhetoric (“you get cancer”).

(Not being authentic, hiding who we truly are, hiding our feelings from others, suppressing them within ourselves, maybe even trying to be liked by everyone, is a pointless cause of chronic psychological stress. This chronic stress might lead us to smoke more tobacco, to drink more alcohol, to eat more sugary food; these behaviours each make it more likely to get cancer. We might hide ourselves away indoors, not get enough UV exposure, end up with low vitamin D levels; that makes autoimmune disease more likely. We might turn into a workaholic to numb the pain of being unseen, to make sure that at least our colleagues like us, which makes it more likely we get stomach ulcers and high blood pressure. And so forth.)

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

So it is a matter of placing first priority on taking care of yourself.

To jump ahead: I agree with your conclusion, and I think it is Maté's conclusion as well 😊 even though we all agree on that, let's take it step by step, just to be sure:

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

when he uses the word "authenticity" he is referring to both internal experience and outer expression of feelings/emotions.

He does, indeed. Let's keep in mind he is talking about children; with that context, I consider it valid to define “authenticity” such that it is both internal experience and external expression, because it is quite hard for children to hide their emotions. It takes some time to learn the skill of the so-called “polite” smile, the smile which – while being an expression itself – distances itself from expressing anything at all (which requires a sort of “stepping besides oneself without mentally leaving the situation entirely”; more on that can be found when reading Helmuth

Plessner's work on anthropological philosophy, where he introduced the terms *centric* and *eccentric positionality* to describe that).

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

[...] makes it sound like one's "self" is in a very delicate and precarious position (a very vulnerable understanding of the "self"). Yet as an adult [...]

As a child, it is quite hard to inwardly maintain a contrarian position (or to inwardly feel a feeling) and outwardly hide one's true self (or to appear unemotional on the outside). As an adult, many people continue with patterns they learned as children – patterns which were adaptive and correct given their powerless position as a child, patterns which ensured their safety throughout their formative years.

This continuation with what was once functional/adaptive (but now is dysfunctional) is one common reason for why people stay in abusive relationships, for example. I think it is fair to acknowledge, that our behaviour is not *entirely* free to choose, that we are set in our ways *to some extent*, and that it requires effort to change. For instance, if abuse is what you've known for a long time, it feels familiar. You'll know what to expect. How things work. Leaving the abuse then, by way of amounting to a big change, can be scary. Leaving harmful situations can be scary, whereas simply staying in the harmful situation is *that person's* normal. Another aspect would be that freedom is, among other things, a state of mind. And to add insult to injury, one's sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem were likely deeply eroded, reducing the sense of agency and empowerment needed to take a leap of faith, step outside the cage, and act freely.

A similarly twisted dynamic can be at play with authenticity: To show who you are makes you vulnerable to be attacked (belittled, laughed at, shamed, ...) *for who you are*. I'd claim that people who don't show who they truly are often have an eroded sense of self-worth and self-esteem, originating from what caused them to hide their self in the first place. For those people, then, it feels safer to continue to act as if they're someone else: It means no change. It worked so far. And if anyone makes fun of them, it's not actually fun of their true self, merely fun of their mask, which is much easier to cope with and brush off.

So when we look at the type of question he asked

[Quote from Julia](#)

“Who would you rather have in your life? Them or yourself?”

it is important to keep in mind that, from context, “them” are bad people, people who his addressee puts up with, because she learned to please and appease everyone around her, because she internalised being disrespected, disregarded, and as such the type of question he asked is indeed

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

This sounds like an "either/or" phrasing

an either/or phrasing: *Either* you continue your childhood pattern and keep letting yourself be mistreated for the sake of not being abandoned (which as a child felt-like-being or actually-would-have-been deadly) – *or* you realise you're an adult now, that you now have power, that you have agency and many degrees of freedom. *Either* you continue chose *them*, *or* you wake up and chose *yourself* again!

As such, the context in which he asks his question doesn't transfer perfectly cleanly to the oxygen-mask metaphor: In an airplane, there is enough oxygen for everyone; nobody needs to go without. However, when choosing yourself, there might very well be less for others: abusers will take offense, will get mad, will assert their power, will try to put you back in your box, and even average people, even the people who were friends with your fake-self for years and years, will – chances are – no longer like you, abandon you when you're most fragile (which might mimic the child's experience of being abandoned for being itself, causing the whole effort to be aborted prematurely), precisely when you're just starting to explore life on your own, as your self, when you'd most benefit from support and friendship.

All of that said, he offers *not* a choice between “either any company or solitude”, rather he raises the question of “either keep your current company or get reacquainted with your self (with the small but existing chance that some of your current company might be good people, might stick around, be that to be good friends while you're still learning to talk or be that because they actually like your true self, too)”.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

For anyone dealing with "people pleasing", that likely needs help from a professional therapist.

I'd agree that a good therapist can be a valuable resource; but I'd disagree that one is “likely needed”: Physical injuries heal automatically; doctors cannot heal them – but they can set up a good environment for the automatic healing to take place in (such as a cleanly stitched wound or a plaster cast). Likewise, therapists cannot heal our psychological wounds – they can only provide a good environment for that healing to take place in. However, unlike with physical wounds, the healing of psychological wounds remains mostly a manual process. With that in mind, in Western Europe, many[1] of the licensed professionals are still quite bad, so depending on the country and financial means, it can go a longer way to read books written by experienced good therapists (rather than have a bad therapist offer a 3rd rate regurgitation of what they only learned from reading, too), keep a journal, reflect, and chose one's friends

wisely – depending on the circumstances, it can actually go a longer way to consciously create a good environment, and to manually do the healing inside of it, without a coach cheering from the sidelines. But of course, having a sympathetic coach cheer doesn't hurt, and having an actually qualified, actually good coach sprinkle in bits of wisdom throughout training sessions is very nice to have. But even then, just like a teacher can explain things to me, but not understand them for me, no coach can do my training, no doctor can do my body's healing, and no therapist can heal my mind – that's for me to do myself.

[1] With regard to the countries/places I know (all in Western Europe), I feel inclined to go much further and say *most* are still quite bad; but I also know that they're sufficient for assisting in a garden-variety issue, a problem of the type most people face at one point of their life. Nonetheless, abuse at the hand of therapists, psychiatrists and psychiatric nurses is still common, while their knowledge of and willingness to assist in the overcoming of more challenging problems is usually subpar at best... 😞

End note: In this context, being courageous initially entails being oneself, but being oneself leads to an increased vulnerability. The Stoic way to be courageous and invulnerable, is to not be courageously oneself, but to be a courageous embodiment of their four virtues. Then one might not be oneself, be emotionally disconnected and eventually empty, but it eliminates the vulnerability and being virtuous provides a cognitive anchor for at least feeling morally superior

