

Talk #15 Being Human

The drama of the human condition comes solely from consciousness. Of course, consciousness and its revelations allow us to create a better life for ourselves and others, but the price we pay for that better life is high. It is not just the price of risk and danger and pain. It is the price of knowing risk, danger and pain. Worse even: it is the price of knowing what pleasure is and knowing when it is missing or unattainable.

– The Feeling of What Happens,
Antonio Damasio, p 316

We become what we pretend to be, so we must be very careful about what we pretend to be.

– Kurt Vonnegut

Thea: What are you doing? You're very still, but you look like you're concentrating very hard. Are you meditating?

Guy: You could call it that. But it's nothing very mysterious.

Thea: What is it then?

Guy: I call it "taking the world apart." It's a kind of deconstruction – like some critics do with literary texts. The idea is to look at things not for what they are to us, not for their potential impact on our lives, but for what they are in themselves.

Thea: How do you mean?

Guy: Well, you can visualize this room as the inside of a large box made of painted drywall mounted on wooden two-by-fours. Then at that chair as a structure of wood, metal, foam rubber and fabric – not as a piece of furniture to sit in. And then, at the wood itself as a material cut from the trunk of a tree, and at the fabric as a woven synthetic fibre. And so on. You can look at another person not as the other party to your relationship with him or her, but as a fellow human animal, a fellow entity in the universe. It's a good way to avoid taking things for granted, and to realize how little we actually know about them.

Thea: How long have you been doing this?

Guy: About half an hour now. Why?

Thea: No . . . I mean, what got you started on this practice?

Guy: I started doing it about twenty years ago, shortly after my second marriage broke up. For my new apartment, I bought this reclining armchair that I'm sitting in now. The cool, dark leather was great for reading or daydreaming or dozing; and I had this fantasy of it as a kind of acceleration couch for head trips, letting me leave my body where it was so that my mind could wander. One day doing that, I noticed that I

was seeing my room as I just described it to you. And it felt delightful, as if I'd slipped beneath the surface of things and was seeing them freshly, as they really are. More nearly as they are, at any rate.

Thea: And now you keep doing it?

Guy: Nearly every day. By now, it's a state of mind I can get into, more or less at will. I use a version of the practice for writing.

Thea: You remind me of that movie we saw a few months ago: *What the BLEEP Do We Know?* The world as an Alice-in-Wonderland adventure.

Guy: With reservations, I liked *What the BLEEP* very much. I'd like to see more of that vision in pop culture today.

Thea: I think you're more adventurous than I am. You want to go further down the rabbit-hole. I hear the arguments you've been making in our talks, and I'm even mostly persuaded, but I still find this whole world-view disturbing. From these talks we've been having about human life and mind and the eD bottom-up paradigm, what's the bottom line? Where do you come out, after all this?

the context of life

Guy: It's too soon to say. I certainly don't claim to have ready-made answers to the meaning of life. I only insist that our society needs to assimilate and come to terms with the new knowledge in some intellectually honest way. The science itself is in flux. Only a fool would claim to know where it's going.

Thea: You're just dodging. I'm not asking you to tell me the meaning of life – only to sum up what all that reading is telling you. Your claim has been that religion, philosophy, psychotherapy – all serious thought today about the human condition – must either accept and come to terms with this way of thinking, or thrash futilely against its own obsolescence. So it's only fair to ask where all this reading is taking you?

Guy: It tells me that my "self" is just me – the whole person: body, mind and life-history together, including whatever story I'm pleased to tell myself about that human creature. It tells me that (except as metaphor, a manner of speaking) there is no "soul" – no mysterious essence – inside my skull, running my brain and making its decisions. No such homuncular self is needed because a functioning human brain can weave the minds we know ourselves to be without supernatural assistance. It tells me that my experience of consciousness emerges – bubbles up, so to speak – as a largely unconscious ecology of competing suggestions from my body in its life-world. It tells me that the ideas I entertain about myself – the ideas that form my values and guide my choices – are socially constructed stories and rationalizations after the fact. Along with the playgrounds we build around us, they fix an over-arching context for our actions and choices. But they are only cognitive artifacts, conveniences.

Useful guides to live by, but nothing to kill and die for. Nothing to cling to, when they are dragging you under. It tells me that our world was not designed nor maintained and cared for top-down by a supernatural person. Though some outcomes are probable to the point of practical certainty, nothing is planned in advance. Rather the world seems to be making itself up as it goes along, as a beautifully self-organized, holarchical system.

Thea: You're talking in generalities. Can't you get a little more concrete – a little more personal? What does this stuff have to say about managing your life? What does it tell you about the business of being human?

Guy: I'm trying to tell you. Perhaps I should begin by saying that I don't normally think about my life from the perspective of biology and brain science any more than you do. And see no reason why I should. Usually, I just think about what I must do, and do it; or I think about what I want and go after it – just like everybody else.

Thea: But surely this stuff is important to you in some way. You're not a university prof who has to publish for the sake of his career. You're not getting paid. You're working with these ideas for their own sake, because they mean something to you.

Guy: They do. But it's important to recognize that philosophy and science, and other systems of ideas, have only limited impact on people's ordinary speech and daily lives. And this is as it should be. Even the philosophers and scientists who work with new ideas and play with them, get across the street, do the shopping, make love to their lovers like everybody else.

Despite all we know about astronomy, we still talk about the sun as rising in the east and setting in the west, though we have dropped the image of a solar chariot pulled across the sky by Apollo's horses. Similarly, we will continue to talk about having bodies and making decisions, even while knowing that it would be more accurate to think of our brains and bodies as making us. It would be foolish to do otherwise. We choose our metaphors and language for the purposes at hand; and for most purposes of life, folk psychology is a lot more convenient than neuroscience.

Thea: But our "supreme context" is altered?

Guy: That's true. I don't imagine my affairs and doings as supervised by a parental God, who awards gold stars and demerit points for my behavior. That's a large change right there.

Thea: Then how do you see yourself?

Guy: I see myself living in a biological and cognitive eco-system, not in a moral kindergarten. I'm a single node of feeling and narrative consciousness in a vast system that includes many similar nodes, with all of history and all the rest of Nature as its context. I'm a link in a chain of

generation that began with the earliest life on earth and now extends through me to my daughter and grand-daughter and any further progeny from my loins. I'm a link in several lineages of knowledge and thought, extending back in time through people and works I've learned from, and forward through people who've learned from me. I'm linked to you and others that I've loved, or merely known and dealt with, and through all these people to their circles of loved ones, friends and acquaintances through however many "degrees of separation." I'm made up of atoms and chemical molecules and then of living cells, and am myself a component of various social groupings and organizations.

So there's still a "Great Chain of Being" if you like, and we're still parts of it, though it does not proceed from God down through the angels, but builds itself up from nothingness and branches out in all directions, inter-linking entities of the cosmos in ways that beggar the imagination.

Thea: But you can't find much love in such a world, nor much sense of duty or purpose. It throws people onto their own resources and leaves them fundamentally isolated – for all the inter-connections you speak of.

Guy: It's a minority view I know, but personally I find it easier to see love in a self-organizing world that's slowly and painfully lifting itself out of chaos by its own bootstraps, than in a Judaeo-Christian world, supposedly designed and called into being by an all powerful, loving God in full awareness of all the horrors that would follow. I'd sooner believe the Gnostic myth of an ambitious apprentice-god who bungled the Creation while his master wasn't looking. The ecoDarwinian story is not just more scientific, and more truthful about the Nature we see around us. It gives us more to wonder at, more to be thankful for – more to praise, if you feel moved to worship. That the world has come as far as has, has become so rich and beautiful, all by itself. without any guiding hand, leaves me happier and more at peace with our condition than the religious story of a God who must be either sadistic or incompetent, if his performance is judged in human terms.

Thea: And purpose? Where do you find that? For that matter, how do you experience time, without a "moving finger" writing the story?

Guy: To the best of my knowledge, time for the physicist is still a riddle. In my own life, time is an arrow, climbing toward the sky and falling back to earth. Nothing new about that image, is there? In the larger context, ecological time tends to run in spirals. Its cycles tend to resemble the cycles that went before, but there is ample room for novelty and its risks. Changes accumulate until the system undergoes a change of state, crossing the pass into a different region.

"Shit happens," as that T-shirt says, but not toward some intended goal. Nor does it just happen repetitively, again and again. Rather, the shit configures itself into complex systems that support and constrain life in manifold, highly specific but inter-related ways. History seems to be important, but not as progress toward the fulfillment of a master plan.

Many events happen more or less at random, but then exert a permanent influence – like the stones on a *go*-board that don't move, once they have been placed.

Thea: So your “religion” then amounts to what? What’s the “supreme context” for your life choices?

Guy: A cautious probing at the edge of the possible,¹ pursuant to my desires and interests and concerns. Certainly not a living up to general principles, or to a grand plan. Widening circles of attachment to specific people, institutions and histories in a self-organizing world. A life-long project to understand what I can – and take in what I can of what others have understood – in the brief time I have here, within the limits of my energy and intelligence. And to share what I can of all this with anyone who’s interested.

Thea: And that is enough for you?

Guy: It has to be. It’s what I’ve made of myself. It’s what I’ve become. By now, it’s who I am.

Thea: You know, it’s weird. I think you’re one of the happier people I know. But listening to you these last few minutes, you sound more resigned than happy. How do you really feel about all this? About the disenchanting world that your science has shown us? Or this de-anthropomorphized world, if you prefer?

Guy: I have mixed feelings, like everybody else. The central change, I’d say, is that in place of a Divine Mystery beyond human understanding we now have insuperable complexity that in principle seems more or less understandable, though no individual can grasp more than a fraction of it. Because hard-working, intelligent, ambitious persons can now learn a great deal about some narrow corner of the universe, much that was once left to “fate” or to “the will of God” is now subject to human manipulation if enough time and energy are mobilized. But time and energy mean serious money, and money means politics. The upshot is that what used to be a matter for prayer is now a political issue – ultimately demanding submission to systems and interests that are increasingly global in scope.

Thea: So where does that leave you?

Guy: Feeling extremely fortunate in some ways, but rather helpless at the same time. Also, wondering at the position we have reached in our career as a species. The debate one hears is between people hoping for further benefits, medical, economic or even spiritual, from these new discoveries against people who are frankly hostile to and fearful of the story they are

¹ Stuart Kauffman’s phrase again. See Talk. #2.

hearing. I am not comfortable with either side's position. I would be more impressed with the potential breakthroughs if so many people all around the world were not still starving, or dying in wars or from common diseases that have been curable for half a century. And I am disgusted by the religious types who know so little of "God's Truth" that they cannot recognize intellectual cowardice and dishonesty when it picks their pockets and grows fat at their expense.

For myself, I am just trying to follow this story as it comes together, and consider what it has to say about human nature and the human condition.

Thea: Which is what according to you? You obviously don't feel threatened by the story it is telling, as so many people obviously do. Why is that, I wonder?

Guy: I don't feel threatened because I feel no stake in denying the obvious. On the most basic level, this new science merely confirms and details what we've known for thousands of years. It's not news that people have animal needs; that we feel pleasure and pain and a range of universally intelligible emotions; that we die when we've been injured badly, and grow old and die eventually in any case – like any other animal; that people are much the same everywhere in some ways but, in some other ways, can differ very widely; that our languages and cultures give us a range of proclivities and capabilities that no other animal can match – notably a sense of history and imagine future; it's not news that our minds play tricks on us; that we sometimes do things against our better judgment. I could go on and on. On the basics of the human condition, nothing in the scientific story is tremendously new. What we're losing is a cherished fantasy. Or not even that – just the dubious privilege of feeling intellectually honest and special while pretending that our cherished fantasy is "Revealed Truth."

Thea: One thing you've emphasized in these talks is that "human nature" is again a respectable concept – that the mind is nothing like a "blank slate," and that humans are born with instinctive behaviors and propensities that seem pretty much the same everywhere. Could you say more about that? It's controversial for some reason. People care a lot about this point.

human nature

Guy: People care because there are political stakes involved. The idea of human nature is thought to favor a conservative stance, while a culturally malleable humanity, supposedly, should be more open to reform. But in the scientific community by now, it's generally agreed that nearly all behavior requires both nature and nurture. There's a physiological propensity to learn something, and a window of opportunity in which that learning occurs. Both human speech and bird song are obvious examples: Young birds need only minimal prompting to acquire the songs of their species, but hatchlings kept isolated from others of their kind do not learn to sing properly. The same seems to be true of human

children.²

Just which traits are human propensities, and how exactly – and to what extent – our genes contribute to their acquisition is still a subject of debate.

Thea: How would we recognize genetic influence in a human trait? Twin studies wouldn't help much if the trait is common.

Guy: That's a good question. Just because a trait, in one variant or another, is found in societies of all times and places does not establish a genetic component. Dennett, with his usual wit, remarks³ that all hunters everywhere throw their spears pointy end first, presumably without a neural structure prompting them to do so. Only when a universally observed behavior is counter-intuitive or (even better) self-defeating today, yet plausibly related to reproductive success under stone-age conditions is there a claim for some instinctual contribution from human biology.

Thea: For example?

Guy: Certain aspects of mating and child rearing behavior may have a biological foundation: that women tend to be attracted to older, high-status men, while men go for good-looking, young women and fall readily into jealous rage when those women hook up with someone else; that everybody finds young children cute, and feels an impulse to take care of them. That people mimic each other's behaviors, form themselves into groups, compete for status, and make war against outsiders.

The specifics of such patterns surely require cultural learning but, as with language, there may be genetically guided propensities behind the culturally-prescribed forms.

Thea: This idea that our typical patterns concerned with sex and violence may be expressions of our genes reminds me of Original Sin – a theory of evil in the human blood line.

Guy: Except that evolutionary biology has no category of evil.

Thea: No, nor any notion of disobedience to a divine commandment either. Yet, like the Christian doctrine, it provides a theory of human nature, purporting to explain why we so readily make our affairs worse than they are or need to be.

Guy: The explanations could hardly be more different.

² See <http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2005/songbirds.html>, www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2004-12/uou-sit120304.php and <http://bowland-files.lancs.ac.uk/chimp/langac/LECTURE4/4feral.htm>.

³ In *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*.

Thea: But that is just what is so interesting – that your modern science agrees with Christian teaching on this one point, while disagreeing everywhere else. For their different reasons, both genetics and Genesis teach that humankind needs to be suspicious of its own nature. Both seem to say that humanity is a flawed or incomplete species, alienated from Nature and from its own condition. In every other respect, as you say, the two accounts are completely different. What the Bible attributes to disobedience, pride and sin becomes a matter of human biology and natural selection.

Guy: Yes. I see your point. I think it's a nice example of mythical thought managing to express something true and important in a thoroughly distorted way.

Thea: The distortion is a serious one. As Freud saw, civilized life compels us, on occasion, to struggle against our natures, and may exact a high price when we fail to do so. Yet the notion of sin distorts the issue completely. It is precisely God's law for us – our human nature – that we're *obeying* when impulse gets the better of us.

Guy: But why frame the issue in terms of obedience? That's a source of misunderstanding right there. Sure, we've evolved a set impulses. But we've evolved some judgment as well. Human suggests can learn to reject bad suggestions even from our own affect systems. Just because we have evolved propensities to act in certain ways doesn't mean we're compelled or commanded to do so.

Thea: Of course, the learning needed for responsible self-control may have been missed. Or, on the contrary it may have been over-learned, cramping all capacity for spontaneous enjoyment.

Guy: Evolutionary psychologists are now considering that human moral intuitions too may have a biological foundation. For example, in an article for the Edge web site,⁴ a social psychologist named Jonathan Haidt lists five “psychological systems” (as he calls them) that he regards as both innate and foundational for the moral codes that specific cultures develop.

Thea: That does sound interesting. What are they?

Guy: The first two systems, Haidt says, are standard liberal virtues: fairness/justice and care and protection of the vulnerable. The first can be connected to our concepts of free, informed consent and freely negotiated contracts – central values of any commercial society. The second, connects with our ideas of nurture, rescue, guardianship and chivalry – equally central to the possibility of any society whatever.

In addition to these, Haidt suggests three further systems as innate and foundational for human moral intuitions: in-group/loyalty,

⁴ At www.edge.org/3rd_culture/haidt07/haidt07_index.html.

authority/respect and purity/sanctity. These values, more congenial to a conservative than to a liberal world-view, uphold a vision of collective solidarity – at the expense of the individual, where necessary.

Thea: And sometimes, where not so necessary. Leaders tend to confuse loyalty to themselves with loyalty to the group, and all too easily see any criticism of their policies as treason. They regard their authority as a God-given right, not as a gift and trust from their constituents. They push the concept of purity to a point where everything not compulsory is strictly forbidden.

Guy: All too true. But at the risk of becoming an apologist for tyrants, one could point out that there are risks the other way too, when individuals pursue their private interests to the limit, and the public interest be damned. If there is such a thing as group selection, then groups who manage a good balance between individual rights and collective expectations are likely to fare better in the long run – in terms of both genetic and memetic descendants – than groups who flunk this dilemma in one direction or the other.

Thea: I can accept that. It was a great strength of the American constitution to recognize this issue, take it seriously, and seek a viable balance. It's surely interesting to think that evolution might be pushing human moral sensibilities in this same direction – toward an adaptive balancing of individual and collective interests. What else does the theory have to say about human minds and their tendencies?

Guy: While the details are still uncertain, another point is that all human minds seem to be anchored not only in the neurons, but also in the structures and experiences of a human body.

Thea: What do you mean?

Guy: In all cultures that we know of, progress and success are “up” while failure is “down.” We “reach out” to people in trouble, and advise them to “get a grip.” In the groups we join, we become “insiders,” or we are left “out in the cold.” We go “off” the booze and get “on” the job. We “take a stand,” or “button our lips” and “sit on it.” In these metaphors, and a thousand others, our cognitive choices and procedures draw structure from our experience of embodiment.⁵

Thea: Interesting, but so what? Why is this important?

Guy: Because it shows one way that our genes can eventually express themselves in thoughts and cultural patterns. We think along certain lines, because our bodies are as they are – as our genes shaped them to be.

We can suppose too that human languages tend to carve the world

⁵ See *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson.

into things with qualities that perform actions because our senses themselves do so. More generally, it seems clear that our brains are not general-purpose learning engines, and that our minds are expressions of human genetics and physiology, as well as culture and personal experience. To some considerable extent, our cognitive capabilities seem to be what the evolutionary psychologists call “domain specific” – adapted for typical problems that our paleolithic ancestors faced. As a species, we are remarkable generalists, but strongly influenced and sometimes constrained by the evolutionary heritage of a paleolithic life style.

autonomy and authenticity

Thea: You know, I’m still not clear what conscious agency or autonomy can mean under these conditions. I don’t see where there is room for such a thing. We’ve known since Freud’s time that agency can be tricked by the unconscious. But if suggestions strongly shaped by stone-age proclivities just bubble up from the unconscious, and may or may not be subject to conscious review on their way to the motor pathways, then we must expect our actions to take us by surprise much of the time. Or am I missing something?

Guy: No, I don’t think you’re missing anything. You’ve just described our situation pretty much as neuropsychologists now understand it. But doesn’t that fit with your clinical experience, and with the historical record? We know that people can function much of the time as conscious and relatively autonomous agents. That this capability has its limits, we also know. If the question is, “Do words like agency and autonomy retain coherent meanings?” then I think it can be shown that they do. But these meanings are not identical with those of folk psychology. There is a sea-change, corresponding to neuropsychology’s shifted concept of a self. Where that change is relevant, we’ll need to get used to it.

One point worth noting, though, is that problems with the concepts of agency and autonomy do not originate with neuro-science or the eD paradigm. These merely add their own perspective to an issue that has been familiar to Hindu and Buddhist thinkers for a few thousand years, and that arose for me many years ago, when I was a beginner in aikido, trying to read a little about Taoism and Zen.

Thea: What issue are you thinking of?

Guy: In most arts, you learn from experience that trying to do things on purpose, in the agential fashion that we take for granted, is self-defeating. You must let go of control for a while, and let the unconscious play if you hope to do anything worthwhile. In aikido the point is especially clear. You start out thinking that what you have to do is see your chance and apply one of those neat techniques that your instructor has shown. But you soon discover that this technical mind-set gets in the way. Rather, you have to go along with the aggressive intention, catch its rhythm, amplify the inherent instability of the attack, and allow it to defeat itself. Getting personal fear and ego out of the circuit would be

one way to put it. Also, you must forget the technique on a conscious level – though of course, your subconscious has been trained to do it automatically, in every possible variation. In short, you must forget about willful agency, and just participate in the movement – be fully present to it, without the illusion of making it happen.

Thea: Just let the movement self-organize, you will say. Even if it kills you.

Guy: In the language we're now speaking – that I learned many years later – that is just what I'll say. But the Taoists and Zen people made the same point in their own language; and even in Western thought you can find a similar idea. In every tradition I know of, it has been clear to people who allow themselves to know such things, that the folk psychology of desire, belief and intention – of agency, in one word – is paradoxical.⁶ Indeed, I think this may be the experiential core of “perennial philosophy.” Whether you talk about “going with the flow,” or “letting go of the illusion of a separate Self,” or “putting yourself in the hands of God” who is known to “help those who help themselves,” the point is much the same. Long before brain science, people recognized by introspection and experience that the concept of voluntary agency is deeply flawed. We'll never know how many people have committed murder because they had a gun at hand. Conversely, we know that people sometimes behave heroically, and/or prevail against all odds when they forget themselves and let a situation have its way with them.

Thea: Stigmergy in action!

Guy: Yes, exactly. Our tools and weapons, not to mention the global systems we're now building, use us as much as we use them.

Thea: Then what remains of autonomy? You said that concept still had meaning, though I feel it continuing to erode with every point you make.

Guy: Remember the Baldwin effect.⁷ Living creatures exploit the plasticity of their own bodies to select the selection criteria that act upon them. We use a version of that same effect to select the reinforcement schedules that guide our learning when we choose the games we play. Much of our autonomy lies in the choices we make when we sign up for this game, and this lifestyle, rather than that one. When you go to med school they train you to think and act like a doctor. Mug people on the street, and your life will teach you the instincts and reflexes of a mugger. Either way, after a period of apprenticeship, you become what you are practicing to be.

Thea: So once you join a game or a group, you lose your autonomy to it. It

⁶ For a discussion of these paradoxes, see my essay *At the Limits of Agency* in the collection entitled *Second Thoughts*. Also available on my website at www.secthoughts.com.

⁷ See Talk #2.

takes you over and directs your choices. Is that what you're saying?

Guy: Not entirely. There's more to autonomy than that. Apart from the stigmergic effects, and effects of social participation there are the unpredictable effects of inner conflict. There are unanticipated, even paradoxical effects of strategic interaction – a “cunning of Reason,” as Hegel called it. And there are random effects of sheer happenstance. For all these reasons, life is always happening to us while we're planning something else. No matter what, you always construct your own responses to the suggestions you are receiving. They are always *your* responses, shaped by *your* temperament, *your* education, *your* life history. Human behavior is autonomous because it feels, and is uniquely your own.

I'd say, autonomy remains what it has always been, though we now understand it better: We cannot be unconditioned masters of our lives because there is no a priori self beyond and above it all. Life lives us more than we live it; life must “always already” be living us before we can begin to think about living it. If free will means a power to create and choose our lives out of nothing, there is no such thing. If it means the autonomous capability to evaluate and act on the suggestions we receive, then we have it as much as ever.

I think the greatest autonomy is found just where we always looked for it: in creative work that leaves you wide choice, with only vague direction from your problem and materials – where you spend a lot of time wondering what to do next, experiencing not too little autonomy but too much of it. Csikszentmihalyi got this right with his concept of “flow” – the state you enter when a challenge is well suited to your level of skill.⁸ We are happiest when feeling free but optimally guided at the same time.

Thea: Yes. I've always liked that notion of “flow.” I try to teach it to my clients when they express boredom or frustration. It helps them think about the ways that their lives are too challenging, or not challenging enough. It adds up, I suppose. While we lack the metaphysical “free will” of moral beings “made in the image of God,” we have the relative autonomy one might expect, subject to all the constraints and conditioning in our lives, but all the possibilities we've learned to see, and all the distinctions and judgments we've learned to make.

Okay. Before we quit for tonight, there's one more concept I'd like your take on. What is authenticity on this account? What can it mean to live authentically, if there is no essential self, but only a neural self-representation and a self-narrative?

Guy: Authenticity may be one of those concepts – like “truth” and “justice” – that are easier to recognize than to define, and that in the end, can only be recognized and defined by their absence. Just as we know more

⁸ See the interview with Dr. Csikszentmihalyi by Elizabeth Debold on the Web at www.wie.org/j21/csik.sz.as.

clearly what it means to lie than we know what truth is, so we can be much clearer about what is phony than what is authentic.

A constructivist like me might liken the authenticity of a life or character to the integrity of a design. Saint-Exupery said, “A designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.” What he meant was that in great design, everything included is necessary – essential, as we say. Nothing can be changed without diminishing the whole.

That is certainly true of good writing: You work by blurting your thoughts to the word processor, and then by keeping what is worth saying and discarding the rest. Often, you only recognize the themes of your piece as you are doing this; and in this way, you learn from the process itself just what you are trying to say. Similarly with a character, or a life. Its themes emerge as you are living them. Only with hindsight, looking back, can you say what kept faith with those themes and what did not. The difference is that in real life, you don’t get to do a second draft.