

Authenticity

*To see what is in front of one's nose
needs a constant struggle.*

George Orwell



The Freewheelin'
Peter Geyer

Authenticity
can be a double-
edged sword

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People

My father was who he was.

Robert Fripp

Some time ago **Robert Fripp** released a series of 'Soundscapes', live solo performances using guitar and electronic 'devices'.

One of the works, *A Blessing of Tears*, is a memorial to several women, including his mother, Edith. Fripp describes the life of the vibrant woman who bought his first guitar with great affection. His father was a contained man, perhaps like his son in performance (he sits down to play): Fripp 'sensed his children were something of an interruption in a life which otherwise might have been quieter' (1996).

Margaret Whitlam had some commonalities with the outgoing Edith. Whitlam – designated a 'National Living Treasure' – died recently, receiving what amounted to universal acclaim for what she had done and how she did it.

The wife of a controversial prime minister, compared by some to Eleanor Roosevelt, she made her own contribution to life in Australia. In one of many reports extolling her virtues, friend and biographer Susan Mitchell identified her as 'authentic', in that she appeared to be herself with people of any status or background (2012).

Authenticity can be a double-edged sword, particularly if you're a 'living treasure' – a title that appears a confection.

Peta Searle, the first female assistant coach at a senior Australian Rules football club, thinks that 'the golden rule of coaching is to be yourself. That way, respect won is based on truth.' (Lane 2012).

The vituperative and controversial media figure **Kyle Sandilands** appears himself, but in a way that doesn't appear to involve respecting others (as in Margaret Whitlam's case). Then again, his approach might be better seen as narcissism or psychological unconsciousness. Nonetheless, he has many admirers, as well as detractors.

Projection onto others – an unconscious process – is a standard feature of life, particularly for those in the public eye. Gabriele Marcotti writes that soccer star **Mario Balotelli** is 'whatever others want him to be. People project whatever image they want ... and he lives up – or down – to it' (2012).

Julia Gillard has been dogged by a number of issues, many of the prime minister's own making. The 'real Julia' – a phrase she appeared to conjure up herself – is apparently still to be found, amid various negative archetypal projections related to her gender, fertility and marital status.

Comparisons have been made with her predecessor, **John Howard**, who to me appears to have the same personality orientation. Howard is now presented as an acme of personality clarity, yet during his time in public life he appeared a general and genuine mystery to commentators.

Authenticity as Hoax

Authenticity is one of those motherhood words like community, family, natural and organic – that are only ever used in their positive sense, as terms of approbation.

Andrew Potter



Julia Gillard:
the 'real Julia' is
apparently still to
be found

Andrew Potter, somewhat sardonically, thinks that authenticity doesn't have a core defining attribute and so is open to contradictory interpretations and expressions, as well as being a marketable product for various lifestyles and cultural experiences (2010).

According to this way of thinking, cultural displays are required to be living artefacts. This can lead to a cabaret of authenticity focused on performances of dubious truth or antiquity.

When the culture that you're visiting has its denizens using mobile phones, riding motorcycles or watching television, rather than the pristine world you envisaged, you can get annoyed. Engaging in this kind of enterprise yourself might mean that 'having a mud floor in your house is not a sign of desperate poverty, but of your impeccable authenticity'.

Although authenticity has to be 'sincere', this can mean anything from well-meaning to ingenuous to manipulative. A person can apparently be sincere without telling

the truth about themselves. So the authenticity of public figures like **Oprah Winfrey** may have less to do with truth or facts than with emotional feelings related to being 'spontaneous, risky, sentimental and creative'.

At the heart of the authenticity hoax is the assumption that what is good for me must also be good for society, good for the planet, and just plain old Good.

Andrew Potter

Equality

It has become commonplace to assert that we all want the same thing; we just have different ways of going about it. But this is simply false. The rich do not want the same thing as the poor. Those who depend on their jobs for their livelihood do not want the same as those who live off investments and dividends.

Tony Judt

One of the difficulties of being in a society that values a particular kind of equality, as Australia seems to, is the tendency to make blanket statements involving all citizens. Equality can mean extending presumptions that everyone is the same to notions of desires, interests and abilities, at the same time as stating that we are all individuals, without a hint of paradox.

Whole 'communities' appear to be routinely 'shocked', 'angry', 'celebrating', 'mourning', and so on, as though being in the same locality provides a version of groupthink or emotional contagion. A fashion designer or performer captivates 'all' of us, even those unaware of their existence.

Accordingly, my life and desires must be essentially the same as someone else's, notwithstanding disparities in income, personal circumstances and the like.

Perhaps this is one reason why banking official **Phil Chronican** finds it hard to understand the anger expressed at his and other executives' remuneration (Zappone 2012), and why the billionaire **Clive Palmer** (curiously, a 'living treasure' like Margaret Whitlam) has spoken out on a number of issues in a manner suggesting that he's just an ordinary bloke, which he may be in some ways.

Business commentator **Ian McIlwraith** thinks that the super-wealthy such as Palmer and Gina Reinhart are simply amusing, and perhaps should venture into the entertainment industry (2012).

Awareness

The risk in describing and addressing social problems lies in reducing them to things like 'drink' or the need for 'charity'.

Terry Eagleton

Depending on your hemisphere, March 21st is the vernal or autumnal equinox. For Zoroastrians, a northern hemisphere belief, it's appropriately the New Year.

According to a government pamphlet it's also Harmony Day, 'for all Australians to celebrate cultural diversity', 'managed' by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship who, doubtless sincere, apparently see no irony in also managing detention centres where harmony appears deficient. (This is leaving aside whether ideals of harmony and cultural diversity, admirable in themselves, *can* be managed.)

One workplace, rich in cultural diversity, announced Harmony Day to its staff via email a few days beforehand. Almost immediately, in line with a managerial practice of what seems to be compulsory socialisation as a means of developing teamwork and motivation, staff were again emailed, asking how they were going to celebrate the day.

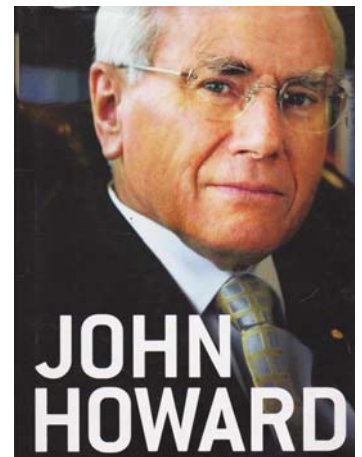
The answer, after the manner of 'consultation', was provided: dressing in orange, displaying balloons and wearing ribbons of that colour (distributed by management). Most staff appeared not to be bothered by the lack of consultation, tolerance and, indeed, harmony, surrounding the event, while others were disturbed, particularly given the implication that not accepting a ribbon or balloon was an act against diversity and harmony.

The apparently radical belief in perpetual change, mobility, plasticity is a fantasy largely in the service of the status quo.

Terry Eagleton

This approach to behavioural expression and change, exemplified in many ill-thought-out processes, indicates a lack of understanding of personality and social diversity: even a denial that there are such differences, to the point of unconsciousness.

RMIT University recently imposed what amount to rules of behaviour requiring positivity. This suggests that its proponents think that a positive approach (and there is a minefield of definitions to consider, some contradictory) is something you just ask for and expect to receive – in short, a neo-behaviourist stimulus-response transaction requiring no examination of



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Bruce Springsteen:
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organisational processes (to say nothing of the nature of work undertaken at a university, a necessary place of critique).

Apart from being examples of a growing tendency to solve problems by promotional strategies rather than examining issues, one wonders what these programs actually achieve. Perhaps George Orwell's observation should be taken on board.

The economist **John Kay** points out that problems are rarely solved by direct attacks (e.g. 'wars' on drugs, or zero tolerance processes) or by looking for 'outcomes', but by *obliquity*, whereby problems are approached from an angle, with regular re-examination of the relevant situation. For Kay (2011):

the process in which well-defined and prioritised objectives are broken down into specific states and actions whose progress can be monitored and measured is not the reality of how people find fulfilment in their lives, create great art, establish great societies or build good businesses.

Kay states that 'happiness is not achieved through the pursuit of happiness', and you don't have to be familiar with his method to come to the same conclusion. The journalist **Matthew Syed** puts this as 'whatever you do, don't try to be happy' (2012). And **Andrew Potter** suggests 'the only way to find what we're really after might be to stop looking'. A plan, such as it is, may become more important than the reality.

Irrationality lies in persisting with methods and actions that plainly do not work – including the methods and actions that commonly masquerade as rationality.

John Kay

Diagnoses

Wish I was a better person, with more control.

Donald Roeser

Even without these mixed messages of authenticity, being who you are can be a lifelong struggle. Some professionals suggest this can be fixed with the appropriate chemical, sold over the counter, perhaps unaware that similar claims have been made in the recent past, for unmarketed products.

The psychotherapist **Gary Greenberg** has investigated what might be called the 'depression industry', from its origins in the development of drugs, the drug industry and drug therapies, to the ever-widening definition of depression, which seems to be almost anything that indicates a lack of 'adjustment' to society, as defined (2011).

Greenberg is not the first to investigate this area: there are several well-researched critiques of 'Big Pharma' and the construction of mental disorders, via the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* in particular. But he combines his investigation with personal experience, insightful reflections (including participation in a drug trial), and a course run by key figures in cognitive behavioural therapy.

Greenberg also displays his personal experience of drugs, including some that might be loosely defined as 'recreational', as well as his experience as a counsellor, listening to people.

If you think that people are different, and their personalities and social experiences should be taken into account in any kind of therapy, then Greenberg's experiences

are a reality check. It's amazing how much normal behaviour can be pathologised if the presumed norm of behaviour is morally and culturally based, and if people are reading from a list or dispensing chemicals, rather than looking at the person.

Entertainment

These days, 'entertainment' covers almost all human activity, possibly due to a presumption that everything ought to be fun, including learning, teambuilding and work. What this misses is that fun can be a distracter in two ways: having fun might be more interesting than the task at hand; and the subjectivity of what fun might be can alienate the more seriously inclined.

AFL coach **Nathan Buckley**, a serious man in his field, recently stated that there is more talk and inquiry about football as entertainment than as sport, and that 'the opinion becomes the news' (Pierik 2012). At the same time, a weekly media guide cheekily suggests that one of the unwritten rules of television is that 'newsreaders should fake a close bond with sports presenters, even though they would never be friends in real life'.

Some people confuse entertainment with reality. More than a few Victorian jurors, for example, apparently think that Australian law is much as depicted on *CSI* programs from the USA. Presumably they are proud Australian citizens, yet unaware that there are individual differences between nations, even those that appear to have the same culture.

There ain't nobody here from Billboard tonight.

Bruce Springsteen

Music events can be mixed affairs for both patrons and musicians, especially if the latter see themselves as such, more so than as simply entertainers.

Bruce Springsteen's expression of relief that people are attending a performance out of genuine musical interest, rather than as representatives of the music 'industry', is instructive. It's more fulfilling to play well when people are there to listen rather than be seen. In his first Melbourne appearance in 1985, Springsteen exhorted his audience, many of whom appeared to me to be there for the event, to listen to his lyrics, obviously something important to the way he understood his craft.

The late singer and guitarist **Steve Marriott**, no stranger to excessive adulation and managerial exploitation, commented:

the thing I realised over the years is that you should always remember why you started doing things in the first place. There's a lot ... that happens, but then you realise that what you did first was always the best and you go back to that. [For me] you rediscover your love of music.' (2012)

Art is about artifice

Herbert Read

If, like Victorian jurors, your experience of legal issues is via entertainment constructs, then other realities can confuse. **Meryl Streep** has been interrogated about her playing of Margaret Thatcher as though she and the historical personage are one and the same. For her own part, Streep has appeared confused by the animosity some showed towards this controversial public figure.



Meryl Streep:
interrogated as if
she is one and the
same as Thatcher

Neither Freud nor Jung looked favourably on biographies of or by themselves. (Jung was prodded into his somewhat bowdlerised effort.) ***A Dangerous Method***, a film based on a play adapted from a book, illustrates the problem of making a brief performance out of complex material.

The film is essentially a costume period romance, focusing on Jung's relationship with Sabina Spielrein. Accordingly, the surroundings are much cleaner and more opulent than the reality. Historical material is presented jaggedly and sometimes inaccurately. The actors playing Freud and Jung are physically misleading and almost caricatures in dress and manner. However, if this is your only contact with these people and events – subject of many well-written books – then those are the impressions you have. To my mind this is hardly authentic.

But if a public figure *is* authentic, in the sense of having sufficient self-knowledge about what being themselves might be, how would people know? Would their behaviour be accepted as authentic, or just spin?

Where do projected roles – actor, musician, businessperson, footballer, politician – begin, and where do they end? Can you be authentic with dyed hair and a particular style of dress, like a woman I've observed in a workplace over some months? Does such a persona express, or hide, the person? Is it authentic to be a 'consultant', or does that term deprive you of ground-ness and credibility? And what about Potter's criticisms, as quoted above?

I don't have the answers for any of these questions, but I think they deserve some deep reflection. ❖



Dangerous Method:
historical material
presented jaggedly
and inaccurately

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