

“Be Your Authentic Self.” Which One?

Don't be an adjective. Be a dictionary.

I'm wary of words that get bloated with branding and co-opted by the corporate world. People who tell you to “be your authentic self” usually mean well, but that adjective is one big can of connotations! Try the three exercises below before you adopt some shibboleth to lead you into a battle with life.



Andy Warhol, *Marilyn Monroe (Marilyn)*, 1967

Years ago, my voice teacher recounted a story Patrice Munsel told him about Marilyn Monroe. Hollywood star Marilyn, famed acting teacher Stella Adler and opera star/TV host Patrice were walking on 57th Street after lunch one day. As they chatted, Patrice started to laugh: “I can’t believe I’m walking in the middle of Manhattan with Marilyn Monroe and no one seems to notice!”

“Oh,” Marilyn replied, “I’ll do *her*.” Suddenly, her whole self—body and soul—morphed into the slinky, sinuous, sex-kitten of film fame.

Marilyn! Wolf whistles! **Marilyn!** People pointing. **Marilyn!** Shouting her name! **Marilyn!** Cars screeching to a halt!

Was that Marilyn’s “authentic self”?

There’s tons of advice about presence and all that jazz. If something works for you, great! If it doesn’t, don’t presume you’re an idiot and just don’t “get it.”

I can’t imagine what “your authentic self” means. If it means your True Self, that’s different. I view that as a far loftier concept formed by the constantly growing and changing interplay of Being and Becoming. We may aspire to the True Self, but we’ll never attain it in the reality of our lifetime. Why? Because it is the cumulative, composite Self that continues the journey after our physical body dies.

Know Thyself

“Be your authentic self” seems too much like a fabrication—a layer of defensive (or aggressive) armor, sanctioned by today’s fashion. People love to gobble up little buzzwords—feeding on “platitudes from cans,” as the Jacques Brel song *Les Timides* chirpily notes.

The big problem with “your authentic self” is that it disregards components of you that you discover in the future, that you’ve buried in the past, or that you refuse to recognize in your current composite you.

We all have lots of selves: comforting mother, wise parent, curious student, bored student, dreamer, disciplinarian, wounded child, older sister, younger brother, friend, lover, gardener, ex-lover, worker, swimmer, diplomat, chef, musician, prankster, on and on.

We also have selves we don’t want to acknowledge: manipulator, injustice collector, Prince of Destruction, Gorgon of Terror, lazy child, smirking bully, sheep in wolf’s clothing....

If we’re being honest with ourselves, we can name a lot more.

Whether good or bad, they’re all authentic—at least for the moments that they take center stage in our lives. And that good–bad dichotomy helps us lie to ourselves, because we don’t have the searing sagacity to observe ourselves without bias. For example, human beings love to redefine self-serving as self-preservation.

Before you go on a quest to enumerate all your various selves—or fall in love with what you think is your authentic self (is that what Narcissus found in the pool of water?)—try something a little more mundane and yet far more difficult.

Observe. Consciously observe.

Learn to observe yourself...all your selves.

This is a lifelong journey of Being, Becoming, and being awake.

If you can’t consciously observe yourself, then you have no idea who you are.

If you don’t know who you are, then you live forever with the fear of disintegrating...dying...disappearing from the consciousness of the cosmos.

Art, music, dance, film, theater—these all generated numerous creations that can illuminate the path toward discovery and “selves”-realization. I’ve plucked out three somewhat obscure film clips that are worth experiencing if you want to go deeper in the understanding of you—the foibles, fears and struggles that shape and scar our greatest creations: ourselves.

[Jan Švankmajer, *Do Pivnice*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9flixRapXqQ) (Down to the Cellar), 1983

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9flixRapXqQ>

“Down to the Cellar,” a short film (about 15 minutes) takes your subconscious on a journey into the seemingly terrifying secrets buried in your hidden depths. In the film, don’t just watch the young girl, imagine you are that child.

[Martha Graham, *Errand into the Maze*](#)

Dancers: Terese Capucilli, Young-Ha Yu; Music: Gian Carlo Menotti; Set Design: Isamu Noguchi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cYzPS84qVtY>

Martha Graham created powerful, riveting, iconic journeys of meaning and transformation. I was fortunate to have seen the Martha Graham Dance Company perform while Martha was still alive. The clip below is Martha's incredible reinterpretation of the Greek myth of the minotaur, the labyrinth in which the monster lives, and Ariadne as the hero who conquers the monster. Martha's program notes described it as:

“an errand-journey into the maze of the heart in order to face and do battle with the Creature of Fear. There is the accomplishment of the errand, the instant of triumph, the emergence from the dark.”

Sadly, there's precious little of Martha's work on film, but the 14-minute clip below does feature one of the greatest Graham dancers, Terese Capucilli. Seeing Terese perform this live was raw, beautiful and terrifying. When Martha's best dancers performed, they would be possessed by some other-worldly fire-passion. Don't simply watch this clip, become Ariadne. Her journey is the journey all of us should make.

[The Comb \(*From the Museums of Sleep*\), The Brothers Quay, 1990](#)

<http://filmow.com/the-comb-t126749/>

The greatest struggle we all face is staying awake—not physically, but consciously. And our greatest enemies are our automatic habits that allow us to sleepwalk through much of our day. The Brothers Quay created a mesmerizing journey into the deep, secret dreamscape of our lives and how we struggle to understand what we do and what we don't do. Pay attention to the doll! That's your consciousness trying to grow. Pay attention to the doll's disembodied hands! They are your imagination and your higher mind furiously trying to keep rising toward greater consciousness even when you collapse into an exhausted stupor.

Adjectives Don't Make an Individual

Be a little bit wary of society's trend words. They may gratify some part of you that wants comfortable, not the friction needed to grow. Being an individual isn't easy, but there's a whole host of selves trying to help you learn who you are and can be. There's also a host of selves trying to keep you asleep. Shine a light on all of them to find out which is which.