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On Being Real

By Carla Mae Streeter, O.P.

As United States citizens we have long sought "the real thing." From freedom to the familiar fizz, we want it to be authentic. But what does "authentic" mean when it comes to people, and how will we know one when we find one? In a familiar child's book, a velveteen rabbit maintains that you become real when you are loved so much your hair wears off and your eyes fall out. The love is indeed a clue, even though we'd rather not lose our hair and have just bought a pair of bifocals. My hunch is that all the clues we need can be found in the data immediately available to us, the data of our own human struggle.

Catch yourself in your first waking moments some morning. Quietly notice how you begin to attend to what the day's menu offers. Notice how the quiet inner dialogue begins. "Should I shop? Yes, the folks are coming . . . I wonder if Johnny put his school pants down the chute . . . he'll need them clean for Monday . . . I won't have him going off looking tacky . . . never seen a kid so affectionate . . . better wake him to be sure he eats something . . ." And so it goes. There is attending and intelligent questioning, statements of yes and no and decision, the countless decisions in an ordinary day.

A Jesuit priest who died in November of 1984 had some interesting things to say about all these ordinary things. His name was Bernard Lonergan. He thought about things so ordinary that most people miss them. He was convinced that all these ordinary things were the stuff of being really real.

The really authentic people we know, ourselves included, can be known by how they are present to things and to people. Such people are attentive to you, to me. They are all "there." Did you ever have the experience of talking to someone and feeling they weren't "with you" that they were really somewhere else, even though you were exchanging words? It is worthwhile to reflect on this simple thing. It helps us to be more real ourselves and to delight more in the warm "real presence" of people around us who are well on the way to being authentic. We will call this first characteristic of authenticity "being attentive."

But there is more. People who are real are intelligent. This is quite different from being knowledgeable.

Knowledgeable people have answers about things. They know about computers or sewing, about gardening or Shakespeare, or about theology. But intelligent people have questions about things. Some of the most intelligent people I know are children. They are always asking why. They wonder about everything. They ask questions about birds and bees, why Stevie can't walk, and why daddy left home. Authentic adults ask intelligent questions about what they

are asked to believe. "How can I vote on aid to Central America? What is our involvement there anyway?" or "What does the church mean by having an informed conscience about family planning?" or "What is an alternative to a prison system that never has worked?" For every good question there is a good answer. A person on the way to authentic humanness knows that where there is honest questioning there is life. We will call this second characteristic of authenticity "being intelligent."

Then comes the moment of truth. It may be the awful day when all the questions about the missing checks at work are answered. Or it may be the day I realize I am an alcoholic. Or it may be when I realize that my notion of God is full of fear because I never had a Dad I could trust. People on the way to being real don't hedge from the truth. They don't run from facts. Whether those facts deal with my cancer or with the Pentagon's over-spending, facts answer questions and lead relentlessly to truth. If there isn't enough truth, there will be further questions. But when there are no more questions the authentic person reads the handwriting on the wall. We will call this third characteristic of authenticity "being reasonable."

This is the way a "real" person lives. But still there is more. An attentive, intelligent, reasonable person makes choices. And here comes the crunch. Without attentiveness, intelligence, and good judgement, choosing is blind. It will move toward what superficially satisfies, but may not be really good in the long run. Confusion and chaos result. Ed and Sue decide to separate when they really haven't talked through the facts about their incompatibilities and the struggle to deal with them. The separation doesn't bring peace, and Ed and Sue wonder why. They've chosen blindly, thinking the distancing would be good when it only satisfies a temporary relief from the tension their marriage is in. The person on the way to being real will recognize there is unfinished business. Or Pearl and Al may decide not to talk to the son who is living with his girl. The result is more, not less pain to the son and to Pearl and Al. The decision seems to satisfy Pearl and Al's values, but they really don't know why their son is doing this thing. They may need to back up and fill in the blanks. They need to ask their honest questions, and listen to his attempts to give some honest answers. We will call this fourth characteristic of authentic choosing "being responsible." It is the tension-crunch of being free.

There is one more basic characteristic. The real person is in touch with the undercurrent of all this human attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility. That undercurrent is the movement of Mystery in the midst of our own personal story, a seductive movement calling us ever more to greater and greater authenticity. Constant and

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faithful, it holds us in the midst of joy and sorrow, the finding of a friend and the loss of a loved one. Relentlessly it draws life even out of our sins.

Perhaps we remember the day when we fell in love with this Mystery, and we remember too how different we became as a result. People in love with God find it hard *not* to be attentive. Like the child, they wonder about everything. They find questions about life's deepest meanings coming thick and fast. What they wonder about most is how they can thank and love back. Rather than becoming fanatics (who are well meaning but not very intelligent) these people become serene and wise. For people in love with God, faith suddenly makes sense. It is a type of knowing born of religious love. Despite the gloom and doom predictions, these people are hopeful, for hope is a felt expectation born of religious love. Most of all, they *do* things for people. They know the only way to love the dear Mystery they cannot see is to love the brother or sister they do see. Charity is the hands and feet of their choice to return love for love.

For the person in love with God who is Christian, this faith, hope, and love finds a focus in Mystery-made-flesh. The person of the Word in Jesus of Nazareth becomes the object of that faith, the expectation of that hope, and the face behind every man, woman, or child attended to.

We have been looking for "the real thing." A person who is real is attentively present and full of intelligent wonder. The person growing ever more authentic is reasonable about facing life's facts and responsible about acting on them. But most of all, the person who is indeed real is in love: in love with the Mystery in whom we all live and move, and compassionate to those who journey beside us in that Mystery. By such will we recognize authenticity. Let us rejoice in its good company.

**Many Plains + Many Paths = 42****By Greg Page****Reflection On a Morning Snowfall**

I can see the snow from my window
 As it blankets the cars in the parking lot.
 With my hands pressed to the glass,
 I can almost feel the touch of snowflakes against my face
 And hear the the gentle whisper of the trees.
 For a moment, I have escaped.
 Then the cold touch of the window beneath my hands,
 Returns me to my self-imposed prison of
 pride and promises;
 Where the magic of the morning cannot touch me.

- Barb Stiller

It's hard to see inside you
 When you close your eyes
 When you turn away
 Sometimes it's hard to face
 When the warning is overwhelming
 You hide, you touch my hand
 It's tense
 We both play
 It's a game
 Neither of us wins
 Heartlessly we continue
 But soon I will be gone

- L.D. Kangas

Bridges of Humanity

Dear Pain,

Sometimes, though not often enough,
I invite you
Into my life,
Celebrating your challenge
To feel,
To hurt,
To grow.

But too often
I fear you.
I choose not to follow your direction.
Rather,
I search out alternate paths.

You tell me that you are a bridge to humanity
That all individuals cross you at some time,
That you are the only way to "self".
Yet I don't want to believe you
And I don't fully understand your message.
I am frightened.

You see,
The bridge is so high
And the waters below—so turbulent.
What if I were to fall?
And besides,
I don't know where you'll lead me.
Why should I make this difficult journey
When only the unknown awaits me?

I am comfortable here.
I think I'll stay.

... I thought I hid well
I guess fear is transparent.
I feel trapped,
At a dead end.

Why don't I realize that you are only destructive
when I run from you?
Or when I try to manipulate you
In an effort to limit your powers.

Believing that I can control Pain ...
Silly, isn't it?

It's scary for me to invite you again.
Already I feel you roaming through my soul,
Stirring the life within me.
And it hurts.

I anticipate your product Pain,
But not the means.
It's like frostbitten toes
Warming by the fire.

Once they were numb to life.
Now the warmth teases them with comfort.
But before they feel better,
Pain slaps them with the awareness of feeling.
Only after this, does the hurt diminish.

Only then, am I able to truly feel alive!?

Pain, I think I am beginning to understand.

Today
I am ready.
The welcome mat is out, greeting you as you enter my
being.

You have become a part of my self
No longer an "other".
Fear and I
Will join hands and cross our bridge together.

As we venture into the mysterious darkness,
I feel great comfort in knowing that a friend
patiently awaits my arrival at the other side.
Change, I call her.

That I may rejoice in Change
For this, I thank you.

- Katy Stelzer

The Last Idol

Your vacant stare greets me
when I look in the mirror.
I know you, behind that grin.
I watch for you, sure you will show.
Eyes that will not see, and ears plugged,
You siphon off my attentiveness
whining for the sick scent of incense.

Serpent in the shadow of the sick-self
Come out!
Why do you entrance me
with your hollow rattle
and a flailing tail
your head already crushed
beneath a wounded foot?

I owe my homage elsewhere.

- Carla Mae Streeter, O.P.

Lent 1983, A reflection on personal sin