

The Challenge of Living an Authentic Existence

Seminal theologian Paul Tillich, in his book *The Courage to Be*, elaborated on the three types of existential anxiety that he believed are universal features of the human condition. In their starkest form these are the anxiety of death, the anxiety of meaninglessness, and the anxiety of condemnation.

In short, to one degree or another, the three most elemental fears of all human beings are the fear of death, life without meaning, and being condemned.

In the history of Western civilization, said Tillich, the fear of death (ontic anxiety) predominated at the end of ancient civilization, the fear of condemnation (moral anxiety) predominated at the end of the Middle Ages, and the fear of meaninglessness (spiritual anxiety) predominates today. But all three are always present.

Religion may be understood as one way, perhaps the most prevalent though not always healthy way, of addressing these fears.

Tillich's account of the human condition struck a strong chord with me when I first encountered it some fifty years ago. It still does today. However, in contemplating my own life experience and the anxieties that sometimes rise to consciousness, I think something is missing from Tillich's account.

For me, as a Christian, it is a given that I am fallible, as are all human beings. Nonetheless, I consider it important to live as best I can an authentic existence. And while it is commonplace to think that an authentic existence means being true to oneself, in my view an authentic existence has to do with very much more. It has to do with being true – in thought and action – to what is actually real. The human condition, as I have experienced it, includes the fear, or anxiety, of inauthenticity, of not being so true.

Living an authentic existence has to do with not living a lie but living the truth – not infallibly, of course, but to the best of one's ability. It has to do with being on the "right" side of things, and living a life that is not only not "beside the point" (and thus meaningless), but one that is "on point." Social commentators are expressing an important element of this contemporary aspiration when they speak of being "on the right side of history."

I believe that we inhabit a cosmos – an ordered world – albeit complex but not chaotic. In such a world meaning is not arbitrary. Truth is not discretionary. We do not create or invent meaning and truth, certainly not in any ultimate sense. We discover them. And we are obliged to try to inform, reform, and transform our lives in accordance with the meaning and truth we are able to discern. For it is easy to be on the wrong side of history and the wrong side of the truth.

So I find myself anxious (in both senses of the word) to know as much as possible about the truth of things that matter, especially things that affect the health and prospects of humankind. This requires a constant questioning of claims and assumptions that pass for knowledge, many of

which cannot bear objective or critical scrutiny. Human beings have all kinds of ways of avoiding and hiding themselves from the truth. Often as not, the truth is inconvenient, to say the least.

I'm not all that good at it, but I seek to act in ways that are congruent with the truth. And I am sustained by the hope that, in the ultimate scheme of things, which is the providence of God, my life will thus be more contribution than detriment to the beauty and goodness of the whole.

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