When an Identity Includes Being Slapped Across the Face

Reflection by Rajmund Dabrowski, Longmont, CO

The uniqueness of who I am is a composition of what I inherited from my ancestors. Not just my parents, but also those who influenced them, and the culture they engaged in. On reflection, I concluded that I lost much of what was a feature of small Rajmund. I was not afraid to express myself freely, not fully grasping the meaning of what being confined to what was proper and correct may mean. So, grooming and influences of the whole environment and culture tampered with some authenticity of the early days.

But not all was lost. External influences brought out a tapestry of values that became my own, including beliefs and traditions. My convictions took root. Rajmund was as authentic as my talents, walk-and-talk were synchronized.

When going through my library recently, a book dedication by a truly special friend caught my attention and brought back a memory or two. In a copy of Authenticity, A Biblical Theology of Discernment by Thomas Dubay, S.M., which Pam Harris sent me, she wrote: Ray, you taught me more in a conversation about authenticity than I had learned in a lifetime ... Pam. Kindness and generosity of thought is what makes Pam a special friend.

But now, Pam made me reflect on my own, personal pedigree that propels my quest for authenticity with "every breath you take," as Sting would have it. Should I conclude that
taking stock of what makes me who I am synchronizes with what others seem to see in me as valuable? Yes, I am special to my mother. I am special to Grazyna, my wife. I am special, unique to my Maker. And so on.

Thomas Dubay explains what authenticity is all about in a Christian life. He identifies authenticity as "reality without sham." We are "authentic to the extent that [we] live the truth." The human person "conforms his mind, words, actions to what is. His mind reflects reality, and his speech reflects his mind."

It's tough to live up to it all and be called authentic. And there is more. An authentic person "is patient when suffering rejection for he knows that those who live fully in conformity to Christ Jesus are sure to be persecuted."

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A story will illustrate my coming of age as a person and a believer. Barely 14, I recall an event within a couple of weeks of being successfully enrolled in Jan Zamoyski Liceum, a well-known and historic public high school at 30 Smolna Street in Warsaw, Poland. The school had nearly 900 students and was located just across from our home and the Seventh-day Adventist church in city center, where my father worked.

On one September Monday morning I was called-out to stand in front of a class of 35, to be questioned about my absence in school on Saturdays. Answering respectfully, I repeated my convictions about Sabbath observance. The teacher called for Mr. Jan Gad, the school principal, to come and question me, too.

Mr. Gad, who I later found out, lived in an apartment building next to where I lived, was a tall, stocky man, and his larger-than-life presence commanded respect. For us youngsters, it exuded fear. Later, a school chronicle would refer to him as an "excellent principal," who said that a "school is like an orchestra. You need a good conductor, good team and a good music score. A melody will then sound beautifully." On that Monday morning he exercised his conducting skills on me, and for the benefit of others, it appeared.

Even today, I well recall being slapped across my face. The hot tears ran on my cheeks, a reaction to this sudden and public humiliation. I experienced – first-hand – an act of violence by someone in authority. That moment is etched firmly in my memory.

Among high-pitched, angry shouting, I still recall something said about atheism and that my unpatriotic behavior would not be tolerated.

My parents were summoned and I was expelled.

Thus ended my enrollment in Warsaw's premier high school. I was kicked out of school but for a good and – in my opinion – positive outcome. My parents negotiated a move to a different high school, just a few hundred yards further, and still within a walking distance. My new lease on student life began at the Jaroslaw Dabrowski high school on 1 Swietokrzyska Street. I enjoyed the fact that a Dabrowski would be going to a school named after another Dabrowski.

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In essence, the Jan Zamoyski Liceum event was my first lesson in human rights and
nonconformity. My Seventh-day Adventist culture no doubt influenced my decision to make a stand that day. Though what could one do in such a circumstance? After all, I was just 14. This early “here I stand” position was a reminder when my future choices, and decisions, required removal of shadows and manipulations in other tough moments in my life. My DNA, however, so rich with the building blocks of those who for generations before me chose not to conform – to be authentic at whatever the cost – became my own way of life.

The moral of the experience is – speak the truth and do not be afraid to do so, even the unpopular truth.

Such moments like the one when I said "no" to school’s conformity, continue to allow me to be assured that in authenticity, I am a "total lover of God," as Thomas Dubay would say.

Besides, the admonition of Jesus Himself has taken root in my life: You don’t make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong. – Gospel of Matthew 5:36-37 [The Message]

**Recalibrate**

1. Is there a place for “political correctness” in the life of a Christian?
2. What shapes your identity? Is “God’s way” the only option that makes you a child of God?
3. Do you allow “gray areas” to shape your reactions to moral and behavioral issues of life?
4. Honesty, openness, frankness – is your contribution to church and social life driven by them?

Feel free to send any thoughts or comments to Rajmund Dabrowski.