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# It's time to get real

*Authenticity is an ancient word which has undergone a modern do-over in the 21st century. This is the nature of language; it morphs and changes. What does authenticity mean in its more contemporary mode? Is it a fad or does it have staying power? Let's get real with what it means to be authentic.*

Words MARIE ROWLAND

In recent years, corporate jargon, advertising terminology and psychology-speak have hijacked and integrated words such as "authenticity", "journey" and "disruptive" into their respective industry lexicons, spinning their meaning from their original usage. Then new interpretations of old words have spilt into common usage which we use without thinking.

We take language for granted and yet words are our primary tools for meaningful communication. Over the centuries, the English language has shifted and shaped how we view ourselves. From Latin derivation and Middle English with its Germanic and Dutch roots, modern English as we know it has had many incarnations and it is still shedding its linguistic skin. Jargon, vernacular, street language and slang have influenced how we speak and subsequently how we think. And this is a good thing if we understand how we use and relate to the revised meaning of words. Language is dexterous and pliable.

The word people might use to describe modern language would be organic — meaning naturally evolving and changing. But the actual meaning of organic is unrefined or unprocessed. At a biological or botanical level its definitional meaning has very earthy roots, literally. But now through linguistic evolution this word has transformed from a scientific term to an experiential one. Organic is no longer about being preservative-free but now refers to the

process of growth and developmental change usually to do with the human experience. Organic isn't organismic anymore. It has taken a more esoteric flavour.

Similarly, when we regard the word authentic it was never used to describe a person. The act of authentication was to render something as the genuine article and not a copy or a fake. An authentic Picasso or Rembrandt affirms that the painting is an original painting as produced by the artist; an authentic Shakespearean manuscript was written by the bard; or an authentic legal document such as a will, passport or marriage certificate cannot be duplicated and provides proof of identity. The term authentic traditionally and technically still denotes that whatever the item, tradition or process on offer, it is the genuine and original article.

To be authentic, in this sense, means its value or originality cannot be disputed. It is a provable entity and not notional. There is a verification process that happens and it is a known fact. For instance, champagne can be known only as such if it is produced in the French region of Champagne. It is an empirical fact and can be traced back to its roots. It has provenance. However, if a musician sings reggae but is not Jamaican, could he be considered authentic? What denotes authenticity? If you believe in what you do then should it matter if you're singing American soul as Aretha Franklin did? It is a matter of opinion.

The descriptor "authentic" is now no longer only confined to the authentication or verification of something but rather about describing a sense of being, and rather than being an objective process it is far more subjective in its approach.

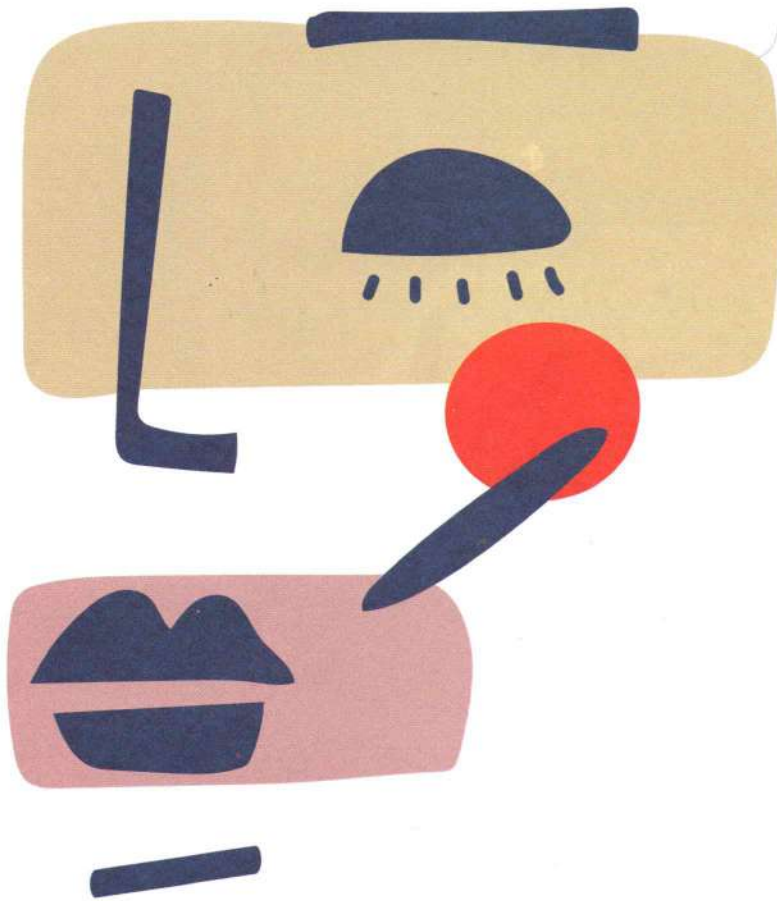
## Buzzword or byword

In the early 21st century, advertising agencies adopted the word for branding copy, using it as a byword for quality and reliability, while corporations and wellness industries have taken it on, imbuing it with notions of being truthful, especially to self.

This word authentic has now become ubiquitous and as a result overused. It was the darling of branding language, but some advertising agencies know that its gratuitous usage has resulted in the word losing its potency. It has become a byword for anything you want to market as real or efficacious. Sometimes to update a word is to inadvertently render it outdated. It risks becoming redundant. And this may be the case with this word that has lasted the test of time.

Author Lindsay Pederson, whose book *Forging an Ironclad Brand* is directed at branding and advertising agencies, writes, "A few years ago, I observed that in every single brand strategy I was crafting, the business owner wanted to describe the business's personality as 'authentic'. At first I found it curious but I went along with it, because I liked the word 'authentic' too. It made sense that in our increasingly





technology-driven world that there would be a hunger for authenticity. But after the third or fourth time someone wanted "authentic" in their brand strategy, it smacked of cliché. This word 'authentic' started out with a precise meaning but is now almost comically overused. As a buzzword, it has become a capsule for all things good and not fake; it is no longer defined by what it is, but by what it is not. It's a placeholder, a platitude; people don't take the time or energy to deconstruct what they truly want when they choose this word."

And this is the problem when a word is plucked out of the lexicon and given a makeover. At first we love it and embrace it wholeheartedly, until it actually loses its meaning because we forget the very value it denotes. In recent times it has had a saturation effect where it has lost its innate complexity, reducing it to a binary proposition. You're either authentic or you're not.

The word has been subverted or converted, depending on how you see it. In the wellness industry, it means being yourself, or rather being your true self, but that is a subjective notion, while an ancient Greek statue can be deemed as authentic with its provenance verified or authenticated by an expert. So how does this translate when regarding oneself or another as an authentic person?

### Fifty shades of authentic

To say you're authentic is to assert a value proposition about yourself. But what precisely is that value proposition? If it is about living your values and asserting your beliefs, then there may be more apt words to describe that sensibility, such as "principled" or "being a person of strong character". Pederson feels that specificity is required as the term authentic is prone to vagueness.

When we implore someone to be their authentic or true self, we assume and trust this must be a good thing. Well, Stalin and Hitler were authentic as they did live their true beliefs. This word doesn't feel so good any more, does it? Authenticity as a notion inside our current sensibilities conflates truthfulness with true self, which sometimes may not be a good combination. Someone's true self may be an anathema to what we perceive as good and moral.

Further, authenticity can be all about perception. A political candidate can come across as authentic in that positive way we deem it. In US politics, Bernie Sanders is viewed as authentic, but if we are to use this definition of being your true self, Donald Trump makes the grade too. Like him or loathe him, he is authentic. He presents as he is, even if some may find him unpalatable. So is there a perceptual issue with this word? Can you be authentic only if you're a good guy or perceived as one?

Authenticity implies truth, but the truth isn't always pretty. Marketers often talk about truth in advertising, and this means transparency and honesty. Authenticity in its new inception can be vague and subject to an interpretation. Perhaps drilling down into the word and being more specific may be helpful when describing what it is to be authentic.

### Fake authenticity

When the late, great Helen Reddy belted out the seminal 1970s hit "I am Woman" it meant something. She was declaring herself as a feminist prepared to stand up for her rights. What if she sang, "I am authentic"? What would that have meant? I am myself. Sure. But what does that mean?

Authentic means nothing by itself. It always requires definition. Who am I? In its previous incarnation, authentic talked about something being a bona fide, genuine article. So in its new conceptual meaning, when we say "She is authentic" we are saying she is genuine, with the implication that this person is honest and sincere. But she could also be an intolerant or difficult person and happy to own up to that. Effectively, someone could be genuinely disagreeable.

Many people use this word as a byword or as a lexical crutch to avoid more complex description or discussion. Authentic offers us a shortcut as it is assumed by the consumer, listener or viewer that it is a good thing.

In advertising, this word has become oversaturated in copy because it is such a go-to term to imply honesty. But that is an implication, not a promise or a fact, and there is nothing specific or qualified about it. The song "I am Woman" is explicit and unambiguous — we know what the singer meant.

Marketers are now seeing the pitfalls with this word as its blanket usage is rendering it reductionist. The more this word is used, the less potent it becomes. Other buzzwords like "journey", "synergy", "vulnerable", "agile", "value-add", "thought-leadership" or "micro-moment" are on the surface all comprehensible, plus catchy, but what do they mean or meant to convey? Are they even real? Isn't a moment already micro?

We all use these catchphrases. They have become so much a part of our regular speech and syntax that we don't even realise it.

Authentic can be so many things and it can mean different things to different people.

Is authentic someone at ease with themselves, exudes confidence, is natural, is respectful, is empathic, vulnerable? Whatever your brand of authenticity, you need to identify it in yourself and in others.

Because it has vagueness but also has become a generalised term, it is helpful to strip it back to its essential definitional core. It is not merely about being yourself but defining yourself. There is no right or wrong and no good or bad. It just is.

### How you can be authenticated

Sociologist and renowned speaker Brené Brown asserts, "Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we're supposed to be and embracing who we are." But she also quantifies it as: "Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen." And just when you think you have it down, she pops up with this kicker: "Authenticity embraces whole-hearted living and loving, even if we are struggling with the shame and fear of not being good enough and especially when the joy is so intense that we are afraid to feel it."

Brown's version of authenticity has a one-size-fits-all about it, and therein lies the problem. From a definitional point of view, the meaning is not definitive. Of course, we understand that the sense of it is to essentially be your true self, or as in the definition the Greeks put forward hundreds of years ago: to have authority over oneself. But semantically speaking, this word is doing some heavy lifting. I wonder if it is trying to be all things to all people.

I wonder if you swapped out authenticity for autonomy if you could still deliver those same precepts? Authenticity is a word that encompasses a range of values to do with the embodiment of self. Effectively, in the same way as the advertising world has used the word authenticity to build the enhanced reputations of brands, in the

### Choosing authenticity means

- ~ Cultivating the courage to be imperfect, to set boundaries, and to allow ourselves to be vulnerable;
- ~ Exercising the compassion that comes from knowing we are all made of strength and struggle;
- ~ Nurturing the connection and sense of belonging that can only happen when we believe we are strong enough; and
- ~ Mindfully practising authenticity during our most soul-searching struggles is how we invite grace, joy and gratitude into our lives.



wellness sector, authenticity has become a byword for selfhood. It is an umbrella term in the same way as vulnerability became. These two words are now touchstone terms that provide a system of thinking about all things to do with the self, signalling how to live our lives and to view ourselves.

As a therapist, I have concerns when these buzzwords become blanket words, as the thinking can become reductionist and simplistic. It is disconcerting when Brown categorically states: "If you trade your authenticity for safety, you may experience the following: anxiety, depression, eating disorders, addiction, rage, blame, resentment, and inexplicable grief." The premise is sound, but now authenticity is forced to carry a heavy load of responsibility with mental health. And it doesn't hold up that if you're inauthentic you may be prone to catastrophic outcomes. Authenticity has become the byword for being yourself, and that's fine if the word doesn't take on more than what it is.

### Authentic anxiety

If you're not authentic, does that mean you're inauthentic? And how can you be inauthentic? Many people don't live their true lives or fall short of their values. But the problem with this word is that can be binary — you are authentic or you're not.

Life isn't like that. Often, we let ourselves down when we don't live according to our beliefs. But life is a work in progress and we are continually trying to work out who we are and what it takes to be ourselves.

Authenticity feels like the outcome rather than the process. Authenticity should be a daily way of life, allowing for growth, mistakes, missteps and change. We want to be true to our values, but we must allow for our values to change or to be updated. Authenticity has become a goal as opposed to being a state of mind.

If we devote our time trying to be authentic, we may inadvertently forget to be ourselves and to accept who we are as we are. Achieving or chasing authenticity can be an anxious pursuit if we see ourselves only in this binary light.

In the same way as we should never be reduced to or defined by a diagnosis either medically or psychologically, such as calling oneself asthmatic or depressed, let us not be reduced to a buzzword. We are so much more complex than merely being authentic, or not.

As the late Ms Reddy sang: "I am strong, I am invincible. I am woman." She was being herself. 🌟

*Marie Rowland is a writer and psychotherapist from a private practice based in Manly on Sydney's Northern Beaches. For more information, go to [talking-matters.com](http://talking-matters.com).*