Radical Authenticity

For those of you too young to remember the days before e-mail and other electronic and digital communication, one sometimes wrote handwritten letters and mailed them to someone who many times lived in another part of the world, thus forming a relationship referred to as pen pals. Although never having met in real life (IRL), this exchange was a way to get to know someone and learn about another culture through letter writing.

I feel like I just met my pen pals. But it’s 2018 and they are not pen pals I got to know through letters, but individuals I know through social media. This meeting happened when a mutual friend came to town, which mobilized us to finally meet over dinner at a local restaurant. What happens when you meet people you’ve never met IRL, but whom you have engaged with via social media? You have engaged in multiple Twitter® chats; you’ve shared, liked, and retweeted their content, and they have reciprocated these actions. Sometimes it’s nothing more than a friendly acknowledgement such as, “Hi, I follow you on Twitter.” Other times, however, it’s almost magical. And now, you meet in person for a real-time, real-life conversation with strong, educated, and interesting women (and men) who are living, being, and talking in radically authentic ways.

Radical authenticity is a term I started using recently to describe communication that is direct, and less performative, which challenges or attempts to disrupt the status quo. Merriam-Webster (2018) defines radical as “very different from the usual or traditional; favoring extreme changes in existing views, habits, conditions, or institutions.” Regarding authenticity, Starr (2008) states:

1) Authenticity is a process of discovery; 2) This process includes realizing personal potential and acting on that potential; 3) Part of this process is accepting the responsibility for and the consequences of life choices that are consciously or unconsciously made; 4) Suffering may be involved; 5) The culmination of this process is a demonstration of congruency in ideals, values, and actions in relation to self and others; 6) This is a lifelong process whose ultimate achievement may not be realized. (p. 58)

Thus, radical authenticity is an unusual way of being that disrupts existing beliefs through an understanding of personal action through individual agency.

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Probably because I’ve been thinking about this concept—radical authenticity—I’ve “recognized” it in others (and myself). It was present that night at dinner with my pen pals/social media friends during a discussion about leadership in academic nursing and reproductive justice. Another example was my recent job interview for a president’s position at a small college. I prepared for the interview by reading strategic plans, budgets, and all that I could find about the university, including public tax records for salaries and the backgrounds of Board of Trustees and health system leaders. During the in-person interview, I asked difficult questions, specifically regarding the wage gap between the Vice President of Graduate Medical Education (who makes approximately $400,000 per year) and the President of Nursing Education (who makes approximately $200,000 per year). The question was direct and challenged the status quo/salary inequity.

Another example from a clinical practice perspective would be when a nurse questions a psychiatrist who wants to place an order for constant observation of a patient who is manic. The nurse, who spends far more time with this patient than the psychiatrist, knows this order will add even more stimulation to the patient who is already overstimulated. In this instance, the nurse questions the orders in a clear and direct way, exhibiting radical authenticity.

Maybe this type of communication or way of being could be referred to as “a straight shooter,” or someone who “tells it like it is” or embodies “what you see is what you get.” Radical au-
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henticity though, is more than just that. Its message and intentions are bigger. I started using the concept while preparing my interview questions and after listening to several podcasts on leadership, and after my recent introduction to Tara Brach (2003), author of Radical Acceptance.

To be sure, it is easier to be radically authentic when one comes from a privileged position. In the example of my social media friends, they are educated professionals with powerful positions. In my example in the job interview, I could “afford” to be myself and ask difficult questions. As an educated and credentialed middle-aged White woman with a good job in a good university, with good open job prospects (if anything were to happen), I recognize I am free. I come from a position of power and therefore am able to withstand blowback (or suffering as Starr [2008] reports). I have position power as a department chair and confidence.

Nurses need to challenge the status quo in work places for better care of individuals—whether it is to decrease the number and length of close observations on inpatient units, to ensure adequate staffing, or for advanced practice nurses to be recognized with full practice authority.

Radical authenticity has been used before and it may or may not be a useful concept, but I suggest that it may be a useful way to think about social change. To embody the agency and act in ways that stimulate change.

Whether it is about salary inequities or patient care, I think the world may be a little better if we all strived for more radical authenticity.

REFERENCES


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