THE ART OF BEING AUTHENTIC

NINE PRINCIPLES TO LIVING AUTHENTICALLY YOU!

Tracey R. Cobb LPC, NCC, CMFT

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The events and conversations in this book have been set down to the best of the author's ability, although some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my father, Herbert L. Cobb.

Thank you for giving so much and asking for so little in return.

Love never fails. 1 Corinthians 13:8



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Living Authentically you and the lotus flower

magine a stunning flower that grows in the muddy water of still ponds and lakes. Deeply rooted in the soil under water, it pushes forth, growing through the dirt until it reaches the light of the sun. From this murky beginning in a hostile environment, a beautiful flower emerges. This flower is the lotus.

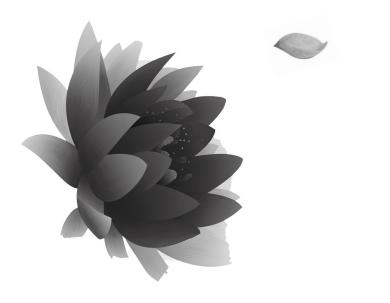
Like the lotus flower, I am blossoming through life's difficulties, no matter how challenging they might be. Despite tough circumstances, I know there's beauty and life on the other side. I also know there's no way to move but forward, and I fiercely challenge all the things that try to hold me back. *Living Authentically* is the vehicle by which I travel along this journey. *Living Authentically* began as a personal vision, one that daily reminded me to practice self-love and self-compassion. As I began to openly discuss authenticity and this book's concept, others around me began to share their need for the same self-love and compassion. This is when I realized I could help others move forward and that I was destined to lead with love. As a therapist, life coach, and relationship strategist, I endeavor to meet my clients and others who cross my path exactly where they are on their respective journeys.

Therapists often focus on maladaptive thoughts and behaviors to help people overcome being stuck in the past. In order for me to truly assist someone's process of moving forward, I offer a safe, therapeutic space, empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard.

Life coaching is similar to therapy when it comes to creating the space for empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard, but when it comes to people's circumstance, it's adaptive. While someone who seeks to overcome trauma or dysfunction would look to therapy specifically, those who seek life coaching are focused on their future. As a relationship strategist, I work with clients to help them understand the nuances of love and relationships and to prepare them for healthy, loving relationships based on genuine reciprocity.

Within these different approaches I employ various vehicles (trainings, writing materials, webinars, and support groups) to help individuals find the truest version of themselves while discovering what empowers them to walk in their life's purpose. The results are often very different from what people initially expected or believed. I am determined for people to know that no matter what challenges they might face in life, there is a place to find healing, strength, and support. That place is found in *Living Authentically You*.

INTRODUCTION







Tracey's Truism

"I am beautifully made inside and out—as I accept myself, I offer the world permission to Live Authentically."

his book began as the journey of a little girl who was never quite sure of herself. I didn't realize it then, but my life was filled with plenty of love and support, and I was constantly surrounded by family and friends—safe from many of the challenges that other children faced. I had the perceived basics for a happy life—a stay-at-home mom, a hard-working dad, a room of my own in a suburban home complete with an apple tree and swing set in the backyard. I was an above-average student who could have been an A student if I had only worked a little harder.

Growing up, I was constantly told I was beautiful by many of my family members, but I struggled to believe that truth. I had smooth, dark chocolate skin, large brown eyes, full lips, and a head full of thick hair—but that wasn't "enough" in my mind. I didn't see beauty when I looked in the mirror, and I always felt just a little bit unsteady and unsure of myself.

As I think back on it, I don't believe I ever wanted to be or look like anyone else. But I wrestled with my identity and didn't place much value on my being because I was searching for that validation elsewhere. I often looked to others to uplift me, and I spent most of my teen and youngadult years pursuing that love and validation I so desperately craved.

Now, it's easy to see that I would have been considered to have low self-esteem, something I'm sure many people have dealt with at one time or another. Thankfully, I was able to stay away from looking for "love" in all of the wrong places and didn't indulge in activities such as drugs, misdeeds, or promiscuity. I was able to keep away from a fate that tripped up many others, and it's probably because I had a healthy fear of causing trouble or the sometimes unwritten and unspoken rules placed on me by my parents in order to honor them. I worked so hard to meet their expectations (and still do at times), but I realize I did not expect much from myself when it came to loving me. I was experiencing the uncertainty of a little girl who was lost. A combination of unchecked behavior and an unhealed heart shaped me into a woman who sought approval and validation from men because she wasn't able to see her worth. My experiences with men opened a vortex that eventually impacted every meaningful part of my life.

In many relationships I felt an obligation to give, no matter what. I didn't feel worthy enough to communicate my wants and needs to the men I dated. I'm reminded of the age-old proverb: "*if I* can't love myself then how can I expect someone else to love me?" I knew the type of relationship I desired to experience with potential mates, but I didn't have the courage to expect and, if required, demand it. To make matters worse I found myself drawn to emotionally unavailable men.

Emotionally unavailable men (and women for that fact) are incapable of creating and sustaining emotional bonds with others. They're often only interested in situations where *their* needs are being met and are often unable to engage in meeting the needs of anyone around them, whether in a romantic or a platonic relationship. This is often a defense mechanism put in place as a response to early trauma and is used to keep them safe. Whether people with these traits intend to or not, their behaviors can cause damage to the people they're in relationships with, causing others' faith in them to be shaken.

A vicious cycle of those types of relationships, perpetuated by my constant feeling of unworthiness were never going to produce the desired ending. The men I attached myself to were incapable of loving me or even liking me in a whole and healthy way. They had nothing to give, and I judged my worthiness on how well I could get them to show love and concern in the relationships.

So, when I didn't get what I wanted I began to tell myself that I was the problem. If I claimed to be the problem, then I could craft the solution never realizing I could have never been enough for those men because I was not their issue. The more they pulled away, the harder I fought and blamed myself. Their inability to form emotional attachments had nothing to do with me. Eventually, I had to identify why I continued to desire that type of man.

I wasn't able to take any accountability in those

situations. I tried to be tough—I acted calloused and cold in order to protect my heart. I wanted to be like the people who seemed to go through difficult times without any emotional response. I thought, "Who cares if the man I liked didn't like me? Not me!" I worked so hard to be equally as evasive and unbothered. Looking back, I realize that all I truly wanted to be was *numb*. It took a lot more living for me to realize that even the people who pretended to be numb, were indeed feeling something. They simply mastered the art of masking their emotions.

The reason the cold and calloused act didn't work for me is because my nature is the antithesis of that—my caring temperament is one of my greatest strengths. My Higher Power designed me to be a woman led by her heart—so even when I thought I was protecting myself by being tough and thick-skinned, I was heartbroken because I wasn't being me.

When I learned all these things about myself, I had to find a way to intertwine all the pieces of Tracey to match my true identity. Through prayer, meditation, reflection, and many tears I discovered that I was seeking my authentic self. I wasn't even aware that authenticity was what I desired or needed but through my journey of hurt and pain, coupled with my education and personal awareness, it became abundantly clear. I wanted to be at peace with all the details that made me, *me*. I needed to know the difference between feelings and emotions, energies and intelligence. They were all a part of a Higher Power's perfect plan for who I was destined to be. I had to recognize the woman I was becoming was capable of a happiness and joy beyond what I thought was imaginable if I simply let go and put trust in my journey!

One definition of authentic is "*worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact.*" This rang so true; I discovered I was worthy simply because I exist—because I was formed in a Higher Power's image. I was fashioned exactly the way I was supposed to be. My sensitivity, my heart, my intelligence along with the wide nose and skinny legs are just what was ordered when I was created. I had to own all the things that made me—well, *me*.

Another aspect of authenticity highlighted in the dictionary speaks to being "*true to one's own personality, spirit or character*." These definitions operate hand in hand. Not only must we accept ourselves as worthy, but we must accept the traits, characteristics, quirks, and faults that become the essence of who we are. Accepting our character traits is necessary for the way we live our lives and instrumental in presenting our best self to the world. Our complete self-acceptance can also assist others in becoming who they are meant to be. When we consider the best or worst of who we are, we must know that our beliefs about self and our character traits influence, teach, and shape the people in our lives. Oftentimes, our self-awareness may impact the way people see the world. How wonderful to know there's a Higher Power that uses each and every opportunity to stretch us, teach us, and show us love.

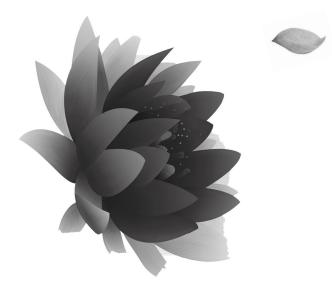
As I gained wisdom from certain lessons and began to identify my authentic self, I realized I no longer needed acceptance from anyone else. On good days and bad, I knew I was exactly where I was supposed to be. The truth is, life will have some incredibly inspiring and awesome moments and every now and then, tests will come. In the challenging moments it's so important that I (and you) remember, *this too shall pass*. The trials are a part of life's journey, and I will be molded and changed by them. As I continue to grow, I take every opportunity to learn new things, love on others, and be supportive as I become my best self. It is not always easy, but there is a weight lifted off my shoulders knowing I don't have to suppress or repress the core of who I am.

I offer "The Art of Being Authentic" as a way to share my journey and touch the hearts of those who may be feeling the same way I felt and still feel at times. This book consists of nine principles I learned on my journey to self-acceptance, self-respect, and self-love. Not "self-ish" in a way that seeks to take from others but in a selfless way that enables us to teach boundaries and accept healthy love and relationships. I hope it resonates deeply with you.



PRINCIPLE 1

Acknowledging a Higher Power







Tracey's Truism

"Be open to the difference in an individual's walk with faith. We all come to know our Creator's love in our own time and circumstances."

Il my life I have struggled with the concept of God, Jesus, and the Bible everything that people in my world encouraged me to believe. Though my mother grew up regularly attending church, my parents did not require my brother or me to attend. My father didn't speak much about religion, but he did share his belief that the organized religion imposed upon Africans was the downfall of the African continent, subsequently dismantling Africa's autonomy and negatively impacting the lives of their descendants for generations to come. My father's sisters were God-fearing, church-going women by the time I got to know them well, so I was surprised when I learned that prior to their receiving salvation, they enjoyed a youthful life that included drinking and dancing.

My experience within my immediate family was very different from my aunts' in reference to religion because their children attended church with them on a regular basis. My mother believed that we should be able to choose for ourselves whether we attended church or not, since that wasn't an option she was given as a child. My mother was expected to attend church even though my grandmother wasn't always able to go with her. My family and I were seasonal church visitors who attended for holidays, baptisms, or funerals. On the rare occasion that we did attend, I was struck by the length of the service and gripped by fear when the pastor shared the fate of those who disobeved the Lord. After attending church, it took me days to get the visions of fire and brimstone, eternal damnation, and isolation from loved ones out of my head. It was also surprising to me that I was conflicted about "my faith" because I was definitely a rule follower, but for some reason *church* didn't make sense to me.

To be clear, I believe there is a God or a Higher Power who is the Creator or guardian of all. I just had a hard time reconciling what that Higher Power was saying to me in regard to organized religion and the Bible. Within my social circle, I saw people who were true believers and people who never made an acknowledgment either way. Through it all, I silently feared my Higher Power and the whole process of being judged by the general authority figure "God/Jesus." I feared being judged by believers who were vocally telling my parents that I should be attending church, because I didn't know enough as a young person to make a decision about church, God, Christ, and the relationship between those three things. I figured since I was a good person, I didn't need to worry too much about the religious aspect, and I chose to focus on caring about others and continued to do the things that resonated with my spirit.

I believed I'd be rewarded in my quest to be a kind person. What I've discovered is that there was no direct link to being a good soul plus being happy or successful. I tried to convince myself that if I could begin to believe the teachings of the Bible and Christianity wholeheartedly, I would feel more connected. I ignored the fact that I truly believed any religion that moves the hearts of any man or woman was just as sacred, valuable, and important as the religion I was trying to adopt. The American culture tends to teach Christianity as the primary and secondary option—the answer to every question, but I never felt that pull, and I tried to manufacture the spiritual connection and experience I witnessed others having. I ultimately found myself being drawn to a more simplistic spirituality, one that didn't draw lines of division based on a name, sexism, or hierarchy but where the creator of all life and the maker of all things was just that.



A Guide on This Journey

I believe being authentic begins with spirituality the belief in a Higher Power who allows you tohave a level of faith that gets you through the hard times and the good times. Being authentic means acknowledging the Higher Power that moves you and speaks to the essence of your soul. It means having the courage to allow others to believe in their own version of a creator without the need to judge or belittle their faith. None of us can get through this life alone, and I like to think that all the people who have supported me on this wonderful winding journey are the human manifestations of the creator's love for me on this earth. I believe their impact on my life is less about the teaching of a specific religion but more about the collective agreement that love should be everyone's primary goal.



Recognize You Have a Purpose

Your being here on earth is intentional. Know that your existence is not by chance, and that you are supposed to be right where you are. Our individual lives are the vehicles that the universe uses to teach lessons and accomplish goals that benefit us, and most importantly, others. This unique planning has predestined each one of us to perform miracles through gifts and services that are specific to our individuality. No matter the reason, the fact we woke up this morning means we have not yet fulfilled our purpose. And even though we may not consciously realize what that purpose is, just to know there is one, gives life meaning.

Lay Your Troubles at Your Creator's Feet

Life can be challenging. Life can be overwhelming. At times, it may seem as if obstacles are coming at us from all sides. Do this-pay that-be *here—go there.* It's a never-ending cycle. There can be points where there's so much stress, we feel as if we don't have the capacity for one more thing to go wrong. And when it does, it weighs us down, crushing our confidence and spirits, leaving us feeling helpless and hopeless. It is at this point our faith needs to be activated. We need to seek a deeper understanding and lay our burdens down. The wonderful thing about having a spiritual relationship with our Creator is that we can relinquish our perceived control and turn our heavy loads over to a Higher Power who desires the best for us. Who doesn't desire this level of love and support?



Have Faith

Faith is believing in a power greater than ourselves in order to face what the world says or what life brings our way. When we operate in faith, we are able to remain patient and confident that a Higher Power directs our steps, according to the purposes of our lives. Although it is not always easy to live in this space when the walls seem to be closing in, knowing a Higher Power in a personal way can make a difference. Faith is not knowing what will come next but recognizing there is hope on the other side of life's uncertainties. Living in faith removes some of the pressure to make life-changing decisions and gives us the confidence that we can trust in a Higher Power.



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REFLECTION

HIGHER POWER

How are you acknowledging your Higher Power?





REFLECTION

CONFLICT

Share a time when you were conflicted in your faith. How did you overcome the conflict?





REFLECTION

IMPACT

How do you think your Higher Power is using your authenticity to impact the world?



About the Author

Tracey R. Cobb is a therapist, author, life coach, and relationship strategist who is also lovingly known as "Therapist Tracey". Her background has given her keen insight into the self-help and awareness arena, mostly about relationships and dating, and has driven her passion to help people live with intention and authenticity.



Through her stories,

Tracey hopes her readers will find that it is a beautiful thing to seek their authentic selves and let go of the notion of having to perform or meet the expectations of others to be valuable or worthy. She wants her readers to love the idea of learning who they are and stepping unapologetically into the space they occupy on this earth.

Tracey lives just North of Atlanta, Georgia, where she loves the Black culture, the proximity to civil rights and her history, the beautiful weather, and the family-centered community where she raised her children. *The Art of Being Authentic* is her debut non-fiction book.