THE ART OF BEING AUTHENIC

NINE PRINCIPLES TO LIVING AUTHENTICALLY YOU!



THE ART OF BEING AUTHENTIC

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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.

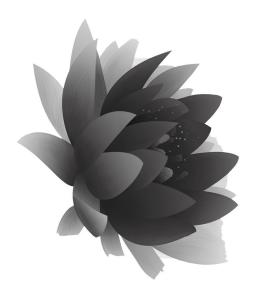
Love never fails. 1 Corinthians 13:8



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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.

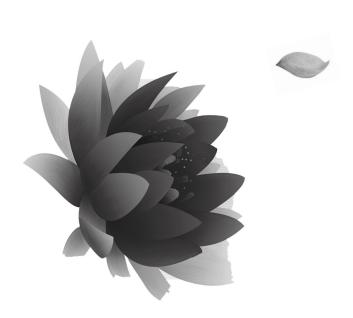
Therapists often focus on maladaptive thoughts and behaviors to help people overcome being stuck in the past. In order for me to truly assist someone's process of moving forward, I offer a safe, therapeutic space, empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard.

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





"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

INTRODUCTION

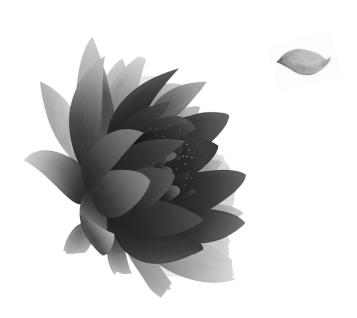
my shoulders knowing I don't have to suppress or repress the core of who I am.

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 8

I am the center— Sometimes





"I am powerful beyond measure!"

s a single mother, I have learned very well to defer to the needs of my children. As a young mother, I felt empowered when I made any decision to do what was best for them.

Once, I had the opportunity to see Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls play in the United Center during the team's second championship run in the nineties. I worked for a cable company that provided free tickets to the game plus lodging; I just needed to get to Chicago. This game was

during the holiday season and during that same time, my parents had planned a trip to Orlando and my daughter and I were scheduled to go with them.

After I got the chance to go to Chicago, I was torn—I had never been to Chicago and the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see one of my heroes was huge. On the other hand, I had an obligation to my six-year-old daughter. Needless to say, I did not see Michael Jordan at the United Center that year. I saw Mickey and Minnie Mouse instead.

In that moment, I wish that I had the courage to choose myself. I wish that I'd recognized it was okay to do something I loved. I'd always heard it was necessary for parents to sacrifice for their children at all costs. I believed that was needed in order to show my value as a mom and prove to my child how much I loved her.

Today, I know it wasn't necessary or healthy for me to give up that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. My daughter was a happy, well-adjusted child who had a loving and supportive relationship with her grandparents. Over the years and before my father died, she traveled the country with them and built a loving bond with them. She was the first grandchild and only girl, so they treated her like a princess. Other than my misconstrued notion of motherhood, there was no reason I should not have attended that basketball game.

Not taking the time to do some of the things I enjoy might have taught my children that my needs are not important. That it is perfectly acceptable for them to discount my desires whenever their needs and wants are concerned. I taught them that I had no right to autonomy, and I was supposed to sacrifice everything for them.

Ironically, my loving, supportive children seemed to have learned the opposite. They are very aware of themselves and their needs. They know when to share and when to turn the focus inward. My daughter reminds me all the time to do things for myself, to care for myself, and to shift my thoughts from the things I need to do to the things I love to do! It is important that I understand self-sacrifice is not a bad thing, but as a young mother I needed to strike a balance and surely didn't know how to do it. The more evolved version of me wants my children and anyone I love to know that their goals, dreams, and once-in-a-lifetime opportunities should be honored.



I Am Valuable

Throughout this section, I will speak specifically to how the words *I Am Valuable* empower black women and people of color. I also want to be clear that this principle is just as important and powerful for all people—not just those of color—and affirms the right of existence for women, immigrants, and members of the LGBTQ+ communities as well. We are all better when we acknowledge the cares, struggles, and challenges that the collective of humankind faces.

As I write this, America has chosen its forty-sixth President of the United States. By unseating the forty-fifth president, who ruled the nation focused on racism, sexism, classism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and an obvious mistrust of science, we end an era of divide in our country that was relatively unseen since before the 1960s civil rights movement.

While ending his reign is a satisfying feat, the best part of a new presidency is that our new Vice President Kamala Devi Harris, is a black woman of Indian and Jamaican descent. She will be the first woman to serve as vice president and her being black reminds us of the promises of those who

went before us all. She is the embodiment of the unfulfilled dreams of our ancestors. In her I see myself, my daughter, my mother, my sister circle, and so many women of color who feel disenfranchised by life in America. Vice President Harris offers us black women and women of color a visual confirmation that we are valuable simply because we exist and we are capable of accomplishing *anything*.

The words I Am Valuable, in my opinion, are three of the most powerful words in our language. They imply self-sufficiency and self-existence something that America has not always offered to black women. These words ground us in our humanity and our right to be in this world without seeking validation or approval from America's or anyone's ruling majority. I Am Valuable allows us to take back the power stripped from us and our ancestors through being kidnapped from our homeland, brought to another country, and enslaved only to be treated poorly because of our skin color. As a black woman, I feel authenticity in my spirit and I wonder how my ancestors managed each day being forced to stifle their true selves—especially knowing their self-expression was a death sentence. For hundreds of years,

they had to suppress the powerful expression of *I Am Valuable*, until generations of black children could no longer hear that part of their spirit.

IAm Valuable makes this country accountable for every Black American life that has been denied full partnership in the constitutional promise. From the founding of the NAACP to the current Black Lives Matter movement, what has emerged from these challenges is a collective energy in the Black community that no longer seeks to apologize for being black, a realization that we are not inadequate, and a release of the need to cater to the experiences of the white culture.

As an individual, the affirmation of *I Am Valuable* reminds me of my own self-sufficiency, self-existence, and self-love! *I Am Valuable* tells me that I have life and am entitled to occupy space in this world where so many people prefer my silence. *I Am Valuable* reinforces my talents, my treasures, my worth, and my value cultivated by my Higher Power's creation of me and not a manmade system. My wish for everyone reading this book, no matter your race, gender, or sexual orientation is for you to cultivate your passion and walk wholly and completely into that.

It's All About You—Sometimes!

Genuine authenticity is about finding the courage to embark on a journey to discover who we truly are. The most important step in this journey is making it all about the individual. Often, we live our lives trying to fit a mold, meet a need, or satisfy the expectations of others. Sadly, we do this without awareness that it's happening. Lessons we learn as children about how we are supposed to act and who we are supposed to be, tend to challenge our authentic existence. A traditional rule such as "children should be seen and not heard" can lead us down the path of not having a voice. Unconsciously absorbing some of those unhealthy behavioral patterns and mindsets teach us that our own lives are not worthwhile unless. we are constantly giving of ourselves, and the idea that we should be doing it with a smile on our faces is another misconception.

We must give ourselves permission to turn our journey inward and focus on ourselves. This does not mean we disregard our families and other responsibilities. What it does mean is that we should work to strike a balance between living life to the fullest and prioritizing what's most important in different seasons of our lives. We all deserve an abundant and rich life, and part of that is honoring our loved ones and honoring ourselves.

Most of us find it easy to honor our family, work, and commitments to others but stumble when it comes to honoring self. The way we honor ourselves is to make time on a regular basis to commune with our mind, body, and spirit to learn how to hear our own voices. This practice is important to silence the noise others bring to our lives and listen to the guidance of ourselves and our Higher Power. Three ways we can begin to honor ourselves could be as simple as regular physicals, exercising, and eating well. Cultivating balance and setting boundaries allows us to confidently say "no" to things that we don't want to do, leaving time for the things that fill our spirits and make us happy. This may look like seeking therapy or coaching to help confront long-standing pain and trauma that's been hidden in our bodies. It's necessary to grant ourselves grace when we make the decision to heal in order to live life in our most authentic state. Recognizing that we are truly doing the best we can is also important.



The Collective Magnificence That Is You

I'd like for everyone reading this book to take a moment to examine the personality traits and gifts that define you. Do you fall in the shy, funny, extroverted, or intense category? Do you see yourself as a talented dancer or rhythmically challenged? Guess what? Whoever or whatever you bring to the table is okay! It takes many different characteristics to create the fullness of who we are, and living authentically you is about never disparaging any parts of that fullness. Every piece of our person and humanity is needed to complete our personal tasks in this life. We should marvel at the subtle nuances that make up our hearts, spirits, personalities, bodies, and souls. We often define ourselves by the roles we play: mothers, caretakers, lovers, friends, employees, entrepreneurs, problem-solvers, and creators. We may operate in one or more of these roles at any given time in our lives and may be faced with being many of these concurrently. None of these labels can accurately express the totality of who we are because being authentic is about embracing all the pieces that make up "the whole me."

In my experience of learning myself, I recognized that there was something missing in my life.

The tape that reinforced who I was began to stick and sputter like a worn-out cassette tape, forcing me to really examine the validity of the woman I was trying to be. Once my curiosity was piqued, I no longer felt comfortable with the old narrative of the good girl who was quiet and docile, overextending and sacrificing herself in order to meet the needs of others. The whole *bite my tongue* because confrontation made me uncomfortable and *keep the peace until it hurt* bit, was no longer working for me.

I began to ask myself questions like: Who could I possibly have been before I allowed the world to tell me who I should be? What things make me happy just because? What story am I telling myself that is keeping me stuck? I had to cultivate the answers to these and several other questions and sit with the answers—offering myself time for real reflection, grace, and compassion as I faced the hard stuff. Once I was able to confront and own my story, I could rewrite it with a different skillset, understanding, and attention to detail that helped me to focus on who was emerging within me. The journey to self-awareness and authenticity is not ever easy-but can free you from the burden of living a life that does not belong to us. And though uncovering our authentic selves may be challenging there is joy in discovering all aspects of you, defined ultimately by you and for you.



Be Transparent

There is so much self-reflection involved in being on this journey that we must be sure we are in it for the right reasons. The current fad seems to be calling-out, judging, and using cancel-culture tactics to shame and influence others, both friend and foe. Many times, we have no trouble reading and telling other people about themselves all under the guise of "keeping it real". Keeping it real is another person's truth with the expectation that the listener will respond favorably because it is coming from the heart. This cultural phenomena is often waged by people who are uncomfortable with assessing their own lives. It is always easy to judge and criticize others rather than look inward.

Sadly, many of us feel empowered when we can identify what we believe to be negative information about others and creating drama feels like power. We feel superior because their issues are not our own. But I would ask, "Can you keep it real with yourself?" In our minds, we are bigger, faster, stronger, better than the person we are trolling or judging—but we are not addressing the problematic behaviors in our lives. This deflection keeps us focusing and monitoring the lives of others and implies safety from deep self-reflection. We can't fix anything in our lives focusing on someone else's yard. There is no way around it, we must sit with ourselves.

I believe it's necessary to take time to see ourselves as we really are: are we kind, respectful, and open to listening to others? Do people avoid confrontation or tough discussions with us? Are we comfortable with the person we present to other people? What is that inner voice saying? Many of these questions are difficult to answer but necessary if authenticity is the goal. Working to answer these questions honestly and compassionately can help us recognize that we are subjecting ourselves to difficult thoughts and feelings. Transparency is vital and will open the doors to see the good with encouragement and the bad with a loving, caring approach that will allow the courage and esteem to make the desired changes.

Authenticity usually finds us when the pain of living for someone else's expectations becomes too much to bear. It appears when our hearts would rather live out the hard times and tough challenges of our own life rather than the perceived certainty of someone else's dreams. Make no mistake, not everyone is interested in authentic and organic living. Not everyone can be honest enough with themselves to take this journey. Some people may even feel joy or power being inauthentic.

Authenticity is about examining things about ourselves that make us uncomfortable with the hope of achieving better understanding within the context of who we are. On this journey, we relinquish judgement of ourselves because of our newfound understanding and offer self-compassion while we commit ourselves to grow through true self-discovery. Being able to see ourselves clearly enables us to seek the things we need such as love, support, and care. We also learn how to seek and receive those things from a healthy space.

We will not be able to cajole others to take the journey with us nor make them respect our desire to be better when it may change the dynamics of our shared relationships. It will take tact and critical thinking to erect boundaries around ourselves as we transform. We can ensure these boundaries by standing firm in them, by remembering the

goal of this process and remembering the power of *I AM* in our lives. The power to be, the power to exist. No one has the right to shape you into what they want or need. People who attempt to do this won't be successful when we decide that we must do what is best for us. Boundaries set are assumptions around what we expect in our lives, how others should treat us, and how we will manage those people who choose to disrespect those boundaries. Some of us may find that we must remove individuals from our sacred spaces to preserve the integrity of the space and your life. I say, do it anyway! The power is ours to wield, simply because we exist.







MY JOURNEY

What would you find if you made this journey about you?

Bally
 1000

REFLECTION



SAY NO

How often do you say yes to things you want to say no to?

Bally
 1000





LOVING ME

Be honest: do you love yourself? Describe what loving yourself looks like to you.

 1040
 700

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.