

Good Wear

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Many of you know that before I was a minister I was an appraiser of art and antiques. One of the hardest parts of my job then was having to break the news to a client that something they owned was not what they thought or had been told it was.

Sometimes it was a case of mistaken identity so to speak... a vase they thought was Chinese was in fact Japanese or a painting that bore the legitimate signature of a relatively unknown artist who happened to share the same last name as a more famous painter. Then there were the outright fakes, which ranged from the absurdly obvious to the astonishingly good, which, as you might imagine, are generally the hardest to detect and where sometimes even experienced experts do not always agree.

More often than not, the giveaway in the case of a superb fake is that it will frequently appear rather stiff or rigid in its execution. This is true regardless of the medium.

The reason for this is a forger is usually so concerned with producing a precise, technically perfect imitation of an original work that he or she fails to capture the creative movement and natural aesthetic imbued in the original by the artist or craftsperson who created it. The result is an object that may be perfect in form, yet feels plastic or artificial in some essential way.

I'm struck and, truthfully, saddened by how often modern life can feel this way too.

So many facets of life now mimic genuine human interaction and yet feel plastic or artificial, devoid of the humanity they're meant to imitate and in some cases replace.

When was the last time you called a customer service line and were even given the option of talking to a live person without first having to decode the exact language required to prompt the "automated system" to connect you? How many spend most of the day interacting with a screen rather than other people in the flesh? Watching Youtube videos instead of attending the theater or going to the movies? Or scrolling through endless reels on Instagram with our friends or family seated just a few feet away? And how many have hundreds of Facebook friends yet struggle to think of even a single person they might call to have coffee or lunch with, let alone call on in the event of an emergency?

And then there's AI and things like ChatGPT, to which, out of curiosity, I'll occasionally pose random questions to or see if it can correctly identify antiques. It's

not that great at identifying antiques. At the same time, it is an incredibly capable sycophant and may pose the greatest threat, at least in the short term, to those aspiring to political appointments within the current administration.

We're told we're more connected than ever and yet so many of us report feeling lonely. In fact a recent data (from the 2024 U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey) shows 40.3% of Americans report feeling lonely at least sometimes. And another (Gallup's 2024 research) found that 1 in 5 U.S. adults experiences loneliness daily. Curiously, the highest rates of loneliness are reported by people aged 18-34 followed by seniors.

According to research, persistent loneliness carries a similar, if not greater risk, of premature death as smoking and obesity and increases the prevalence of conditions such as dementia, high blood pressure, substance abuse, depression and anxiety.

Those last two, depression and anxiety have skyrocketed for Generation Z (usually defined as people born from 1997 to 2012) in the last decade or so says Arthur Brooks, author and professor at the Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Business School. Indeed, last year, while guest lecturer at private liberal arts school, Brooks told students they're living in a "simulation."

According to Brooks, "The trouble with technology is that it's really rewired our brains. When you're spending all of your time in the complicated tasks of work efficiency and technology, you're never using the parts of your brain you need for love and mystery and meaning."

The casual reader might dismiss Brooks' assertion as right brain/left brain mumbo jumbo, but others, including myself may find themselves wondering, if this is true, then what's a stake for us as human beings, spiritually?

I believe it's our very humanity that is at stake.

Consider the central question in that most piercing of children's stories by Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, "What is Real?"

What a powerful question. It's a question connected to an age old conviction that our lives are not simply random accidents, but instead have meaning and purpose.

Now, presumably the rabbit asks this question because he has a nagging sense something's missing, that he's not real...yet. As is or will be familiar to most people at some point in life, sometimes several points, the rabbit is experiencing a period of existential questioning, if not crisis.

Not surprisingly, he looks first to superficial indicators, “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick out handle?”

Wisdom, represented by the skin horse who has lived in the nursery for a long time, tells the hopeful little rabbit, “Real isn’t how you are made...it’s a thing that happens to you...it takes a long time and sometimes it hurts.” Most importantly, you can’t become Real by yourself.

Now, imagine, for a moment, if the velveteen rabbit shared a nursery with the latest iPhone instead of the worn, shabby skin horse. And he asks the iPhone, “What is Real?” Well, the iPhone wouldn’t even understand what the rabbit was asking. And so the iPhone might say real is all about sleek design, having lots of cool new features, tons of storage space, and ease of use...in other words it is about how your made, but the iPhone might also suggest he look it up...something the iPhone could help him do. While he’s doing that he could also look up how to be real without waiting, and without pain. Indeed, the iPhone would likely be inclined to take the rabbit’s question not as a mystery to ponder and live into, but as a problem to investigate and solve.

If the poor rabbit follows the iPhone down that, um, rabbit hole, having his hair being loved off or his eyes dropping out would be the least of his worries. As Arthur Brooks, posits the increases in depression and anxiety observed over the last decade, particularly among young adults, is the result not of economic stress or the state of the world, as is often assumed, but the state of our soul, so to speak. Indeed, he writes, “The real reason that we actually find behind the epidemic of depression and anxiety is the answer to the question, does your life having meaning?”

Increasingly, for many, the answer is no.

What’s going on?

Right now we live in a world where more people take, if not entirely trust, the iPhone’s approach to the question “What is Real?” more than that of the skin horse and we are losing our very humanity in the process. We are, in a sense, becoming less Real as our connection to one another becomes more and more superficial, screen based, ...more like a “simulation” to use Brooks’ term.

The good news is all in not lost. As Brooks notes, “The number one predictor of your life feeling meaningful is living your life in real life.” It’s relationships. It’s living kind of in the old way, as a matter of fact.”

Now Brooks is no luddite. He uses technology himself and knows it isn’t going anywhere. In fact, as he and others often point out, the issue isn’t simply technology

alone, but our relationship to it, the convictions we hold about it, both its promises and its pitfalls, and the primacy we give to it in our lives.

Part of the way we start to again use “the parts of our brain we need for love and mystery and meaning”, is to reset the terms of our relationship with technology. And Brooks offers some scientifically based pointers for doing this in a recent talk he gave for *Big Think* and as you might imagine it revolves around managing screen time via setting tech-free time, establishing tech-free zones, and taking tech fasts. If you want the specifics here’s a link to a recent interview he gave on the subject for *Big Think*, a site that publishes interviews and round table discussions with experts from a wide range of fields. <https://bigthink.com/series/full-interview/meaning-crisis-brooks/>

To compliment the science based pointers, there’s also the religious or spiritual approach, or what Brooks describes as, “living kind of in the old way”.

Earlier I noted that when I was an appraiser it was hard to tell people an object they believed to be real was fake. Often it was a blow to their ego that they were taken by an unscrupulous dealer or a humbling experience as they realized they had let their excitement over a potential monetary score override all the warning signs that the item in question was not what it appeared to be.

Well, I encounter a similar situation as minister from time to time. A person, who from the outside often seems to have it all together: accomplished, physically healthy, always busy with one thing or another, will come in and share that contrary to what how it appears, they struggle with the question, in one way or another, of meaning, of “What’s real?” Sometimes they feel cheated by life, other times embarrassed they’ve lived so long busying themselves despite the signs something was amiss.

The skin horse tells us real is a process and not something we can do ourselves. No matter how smart, rich, self-sufficient we may be, to experience what Real is, we need an agent of transformation. More plainly, to become Real we need to be in actual relationship with others. People with whom we can be vulnerable, people willing to love us with our “eyes dropped out”, “loose joints”, and “looking shabby”. People who will encourage and stay with us as we become Real, when it comes to us through pain or joy. People who help us make the transformation spoken of by the skin horse and alluded to in our call to worship this morning to, “Live your life so that when you die, the world cries and you rejoice.”

Where do we find such people?

A good place to start is to look around you...right here. You're sitting with and among such people. People with a mission, literally. A "Welcoming Congregation dedicated to Love, Faith, Justice and Reason. A community that seeks to nurture the spirit and enrich the mind; foster a reverence for life in all of its complexity and mystery; build a spiritual community dedicated to social, economic, and environmental justice; explore the search for truth by providing a safe space for the exchange of diverse perspectives; inspire members, friends and our larger community to go forth and make the world a better place." (SUUS Mission)

Real is the focus of religious community...of this religious community.

Some of us are just beginning to ask, What is Real? others have likely known for years and a whole lot of us are gradually coming into an understanding because we are part of this religious community.

Those who "break easily, have sharp edges or have to be carefully kept" will come and go and always we wish them well because the only thing harder than loving your true self in a world of memes, reels, and generative AI is allowing that self to be known and loved by others, including, depending on your theological view, by God.

A healthy, compassionate religious community works together to provide a safe place to be known and loved, which is the most basic and profound spiritual need of every person. A need filled as we become Real.

There's a phrase in the antiques trade often uttered by appraisers on the Antiques Roadshow, "good wear", meaning wear that is consistent with an object's alleged age and intended use. It is one of the most reliable means of evaluating the authenticity of an object and something the forger is unable to convincingly replicate.

Real we might say then, is a life that exhibits "good wear". Like a toy horse whose hair has been loved off by a child or the smooth finish on the knuckles on antique chair softened by generations of human touch, it is not something we can fake. Real happens in our own age as it as always happened: when we join our lives with others on the long, often slow, and sometimes painful process and practice of being human...fully... beautifully. A journey that is, in this age of simulation, the ever vital call of religious community. May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be