



Pop quiz time. You're at your favorite watering hole and the group is discussing popular music, when someone says that opera is reserved for closet-dwelling geeks who can't keep a beat on the dance floor. Do you pipe up and confess that the score from *La Bohème* stirs your soul? Or, do you hover silently over your cocktail only to later sob over your Pavarotti collection?

If you chose silence and sobbing, you may be trading the joy of an authentic life for the drudgery of living someone else's idea of what your life should be.

From birth to death we are bombarded with the opinions of parents, friends, teachers and lovers. "Not only do we hear those voices but we also hear the voices of people we see on TV," says Susan Piver, author of *The Hard Questions for an Authentic Life*. "You need to separate those family, media and cultural messages from who you really are."

But it can be hard to separate those voices from our inner truth. In fact society encourages us to trade our real selves in favor of the latest concept of what is considered right to wear, do and have to

Are you for real?

Living an authentic life isn't as hard as it sounds — and the reward is a happier you.

By Koren Wetmore

be successful. But only you can define what is right for you, because you are the one who knows you best. And if you don't know your real self, it's time you two got acquainted.

Getting to Know You

Before you can get real, you've got to get quiet, says psychologist Suzanne Zoglio, author of *Create a Life That Tickles Your Soul*. "You can meditate, do yoga or sit and do nothing but take a few breaths and ask 'What do I want? What feels right?'" she says. "Do the things that allow you to free your mind and cause your inner desires to bubble up."

Pay attention to inner longings, Zoglio says. If you attend a museum and are drawn to the paintings, consider taking an art class. If horses thrill you, saddle up for a few riding lessons. Should the road call, get out a map and start planning your trip, because you can't confirm or deny your true path until you take action and reflect on how you feel about the journey. "Take one small step in coming out of the closet about things that please you, about your opinions," Zoglio says. "You have to find out what's important to you and take your best shot."

Childhood memories can serve as snapshots of the real you. Recall what you were good at and what you enjoyed doing as a kid, as these things offer clues to your natural gifts and desires.

“ Women will think it's outside events and circumstances that are limiting them, but it's really their inner thoughts and beliefs. ”

"As children we were closest to our authentic selves," says career coach Ann Ronan, Ph.D., founder of the Authentic Life Institute in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif. "It was a time before culture, family or society could affect us."

Ronan also recommends making a list of your values and asking that all-important question: Why am I here? Your answer helps form your mission statement or life purpose.

"But don't get bogged down with thinking that only people like Mother Teresa have a life purpose," Ronan says. "If you long to contribute to the health of the environment, we need a lot of people to do that. Your purpose doesn't have to be unique or new."

You should also question yourself about key areas of your life such as your finances, your career and your relationships. "Different questions are important for different people," says Piver, who lists her top three as: Where do I have the most immediate experience of the divine? How much money do I have in my life? What friendships do I have in my life that I shouldn't be keeping?

Piver says money is an area where we often procrastinate or deny reality. Our relationships, she says, should be examined to determine which are grounded in affection and which are grounded in habit or insecurity.

Turning the Inside Out

When you start living authentically, prepare for opposition — from others and yourself.

Negative self-talk or limiting beliefs can hinder your progress, while those who benefited from the old you may criticize or belittle your new goals. "If the authentic you will no longer be a doormat, the people who liked you better the old way will try to get you to return to that. They may make you feel like they won't love you or like you and that you're going to die alone," Zoglio says. "The messages coming at you may not be supportive, so you need to be affirming to yourself."

Develop good things to say to yourself when the going gets tough. Practice affirmations such as "I can be happy even if others don't approve of me," or "I don't have to be perfect to be worthwhile."

Challenge your negative self-talk and beliefs. "Women will think it's outside events and circumstances that are limiting them, but it's really their inner thoughts and beliefs," Ronan says. "Purposely change your self-talk to what you prefer it to be. As you change your thoughts and beliefs, you'll see your outer world change to match them."

Your reward will be a life filled with passion, peace and purpose. It's your time to dance, and you get to choose the music. ■

FAKING IT

When you act in ways that are contrary to your real self, the resulting conflict creates a host of physical and mental symptoms. Watch for these warning signs, which can indicate you're not being true to you.

1. Lack of confidence
2. Feeling disconnected from life
3. Anger or resentment
4. Feeling of emptiness
5. Fatigue
6. Headaches/muscle tension
7. Severe weight loss or gain
8. Depression
9. Lack of laughter
10. Things not feeling "quite right"