

Perspectives

# To Thine Own Self Be True: 3 Simple Steps for Living with Integrity

By Donna Daisy, Ph.D.

**H**ave you ever heard the legendary phrase from Shakespeare's Hamlet, "To thine own self be true" and wondered, "What's that all about? It sounds good. But how do I know for sure who 'my own self' is, let alone if I am being true to myself?"

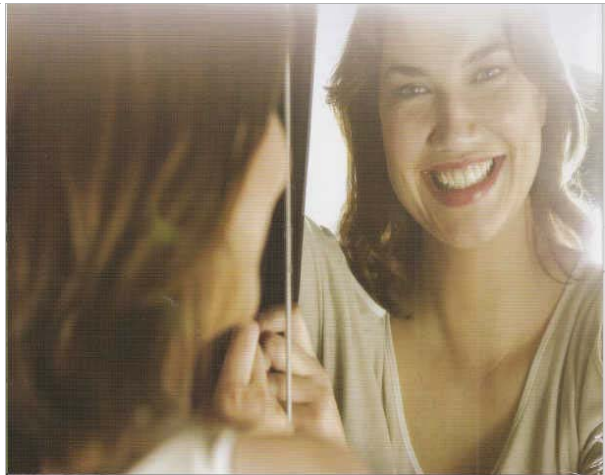
I started thinking about this issue a few months ago when I had the opportunity to work with a group of people in their '60s and '70s on the creation of a book entitled, *Celebrating Life - and Sharing What We've Learned*. I asked participants to write a sentence or two describing the advice they would most like to pass on to future generations.

Two people chose Shakespeare's famous expression about self awareness and personal integrity I found myself wondering what that advice meant to the people who submitted it, but more importantly, I wanted to think through what it means to me and how it applies to how I live my life.

The following 3-step process worked for me, and can also be helpful as you seek to define who you are - your "self" - and live in integrity with that "self."

**1. DISCOVER YOUR DEEPEST CORE VALUES IN LIFE** The first question I had to answer was, "Who is "my own self?" Is it the "me" who had to make the top grades in school (my parents' expectations)? Is it the "me" who had to have the most fashionable clothes (my friends' expectations)? Is it the "me" whose soul was stirred as I witnessed the beauty of an American Indian missionary reverently performing the Lord's Prayer in his ancient sign language? Or am I a combination of all three?

I believe the answer to that question lies in being in touch with the values that each of us holds at the core of our being. These values are often quite different for each of us.



Our values may even change somewhat as we enter different stages of our lives. But always, clear values will serve as a compass that will, without error, guide us as we choose our words, our actions, our friends, our careers, even our plans for retirement.

So how do we get in touch with our values? There are values exercises in many self-help books to help you with this process. Short of that, you can simply ask yourself, "What is truly important to me in my life?" and start making your list. Your list might include things like success, love, health, security, wealth, peace, compassion, happiness, fun. I suggest that you keep your list to your top eight to 10 values.

**2. PRIORITIZE YOUR VALUES**

Your next step is to prioritize the values that are most important to you right now. I had always ranked success in my business right up at the top of my values list and planned my goals and activities accordingly. Now, however, my husband is experiencing significant health problems and success has become less important to me than, for example, "compassion." So I re-prioritized, and my words and actions reflect that change.

**3. LIVE IN A WAY THAT REFLECTS YOUR VALUES** This means that you not only know what you value, but you also behave in ways that are congruent with those values, even at the risk of criticism or rejection. This process involves getting past the "shoulds and oughts" of other people, and demands the kind of soul searching that most of us tend to put off or avoid entirely

Whether you are in your '30s, '40s, '50s or beyond, this process will provide you with a foundation for making decisions that affect all aspects of your life. For example, let's say that you're in your '40s and you receive an offer for a job promotion that pays more, but requires you to spend more time away from your family. If your number one value at this point in time is success in your career, you're likely to make the choice to take the promotion. If, however, family and intimacy are at the top of your values list, you may choose to pass on the promotion for now. Remember, at different stages in life, your prioritization of values may change.

Throughout our lives, being "true to our selves" is the cornerstone of mental health, high self-esteem and the development of effective coping skills. And best of all, as we grow older, we never feel a need to ask ourselves, "Is that all there is?" Our life choices made with integrity will insure that we have maximized the sense of fulfillment and life satisfaction we experience every single day of our lives.

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consciously.

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