WHO AM I?

The Three Life-Changing Questions That Help You Live a More Authentic Life



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"Just be yourself."

It's probably one of the most common pieces of advice we hear, whether from friends, family, social media or leadership experts. Authenticity has become the modern answer to almost everything. We're told it improves our relationships, our wellbeing, our careers and our happiness.

Yet despite all this enthusiasm, very few people can answer a simple question:
What does it actually mean to live authentically?

Without a clear answer, many of us begin searching for authenticity in entirely the wrong places. We observe people we admire, read books, follow influencers and attempt to imitate what appears authentic in someone else. We adopt their habits, language and beliefs, hoping that somehow their authenticity will become our own.

The irony is that the harder we try to become someone else's version of authentic, the further we drift from ourselves.

Perhaps authenticity isn't something we discover by looking outward.

Perhaps it begins by looking inward.





Authenticity is not a destination

Many people imagine authenticity as a permanent state. They believe that one day they'll finally understand themselves completely, align every part of their life and remain forever grounded. But life doesn't work that way.

We are continually changing. Our experiences shape us, our priorities evolve and our understanding of ourselves deepens over time. Rather than being something we achieve once, authenticity becomes a lifelong practice of returning to ourselves again and again.

As the existential philosopher and psychotherapist Emmy van Deurzen writes, authenticity must be hard earned on a daily basis.

That phrase captures something profoundly important. Authenticity is not about becoming a flawless version of yourself. It is about taking ownership of your life, being honest with yourself and making choices that create greater alignment between who you are on the inside and how you live on the outside.

Authenticity is less about self-expression and more about self-honesty.

Seeking to live authentically asks us to stop performing and start paying attention. It invites us to become increasingly congruent, where our actions, values and decisions reflect the person we genuinely aspire to be.

The question that changes everything

If authenticity is a practice rather than a destination, then there is one question we need to keep returning to throughout our lives.

Who am I?

At first glance it seems remarkably simple. Yet it may be one of the most difficult questions any of us can answer.

In modern life we spend much of our lives introducing ourselves through explaining what we do. We describe our careers, qualifications, achievements or family roles. These things matter, but they are only descriptions of our circumstances. They are not necessarily descriptions of us.

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Knowing who we are requires a different kind of reflection. It asks us to look beneath the labels and become curious about our character, values and the qualities that define us when no one else is watching.

The question of 'Who am I?' is not designed to produce one perfect answer – it is designed to become a lifelong conversation enabled by three reflections.



Reflection 1: Who are you at your very best?

Every one of us has experienced moments when life simply feels right. Perhaps you've been completely present with your family. Perhaps you've supported someone through a difficult time, created something meaningful or found yourself fully immersed in work that energised you. In those moments, you probably weren't thinking about authenticity – you were simply being it.

Yet very few of us ever stop to examine those experiences.

- Who was that version of you?
- How did they think?
- How did they treat other people?
- What values were they expressing?
- What gave them energy?



These moments offer something incredibly valuable. They provide evidence that your best self already exists. Therefore, rather than trying to invent a new identity, authenticity often involves recognising the person you already know yourself to be and choosing to become that person more often.

The lesson: You don't need to become someone new. You need to remember who you are at your best.

Reflection 2: Embrace your shadow

There is, however, another side to this journey. While we naturally like to celebrate our strengths, authenticity also asks us to acknowledge the parts of ourselves we would rather ignore.

The psychologist Carl Jung described this as the shadow – the aspects of ourselves we reject, hide or deny because they don't fit the identity we want others to see. Perhaps it is our insecurity, impatience, need for approval, jealousy, fear or tendency to avoid difficult conversations.

Many people believe authenticity means eliminating these qualities. It doesn't. The shadow isn't something to defeat. It is something to understand because the more we deny it, the more influence it gains over us. The more willing we are to acknowledge it, the more freedom we have to choose how we respond.

Real authenticity is not pretending our darker qualities don't exist. It is recognising that they are part of being human while refusing to let them unconsciously direct our lives.

The lesson: The goal isn't to become a person without shadows. It's to become someone who knows where their shadows fall.



Reflection 3: Accept that you will never be perfect

One of the greatest barriers to authenticity is perfectionism. Many people postpone living authentically because they believe they first need to become calmer, wiser, healthier, more confident or somehow "perfect."

The problem is that there are no perfect humans. Growth never ends because life never stands still. There will always be moments when we lose patience, make mistakes, forget our priorities or drift away from the person we aspire to be. This isn't evidence that authenticity has failed, it is evidence that you are human.

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The aim is not perfection. The aim is intention.

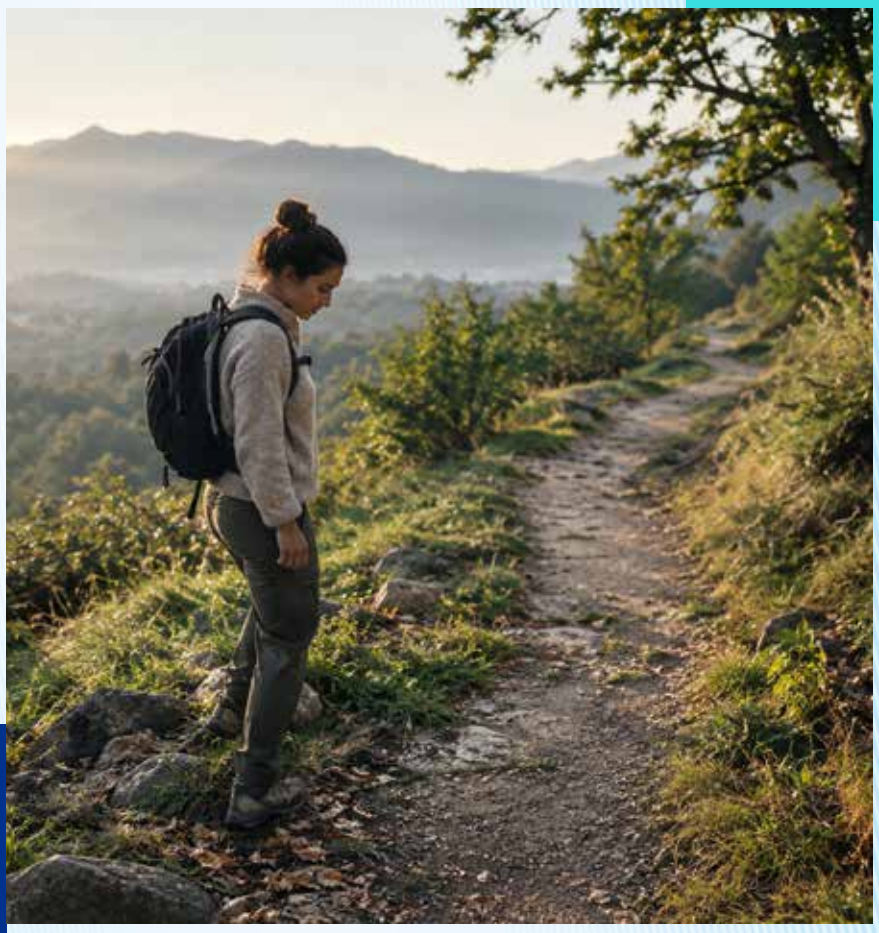
When we notice ourselves drifting, we simply return to the question once again.

Who am I?

And with this, what kind of person do I want to be today? And, what choice would move me closer to that person?

Mindfulness reminds us that awareness always precedes change, while self-compassion gives us permission to begin again without self-judgement.

The lesson: Authenticity is not measured by how rarely you drift, but by how willingly you return.



A practice for life

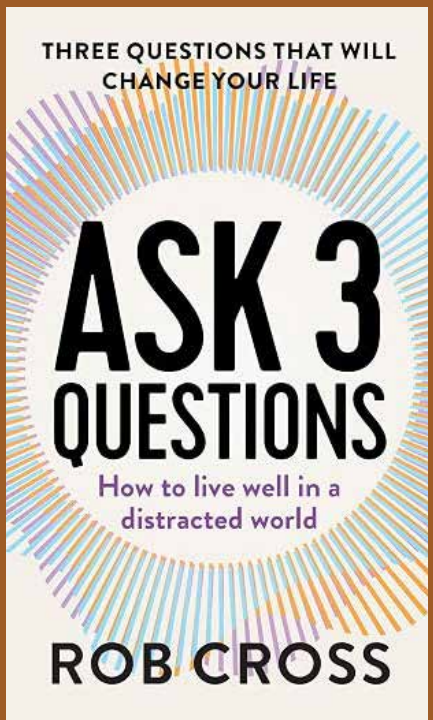
Perhaps the greatest misunderstanding about authenticity is believing it is something we eventually achieve. In reality, it is something we continually practise.

It begins by becoming clear about who you are at your best. It deepens when you have the courage to embrace your shadow rather than hide from it. It becomes sustainable when you accept that you will never be perfect, but you can choose to live intentionally.

That is the invitation hidden within one deceptively simple question:

Who am I?

You don't ask this once, nor only during times of crisis. But throughout your life. Because authenticity isn't a destination waiting somewhere ahead of you. It is a daily practice of becoming increasingly honest about who you are – in the light and the shadow – and choosing, each day, to live in a way that reflects that truth.





Rob Cross is the author of *Ask 3 Questions: How to Live Well in a Distracted World* (out 9th September), and an experienced leadership development coach who works with senior leaders and organisations to build high performance through clarity, purpose and effective leadership.

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