

Grace Under Pressure: When I speak with my own voice I know it is right

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More than anything I want to write and speak with an authentic voice. This voice is most engaging for the reader and also me. When I speak with someone else's words or voice I don't feel good. When I speak with my own voice I know it is right.

I feel exhilarated when I speak and write with my own voice. From now I will try not to parrot other people's words. Although I have been greatly affected by other people's words, they are not mine and when other folks read them they know. Also I know.

And so...

Some folks are born with a kind of gracefulness; tall, slim, graceful in movement, gesture, and speech. On top of that they may be born rich. How annoying. But it ain't me babe. Although I've admired such attributes and even strived to pick them up, it's always been an uphill struggle for me.

Instead I've often felt awkward and almost average. The beautiful people seem to live a charmed existence. 'Born with a silver spoon in one's mouth' is one way to express it. Peter O'Toole, John Kennedy and others come to mind. Ah, the Irish; when they got it, they got it in spades.

You can't help thinking that it's in the genes. And maybe it is for the most part. But that's not the whole story. As humans we do have a 'nature' and that nature is embedded in our genes. Physical attributes such as appearance and graceful movements may be mostly a matter of the luck of the genetic draw. Not much we can do about that. I've often thought that it was random and arbitrary. You know, just not fair. Appearance, grace, athletic ability, musical or artistic talent, and many more don't seem to be gifts that are fairly distributed.

Long ago I somehow came to the idea that all these things balance out in the end. I came to that

conclusion based on the long painful observation of my own self and the world around me. That means, based on my admittedly biased view of the world, if someone is gifted in one area then he or she won't quite measure up in one or more other areas. Is this true and is it provable? Don't know but it works for me.

Another observation is that the so-called beautiful people are often hiding behind a facade. They seem to have an easy time but the fact is they may not be any more happy than anyone else. Everyone has to come face to face with the reality that being is limited. They also get sick, go broke, get divorced, suffer in uncountable ways, get old, and die. Beneath our facades we all are confronted with the tragedy of life. In the final analysis, the only thing we have to confront the reality of being is our own character. This is internal and not always readily seen.

How the individual acts in the face of the tragedy, malfeasance, and the simple limitations of being may be what is called grace under pressure. The term was originally coined by the writer Ernest Hemingway. He created characters, put them in various challenging situations, and asked them to prevail. It's more or less, easy to respond gracefully when all is going your way. When the odds are against you, things are going from bad to worse, and things beyond your control are pressing you from every side, in order to prevail and even just survive you're gonna need to reach down inside and see if you really have what it takes. This is where the rubber meets the road. It's good character and either you have it or you don't.

Some of the most terrible circumstances of life have produced some of the most admired human beings both in literature and in real life. Those who have overcome horrible circumstances through the power of their own character are an inspiration to all. Think about Victor Frankel or Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

In his iconic speech "I Have a Dream" Martin Luther King said "I have a dream that my children will grow up in a nation where they will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." The content of the entire speech's power to spell out such a fundamental truth is a testimony to the character of its author. It's not only his words but the integrity of his life that leads men and Women of good conscience, black and white, to recognize King as a man of great character. While still deeply moving today it does beg the question; what is character and what exactly makes up its content?

Character is often confused with personality. Although related, they are distinctively different. Personality is the external expression of one's character. Expression is readily observed and more easily crafted to fit cultural norms. A pleasant smile, a firm handshake and good people skills can hide a malignant character. Of course on the other hand a shining character could be buried by an underdeveloped personality.

Grace under pressure is a thing to behold. It's easy and almost pleasant to do the right thing and look good while you are doing it. Then add some pressure and now it becomes more difficult. Under the most adverse circumstances, few have enough character to prevail. Good character is hard to fake. These are our heroes.

Good character is to remain true to your deepest held values even under the most adverse conditions. It is predicated on first telling the truth as much as possible and then acting in accordance with what you say. Seems some have it and most of us, under the right pressure, come up short. Such good character is not something we are born with but is developed over a lifetime through conscious cultivation. It remains the ideal and the thing to strive for. Without it there is no grace under pressure.