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Introduction to the piece

Welcome to this reflective paper entitled: *standing in our own ground, openheartedly*. The paper offers one framework for discerning authentic Self in today's world. The subject matter draws from a workshop I offered at the Kardia Summit, May 18-20, 2018 (www.kardia.com.au). The Summit was entitled: *Imagining the Self in a Spiritually Expansive World*. The keynote speaker at the Summit was writer and speaker, Margaret Silf. Silf is committed to working across and beyond the denominational divides.

I come to the theme of authentic Self through many years of exploration, particularly around the question: "what does it mean to be human in an evolving universe?" Such exploration was undertaken through the lens of a western cultural context. Drawing from my explorations, this reflective paper shares some of themes and images which caught my imagination along the way and both inspired and challenged me into my current understandings.

The rhythm of this paper is contemplative, in that following times of input, readers will be invited to pause and reflect upon what is stirring within them in response. The term *stirring* here refers to bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, insights, and/or questions which arise in response to the input. There is no right or wrong response. Each person will respond within the context of their current belief system and lived experience.



pause . . . reflect on what is stirring within

For personal reflection

1. What was it that drew you to read this paper? What are you looking for from this paper?
2. What comes to your mind when you consider the metaphor: *standing in our own ground, openheartedly?*

Introduction to the theme

In his book, *Integral Spirituality*, philosopher Ken Wilber wrote: "we are living in an historical time when all of the world's cultures are now available to us." The availability of the world's cultures has given rise to an information overload of seemingly competing spiritual practices and belief systems to draw from. We truly are living in a spiritually expansive world.



In terms of discerning authentic Self, how do we choose what to adopt and what to let pass by? Within such a myriad of competing voices, how can we each discern, and live into, our authentic Self? Some years ago I came across a quotation by physicist, Robert Shaw. Shaw stated: "you don't see something until you have the right metaphor to perceive it." The metaphor of *standing in our own ground, openheartedly* allows us to see, or reimagine, authentic Self in today's world. It is a metaphor which is rich in symbolism.

Drawing from the metaphor, this paper will introduce an understanding of:

1. **what the stance encompasses ~**
including one understanding of the term authentic self
2. **how the ground component may be envisaged ~**
including how to discern authentic self
3. **the experience of openheartedness**

The understandings are offered as an entry point, or springboard, for each reader to engage with, in the light of their particular belief system.

1. What the stance encompasses



the stance is one of: self-in-Life

The stance is one of: self-in-Life. The term self-in-Life means that we are consciously choosing to place ourselves within the bigger picture of Life itself. The bigger picture encompasses both the 13.8 billion years of evolutionary history as we understand it today, and the wider human experience of life thus far.

The 13.8 billion years of evolutionary history as we understand it today. When we have some idea of the bigger picture to which we belong, we are more able to discover our personal place of belonging within it. In this regard, in his book, *Quantum Theology*, Diamuid O'Murchu wrote: "*we belong to a greater whole from which we receive our very being and without which we have neither meaning, purpose nor uniqueness in the great cosmic drama.*"

Anne Hillman echoes something of O'Murchu's understanding. In her book, *Awakening the Energies of Love*, Hillman wrote: "*we are life itself, not separate from it.*" Drawing from Hillman's understanding, we are not simply observers of Life, neither does Life serve us. Rather, we participate in the very nature of Life itself! One characteristic of Life is that it is forever and continually in the making. Therefore, Life is understood to be an ongoing dynamic process of emergence; emergence in the form of both being and becoming. Once we each recognize that we participate in such a dynamic process, that our very living is part of a larger whole, then we can begin to explore our personal experience of authentic Self.

Note ~ Emergence: "in philosophy, systems theory, science and art, emergence occurs when "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts" meaning the whole has properties its parts do not have. These properties come about because of interactions among the parts." (Wikipedia)

The wider experience of life thus far. One way of understanding the wider human experience of life is through the framework of the sacred work of being human. The sacred work of being human involves an ongoing dynamic of calling, longing, and responding. Such an ongoing dynamic takes shape in our living in the following manner: *within each new era of human history, we are required to discern the Call of that particular era to discover and take up our human place of belonging; belonging as individuals, belonging as cultures, and belonging as a species. Responding to such a Call draws each one of us into an ever-deepening experience of connection in the here-and-now, while at the same time continuing to participate in the ongoing evolution of the human community-in-Life.*

In terms of the Call, Hillman wrote: *"Our call takes place underground, far beneath our awareness. Like a soundless song, it sings to us all our lives, whispering in a wordless way, "Follow!" I call it the song of the soul. I believe this ongoing inquiry into life is the song we are here to learn."* So the call beckons us towards an ongoing inquiry into the very nature of Life and human belonging.

In terms of the longing, in his book, *Eternal Echoes*, the late John O'Donohue wrote: *"the human heart is full of longing. We long to discover who we are. The voices of longing keep our lives alert and urgent. Yet if we cannot discover a shelter of belonging within our lives, we could become a victim and target of our longing."* And so the longing involves the desire, within our individual and collective hearts, to discover who we are and how we belong in the bigger picture.



In terms of the responding, how do we discern the Call of the era, respond to our longing to discover who we are, and discover a shelter of belonging? Each new era of human history, requires of us to once again pose our time honored and time specific spiritual questions, within the light of our current knowledge of how the world, and the human mind/body works. Our time honored spiritual questions are ones like: "Where did we come from?" "Why are we here?" "What becomes of us when we die?" "Is there a god?" "What is love?" One time specific question has been: "What does it mean to be human in an emergent universe?" Perhaps the next question

will be: "What does it mean to be human in an artificially intelligent world?"

We integrate the responses we discover to our spiritual questions by way of a unified narrative, or, Story of meaning. Therefore, our Story offers a shelter of belonging from which we live meaningfully in our world. As well as offering a shelter of belonging, our current Story of meaning becomes both the lens through which we view ourselves-in-our-world, and the boundary, or limit, of what we are able to see. Thus, to be human is to live within a limited view.

Summary ~ Within the bigger picture of the 13.8 billion years of evolutionary history and the sacred work of being human, the stance is one of self-in-Life. Such a stance involves *both* attuning to the call of the era *and* responding by way of reposing our spiritual questions within the light of our current understandings of how the world came to be/continues to be, and how the human mind/body work. As a consequence, the stance encompasses *both* the inner journey of self discovery within the whole *and* the outer journey of taking up our place of belonging in the world.

For Personal Reflection

1. What do you notice stirring within you in response to this understanding of the Stance?
2. What is it like for you to think of yourself as a participant in Life itself?
3. Are your current responses to your spiritual questions coherent with your current knowledge of the way the world works?



Within such a stance, how can authentic self be reimagined?

1.1 Reimagining authentic self within such a stance

In line with the stance of *self-in-Life*, one understanding of authentic self is: ***the inner freedom to live in accord with a values system which seeks the flourishing of all.*** Inner freedom comprises: the experience of personal wholeness, communal belonging, and joyful humility and reverence for the mystery of being human in a wondrous universe. As we continue to grow towards inner freedom, we are more able to respond to life events in accord with a values system which seeks the flourishing of all.

In light of the above, authentic Self is not viewed as a state or stage of personal development to be pursued. Rather authentic self is a way of being present in the world whereby our living is animated by personal wholeness and communal responsibility. Therefore, authentic self involves both our being and our doing.

The following image offers one visual representation of authentic self within the context of the metaphor: *standing in our own ground, openheartedly.* The photo is of a sculpture from Bruno's Art and Sculpture Garden, at Marysville. The Garden was severely damaged in the bushfires of 2009. However, it has been regenerated and is worth a visit. Bruno kindly gave his permission for the picture to be used for the Summit workshop.



a visual representation of the metaphor

from Bruno's Art and Sculpture Garden, Marysville, Victoria, Australia

The statue evokes something of the above understanding of authentic Self in the following manner:

1. The figure is placed in life.
2. There is an overall sense of stillness . . .with eyes closed. Such a stance suggests a sense of inwardly attuning to the call of the era.
3. As well as the stillness, there is a sense of movement . . . with the hair and the garment. The sense of movement suggests a breeze in the air. The breeze of the whispered call within Life to "follow."
4. One hand over the heart, evoking a sense of the inner journey of self discovery, within the gentling light of lovingkindness. Self-discovery which leads towards inner freedom and self love.
5. The outstretched arm and open hand, evoking a sense of participation in life in an openhearted way; participation which flows from inner freedom and gives rise to wholesome community responsibility.

For personal reflection

1. What is stirring within you in response to this understanding of authentic self?
2. Reflect on the statue in the light of the stance of self-in-life and authentic self. What more do you see in the image?
3. Have you ever equated authentic self with self love?

2. The Ground Component



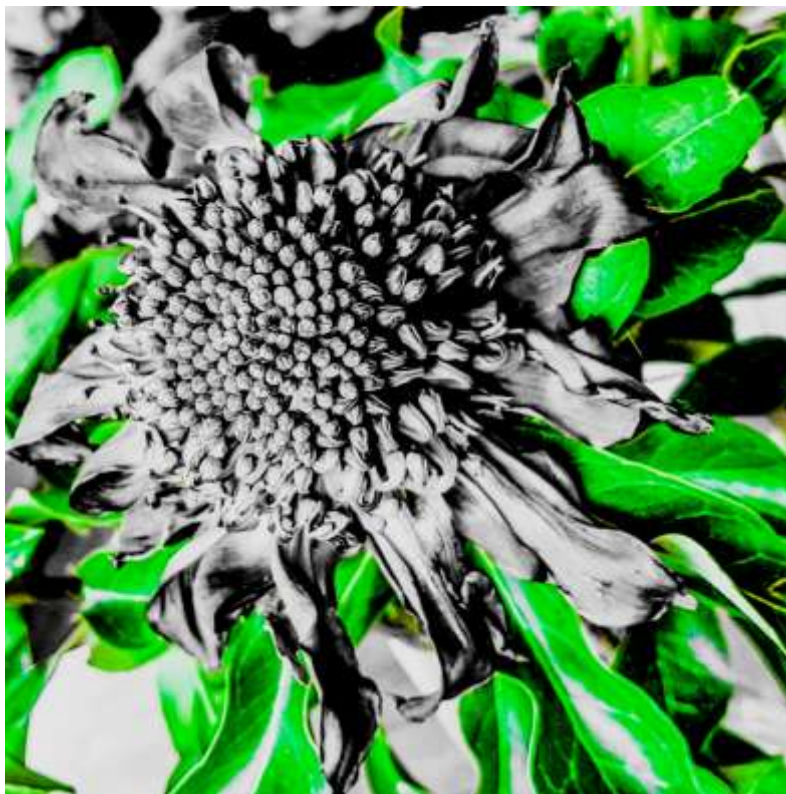
the ground component ~ a coherent Story of meaning

If the stance is one of self-in-Life, what constitutes the ground component? A coherent Story of meaning is the ground, or the land we currently inhabit. Our current Story of meaning determines our experience of connection and belonging in our world, or, our experience of disconnection when the Story is no longer congruent with our current knowledge and life experience.

In her book, *The Storycatcher*, Christina Baldwin wrote: *"The unceasing interplay between experience and narrative is a uniquely human attribute. We are the storytellers. We are the ones who put life into words."*

Why do we put life into words? We are a species which is both driven and enabled to give meaning to our living and our dying. Therefore, we do not passively receive meaning. We give meaning by way of posing our spiritual questions and discovering responses which hold truth within a particular historical context. And as mentioned earlier, our responses are unified into a Story. To be human is to live meaningfully through a Story.

Baldwin also wrote: *"our Story is not what literally happens, but what we make out of what happens, what we tell each other, what we remember. We make our lives bigger or smaller, more expansive or more limited, according to the interpretation of life that is our Story."* Even though our Story is a subjective interpretation of the facts of life, it is the source of our self image; the source of our experience of identity, purpose, and belonging in the world. In turn, our self image determines our values system, which in turn, shapes the way we will live within and act upon our world. Therefore, our Story determines who we know ourselves to be, and how we will act in daily life.



our Story is not an end-in-itself, rather a means through which we source our identity, purpose, and belonging

As well as our Story being a subjective interpretation of Life, our Story will change and/or transform in response to our ever expanding knowledge of the nature of being human within an emergent universe. So although our Story is the source of our identity, purpose and belonging, it is not an end-in-itself. Rather, our Story is a means through which we live authentically at any given time and place in history.

As mentioned previously, when our Story is coherent with current knowledge of how the world, and the human mind/body works, it offers fertile territory upon which to stand. In turn, we feel at home within our own selves and our world. Equally, when our Story is no longer coherent with current knowledge it becomes like arid soil, giving rise to the experience of disconnection. Therefore, a coherent Story of meaning, one which integrates our responses to our spiritual questions, is the ground upon which we stand.

The problem for us at the moment, according to the late ecotheologian, Thomas Berry, is that the old western cultural Story has been broken open; the collective self image and shared values, or the ground upon which we once stood together, has been broken open. As a result, our western culture has been living in-between stories and there has been a corresponding cultural experience of disconnection giving rise to a crises of meaning for many individuals.

The good news is that a new cultural Story is emerging; a new Story which gives rise to a values system which seeks the flourishing of all.

A new Story has core themes to draw from, rather than specific storylines (belief systems) to which all must adhere. As such, a new Story does not depend upon one particular belief system. Furthermore, one shift in a new Story is that of focusing on what it means to be human within the whole Earth community, rather than trying to escape the human condition. In this regard, in his book, *Shift into Freedom*, Loch Kelly wrote that the shift: "*is no longer showing us how to transcend or escape the human condition, but helping us discover how to live a fully intimate human life.*"



a new Story is a natural process within the sacred work of being human

We need not fear the notion of a new Story. It is a natural process within the sacred work of being human. It has taken place before and will no doubt do so again in the future.

For personal reflection

1. What do you notice stirring within you in response to this understanding of ground as a unified narrative, or, Story of meaning?
2. Is your current Story coherent with your current knowledge of how the world works?
3. What is it like for you to consider that the western culture has been living in-between Stories?

2.1 Two core themes within a new cultural Story

Two core themes within a new Story are: 1. Unity with diversity via the principle of both/and; 2. The human tradition via an integral framework for understanding ourselves-in-the-world. Both themes offer fertile territory from which to explore authentic Self in today's world.

2.1.1 Unity with diversity via the principle of both/and

I first came across the principle of both/and through the writings of Diamuid O'Murchu in *Quantum Theology*. Within the principle of both/and is the understanding of living with paradox. Paradox, according to physicist Neils Bohr, acknowledges that: *"the opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth.* So paradox here means that two seemingly opposing truths can stand together.

The principle of both/and breaks through the limitations of the dualistic principle of either/or which was embedded in the previous cultural Story of meaning. Such an either/or principle gave rise to the notion of dualistic opposites. For example: matter vs. spirit / man vs. woman / us vs. them. The notion of dualistic opposites, in turn, gave rise to the view that we were in competition with each other, which in turn, gave rise to judgment, fear and prejudice.



freed from the competitive view, we now know ourselves to be part
of the one human community . . . without losing our uniqueness

In contrast, the principle of both/and gives rise to the paradoxical notion that we now know ourselves to be:

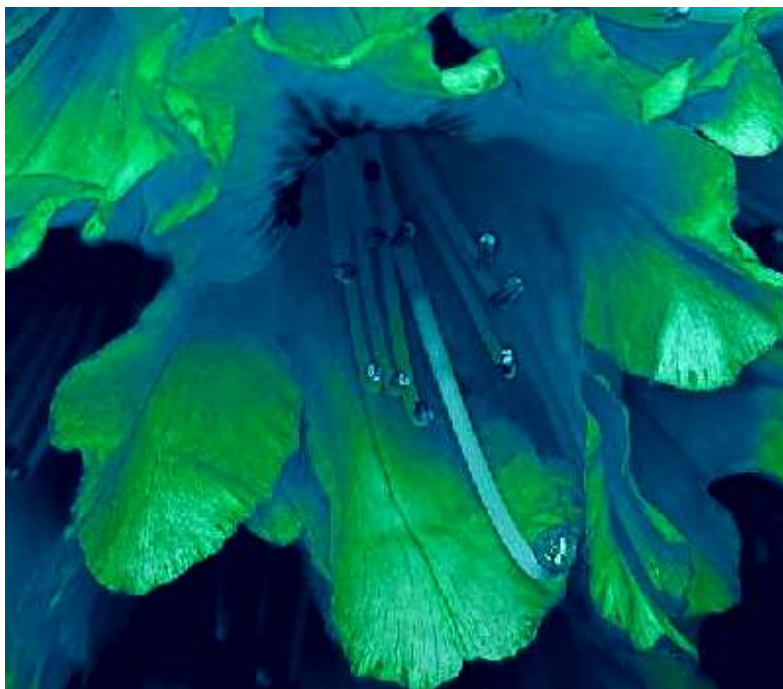
both unique beings in our own right, who are yearning for a personal experience of authentic Self, and that we are intrinsically connected within, and responsible for, a much wider web of relationships.

As we continue to recognize ourselves as unique beings who function as part of the whole, we are freed from the competitive view. In turn, judgment, fear, and prejudice dissolve. Freed from the competitive view, we are then able to embrace the lived experience of unity with diversity where we each know ourselves to be part of the one human community, without sacrificing our uniqueness; our uniqueness as individuals, our uniqueness as cultures, and our uniqueness as one species within the wider Earth community.

In line with such a knowing, the theme of unity with diversity via the principle of both/and breaks through the limitations of the cultural norm of individualism which characterized the previous cultural meaning making Story.

2.1.2 The human tradition via an integral framework of understanding ourselves-in-our-world

Drawing from the principle of both/and, the second core theme within a new cultural Story is: the human tradition via an integral framework for understanding ourselves-in-the-world. An integral framework is one that both includes and transcends all previous human knowledge and experience. As such, an integral framework offers a new lens for viewing ourselves-in-our-world; a new lens which takes into account human history as a whole, within the awareness that history is forever and continually in the making.



**all of humanity is viewed within the evolutionary process
of being and becoming**

When we start viewing life through the lens of an integral framework we naturally come to see that we belong within the wider human tradition.

The wider human tradition spans across time from ancient civilizations, e.g., the indigenous nations of Australia, till the present. As such, within the context of the wider human tradition, all of humanity is viewed within the evolutionary process of being and becoming.

What do the terms *includes* and *transcends* mean? An integral framework is all-inclusive in orientation in that it draws from the knowledge, beliefs, values, spiritual practices, and wisdom teachings which have emerged within the human community from ancient times until the present. However, often such knowledge, beliefs, practices and teachings are no longer coherent within a contemporary context. So an integral framework is one which breaks through and transcends the limitations of that which has gone before, whilst continuing to embrace the underlying wisdom teachings which continue to resound for us now.

In light of the above paragraph, an integral framework offers a new way of integrating the wisdom of bygone eras beyond either wholly accepting, or wholly rejecting the belief systems which encased such wisdom teachings. In this regard, I found a quotation by Raimon Panikkar particularly insightful. Panikkar is a Spanish priest and advocate of inter-religious dialogue. The following quotation was cited in *The New Monasticism*: "*our task and responsibility are to assimilate the wisdom of bygone traditions and having made it our own, to allow it to grow. Life is neither repetition nor continuation. It is growth, which implies at once a continuance and rupture.*" In line with Panikkar's teaching, in each new era of human history, we are required to begin again and taking into account human history thus far, we are required to repose our spiritual questions, discover responses which hold truth for us now, and form a new Story of meaning . . . as if for the first time.

Note ~ within western culture's consumerist mindset, an integral framework can be treated like a grab-bag which individuals dip into ~ consuming and metaphorically spitting out those bits that do not taste pleasant. This is not healthy and can become frustrating for those individuals who are truly seeking their life's deeper orientation.

A more healthy approach to an integral framework involves taking the time to discern what knowledge, beliefs, values, wisdom teachings, and spiritual practices continue to resound. As such, viewing life through an integral framework actually raises many questions; questions which require patient engagement. In terms of questions, the poet Rilke taught: "*be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the purpose is to live everything.*"

Rilke's invitation to love the questions took shape in my living in the following manner. When my personal Story had been broken open, I experienced a sense of inner disorientation. Out of that inner disorientation I posed the question, in a forlorn tone: "what is the meaning of my Life?" Over time I noticed that my tone had changed and I was posing the question with a tone of curiosity: "Hmm. . . I wonder what the meaning of my life is?" Same question, very different tone. Seventeen

years later I can now stand in my own ground, openheartedly. What prompted the shift in tone? I engaged in a practice of conscious grieving; grieving the loss of the Story which had meant so much to me, but was now redundant. Allowing myself time to grieve, gave rise to acceptance, which in turn gave rise to the shift in tone, which opened out the possibility of discovering a new personal Story.

2.2 How do we discern authentic Self?

The stance is one of: self-in-Life; of choosing to place ourselves within the bigger picture. The ground comprises: a coherent Story of meaning from which to source our personal and collective self image and shared values. Culturally, we are in the midst of discerning a new story in which two core themes are unity with diversity and the human tradition. In line with such understandings, a new Story collective framework for understanding authentic self is: the inner freedom to live in accord with a values system that seeks the flourishing of all. How though, do we discern personal inner freedom?



Two genres of spiritual practice which assist us are: meditation and the ongoing practice of contemplative self enquiry.

Meditation

Some form of meditative practice which allows us to attune to the deeper rhythms of Life itself, so that we may perceive the whispered Call of the era.

Note ~ see: [www.treeoflife.org.au/Contemplative practices/Meditation](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/Contemplative%20practices/Meditation), for more on meditation.

The ongoing practice of contemplative self enquiry

This practice encompasses an attitude of openness, curiosity, non-judgmental exploration, and as Hillman wrote, the process: "is not linear, it is a deepening." The practice draws from, and flows back into, our daily lives. Therefore the practice takes into account both our being and our doing.

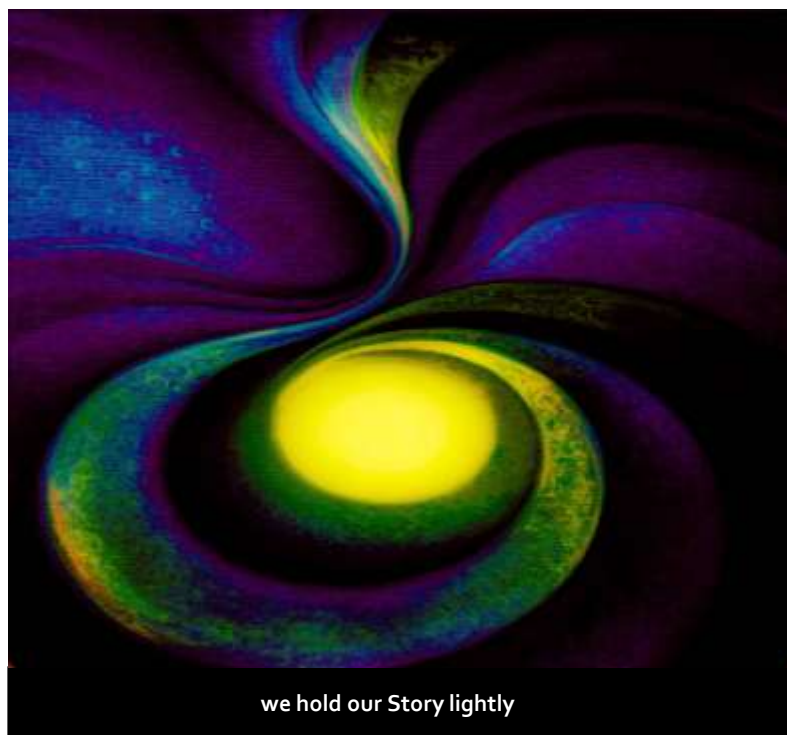
The practice guides us through a personal inner journey of self discovery towards wholeness, within the gentling light of lovingkindness. Wholeness, according to educator, author, and activist, Parker Palmer, in his book *A Hidden Wholeness*: "by definition, can never mean a cancellation of one side of us in favour of another. Wholeness is an embrace, a receptiveness to all that is within us and an enthusiasm for working with it all to mine and refine its buried gold." Therefore, the inner journey of self discovery assists us to notice and befriend who we currently know ourselves to be, i.e., our brilliance, our ordinariness, and our not so desirable aspects. Because we are not trying to metaphorically *hide from aspects of ourselves*, we experience authenticity within our own being. As we do so, we continue to grow in self love.

The more we know and love ourselves, the less we project our shadow-side onto our world. As such, we can respond to life events, rather than react through involuntary drivers. Also, the more we know and love ourselves, the more we are able to express lovingkindness with others we meet in our daily living. Therefore, with love as our inner orientating reference point, we experience authenticity in our doing.

Summary ~ Meditation and contemplative self enquiry are transformative practices which enable us to continue to non-judgmentally explore, discover, integrate, and celebrate authentic Self within the larger whole . . . one step at a time.

Note ~ One form of contemplative self enquiry is posted on the Tree of Life Spiritual Wellbeing website: [www.treeoflife.org.au/contemplative practices/Contemplative Self enquiry](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/contemplative-practices/Contemplative-Self-enquiry)

3. The experience of Openheartedness



Openheartedly simply means: *to hold lightly.*

Remembering that our Story is not the end-in-itself, rather the means by which we source authentic Self, holding our current Story lightly involves a paradox; a paradox which encompasses both our being and our becoming. Therefore, we can experience authentic Self in the here-and-now, whilst knowing that we will continue to grow into authentic Self.

The first profound truth of the paradox is that we live deeply from and into our current Story, allowing it to soften us into a clear view of authentic Self, from which we live a fully intimate human life and experience an ever deepening connection and belonging within our own selves and within our world.

The second profound truth of the paradox is that we are not our Story. Therefore we do not fully identify with our Story or with a particular view of authentic Self. Rather, we remain open to transformative shifts in our view.

Holding our Story lightly also impacts our interactions with one another. When we are able to live deeply from our current view of authentic self without fully identifying with it, we are more able to listen and respond to one another with an attitude of genuine curiosity, without rushing to either defend or relinquish our own position. Therefore, openheartedness means that conversation within one another is not simply a matter pooling together ideas, opinions, and beliefs. Rather, we are choosing to listen and respond in a way that, in Parker Palmer's words, *"seeks to truly see and hear each other."*



When we are seeking to truly see and hear each other, even though we may not agree with one another, we experience a kind of resonance, or what clinical professor of psychiatry, Daniel Siegal named in his book, *Mind: a Journey to the Heart of Being Human*, as “feeling felt.” In turn, such resonance gives rise to an environment of trust. In this way, openheartedness gives rise to the lived experience of unity with diversity within an environment of trust.

Note ~ Openheartedness does not equate to passiveness. Neither is it all sweetness and light. It is definitely not neat and tidy. When we truly attune with one another, transformative shifts start to break through into our awareness and transformative shifts are not often neat and tidy. Therefore, when we choose openheartedness we can expect inner turmoil. Such inner turmoil reveals something of the unrecognized limitations in our view. Notice that this is about our view, not the other person's view. Even though openheartedness can be quite confronting at times, if we choose to engage with the inner turmoil which arises, within the gentling light of lovingkindness, we continue to break through the limitations of our own view and in so doing, continue to grow into authentic Self.

Summary ~ Choosing openheartedness involves choosing to engage in the ongoing life adventure of discerning authentic Self . . . which is held lightly.

For personal reflection

1. What do you notice stirring within you in response to this understanding of openheartedness?
2. What is your experience of the paradox of living deeply from and into authentic self, without totally identifying with it?
3. Have you experienced the resonance of attuning to another, even when your beliefs differ?



the ongoing life adventure of discerning authentic self . . .
which is held lightly

Concluding remarks

Drawing from the metaphor: *standing in our own ground, openheartedly*, this paper has introduced one framework from which to discern authentic self in today's world.

- 1. The Stance:** self-in-Life ~ where we choose to place ourselves within the bigger picture of the 13.8 billion years of evolutionary history, and the wider human experience of life, attune to the call of the era, and take up our place of belonging.
- 2. The Ground:** involves a coherent Story through which we source our identity, purpose, and belonging within this era of human history. A coherent Story also shapes our values system, which in turn, determines the way we will live within and act upon our world. Therefore, a coherent Story determines our experience of being, which in turn shapes our doing.
- 3. Openheartedly:** involves holding our Story lightly. In this way we are able to live fully into our current view of authentic Self in the here-and-now, whilst remaining open to transformative shifts in our view, if and when they emerge within us. Also, when we hold our Story lightly we are able to truly see and hear one another, without seeking to defend or relinquish our own position.

In line with the above, a new Story collective framework for understanding authentic self in today's world is: *the inner freedom to live in accord with a values system which seeks the flourishing of all*. How we each discern personal authentic self within such a framework will depend upon our individual belief system and lived experience.

For personal reflection

1. Let your mind wander back to the beginning, back to the question: what drew you to read this paper? How has this paper responded, or not responded, to what you were seeking?
2. What insights or questions are arising within you?
3. If this paper does not reflect your understanding of authentic self, how would you articulate your understanding?

Final remark

Standing in our own ground openheartedly is not about leading an ordinary or extraordinary life in terms we have understood, but about leading whatever life we have with extraordinary attention to (1) the call of the era and our response, and (2) our longing to belong and Life's response to us. (Paraphrasing one of Christina Baldwin's quotations.)

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