

# Missy Franklin's gift: authenticity

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Of all the captivating things Missy Franklin did during the London 2012 Olympics, one of the most admirable occurred during her interview with Bob Costas on August 5 to close out NBC's coverage that evening.

Costas, clearly having fun with Franklin, rolled a video that she and several of her fellow Olympic swimmers made in which they lip-synced Carly Rae Jepsen's summer hit "Call Me Maybe" while dancing in the aisle of a plane. As the tape rolled, an inset shot of Franklin sitting next to Costas showed her smiling and singing along, out loud, to her own music video. The genuineness of the moment was startling. Franklin, filled with ease and joy, exuded the sense that she was alone during a private moment, as opposed to being watched by millions, and therein lies Missy Franklin's greatest gift to us, and perhaps her most important talent.

Holden Caulfield, another famous teenager (albeit the fictitious one in J.D. Salinger's classic "The Catcher in the Rye"), posited that most people are "phonies." While reality might not be quite as dark as Caulfield's cynical view, there seems to be little question that people frequently have a difficult time presenting their true selves. This, coupled with the fact that humans seem to be particularly skilled at sensing when someone is behaving even slightly tense, scripted, or in an overcompensating manner, means we see a lot of masks — some thick, some thin, but all slightly disappointing and confusing.

Which is why seeing Franklin spontaneously singing out loud to her own music video on national television is cause for celebration, especially for those of us who desperately want good role models for our daughters. Females are particularly vulnerable to pressures of conformity. Calls for them to be something other than they are rampant and destructive.

My family and I have watched a great deal of the Olympics, and been thrilled by so much athletic achievement, but it is Franklin's interview I will most remember and point out to my children to emulate. Few of us can hope to match Franklin's incredible swimming talent. We can all strive for her authenticity.

Introverts may argue that genuineness unfairly favors extroverts because it is only in social interaction that the construct becomes alive, but one can cultivate and exhibit genuineness as fully in quiet solitude as in throngs. Indeed, it was the illusion that Franklin was alone when she sang to herself that was most astounding and charming. Introverts need not feel left out.

Carl Rogers, the great psychology theorist, believed that abandoning artifice and being open about ourselves is one of the single most important aspects of being human, and that self-actualization occurs in the same manner that a planted acorn becomes an oak tree. Within us lies the knowledge and capability to grow and develop into our greatest selves, we need only the appropriate nutrients.

I don't know Missy Franklin, and am sure she has her fair share of faults, struggles, and self-doubt, despite her immense success, but thankfully self-assuredness is not a product of perfection but rather a consequence of embracing our imperfect selves and following our own instincts, values, and ideals. To hear Franklin talk about subjects like her commitment to stay at Regis Jesuit High School because being in her own community is where her happiness lies, and remaining an amateur to go to college on account of her love for being part of a team, is to witness someone in full command of who she is. That she is merely 17 makes her sense of self all the more profound.

As you cross your fingers and wish for Missy Franklin to retain her world-class swimming talent over the next four years so we can be awed by her again in the 2016 Olympics, take a moment to hope that her sheer genuineness remains in place and continues to grow as well. And while we're at it, we would be wise to wish and work for that in ourselves and those we care about, because we should all be singing out loud to our own music videos, whatever form they take. We all have the capacity to be towering oaks.

Rick Ginsberg is a psychologist and writer living and working in Denver. He was a member of the 1999 Colorado Voices panel.

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