Living Authentically in a World with Others

A Review of

*Captain Fantastic* (2016)
by Matt Ross (Director)

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Reviewed by

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The happy life, therefore, is a life that is in harmony with its own nature, and it can be attained in only one way. First of all, we must have a sound mind and one that is in constant possession of its sanity; second, it must be courageous and energetic, and, too, capable of the noblest fortitude, ready for every emergency, careful of the body and of all that concerns it, but without anxiety; lastly, it must be attentive to all the advantages that adorn life, but with over-much love for none — the user, but not the slave, of the gifts of Fortune. (Seneca, 58 C.E.)

In his 2,000-year-old essay, "On the Happy Life," Seneca speaks to the current trendy topic of how to live a so-called authentic life. A cursory Google search on the “definition of authentic self” yielded more than three million entries from such luminaries as Dr. Phil and the Huffington Post (see, e.g., https://www.google.com/#q=definition+of+authentic+1self). But talking about the “Three Easy Steps” towards living a more authentic life or “How to Discover” your authentic life is very different from what Ben Cash and his family experience in Matt Ross’s film *Captain Fantastic*.

Cash, played by Viggo Mortensen, is the patriarch of a family living off the grid in the woods of Washington State. When we first meet them, we see them as feral children: The oldest son, Bodevan, is stalking a deer. As the film opens, the camera pans lovingly across the gorgeous tree tops of this completely uninhabited, pristine woodland. Soon, our view shifts to the ground as the camera now looks up from the ground at the height and the majesty surrounding us, trees dappled by sunlight. A deer appears, first in medium shots as he goes about his grazing, and then in close-up, as he senses the presence of the other. The deer and Bodevan lock eyes. And with almost preternatural speed, the film assaults us with the violence of Bodevan slaughtering the creature, blood and organs splattering everywhere, the screams piercing. Almost as suddenly, the film grows quiet again, as Bodevan, mud covering his face and body, looks at what he has just done. Soon, we see the appearance of other younger children, cautiously entering the frame, similarly adorned in mud, dirt, and leaves. The sight of the younger children gives the viewer a moment to breathe, a moment to savor innocence, before Cash helps Bodevan in the final step in this ritual marking
Bodevan’s entrance to adulthood: the brutal disemboweling of the deer, after which Bodevan eats the animal’s organs raw, ripping it apart with his teeth. However, a moment later, the film returns to the bucolic—the happy children celebrating Bodevan’s entrance to manhood by laughing and splashing in a stream as they wash the mud and dirt from their bodies.

Lest we believe that we are about to watch a scene out of *Lord of the Flies*, a story several critics have referred to in their reviews (see e.g., Darghis, 2016; Kermode, 2016; Robey, 2016) we then see the children gathered around a campfire at night, not sharing ghost stories or playing games, but rather reading classic literature: *Middlemarch* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. It’s now clear that we moved from the feral world of *Lord of the Flies* to the cultured world of the intellectual elite, minus the trappings of civilization. This is a happy family, but challenged daily by grueling physical training, taking them onto rocks in the rain, and mental training, with book reports and analyses. The wrinkle is the emotional challenge—their mother, Leslie, has been away for some time, in a psychiatric ward, undergoing treatment for bipolar disorder. Ben holds back no detail about her condition, including his distaste for commercialized, traditional medicine. His children, trained in both critical thought and the art of survival, can quote back to him chapter and verse. When Leslie finally commits suicide, this “Walden Pond” they created faces its ultimate challenge: how to re-enter and even try to co-exist in the world they left behind.

The idea of authenticity has been a major concern of existential philosophers, including Kierkegaard, Sartre, Heidegger, and Buber. Schlegel and her colleagues (2009) examined the connection between being one’s “true self” and having meaning in life, finding that the ability to access one’s “true self” predicts a sense of meaning and purpose. Craig (2009) discusses Heidegger’s notion of the authentic self—“a Self that has taken possession of itself” (p. 294). She said this frees the Self to choose his or her own path, within the given givens of human existence—birth and death. Along with his wife, Ben has done just that—they chose an existence for their children outside the norms of what we call “civilized society.” And when they must return to the path that most others follow, neither the Cash family nor their extended family quite know what to make of what they encounter. The family bus, Steve, a school bus repurposed as a mobile home, crosses a bridge, symbolizing the distance between where the family is—intellectually, psychologically, and even morally—and where the rest of the world lies. Holton (2010) refers to a gap between simply violating a norm—i.e., unintentionally—and actually consciously choosing to violate a norm. He said that when people conform to social norms, they treat those norms as a “regulatory guide” and are “ready to modify their behavior (within reason) to ensure that the norm is followed” (p. 419). When one intentionally violates a norm, as Ben does by removing his children from the very environment that would create and sustain social norms, one does not need to be prepared to modify behavior.

Stapel and his colleagues (2010) examined how environments influence one’s thoughts, feelings, and actions, posing the question: “can an environment also raise the relevance of social norms that apply to that environment?” (p. 175). In *Captain Fantastic*, two scenes demonstrate how particular environments provide battlegrounds for the war between living authentically and conforming to social norms. In the first, when the Cash family arrives at Ben’s sister’s house on the way to Leslie’s hometown, these two worlds collide. Harper and Dave, with their kids Justin and Jackson, occupy one side of the dining room table, while Ben sits at the head of the table, with his kids lining the opposite side. The conflict begins innocently enough, with Ben offering to pour the wine—for his youngest kids. Breach of
drinking laws! Then, the cousins ask what happened to Leslie. Harper and Dave come up with every euphemism for psychological distress and death known to humankind, but Justin and Jackson, in the early years of adolescence, can make no sense. Ben steps in and offers an explanation, again with his usual frankness. Breach of etiquette and common decency! Who talks about psychological disorders and death at a nice, suburban family dinner? Justin and Jackson also cannot understand why their cousins have no knowledge of X-boxes, Nikes, and iPhones. Who does not understand such icons of American consumer culture?

The Cash family opts to sleep on the grass under the stars, rather than in the lovely rec room Harper has prepared. The ingratitude! The ultimate blow, however, comes when Harper challenges Ben about how his kids need to be in school getting a “proper” education. Ben responds by holding an impromptu showdown including Justin, Jackson, and his own daughter Zaja, on what the Bill of Rights is. Justin and Jackson, in typical adolescent form, hem and haw and recall bits and pieces—enough to recognize it in a Tweet but no more. Zaja, on the other hand, starts reciting it until Ben stops her to explain its importance in a historical and sociocultural context. Who has had the better education? The Cash children raised in the woods or Harper’s and Dave’s children, raised in upper middle class suburbia?

The second battleground is the New Mexico church where Leslie’s parents have arranged a formal, traditional Christian funeral, complete with a pastor who did not know the deceased, or that the deceased was a Buddhist who did not believe in the system attempting to put her to rest. Overhead wide shots show us the sea of black and grey—the somber palette of death and mourning. Cash, wearing a cherry red leisure suit, straight out of the 1970s, followed by his family, adorned in costumes, hippie garb, and flowers in their hair, provides both a visual and psychological shock in this milieu. Furthermore, Ben gets up to speak about how Leslie, as a Buddhist, would have hated all this alleged pomp and circumstances, as her worldview had diverged from that of her very traditional parents, who organized the event. Ben injects humor into this very solemn occasion, and the whole scene prompts Leslie’s father to call security and have Ben removed from the church.

Faced with the prospect of jail or separation from the family, the Cashes need to decide about the project of their authentic lives and the mission of “rescuing” Leslie from the fate of a burial in the ground. Craig (2009) cites Spinnell’s (1989) comment that since freedom allows each individual to interpret the world as he or she wishes, there is no ultimate interpretation, and thus no certainty. Craig, citing Cooper (2003), said,

> Such absurdity and apparently meaningless to life might lead one to despair as to our purpose. However, the existentialists are not advocates of despair. Instead, they campaign for a resolute and courageous attitude that is willing to commit to life’s projects despite the absurdity. There is a sense that the authentic being requires a decisive dedication to whatever it is we choose to accomplish in our lives. (Cooper, 2003. p. 294)

Such forward-directedness is what Heidegger termed “resolution” (p. 294). While the uncertainty of the situation—how to take care of Leslie, how to deal with Leslie’s father, how to bridge the gap between the life the Cashes left and the temptation of the world outside (e.g., video games and elite colleges)—lingers, the family works toward this idea of resolution. They learn a level of compromise, and one sees them reach a resolution close to their original ideas and purpose but with some engagement with the world.
Craig (2009) refers to Macquarrie’s (1973) idea that “existence is impossible without a world.” Indeed, the journey of the Cash family and their quest to live as authentic of a life as possible shows that they have recognized that authenticity does not mean isolation but rather living in a world with other people. They find the elements that Seneca identified in a happy life. The Cashes manage to combine the strength and fortitude of body and mind with what Seneca described as the “advantages that adorn life.” Captain Fantastic reminds us of the great gift of how one can be authentic while still living in a world with others.

References