

# Communicating and Philosophizing About Authenticity or Inauthenticity in a Fast-Paced World

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**Abstract** North Americans live in an increasingly fast-paced world. Not only might this be physically and relationally unhealthy, a fast pace of life might prevent people from living life to its fullest and achieving happiness. Using Heidegger's theory of Dasein, this study examines how individuals talk about time in holiday letters. Results of the study indicate that many letter writers were living inauthentic lives. According to Heidegger, inauthenticity prevents individuals from experiencing life at its fullest; implications of the findings blending philosophy and communication are discussed.

**Keywords** Fast-paced life · Heidegger · Authenticity · Inauthenticity

## 1 Introduction

The great mystery in life is we have no idea when our existence will end. Existence is temporal, and the knowledge that death may occur at any moment shapes how an individual chooses to live her life (Inwood 1997). With the knowledge of certain death, we may be motivated to move forward with activities of daily life. Along with accomplishing daily life tasks, we have a desire to live a happy life. We want to experience everything life has to offer before we become too old and incapacitated or die. The question is, are human beings able to accomplish this goal? Using elements of Heidegger's philosophy, the purpose of this essay is to examine our knowledge, or lack thereof, regarding finite existence, and how that knowledge is communicated. We accomplish this goal by examining written artifacts, holiday letters, which may provide year-end summaries reflecting upon life's accomplishments.

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To undertake this analysis, we first introduce Heidegger's position and the research question that guides this study. Next, we discuss the holiday letters selected for analysis and the methods used to analyze the letters. Then, we discuss our findings related to evidence of authenticity and inauthenticity revealed by letter writers. Finally, this paper concludes with a discussion of the conclusion, limitations, and future research.

## 2 Review of Relevant Literature

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger is, among other issues, concerned about too many people leading inauthentic lives when each has the ability to lead an authentic existence (1962). The problem stems from so many individual's failure to recognize Dasein, or human Being, which is comprised of Forfeiture, Facticity, Conscience, and Existentiality, in its "active, dynamic, verbal sense," (Demske 1970, 12) even though each person always seeks his or her Being.

### 2.1 Forfeiture

The general population's lack of self-awareness is caused by one of the three aspects of Dasein itself, *viz.* Forfeiture. When people are distracted by the hectic, intertwined, complexities of everyday life, they focus on mere illusion (Heidegger 1962). Those leading inauthentic lives have their attention shifted from what is real to what is too abstract and theoretical, or they are too focused on the external world of others, such as parents ordering their lives around work and children's activities. The result is that instead of having wonder and amazement from recognizing her true Being, the "I" of the individual is sacrificed to the "they" mentality in which the focus is on objects outside of who we really are (Heidegger 1999).

Fortunately, each person has the internal ability to break out of the inauthentic life. Angst, or Dread as it is commonly translated, shows us how the world and what our being actually are (Heidegger 1962). Angst is the only response capable of doing so in part because it makes us realize that something is forgotten (Seidel 1964) by its unique lack of object. That is, pleasure, pain, happiness, fear, and all other states have an object, such as being pleased about or afraid of *something*. On the other hand, the state of Dread is about no particular thing, but gives us a "weird and uncanny feeling" in which we act normally yet observe ourselves performing the actions from what seems to be an alienating distance (Gelvin 1970, 115). We are aware something essential has been forgotten; we do not know that it is our Dasein and needs to be found (Seidel 1964). For many of us, Angst can be caused by a painful life-changing experience, such as a medical crisis or death in the family, or catastrophic event, such as a terrorist attack or natural disaster. Regardless of the incident's particulars, it has to be something that makes a person have sufficient Dread to begin examining her life for what is awry with it.

### 2.2 Facticity

Although we take solace in the view that we are at home in our world and relationships, when we consider the world as it really is, the world is indifferent to us. Whether or not the individual even exists is of no concern to the world itself. Each person is in a world not of his or her own making. One has no control over one's origin or the role he or she will play in the world for, in Heidegger's view, all of these factors are determined by forces outside

of the Self (Heidegger 1962, 1999). The world in which we find ourselves is not of our own making, nor are we able to escape it except to die. What might make matters worse, but actually places us in the proper frame of mind to understand our Being, is that there is no individual existential explanation for why we have the roles we do, why we will die, or even why we exist at all. That is, although we would like to think that we have control over our lives, e.g., being able to decide our careers, the vast majority of our personal life's characteristics are decided by independent causal forces outside ourselves, such as political economies and social structures. The full awareness of the world as it truly is incorporates the second aspect of Dasein, *viz.* Facticity (Heidegger 1962). Facticity is the facts of our true existence in the actual world.

### 2.3 Conscience

Once Angst has liberated us from our distractions and brings us to our Facticity, Conscience then enables us to grasp our Dasein (Heidegger 1962). Conscience is:

The voice by which human being, speaking in secrecy and silence, calls itself out of the distraction of self-forgetfulness to the lonely avowal of its own responsibility for being itself (Grene 1967, 461).

Basically, Conscience takes people out of the inauthentic life of forfeiture to that of authenticity.

### 2.4 Existentiality

It is at the juncture in time in which Conscience has successfully accomplished its task that Existentiality, the third aspect of Dasein, comes into play. Existentiality is the act of freely making the world as it is as one's own, even though the world itself cannot be altered (Heidegger 1962). "Only by taking death into ourselves...is an authentic existence possible for us" (Barry 2007, 63). It is knowing our own possibility and that of the world in which we are; i.e., it is understanding our world for what it is and who we are.

There is an inherent inconsistency between Heidegger's position and that of Existentialists who believe that children are the most self-actualized entities. Children, it is thought, lack the camouflaging, and distracting layers of roles that adults must play in their lives, i.e., laborer, professional, significant other, church member, and so on, which stultifies socialization. Instead, children act in the moment as they truly are; hence, they are fully realized. However, one thing that most children lack is Angst or awareness of death, and the role such realization plays in their actualization. Since it never occurs to them to examine their lives to find its truth, they do not know really who they are. Although their lives are pleasant, they are not truly happy, if we take Heidegger seriously.

Does Heidegger's position imply a life of total unhappiness or mostly so for those with the mental wherewithal to examine productively their existences? The answer will puzzle those who have a more optimistic but less realistic ideology about what happiness is. If happiness results only from having any whim fulfilled or is a life of unbound pleasure, then Heidegger's world is, to say the least, non-conducive to anyone achieving happiness. But these worlds are nothing except illusions anyway. Resources are limited so that we cannot fulfill the desires of everyone on Earth as it now stands. The best that we can do is to address the central needs that many developed world citizens ignore, especially suffering and death in far away countries from lack of basic necessities such as clean water, food, and medicine. Even with our best efforts, death from any number of uncertain variables

confronts many people in their everyday lives at every moment. Therefore, death is a central component to our existence even though we might not like acknowledging this fact.

## 2.5 Authenticity's Effect on Happiness

Although leading an authentic life would at first appear depressing, it has been characterized by Soccio (2007, 522) as "living honestly and courageously in the moment, refusing to make excuses, and not relying on groups or institutions for meaning and purpose." Although it is not easy to accept the imminence of our death and actualizing our Dasein, it is liberating (Barry 2007, 63). With authentic lives we reject the neediness of our current society that is materialistically and technologically cursed with entities that distract us from our Dasein (Heidegger 1962, 1999). The world is as it is, we are in it, and we give ourselves our own meaning and purpose rather than having it passively thrust upon us, thereby instantiating our Dasein or Being-in-the-world (Versenyi 1965).

Heidegger's world is a more realistic realm in which to live. Although it appears less pleasant, it is the only place where we have Dasein, where we exist as we truly are as authentic creatures with conscience and resolve. Gone are the illusions of existence and forfeiture that make us inauthentic, and which lead to actual unhappiness as we attempt to realize ourselves using false goals and desires. Resources are not needlessly wasted in pursuit of the irrelevant. Instead, everything is put into its proper prospective and we can be happy as any fully realized being in the world can be. Perhaps the best way to understand this happiness is to briefly mention the experiences of those who try recklessly to achieve some goal for which they have no real ability to attain. As we have seen on the various American Idol shows, a large number of people deeply believe they can sing when they have no talent to do so. They are ridiculed and humiliated-sometimes on national television-and still blindly pursue their goals. Those of us sensitive enough feel badly for them, while still recognizing that their lives could be fuller if they would pursue an avenue more conducive to their talents. If they do not, then their lives will be filled with future humiliations. On the other hand, those who have Dasein are happy because they are authentic. They do not have to worry about being liked, having fame, fortune or any of those other socially desired ends. Instead, they have contentment from being real, which is the entire happiness one can hope for or expect in the actual world.

On the other hand, those who struggle for existence in the developed and developing world or live without excessive technology are more likely to fulfill Heidegger's view of self-actualization than those who are fully-integrated members of wealthy, privileged technologically-dependent societies, as are those found in the holiday letters we examine. "Only by the anticipation of death is every accidental and 'provisional' possibility driven out. Only Being-free *for* death, gives Dasein its goal outright and pushes existence into its finitude" (Heidegger 1962, 384). The reason why is obvious: since the destitute confront their deaths on a sometimes daily basis, they are able to contemplate their reality to a degree that others do not. As a result, they understand the world as it truly is and their roles in it, which then makes the world their own; they can gain mastery over the "everyday" although they can never extinguish it (Heidegger 1962, 371). This is not to say that living on the cusp of existence is something that should be praised, the rich pitied, or the poor and struggling not helped to steadier security. However, the fact of the matter is those whose lives revolve around technology and running from one non-essential event to the next often do not have sufficient Angst to ever start the process of understanding who they truly are and taking ownership of it. They are overly concerned about inventiveness to

solve discrete manageable problems rather than using any theoretical insight or having understanding (Heidegger 1962).

Heidegger's interest in authenticity and time lends itself to studying the ways individuals communicate about life and their accomplishments. In particular, Heidegger's focus on time is of interest due to North Americans' increasing pace of life. An investigation of this sort has not yet been conducted. Such research will provide insight into everyday life from a philosophical perspective. It is possible that North Americans who are caught up in the activities of everyday life do not take time to acknowledge Dasein. They could be living an inauthentic life and missing out on the opportunity for true happiness. One way to ascertain whether this occurs is to examine individuals' year-end reports about their lives, through holiday letters, a common way of corresponding with friends and family during the holiday season. Therefore, to fully explore this area, we advance the following research question:

RQ1: How does Heidegger's notion of Dasein manifest itself in ways that individuals in contemporary North American society talk about time in the context of holiday letters?

### 3 Method

#### 3.1 Material for Study

Over the course of the last seven years, one of the project's investigators collected 598 holiday letters. Holiday letters are sent frequently in North America; they are typically one-page, typed, single-spaced letters detailing the activities, events, and accomplishments of the year for each family member. Each year in December, and again in early January, the researcher contacted colleagues, friends, students, and others and asked them to send to her holiday letters they had received. Letters appeared to have been written by individuals of all ages and a variety of backgrounds. Despite the fact that only one of the authors collected the letters, states represented included Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Minnesota, Rhode Island, North and South Dakota, and Texas. Those who donated letters were guaranteed anonymity; therefore, it was impossible to determine more specific demographic information about the letter writers, except that which was explicit in the letters. It was impossible to contact the actual letter writers, as most of the letters did not contain addresses, and those that did were blacked out (in addition to their names); additionally, the letters we studied were not personal because they were mass-mailed to family and friends.

#### 3.2 Justification of Material

The use of several of Heidegger's concepts to analyze any communication document might seem somewhat strange. To use his ideas to examine holiday letters would seem to be the height of madness. There is, however, justification for this approach.

First, authenticity as described by Heidegger (1962) is internal to the individual, but can be observed by how the person lives his or her life. The best observations for authenticity usually come from catching a person at moments when he or she is not prepared with an obvious or prepared response. For example, if asked in a non-threatening situation what a person would do if she was ordered by someone in power to commit a crime, the response will likely be one that is considered to be standard for the society. However, we cannot

really tell what that individual would do unless we are able to observe his or her actions in actual circumstances in which he or she is unaware of an inquiry. Holiday letters are ideal material to evaluate authenticity. If people demonstrate authenticity in what they do and say in these documents, then there is much greater reason to believe that our observations are accurate.

In addition, the holidays are a hectic time in which people have a considerable amount of work to do to fulfill their and other's expectations. If they take the time to illustrate examples showing authenticity, then again, based upon the other stresses under which they operate, they are more likely to be living authentic lives. Most people would merely scribble down what each person has done or is doing, and then leave the letter at that point. However, those who demonstrate self-awareness by writing about how life-changing events, for example, have altered their thinking processes are individuals who probably will trend toward authenticity.

Third, holiday letters are a form of communication in which individuals and families commonly share the details and events of the year with other family and friends. The holiday letter usually is a family's annual report of activities, accomplishments, memories, and reflections. In fact, multiple websites are devoted to providing advice about what to write in these letters (e.g., Christmas letter confessions 2003; [Write a quick Christmas letter 2003](#); [Writing the perfect Christmas letter 2003](#)). Holiday letters were chosen for analysis because they are a report on the year's events, especially those classified as life changing, and are individuals' reflections of time. As Mendez (2005) notes, the holiday letter is a "tangible touchstone in a time when communication can be fleeting and ephemeral" (para. 7). Further, because people use holiday letters to talk about issues surrounding time, this artifact is akin to a time-diary. Robinson and Godbey (1997, 15) argue that such artifacts are essential to revealing "insightful speculations about the nature of human behavior."

Finally, the holidays are often a time to forget unpleasant truths and to do a bit of bragging about the accomplishments that others would find laudatory. In fact, many types of social interactions enforce this belief by relentlessly promoting goodwill and cheer and ostracizing those who are unwilling to engage in the typical holiday behavior of visiting relatives and friends, or being cheerful. Holiday letters follow the same route in that those writing them may try to impress others with their accomplishments and overall happiness rather than show authenticity. Given the social and media forces of this time each year that would sway many from expressing authenticity if they had it, it follows that elements of authenticity in the holiday letters are excellent indicators that the writers lead authentic lives. There are considerable reasons for not making others aware of one's Forfeiture, Facticity, Conscience, or Existentiality, but only authenticity as a justification for doing so.

### 3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

First, each author read 50 letters and coded them as either authentic, inauthentic, or as in-between, meaning the letter showed signs of possible authenticity. Coding was based on Heidegger's four aspects of Dasein: Forfeiture, Facticity, Conscience, and Existentiality. For example, an authentic letter might have discussed a family member's illness and death along with acknowledgement of the finite nature of life and provided evidence about how that event altered the writer's life. Whereas an inauthentic letter might have talked about a family member's illness and death, rather than recognizing that person's life had ended and the self-examination that event should have caused, the writer either moved on to other family events or talked about the day they would be together in Heaven. In-between letters

acknowledged a life-changing event but failed to exhibit sufficient signs of Angst or to show an alteration of the person's understanding of his or her existence. After agreement was reached on all 50 letters, the authors individually coded the remaining 598 letters (each of us coding approximately 180 letters). In order to test inter-coder reliability, 60 individually-coded letters were removed and recoded by an independent coder, trained by one of the researchers. A Cohen's Kappa was calculated at .92, indicating excellent reliability (Landis and Koch 1977).

## 4 Results

### 4.1 True Authenticity

Heidegger (1962) believed that very few individuals are able to lead authentic lives. Most people are caught in the trap of Forfeiture, which is the lack of self-awareness of one's true self and of the world. This is possibly due in great part to their hectic lives full of technology and other external items and concerns, which distract them from reality. The holiday letters we examined fit Heidegger's prediction. Of the 598 letters, only 32 showed fully developed authenticity.

The authentic letter writers seemed to reflect upon traumatic events in their lives that appeared to act as incentives for self-examination and awareness. In Letter 231, for example, the writer talked about the harm caused by the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the people she knew who had lost family members and friends, and then went on to state that life has to be lead even with this burden "always on our minds." Two additional letters cited the terrorist actions in their letters as well. Another author spent an entire page on the devastation inflicted by Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans and rebuilding efforts in which he/she and others were engaged. Another writer spoke of his/her mother's death and the spouse being laid off from a long-held job.

The writer of Letter 114 described the consequences of a severe accident, and then stated that, "More mindful, too, we are of the transience of this lovely life together as family and friends, not in an anticipatory, fretful way, but wanting to embrace the fullness of what we have and be grateful for it." In other words, the accident caused her to realize the fleetingness of life and her lack of control over it, which she accepted and made her own. Letter 512 details the experiences of the writer and others with their battles with various forms of cancer and what the diseases taught them about Dasein, although they did not use that term.

Although less traumatic than death or serious illness, alteration in lifestyles also appeared to cause the requisite introspection. In Letter 104, the writer sold her house and moved into a retirement home. She believed that fate is in control of her life, and she had no doubts or regrets about her significant change of life. Letter 291 begins about someday doing what one wishes. "Someday is another way of saying some other day. Some other day may never come and if it does the result may not be what you wanted." This author had been following his goals by taking karate lessons. He stated that, "The little aches and pains remind you that nothing worthwhile comes easily and that growing stronger involves change."

Of the 32 letters, ten of them gave the best case for the full authenticity of their writers. Letter 417's writer described an incident on her parent's 50th wedding anniversary in which her father became ill, and she took him to the emergency room. The writer and her father "spent a special time together in the ER," while her mother continued hosting the



party. In another letter, the writer was injured in a fall, yet she was still overwhelmed with gratitude for what happened in her life. Letter 237's writer learned lessons about herself from observing her dog that had been abused by a former owner. The writer of Letter 238 dealt with a considerable number of deaths, yet she made her life authentic in her own way by pursuing a Ph.D. in mid life. Also, she fully realized that decisions in her life lead from one to another, thereby recognizing Facticity. Letter 410's author was 70 years of age and had a new foot that is a "super duper, space age, technological marvel that will never hurt, nor fail nor any other thing." What is most authentic is that even with her physical problems she still stated that, "Some days I can hardly stand to stay in bed until dawn for fear that I might miss something." In Letter 508, the writer said much the same thing with his desire to live his retirement years fully. In addition, he fully realized the impact of teaching on future generations, demonstrating Facticity as determined in part by what others do in their environment.

The life of Letter 369's writer was authentic even though she is extremely busy. She travels a great deal, is a coach of a university speech and debate team, teaches, will be chair of a university department, and is expecting a baby from China. Despite these distractions, the writer begins by noting the bombings of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and then speaks about how nothing is permanent, but one can take control, in a small way, of one's world. She responds to congratulations on a major win by her speech and debate team as being "particularly sobering," perhaps because it will be her last year coaching with her co-director. Adopting an infant girl from China has shown her and her partner the need to endure a world they cannot control, but to make it their own in the small ways they can.

Perhaps the most authentic life was found in Letter 521. In his 76th year, the author was preparing for his own death. He was completing his life's work on Abraham Nofziger. The writer's plans were to stay alive, complete his funeral arrangements, disperse his library, preserve his unpublished manuscripts, and put his financial house in order. What is of great interest is the joy he still takes in life as evidenced by the running joke of who/what to praise he places at the end of each paragraph, including a praise for the Lunken Airport. This writer showed that he understands his Dasein. His situation has caused him to recognize Forfeiture and to reject it. Instead, through Angst (the uncanny feeling that acts as a mental mechanism to show us that something essential – our true existence – has been forgotten) he understands Facticity and has chosen to make this world his own. He did not choose his role to play, but he will play it to the utmost of his being to his end, thereby grasping Existentiality (the act of freely making the world as it is as one's own) and being an authentic person.

#### 4.2 Not Quite Grasping Authenticity; in Between

From the 598 letters, 71 of them demonstrated the potential of Dasein, but did not fully realize authenticity. In many of these letters, the writers described key events that could have lead to an understanding of the finite nature of life, but after brief mention, the writers typically reverted to the litany of activities in which family members were engaged. For example, in Letter 279, the writer talked about how difficult it is to begin the newsletter with the death of a sister, her own diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer, the Iraq war, and her grandfather's death. Any one of these events might lead an individual to Dasein, but instead, she then discusses each family member's activities over the year.

Similarly, the author of Letter 105 talks about the death of her grandmother the preceding December and how she was not able to get Christmas letters sent; she then turns her



attention to the present holiday season, described as “bittersweet” and full of reflections about Grandma’s life. However, she then goes into the life event descriptions of each of her family members. Several other letters mirrored Letter 105. Other events mentioned in the letters included diagnosis of colitis, two fathers’ deaths, a mother’s death, a sister’s death, a brother’s death, a couple of car accidents in one family, an adoption, 9/11, a vacation in Europe, being homeless due to a hurricane, and having a child diagnosed with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). After writers mentioned each key event, they continued with a discussion of busyness and a litany of the year’s activities.

Whereas other letters in this group did not mention specific, key events, they made brief mention of life’s finality. In Letter 294, the writer talked about her job and life in Colorado, but noted that she ought to get home more. Letter 394 simply listed a few of “life’s blessings.” After listing the family’s activities, Letter 310’s author concluded that her house is “full of love and fur.” Using a quotation from Thackeray, Letter 406 tells readers to follow Thackeray’s “simple plan for finding your destiny;” however, the remainder of the two-page 8-point-font letter is a detailed description of the year’s events. Several of the letters refer to God and His [sic] plan for their lives. One letter writer remarked about finding some peace during the Christmas season, despite the “state of chaos our world has evolved into” (Letter 505). Another writer mentioned that her future looked bright, but she was not sure where she would be. The author in Letter 243 remarked that she and her husband were trying not to let their jobs become the focal points of their lives, but then went on to describe their jobs in detail. Finally, Letter 293 concluded a description of activities with the comment, “we never thought we’d feel as full of life in the year 2000, much less even be alive.”

The examples from this “in between” group illustrate that in some ways the writers understood Facticity and had moments of authentic expression. However, these moments comprised mere sentences or seemingly offhand remarks. Instead, most of the material in these letters consisted of listing and describing the accomplishments and events of the year, similar to the bulk of letters in our sample that do not illustrate authenticity at all.

#### 4.3 Inauthenticity

Heidegger (1962) notes every individual has the ability to lead an authentic existence; however, most fail to recognize Dasein due to Forfeiture and end up leading an inauthentic life. Forfeiture may occur when an individual becomes distracted by the hectic details of daily life. Very few people are able to move past Forfeiture to the awareness of their actual existence. It is therefore no surprise that of the 598 holiday letters examined, 495 were evidence of individuals leading inauthentic lives filled with Forfeiture.

Most of the letters presented a quick report, stating the events of the past year. The letters were essentially a “laundry list” of kid’s activities and job reports, grandchildren, and ailments. Many of the letters were presented in alternative formats in an attempt to be creative and unique. Some letters were formatted similar to a newspaper, complete with headlines and text boxes. Letter 225 flashed “Christmas Chronicle” in bright red and green colors with volume and issue number across the top of the page. The first headline read, “The Year in Review.” Letter 280 challenged the reader in the opening story stating, “If you dare, read on to hear about the exciting life and times of Mr. and Mrs. [Smith].”

Many letters provided the reader with bullet points, whether it was a month-by-month breakdown of events, a quick two to three sentence paragraph reporting on each family member, or actual formatted bullets. Letter 414 presented the month, the corresponding

national/world recognized holiday, along with the family-recognized holiday. For example, January was reported as the month to celebrate the New Year and the ice-fishing opener.

Every letter in this category showed explicit evidence of inauthentic lifestyles and overt missed opportunities for awareness of Facticity and Conscience. Recall Conscience enables us to grasp our human Beingness. Letter 300, arranged in bullet points, reads:

- [John] had bursitis in his knee and was in the hospital... treating the infection;
- [Grandpa Smith] turned 100 in May;
- [John] is busy installing doors and farming;
- [Great-Grandma Joan] went home with Jesus in October;
- [John, Jr.] bought a '96 Chevrolet pickup

The writer nonchalantly passed over several significant events appropriate for reflection and awareness of Dasein.

Letter 119 starts out “~14~ The number of months we have enjoyed each other’s company in wedded bliss (Well, it’s not ‘bliss’ 100% of the time, but close enough!).” The next line then reads “~2~ This is how many MORE times [Jack] wiped out on the ski slopes than me on our trip to Lutsen last New Year’s weekend with some of our most fun friends...” The writer of this letter reported a major life event, then quickly moved on to another newsworthy report without any pause for reflection.

The introduction of a new life could be a trigger for an individual to recognize Facticity; however, that is not always the case. Letter 260 reports the birth of triplets, a baby girl, a baby boy, and another baby girl all within a few month’s time. After taking inventory of the year’s births, the letter writer started a new paragraph reporting on a relative who came to visit and ended up staying longer than expected due to a sudden major heart attack. Again, this writer demonstrates Forfeiture, not reflecting on the life events she experienced.

Letter 110 states, “we very recently became foster parents to a pair of brothers, ages 3 and 4. Hopefully we will help bring love and stability into their lives. They have already made an impact on ours!” Letter 281 begins, “Last Christmas [Bob’s] mom was seriously ill but is doing much better and has pretty much recovered. [Jane’s] dad ran into serious problems with his health but is doing much better now too. Praise the Lord for all His blessings.” Again, the writers reported major events in one sentence then moved on to the next item.

Another vivid example of inauthenticity appeared in Letter 101. The author wrote an entire single-spaced page reporting on the activities of each family member. Finally, in the second paragraph on the backside of the page the author writes,

With all of our highs, we unfortunately had our lows. [Laura’s] grandma died just days before [Sally] was born. It was a strange feeling losing and gaining someone so special at the same time. At the end of June we lost [Mike’s] father who was battling cancer. The summer was long and lonely without our favorite lake man, and the holidays will never be the same. Along with them we lost many other friends who were very special to us. It was a difficult year.

At no point does this writer make any indication that he or she is aware of his temporality or the reality of Dasein, despite the fact that he had reasons for doing so.

Perhaps the ultimate exhibits of an inauthentic life were found in letters written by children or from the point of view of a child. Letter 205 reports,

[Jake] – 7: I got to skip 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, and started 3<sup>rd</sup> grade this year. It’s cool and I like it a lot...[Bruce]—3: The world and all the players are there solely for my

entertainment. I expect that everything will go my way and when it doesn't, there is a price to be paid.

Letter 522 begins, "We've decided to write things a bit differently this year. Everyone is handling his or her own part of the family Christmas letter because Mom has lost her creativity." Following this opening paragraph, each paragraph is written in a different font representative of a family member. For example, "[Sam]: I am in preschool and learning a lot. I already know my ABC's and numbers. I love my dog...." Letter 501 announces,

[Jane's] past year through the eyes of her 2-year old nephew, [Scott]. I wanted to play on Auntie [Jane Jane's] 'puter, so she told me to write her Christmas letter for her. [Jane Jane's] been busy this year. She went to Egypt last March for Spring Break. She had a lot of fun and brought back presents. She says she is glad that she went when she did, especially since the September attacks.

Therefore, even children played a role in depicting inauthenticity in holiday letters.

## 5 Conclusions

Based on our analysis, Heidegger is correct about the number of those who are able to communicate an accurate understanding of their lives, as conveyed in holiday letters. The number of authentic depictions of life was relatively few and demonstrated several general trends. First, most letter writers had some sort of traumatic experience to relate. A number of writers had health issues or deaths with which to cope. Another one experienced an unsettling event. This experience might have been the catalyst required to cause the writer to cease being distracted and begin to apprehend the reality of Dasein. It is unfortunate that it took a traumatic event to trigger Dasein, and we certainly do not mean to imply that more individuals need to experience bad situations in order to fully live. However, it does appear that, rather than ignore or defy negative emotions, we should welcome them as a practical way to avoiding Forfeiture.

A second characteristic is the level of life experience and maturity that each of the letter writers seemed to have. A conclusion that is plausible from these documents is that the recognition of Dasein and leading an authentic life require life experience and maturity to look beyond the inauthentic. Perhaps those who have recognized Dasein have the potential to reach out to others with this awareness. It is possible that authenticity is transitory, depending on life's events. An individual probably is inauthentic at birth because he cannot comprehend Dasein. However, later in life, that individual may have experienced significant life-changing events and may grow towards authenticity. Future research should attempt to gather more demographic data related to age and stage of life. It is possible older individuals are more able to grasp Dasein as they psychologically come to terms with their aging and begin to discover their internal center, or Self. Living with an increased level of consciousness of the Self may result in more intense feelings of integrity and wholeness (Jung 1966).

Third, and most importantly, the letters in this study, particularly those coded as inauthentic, revealed that these individuals appeared to be living a fast-paced lifestyle, which has possible connections with inauthenticity. This result is not surprising given the current pace of American culture (Adams et al. 2006; Perlow 1997; Roxburgh 2006). For example, Epstein and Kalleberg (2004) argue families have little unprogrammed time, as children and adults are involved in many different activities. Many Americans who work

report they are working more and feel like they have less free time than they did in the past (Jacobs and Gerson 2004). It is possible that individuals who live fast-paced lifestyles and do not take the time to acknowledge Dasein may be inauthentic and ultimately unhappy. The relationship between inauthenticity and pace of life ought to be the subject of further inquiry. Further, a eudaimonic versus hedonic view of inquiry related to living a complete human life (for a complete discussion see Ryan and Deci 2001), combined with the Heideggerian view of authenticity and inauthenticity, could offer an additional perspective to fast-paced lifestyles through the perspectives of psychology and philosophy.

This study provides some insight into the role of communication in living an authentic life. In holiday letters, written at a stressful time of year, and in which authenticity is not rewarded, few people talk about time and their relationship to it. In fact, people use holiday letters to describe time as something to fill, and the lists of multiple family accomplishments point to their successes in doing so. If language does, indeed, create and shape culture (Kodish 2003/2004), then even holiday letters, in which so few people are authentic, help shape and further perpetuate our fast pace of life.

Whereas Heidegger might agree that a fast-paced lifestyle contributes to an inability to discern Dasein, he might suggest that technology, as part of this world, plays a role as well. In fact, he seems almost prescient on the effects of technology on the ability to recognize Dasein (Heidegger 2002). Instead of technology allowing us enough time to contemplate our true being, we lose ourselves in the technology itself and our drive to control it and develop more technology. In other words, we willingly blind ourselves to our Forfeiture.

Heidegger's view can be borne out by simply examining what people actually do in real life in regard to technology. The value of individuals in contemporary North American society depends to a large extent on what gadgets they possess, the number of cell phone calls or text messages they receive, and how well they know and incorporate current technological developments into their lives. For example, computers seem to have taken a fundamental role in our communications and interactions with others. People can be in the same office, but instead of interacting directly with each other, they text message or use email. The loss is great. With the myopic focus on technology and what it can do, people craft a shell around themselves that is almost impossible for them to crack so that they can see reality as it is. The holiday letters show this to a great extent with people using computers and copy machines instead of taking time to handwrite any part of the missive. Moreover, the hectic quality of the lives found in the vast majority of letters is made possible only through the adoption and exploitation of technology.

Inauthentic descriptions of life, such as many writers described in these letters, depict a rather narrow view of life. Not only does a fast-paced lifestyle create potential stress (Managing stress in a fast-paced world 2001) and affect relationships we have with others (Burnett and Gold 2002), it may, according to Heidegger, affect our very existence on this Earth. The "reality" of a majority of letter writers in this study relegates them to not ever be fully aware of life's fullness, and may trap them in an endless circle of meetings, schedules, and events.

Perhaps children are the epitome of inauthenticity as they are unable to grasp Dasein. Or worse, parents teach them inauthenticity by asking them to write holiday letters that emphasize hectic lifestyles rather than self-examination and understanding. Children, unless they can grasp their own deaths, can have a very pleasurable existence, but it is an unauthentic, unhappy one.

Whereas this study is one of the first to examine interpersonal concepts through both communication and philosophical lenses, the project has its limitations. For example, not all North American individuals write holiday letters. Those who do write letters may be

constrained by the traditionally accepted holiday letter format, thus not allowing for their true authenticity to emerge in the text of the letter. Holiday letters are but one way to examine how people describe time, and certainly multiple other venues exist; however, as argued above, our choice to use holiday letters in which individuals talk about life and time seems an appropriate beginning. Our analysis was qualitative in nature, due to the examination of this phenomenon through Heidegger's perspective. Further qualitative study examining levels of education, age, and pace of life are warranted. Also, in-depth interviews may be necessary to help individuals, specifically those with letters placed in the *in between* position, to be able to articulate characteristics of true authenticity in their lives.

The true meaning of life and happiness in it revolves around our ability to recognize Facticity. In this study, participants reflected on their lives in holiday letters, revealing that most of them appeared to live inauthentic lives, and also lived fast-paced lives. Such implications warrant further study, not only in communication, but from a variety of philosophical perspectives. Life is short; if we are unable to get off the gerbil's endless wheel, and appreciate what life is about, we may never be able to recognize fully life's meaning and ultimate happiness.

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