

IN PURSUIT



LESSON #45 • FROM GRACE COOLIDGE

AUTHENTICITY BUILDS TRUST WHEN ACTIONS MATCH VALUES



by Colleen Shogan

Grace Coolidge, a dedicated educator for the deaf, never envisioned becoming First Lady of the United States. She married Calvin Coolidge, a man characterized by reserved speech, deliberate action, and discreet ambition. Upon Calvin Coolidge's accession to the presidency following Warren Harding's unexpected death in 1923, Grace found herself at the heart of American political discourse, a position she had neither sought, anticipated, nor desired. However, it was precisely her unassuming authenticity that endeared her to the nation and provides a lasting lesson regarding the potency of genuine character and sincerity in public service.

Grace Coolidge's authenticity was rooted in an unwavering commitment to her personal values and religious beliefs. She did not create a persona to meet expectations or generate political support; she simply extended the warmth and cheerfulness that defined her private life to her public duties. Unlike many first ladies--who shaped policy, influenced decisions, or championed grand initiatives-- Grace understood her role as one of sociability and meaningful connection. She resumed public tours of the White House, greeting visitors with an affable charm that contrasted sharply with her husband's reserved demeanor. In doing so, she provided Americans with an early dose of accessibility to the presidency during a historical period of rapid social and economic change.

Authenticity builds trust when public actions match private values.

The 1920s were also an era of exuberance and excess. Jazz clubs flourished, consumerism surged, and Americans were captivated by new technologies, flashy clothing, materialism, and modern lifestyles. In this environment, cynicism about politics took root; the recent Harding scandals had eroded public trust and contributed to a growing national sentiment of skepticism. Grace's genuine approach offered an antidote to this burgeoning suspicion of government and political leadership. Her readiness to laugh, her friendliness toward guests, and her spontaneous joy at public events served as a discreet yet potent example that integrity could still reside in the nation's highest offices. Although she may not have explicitly articulated it in these precise terms, Grace Coolidge undoubtedly comprehended the value of soft power.

As first lady, she became a celebrity in her own right. This was a remarkable occurrence, since President Coolidge and Grace agreed she would not accept interviews, give speeches, or make waves. Despite shunning a formal media role as first lady, Grace still became famous. Her renown was due to her vivaciousness and dogged authenticity, which naturally drew people to her.

Perhaps the most poignant illustration of her authenticity occurred during the summer of 1924, when the couple's youngest son, Calvin Jr., tragically passed away unexpectedly from an infected blister. This devastating event profoundly affected both parents. President Coolidge retreated further into his customary silence, while Grace exhibited remarkable openness in bearing her grief, uncommon for that era. Her public appearances, resumed only a few weeks after her son's demise, were characterized by a palpable and

dignified sorrow that resonated deeply with the American people. Instead of concealing herself or fabricating a narrative to safeguard her image, she permitted the public to observe her as a mother in mourning. She wore white during this time, an unusual decision but in keeping with her spiritual nature. This display of vulnerability fostered a shared sense of humanity between Grace Coolidge and the nation.

Grace also demonstrated authenticity in her unshakeable devotion to her husband Calvin. She never shied from his quirks or his reticence; instead, she balanced them with her cordiality and convivial demeanor. She knew her husband better than anyone and subtly guided him through the impersonal demands of politics. When he routinely exhibited curtness at White House receptions, she greeted guests with a noteworthy enthusiasm. Her honest affection helped soften President Coolidge's public image and humanize a president often caricatured as



Grace Coolidge | Library of Congress

aloof and indifferent. During an era when the mass media had begun to cover the president as a person as well as a politician, Grace Coolidge's actions had a real political impact.

Mrs. Coolidge consistently demonstrated unwavering support for individuals with disabilities. Helen Keller visited the White House as her guest, and Grace maintained her lifelong vocation of assisting the deaf community. Her dedication in this field stemmed from a lifelong passion, commencing with her work as a teacher at the Clarke School for the Deaf prior to her marriage to Calvin. As the first First Lady to earn a bachelor's degree, Grace's energy and enthusiasm for this population were evident in the purity of her motives, excluding any political concerns associated with her work.

Grace's genuine spirit manifested in small, endearing moments. A profound affection for animals permeated her life. In 1926, when a live raccoon was dispatched to the White House for Thanksgiving dinner, Grace made a compassionate decision to spare the creature. Instead of considering it a meal, she named the raccoon Rebecca, took her under her care as a pet, and permitted her to roam the White House grounds and even participate in the annual Easter egg roll. Rebecca swiftly became a beloved figure, captivating both visitors and the media. Grace's choice to embrace the raccoon as an integral part of her family showcased her playful spontaneity and disregard for conventional, formal expectations. Through Rebecca and her canine companion, Rob Roy, the public witnessed Grace's remarkable capacity for kindness and whimsy, qualities that endeared her to the hearts of many and rendered her approachable and authentic.



Grace Coolidge and Rebecca the Raccoon at the White House Easter Egg Roll, 1927 | Library of Congress

In many ways, Grace Coolidge reminds us that authenticity is not about constant openness or endless self-disclosure; it is about consistency between one's private values and public actions. Even though she gave no interviews during the White House years, the truthful persona she embodied was so powerful, it simply shone through as journalists observed her behavior and actions as first lady. Her example teaches us that public figures do not need to adopt artificial polish or hide behind carefully constructed facades. Rather, by simply being true to themselves and to those they serve, leaders can inspire trust and loyalty that no manufactured image can ever achieve.

In today's world and our contemporary political life, authenticity is both elusive and desperately needed. We live in a time when public figures are often scrutinized for every inconsistency, and yet, paradoxically, many strive to maintain carefully managed brands rather than display their genuine selves. The lesson from Grace Coolidge is that authenticity cannot be faked or manufactured. When it is real, it transcends political divides, fosters empathy, and strengthens the bonds of civil society, which, in turn, supports the functions of a republican democracy.

Grace Coolidge's legacy lies not in her overt political influence or significant legislative achievements, but in her unwavering embodiment of the values she espoused. Her laughter, grief, and unwavering support for her husband exemplified a leadership model that prioritizes sincerity over strategy and personal character over calculated actions. By reflecting on Grace Coolidge's life, we are reminded that authenticity is not a luxury in public life, but a fundamental requirement. It remains one of the most effective means for leaders to establish meaningful connections and maintain public trust in elected officials and the democratic institutions they serve.