
CONTINUUM

THE IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON

I am an impostor. At my first job, on a daily paper in upstate New York, I worked for a frantic city editor who pounded out scathing, incoherent editorials on his Underwood Model T. He was driven, it seemed, by a row of ancestors that loomed from the wall above his head. Most prominent were the still-mourned father, a frustrated poet-turned-shoe-salesman; and a beloved great-uncle, a wild-haired Russian scribe who had dreamed of crossing the border to Poland and the literary world beyond. They glared down vengefully, directing editorial policy from on high. Laboring in the dusty city room day after day, I was assailed by these icons. I was an impostor, they screamed. How dare I presume to be a writer when they and their progeny had failed. And even if I did eventually have some small measure of success, what would it mean when weighed against the work of masters like Shakespeare and Proust?

In those days, often enough, my stories were muddled, my language obscure. But it was because spirits hounded me. Once I entered the wider literary world, where writers were polished and profound, I told myself, I too would learn clarity and precision, and wonderful stories would flow.

Roaming from job to job over the years, I did indeed learn to report a story accurately and clearly, molding sentence after sentence with patina and form. Today I sit behind the desk of a national magazine, recasting the tortuous prose of other writers, people no doubt haunted by ghosts of their own.

But I still feel like an impostor. I still hear the poet and the scribe insisting that none of my accomplishments are real.

According to psychologist Madeline Hirschfeld, of Lynbrook, New York, I am not alone. I suffer from a common malaise known as the impostor phenomenon—the belief that I've merely *tricked* others into thinking I'm intelligent and skilled. A study conducted by psychologist Gail Matthews, of Dominican College of San Rafael, in California, reveals that the phenomenon strikes successful professionals, from judges and lawyers to physicians, police officers, and priests. And University of Pennsylvania Medical School psychologist Joan Harvey (author of *If I'm So Successful, Why Do I Feel Like a Fake: The Impostor Phenomenon*, published recently by St. Martin's Press) has learned that two of every five successful people suffer from the syndrome, while 70 percent of all high achievers have at some point felt like frauds. Despite break-

through inventions, hit records, advanced degrees, or other extraordinary accomplishments, she notes, victims of the syndrome live in fear of the day their "ruse" is uncovered. Moreover, those susceptible to the syndrome suffer more with each new success.

The master actor Richard Burton, for instance, described himself as a poor boy from a Welsh mining town, undeserving of his fame. And one of Harvey's patients, a well-known magazine writer, felt like a fraud because of her father's unyielding advice: "Don't even *try* to write unless you can do it like Joyce."

The impostor phenomenon was first defined in 1978, when psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes discovered the overwhelming insecurity of female A students. Fascinated by this clinical work, Harvey set out to quantify the results. Still a graduate student who felt like something of an impostor herself, she learned that the phenomenon was most prominent in those just starting a new field of endeavor.

She also divided the afflicted into several types, including the workaholic, who relates his success to excessive work; the charmer, who feels he has climbed up the ladder because of personality; the chameleon, who believes he has succeeded because he's adopted the views of a superior; and the magical thinker, who relates success to the desperate anxiety that precedes it. "Some of these people even attribute success to clerical errors or misprogrammed computers," she says, "to anything except their own inherent intellect or ability."

The cause of the disorder? According to Hirschfeld (who is also writing a book on the subject), the phenomenon often has a different derivation in men and women. Men, she notes, are afflicted by the age-old Oedipus complex—success might traumatize them with the guilt of overpowering, even murdering, Dad. Women, on the other hand, are haunted by a social notion—dare to succeed and you're not a woman at all.

Can such a deep-rooted disturbance be cured? Of course, Harvey says. "Most people suffering from the phenomenon find the feeling so natural they don't even perceive it as a problem that can be treated. But once you're aware of your feelings and their derivation, you can benefit from therapy that tells you you're okay."

Maybe so. But writers, after all, are in a special category. The poet and scribe said it best: Don't get too cocky. There's always Shakespeare and Proust.—PAMELA WEINTRAUB