

# How We Lost Ourselves

## How much of other's Shadow Reflects Me

For a long time I did not have an *identity*. I used to be my parents' daughter, then a teacher's favourite, certain position at work, a member of my professional association, a therapist to my client and a trainer to a group of enthusiastic participants.

But when the months, weeks, or a day's of work is over, body felt tired and somewhat empty. I know its time for a moment of silence and rest.

I had time to think. I could see that I had no identity besides being someone's family, friend, or being available when someone reach for help and support. In that moment of deep silence and reflection, the big question arise - What am i doing?.

I searched and researched for answers to the question: How do a few people become successful while the rest struggle? I've been told that only a few rare people are free to be who they are. They have a sense of confidence and power about them that no one else seems to possess. I admitted to myself that though I had some success with my work, I never had that kind of confidence to be more than what I currently am.

I was told that those who have a rock solid inner power are those whose individuality is highly developed. I used to belief that only such people can make their mark in the world. I wanted to be such a person. My question was "Why didn't I have that sense of individuality?" The answer is "**conformity and compliance**".

From childhood most of us were shaped and moulded into certain feelings, thoughts and behavior by the attitudes, ego personalities, words and actions of the society which surrounded us – parents, neighbors, relatives, teachers, and peers.

They all had vast power over us. They shaped our private thoughts, values and feeling which we thought were our own by providing the language and images that

we think through. We copied emotional reactions to things and situations from them, learning that poo is dirty, food smells good, my elders and superiors ought to be obeyed, I must respect the elders and death ought to be feared. We adopted the belief system from family, friends and environment.

I was obliged to learn how my society expected me to behave. Society taught me contradictions. I was expected to be part of a homogenous whole society by copying their behavior. At the same time I was expected to be a unique individual.

Conditioning started in preschool. On the one hand I was taught to be an independent, free agent with my own thoughts. On the other hand I couldn't behave the way I wanted. I was judged when I didn't want to share my toys. When I complied (unwillingly) I was complimented and praised. When I copied the behavior of my friend I was told to be myself. When I refused to comply because I did not enjoy doing what others was doing, I was punished. I got confused right from the beginning. How could I be a free agent when I had to comply in order to be accepted? Well, non-compliance had painful consequences so it was easier to comply.

At school obedience was everything. There were school rules to be followed without question. I was not encouraged to question "facts" and to think for myself because that amounted to disobedience. I learned to memorize and regurgitate facts for exams. Since was a good learner that earned me high marks and praise. If I wrote an essay disagreeing with "facts" I was criticized. Kids who were weak academically were made to feel inferior, destroying their self confidence. So I learned to compete academically to gain recognition, completely ignoring my creative sides.

Looking back, I can see that everything that I learned was about the external: what the school, parents, friends and society expected. No one congruently encouraged me to be myself. I can see that the school system is very effective at creating mediocre and compliant kids who cannot take a stand opposed to what is being taught.

As a compliant student I entered the working environment where good behavior was synonymous with compliance. I had to be goal driven, and have a certain attitude and behavior in order to be accepted by others and to be included and rewarded. That behavior included office politics, something that <sup>2</sup> never learned to

do. How could I since I was a conformer? Eventually the office political system crushed my career and crushed me as an individual because I had no idea how to look after my needs and my aspirations.

As you can see, the social system raised me to be fully compliant while telling me I was an individual and a free agent. I was expected to always take care of the well being and wishes of others, not mine. I was what society expects me to be - a full extension of what others are. I really did not know who I was. I did not know that I should know. I had never been introduced to who I truly am, or encouraged to find out. I had been told all my life to be myself, and yet I had been trained to follow what society prescribed. I was a confused conformer who drifts with the stream of his environment. When individuality mattered most, I failed and I was pushed out of my job several times. At home I was not happy either because I never learned to take care of my needs within myself.

Most of us are like this. When there is a crisis, e.g. redundancy at work, broken marriage or death, the system will let us down. Because we are products of a system that kills individuality, we do not know how to survive outside our familiar environment. We do not know the strengths and weaknesses that dictate who we are as individuals. We do not know what we should work on to improve ourselves. We are used to complying with the orders or expectations of others and cannot cope and creatively create a new reality. We feel like a failure. The crisis is mental because finally we have learned that we cannot rely on society, we must rely on the self. How do we rely on ourselves for the first time?

Since we do not know how, we may not see that the problem lies within. We blame everyone for our circumstances. We blame our parents. We blame our spouses. We expect our kids to achieve what we have failed to achieve under similar conditions. We expect others to create our happiness. This crisis brings out all our inner pain, self doubt and secret longings that we masked for a long time because we did not want to deal with such issues. Now we have all the time to deal with them.

Further observation of clients' illness, fears, and inferiority shown at work, or at home, showed me that this crisis is due to conditioning, compliance and conformity. Deliberate daily reflection showed me that I am a <sup>3</sup>mirror image of what society is and how society behaves mirrors what I am. I am part of the whole because I complied and conformed. Why then blame others? I realized that in

order to be my genuine self, I must learn how to develop individuality. I must discover to recognise my real identity and my inner power in order to develop individuality.

I learned that individuality is that invisible something within me that inspires, initiates or directs activity. That individuality must be made distinct, determined and congruent. I must know always what I am and what I want. I must constantly be determined to find and protect what I want. I must take responsibility for my happiness and not expect it from others. I must learn how to survive financially without having to conform. When my individuality finally becomes highly developed, it gives me power to stand out different and distinct above others. Individuality is what will free me from conformity and compliance to society.

This new found awareness that I can find myself again, even though I was conditioned, was the first step towards personal transformation. I had to unlearn a lot that I had been taught by a society that conspired to keep my true identity hidden.

The seeking begins where I search for answers to questions: Who am I? Why am I here? Am I here to conquer nature? Am I here to serve others? What's the point? Where did I come from?

Should my identity be determined by those who compliments me with my work, those who recognises me for my efforts, or by those whose lives I've touched? The moment I started asking the right questions, information made its way to me.

I learned that there is a more powerful self that lies within me, one that knows everything and has unlimited power and possibilities, but will never impose itself on my outer person. I discovered this inner self and learned to befriend it and to use its power. I left the belief system that never empowered me, and I found my inner guidance and inner strength. I learned to say "yes" when I meant yes, and "no" when I meant know. I stopped drifting down society's muddy stream and finally took control of my destiny. I once was lost and I am beginning to find myself, the stranger within<sup>(1)</sup> that awaits to be found.

Society may complain and judges because I stopped complying, and I left their traditions, clubs and religion, and have become different. Later, they will see the big difference that I will make and say, *"Maybe she is on to something after all."*

## References

1. Stanger in That Mirror C.D., Irene Khor, 2017.<sup>5</sup>