

SIMRAN BHARGAVA*Saturday , April 12, 2003*

TODAY'S COLUMNIST

SIMRAN ON SATURDAY

The Imposter Syndrome: Feeling Like A Fraud

My shameful secret is out: I cannot write. I have been sitting for two hours now, my pen idling over my page. My mind is barren of fresh ideas, my thoughts are cranky and resistant. I have been calling to the winds for inspiration but it hasn't come. It's almost noon and my writing boat hasn't even left the shore.

A secret voice hisses in my ear: "Call yourself a writer? Ha, you have nothing to say, everything you want to say has been said before. You got assigned this column because you smart-talked your way into it, but now you're caught. Your time's up, you fraud."

But I have hundreds of very flattering e-mails in my inbox, I plead. I have been writing for almost two decades. The ominous voice hisses back: "You fooled all those people, but it can't last. You may have written a few good pieces but that's all you've got in you. It was all a fluke."

It's familiar, this voice. It comes every now and then, especially when I have a creative block as I do now. Or each time I start a new job. It says: You're not good enough. You don't really deserve this job. It's only a matter of time before you are found out. It first came years ago when I got admission into one of the world's best universities: "You managed to get in somehow but now you're sunk," went the voice. "All those other people out there are much smarter than you." Since then I've heard it each time I've had to handle a big project or have landed a top job. The more senior the position, the louder it whispers: "Imposter."

Thank goodness I recognise it because now I can tell it to shut up.

Researchers says that these vague feelings of self-doubt, intellectual fraudulence and anxiety are so common among people, it's almost an epidemic. The "imposter syndrome" strikes people everywhere, especially high achievers. It makes them discount their success attributing it to luck, not real ability. Along with it comes the fear that anytime they could be found out.

The more successful you get, the greater the inner stress. Now people have expectations of you that you may not be able to meet. Now each decision you make should be perfect because there's much to lose.

Success. It can come with handcuffs.

Research into the "imposter syndrome" first began in 1978 by two psychotherapists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes who studied a group of successful, high-achieving women. They found that these women had high levels of self-doubt and an inability to internalise their success. They believed they were "fooling" other people, that they got where they did because of contacts or luck — even when a reality check proved that the exact opposite was true. External proofs of excellence — academic degrees, awards, promotions — were routinely dismissed. As researcher Dr Valerie

Young put it: “Rather than offering assurance, each new achievement and subsequent challenge only serves to intensify the ever present fear of being...found out.”

Often it's the smartest people who suffer most. As children they are told how intelligent and exceptional they are. And then, as they grow up, they invariably encounter tasks that are not so easy, where they don't have all the answers. Suddenly they have to accept that they aren't so special, that they may actually be only average, even dumb...an imposter. It's the dirty little secret many smart people share — and no one tells.

I personally know dozens of “imposters”. Like this man who worked very hard to become CEO of his company, got the job — and is now panicking because suddenly he thinks he's not really good enough for it. Or another friend who sings beautifully but thinks he's a fraud because he doesn't sing as well as Bhimsen Joshi. Or this young woman I know who started out as a secretary and who at age 29, is now vice-president of a very successful company. A hard-working, determined woman, she has also managed to build her own home, one of the youngest people I know to have done so. And yet she too feels like a fraud. But if she is a fraud, then who was it who achieved all those successes?

A few weeks ago I reconnected with an old friend, a gifted journalist, via e-mail. She has done remarkably well for herself in the software industry, spearheading a project that was good enough to survive the dotcom typhoon. She sent me an e-mail and these are her exact words: “I can't believe I make my living as a techie. I feel like such a poseur until I remind myself I've successfully delivered projects more effectively and quickly than guys with advanced degrees in computer science. But I still feel like I'm going to be shown up some day.”

A long-time teacher posted this message on the Net: “Often I have felt the ‘imposter syndrome’ as an academic — that sooner or later, someone somewhere is going to figure out I don't know what the heck I am doing.”

Interestingly, real imposters never suffer from these feelings. Nor do people who are struggling to survive have the time to luxuriate in such thoughts. I can't imagine my driver thinking: “I've been driving for 20 years but I'm actually a fake. One day they'll know I can't really drive at all.”

The good news is that once you figure out how this Imposter scoundrel operates, you can get him before he gets you. You know he's hovering around when you find yourself thinking such thoughts: “I give the impression of being more competent than I actually am.” Or “I'm afraid people will discover how much knowledge or ability I really lack.” Or “Everyone else is smarter than I am.”

The Imposter lies. You can defuse it by doing a reality check of what you have actually achieved. It also helps to know that sometime you're good and sometime you're not (helps to also know the same about Sachin Tendulkar. Sometime he scores a century, and sometime nothing at all).

Helps to know that a creative block is just a creative block — a small bump on the road. Not a signal that you've been in the wrong career for years.

Helps to know that the Imposter can feel like a psychological anaconda, but is only a mere mosquito. Shoo it away when it comes and get back to work.

And it sure helps to remember the joke: “What do you call an imposter ten years

from now?"

Boss.

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