CHAPTER 8.

IMPOSTER, PERFORMER, PROFESSIONAL

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I was the assistant director of the writing center when I applied to the PhD program in English Language and Rhetoric in 2002 at the University of Washington, Seattle. I felt lucky to be accepted. During the application process, however, I worried a bit over whether my application was as competitive as those of my new classmates. Since I already worked for the English department as a professional staff person, I had a niggling feeling that my application had been accepted based more on familiarity and the understanding that I wouldn't need funding than on the quality of my materials. And so the anxiety over my writing and my self as an academic began.

Of course, this type of anxiety is not uncommon or new among professionals. In 1978, psychology professor Pauline Clance and psychologist Suzanne Imes wrote in *The Impostor Phenomenon Among High Achieving Women* that "Despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, women who experience the imposter phenomenon persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise" (p. 241). The impostor phenomenon (more commonly called the impostor syndrome) has been documented as a continuing problem for women and people from working-class backgrounds ever since.

On her website, Valerie Young (2023), author of *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women* (2011), gives readers an opportunity to consider whether or not they are suffering from impostor syndrome by taking this short quiz:

1. Do you secretly worry you're not as bright, capable, or qualified as everyone "thinks" you are?
2. Do you chalk your accomplishments up to luck, timing, connections or computer error?
3. Do you believe "If I can do it, anybody can"?
4. Do you agonize over the smallest flaws in your work?
5. Are you crushed by even constructive criticism, seeing it as evidence of your ineptness?

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6. When you do succeed, do you secretly feel you fooled them again?
7. Do you worry that it's just a matter of time before you're "found out?"

Looking back now on my time as a graduate student, I remember precisely those feelings. I was from a low-income background, the first in my family to attend college, and a single mom on welfare and food stamps while working toward my BA and MA degrees. While in my doctoral program, my husband drove to the food bank once a week to ease the burden on our income. I often felt deeply frustrated that I would have to wait and work for so many years before earning my PhD and finally earning a middle-income salary. My gender, background, and financial status all pointed to a person with impostor syndrome: someone who doesn't feel that they fit in, who doesn't feel that they deserve what they have worked for.

TAKING MY QUALIFYING EXAMS AND THE THREAT OF UNMASKING

I did well in my PhD courses and even managed to publish seminar papers as articles. But, as I was studying for qualifying exams, I confessed to one of my committee members fears that the oral exams would "unmask" me, that, without the structure of a course where I could maneuver to please the instructor, I would reveal that I had no idea what I was doing. The committee member then told me, "It's normal to feel that way. I feel like an impostor every day." She was a successful, fully tenured, and well-published professor. Even with this sympathetic advice, I remained unsettled about the prospect of representing, through writing, nearly a year's worth of learning over the course of a weekend. The week prior to exam weekend found me beset by various ailments. One day, I would come down with a cold; the next day, the flu would threaten. After prompting the anxious specter of sitting for exams while sick in bed, the mysterious ailment would disappear overnight. The pre-exam anxiety played itself out in time for the actual work of writing, and I felt satisfied (although still worried until the feedback came in) with my performance.

The feedback, when it did arrive, was overwhelmingly positive and went a long way toward curing me of impostor syndrome. When it came time for oral exams, I was confident and comfortable; the committee was an interested and sympathetic audience who asked me to expand on the themes I had touched on in the written exams. They had tough questions, of course, but the tough questions were asked with the expectation that I would answer them well—and I did. When the exam was over, they presented me with wine, flowers, and hugs—along with my official candidacy.

THE JOB INTERVIEW PERFORMANCE

But, of course, before I could move from my exams (and dissertation) to a professorship, I had one more major trial to endure, one more test of the impostor syndrome to overcome: the job search. I found myself fully marshaling all of my authorial powers up to that point—updating CVs down to the minute, putting together the teaching portfolio, sample assignments, sample course syllabuses, meticulous cover letters and statements of teaching philosophy, and spell-checked email responses . . . Then needing to present the person behind the pen and paper.

My written application materials generated quite a lot of interest, and my schedule quickly filled up with interviews. None of them seemed to go well, however. I wasn't able to present myself in person as well as I did on paper. I couldn't summon up the level of self-presentation needed to show interviewers that I was worth inviting to a second (on-campus) interview. After suffering through the post-interview weeks with no callbacks, I applied to a late-advertising university and was asked to do a phone interview. Determined to finally show my true worth to a hiring committee and quite aware that my "regular" self wasn't communicating that worth, I borrowed another persona for the interview. As part of my dissertation work, I had conducted a research interview with an administrator at the University of Washington, Sheila Edwards Lange. Lange struck me as the most poised, articulate, intelligent, and professionally passionate person I had ever met. Listening to the tapes of the research interview, I realized I could *be* Sheila Edwards Lange for my own job interview.

And, somehow, it worked. The hiring committee invited me to a campus interview where I continued to perform this poised-and-articulate self and subsequently was offered a position. I deliberately took on a false persona, put on a mask, performed as an impostor. Or, perhaps, I used Lange's persona as a tool to bring the polish of my written self to my in-person self, to give me the confidence to behave as if I were qualified for, because I *was*, in fact, qualified for, an academic appointment. Either way, an actual physical job contract came in the mail a few months later.

QUESTIONING THE IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Clance and Imes are reportedly dismayed by the way their 1978 work has been used to pathologize the experience of women in the workplace and would prefer that their "phenomenon" had not morphed into a "syndrome" in popular culture (Jamison, 2023). In fact, the whole idea of imposter syndrome has come under scrutiny. Ruchika Tulshyan and Jodi-Ann Burey (2021) have pushed back

against the pathologizing of women's experiences and questioned the imposter syndrome's ubiquitous status as a diagnosis of insecurity and self-doubt. In their article "Stop Telling Women They Have Imposter Syndrome" (2021), they argue that "imposter syndrome puts the blame on individuals, without accounting for the historical and cultural contexts that are foundational to how it manifests in both women of color and white women. Imposter syndrome directs our view toward fixing women at work instead of fixing the places where women work."

Could the failure of my job interviews have been the fault of the nature of the interviews themselves? Looking back now, sixteen years later, I remember the uncomfortable and unfamiliar feeling of wearing a suit (that I bought at the local thrift store). Of walking into upscale hotel suites (as was the practice at that time) to meet with committee members. Of feeling off guard and wrong-footed in the face of unanticipated questions. And while some of this is a matter of me having a hard time rising to the occasion, job search committees could take some steps to accommodate those who might be less adept at this particular professional hurdle. A colleague of mine recently interviewed for a position where all questions were provided at least a week in advance. As someone who also struggles with interviews, he appreciated the opportunity to think and prepare and felt confident going into the interview.

IMPOSTER(S) FOR LIFE

A large part of my education has been to learn to accept success as well as failure, to manage feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt and to nurture feelings of confidence and self-assuredness. My experiences are in some ways similar and in some ways very different from many other people's, but if I can offer anything from my experience, it is perhaps that the life of the academic necessarily is the life of an impostor—one who is continuously posturing, masking, unmasking, borrowing, building confidence, suffering through insecurity.

Maybe my background has formed an identity that is especially prone to imposturing, or maybe my background has led me to more acutely question the legitimacy of my own persona. I've pushed my way through hurdles, sometimes blindly, with what seems like sheer force of will, using whatever tools and personas I find at my disposal.

In the end, though, what I have learned from these experiences is not how to stop being an impostor but how to more successfully perform my professional identity in satisfying, exciting, productive ways both on the page and in the flesh.

I may never truly be cured. And maybe I don't need to be.

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