Reflections on Self-Acceptance

by

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Personal growth through self acceptance is a theme throughout many of my blog posts. The posts in this book were selected because they were the most frequently read during 2015-16 and seemed to resonate with readers across a very wide demographic. Perhaps they will also resonate with you!

Enjoy reading and feel free to contact me with your comments.

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Sorry Doesn’t Cut It

Many years ago when my daughters were quite little, the younger one came running into the house full speed a few yards in front of her older sister. She breathlessly told me, “I said I was sorry – I said I was sorry (pause) and sorry does cut it.” Her older sister had obviously told her that for her offense, “sorry doesn’t cut it.”

I have often felt that “sorry doesn’t cut it” either -- but for a different reason. We need another word besides “sorry” that conveys compassion but not culpability. Women especially. When something bad happens to somebody, I’ll automatically say, “Oh, I’m so sorry.” I am not apologizing but expressing regret, but often the reply is, “It’s not your fault.” Of course it’s not my fault but I can still feel compassion for them.

Women are told we say “sorry” too much, and that it diminishes our authority and credibility. Grey Advertising created a compelling ad for Pantene around this very issue. As the video below (from Good Morning America) shows, this powerful message was applied to those situations where an apology was definitely not needed – and also offered examples of how women could re-frame their words without using “sorry”. It’s impressive and a great message. That still leaves us with all of those interactions where we are not apologizing but expressing regret and compassion. We don’t really have a word that differentiates an apology implying wrongdoing on our part (whether or not it is warranted) from one that simply expresses empathy.
So, I offer this challenge to you as a way to stop saying you are sorry when it is not called for. For at least one full day, *mentally* substitute the popular slang equivalent “My bad” for “I’m sorry”. How often did it really fit the situation? My guess is that most of the instances where “I’m sorry” was appropriate were for expressions of compassion, rather than an automatic apology for an imagined misdeed. Even though we don’t have a word for it, “I’m sorry this happened to you” or some similar compassionate response may be the only “sorry” you are left with at the end of the day. In that case, sorry *does* cut it.
Stuck in the Imposter Cycle?

The dogs woke me early today and for once I was grateful. I was having a version of a recurring dream. The one where I’m not prepared. This dream comes in various forms. This time I had forgotten I was in school and hadn’t been going to class and now it was the end of the semester and my research papers were not started and I was trying to fake my way through final exams. The worst part was I really respected my professors (all women in this dream) and I felt horrible letting them down. Stressful to say the least. And interesting. Because in my waking life, I am pretty well-prepared – at least in my professional life. I’m not the type to forget I have something due. So why the recurring dream?

In my research for my Masters in Applied Positive Psychology capstone, I came across something called “The Imposter Phenomenon.” It was originally identified back in the 70’s by two researchers, Clance and Imes. They were interviewing high achieving women for a different project but were surprised at some common themes that occurred. Many of these women felt:

- They were intellectual frauds
- Their success was due to luck, hard work or charm rather than ability
- That failure was just around the corner
- Afraid of being judged
• Unable to enjoy their achievements

• Afraid others would discover their incompetence.

These fears lead to a self-perpetuating Imposter Cycle. A woman faces an exam, project, or task. She experiences doubt or fear. She questions whether or not she will succeed this time. She may experience psychosomatic symptoms, anxiety dreams, etc. She works hard, over-prepares, or procrastinates, and then prepares in a frenzied manner. She succeeds and receives positive feedback. The whole cycle is reinforced.

On the outside, "Imposters” are successful. They have high GPA’s and succeed at work. But inside, they are their own worst critics and have a low sense of control over important outcomes.

Ok, Ok, sometimes I feel like an imposter. What do I do about it?

I often talk about the 3 C’s when I’m speaking to women: competence, confidence and courage. I know a lot of very successful women, whom I admire. None of them would consider not being prepared or winging it in their professional endeavors. They are competent. Sometimes, we need to look up from our work and look around in order to realize how competent we really are. This competence should give us confidence. If it doesn’t, we probably have a little more work to do on self-acceptance (a topic for a different blog). In the meantime -- fake it.

This is where the third C comes in – courage. It’s well-documented that women don’t try for positions that they’re qualified for in the same numbers that men do. Women have received so many messages that undermine their confidence that it is not surprising. Two ways to counteract this phenomenon are (1) take incremental steps rather than leaps. Put your name in for a project that has high visibility, some risk, but high rewards. (2) Build yourself a “posse” that can give you some confidence when yours is low. People who believe in your abilities, people who want to see you succeed, and ideally that work with you and can support you in those critical moments. You return the favor for them.

I know why I had the dream. I’m preparing a program on Unconscious Bias that I’m going to be delivering later this year. I want it to be awesome and I so respect my audience (my professors in the dream) that I will probably over-prepare and worry. Consciously, I know I’m competent and that the program will be great. Now if I could just convince my dreaming self.
Dorothy Gale traveled all over Oz picking up a motley crew of friends and enemies as she and Toto searched high and low for someone to help her get home to Kansas and Auntie Em. In the end, as she begged for help from the Good Witch Glinda, she finally realized that the answers were within her all along.

“If I ever go looking again for my heart’s desire, I won’t look any further than my own backyard because if it isn’t there, I never really lost it to begin with,” Dorothy realizes. The scarecrow and the Tin man feel they should have figured it out for Dorothy but Glinda disagrees, “No she had to learn it for herself.”

I have seen the movie many times (maybe you have as well). I think it covers nearly every aspect of life’s journey - growth, resilience, fear, tolerance and so much more. However it wasn’t until the last few years of my corporate career, when I had an excellent executive coach, that it occurred to me that if The Wizard of Oz were to be written as a business story, the role of “executive coach” would surely be held be Glinda. She listened and provided the tools (including the shoes) to help Dorothy build the courage she needed to find her way home. Dorothy returned home armed with an awareness of the unique gifts she had all along. That’s what coaches do. That’s what my coach did. He also helped me see that I had been “unofficially” coaching people for years. It was this revelation that inspired me to change careers and make coaching part of my new life’s work. I can’t imagine ever growing tired of seeing people begin to truly understand the personal power of their unique gifts – the ones they’ve had the power to use all along. Ruby Red Slipper are optional.
I would enjoy hearing from you about times when you discovered a hidden “power” you had all along and how you chose to use it in transformative ways. Feel free to comment or email me.
Who Am I?

When you’re a woman with children, this question is freighted with meaning. When you’re a woman with children and you are working outside the home, the question is even weightier. Are you a wife, a mother, a daughter, a professional – some weird combination with blurred lines that change daily?

I just finished a new novel by Ann Packer entitled, The Children’s Crusade. Here’s a blurb from the book jacket:

“Bill Blair finds the land by accident, three wooded acres south of San Francisco. The year is 1954, long before anyone will call this area Silicon Valley. Struck by a vision of the family he might create there, Bill buys the property and proposed to Penny Greenway, a woman whose yearning attitude toward life appeals to him. In less than a decade, they have four children. Yet Penny is a mercurial housewife, overwhelmed and under satisfied at a time when women chafed at the conventions confining them. And Penny will sacrifice anything to become an artist.”

The book captured my attention for a couple of reasons. One, I was born in 1954 and I enjoy reading about that time period. Two, my mother sounded a lot like the description of Penny. The story details the effect of Penny’s passion for art on her four children. On the surface, Penny’s actions seem selfish. She is uninterested in the minutiae of her children’s lives. In fact the title, “The Children’s Crusade,” is taken from their childhood project to find things that would make their mother interested in being with them.
I know how the kids felt. I always felt loved by my mother, but she would also disappear for hours into her art studio, and I never felt that I or my brother was at the center of her life. When I got to college, I read Kate Chopin’s groundbreaking novella, *The Awakening*. The main character, Edna Pontellier, finds being a mother stifling in her late 19th century Creole Society and says at one point, “I would die for my children, but I cannot live for them.” I had a feeling my mother felt the same way. Edna eventually drowns herself escaping the limitations of her life. The book was scandalous at the time for its feminist themes.

Probably in reaction to my mother’s rather laissez faire approach to motherhood, I approached motherhood a little differently. I never had a baby book and have very few pictures of me without my older brother. With my own daughters, I documented every coo, every whimper, every step of their young lives. I made packing lunches into an artistic challenge. Fruit kabobs, sandwiches cut with cookie cutters of the season (pumpkins, Christmas bells, Easter bunnies), trips to the library, no video games – nothing was too over the top or neurotic for me to try. Working outside the home was still a contentious topic when my girls were young and I was determined to “win” at both – mothering and career.

No matter which path mothers take -- laissez faire to helicopter -- I can guarantee you at some point, we feel conflicted. Are we doing it right? I always wondered why my husband never seemed to worry about the girls. I asked him once and he said, “I don’t have to. You worry enough for the both of us.” He actually meant it as a compliment, but it speaks to the truth that mothers are much more judged about how their children turn out than are fathers.

The name of my company is *The Right Reflection* because no one sees themselves directly, only through the reflection of others, and I’m fascinated with the reflection women see of themselves.

We are all unique, complex kaleidoscopes consisting of thousands of facets that continually change throughout our lives. What my mother and Penny and Edna were all chafing against was being defined by one facet no matter how brilliant. By embracing all our facets, we can *See Clearly, Act Boldly, and Live Fully*. 
We all have voices in our head. Sometimes they sound like us. Sometimes they sound like our mother, teacher, spouse, boss or just a whiny, sarcastic troll that tells us we can’t do much right. Occasionally, they say, “Good job” or “You can do it” but most of the time, they’re not that helpful.

These voices have various names. Inner-Critic, Limiting Beliefs. Reivich and Shatte in their book, Resilience, call these voices “ticker-tape beliefs” as they continually run in the background to the point that we don’t even notice them, yet they shape our perception of reality. In Co-Active Coaching, (Kimsey-House) these voices are called “saboteurs” since in their quest to maintain the status-quo in our lives, they sabotage or prevent us from moving forward and getting what we truly want in life.

We all have saboteurs. The trick is to become aware of them, name them and take away their power. Saboteurs basically tell us in their own special way that we “are not enough.” We’re not smart enough, pretty enough, rich enough, athletic enough, good enough to try for what would fulfill us. Or we’re “too much.” Too fat, too lazy, too average, too lacking. Supposedly, these voices are protecting us from getting hurt by trying for something we obviously can’t have or don’t deserve.

It’s much easier to recognize someone else’s saboteurs than our own as our own saboteurs hide in plain sight, much like the old cartoon where one fish says to another, “How’s the water?” and the other fish answers “What water?” Here are some ways to identify and defuse your saboteur.
**Personify Your Saboteur**

Sometimes it’s easier to recognize when your saboteur is speaking instead of you by giving your saboteur a name and persona. I’ve named one of my saboteurs “Edith” after Edith Bunker in the old sitcom from the 70’s *All in the Family*. Edith would natter on about nothing in a whiny voice until her husband, Archie, would finally yell, “Stifle.” Edith was very well-meaning but her non-stop chatter would get annoying. When I find my inner-voice interfering with forward movement, I internally yell, “Stifle,” and picture Edith with some duct tape across her mouth.

By personifying my inner critic and naming her Edith, it’s easier for me to recognize that Edith and I are not the same person and I can choose who gets to speak and get listened to.

**Disarm Your Saboteur**

Your saboteur is basically afraid – afraid of change. There probably is a shred of truth in what the saboteur is saying. Acknowledge that truth but don’t let it kill the whole idea. “Yes you’re right, Edith, that change would require going back to school and that would take a lot of time and I am busy. But this move aligns with my values of love of learning and curiosity. How can I keep from becoming over-booked and sick and still go back to school?”

Saboteurs are the ultimate “frenemies.” They’ve been around forever and are deeply familiar and maintain that they only want the best for us, yet with friends like them we don’t need enemies.
I Hate Networking But Love Visiting

According to recent headlines, one of the reasons women don’t rise to the top of organizations is that we don’t network effectively. Wonderful. One more thing to add to the list of things I don’t do well. Add to that the news that women lack self-confidence and don’t negotiate, I guess I’m lucky I get out of bed in the morning. But hold on. The name of my company is The Right Reflection because too often, all of us – but women especially, have a distorted view of themselves and that view is often negative.

So maybe we’re not so bad at networking. It’s true many women view networking events as one more item on their to-do list. They seem self-serving, false, and awkward. I prefer to think of networking as “visiting,” and all of us know how to visit. And rather than thinking of networking as an event, think of visiting as an approach to how you go through your day. Whether you’re sitting next to other parents at your son’s soccer practice, talking to the banker who’s helping you open an account, or volunteering at your favorite non-profit, be curious about the people around you. I know it’s tempting to jump on Facebook or finish your 500th game of Candy Crush, but look around. The people in front of you all have jobs, lives, connections, interests. Strike up a conversation when there is no expectation of getting anything in return. You never know what connections you’ll make. If you can help someone out, do so.

There’s a wonderful book by Adam Grant called Give and Take where he divides people into three categories: givers, takers, and matchers. Givers give with no expectation of anything in return; takers take and matchers will give but expect a quid pro quo in return.
I think the reason most of us balk at the term networking is we feel it is a matching behavior. If we view networking as a giving activity, it’s much easier. And according to Grant, givers are much happier and more successful in their lives and careers.

I often tell young mothers the best networking they can do is with the parents of their children’s friends. There will come a time when you have to stay late at work for a meeting with your boss and can’t get there to pick up your child. Having other moms on speed dial can save your career. And of course, you’ll do the same for them.

Hmm…maybe I’m not so bad at this networking thing after all.
The Importance of Self-Acceptance

I mentioned in my last blog that I want to help others see themselves clearly, act boldly and live fully. Over the years, I've read the same self-help books that everyone else has and I have often found them less than satisfying. Too often, they are based on one person's experience that the author then attempts to extrapolate to universal experience. These books are often not evidence-based and only address the symptoms people may be having but not the deeper issues. I knew I wanted something more. I found that something at the University of Pennsylvania where I completed their Masters in Applied Positive Psychology degree in 2014 (MAPP).

Positive psychology focuses on studying what makes life worth living. For years, psychology focused on easing the mental sufferings of depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsiveness, eating disorders, schizophrenia, which resulted in some wonderful advancements in alleviating suffering. But just as the absence of physical disease does not mean someone is healthy, the absence of mental disease does not indicate mental thriving. Positive psychology focuses on how to have optimum well-being. During MAPP, the concept of well-being was described as what people want, “the good life”. Well-being is more than being “happy.” Aristotle called it Eudaimonia, which is when individuals use their unique gifts to achieve a higher good.

There are many theories as to what constitutes well-being. I was particularly drawn to one model proposed by Carol Ryff entitled, Psychological Well-Being (PWB). According to Ryff, in order to have psychological well-being, people need the following in their lives:
1. **Autonomy**: Being self-determining and independent; able to resist social pressure to think and act in certain ways;

2. **Environmental Mastery**: Having a sense of mastery and competence in managing their environment;

3. **Personal Growth**: Having a feeling of continued development; sees self as growing and expanding;

4. **Positive Relations with Others**: Having warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others; concerned about the welfare of others;

5. **Purpose in Life**: Having goals in life and a sense of directedness; feels there is meaning to present and past life; holds beliefs that give life purpose; has aims and objectives for living.

6. **Self-Acceptance**: Possesses a positive attitude toward the self; acknowledges and accepts multiple aspects of self, including good and bad qualities; feels positive about past life.

To me the root of my own problems with self-doubt, lack of self-confidence, spotty self-esteem all stemmed from the largest SELF of all: self-acceptance. And I became interested in exploring the effect of lack of self-acceptance on individuals. What I found was fascinating. To truly develop the right reflection, we must begin at the deepest level – our view of our Self.
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