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On Being an Imposter

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Early in the spring semester, I had another bout of feeling like an imposter in the classroom. I cannot recall what exactly prompted it this time, but the feeling was familiar, the voice in my head saying, “you do not know what you are doing. You are not the teacher these students need right now. They recognize your inadequacy, but they are just not telling you.” Later that same day, it came back with a vengeance in faculty meeting, where I felt surrounded by colleagues much smarter and more capable than I.

An imposter is “a person who pretends to be someone else in order to deceive others, especially for fraudulent gain.” (Oxford Languages online) The older Oxford English Dictionary adds, “a fraud, a swindler, a cheat.” Since graduate school, I have recognized this feeling, popularly labeled “impostor syndrome.” One day during my doctoral work, I struggled to describe this feeling in the graduate student lounge with some friends, and I was startled to learn that many of my colleagues (most, though not all of them, women) had similar experiences. Many of us felt like we didn’t belong, like we are not enough.

I began thinking about making a T-shirt: “We are all impostors!” There was healing in the recognition that this is a shared experience. I am not alone in feeling like a fraud.

While contemplating this idea a few months ago, I learned about this recent New Yorker article

by Leslie Jamison. I learned that psychologist Pauline Clance and her colleague Suzanne Imes first published their research on “impostor phenomenon” in 1978. Sparked by their own experiences of self-doubt, they had interviewed over 150 “successful” women in academia, law, medicine, and social work, and discovered that they reported a common “internal experience of intellectual phoniness,’ living in perpetual fear that ‘some significant person will discover that they are indeed intellectual impostors.’” This idea resonated with the experiences of many folks in the decades that followed (including my own group of friends in the graduate student lounge in the late 1990s). It is a relief to know that we are all impostors.

And yet. There is a danger in this diagnosis, as a new wave of scholars have begun to point out. Jamison reports: “Lisa Factora-Borchers, a Filipinx American author and activist, told me, ‘Whenever I’d hear white friends talk about impostor syndrome, I’d wonder, How can you think you’re an impostor when every mold was made for you? When you see mirror reflections of yourself everywhere, and versions of what your success might look like?’” In other words, it is important not to confuse internal struggles with self-doubt and real external injustice that may cause one to feel out of place.

So, I have begun to wonder: what is the good news and what is the bad news about the impostor phenomenon? What can the feeling of being an impostor teach us, and what are its dangers?

The feeling of being an impostor can remind us of one important aspect of ourselves: we do mess up. We are not perfect. In an earlier blog, I used the term “impostor” to name my deep sense of not knowing enough or being good enough at what was needed in the classroom in a particular situation. This is part of the reality that we are complex creatures with multiple stories. This is not the only thing we need to know about ourselves, but it is one part of our truth.

The truth is feeling like an impostor can open us to compassion for others who feel the same, and it can make us better teachers. Two Wabash blogs in the past two years offer good examples of this:

- Christy Cobb’s battle with impostor syndrome as a Southerner in academia, and the way it has made her a better teacher.
- Anna Lanstrom on feeling like an impostor teaching about race when she does not know enough, and learning to resist perfectionism.

Knowing what it feels like not to belong can help us open doors to others who feel shut out.

Identifying too much with being an impostor can obscure our ability to recognize truly harmful falsehoods, such as the structural obstacles that prevent colleagues from being fully valued. Samuel Perry, professor of religious studies at the University of Oklahoma, also warns of the genuine danger of “impostor Christianity” (see also Kristen du Mez’s helpful follow-up commentary on this piece). Focusing on an internal experience of “impostorhood” must not turn us away from naming external realities that unjustly make people feel like impostors.

In the end, feeling like an impostor can be good news if it opens the door to greater compassion for others. However, it can be dangerous if it keeps us mired in self-doubt, failing to see and name the injustices that masquerade as gospel.

<https://wabash.center/2023/07/on-being-an-imposter/>