

Dream World

We live in a dream world, imagining and acting like we'll never die, expecting people to love us unconditionally when few do, and feeling safe in our homes from felony and injury. Statistically, we'll probably get lucky and escape many of the catastrophes others may suffer. But the fact remains: without our minds to assuage our existential fears, most of us would be paranoid. And without our imaginations to smooth out our roller-coaster relationships, we would be at each others throats. We'd be just like all the other animals in the world.

In a relationship, if I like you but you're not quite the person I need you to be, my brain will often fill in your missing parts.

The process is similar to the magic we all employed as children. At a local trash dump when I was ten years old I frequently found used household objects that to me were treasures. Visitors to the dump regularly pulled wonderful things from the trunks of their cars and threw them onto piles I would walk through on my way home from school in the late afternoon. Broken mechanisms and industrial baubles sat there in all kinds of weather waiting to be rescued. I never met a piece of trash I couldn't imagine in some other use.

When I found a toilet seat on my wandering path through the piles one day, I separated the top lid and discarded the seat. The oval shaped lid made an excellent shield, like a Knight of the Round Table might carry. Later, searching for anything resembling a sword, I came across a piece of angle iron that was a few inches longer than my height. It had no cross piece to serve as the hilt, but a scrap of wood and some stiff wire found elsewhere in the dump soon remedied that problem. I now had an almost complete Knight's outfit, but I needed a handle on the toilet lid to hold it in front of me for protection against enemy arrows and lances. No problem, I thought, a solution would eventually materialize from somewhere in this limitless sea of gadgets and trash that filled the dump. Meanwhile, in order to array myself in my new Knight's outfit, I tucked the lid under my left arm and wrapped my right arm around the angle iron under the hilt and dragged it along the ground, the tip bumping and scraping along behind me.

As far as I was concerned, my toilet lid and angle iron were reasonable facsimiles of a sword and shield. It's always hard to explain the psychology of an imaginative mental improvisation. Intellectually I knew my treasures were scrap iron and a toilet lid. But I could bring my mind to temporarily see them as a sword and shield. I didn't really believe it ... I was not hallucinating ... but I sort of believed it. I had the ability to let a piece of trash act as a surrogate for the real thing, as long as its shape or color or surface texture realistically mimicked what I wanted. If there was some similarity I could imagine almost anything I desired.

Growing older, I noticed this ability begin to markedly decrease, but so did the need to create my own universe. Today I wonder if the dwindling of my "magic powers" was indeed progress.

Without realizing it, as I advanced in years, I caught myself practicing the same kind of alchemy on people. I don't necessarily mean I imagined a person to be who he was not, but on occasion I'd combine a friend into

a mixture of his true self and other traits I borrowed from elsewhere to paste onto his personality.

Imagining a person as slightly different is not always a bad thing, by the way. For example, I once found it difficult to be outgoing and friendly at a job I held as a young man. I was just too young and too shy. An older, wiser fellow insisted on treating me as if I were the friendliest person in the office. He often told me I was an amicable companion and he mentioned my congeniality to others in my presence in a perfectly believable manner. In a short time I began to believe him. Soon I fulfilled the role and went out of my way to be nice to people. They in turn began to think of me as friendly and treated me quite cordially. Wittingly or not, my older co-worker transformed me by first imagining a better part of my personality that was covered by a blanket of shyness. I'm pretty sure he knew what he was doing. And his method was much more effective than had he taken me aside for a talk and explained how to converse with adults, a new challenge for me at that age.

And yet the transformative effort wasn't all his doing. On my own I began to adopt new parts to my personality. They may have been natural for me and latent, but I had not practiced them before. The openness and trust I began to exhibit to people seemingly came from nowhere. In actuality, I began to imitate others. Just as I had used stiff wire to tie a wooden hilt to my sword back at the dump, I somehow tied a personality trait I wanted to my behavior in the office. It would bump along with me just as my sword did years before. And as it began to work for me, it became a part of me.

The development of a personality as one matures ... one might call it a persona ... is really a complicated process where we borrow pieces from others to use as our own, and where we are imagined by others to fulfill some need they want to find in us. In the case of my older coworker, he was imagining me as someone better than I'd been acting. But I was also imitating and playacting the person I

wanted to be. Together we all formed a process by which my public persona was built.

For those who consider me a friend, I hope this disclosure won't make you feel unappreciated. I don't have many real friends and so I would hate to lose you. Still, you may wonder why I need to change you into someone different. I don't. I really don't change you into anything. As friends, we morph for each other.

Each of us has the opinion ... and rightly so ... that we should remain who we believe ourselves to be. And yet our association will change us, if only in small ways. It will depend upon how close we are. The closest person to me on earth, my wife, has changed me in a multitude of ways and I have probably done the same to her.

When you like me as a friend, your brain fills in my missing parts. And if all the stars line up and your vision roughly fits who I am, I might even begin to act like you're treating me.

We may live in a dream world, but how well we live will be as good as the dreams we have for each other.

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