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The Great Imposter

Unmasking the Burden of Self-Doubt in Our Professional Lives



Luis Antonio Hernandez

Most teachers and professionals in early childhood are competent people who sometimes have moments of doubts about their skills and capabilities. Now may be the time to discuss this dark shadow that impacts our work in subtle yet negative ways. In this chapter, we provide an overview of the roots of these doubts and accept, affirm, and take action on certain personal and professional weaknesses, whether we recognize them or not. On the positive side, leaders in education are always working on self-improvement and learning—the lifelong learner—as an integral part of a professional development process. It is reassuring to have a consistent focus on strengths, to claim credit for small and big success stories, to recognize tasks that are accomplished, and to reflect on positive engagement and relationships.

Maybe it all started for me with the lyrics to “The Great Pretender” by the oldie but goodie Platters playing in my head. The catchy tune by the Platters plays in many of our heads when we feel like a pretender or imposter. The lyrics and tune play, teasing us with nostalgia as well as a reminder of insecurities of who we are not, loneliness, and the façade of strengths. If it’s just a song, why does it resonate so much?

Whatever the label—imposter or pretender—it describes the self-doubt many leaders in every field experience. Even for high achievers, it is a nagging feeling that you don’t really belong, that you don’t fully know what

you're doing, that you are not good enough for the responsibilities ahead. And that you are fooling many people around you into believing that you are more competent or talented than you really are. This uncomfortable feeling hits leaders across the spectrum. For those in early childhood education, it is a particularly heavy load to carry because we question professional choices, are angered by low wages, and bristle at the lack of respect for our meaningful work.

Part of this guilt is based in the fear that others will discover our professional limitations or that a perceived weaknesses will translate into overall incompetence. Self-doubt becomes a burden of insecurity that can hamper individuals daily and over the long run. In reality, developing leadership skills requires that we make mistakes and learn from them. But those in the bind of being perceived as an imposter tend to be poor judges of their own performances and often tend to minimize their abilities.

Let's take some time to reflect on some of these concepts:

- Does the topic of self-doubt interest you? Why or why not?
- Are there gender differences between men and women in having a sense that they are not as capable as others may think? If so, what are the differences and why do you think they exist?
- When it comes to age or generational differences, are older or younger people more confident in their professional abilities?
- What cultural or class-based factors can either raise or minimize a person's sense of self-doubt at work?

My informal conversations with friends and colleagues in leadership positions in early childhood education have pointed to frequent cases of imposter feelings. One colleague told me how she was named director at her center when the current director suddenly quit. She was told, "You are a great teacher; you can also be a great director." She took the full responsibility in body, mind, and heart. Still, she knew perfectly well that she had no idea about how to manage an organization, positively supervise a large team, or deal with clogged toilets. She recalled how she cheerfully pushed on, feeling that at any time she would be called out for her lack of expertise. She survived and continued for the next ten years, always in fear of being discovered. Another friend, with advanced academic degrees and years of experience in the area of public policy and advocacy for children and families, always had a nagging fear at the bottom of her heart. She feared that as a single person with no children, her credentials and body of work would be questioned.

Such stories are common in just about every field, and for leaders in ECE these self-doubts can be hard on our confidence and well-being. These questions whirl in our minds: How did I get here? Am I competent in this position? Do I have the necessary expertise and skills? Will I be taken seriously? Why do people think I'm an expert? In other words, can you sing the blues if you don't have the blues?

A case in point for me is my self-doubt in a number of professional areas. Although I believe I have a fairly good command of the English language, I recognize it is not my native home language. Still, the occasional comments, such as "You seem to have an accent," "I love the way you talk," or "Did you really write this?" make me wonder. Is it my hybrid idiom of Cuban Spanish, Bronx English, the occasional Southern tones, and Broadway show references that makes my persona more interesting? And most importantly, does it take away from my professional work? Are listeners trying to figure out where I'm from, or are they truly listening to whatever words of wisdom I'm rambling on about?

Another big professional insecurity is my lack of a doctorate. Imagine, I'm out there giving presentations, citing research, speaking on public policy, and serving on boards and panels with no PhD! Although I know I should have completed that infamous degree, it did not happen, nor will it happen. Can I hold my ground with colleagues with the degree? Absolutely. But then a little voice says, "Can you truly be a leader or mentor in the twenty-first century without a doctorate?" There it is, that nagging insecurity that without that degree, I am not as good as those who have one. Maybe I am not as smart as the "degreed ones." I will only have a master's degree until I die, and the *New York Times* will not carry my obituary.

Consider the following questions and reflect on your personal and professional journey up to this point:

- At work or in school, do you worry that you may not be as bright and capable as others in the ECE profession?
- Do you sometimes shy away from leadership challenges because of nagging self-doubt?
- Do you tend to chalk your accomplishments up to being a fluke, no big deal, or the fact that people just like you?

Now you know a couple of my little imposter secrets. And many of us carry these real secrets every day. Comments we hear, little jabs here and there, making introductions or meeting people at a conference, even job postings raise insecurities for many of us. They become a deep well in which we think, "I'm just an imposter, not good enough for the work I do, the position I hold,

the leadership I advocate." If we think these thoughts for too long, we end up in a dark place, and sooner or later we will be found out.

Real Stories

A dear friend was selected, from a field of hundreds, to be a one-year fellow in a major early childhood organization in the nation's capital. She was absolutely thrilled but felt she was not ready for Washington, DC; after all, she was a country gal from a small Appalachian town, and the biggest city she had ever been to was Nashville. When she arrived, she was assigned as a congressional representative; by now she was having many doubts about how she dressed, how she talked, how to ride the Metro, even how to find the right buildings. She was basically not ready for the Big Time. She felt that she was an imposter dealing with really smart people and city types. But in making the rounds of congressional offices, she told the stories of her family, her children, and her community to the congressional people, and they connected to her passion and genuine voice. In the end, she felt at home, and her basic lesson still resonates with me: "At first I wanted to hide or run away, but slowly I learned to see the chambers of Congress as a huge version of our little town hall back home. People are just the same wherever they are."

As part of this imposter club, it's important to look first at how we create a set of conscious and unconscious reasons to maintain professional insecurity. And later we'll discuss how leadership skills will get us out of deep negative funk.

People who feel like imposters do not give credit to their own positive qualities or achievements. People who feel like imposters tend to believe that their positions or contributions, no matter how small or large, are based on a fluke or luck or planetary alignment. They believe that it is not a big deal to complete a proposal, give a presentation, or invigorate a teaching team. People who think they are imposters tend to minimize their accomplishments: "Anybody else could have done it just as well." For others, once a project is successfully completed, they start working on the next one, mostly to prove that they can do it bigger and better next time. No big deal indeed.

Did you know that those who think they are imposters are nitpickers? They tend to get worked up about how they could have done it better. They are extremely focused on mistakes and dwell on minor flaws in their performance. A healthier attitude is to focus on what we do well, what works, and how things can be improved in the future. If anything, those who feel like imposters tend to discount all their good qualities, strengths, and accomplishments. And sadly, they compare themselves unfavorably to others: "I

wish I were as smart as Einstein." There's always someone smarter, taller, better-looking, more well connected, and better at dancing than the imposter. Such unrealistic views and qualities result in poor leadership.

So, what is the imposter in each of us to do? Remember that we are in good company! We are not alone in these self-doubts; many others have the same concerns. Accept the fact that we are luckily unique and human. Each of us has great qualities as well as weaknesses; therefore, we should recognize them and deal with them, for they are all part of the human condition. Do not let these self-imposed barriers derail self-esteem and chip away at the confidence of leadership.

Working on improving the self lessens the imposter syndrome. Through discipline, habit, and persistence, a process begins at the level of awareness. You begin to think, let me out of this hole! It takes time, sweat, and tears to slowly overcome the stickiness of self-doubt. Start by giving yourself credit for the insignificant and magnificent accomplishment in each day: "Hey, I'm actually good at making coffee for the whole staff," and "After many meetings and proposals, we were awarded funds for a new nature play area." Recognize the merit of your work and how your passion for early childhood education translates into positive outcomes for a child, a family, a team member, or an entire organization. Be willing to accept compliments for a job well done and be gracious in accepting suggestions or criticism—each can translate into affirmative lessons learned for the day. Rediscover your strengths, focus on your solid skills, and be curious about those things you want to learn. Admit mistakes, learn from them, and move on. One side lesson in having imposter syndrome is that heartache can provide new grounds for honesty and purpose. Regain confidence and a healthy dose of humor in the process. "Indeed, I have a PhD: a doctorate in the Stuff of Life."

As for my friends and colleagues who have that nagging feeling of being an imposter, here are a few quick responses: "I have learned so much being a director at my center. When I first started I lacked the necessary skills of a good director, but with determination, help from the entire team, and continuing education, I am now an accomplished professional." "You are right, I don't have children of my own, but I once was a child myself. I played with my brothers, sisters, cousins, and all my friends in school, and today I am a wonderful aunt, a fantastic teacher, and a great storyteller."

As for myself, I could respond with, "I'm glad you find my English so colorful. My family is so proud to be welcomed to the United States, and we are all still working to master the language of Shakespeare—not an easy task as you know." As for my lack of a PhD, I could say, "It has been my intention to earn that degree, but I find my work training ECE teachers across the nation so very fulfilling. Maybe one day I will finally do it. Right now, I love what I do."

Finally, as the Platters song plays, it may be time to update some of the lyrics (but not its soulful tunes) to a more positive rhythm. Take away words and feelings of weakness and infuse yourself with uplifting words of confidence and inspiration. Create your songs of strengths, write lyrics of power, sing tunes that embody your passion, and dance with the joy of your work.



Janet Gonzalez-Mena

My Insecurities

Luis's discussion of self-doubt really struck home with me and gave me lots to think about. Yes, I've been there. The story of his friend, the good teacher who became a director, was also my story. His friend knew perfectly well that she had no idea about how to manage an organization. I may not have known that when I got hired, but I sure discovered it my first day on the job. I was director of child care services in a fairly large community organization that started as a counseling agency. The counselors discovered right away that child care was a huge issue with their clients, so the agency took it on and applied for grants. The child care program was up and running and about to expand when I was hired. I wasn't the first director—she had been promoted and left a vacancy that I applied for and filled. She had huge shoes, and they didn't fit me at all. I lasted a couple of years, and there was never a day that I felt secure in that job. I knew when I quit that I was never designed to be a director, and I went back to teaching community college when a full-time job finally came along and I was able to get hired.

I can also relate to Luis's language insecurity. English isn't my problem, my monolingualism is. I have been intrigued with learning other languages since high school. I took two years of Latin thinking it would be a helpful place to begin. Of course, I never learned to speak it. In college, I majored in English and minored in French, but although I became good at French grammar and reading, I wasn't great at writing, and I didn't learn to speak French at all. Conversation wasn't a goal in any of the classes offered. We read literature and struggled with writing about it. When I graduated from college, I ended up spending a year in Germany on an American military base. I worked on learning German until I could finally buy groceries and ask where the bathroom was, but I never got much beyond that. Finally, I went to work on Spanish and took classes as an adult. By that time, I was teaching in a program for Spanish-speaking preschoolers and was highly motivated

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to learn. The year that federal funding for bilingual education first became available, the administration applied and received a government grant. That grant put me in the job of the English teacher, so I wasn't supposed to be practicing my Spanish. The Spanish-speaking teachers were native speakers, and though I tried to keep up with what they were saying and what the children were saying, it was hard!

When I married my adult-school Spanish teacher, I thought for sure I'd become fluent. I didn't! I do remember a trip we took to visit his family in Mexico. After we were there about a month, I realized one morning when I woke up that I had been dreaming in Spanish. I was really excited about that. The story is long and complicated, but the outcome is that I'm not bilingual, and by now I'm convinced I never will be. Maybe in my next life, if there is to be one (smile). I've wondered for years why it's so hard for me to acquire the ability to speak a language other than English, and I've come up with two reasons (excuses). I'm shy! Unless I'm on stage or talking to people I know well, I get tied up. That's not a very good excuse, but I have a better one. I eventually discovered that I have a hearing loss, and I now wear hearing aids. Since I have two children with hearing losses, one doctor suggested I might have had it since childhood, but it was never diagnosed.

Of course, it's easy to imagine that I might share another of Luis's insecurities—lack of a PhD. I have an MA after my name, but I'll never have a PhD, EdD, or any other kind of doctorate. I came to grips with that a long time ago. There was nothing about going on for a PhD that attracted me. I decided it wasn't for me, just as after I tried being a director I came to the same conclusion. Do I sound defensive? I hope not. I don't feel defensive. Like Luis, I also have imposter problems; however, there's nothing like living as long as I have. I think by now I've come to grips with my imposter problems. As Luis said, "There's always someone smarter, taller, better-looking, more well connected, and better at dancing than the imposter." I guess I'm secure enough that I don't spend much time comparing myself to people who have qualities that I lack. Okay, to be honest, sometimes I do, but it's not my main way of being or thinking.

Personas and Subpersonalities

I want to suggest two other ways for me to look at who I am besides as an imposter or a pretender: personas and subpersonalities. I couldn't help but think of them as I was reading Luis's chapter opener. One is the idea of personas. Do you know that word? The dictionary says it's an identity or role that somebody assumes. The word is from Latin, and from it we have the words

person and *personal*. Originally, the persona was a mask that actors put on to play a role. It's not the same as being an imposter because it's less about deception and more about acting. A persona can be thought of as a personality that we put on and take off like a mask. But it's not about trickery. For example, if you followed me around, you would see that I'm one way with my children, another way with my grandbaby, still another way as a presenter, and a very different way when I'm out to lunch with friends. I change roles, including the way I talk and how I behave. I don't feel uncomfortable or insecure about being those different ways. They are all aspects of who I am—aspects of my *self*. A question I won't ask, but find interesting, is this one: Is there a true self that is beyond masks, personas, and personalities? For me the self—the true self, whatever that is—can only be seen through its physical manifestations. But now we're getting in really deep, way beyond Luis's subject of self-doubt. But while we are still here, let me ask, what do you consider your true self and what personas do you present to the world? Is the way people probably perceive you the way you perceive yourself? If you answered no to that last question, you are probably back to Luis's subject of self-doubt. One more question: How do you want people to perceive you? This may be a hard question to answer unless you think of a specific setting, a group of people, or one of your many roles in life. So let me make it specific: How do you want people to perceive you as a professional? How can you make yourself a professional persona that works for you and doesn't leave you doubting yourself?

If I haven't already made this subject complicated enough, let me add one more theory that few people know about. Roberto Assagioli, an Italian psychologist who lived around the time of Freud and Jung, came up with the idea that the real self is clothed in what he called *subpersonalities*. Each subpersonality has a particular perception, a set of behaviors, even a voice. Each is wrapped around a need, and when that need is great, the subpersonality demands a lot of attention. He also believed that when two subpersonalities are in opposition to each other (and creating confusion and chaos in a person's life), it means that they are trying to get together. His theory is called *psychosynthesis*, which describes the process of continual integration as parts of us come together to make greater wholes. I studied with people who had studied with Assagioli himself, and I learned interesting things about myself. It was back when I was a beginning writer, and although I hadn't come to the studies to improve my writing, that was exactly what happened.

As part of a psychosynthesis course I took, I explored two subpersonalities in conflict within me. I gave them names, but I don't remember them now. I came up with an image for each. One was an iron rod. It was my unmovable self—a person who tended to be critical and wouldn't listen to any opinions that didn't fit what she believed. The other was a wet washrag—limp,

spineless, wishy-washy. It was the opposite of my iron rod who took a stance and kept it. It was very hard to have these two characteristics fighting inside me. I would have to choose to present one or the other to the world. After working with these two characteristics—using symbols, imagery, self-talk, and other therapeutic devices—I was finally able to bring them together. As a writer, I need to be open, creative, and accepting of multiple ideas even when they clashed. I learned to get all kinds of things down on paper without critiquing them. That old wet washrag turned into a creative spirit—open and expecting. But then I call in my editor self, who is no longer an iron rod but a perceptive critic who knows how to clean up messes, straighten out thoughts, and make something readable. I used both to write this piece, though they are no longer separate in me. I also use both aspects in my diversity work when it comes to understanding perspectives on early childhood education that I don't naturally have. Both these subpersonalities are still part of me and have become one.

So I have shared where I have come from as an imposter and have gone way beyond to some rather esoteric personality and psychological theories. I hope, dear reader, you still see some connections to the original subject.



Debra Ren-Etta Sullivan

Imposter Syndrome Management

For me, it wasn't a song as it was for Luis. It was a turkey. Last Thanksgiving I had twenty family members over for dinner. I roasted a twenty-four-pound turkey, and it was a big hit. A really big hit:

"That was the best turkey I've ever tasted in my life!"

"I've never had a turkey that juicy and tender—never!"

"Can I come over for dinner again tomorrow?"

"I can almost taste those turkey sandwiches to come right now."

Well, there were no turkey sandwiches to come. They picked that turkey clean right down to the bone. This sounds like a good thing, right? So what's my point? My point is that Thanksgiving is coming up again, and guess who's in charge of roasting the turkey? Suddenly I'm panicking. The pressure, the sweating, the heart palpitations, the shaky hands, the high expectations. Will the next turkey be as good? Will I be able to pull it off again? Will I be able to measure up? Or am I an imposter whose great turkey last year was just a fluke? Am I just pretending I can cook?

In Luis's and Janet's examples, teachers were told, "You are a great teacher. You can also be a great director." Sometimes a well-meant compliment can go awry. Some say flattery will get you everything, but sometimes flattery only gets you frightened. Flattery can most certainly lead to feeling like you're an imposter! Most times when people flatter you, it's to make you feel good, but it can also feel like a setup for failure, especially if you feel that the flattery is not quite genuine.

Then (in my experience) the opposite can also happen—you or others begin to quash all feelings of confidence. If the *New York Times* does carry your obituary, it will say you died from complications due to quashing! This kind of critical approach usually happens when you try to accomplish some important goal, and then you or someone else doubts either the significance of your goal or your ability to do it. Twenty-five years ago, when my husband and I were first married, I told a colleague that I was going to have both my family and my husband's family over for Christmas. His response was, "Well, that's ambitious, considering you just met your in-laws." For just a moment, I had a twinge of doubt. Who was I to think I could prepare an important holiday meal for my newly acquired in-laws? Fortunately, I was offended enough to confront my doubt head-on that time. I'm a great cook, my in-laws love me, my family loves my husband, and my dining room was large enough to fit everyone. And besides, what's wrong with having ambition?

Seeing yourself as the Great Imposter can wreak havoc on leadership, because whether doubts are disguised as flattery or quashing, they can poke at your sense of confidence and cause you to focus on expectations. Are you as good as you think you are? Are you as good as they think you are? What if you lose the humility of being an imposter? What if you have so much confidence that when you, the Great Imposter, are given flattery, you acknowledge the compliments and then add your own? What if you lose your confidence and start agreeing with "quashers" who say you can never succeed?

Paying attention to being an imposter undermines the confidence you need to do well. But ignoring feelings of being an imposter is not much better, because it undermines the humility you need to remember you can always do better. Once you decide you can never measure up, you've lost confidence. Once you decide you can always measure up, you've lost humility. In either instance, leadership is compromised. Good leadership requires you to manage the imposter syndrome by balancing confidence and humility. How can we manage balance? I have nine strategies that I've found helpful for imposter syndrome management:

1. **Accept the fact that you cannot be perfect** all the time and you may not be successful all the time, but you can strive to do better all the time. Effective leaders know that failure is just another step toward success.

Learn from your failures and imperfections and use that information to do better next time.

2. **Don't be afraid of high expectations**—yours or others'. Just remember that *high* is a relative term. Expectations should be high enough to encourage motivation and perseverance but not so high that success is perceived as unachievable. Effective leaders know that mediocrity is not an option. Which brings me to my next strategy:
3. **Set realistic expectations.** There was a time when we believed it was impossible for us to fly like a bird. But we kept ambitiously trying to achieve the impossible until we learned how to fly in a plane. Effective leaders strike a balance between setting realistically high expectations and trying to achieve the impossible.
4. **Regularly engage in self-reflection.** Think about where you've been, where you are, and where you want to go. Ask yourself helpful, critical questions: Have I made progress? Have I improved? What is it that I don't know yet? What more can I do? What have I not considered? Use your answers to these questions to inform your professional and personal development and learning.
5. **Assess every situation.** Is there a reason to doubt your confidence? Do you need to be humbler? If there is no reason to doubt your skill and ability in that moment, don't. Do what you do well with the assurance that you are good at what you do. Be the teacher who has something of importance to impart or accomplish. If you need to be humbler, do so. Acknowledge that you are also capable of improvement. Be the student who knows you have much to learn and many from whom you can learn.
6. **Refresh! Renew! Research! Refocus!** Anything can become stale with time. Effective leaders know that even the greatest vision requires updating. Take time to take a fresh look, add a new twist, tie in a different perspective, hear a different voice. You don't have to wait for failure. Quality improvement, updating, and advancement can take place at any time.
7. **Stay resilient and flexible.** Whether you think of it as bouncing back or getting back up on the horse or picking yourself up and dusting yourself off, just be sure to try again no matter what. When the Great Imposter seems to be winning, remember that this is just an opportunity to examine another path, another approach. Effective leaders know that resiliency is the perfect tool for balancing confidence and humility.

8. Stay grounded in who you are, especially when someone is quashing your ambitions. There will always be those people wishing you'd give up and quit trying to achieve your ambitious goal. If you do measure up, it means others have to measure up as well, so they want you to fail even when they want you to measure up! Effective leaders stay true to themselves and focused on their goal. They know that ambition is a good thing. Even if you don't reach the star you were aiming at, getting as far as the moon is still a great achievement.

9. Finally, remember to breathe! When the Great Imposter rears its ugly head, do what my daughter always reminds me to do: Smell the roses. Blow out the candles.

So this Thanksgiving, I'm going to make the best turkey I possibly can. It may be as wonderful as the one I made last year. Or maybe I won't be able to measure up to last Thanksgiving, and the turkey will turn out only so-so. However, there's also a pretty good chance that if I follow the strategies above, I'll achieve the near-impossible and roast a turkey that outshines the last one by a long shot. I'll keep you posted.



Holly Elissa Bruno

The High Cost of Keeping Secrets

"You are only as sick as your secrets," a twelve-stepping friend reminded me. We were chatting amicably after our CoDA (Co-Dependents Anonymous) meeting, reflecting on what we had learned. My friend continued, "Pretending to be who we are not requires us to hide parts of ourselves we don't want others to see. Keeping secrets isn't always the same as keeping confidences."

The more we cover up about ourselves, the more "dis-ease" we feel. Luis's Great Imposter may look happy on the outside but feel out of sorts inside. Being fake steals energy and costs us serenity. Imposters are in danger of losing touch with who they really are. This is the disease of codependency: losing our identity trying to please others while relying on others for our sense of worth. Reclaiming our identity takes courage and hard work. I am a practiced (and gratefully recovering) codependent.

How did I learn not to be myself? My name was taken away from me. Talk about loss of identity! Here's the story: My father, Vincenzo Bruno, eldest son

of immigrants Adollorata Modello Bruno and Michele Bruno from Caltanissetta, Sicily, was the only member of his college class unable to find work after being the first in his family to complete college (Cornell Engineering School, class of 1934). Back in those days, signs in shop windows warned, "Positions available. Italians need not apply." My unemployable father moved back, tail between his legs, to his crowded home as if his four years in Ithaca hadn't happened. He sold shoes and Fuller brushes.

When I was born, attending nurses spooled alphabet beads onto elastic bracelets and placed the identifying beaded bracelet on each baby's wrist. My bracelet identified me as Holly Elissa Bruno. Later on I taught myself to spell my name by studying those beads.

When I turned four, the world became flat. My parents announced our name was Bruner and that our family name originated in Alsace-Lorraine at the border of France and Germany. I asked why I wasn't Holly Bruno anymore. I do not recall the words I was told, but I got the message: beatings would result if I asked that question again. In that formative moment, I said farewell to childhood and stumbled into an adult world of falsehood.

I didn't understand why we were no longer part of the loud and lively Bruno, Cocca, and Jelfo clan from Rochester, New York. How strange to visit my grandfather's kitchen steaming with homemade pasta and tomato sauce with his fig tree miraculously growing in the backyard and strains of *La Traviata* spilling from the phonograph and not be a Bruno. Cousins treated me differently, whispering that the Bruners were stuck up and thought we were better than them. I went into hiding inside myself.

As an adult, I understood my family had reason for changing our identity. We were (allegedly) short, swarthy, garlic-eating "greasers." Relatives on my mother's side (the Scots) called us "wop" or "guinea." None of these derogatory statements would make sense to a four-year-old.

What does a child do when she is told she isn't real? How does a child live with the inner conflict, especially when adults pretend not to see a problem? What do children do when classmates make fun of them or exclude them for being different? How does a child feel when she can't "talk right" or "dress right"? The pain of losing our true identity exiles us.

Do adults have a panoply of rationales for denying who we are? My father wanted to get a job to support his family. As Janet notes, shy people are not acceptable; they masquerade as extroverts. Luis explains, with Spanish as his first language, he fears others will judge his efforts to say things just right in English. As Debra explains, family expectations can put us into a tizzy of pretending and anxiety.

As for me, I have devoted a lifetime to rediscovering and reclaiming who I am. When I flew to Sicily after completing the bar exam, I was mesmerized

by the stark beauty, the adorable bambini, and the kindness of strangers. Sicilians have ancestors from Africa and Arabia and Turkey and Spain and Greece and England. Sicilian faces are black to light; our height ranges from my grandmother's four feet ten inches to my grandfather's six feet three inches. I can't wait for a DNA swab to reveal my eclectic heritage. I embody a rich jumble of ethnicities and am grateful for that heritage.

Being Sicilian is only one layer of my identity that I have gone on a quest to discover. I have challenged myself to face the truth about other painful secrets. Child abuse is a secret that makes us very sick. My father was a violent abuser who beat me, sexually molested me, and otherwise let me know I was worthless. My mother's bouts with mental illness required me as a very young child to become my mother's mother.

When the truth isn't pretty, pretending is a way to survive. Pretending is not the way to live. If we are only as sick as our secrets, we are as healthy as our authenticity. Truth sets us free. These days I don't pretend. I tell people I am an abuse survivor. I tell them about losing and reclaiming my ethnicity. I tell them about my sixth-grade teacher, Michael Gonta, the first person to see any worth in me and the first person to tell me, "Holly, you are a special little girl, and someday you will make a difference." Michael Gonta's someday is today. When I tell my truth about being an abuse survivor, some people turn away; others get teary. But every time, at least one person says, "Thank you for being real. You give me courage to do the same."

So what do I know about being an imposter? I know that I cannot be anyone other than who I am, with all my immaturities and blind spots. I know when I speak the truth about being a survivor, I speak for children in your classroom or program who cannot yet speak for themselves. I know I am breaking an unwritten code about keeping secrets. When I tell the truth about my heritage being wiped out, I speak for countless children who have been reviled for their ethnicity. I know that being real is all I can be. People love me or hate me for putting the truth out there. Today I don't need their approval anywhere near as much. I just need mine. May all children and adults be free to be who we are, human beings wanting to be ourselves, shaking hands with others who want to be themselves. May imposters be set free.

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Summary.....



Luis Antonio Hernandez

Dear Reader,

We have bared our souls of some deep insecurities—trivial, gigantic, silly, heart wrenching—but all residing inside our emotional selves. We all have them and we all have nagging imposters that sometimes get the better of us.

Discussion Questions

1. If you have self-doubts in a particular professional area, what can you do to overcome those dark feelings? How would you assist a colleague who may show evidence of professional self-doubts?
2. As an early childhood educator and leader in today's world, how do you influence and impact the lives of children to gain and retain a sense of confidence in their strengths?
3. With families, what strategies could you use to support an adult who is struggling with a sense of self-doubt and tends to belittle achievements?