

Pearls we are: imperfect but beautiful

By Ruth Ostrow

I REMEMBER an incident about 12 years ago that changed my destiny. At the time I was going through emotional upheaval because of the break-up of a relationship. For a while I became quite reclusive, rarely answering the phone, hiding in a dark house and shakily swinging between sadness and a feeling that I would survive.

I did survive and eventually started seeing a man I really liked. Slowly, steadily we grew to care for each other. But there was something coming between us. I knew he hadn't seen all facets of me. There was a "dirty little secret" that he didn't know.

Because of his sophistication, life experience and self-confidence, I felt that when he found out my "dirty little secret", he wouldn't want to see me any more. We'd go out for dinner, and when we'd get home I was always aware that the secret was in the house.

One day, I summoned all my courage. "There's something I have to show you," I said, taking him by the hand into my bedroom. "It's something I'm really ashamed of."

There at the top of my cupboard was a large box. We pulled it down. "It's my coffin box," I said, referring to the sheer size of it and its rectangular shape. Intrigued by the box and my sombre mood, he knelt down -- probably expecting to see a dead body. It was worse than that. Inside were piles of letters in unopened envelopes.

Tears welled up in my eyes. "Over the past months I have been very depressed and disorganised. I haven't been able to cope with people. I stopped opening my mail for a few weeks because life became overwhelming.

"Then I just couldn't open it because I felt so afraid that there were people I should have answered and had let down, and bills that should have been paid. And then I knew the new letters coming would be questioning whether I got the old letters, so I didn't open them either and ..."

"And from the state of the box, it just kept getting worse."

"Yes," I said. "It's been so long, I'm too frightened to start. And it haunts me every day. I'm really embarrassed that things got to this," I said, revealing my vulnerability to this man, allowing myself to fall off the pedestal. Even before I saw his reaction, I began feeling lighter, better, for having exposed my humanness. It's exhausting for us all to carry around our frailties, shame, flaws and pretend that we are other than what we are.

I've seen it all my life, people performing, adopting a fabulous persona, but inside feeling fragile and living in fear of being exposed as a fraud.

When I finally could look up, he was smiling. "That's OK. I have a 'dirty little secret' too." This man whom I so admired, told me how he was recently asked to address a group of prominent business leaders at a conference. He stood up on

the podium, suit by Armani, slightly greying temples, intelligent, respected, articulate, and as he opened his mouth to speak, nothing came out.

Overwhelmed with terror, he staggered to the side of the podium and fainted.

"We're not all we seem," he smiled. Which is true enough. I was thinking of this story because recently I've had the chance to meet several people who, on closer inspection, are far more vulnerable than they appear. One, a magnificent-looking woman, confessed to me that she really hated her body, then was riddled with guilt for not appreciating herself. Another prominent psychologist revealed behaviour that was extremely eccentric, reminding me of Hephaestus the mythological "wounded healer" who because of his own pain and flawed personality, was able to help other suffering souls.

Our vulnerabilities are like sand to oysters -- they help us create the pearls of our being. We should honour them, accept them, and reveal them so others can feel relieved about their own imperfections.

When we share our "dirty little secrets" with each other -- that we can't always cope or that we hate ourselves, are addictive or secretly play doctors'nurses, binge on chocolate or still take teddy to bed -- we move beyond our individual plight to a deeper understanding of the human condition, which fosters empathy and compassion, towards others and ourselves.

Our pains and foibles define us. We are most beautiful when we allow ourselves to be fully seen, both in our wonderful power and in our imperfection.

Over the next days, my new boyfriend and I sat and opened each letter. The ones that made me feel worst were the letters praising me. "If only they knew the truth," I kept mumbling. "If you weren't the sort of woman who felt deeply and who occasionally messed up, you wouldn't write as you do," he reassured me.

That weekend, seen and accepted in my truth, I made a decision of a lifetime.

Not only to accept myself but to fully accept the love of someone who fully accepted me. We were married a short while later.

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