

You know, it's got to be Me

By Ruth Ostrow

EARLIER this year, I met a woman who really interested me. She was a very bright, warm and witty soul who made me laugh. Fate kept bringing us together at parties, at workshops, and I decided that she was the sort of person I would like as a friend.

So I set about connecting with her more intimately, approaching her when we were at social gatherings, telling her stories, asking her about her life, and eventually inviting her out for coffee.

At first it seemed we were destined to be good friends. We shared many similar interests and both seemed enamoured with each other. Then things started to change. I would approach her at a party and she'd talk for a few moments, then her eyes would wander off, and she'd be gone.

At a two-day seminar we recently attended together, she made an effort to sit next to me at meals but hardly spoke a word. When I asked if anything was wrong, she shook her head, but remained aloof and indifferent.

"I don't know what happened," I complained to my husband in the car driving back from the seminar.

"I must have done something to upset her. We were going along so well," I grizzled as we spent the next hour analysing every possible motive for her sudden withdrawal: offence that I'd not asked her to a recent gathering, anger at something I'd written, ad nauseam.

Last week we ran into each other at a coffee shop. She came and joined me. "Ruth! How wonderful to see you!" she enthused, grabbing a chair and pulling it over.

After about 10 minutes she said she had to go. "I'm going to see a specialist. I've been in terrible pain for the past three months. I didn't want to tell anyone. I hurt my back skiing and I've had pain shooting up my spine day and night. It's been awful. I've just taken myself off this strong medication which was making me vague and trembly," she said, cuddling up to me.

"Let's catch up soon," she said. And as she left I realised that I'd fallen into the biggest trap of all. The "It's Me" syndrome. Where we take all our feelings of unworthiness from childhood, all our hidden fears that we don't measure up, all our fear of rejection, and project them on to someone who is simply suffering from chronic back pain.

I know I can write this freely because we've all done it. Read a whole lot of rubbish into another person's behaviour. Allowed the lack of an invitation, or the dearth of compliments from a boss, or the absence of a smile, to confirm our worst fears about ourselves. Because we humans don't just say: "It's raining." We say: "It's raining on me, personally."

I've been in the opposite situation many times, too. "Your wife isn't very fond of me," a colleague confided in my husband a week ago. "I saw her down the street and when I went to kiss her, she turned her face and walked away."

Fact is, I've been grieving the loss of a loved one and in my disconnected state of mind I hadn't even seen the person.

The big danger in projection, is that life is a self-fulfilling prophecy. And when we believe someone is angry or doesn't like us, we can create that very outcome by standing with folded arms, looking sour, and often bringing on the rejection or disapproval we were mistaken about in the first place.

"We do not see things as they are. We see them as `we' are," says a wise, old Jewish proverb. We see the world through our own filters, our biases, our conditionings but most often through our own damaged sense of self-worth.

We walk around living out of our wounds rather than just allowing people to be premenstrual, a little bit more reticent than us, shy, gruff-natured, tired, or simply suffering from too many children.

Recently, I watched someone take offence at what they perceived was a racial slur. The friend thought the person was making some anti-Semitic statement because he was talking to her in a mock accent. Actually, he was doing a bad imitation of an Irish character he'd seen in a play that night.

The reality is we all project on to others the way we feel about ourselves at any given time. There is only one antidote to this dilemma. We have to take back our own stuff. Ask, "Why do I dislike myself today?", before deciding how to handle a situation where we perceive ourselves to be judged. Because more often than not, there is no truth in the drama we've made up.

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