

Such bliss to be overlooked

By Ruth Ostrow

I WAS at a party last week and I finally caught up with someone whom I'd heard about from a girlfriend for months. She had been raving about this particular man due to the fact that he had become significant in her life, and it seems she'd also been raving to this man about me - being one of her close friends.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, I bumped into him quite by accident. It was a case of "Oh, so you're John!", "Oh, so you're Ruth!" and we started chatting. Knowing that he was curious about me, I blathered on and on about our mutual friend, flicking my hair this way and that, and expounding my theories on all manner of subjects.

The next day I rang my friend and we discussed John for a suitable amount of time. Finally curiosity got the better of me and I popped the question. "What did John say about me?" I asked. "Well," she said, "I don't think he noticed you. He was too worried about what you thought about him. He rang first thing, to ask."

We laughed at the realisation that this is one of life's truths. We are always so busy wondering what people think of us, the impressions we make, whether we appear competent, and are regarded highly by those we value or mix with. Yet most of the time those people we seek to impress are not even noticing, as they seek to impress us back - or, more likely, as they are utterly preoccupied with the stuff they need to do, have done or want to do that day.

Like a friend of mine who is an adviser to government departments. She was recently invited to a high-level conference where she would spend several days in the company of the country's top politicians, business leaders and public officials. "I was terrified I might not come across well. It was a very intimidating prospect." But when she got there she looked around and noticed how self-occupied all these people in suits were.

"They were all busily writing their speeches, and rehearsing their speeches, and straightening their ties, and playing one-upmanship on each other - lots of posturing, networking and preening. And it occurred to me that no one there could actually even see me. I was invisible. Totally.

"At first that really hurt my ego, but then I felt the most enormous relief. It felt liberating, refreshing to be invisible. I knew I could relax and have a wonderful time because no one was paying that much attention to me, worrying more about their own performances or what the last person had said that had upset them, whether their hotel room was as big as the other guy's, or whether or not there was a bread roll available to take the edge off that rumbling stomach."

She was expressing something my mother always tried to teach me.

"The truth is that people's heads are filled with themselves and the minutiae of their day-to-day lives. No one is thinking about you. No one is looking at you," she told me when - as a sick child - I was too scared to walk into the chemist in my pyjamas, or later when I was too embarrassed to wear bikinis on the beach.

"It is stupid being self-conscious," she would say. "People have 90,000 thoughts a day. Someone may see you and think for one split second: `Oh, I saw a girl in pyjamas' or `Oh, that silly girl just fell over'. But then that thought is bumped out of their brains a moment later by the fact that their daughter has a cold, and their husband has forgotten to call, and what's for dinner tonight."

She also pointed out that when people have vacant or irritated expressions on their faces, we immediately think we have performed poorly at some level. But this too has more to do with the person in front of us fretting about whether he said the right thing to his boss who he just ran into, or whether he remembered to feed the cat, or being preoccupied with his girlfriend's waning libido.

When you realise that you are invisible, it makes for a bit of ego confusion, but then there is the rush of freedom. Because this whole consumer culture is geared towards forcing us to look good, sound good and be good. But with everyone else competing for the same kudos, it is unlikely too much attention is going on you, so why waste precious passion, energy and integrity?

Better to acknowledge that people are full of suffering, pain, unacknowledged fears, worries about their looks, performance, mortgages, their sick child, thoughts about a partner who hasn't called and tonight's dinner. And to lovingly give them your time or some stroking and tenderness.

In fact, next time you want to impress someone, my advice is this: Listen, be utterly attentive and validating, smile and nod generously. They will undoubtedly walk away convinced you were the funniest, most intelligent person they ever met.

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