These Three Words May or May Not Be Ruining Your Social Life

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"Just be myself? Okay. I'll just keep playing World of Warcraft in my mom's basement."-Me, five years ago upon reading that I should just be myself.

We admire genuineness and detest fakeness. If you're a genuine loser, and you take to heart the advice that you should 'just be yourself', something expected will happen. You will continue to be a genuine loser. The true meaning of being yourself is subtle, it's nuanced, and if you take this concept at face value, it can do more harm than good.

But, if you put in the effort to understand what 'just being yourself' really means, then the phrase goes from being an excuse to cling onto a negative self-identity the way a fly clings onto shit, to becoming a piece of sage fucking wisdom. Genuineness has nothing to do with the mask your wearing, and it has everything to do with how well you're wearing it. Look at great acting. Is Marlon Brando really Vito Corleone in The Godfather? Hell no, but he is 100% genuine when he plays the role on screen. At his core, was Heath Ledger the maniacal, psychopathic, clown prince of crime that he portrayed in The Dark Knight? Probably not. But he was terrifyingly real when he played that role. How is it that great actors strike us as more genuine than our real-life friends even though these actors are literally playing a fake role? Because, genuineness isn't about taking off your mask, it's about being in alignment with it.

Alignment

Alignment means that the thoughts running through your head are in sync with your words and actions. When you're in alignment you don't give a damn about what other people think of you, and that anxious voice in your head that's normally yapping at you with the desperate enthusiasm of a chihuahua goes dead silent.

The particular mask you're wearing is irrelevant. When you're being genuine, you're still playing a role, you're just playing it well. If you want to improve your social skills, ignore advice that says, "Just be yourself." Instead, play whatever role you want to play, just do so with alignment.

That sounds great! But how the fuck do I do that? After years of trying dozens of different methods, I've found one strategy to be the most effective. It's not easy, but it works. Do the opposite of what feels comfortable in social interactions. For example, if you're boring and you want to become more engaging, interact with people as if you're on stage playing Shakespeare, attempt to infuse every word with an exaggerated emotional impact.

This may feel strange, but it is necessary, because our upbringing taught us to be social zombies. We were trained to value fitting in more than genuine self-expression. Throughout our formative years, we learned to constantly monitor ourselves, to judge whether our behavior was appropriate, and to filter it out if it was not. We learned to reject anything unusual about ourselves (even if it was unusual in a good way). Guess what? The best parts of your personality are the same parts that you were taught to hide from others. To change this, you must behave in ways that you've learned are inappropriate, you must exaggerate your personality until your most genuine self is set free.

Change is Hard

I'll tell you what Tony Robbins won't: change can only occur if you endure extensive discomfort. And if your social skills are on the wrong side of average, you'll have to repeatedly make yourself uncomfortable to change that. The reality is that the above strategy of infusing your personality with exaggerated emotional expression and theatricality will probably make you more anxious and more self-conscious before you get any positive results from the practice. At first, speaking with the fervent passion of a Shakespearian actor will feel unnatural. You'll fantasize about being judged or even humiliated by those you interact with. That yapping chihuahua in your head will get louder and louder, trying to convince you to stop attempting something so awkward and abnormal. But, if you face this internal resistance head on, and persist through it despite your negative inner-dialogue, something fascinating will happen. As you exaggerate your personality, your emotional resistance will build up, the uncomfortable tension increasing further and further, until it reaches a fever pitch. And then, silence. You will enter a state in which you no longer care what people think, that obnoxious voice in your head that usually holds you back will be gone. You will experience total alignment, a state in which you are free from all insecurities and self-doubt.

Keep in mind, this isn't a one-time process, states of alignment aren't permanent. But once you've experienced alignment, you'll get hooked on it. You'll feel compelled to do whatever it takes to get back to this state again and again, until eventually, it becomes your default.

A Contradiction

It's a paradox, to be perceived as more genuine, the best strategy is to intentionally exaggerate your natural personality. It might not fully make sense until you've experimented with this in your own life, but if the classic advice of 'just being yourself' hasn't gotten you the social life you desire, it might be a good idea to try being someone different, someone free of unnecessary limitations.

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