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4 ways to get beyond imposter syndrome

by *Kristen Glass Perez*

Recently, I received a request from a friend who is an expert in her professional field. She wanted to share that she was quoted in a national publication via social media, but felt awkward posting it herself. She asked me to post it for her.

I was happy to do so. As soon as I posted it, I saw many other posts of strong individual achievements on my social media feeds.

I noticed that few women posted about their own successes while male colleagues seemed to regularly share updates about their achievements.

As I clicked on each post, I began to notice that many of those posting also had their own blogs, podcasts, websites and You Tube channels. There were also a lot of self-authored articles that they posted. In that moment, it struck a chord with me. Where were the posts from the women?

Soon after, I had a conversation with another friend where I offhandedly shared an experience of being contacted by a search firm on multiple occasions to be recruited for a job. I said to my friend and colleague; “I don’t know why this recruiter called me—it must be because they need more women in their candidate pool.”

My friend immediately responded by saying “Wow—you really have imposter syndrome.” Ouch. I wasn’t sure what he meant, but I needed to know more.

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Did I resemble that remark?

After realizing that I had 16 years of professional experience in my field, I came to the uncomfortable conclusion that I just, might, have this imposter syndrome.

According to Psychology Today, "Imposter syndrome is a psychological term referring to a pattern of behavior where people doubt their accomplishments and have a persistent, often internalized fear of being exposed as a fraud."

It describes a phenomenon where people feel that they are not qualified to do jobs that they are doing. Then I discovered that the imposter syndrome topic appears in professional development conferences for women.

In my own conversations with friends, I began to see a pattern of this syndrome. Sometimes it was expressed professionally and sometimes it was expressed personally.

For example, someone with a lot of professional expertise might feel that it is only a "fluke" that she got promoted. Another example might be that someone might feel that her parenting skills were sub-par and her children's birthday party planning abilities were lacking, even though she had handmade all the invitations (true story).

Between my friend's request for the post, my own disbelief over a recruiter talking to me, and the other friend's birthday party terror, I began to think seriously about imposter syndrome.

With research indicating that the self-esteem of girls generally peaks at age 9 and doesn't return to high levels until age 60, it seemed to me to be no wonder that many women, myself included, might doubt their abilities. At the same time, I found myself feeling both annoyed and angry about this. If it is true, is it our fault?

It turns out, I'm not the only one that feels this way. According to a 2018 article in The Atlantic, there is plenty of research that shows it's not a lack of confidence that hinders women but, rather, it is a fear of backlash for appearing to be self-promoting.

The article states, "While all that most men seem to need in order to succeed in the workplace is a little bit of spunk, women must learn how to master the art of appearing both sure of themselves and modest."

Wow. None of this is exactly inspiring confidence or courage. It seems to me like there are multiple realities that intersect to create both of these situations.

First, is the very real lived experience of doubting oneself. Who among us hasn't done that before? In fact, I tend to think it is healthy to doubt oneself sometimes. Wouldn't the world be better off if some people had just a bit more humility? Next, there are very real lived experiences of bias and backlash that women often face for appearing to be too confident. Finally, there are the ways in which decision making gets compromised because of these intersections.

So, is it hopeless? I don't think so.

Deeply embedded in the Lutheran theological tradition is an understanding and embracing of paradox. In other words, two things that appear to contradict one another can co-exist at the same time. From this we get the "saint and sinner" paradigm.

We are always, more than one thing at the same time. Using this framework helps me understand what it means to both wonder if an opportunity is just an accident while at the same time feel nervous about appearing too confident in my abilities. Put another way, we live in a world that has both LinkedIn and Instagram. We are asked to put our credentials on display while being the same person who is asked to "filter" our real image.

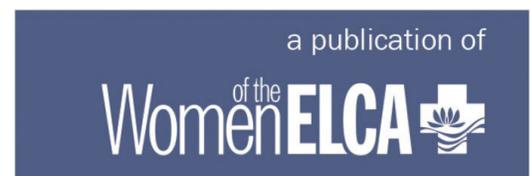
Given all of this, here are some concepts that have helped me in my own attempt to navigate this paradoxical lived experience and work through my own imposter syndrome.

1. Success is not a fluke. Not in relationships, not at work. You don't usually succeed at something by accident and without a lot of hard work and practice (except for that time in 8th grade I misread the amount of flour needed for a loaf of bread I was making for a school project and it rose perfectly.)

We ought to apply that same principle in our lives. Very rarely, have we accidentally ended up where we are. Certainly, there are unexpected experiences in life that have contributed to our sense of identity, but if we begin to chart our path we can see that we usually show up in the world in the same ways and those ways have helped us to get wherever we are.

That's not to say we haven't and won't continue to make mistakes, but-it's so important to remember that success is not a mistake. We have worked hard to be where we are in life and we will continue to do so. This applies to professional and personal areas of our lives.

Other opportunities will continue to come your way. Sometimes, imposter syndrome can take over because you think that this or that opportunity won't ever be available again. That sets us up to be in the precarious position of making a choice out of scarcity. While it is ok to acknowledge that sometimes we need to make a choice based on tangible needs (i.e. salary or or location or family responsibility) it is also important to remember that we have agency over our lives.





Our own agency and discernment are tools for decision making. The lenses of vocation can help make decisions. It can be helpful to ask; “Will this choice help me personally? Will this choice help me professionally? Will this choice help me serve my community? It is ok to make decisions based on one or more of these filters combined.

No one decides which is the most important lens for our decision making and we might use multiple lenses or filters at the same time.

The Holy Spirit is our Advocate. In John’s Gospel, Jesus speaks these words to the disciples:

“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit...will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” (John 14: 26-27).

What I find to be so remarkable and inspiring about this is the way in which the Spirit is active in our lives. Advocacy is not passive. It means that there is a force greater than me working tirelessly to help each of us live into our identities as the beloved children of God. Even more inspiring is that the Advocate is to bring us peace. We are given peace from the worry or fear that we are either “not enough” or that we are to be shamed for being who we are. With this kind of Advocate, we have every reason to be extremely confident in who we are called to be.

Make the next decision, the right decision. A mentor of mine once shared with me that if you are having trouble making a decision, sometimes the best way to do it is to say to yourself “this next decision is going to be the right decision. It doesn’t have to be the forever decision.”

In some strange way, this helps me with my own imposter syndrome tendencies. If I feel that I am “faking it until I make it” in a role, whether it is personal or professional, it might help to remember that this doesn’t have to be forever to be “right.” This often helps me talk myself out of being worried or anxious.

Cut your Losses. Finally, it is also helpful to remember that there are times when things simply are not going to work. Another side of imposter syndrome is overcoming the idea that if you just (insert verb)-work, do, feel, try harder—that you can make something work. That is simply not true. We are not that powerful.

What we can do is assess a situation and make the determination that sometimes, we need to walk away from something—even though it might be heartbreaking.

As the one’s created in God’s very own image, it is important to remember that we are enough. We are qualified. By the same token, we are not perfect. None of us are. We are real people who are gifted, talented, and also have real nuances and particularities.

Thanks be to God for the ability to embody multiple roles at the same time. Thanks be to God for both the gifts of confidence and humility. In that spirit, I will probably never post this article—but I'm sure my friends will.

Discussion questions:

1. What are some of the times or situations in your life in which you feel the most confident in your abilities and roles?
2. Which structures do you find especially challenging in your life?
3. Are there any practices or strategies that help you when you are feeling anxious or unconfident?

Closing prayer:

God of renewal, thank you for your real presence in our lives and for sending the Holy Spirit our Advocate to remind us that you will always make a way for us in the world. Where there is stress, help us to find solace in you. Where there is fear, help us to be confident and calm in our abilities. Where there is exhaustion, help us to find rest. Amen.



The Rev. Kristen Glass Perez is the College Chaplain at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa.

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Holy Witnesses to the Resurrection

by Kristen Glass Perez

In each of the four gospels, Mary Magdalene and other women are the first to arrive at the empty tomb of Jesus. They don't expect it to be empty; they expect to prepare the body for proper burial. In this way, they show up as the people they are, ready to do what is expected of them as friends and followers of Jesus.

The fact that the women are named in each gospel is a powerful witness. It is an indicator that the women were of critical importance as witnesses to the resurrection.

Two of the gospel accounts of the resurrection have always particularly fascinated me. The first is Mark's account. The gospel writer says:

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. . . . As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.
(Mark 16:1-8)

At first read, this is startling. What do you mean, they said nothing to anyone? They were first-person witnesses to the resurrection! Did these women have the first recorded case of imposter syndrome?

We don't know what they were thinking, but I do think we can understand how they were feeling. Mary and the women had a story to tell and powerful, life-giving news to share, and yet they were afraid.

How many times in our lives have we each wondered how the truth that we had to share was going to be received by the world? How many times have we encountered a situation or structure that would tell us it is not OK to be who we are?

The fact is, resurrection is startling. It takes our breath away. It is the great reversal of expectations, where God makes a way where there seems to be no other way. A way to new life and new possibility. It does not make things easier, it makes them new.

That is, at first, more terrifying than calming. The account of the resurrection in Mark's gospel feels so real to me because I know what it feels like to wonder if anybody would listen to me, and to also be shocked by something that seems impossible.

In John's gospel, Mary's voice is loud and clear. The gospel writer tells us:

Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). . . . Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20: 16-18)

In this version, Jesus and Mary speak each other's names aloud. They see each other. When Jesus speaks Mary's name aloud, he also speaks all of our names.

He speaks into existence the startling reality of the resurrection.

Equally powerful is Mary's naming aloud of Jesus, "Rabbouni!" In this gospel, Mary boldly proclaims things exactly as she sees them. And what she sees is the power of the resurrection.

The resurrection in John is also another version of the personal experience having a universal effect. Jesus does not appear to Mary on a public stage; it is in this quiet, private moment at the tomb that there is a revelation that will have universal and eternal ramifications. This is good news, for them and for us. The personal is not just political, it's profound.

I love these two contrasting narratives. Which one is right? Well, luckily we don't have to make that choice. The answer is *both*.



We are both versions of Mary. In my own experience, I understand that there are times when I am certain of my truth, and yet I am unable to share it for fear of how it will be received.

The reasons may be personal, professional, societal, or structural. Other times, we are all public and prolific witnesses to the resurrection. In our everyday lives, we witness new relationships, new paradigms, new understandings—and we, like Mary, boldly proclaim “I too have seen the Lord.”

The Biblical narrative contains many examples of amazing women like Mary who also were often challenged for being themselves.

The good news of the gospel is that nothing can change the reality of the resurrection in which we are all qualified to be proclaimers of new life, truth and the power of possibility.

Discussion questions:

1. What do you imagine the conversation between the women might have been like as they left the empty tomb together?
2. Is there a time in your life when you were confident in your truth yet afraid of how it would be received?
3. Where have you both witnessed and proclaimed new life and resurrection?

Closing prayer

Triune God: Thank you for the ways in which you call out of us our truths. Help us to be emboldened by the women who showed up at the tomb as exactly the people you created them to be. Encourage us when we feel blocked and help us to be witnesses to the resurrection in our own daily lives. Amen.



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