

Wearing originality with confidence



"You felt like a tree bowed beneath the weight of its fruit, and you longed for hands to come and gather up the harvest. Though you stood at the end of the road and gazed out over the cities of men....no one came..."

– Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*

It requires courage to be an original! I have long since learned that the task of making sense of being out-of-step with the template of current business mores will always be a challenge in any society. Human nature, desirous of peace and calm, is comfortable going with the flow and following known patterns as long as they continue to hold water and are profitable. What then of those compelled to seek different paths? Would they be best served by deeply burying who they are?

This conundrum was again brought to the forefront of my consciousness during a recent encounter with an accomplished consultant looking for fuller accommodation of his prestigious skill-set. My advice that he be himself and stop worrying what *mainstream* thought of him brought forth an anguished cry: "If I am myself, people will think I am a loser!" What had brought this intelligent, educated, high-earning and respected individual to this point? How could such a person feel that he had to hide his excellence?

Our conversation uncovered the tremendous hurt he had endured. To avoid the humiliation of constant rejection and belittlement, he had learned to hide his most precious ideas and dish up what he believed parents, teachers, peers and, ultimately, employers wanted from him.

Ironically his strong service orientation and irrepressible desire to make a difference had made the impact of his originality inevitable, no matter the

environment. He might just as well have consciously determined to be different.

It is my good fortune to meet original people most days, affording me some understanding of this conundrum. Notably, my involvement in the Canadian Women in Communications (CWC) Mentorship program has brought me into contact with members of the broadcast industry who are ready and able to work within set frameworks, but who also dare to express their originality. In some cases the desire to express what they see, to say what they feel and to implement their dreams is so strong that the risk of rejection pales in comparison. Courageous individuals, they have sought environments that accommodate who they are, often at the price of mainstream success and adulation.

My experience has led me to believe that chaos and uncertainty are best friends of the original mind/thinker. When others are desperate and have no idea what to do next, when the tried and tested paths are of no avail, the person who sees what others don't, who can develop and deliver a solution, however weird, is always welcome. I cannot help but think of Winston Churchill who, considered insufferable for most of his life, was the single person whose previously ridiculed ideas formed the basis of the strategy that saved an unprepared Great Britain from disaster at the outset of the Second World War.

Does it not make sense to accommodate people who can save us in time of crisis?

Running away in whatever shape or form has often been a perceived panacea for originals. Tropical islands, artist colonies, enclaves of elitist intellectuals, etc. we know are never a permanent answer. To be truly happy, all individuals need to fully invest and use who they are in the real world. Sincere validation of difference is a tough yet essential task if we are not to drive originals away. How much better to recognize the healthy challenge of the discordant note, listen to unusual points of view, remain calm and objective in the face of passionate expression and, importantly, show tolerance of difference. These are daily steps we can take to ensure originals find their rightful and useful place in our society.

The fact that originals such as Da Vinci, Galileo, van Gogh, Lawrence, Hemingway and Polanski, to name just a few, all finally earned their place in history should encourage us in the task of allowing excellent people to wear their originality with confidence... and be true to who they really are!

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