

OBSERVE ME FROM AFAR AND YOU WILL SEE A CLEAR IMAGE OF A WELL-ADJUSTED, CONTENT INDIVIDUAL. BUT, AS YOU COME CLOSER, YOU WILL SEE HOW THAT SAME IMAGE BLURS, REVEALING A MORE COMPLEX, MULTI-DIMENSIONAL IMAGE OF ME IN ITS PLACE.

EVEN AS A CHILD, I FOUND SOLACE IN NUANCE. MY FAVORITE CHILDREN'S STORY WAS "LE PETIT PRINCE," BY ANTOINE de SAINT-EXUPERY. I REMEMBER BEING ENTHRALLED, AT FIRST, BY THE NARRATOR'S UNIQUE METHOD FOR DETERMINING WHETHER A "GROWN-UP" WAS ENLIGHTENED—SHOWING SAID "GROWN-UP" A DRAWING OF A "HAT," A DRAWING WHICH LENT ITSELF TO TWO VERY DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS: ONE PRACTICAL; THE OTHER FANCIFUL. YET, THERE WAS ANOTHER ASPECT TO THIS ANECDOTE THAT LEFT ME SOMEWHAT LESS IMPRESSED: WHEN SAID 'GROWN-UP' CHOSE THE PRACTICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE DRAWING, THE NARRATOR WOULD LIMIT HIS CONVERSATION WITH THAT INDIVIDUAL TO REASONABLE TOPICS. MY SLIGHT DISAPPOINTMENT IN THE STORY, THOUGH, WOULD NOT LAST LONG. FOR SOON AFTERWARD I WAS INTRODUCED TO A TRULY UNIQUE CHARACTER—THE LITTLE PRINCE—WHO WAS IMMUNE TO SUCH CONCESSIONS, REFUSING TO SELF-EDIT HIS BEHAVIOR IN ORDER TO GAIN THE ACCEPTANCE OF THOSE HE ENCOUNTERED ALONG HIS JOURNEY.

IN A SENSE, THESE TWO FICTIONAL CHARACTERS HAVE FORMED THE TEMPLATE OF MY LIFE UP UNTIL NOW: I AM A PROFOUND INDIVIDUAL, PRONE TO OCCASIONAL FLIGHTS OF FANCY, WHO, ON OCCASION, ACQUIESCES TO THE PRACTICAL DEMANDS MADE BY OTHERS AROUND ME.

OF COURSE, IT IS NEVER EASY TO LIVE THIS SEEMINGLY PARADOXICAL LIFE. IT REQUIRES THE CREATION OF VARIOUS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS, ALONG WITH MUDDLING MY WAY THROUGH A HOST OF PRIVATE AND PUBLIC DICHOTOMIES. I RECONCILE THIS DIVIDE BY PROJECTING A SUPERFICIAL IMAGE OF MYSELF TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD, ONE OF A CAREFREE, CONFIDENT, AND CONTENT INDIVIDUAL, WHILE WITHHOLDING, DEEP WITHIN THE RECESSES OF MY INSIDE WORLD, THE TRUER IMAGE OF MYSELF AS A NUANCED, COMPLEX, AND, AT TIMES, VULNERABLE INDIVIDUAL.

LIFE WAS SO MUCH EASIER IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL. THERE, THE DRAWING OF A HAT DID NOT REPRESENT A HAT, BUT A DRAWING OF A SNAKE WHICH HAD JUST CONSUMED AN ELEPHANT, OR, THE DRAWING OF A CRATE DID NOT REPRESENT A CRATE, BUT A DRAWING OF A SHEEP. I FLOURISHED IN SUCH A NURTURING ENVIRONMENT, ONE WHERE FLIGHTS OF FANCY WERE ENCOURAGED ON AN HOURLY BASIS.

DURING THIS TIME, THE WALL BETWEEN MY PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SELVES WAS MADE OF GLASS: THERE WAS NO DISCREPANCY BETWEEN THE PERSON I WAS ON THE INSIDE VERSUS THE PERSON I WAS ON THE OUTSIDE. IN THIS WAY, I BEHAVED AS MY HERO—THE PRINCE—BEHAVED: NEVER SELF-EDITING MY BEHAVIOR FOR ANYONE. I THOUGHT THIS SITUATION WOULD LAST FOREVER. SADLY, I WAS WRONG.

ALL TOO QUICKLY PUBERTY ARRIVED, AND WITH IT, THE END TO MY HAPPY CHILDHOOD AND THE END TO MY ABILITY TO SEAMLESSLY CROSS THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN MY INTERNAL AND MY EXTERNAL WORLDS—REPLACED BY A CIRCUMSCRIBED, SELF-CONSCIOUS DICHOTOMOUS INSIDE/OUTSIDE WORLD. LIKE THE NARRATOR OF MY FAVORITE STORY, EVERYONE STARTED SELF-EDITING THEIR BEHAVIOR, BUT, NOT IN RESPONSE TO PRACTICAL ADULTS, BUT IN RESPONSE TO EACH OTHER. WORSE STILL, I HAD ALSO STARTED TO INTERNALIZE THIS CONTRIVED MANNER OF ACTING, BY BUILDING AN IMPENETRABLE WALL BETWEEN MY PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SELF, ALL IN A FUTILE EFFORT TO BE LIKED. I SHOULD HAVE REALIZED THE ERROR OF MY ACTING IN A MANNER I HAD IMPLICITLY CRITICIZED THE NARRATOR FOR SO MANY YEARS AGO.

RECENTLY, GUIDED BY MY QUIRKY HERO PRINCE, I HAVE COME TO SEE MY ACTIONS DURING PUBERTY IN A VERY DIFFERENT LIGHT. FUNNY THAT A STORY I MUST HAVE READ OVER A HUNDRED TIMES, SEEMINGLY OVER A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, HAS FOUND A WAY TO REACH ACROSS THE CHASM OF TIME AND DEEPLY TOUCH ME IN MY CURRENT LIFE, REMINDING ME OF THE CRUCIAL LIFE LESSON I HAD LEARNED LONG AGO: ALWAYS STAY TRUE TO YOURSELF.