

## Working Shy in a Non-Shy World

Working is one of the biggest problems isn't it?

Being shy when you're young and in school is bad enough. That's when you first meet the pressure not to be shy. All through elementary school and high school I longed for them to end. Year after year I kept my distance from other students and spoke to teachers only to answer questions. By the last year of high school I thought I was finally going to escape. For some reason, I thought I would finally be allowed to be myself when I entered the working world. But it wasn't like that.

There are shy careers. I was hoping to one day become a field geologist or biologist so I could live my life in one wilderness or another. There are a lot of shy people in the sciences, and I think they feel very much at home there. That's also true of the arts, and there are fields like accounting where you can keep a lower profile more suited to your nature. I would urge anyone still in school to move in one of those directions.

But ninety per cent of us now end up in 'services' – face to face with the public, and side by side with our peers working in 'teams' - always with someone in our face or looking over our shoulder. I don't think it matters whether you work in a bank, in government administration, in the restaurant industry, health care services, the armed forces, or in the insurance industry where I've spent most of my life. In any of those fields you're in the belly of the beast, in the last place your shy genes were designed for, so the only thing you can do is try to adapt.

The customary way is to follow the urging of the social world and try not to be shy. But if shyness is in your genes, which is the case with most shy people, all you can really do is pretend that you aren't shy, which is not the same thing at all. Pretending is tiring, often exhausting, and you feel bad because you know your behavior is false.

With enough exposure, you can develop an emotional callous that will allow you to function in the workplace, but that's only a partial solution.

The core problem is anxiety.

The anxiety you feel about entering the working world can be so strong that you may not be able to enter it at all. I will never forget the morning I started my first job in an insurance company. Twenty years old in August, 1966, I stood for half an hour in a doorway on the other side of the street watching the brass doors you see in the photograph, doors that I was supposed to enter. I almost walked away, but I got my courage up and began the forty year odyssey that would teach me the things I want to teach you.

Anxiety can prevent you from applying for a job, or defeat you in the interview.

Because of my long experience in the social arena, I'm not shy in a timid way. I rarely experience anxiety. Though I suffered from selective-mutism as a boy (paralysis of speech in social settings), I talk easily enough now. But I say as little as possible. I'm still aloof and avoidant. Sure, some people disapprove, but I ignore them. You can learn to ignore them too.

If you tell a doctor about your anxiety, they may prescribe drugs. I'm not as opposed to that as you might think.

Prescription drugs are safer than the one I used - alcohol. I don't think I could have accomplished what I did without some kind of help. Alcohol worked, but it's a dangerous drug used heavily, and by age twenty-five I'd had some bad experiences. Prescription drugs are safer and more practical.

Just don't get trapped by prescription drugs, recreational drugs, or alcohol. What bothers me about all of them is that they hide your shyness, when that shyness is usually part of your core, a living spirit that needs the full light of day. It took me decades to work out a method whereby one can remain shy, but stand surefooted in the social world and deal with the situations it presents.

Why do we have that anxiety? Because we don't belong in these places. Shyness is one of the chief characteristics of forest dwelling mammalian species. Shy people have retained more of the hunter-gathering genes all humanity once had. We're only comfortable when we feel hidden and unnoticed, the way we were once hidden in the forests we came from. If these ideas interest you, read *Origin of Shyness* elsewhere on this website.

Remember this – you were born to live in scarcely populated forests and plains where you would rarely meet people other than close family. That's why you have these shy genes. Part of humanity started to give up the small scale hunter-gatherer life some 50,000 years ago, opting instead for the larger tribal communities that continue today on a grand scale. Another part of humanity didn't do that and you are the result.

But you are in the tribe now, whether you like it or not. You have to live in that community, not the one your genes were designed for. Your body and soul are constantly telling you to get out of there, but you can't and the result is anxiety.

The key to overcoming anxiety while retaining your true shy nature is detachment. That's what produced the breakthrough for me.

If you're shy, you probably practice detachment unconsciously already. It's part of your nature. But it's also a skill that can be expanded to accomplish much more than you imagine. Much of what I've learned comes from the Bhagavad Gita, an ancient Indian text in which the god Krishna explains detachment.

The opposite of detachment is attachment. You suffer anxiety because you are thinking too much about the outcome of your undertaking. Krishna says you are attached to the fruits of action. He says you should perform the actions for the sake of the actions, and forget about the fruit.

Do you see what that means? You're anxious in a job interview, or speaking in front of a classroom, or responding to that attractive young woman or man who has just spoken to you, because you are afraid of losing what you hope to gain.

You will only get rid of your anxiety if you go into those situations in an objective way, leaving yourself outside the door. Learn to treat each situation as an experiment which you hope to learn something from. For, trust me, you will learn. Even if the result is complete failure and humiliation, you will learn. In fact, the bigger the failure, the more you will learn, so why be afraid of it?

When I say that you should approach a situation as if there is nothing to be gained from it, I don't mean pretending. Just saying "it doesn't matter" doesn't work. You have to care about the interview, but not about yourself.

If you do your best and you fail, all that means is that you have passed another fork in the road of your life. Forget about the path that is now closed and set out on the other one.

Simple as that - just leave yourself out of the equation. In fact, you already do it. Whenever you get deeply interested in something – watching a film, reading a book, playing a computer game, you forget about yourself don't you? But you still care about what you're doing, and because your ego has stepped aside you are more focused.

You only have to learn to turn on that focus, and turn off the "I". It's not as hard as you think.

Don't worry if you don't do it very well. The first time I went out to interview the driver from a motor vehicle accident I had to walk twice around the block before I could go up and knock on the door. But I did it. The statement I took wasn't very good, but I came away having done something I once couldn't imagine myself doing, and forty years later I'm still proud of what my young self accomplished that day.

Sure, it takes courage. Your hunter-gatherer ancestors had courage, or they wouldn't have survived, and you wouldn't be here. Courage is in your genes, whether it feels like it or not.

Yes, detachment. Sometimes I see my own life as a kind of wandering through a forest. The people I meet and deal with are just trees in the forest that I have to maneuver around. Sometimes I have to cut one down. Occasionally I hug one. But most of the time I'm able to remain detached from them because I perceive them to be different from me.

No, psychologists don't like that idea – detachment is not a popular idea in modern culture, which is supposed to be all about empathizing and connecting. Alienation is seen as an illness to be corrected.

They don't tell you that that feeling of alienation may not be your fault – it may be the natural outcome of a person with your genetic make up trying to live in a society that has been designed for someone else.

And the opposite of empathizing with people is feeling hostility towards them, accompanied by anxiety. Detachment is better.

That alienation you feel is a clue to the path you need to take, to the path of detachment.

Easier said than done you say? Well you're right. Those trees will poke at you, mock you, connive against you, pretend you're their friend then talk about you behind your back, flirt with you, betray you whenever it's to their advantage, etc. I'm not saying detachment is easy. I'm just saying that it does work if you put your whole self into it.

That's all I'm going to say for now, though I know you need more. Soon I will add a page in which I'm going to give advice for working day to day among people.

- Alan Conrad, 2010 -