

Character versus image

Who are you when no one is watching?



“**A**gain!” my tae kwon do instructor shouted, commanding the class to another repetition of the fighting combination we were learning. The moves were difficult, and I was already tired from a long day at work.

With each repetition, my arms and legs felt heavier, and I began to hold back, conserving my energy while hoping that no one noticed. Because I was the highest-ranking black belt, I had the senior position on the mat in front of two dozen students, a position where my every move was visible and expected to be an example for others to follow.

As my instructor moved among us, inspecting each person’s form and technique, I was careful to give my best when he was near and then rested when he walked away. In this way, I believed I was maintaining my image as the senior student without actually having to exert the effort.

It was in one of these moments of executing the movements halfheartedly that I was surprised by the whispered voice of my instructor close behind me.

“Who are you when no one is watching, Mr. Huling?”

Even now, I can recall how I felt at that moment. At the instant I heard his voice, I realized that there was no shame in being tired or unable to perform at my highest level; the shame was in trying to uphold an image that wasn’t true.

Have you ever tried this same approach? Can you remember a time when you had lost all passion for the work you were doing but put on an image of energy and false enthusiasm for the people around you? Perhaps you can remember sustaining an image in a relationship, portraying a personal connection that you no longer felt or feigning dedication to a community service project that, in truth, had become a dreaded burden.

No matter when or where it happens, the moment you shift your energy toward maintaining your image — crafting your actions and your words to sustain the appearance of something that isn’t true — you compromise your most valuable attribute: the content of your character.

If this is where you are, there are three important things to remember.

First, the people around you usually know the truth, in spite of your efforts to conceal it.

They have built-in radar for inconsistencies and subtle cues that tell them the smile on your face isn’t matched by the feeling in your heart.

While you may not be quite ready to resign from the job or end the relationship, you can stop exhausting yourself to convince people that everything is great. Instead, begin to be more authentic in what you say and do. Don’t say yes when you mean no, compliment only what you truly respect, and pause to consider whether each action you are about to take aligns with your personal values for honesty and integrity.

Second, if perfection were the requirement, no one would succeed. All of the people around you face their own fear of inadequacy and rejection and, like you, are tempted to create a better version of themselves through the image they want you to see.

But if you will begin to acknowledge your own imperfections — that you don’t always make the right choice and aren’t always in control of every situation — you will not only drop your own image and become more authentic, you’ll set others free to accept their imperfections as well.

Finally, remember that the image you are sustaining is actually a reflection of the person you want to become. When you create an image of passionate engagement with your work, it’s because you really want your work — and your life — to have these qualities. Instead of pretending that you love your job, channel that same energy into a written vision of what you really want, and then commit to finding an opportunity that takes you toward it.

Let this simple Latin phrase become the standard for your life: “Esse quam videre,” which means “To be, rather than to appear.” When you do, you will discover that the person you truly are is actually greater than the image you tried to create.

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