

**Alice Gerth** and the search for balance between confidence and integrity



# WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

**W**e are taught to be confident. Patients need to trust our clinical judgment and they won't if we bracket it with our uncertainties. As doctors we are expected to lead by example. This means exuding an air of confidence and calm despite any panic running beneath the surface. From the earliest days of clinical practice we are taught to fake it.

Take learning how to do lumbar punctures: somebody has to be your first. So you watch a few being done. You learn how to feel for the space, but ultimately, at some point, you need to insert the needle. You talk the patient through the procedure, set up, bleep your senior to supervise ('just in case, an extra set of hands is always helpful') and proceed. As the needle struggles to find the space, you mutter reassurances to the patient, though it's really to yourself. All the time hiding the tremor in our voice and in our hands.

The skill of projecting a better, calmer, more confident self does not stop with our patients. It permeates our home and church lives too. Through social media it is easier than ever before to project the 'best' part of one's character. We post pictures of holidays and tweet our successes. Rarely do we express the mundane, the everyday, or the hesitations. Our online self is confident, fresh-faced, running marathons; not lounging on the sofa, tired, fed up.

There are dangers and benefits to this behaviour. If we continually project a 'sorted' self it inhibits honesty: honesty with ourselves and with other people. Without this we are unable to identify areas of sin. So we may not seek forgiveness and help in defeating them. Openness with others encourages them to be honest with us.

By acknowledging our own weaknesses it gives others the space to acknowledge theirs. We see this professionally: it is harder to ask questions and advice from a senior who seems completely sorted while juniors fear that they will think less of them if they ask a question. So they hide their uncertainties. This prevents juniors learning and gaining confidence and it places patients at risk. In church 'sorted leaders' inhibit growth in those around them and they may feel inadequate or fear condemnation if they reveal struggles.

The veneer of superficial control has benefits. In the same way that supported juniors learn to become seniors by stepping into the role before they feel fully ready, so as Christians we need to step into our identity as children of God before we have defeated all sin in our lives. The Bible is full of stories of ordinary men and women

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doing extraordinary things despite lack of self-belief: consider Moses, Jonah, Esther and Peter.

If we don't step out until we feel 100 percent confident we limit God and restrict his glory. Too much doubt and hesitation can undermine the assurance and confidence of those around us. We need to balance confidence and integrity, not falling into behaviours that falsely accentuate our conviction, or lack of it. Posturing to encourage others to confide in you is equally deceitful as portraying false self-assurance.

As we think of these two projections of self – the one we emit to the world and the one within – we have to be careful not to 'split' ourselves. Initially it seems as if the scared, tired, grumpy, sinful self is the true version and as such we fear being exposed by those around us. As Christians, however, we know this to be false. We are more truly who God created us to be when we behave in ways that honour God. We are continually being sanctified by God and so the more worldly aspects of our character are in conflict with the more Christ-like. This conflict will continue until we join Christ in the new creation. John Stott puts it succinctly: 'My true self is what I am by creation, which Christ came to redeem, and by calling. My false self is what I am by the fall, which Christ came to destroy'.<sup>1</sup>

The even greater truth is Christ died for the self I am by the fall. God sent his Son for the self I dislike; he loves that self for he sees the self he created. The challenge, therefore, is to not hide our fallen selves whilst striving to be our created selves. If we can walk this line of 'honestly faking it' we will find it easier to identify and battle sin in our own lives. It will empower the wider church family to grow, acknowledging that we are a church of sinners striving to be Christ's perfect ambassadors.

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## references

1. Stott J. *The Cross of Christ*. Nottingham: IVP, 2006:329