

Part 2: The World's 'If' to us

Begin with a few minutes of stillness. Much of our day's busyness and unresolved emotions are carried in us and we need some time to quieten ourselves if we are to listen to the still small voice of our inner self and that of God.

For us all, the experience of life has been to be measured against expectations, respectable standards or arbitrary peer group lifestyles. Whether it was to store our toys, to behave properly for visitors or to do well at school, there was often some pressure to come within the bounds of what was considered acceptable or proper behaviour. Our own feelings about being pressured like this mattered far less than it did to do the 'right thing'.

We soon learned how to play the game of fitting in with expectations, at times excelling in order to enjoy the resulting praise or material rewards. This progressed from the realm of social behaviour to achievements in academic, sporting or other fields, where we learnt to exploit our strengths while hiding or denying our perceived weaknesses. The recognized arenas of physical and intellectual competition became areas that could be reliably developed and exploited for reward, often to the detriment of emotional or creative development.

Largely through not knowing better, much of our formation and education has been hinged on conditions that had to be met to ensure acceptance. 'Tidy your room or there will be trouble'. The 'trouble' carried the threat of pain and rejection that fed our fears of being unloved or unlovable. Our need to be affirmed by those around us coerced us into doing what was acceptable at the expense of being honest in our expression of ourselves. Within these constraints we tried to grow into our own identities, but often the conditions crippled much of our real self. Many of our perceptions of ourselves took on the same critical conditions that had been imposed on us, so that we perpetuated within ourselves the very systems in which we had grown up. The behaviour we had adopted for the sake of expediency became a part of us, and we began rejecting, rationalizing, hiding or criticizing aspects of ourselves that seemed to be the culprits in our not being our best selves. Like Cain, we tried to kill the part we had grown to dislike, but it still cries out . . . This inner split has become the place of pain and alienation, of conditions and criticism, of accusation and the fight for survival.

We try to compensate by polishing up our strengths and achievements in order to make a favourable impression. Everything has a price tag and for the attractive ones, acceptance comes cheaply, whereas for those closer to the fringes the tussle between being true to one's identity and being acceptable can be very costly.

This is so unnatural a way of life that one becomes almost unable to receive anything without feeling that somewhere there must be strings attached. As a defense mechanism we can easily find ourselves judging, criticising or looking for others' failings or weaknesses to comfort ourselves or assure ourselves of our own acceptability. The consuming need becomes to stay ahead, to live a 'respectable' life and to ensure that no societal disaster befalls us. The world dehumanises us by attaching external value to us and thereby sets up a dehumanising value system where acceptance or rejection depends on the subjective whims of 'in' groups. The assumption is: 'If I perform, if I am adequate, if I can hold my own and avoid being a burden, if I can be one of the "beautiful" or desired people, then I will have an easy road.' We cannot bear to consider the possibility that we may not 'make it'.



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Exercise

Choose one of the following to do now in the group, leaving the other sections for later at home.

Reflect on parts of yourself that cause you discomfort of some sort – parts you would rather not have. What has brought them to be like this?

OR

Reflect on your childhood, on being at home and visiting friends' families and homes. Do you remember any differences in the ways things were done in other households or in the ways relatives like grandparents or uncles and aunts treated you? How did it make you feel?

OR

Reflect on some of your ways of being, the ways you like things done or to be; areas where you are strong or feel weak and how you cope with them.

OR

1. What imposed conditions (if any) are you aware of in your life, especially as a young person?

18. What were your areas of strength and where did your weaknesses lie?

19. How did your life shape and form around these strengths and weaknesses?

Do this reflection for 15 minutes and then write in your journal. Share in the group what you feel able to. Choose a facilitator for next week and end the meeting.



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