Piercing the Armor: Professional Coaching and Vulnerability

William Bergquist, Ph.D.

A very controversial (and some would say "mad") psychoanalyst, Wilhelm Reich (1980), provided a very insightful observation about the "Character Armor" that some of us wear as a way to protect against vulnerability. We see this character armor in people with whom we associate (and perhaps in ourselves) through a pattern of rigid behavior and seeming indifference to the interactions of people around them. It is not that these men and women are sociopaths or hermits living in a cave—they work with and around other people and are often quite effective in getting their work done and monitoring the work of fellow employees. And these folks clearly care about those with whom they live and work – it is just that this caring attitude doesn't show up very often.

The Armor of Uniforms and Roles

Sometimes, we see armor that people wear in more visible ways. They are wearing uniforms and are often engaged in roles that relate to safety and life-and-death issues: police officers, firemen, military, physicians, judges – even the armor of the C-Suite coat-and-tie (tailored dress or pants suits for female execs). The armor seems in one sense to be very appropriate and justified for these men and women. It is a matter of collusion: we want these uniformed men and women to be error-free. So, they must pretend to be error-free or, better yet, wearing the armor, they come to believe themselves that their decisions and actions are error-free. They need to eliminate (or at least reduce) their own cognitive dissonance: I must believe that I make no mistakes or I am undeserving of this uniform and the people's trust in me. They are vulnerable to vulnerability (the shattering of their image). Who do they turn to for help – other members of their same role-group?

A "softer" version of Reich's character armor is to be found in the description of "persona" by Carl Jung and his associates (Jung, 1955). As a prominent psychoanalyst who broke away from Freud, Jung suggests that all of us carry around and present to other people a "mask" (persona) that allows us to present a self that is appropriate to the specific setting in which we find ourselves. While this persona can be changed somewhat from one setting to another, it tends to become rather stiff and unchanging as we grow older or as we begin work in a specific job and are assigned a specific role in our family and society. The persona not only enables us to act in a predictable manner (which is reassuring to other people with whom we interact) but also enables us to "engineer" our own presentation self: we can be kind, humorous, challenging, aloof, earthy . . . whatever works best for us. Most importantly, our persona protects us from vulnerability.

As a coach, how do we address the issue of armor – whether our clients have clad themselves in the armor or the armor has been placed on them by society and their profession? What do we do as coaches about our client's persona? Do we leave it alone, or suggest that our client seeks out a Jungian analyst? Taking an appreciative approach, do we help our client see the value of and appropriate use of their persona—or at least help them identify the nature of their persona and its dynamics interaction with our client's shifting environment?

I would suggest that we also consider approaching our armored/masked client by posing (in a gentle and appreciative manner) the following questions:

(1) What is the purpose of the armor (persona)? How does it help people with whom you relate in your role:
   (a) their ability to readily identify your role (particularly important under conditions of stress and the need for rapid response),
   (b) their sense of safety in relating to you and asking for your assistance (recognizing your expertise or carefully defined role) and/or
   (c) their assumption that you will act in a predictable manner (no room for surprise under conditions of stress and the need for rapid response).
(2) When can you take off your armor (persona)?
   (a) What sessions
   (b) With what people (your family, friends, peers in the same role)?
(3) What are the "secondary gains" associated with this armor/persona
   (a) Status
   (b) Personal security
   (c) Job security
   (d) Hide what is "really going on" inside.

One of the people I have coached and with whom I have consulted is a high-ranking official in her state. She has to wear a "uniform" while doing her job and is often featured in the local news. As a result, she can't go out to a local bar to hand out with friends and have a few drinks. She even finds it difficult to take off her "uniform" while going out in public. As a result, my client has purchased a second home in a city far away from her state – where she and her husband can enjoy an evening out on the town. This delightful and deeply-dedicated public servant loves going out to small night clubs and dancing the night away: no uniform and no mask (or at least a different mask).

The Fall of Public Man

There is an even deeper and more historical assessment of armor. In *The Fall of Public Man*. Richard Sennett (2017) writes about the shift that occurred in European society several centuries ago. For many years, the condition of European cities was deplorable. Sewage ran in the streets (which were nothing more that muddy wastelands of filth and disease). Men wore hats and walked with their women folk on the curb side of the street because inhabitants of the rooms located in the buildings beside them were pitching their waste products out the window and onto the street (and hats) below. Under these conditions, there was no need to "dress up" when going outside. Rather, formal wear was reserved for "at home" living. Men, woman and children wore their fine clothes at home and presented their refined manners at home – leaving their courser behavior for the streets outside. Thus "private man" was refined and "public man" was crude and less restrained. Reich would say that the character armor was reserved for domestic life. The Jungians would concur that the "persona" was most consistently engaged at home.

According to Sennett, this all changed with improvement in the conditions of European cities (as well as the shift in numerous other conditions of European societies). Folks began to dress up when going outside and dressed in a more informal manner when at home. We see this at an extreme during the second half of the twentieth century, with the common attire at home often being sweatpants and the

office attire being "gray flannel suits", ties, pantyhose and finely styled hair. In the twenty first century, this is changing again with "casual Fridays", working at home, and digital communication.

However, Sennett wants us to remain for a little while in an era when public man became more formal and ceased to be the less protected, hat-wearing citizen of an earlier era. He noted that there was one sector of European society that remained quite open and unprotected: this was the actor in theater (and later movies). This person not only exposed the vulnerability of mankind in the roles he/she played on stage, but also was "victim" of exposes of their real life. They were subject to public scandals as extensively pervades in newspapers and other printed tabloids (and later radio and television). In essence, the actor signed a pact with the devil: I get to be successful in showbusiness, but yield the rights to my personal life. Sennett noted that this led to creation of the "celebrity". Furthermore, celebrity-status soon was assigned not only to actors and actresses, but also political figures and even some business leaders. We are fully aware of this Faustian trade-off today: if you want to be successful in many fields, you must become "famous" and a "celebrity" with your personal life (strengths and weaknesses) all available for public display and analysis.

How do we coach a public figure – a "celebrity"—who has lost her/his private self? What do they protect? In exposing their own vulnerability do they teach other people, inspire openness among other people, or simply play into the fantasy worlds and envy of their public? To what extent are the leaders we coach – who do not qualify as "celebrities"—burdened with some of the trade-offs of "celebrity-ship" (without all of the financial remuneration)?

The key issue would seem to be the setting of appropriate boundaries. When does "public man" (and "public woman") step out of the spotlight? I often help my highly-successful clients to find a sanctuary to which they can retreat. This sanctuary should not only provide strong boundaries, but also be a source of renewal and a place where my client can interact with family, friends and colleagues who are fully trustworthy. For one of my clients this sanctuary is his sail boat; for another client it is her cottage on a lake; yet another client identifies his sanctuary as nothing more than the daily trip by car into work.

There is also the matter of "retirement." When does the public figure step away from her highly-conscribed and quite public role? What is her next role in life? And can she find gratification in this new role? What about the legacy that this public figure leaves behind? It is important for my client to recognize that she may be stepping "off stage" but her accomplishments (and stumbles) will remain "on stage" for many years to come (only slowly retreating from the spotlight)?

As can be seen from these coaching strategies, I am offering some very old (premodern) and often theatrical notions with regard to the role of public man/woman: (1) finding sanctuary, (2) stepping out of the spotlight on occasion, (3) recognizing the legacy that remains in place. Coaching for these privileged (and often burdened) men and women is often about very primitive and powerful dynamics associated with the emotional cost of becoming a public figure and losing the right to privacy.

The Impostor Syndrome

Finally, there is the armor worn by an impostor. In many ways, the impostor is simply one form of "celebrity" that is engaged for manipulative purposes and leads to the creation of a public figure that is either a distortion of reality or an entirely fictionalized character that has been created by someone for personal gain. As in the case of Sennett's analysis of the actor on stage, the impostor exists and is

successful because other people go along with the false reality. There is collusion between the impostor and his/her "audience." Kets de Vries (2003) notes that we want to believe the impostor is the real person and is skillful, knowledgeable, kind or whatever we wish him/her to be. This is another case of dissonance reduction. Just as we want policemen to be honest and physicians to be knowledgeable and skillful, so we want the impostor to be the real thing (whether serving as an accountant or airline pilot).

Kets de Vries (2003, p. 83) uses the term "true impostor" when describing the intentions and behaviors of those people whose "identity is based on impersonations rather than actual attainments and accomplishments." He uses a different term when describes the rest of us folk: "neurotic impostors." We are the "individuals who feel fraudulent and imposturous while actually being successful." We have "an abiding feeling that [we] have fooled everyone and are not as competent and intelligent as others think [we] are." While Kets de Vries has identified a specific subset us who are living in contemporary times, I have suggested that the term "neurotic impostor" applies to most of us. It is the recognition among most of us that the "persona" we carry with us most of the time or even the "character armor" that we wear as a burden when interacting in our challenging and ever-changing world. As a colleague of mine once said (in quoting some unnamed source): "which of us when told that all has been found out about us and will be revealed tomorrow to everyone in our life won't be taking the first train out of town tonight!!"

How do we coach an impostor? Or perhaps we are more in the role of helping our client identify impostors in their life or their own fears of being an impostor? Does the impostor really want to abandon their role? The secondary gains can be quite compelling. Are they growing tired of being the impostor or have they begun to believe their own lie and can now living comfortably with their false self? Reality and the "truth" can get quite confusing. Perhaps a "personal SWOT analysis" is appropriate. What really are your impostor-client's strengths (that can be truthfully acknowledged and engaged) and what are the weaknesses that this client should acknowledge (as a first step toward moving into a more authentic role). And to whom should the impostor-client first convey this more realistic analysis of strengths and weaknesses? What about the environment in which the impostor is working. Given that the impostor is often quite narcissistic, it might require quite a bit of "heavy lifting" for you as the coach to bring the realistic threats (as well as realistic opportunities) to the attention of your client. The impostor might be quite gifted with regard to opportunities – but even here we are likely to find both false opportunities and "botched" opportunities – from which one's client can learn (with your help as her coach).

My colleague, Kevin Weitz, has written about the personality disorders that pervade our contemporary workplaces. His essay in this Library of Professional Coaching is one of the most frequently accessed—suggesting that the coaching of impostors (often embedded in a narcissistic or border-line personality disorder) and the coaching of those who work with these impostors is needed—and quite challenging. Coaching in this realm moves us beyond armor, persona and public man. Yet, in each instance, we are addressing the issue of vulnerability and must provide coaching in a caring and thoughtful manner. As one of my artful coaching colleagues has noted: these are delicate matters.

Vulnerability and the Art of Coaching

In conclusion I return to the work of Manfred Kets de Vries. This remarkable analyst of leadership proposes that leaders are often addressing the vulnerability of those working with them, as well as their own vulnerability. The more vulnerable we are in any specific situation, the more challenged is our own

psychological equilibrium (Kets de Vries, 2003, p. 113). In seeking to re-establish equilibrium, we are likely to engage in *splitting* (separating the world into clear cut "goods" and "bads"), *projection* (ascribing to other people what we reject in ourselves), or *denial* (refusing to acknowledge what is going on inside ourselves or in our environment). These are all primitive defensive routines that we witness going on all around us today (and not just in our clients). Facing this vulnerability, we must gain a steady sense of self, gain the capacity to test reality, and tolerate anxiety and uncertainty in our life. Kets de Vries suggests the following goal: "the ease with which the individual can articulate his thoughts and emotions, his ability to perceive the relationship between his thoughts, feelings, and actions, and his desire to learn . . . " I would suggest that these goals are worthy of our coaching enterprise – especially when we are coaching the women and men who face the challenge of leadership and must, at times, clad themselves with armor, cloak themselves with a persona, or confront their own sense of being an impostor who might soon be exposed. And perhaps we should check out own armor, persona and impostor-fears as professional coaches. Are we vulnerable? Are we immune?

_____

References

Manfred Kets de Vries (2003) *Leaders, Fools and Impostors* (rev. ed.). New York: iUniverse.

Richard Sennett (2017) *The Fall of Public Man* (40th Anniversary Ed.), New York: Norton.

Carl Jung (1955) *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Boston, MA: Harcourt.

Wilhelm Reich (1960) *Character Analysis* (3rd Ed.) New York: Farrar, Straus and Girioux.