I'M AN IMPOSTER

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My lifetime struggle with imposter syndrome is one expression of the same battle that we all face, learning to take ourselves off the throne and to see that it really belongs to Jesus.
Category: Observations

Last week, for no apparent reason, I felt moved to tweet the following:

https://twitter.com/kouya/status/1311585407562379264?s=20

To be honest, I was surprised at the number of people who replied to say that they feel something similar. I knew that I wasn't the only one, but I didn't realise that I had so much company. Anyway, I thought that I'd follow up the tweet with a blog post to unpack some of my own thoughts on this issue. Some of what I say may apply to others, but I'm not claiming that it does. I hope it will be helpful.

So where does my imposter syndrome come from?

My Upbringing. In the society in which I was raised, it was important that *everyone knew their place* and *didn't get ideas above themselves*. This is perfectly illustrated by a story that I was told some years after the event. Apparently, when I got my first post-graduate job as a researcher in a university biology department, my grandad offered to my mam to get me an apprenticeship at the local glass factory as that was more suitable employment for people like us. I sometimes wonder if Americans, who are generally brought up in a more positive and affirming atmosphere than the one I experienced have the same problems with imposter syndrome.

My Christian Upbringing. I was discipled in a tradition which focussed on God's grace. Unfortunately, God's grace was emphasised by repeatedly contrasting it with how rotten we were. Worms, wretches, miserable sinners... the list of negative terms goes on. Of course, there is truth in this, but we are also beloved, made in the image of God and slowly, but surely being sanctified. I find it hard to get to grips with the wonder of the transformation that God has wrought in my life because I spent so much time being told how rotten I am.

My Personality. I'm a generalist; I am half good at lots and lots of things, but I'm not very good at anything. Unfortunately, I live in a world where experts are highly valued and I've spent my adult life surrounded by people with a lot of expertise. My highest value in professional life is something that I can't attain.

My Search for Significance. This sort of sums up the others. The picture of myself that developed in my youth is of someone who is not worth very much. However, like all human beings, I have a need to feel that my life is significant. Unfortunately, and unwisely, I tend to seek for this by looking for

affirmation from the people that I admire and respect. The problem is that these people have more to do than continually fill up my seemingly bottomless need for encouragement.

There may be more to it than this, but that will do for now. This is getting quite self-indulgent enough.

What are the positives? Continually feeling that I'm not good enough is, in some ways, a good thing. In Christian ministry, none of us is good enough. If it continually turns me to prayer and dependence on the Lord, if it pushes me to minister out of weakness and humility then it is actually helpful.

How should I deal with it? One of the problems with my line of work is that you tend to know many of the answers, but that doesn't mean that you are able to put them into practice. In my case (and it may well be different for others) my need is to shift where I seek significance. I need to stop wanting people to tell me how wonderful I am, or how great that last talk or blog post was. Instead, I need to focus on the affirmation that comes from Jesus who loved me and died for me. The fact that he has written my name in the book of life is worth far more than any number of tweets or blog post hits. The thing is, I know this, but I don't always believe it deep down. The message that I am a sinner is true and one that I need to remember, but I am a sinner who has been saved by grace and who will one day rule with Christ in heaven. My real significance doesn't come from my achievements but from his.

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Of course, there is an insidious meta thing going on here. Am I just opening up and sharing my struggles so that you can all say how wonderful I am? In truth, the answer is probably - in part at least - yes. This side of eternity, I will always live with that conflict. The good news is that I am being transformed by the one who died for me. My life is a continual process of learning to hang on to that reality.