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Remove Those Masks! by Cathy Tsang-Feign

“Business, no problem! But when it comes to making friends I feel like a loser,” Andrew said.

Andrew, a businessman in his mid-thirties, has lived in Hong Kong for three years. He enjoys prosperity in business, but socially he is dissatisfied. He feels lonely, frustrated and without friends he can relate to.

Devoted to his business, Andrew's life very much revolves around it. He realizes that parties and social obligations are part of his job, and at these he can function well. He appears confident and comfortable in such settings.

He learned quickly that most people relate to each other in their particular defined roles, such as banker, diplomat, advertising executive, and so on. Everyone talks about business, politics or small-talk, but rarely express anything even remotely personal. Andrew also slips into his own role as “successful businessman”, which he finds convenient and safe. But he doesn't realize it has turned into a stumbling block in his attempts to make real contact with people.

So used to hiding behind his mask as a business person, he finds it difficult to relate to people even in informal settings. The club, parties, pub and gym are often places he makes business contacts. He tells himself: “You never know if one of these people may be a future client. It might hurt my business image if I become too personal with them.”

Even when meeting acquaintances and socializing, he remains superficial, detached and impersonal. On the other hand, he complains that “sometimes I want to let my hair down, but I just don't know how.” Deep inside he feels lonely, left out and stuck in a twilight zone.

Andrew's problem does not exclusively belong to him. Many lonely people out there also put on masks. Andrew's mask is that of “confident, successful businessman”. They can appear confident and sociable at parties and yet inside yearn for real friendships, just like Andrew.

It is common to hear the complaint: “In Hong Kong, it's easy to meet people but so hard to make friends.” As most people recognize, society in Hong Kong revolves around cliques. People usually associate with others of similar social standing and/or profession. They are drawn together in business as well as in social gatherings. It is not easy to move outside one's clique. Within the group, it is nearly impossible to suddenly break away from the habitual

ways of relating to each other. The common belief that “no one has time or interest to hear personal issues” reinforces people to remain on a superficial level.

Andrew blames his business for causing him to be stuck in such a position. However, blaming doesn't accomplish anything. Andrew must realize that he deliberately allows others only to see a certain part of himself which he feels comfortable to reveal. By doing so, he deprives people from really knowing him.

Many people like Andrew do not know how to draw a line between when to be himself and when to don the mask. Whenever in doubt, on goes the mask and out goes any chance of getting to know others on a deeper personal level.

In order to generate real friendships, a person needs to allow himself to take risks, just like in business. He needs to evaluate the circumstances and if the situation permits, be more open about personal thoughts and feelings.

Drawing a clear line between work and social settings is essential. One can list out the social occasions they have recently attended and determine at which of these they could have been less formal and taken off their masks. Then when similar opportunities come up in the future, they can make a conscious decision as to whether to play the usual role or to be themselves.

More effort should be made to extend invitations to meet people on a one-to-one basis and put away business and share individual interests. People tend to worry that word will get around if they let down their guard. Such an attitude only encourages people to put fences around themselves.

People have to recognize there could be others out there just like them, needing friends. They must allow themselves to reach out and openly express their difficulties in finding friends. By doing so, they will inspire others who hide behind masks to come forward and acknowledge their need as well. Until people can express and admit the problem, they will continue to hide behind masks and remain lonely and frustrated.

The above is not an actual case, but a reconstruction based on actual cases.

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