

### **Hyacinth in Everyday Life;**

Like many middle-aged men who are light sleepers it is not uncommon to find me up at 4 a.m. with the dog watching some old re-runs on TV or thinking in half-sleep about buying some advertised exercise machine that promises miracles and can be rolled neatly under the bed. The other evening it was “Keeping up Appearances” – the British comedy with Hyacinth Bucket (which she insists on pronouncing ‘Bouquet’) and her endlessly patient husband, Richard. In this particular episode she ended up in a hotel foyer sitting next to a nice elderly couple when she opened up the conversation by saying, in that ever so posh accent of hers:

“I am waiting for my husband Richard who is off playing golf with the Major, who is very well got in the army you know. My husband allows himself some occasional breaks from his enormous responsibilities with the local authorities - though he does get a great deal of mental satisfaction from the fact that our son, Sheridan, is doing so well at university!”

The elderly couple look at each and continue reading their papers. You could not but laugh at her constant attempts to appear so much better than she is.

Comedies on TV are very effective in the way that they can take a common personality disorder or neurotic trait and exaggerate it in ways that are often hilarious. Most of the characters in sit-coms have some personality defect or psychiatric trait that characterises them which, when placed in funny situations, is highly entertaining - Joey, Frasier, Clinger, Lucy, Fawlty, etc to name a few. What is interesting about these kinds of characters is the psychological condition that defines them.

Consider Hyacinth:

Mrs. Bucket is the comedic and harmless version of what in psychological terms is referred to as a *compensatory narcissist* – that is someone who compensates for their deep seated inadequacy by having to publicly present themselves as superior. Marge, in the old comedy, *The Good life*, was not unlike her. As was that irritating child in *Little House on the Prairie*, Nelly Olsen. Remember her?

Far from being comedic, the compensatory narcissist is the darker version of Hyacinth or Nelly and is driven by a relentless and resentful need to be the envy of others. I was working with a woman when I was living in the U.S. who had literally destroyed her family by her need to create a public image of superiority, status, and competence. It involved driving her children constantly toward achievement, never being happy with her husband’s efforts to prop her up, and constantly berating everyone at home because of their various human imperfections. These kinds of people are forever trying to be one-up on everyone else and be seen by others to have-it-all. What this means is that they constantly have to compensate for their deep seated inferiority by trying to prove their superiority and they drag their family into their ill-gotten quest.

The compensatory narcissist is the darker realistic version of Hyacinth and, driven by both resentment of others success and their own inadequacy, they will typically do some of the following: They will put down the achievements or successes of others because it shows them to be in a lesser light; they will always indirectly exaggerate and boast about their life and lifestyle; they are highly sensitive to how others react to them by watching a listening carefully for critical judgement; they cover up for inadequacy with a pseudo arrogance and grandiosity; they also cover up a masked depression and

deadness within themselves by always trying to achieve more and more; they sometimes entertains fantasies of greatness and if their family around them do not they get angry; at home they have an intense need for confirmation and praise and can be cruel to those close to them for not applauding their efforts; they often have a wishful, exaggerated, and unrealistic concept of themselves; they can be touchy and quick to take offence at the slightest provocation, is self-conscious, due to a dependence on approval from others; they will often expect their her children to perform well and be admired and will boast, like Hyacinth about their children's success unnecessarily.

Though this person can never acknowledge it, there is s deep feeling that one is defective, inferior, or invalid in important respects; or that one could be exposed for the inadequate person that they are. This person forever wants to gain the admiration and recognition of others. Their sense of esteem is dependent primarily on the reactions of others rather than on their own natural confidence. There is therefore an overemphasis on status, appearance, social acceptance, money, or achievement -- as means of gaining approval, admiration, or attention. This frequently results in major life decisions that are felt to be inauthentic or unsatisfying.

The origins of this kind of personality disorder lies in childhood where parents probably indulged the child's pretensions and unrealistic view of themselves. This fosters a massive denial of emotional reality. At home this works for the child, but when she goes out among peers she is not treated with the same kid gloves and becomes resentful of other children's simple successes. The child then grows into an adult that has to exaggerate herself in order to get friends or get approval. Nelly Olsen, the spoiled child at home, becomes the 'rotter' with her peers.

The basic belief of someone with the Hyacinth syndrome is "I must attain a position of status and superiority because I resent other people's natural competence in the world". The strategy by which this is achieved is pretension. We see this is everyday life with men and women who are forever, in their own minds, competing with everyone else. For hyacinth it is light-hearted comedy. For the husband or wife living with this in reality it can be a life lived on egg-shells and fear.

Situation comedies are great in the way that they can take personal dysfunction and make it the stuff of comedy. With light relief we can laugh at ourselves and others.

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