

Names are changed to honor client confidentiality.

Untuck Your Wings

Walking along a trail, you see an unusual and stunning butterfly. Perched on a small branch, its richly colored patterns and exquisite gracefulness invite you to pause and absorb the wonder before you. But suddenly something baffling and disturbing happens. The butterfly tucks its wings in tightly, concealing its beauty. Guessing the butterfly was frightened by your presence, you continue on your walk. Unable to put the strange butterfly out of your mind, you return to that same spot several minutes later. Your heart sinks at what you see. The butterfly still hasn't untucked its wings. You walk away ... sad.

How many of us, like the butterfly, conceal our beauty—our true nature and worth? Shouldn't our heart sink ... for ourselves?

Instead of celebrating our uniqueness every moment of every day, many of us nullify it. Where does such self-diminishment come from? Early childhood plays a strong role. We learn to alter ourselves to win the approval of our parents.

Claudia received approval by being the model child.

"Out of all my siblings," she said in our counseling session, "I was expected to be perfect."

To her this meant acting like a little lady—never raising her voice, never being rowdy, never getting messy, always being well-behaved. Expressing her natural buoyancy, individual tastes, desires, annoyances, and opinions was frowned upon.

"I learned that I'd be liked if I remained compliant ... if I fit their mold," she said.

But Claudia was in a no-win situation. Being the model child made her a prisoner inside herself and also created bitterness in her siblings.

She recalled a time when one sister lashed out at her: "You've always been the good one, the perfect one, the smart one!" her sister charged.

Being the favored child produced guilt. Since she feels guilty for being brainy, she waters down her natural intelligence.

"I purposely avoid having an air of authority or appearing smart," she said.

She dumbs down so others won't feel insecure. That's another reason why people conceal their

wings. They don't want to cause discomfort in others.

Some people—including Claudia—resist acknowledging their value because it would seem boastful.

"If I display confidence, it means I'm being conceited," she said. "The words 'Who do you think you are, young lady?' still ring in my head," she said. "So I keep a low profile wherever I go."

What a pity. Claudia loses out, but so do others. She has gifts and strengths that could prove invaluable in many aspects of her life, including her family and job.

Hunkering down benefits no one. What a sad world this would be if our best and brightest always did this! Imagine if Einstein had been embarrassed to show his genius. If Gandhi had hidden his powerful belief in peace. What if the guy who happens to be really good at fixing the office photocopier hid his abilities and stood by while everyone around him experienced hair-pulling frustration?

Like Claudia, Heath hides his gifts and his worth. Their reasons for doing so are similar. I'm amazed at his sage-like wisdom. But he reserves that wisdom for our counseling sessions.

When describing a troublesome social situation, he tells me what he could have communicated to others, but refrained.

Heath's reluctance is unfortunate because oftentimes he could be a positive influence, offering sound guidance and a broadened perspective. Heath has a faulty opinion of himself. He has brilliant wings, but fails to notice or believe in them.

My advice to Claudia and Heath is the same: Untuck your wings. Dare to shine. Without flinching, boldly be you. Their therapy entails uncovering and setting free the real self that got buried beneath layers of programming.

Claudia's beginning to find and appreciate her true self, as reflected in some of the children in her classroom. As an elementary school teacher, each year she must say goodbye to one set of children while welcoming a new set.

"The students who remain in my memory," she said, "are the spirited kids. You can see the sparkle in their eyes, the bounce in their step ... they just love life. Yes, they can cause problems; sometimes they don't make good judgments, but they're always the kids I remember and delight in."

When it comes to butterflies, Joseph Campbell, the late famed American writer, has a useful reminder: "The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are."