

# Ask Connie— *Mask of Perfection*

Connie Myslik-McFadden

Dear Connie -

I'm twenty-nine years old, and my boyfriend of two years just broke up with me. He said he's tired of watching me try to be perfect. I am proud of my accomplishments, and I guess I do talk a lot about them. It's true that it takes me an hour and a half to get ready to go anywhere. I weigh myself twice a day and am very upset if I gain a pound; I work out every morning at 5 a.m., and I keep my condo really neat and clean. I thought those were good things, but he said he doesn't want a Barbie Doll, he wants a real woman, and I'm fake. I am heartbroken. Can you help?

—Claire

Dear Claire,

I can understand how hurt you must feel, and I'm sorry for your loss. As hard as it may be to consider, perhaps you have been given a painful but necessary wake-up call. Often, it takes a crisis for people to face the fact that they have been living behind a mask, living an inauthentic life. It may be that this is a golden opportunity to look deeply at ingrained attitudes and patterns of behavior that have gone unquestioned for a long time.

It sounds like, for reasons that probably go back to your childhood, you developed a mask, or idealized self image, that you have been working very hard to maintain. Everyone does this in some form; you are not alone. Someone in your early life, most likely one of your parents, gave you the message that nothing less than perfection was acceptable. Perhaps you were punished when you inevitably made mistakes. Naturally you would have tried to conform to the wishes of that person so that you would feel safe. Over time, it sounds like you put a lot of effort into developing the appearance of perfection as a result. A mask of perfection is not the same as authenticity, as your boyfriend recognized.

It is a painful discovery for people to realize that the person they have tried so hard to be is not real; rather, it is the way they learned to cope in childhood and, until examined, persists through adulthood.



The Pathwork, a psycho-spiritual way of working with any and all of life's issues, says:

*"The dissolution of the idealized self is the only possible way to find your true self, to find serenity and self-respect, and to live your life fully."* [www.Pathwork.org]

What does that mean? In Jungian psychology, the term "shadow" is used to describe those characteristics that are part of us but not conscious. They may be positive qualities, such as artistic talent or a tendency towards exuberance that was shut down by others. More often, they are what are usually considered negative traits. The Pathwork talks about character flaws or negative tendencies as "the lower self." Most people hide the lower self with a mask self, a glorified picture of who we think we have to be in order to have our needs met.

The qualities you describe that have apparently driven your boyfriend away sound like your attempt to do life not just well, but perfectly. Perfection in these human bodies is not an attainable goal! Greater consciousness and wholeness are goals worth working towards. Remember the cowardly

lion in *The Wizard of Oz*? He was full of bravado at first, roaring to hide his fear. Eventually he was able to claim the authentic and divine attribute of courage that had always been underneath his mask and fear.

We are all a mixture of wonderful higher self qualities, such as compassion, generosity, selflessness; lower self qualities, such as greed, power drive, fear; and a mask we hide behind. In order to fully express your higher self, you need to become well acquainted with your lower self and your mask. As you come to understand why you adopted the mask of perfection that you describe, and develop compassion for the child you once were, you will be more accepting of yourself as imperfect but loveable. This will provide a doorway to the transformation of your lower self and the manifestation of your higher self. Instead of focusing on appearance and perfection, you will relax into being who you really are. But this takes time, patience, and practice. As the Pathwork says:

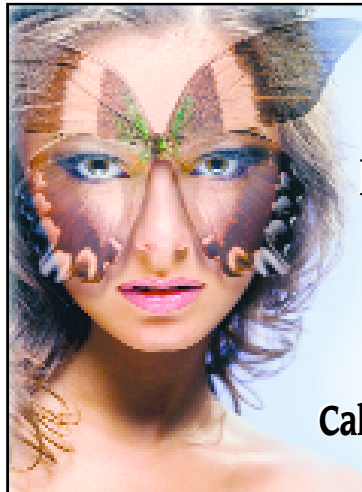
“Constructive patterns cannot have a solid foundation before you experience and go through the original pain and frustration, and all that which you ran away from. That which you turned away from has to be faced, felt, experienced, understood, coped with, come to terms with, and assimilated before what is unhealthy and unrealistic is dissolved, the

immature matured, and the healthy but repressed forces brought into their proper channels so as to work constructively for you.” [Pathwork Lecture #100: *Meeting the Pain of Destructive Patterns*, www.Pathwork.org.]

If you choose to follow the path of self-transformation, it is important that you find a counselor who can guide and support you. Individual and group work will offer the greatest benefit. Be patient with yourself—you have, by asking the question you did, opened the doorway to a more conscious, joyful and fulfilling life. ■

Good luck, Claire! —Connie

Connie Myslik-McFadden, MSS, LCSW, and Catherine Nelson, Ph.D, are offering a series of PATHWORK/DREAMWORK workshops beginning on Saturday, September 13. Participants will work deeply with Pathwork principles and with their dreams to help each person live a more authentic and fulfilling life. An eight-week Thursday evening Pathwork Group is also available beginning in September.



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#### **Do you have a relationship question?**

E-mail Connie, [conniem@mcn.net](mailto:conniem@mcn.net), or Call 406-582-7450 & Ask!

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**Connie Myslik-McFadden, MSS, LCSW, is a psychotherapist in Bozeman with 25 years of experience working with individuals, couples and groups. She leads workshops, retreats and teaches Dreamwork and Pathwork. Connie devoted 9 years to Jungian analysis, training, and supervision, after graduating from the Bryn Mawr School of Social Work. She went on to graduate from the Barbara Brennan School of Healing,**

**and Society of Souls, a kabbalistic school of healing. She is the author of “Gathering the Soul, a True Story of Spiritual Healing.” Pathwork (Pathwork.org) and Imago Relationship Therapy (www.GettingTheLoveYouWant.org) are two easily accessible sources for the theories upon which much of this column is based.**