



FINDING YOUR SOUL IN THE DARK: VIEW YOURSELF CRITICALLY, BUT NOT CRUELLY

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Where am I right now?

We value our navigation apps because they direct us to wherever we want to go, using the swiftest and most efficient route. But we take for granted their true genius—the ability to, without any effort or input on our part, identify precisely where we are on this Earth. A paper map will show all of the roads that lead to your destination. But if you don't know where you're starting from, that paper map is useless. Knowing your current location is key to routing the path forward.

Likewise, knowing yourself intimately and objectively is a vital first step toward realizing your potential as a person and as a leader. You cannot grow without an accurate understanding of who you are and where you're starting from, and there is no app for that.

Finding your way to the best version of yourself—as an influencer, contributor, colleague, family member, friend, or leader—requires persistent effort and constant introspection. Because, while you may find yourself in familiar and comfortable surroundings today, that can change quickly. The political, cultural, and economic landscape is shifting at a pace that affects us all. Any one of us could wake up to find that our jobs and workplaces have dramatically changed or even disappeared. And if that happens to you, your ability to fully understand yourself will be integral to how you proceed.

I first learned about the power of introspection from my mother, Wendy Amaechi, who remains the greatest influence in my life. In both of her full-time roles—single mother of three and family physician with a community surgery in the north of England. And the lessons she shared continue to resonate with me in new and unexpected ways—little Easter eggs of wisdom and benevolence that pop into my consciousness, seemingly whenever they're needed most. It was Mum who helped chart my course to professional basketball and helped lay the foundation for my work now in the discipline of psychology.

I started playing basketball in 1987 when I was 16, developing basic skills and learning the rules on the fly during pickup at a small community college gym. While you might think it quite predictable that an enormous Black child would eventually gravitate toward sport and basketball specifically, it was not a *fait accompli* in my case. I was (and am) a nerd and a geek, who knew nothing about sport and cared even less. My introduction to the game was late and accidental, but it didn't take me long to recognize my potential, given my physical advantages.

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I didn't love basketball per se. In fact, I never loved it and still don't. But in those first weeks in the gym, I fell in love with the way I felt around the game, being embraced by peers who praised me and believed in me and wanted me on their team. Until then, my height had been a liability and the source of isolation and embarrassment. Suddenly, though, it was an asset. It had a practical value in that it connected me to people who viewed me as special and believed in my potential for greatness. It connected me to people who would laugh with me and not at me, people who pushed me to perform and supported me through failure in a way I had never experienced before. That was the initial allure.

On my first day of practice, I learned about the NBA. Although I didn't know then what those letters stood for—National Basketball Association—I knew it was a place where I could be seen completely differently than my day-to-day experience suggested. While it was important that the NBA was a place where I could make a living playing basketball, at that time it more represented the idea of being paid to feel like I belonged—like I felt in that gym in Chorlton—rather than some path to riches in and of itself. I will admit to being seduced by the thoughts of eternal sunshine: after all, that's *all* you saw in 80s US television—sunshine and heroes—and the notion of cheering crowds rather than jeering passersby was really compelling, but I was not thinking about strangers cheering me on and wearing shirts bearing my name. As a person who spent much of their day wishing to be invisible, I thought that a modicum of fame would be a tolerable exchange for sunshine and belonging, but I never lost sight of the fact that basketball wasn't an end to itself; it would simply provide an alternative path to what I truly dreamed of as a child—financial security and a career as a psychologist.

My mother understood my early fascination with psychology and the way that people think and behave. But I left her in the dark about my burgeoning interest in basketball and the places it was taking my imagination. She knew I was spending time at the gym, but it could easily have been a passing phase and, frankly, she was probably just relieved that her lonely, chunky boy was finally exercising and alluding to “friends.” How could she know that a year from college and only months after touching a ball for the first time, her bashful bookworm was scheming to play in the NBA? She didn’t even know that there was an NBA.

My plan was to move to America for my senior year of high school, earn a scholarship to a top university, get selected in the NBA draft and make a lot of money. It was, in my mind, a watertight plan. I presented these intentions to Mum in a deliberate and dramatic fashion. Feeling confident, I sweetened the deal. “And when I make it, I’ll buy you a new house!” Who could argue with that?

She was not impressed. But her expression betrayed nothing, one way or another. I tried not to appear overeager for a response, any response.

“Son?”

YES? WHAT? YES?!?

“Would you recognize your soul in the dark?”

Would I recognize my soul in the dark? What a thing to hear. I'd spent days orchestrating this moment and had now laid bare my ambitions, supported by a well-reasoned plan. And she asks about my soul in the dark? What does that have to do with anything? And aren't we atheists anyway? I'd never been so frustrated with her, but she proceeded before I could reply.

"People who want to do ordinary things," she said, "They are like sticks in the river. They get thrown in at the top, and they may get stuck for a while in some reeds. Or even temporarily washed to the banks. But eventually, all things being equal, they will make their way to the sea.

"You've chosen an extraordinary destination. And as such, you can't rely on chance or fate to wash you there. People who want to do extraordinary things... they need to be armed with full knowledge of who they are.

"Most people can't describe their true selves in enough detail that they could recognize themselves without their physical reflection. Would you recognize your soul in the dark?"

“People who want to do extraordinary things... they need to be armed with full knowledge of who they are.”

Now she had my attention. I listened enraptured as she told me about the power and, indeed, the necessity of introspection for those who plan to achieve the unconventional and extraordinary.

“Describe yourself to me,” she said when she was done. “Who are you?”

That question should have been easy enough for a smart kid like me. I prided myself on my intellect and my studies. I spent hours lost in books and my own thoughts. And yet, I struggled to find a meaningful reply to Mum’s question. I resorted to listing the most basic physical and biological descriptors (e.g., Black, tall, British, student, son, older brother), but that wasn’t what she was looking for.

“Let’s take away all of that,” she said. “What happens if you can’t use those things?”

Neither my mother back then nor I today would suggest that such basic characteristics are not vital to personal identity. But it is easy to start and end self-analysis within the territory of the safe or obvious—job title, age, country of origin, gender identity, and so forth. Focusing exclusively on these basic traits, however, sells us short. It diminishes individuality and quashes the nuance of experience. It overlooks intersectionality and our unique idiosyncrasies and limits our access to greater truths. So Mum pushed me to dig deeper. Over the next few days, she peppered me with questions. What is your most common state or mood? What happens when you experience the extremes of emotion? Under what circumstances do you feel peace, and how often does that occur? What agitates you? What inspires joy and lifts your spirits? What types of interactions do you avoid?

“It’s blind spots and self-sabotage that derail most people in pursuit of the extraordinary,” she would say. “Not the competition.”

It was an invaluable study. I had been charting my destination and all that I’d hoped to accomplish. But, in doing so, I had put the cart before the horse; I had not performed a proper inventory of these less-examined spaces. I had not taken stock of what parts of my character might be incompatible with such lofty dreams—the inconvenient truths, for example, that I was lazy, that I loved eating pie, and that I generally avoided physical exertion at any cost.

The fact that I loved pie was not necessarily news. But Mum forced me to confront my indulgences in a serious and methodical way, particularly as they related to the plans I had for myself. The average NBA player carries about 4–8 percent body fat; mine was... higher. What was I going to do about that? Had I considered the sacrifice that would be required to get into that range? Did I have enough inner resolve to overcome the indisputable strength of my appetite? How many pies a week would I have to leave uneaten?

The fact that I was lazy was a more surprising revelation, at least to me. Less so to Mum, I suppose, but I had never considered myself to be so. It is true that, aside from those few months playing basketball, I had never been particularly active. I was bookish, though! I loved nothing more than curling up with a science fiction novel and letting the hours pass by. And, to my mind, that love reflected nothing more than my superior intellect and passion for reading. But, upon closer scrutiny, I had to acknowledge that I loved the “curl up” part of “curl up with a book” every bit as much as the “book” part. I could be curled up and daydreaming and be perfectly content. Or curled up with the TV. Or a pie. Or the TV and a pie together.

This remains true today: I am inherently lazy. Left unchecked, my default state is to spend as little energy as possible, especially when it comes to physical exertion. I needed to understand that about myself early on because it was not in sync with my world-beating intentions. My mother challenged me to explore such detrimental qualities not to dissuade me from my dreams but to put me on guard. My appetite and my laziness were not going away and could not be ignored. So, in the service of my destiny, I would need to create enduring strategies to negate them.

I was fortunate that my mother forced me toward introspection because it is not traditionally encouraged in young people. Instead, we use standardized tests to tell them what they're good at. And, from their earliest days, we ask not what they value or who they are, but, rather, what they would like to be professionally. What do you want to *do* when you grow up? What do you want to *be* when you grow up? Perhaps we should ask *who* they want to be, not what.

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If you are not open to focused introspection and you do not practice it on a routine basis, you will not be a great leader—at least not by the standards of greatness that I would suggest truly matter. To be authentic, emotionally literate, intellectually curious, adaptable, and connected and engaged with those around you, introspection cannot be ignored. It is a whetstone that sharpens your inner voice, which must be trustworthy. For the rest of your professional life, that voice will be your primary source of feedback. Colleagues, direct reports, and managers will be sources as well. But the farther you advance, the more difficult it will become to acquire useful external feedback.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't seek insights from the people around you; you most definitely should. Share an experience with a colleague who generally comes from a different perspective—someone outside of your immediate peer group—and ask how she or he might have handled it. Find someone you can lean on as a “reverse mentor” of sorts—a less experienced team member or even a direct report who can provide feedback on specific areas of concern. Schedule periodic 15-minute check-ins, and be candid about what you need from them. Explain frankly, “My aspiration is to be an incredible leader. Where am I in that pursuit? I know that I have flaws. But where do they manifest, and how can I change that?”

That takes some chutzpah because you may be told stuff that won't always be pleasant. But your colleagues won't tell you everything. And they'll sometimes tell you things that aren't necessarily accurate, for better or worse. So the first promise you must make to yourself is imperative: *to view yourself critically, objectively, and compassionately*. This means an honest, ongoing pragmatic self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses. Without an accurate understanding of your flaws and fortes, the starting point of your journey forward will be unclear, immediately setting you off course.

Many of us have known people who are unable to see their flaws, even when they're painfully obvious, self-destructive, and toxic to others. Stubborn and/or delusional, these people treat every quality or near-skill as supreme and fully matured. Some of them may be well-intended, while others are blowhards convinced that they're the cat's pajamas. You simply can't tell them anything to the contrary. But they're actually a minority.

More common are the gratuitously self-flagellant, who are hyperbolic in their self-criticism and incapable of recognizing the magnitude of their strengths and accomplishments. Many of us struggle to appreciate the qualities that can't be easily quantified in the P&L or celebrated by awards for hitting concrete targets. We're dismissive of personal triumphs that seem irrelevant to the workplace but actually have salient applications. For example, if you're a woman who is entering the workplace later in life because you were a mature student raising a family while working through school, that alone should resonate as a remarkable and relevant achievement. If it doesn't—if you can't recognize and honor the tenacity and initiative you've demonstrated to get to that point—then that can be as limiting and damaging as being an overconfident blowhard.

Selling ourselves short is an unfortunate but predictable outcome of corporate culture. "Imposter syndrome"—the feeling that you are a fraud and undeserving of your place, that you're actually substandard, and that, at any second, people will "find out" and "expose" you—has been widely discussed. But it is often framed as an individual pathology, which it is not. It is not an affliction of the meek or an absence of assertiveness; rather, imposter syndrome is a natural response to systemic waves of pressure that are pervasive in most workplaces and, indeed, throughout society. Waves of pressure that strike some people as turbulence become the wind beneath the wings of others.

The style of leadership favored by an organization is set from the top. And “the top” has traditionally been inhabited by a homogenous brand of leader. They are mostly white and mostly straight, yes. But it is more than that. Regardless of demographics, traditional leaders are largely autocratic, dominant in their relationships, and fixed in their thinking. This style is not lost on people working within organizations, who will automatically feel some sense of imposter syndrome if they cannot relate to or match the examples at the top. *I will never look like that leader or be stylistically similar, they surmise, so I’m essentially a pretender to a throne I could never rightly assume.*

The damage inflicted by imposter syndrome is compounded because it filters out the people we need most in leadership positions—people who are truly conscientious and concerned about delivering for both their employer and employees—often at the most critical time in their careers. If those people are not adequately supported during early leadership opportunities, they will be more prone to fall victim to imposter syndrome.

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And, as they retreat from leadership, the void will be filled by peers who are less troubled by feeling like a fraud so long as they advance. Those peers are less likely to be inhibited by imposter syndrome because they are empowered to believe that being a boss is their natural destiny. They may not even be concerned with managing effectively or giving appraisals or connecting with their people. Because simply by reflecting the general characteristics of the leaders at the top, they have already checked the most important box. And from there, the system is designed to accommodate their ascension.

If you do *not* check that box, you will be more susceptible to imposter syndrome. If you are a woman or a racial minority or if you are LGBTQ+, it will be more difficult to relate to high-level leadership in most workplaces. But this can also be true for introverted straight, white males, who find themselves in the shadows of charismatic, larger-than-life leaders. *How could I thrive in this space, they naturally wonder. I am quiet and considered, and everybody who leads here is gregarious and seemingly comfortable speaking before thousands.*

How can you be confident in your ability to lead if you don't fit into one of the classical leadership archetypes? What if you're not a zany Richard Branson type? Or a terrifying and brilliant Steve Jobs type? Or, God forbid, a terrorizing and simple Donald Trump type? We know that, like the workplace, society at large takes cues from the dominant leadership style. A week into Donald Trump's presidency, and it was nearly impossible to imagine a time when someone with the characteristics of a Barack Obama could have ever held office. Even those who opposed Trump felt compelled to adopt his tone and his tactics.

Everyone, and especially those who've never felt it, bears a responsibility to limit the damage done by imposter syndrome. It creates leaders who are overly self-critical and unable to recognize the bits that make them good. They are constantly beating themselves up and obsessing over perceived shortcomings, and that makes them neurotic, which has the unfortunate effect of making the people around them neurotic. When the person who is supposed to be leading is saying they aren't any good or showing as much through their body language, it does little to inspire confidence.

Imposter syndrome impairs judgment. Its howls of self-doubt are unnerving, and they don't just scream that you're terrible at your job. They scream that you're a fraud. That it's bad enough that you're incapable, but you're also pretending to *be* capable. It turns people who might otherwise be fine contributors as leaders or otherwise into people who are floundering, timid, and fearful. They recoil from critical decisions and challenging conversations and any situation that might expose them, which is practically every situation in high-performance scenarios. Whether it's onboarding someone new, addressing underperformance, or assessing who gets a promotion, these moments inspire fear because they threaten to expose. Imposter syndrome encourages withdrawal from those moments or avoidance altogether.

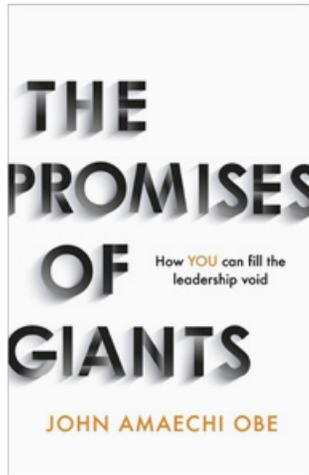
Essentially, imposter syndrome is a nasty voice in your head that sends distorted feedback. And if you lack an acute understanding of yourself, you will not know what to make of it. If you don't know yourself and appreciate the breadth of your skill and experience, that "evidence" will be damning. It will leave you trembling when instead it should roll off your back. *I can't possibly rise to this occasion*, you'll think, even though your own history clearly indicates otherwise. If you can access that history and identify your successes and your proven proficiencies, it becomes easier to refute that voice of doubt.

The force of the tide alone won't get you there. You must promise to maintain an accurate and up-to-date understanding of yourself; you must promise to be objective, detailed, eloquent, and accurate in your praise and criticism. The journey of self-analysis that began with Mum continued beyond her death, which unbeknown to us at the time was only a few years away. It continued beyond my goals of reaching the NBA and becoming a psychologist and starting my own firm, and it will continue until my final breaths. And for this I am grateful because it is joyful work!

While demanding, introspection should not feel like a burden or repetitious drudgery. It is like rereading a familiar book and discovering a new insight or turn of phrase on a page you thought you knew down to the word. **Finding your soul in the dark is not a discrete exercise. It is the essential pursuit of a lifetime, and it begins now so get started!** 📖



Info



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