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Castle Walls and Drawbridges

We have become a society of individuals wanting to connect to each other through suits of armor. I received an email from a friend who I had not heard from in over a year. His message was simple and deliberately short. "Hi Carol. I've quit my job at Acme and am working at XYZ Corporation. What's new with you?"

Okay, so there's no life story here. Only enough to pique my curiosity. Why did he quit? What drew him to XYZ? What else has he been doing since we last exchanged email? I sent back a reply that was enough to say I was alive and well and to start a real conversation.

Thirty seconds later, I received an email from my friend's Internet service provider. My message would be put in the "suspicious" folder until my friend had okayed my email address as someone he wanted to get email from. In other words, guilty until proven innocent. Of sending spam, that is.

It struck me as ironic that my friend, clearly wanting to connect with me, would have these barriers to me communicating back. We have become bombarded with telemarketers and spam to the point that our natural instinct is to become anonymous, unknown and unlisted. Secure the castle by raising the drawbridge, lest a foe in disguise try to enter our private kingdom.

I suppose that celebrities and high-profile individuals, like, say J. Lo, need to have armor to protect themselves from the hoards of people who would like to be close to someone famous. But the average Joe?

I was emailing a group of coaches who had expressed interest in a forum called The Coaching Salon, a way to publicly demonstrate the value of coaching. I invited coaches to be part of a community to share their learning in using the forum by being on my email distribution list and for the time being, doing a "reply to all" to communicate. One of the coaches sent me email, upset that her email address could be seen by others. When I asked her about her concern, she indicated that this was the road to email addresses getting into the wrong hands. How do we stay connected if we're not willing to be visible to others? Sure, I get my share of spam as well. But I consider it a small price to pay to be out in the world.

Now here's the irony in it all. Despite all of our attempts to hide behind the castle walls, complete strangers know more about each of us than ever before,

sometimes more than we know about ourselves. I know of a woman who received an email from a stranger with a four-digit decimal number. It had no meaning to her until the stranger told her that it was her goal tending average during her collegiate sports career. This same woman relayed how it's par for the course to be "googled" before a blind date. She once caught someone in a lie, saying they had grown up in Southern California when in fact, she found out that he grew up in Bulgaria (only a difference of several thousands of miles, another continent, and starkly different economic and political systems, but hey, what's a small bending of the truth when it comes to a blind date?)

I suppose some would say I'm naïve, that in this day and age, one needs to worry about stalkers and lunatics. Okay, fine. I acknowledge that there are people out there who use personal information for harm. But would I decide never to get into a car because people die in car accidents? I still want to go to the grocery store. I still want to take a driving vacation. I still want to get to the hiking trails.

What to make of all this?

- **Think about how you want to be known as opposed to if you want to be known.** The days of being known only by those who live in your neighborhood or social acquaintances in your network are over. Get used to it.
- **Decide what you are willing to risk to be connected to others.** If I don't want to be hurt, inconvenienced, surprised, frustrated, or sad, I could choose to live reclusively, never venturing out to interact with others, ordering everything on-line and living by the FedEx drop off schedule. But if I want to be in the world, I will experience all those emotions, and more. It's your choice whether or not to let down the drawbridge but realize that there is a price to pay for living behind castle walls.

Being human is about living with our own humanity. And to do that, it takes vulnerability. Whether we are trying to keep out spam or keep out strangers knowing some factoid about us, it doesn't matter. The barrier that we put up keeps everything out, including what we most treasure—connection with others and being part of something larger. We have kidded ourselves that we can have our cake and eat it, too. We'd all be a bit wiser to learn to live without barriers.

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