

The Society That Forgot How to Feel out of Fear - When Performance Becomes a Substitute for Presence

By Pedro Lima

There is a particular kind of spiritual impoverishment that cannot be measured by how much money a society possesses, how many buildings it constructs, how advanced its technologies become, or how impressive its institutions appear.

It is revealed by how desperately human beings must perform the appearance of being alive while becoming increasingly disconnected from the experience of actually being human.

In a numb, victimized, mediocre collective by choice, people become so preoccupied with acting, pretending, lying, deceiving, manipulating, exploiting, conniving to benefit and profit, controlling, dominating, pleasing, appeasing, performing, competing, consuming, and exhausting themselves that they gradually lose contact with the very inner world they are desperately trying to have others recognize.

They become performers of identities they no longer inhabit.

They smile when they are empty inside.

They say they are successful when they are terrified.

They say they are happy when they are disconnected.

They demand respect while abandoning their own integrity.

They demand recognition because silence feels like insignificance.

They accumulate possessions because inner emptiness cannot be purchased away.

They glorify the collection of titles and certificates because they have forgotten who they are without one.

They seek applause because they have never learned how to hear their own inner voice.

They call this success.

One of the strangest forms of self-impoverishment is to possess everything necessary to construct an impressive materialistic life while having almost nothing left inside with which to actually experience it.

A fragile sense of self requires an audience.

Without witnesses, the constructed identity begins to tremble.

Without applause, the performance feels meaningless.

Without recognition, the title feels hollow.

Without comparison, superiority loses its reference point.

Without someone beneath them, the person addicted to hierarchy can no longer convince themselves that they are above.

Without someone to control, dominate, impress, rescue, exploit, manipulate, or please, the carefully curated identity is suddenly confronted with something it has spent years avoiding: Itself.

This is where the transactional narcissistic fear-conditioned architecture begins.

Human relationships become merely harvesting exchanges of psychological parasitic currency.

“I will validate you if you validate me.”

“I will respect your status if you recognize mine.”

“I will perform belonging if you give me acceptance.”

“I will tolerate your dysfunction if you protect my position.”

“I will flatter you if you increase my access.”

“I will remain useful if usefulness guarantees that I will not be forgotten.”

“I will give you what you want if you give me what I need.”

Slowly, genuine connection dilutes.

Connection becomes negotiation.

Friendship becomes networking.

Generosity becomes leverage.

Affection becomes currency.

Loyalty becomes dependency.

Recognition becomes payment.

Sexuality becomes validation.

Career becomes identity.

Possessions become personality.

Status becomes self-esteem.

Human beings begin relating to one another less as souls and more as manageable and disposable resources, audiences, opportunities, threats, villains, victims, competitors, consumers, suppliers, followers, clients, employees, investors, contacts, or stepping stones.

This is not merely materialism.

It is the commodification of the human consciousness relationship itself.

A deeply hierarchical, narcissistic, paranoid culture does not merely organize and manage people.

It can teach them to psychologically organize themselves according to rank.

Who is above me?

Who is below me?

Who can approve me?

Who can reject me?

Who can promote me?

Who can exclude me?

Who can make me feel important?

Who can make me feel insignificant?

Who possesses what I want?

Who has more money?

Who has more followers?

Who has more influence?

Who has the better title?

Who has the better body?

Who has the better house?

Who has the better lifestyle?

Who appears more successful?

Beneath all of these questions lives one much more vulnerable question:

“Am I enough?”

But instead of addressing that question honestly, the fragile ego avoids it, constructing an elaborate, victimized, hive-minded civilization around avoiding it.

More money.

More status.

More possessions.

More credentials.

More followers.

More recognition.

More control.

More achievement.

More admiration.

More dominance.

More proof.

More performance.

More evidence that I matter, yet the hunger remains, because no external accumulation can permanently resolve an internal relationship that has never been reconciled.

A parasitic dysfunctional relationship does not necessarily announce itself as exploitation.

Sometimes it arrives beautifully dressed, curated, decorated with hollow words, intentions, and actions.

It can arrive as opportunity.

As mentorship.

As partnership.

As loyalty.

As networking.

As friendship.

As romance.

As employment.

As leadership.

As belonging.

As “family.”

As “community.”

As “professionalism.”

As “success.”

As “we are all in this together.”

The language can be generous while the underlying exchange remains exploitative, parasitic, engineered to domesticate human consciousness.

One person continually gives.

Another continually receives.

One person continually adapts.

Another continually demands.

One person continually proves their value.

Another continually moves the threshold of acceptance.

One person becomes exhausted trying to preserve the relationship.

Another becomes comfortable consuming what the relationship provides.

Gradually, the relationship no longer asks:

“How can we mutually nourish one another authentically?”

It asks:

“How much more can I extract before you finally stop giving?”

That is where transactional human consciousness becomes parasitic.

The human being becomes a resource.

Their attention becomes currency.

Their labor becomes inventory.

Their creativity becomes an asset.

Their emotional availability becomes a service.

Their forgiveness becomes permission.

Their loyalty becomes access.

Their insecurity becomes leverage.

Their desperation becomes a source to enforce authority.

Their labor, emotional, physical, and psychological exhaustion becomes someone else's convenience.

Perhaps the collective's deepest addiction is not money.

It is appearance.

Appearance of success.

Appearance of confidence.

Appearance of morality.

Appearance of intelligence.

Appearance of happiness.

Appearance of belonging.

Appearance of superiority.

Appearance of certainty.

Appearance of importance.

Appearance of control.

A fragile identity must constantly be maintained because it cannot simply exist.

It requires curation.

Editing.

Protection.

Narrative management.

Strategic disclosure.

Image management.

Selective truth.

Sometimes outright deception.

The more energy invested into maintaining the appearance, the less energy remains for discovering what actually exists underneath it.

Through repetition, the inauthentic performative mask becomes so familiar that the person forgets they are wearing one.

They don't merely perform the identity.

They become psychologically dependent upon the performance.

There is also a particularly sophisticated form of disguise:

Charisma without genuine authentic sovereign substance.

Confidence without self-awareness.

Arrogance disguised as leadership.

Pride disguised as dignity.

Entitlement disguised as deservingness.

Ignorance disguised as certainty.

Control disguised as protection.

Manipulation disguised as intelligence.

Domination disguised as strength.

People-pleasing disguised as kindness.

Subservience disguised as professionalism.

Emotional avoidance disguised as composure.

Indifference disguised as independence.

Insecurity disguised as moral, hierarchical, and spiritual superiority.

The louder the hollow performance becomes, the harder it can be to notice how fragile the structure underneath actually is.

A truly grounded human being does not require constant theatrical evidence of their importance.

They can exist without an audience.

They can admit ignorance.

They can apologize.

They can change their mind.

They can listen.

They can say no.

They can tolerate being misunderstood.

They can walk away from applause.

They can lose status without losing themselves.

Because their identity is not rented from the collective.

Another invisible transaction exists beneath many relationships:

The need to be needed.

People exhaust themselves trying to become indispensable because being needed temporarily protects them from the terror of feeling irrelevant and insignificant in others' eyes.

They overgive.

They rescue.

They try to save.

They overperform.

They anticipate everyone's expectations.

They suppress their own needs.

They become endlessly useful.

Then secretly resent the very people they have trained to depend upon them.

This is another form of unconscious societal transaction dynamics.

"I will abandon myself so you will not abandon me."

But self-abandonment does not create authentic belonging.

It creates dependency.

And dependency can eventually become resentment.

Resentment can become control.

Control can become manipulation.

Manipulation can become emotional punishment.

And the original wound remains untouched.

“Please don’t forget me.”

A spiritually impoverished society does not necessarily look poor.

It can be technologically sophisticated.

Financially wealthy.

Architecturally magnificent.

Digitally connected.

Hyper-productive.

Highly educated.

Constantly entertained, yet profoundly inner-disconnected, because spiritual poverty is not the absence of material possessions. It is the absence of inner relationship.

The inability to sit quietly with oneself.

The inability to experience uncertainty without immediately seeking distraction.

The inability to feel grief without turning it into blame.

The inability to experience insecurity without projecting it onto another.

The inability to experience insignificance without constructing superiority.

The inability to experience emptiness without consuming.

The inability to experience loneliness without collecting people.

The inability to experience fear without controlling something.

The inability to experience vulnerability without constructing a mask.

Perhaps most importantly:

The inability to exist without performing for approval and belonging.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE AUDIENCE DISAPPEARS?

Imagine removing the audience.

Remove the followers.

Remove the title.

Remove the wealth.

Remove the possessions.

Remove the institutional affiliation.

Remove the professional identity.

Remove the social approval.

Remove the curated image.

Remove the applause.

Remove the hierarchy.

Remove the people you manipulate.

Remove the people who validate you.

Remove the people you perform for.

Remove the people you attempt to impress.

Remove the people you attempt to dominate.

Remove the people you attempt to please.

Remove the entire stage.

Then sit quietly with yourself.

Who remains?

That question can feel terrifying to a consciousness that has spent its life constructing identity through external reflection, but it can also become the beginning of liberation.

Because perhaps the person beneath the performance was never missing.

They were simply neglected beneath everything they believed they needed to become in order to be accepted.

Authentic relationship begins where psychological bargaining ends.

Not:

“What can you do for me?”

But:

“What can we genuinely create together?”

Not:

“How useful are you to me?”

But:

“Can we meet one another as whole human beings?”

Not:

“What status do you carry?”

But:

“Who are you when nobody is watching?”

Not:

“What can I extract?”

But:

“What can I contribute without abandoning myself?”

Not:

“How can I control this relationship?”

But:

“Can this relationship exist without control?”

Not:

“How can I make you need me?”

But:

“Can we remain connected without dependency?”

This is where reciprocity begins.

This is where dignity returns.

This is where contribution becomes sacred rather than extractive.

This is where relationship becomes relationship again.

Perhaps the most destabilizing question is not:

“What is wrong with society?”

It is:

“Where am I still participating in the hive-minded egoic consciousness I claim to oppose?”

Where do I perform?

Where do I seek applause?

Where do I exaggerate?

Where do I manipulate?

Where do I please to be accepted?

Where do I dominate to feel significant?

Where do I use people?

Where do I allow myself to be used?

Where do I confuse being needed with being loved?

Where do I confuse status with worth?

Where do I confuse possession with abundance?

Where do I confuse control with safety?

Where do I confuse attention with intimacy?

Where do I confuse dependency with belonging?

Where do I still outsource my identity to the collective?

Perhaps the most uncomfortable question of all:

What would I have to feel if I stopped performing who I believe I need to be?

Because self-liberation is not merely refusing the hierarchy.

It is refusing to reproduce its psychology within ourselves.

It is refusing to turn our relationships into marketplaces of validation.

It is refusing to make another human being responsible for repairing the emptiness we have refused to meet.

It is refusing to make our pain an excuse for exploitation.

It is refusing to use our wounds as permission to wound others.

It is refusing to make our insecurity someone else's burden.

It is refusing to become the very architecture that once diminished us.

There may come a moment when the exhaustion of maintaining the identity becomes greater than the fear of losing it, then something begins to soften.

The performance becomes unnecessary.

The mask becomes heavy.

The hierarchy becomes hollow.

The applause becomes strangely quiet.

The possessions lose their ability to speak for you.

The title becomes merely a title.

The status becomes merely a position.

The institution becomes merely an institution.

The audience disappears.

And instead of finding nothing, you find yourself.

Not the curated self.

Not the socially approved self.

Not the commercially useful self.

Not the obedient self.

Not the impressive self.

Not the superior self.

Not the wounded self.

Not the performing self.

The human being.

Breathing.

Feeling.

Questioning.

Remembering.

Present.

Whole.

No longer willing to trade their soul, authenticity, sovereignty, authority, and inner truth for admission into a dysfunctional, ego-based, narcissistic, parasitic society that requires them to abandon and betray themselves in order to belong.

This is the beginning of a different kind of prosperity.

Not merely having more.

But needing less external proof that you are enough.

Not merely accumulating wealth.

But possessing an inner life that wealth cannot purchase.

Not merely being recognized.

But recognizing yourself.

Not merely being accepted.

But refusing relationships that require self-abandonment as the price of belonging.

Not merely becoming powerful.

But becoming incapable of needing another human being to feel powerful.

This is what a spiritually impoverished society fears most:

A sovereign, authentic, and independent human being who no longer needs to perform their worth, because such a human being cannot easily be manipulated by the fake appearances, the hollow, inauthentic applause.

Cannot easily be purchased by status.

Cannot easily be controlled through rejection.

Cannot easily be governed through fear of irrelevance.

Cannot easily be exploited through desperation.

Cannot easily be seduced by hollow appearances.

They can participate.

They can contribute.

They can prosper.

They can love.

They can create.

They can exchange.

They can belong, but they no longer have to betray themselves to do it.

That is where the transaction ends.

Not because the human being leaves the material world, but because the material world finally loses its authority to define the human being within it.

The deepest act of inner revolution unfolds the moment a human being stops performing for the collective and becomes present enough to finally meet themselves with integrity, honor, dignity, compassion, honesty, humility, accountable for their own inner world state.