

To Thine Own Self Be True

All people have always been, in a sense, actors. As William Shakespeare said, "All the world's a stage... all the men and women merely players." And - I'd like to add - most of the time, the audience determines which roles we play. We youth in particular are receptive to the voices of the audience. While we face different audiences, in this age of the internet, the main stage is social media.

As a child, I didn't care too much about this theatre we call life. The stage - the small corner of the world I was exposed to - was fascinating. I was presented bright-colored toys, surrounded by poster-plastered walls, and read stories from second-hand books. Yet even at this age, I knew there was some link between my actions and my parents' reactions. I quickly learned that crying because I couldn't have things I wanted was pointless, and often gained me nothing but puffy eyes and a dry throat. It was better to obey when they told me it was time to go home, even though I so desperately wanted to climb the monkey bars another time. I watched other children at the mall, seeing them wail and throw tantrums while other adults looked on disapprovingly. *I don't want to be like them*, I remember thinking. I began watching the world, mentally cringing as others embarrassed themselves, doing my best to do the opposite of what these people did.

I was mostly home schooled until the age of five. My first day in an actual classroom was a shock; for the first time I fully understood - this was an audience. The other kids were aware of me. More importantly, they formed opinions about me, especially when I revealed my sheer ignorance of video games, movies, cartoons, and celebrities. Being raised with neither cable TV nor a single gaming console, I was a foreigner to topics like Pokemon and Spongebob. In

conversations about Disney films or Pinoy Big Brother, I'd innocently ask what they were talking about, and someone would blurt out, "*Hindi mo 'yan alam?* What sort of childhood did you have?" The incredulity in their voices hurt. I grew up among books, among watercolor paintings and paper mache projects, learning that too much television and video games produced people who sat in front of glowing screens, slack-jawed and staring with empty eyes.

While I wasn't outright teased, I could sense the reactions of others to my ignorance-eyebrows drawing together, eyes narrowing, mouths turning down at the corners in disgust or up in amusement. I wasn't bullied, but I had so far been brought up with little negative reactions, - no screaming, no angry words, no parents pinching me for misbehavior. Imagine someone who has never felt pain being stabbed with a needle. In the face. That vaguely represented how I felt.

I learned to hide facts about myself and certain mannerisms that would make others react like this - as we all do. I learned that one had to step carefully, memorizing the steps in this elaborate dance we call socializing. I played the part of a Grade-School Student in a small private school, slowly shaping who I was based on those around me.

In high school, the social audience was far bigger. There were literally fifteen of us in our batch in my elementary school: here, there were enough students in a grade level to divide into four sections! After getting over my initial shock, I learned the role of High School Student, still doing the same thing, still stitching together the costume of based on how I wanted others to treat me. Everyone does this, I suppose. We all walk a constantly-shifting stage, changing the parts we play as we're faced with different audiences. At this time, in that tenuous stage between childhood and adulthood, our true self-identity is still volatile and prone to change. We youth are easily swayed by the voices of those around us.

Enter social media, and we hear the screams of the entire world. Indeed, the world's a stage, but oh, how our audience has grown. Initially social media seemed stupid to me. I've always been a private person, reluctant to bare my soul for all the world to see. Entire sites dedicated to sharing one's personal information, thoughts, and interests to the world seemed like pure insanity. A status update was the online equivalent of screaming "I DID SOME ACTION HOLDING SIGNIFICANCE ONLY TO ME" into a crowd of people, and people screaming "LIKE" back. Social media wasn't just another stage, though- it was an arena.

Here, reactions from people aren't amorphous anymore. Reputation becomes a quantifiable thing, measured in likes, comments, favorites, reblogs, and notes. Even if we only seek to express ourselves through social media, we cannot help but want these things. I've seen many post *hugot* lines and terrible jokes with a nearly palpable desperation for acknowledgement, yet whom are ignored. I've seen people address an invisible audience with phrases like "Hey guys!", yet to whom no one replies. As I do in the stage of real life, I cringe, feel sorry, and resolve to not be like them. In real life alone, we are sensitive to people's opinions to us - how much more online? Seeing pitiful attempts at expressing oneself like this make us reluctant to speak or even attempt communication with the world. We laugh at screenshots of cringe-worthy online posts, but at the same time fear that someone may be doing the same to one of ours in the future. Frustration at being ignored soon turns personal. *Am I boring? Am I acting too smart? What am I doing wrong?*

I and my friends in high school had a facebook group once. I was thrilled to have a *barkada* at that time, pleased that I was surviving high school nicely. Being a Christian, I often wrote long essays about life lessons based off Bible verses, posting them in the group. Rarely did I receive

likes or comments, and I couldn't help comparing how the other group posts had far better reception. I felt like I was the odd one out, the weird girl who wrote about religion and philosophy when everyone else was talking about nighiga, PewDiePie, and sharing posts from 9gag. It's unavoidable to yearn for good feedback when posting something in social media. Everything starts to go downhill when comparison enters the story, though.

The beauty of social media is that it allows people to connect from all corners of the world, meeting, communicating, and sharing information with unparalleled speed. We become aware of people we idolize - artists and celebrities, authors and composers, bloggers and vloggers - people whom we yearn to be. Then, we begin comparing ourselves to them. "There goes my self esteem" commented my friend on a video of a model's photoshoot. Someone posts a well-done guitar cover of a popular song, and it's flooded with comments of: "I'll never be able to do this!", "I'm giving up on music - this is too pro." and more. I found myself wondering: is the only way to compliment others through self-deprecation?

First impressions also play a significant and often destructive role in how we netizens interact with each other. Most simply jump on with trends, blindly following the masses. Once, a picture was posted on Facebook of an old man holding a sign claiming that his four OFW children employed in well-paying jobs had abandoned him, leaving him no money despite him working to pay for their education in Saudi Arabia. The online world leapt to defend him, trash-talking his children and sending them death threats. Little did they know - as the children explained in a later post - that the old man was a lazy father with many mistresses, that he had never helped them get their education, and this was a ploy to siphon money from his kids. Due to the impulsiveness of others, the man's four daughters were humiliated on the world wide web.

We are exposed to a world that thinks in a million different directions, ideas converging and diverging from the views we've always held as true. Ideas we previously hold are challenged, the definitions of things such as gender, sexuality, and identity broadened or even altered completely. Sometimes we are swept away, defending other people or beliefs we barely know anything about. We slap on labels that define ourselves without fully understanding what they mean. We condemn ideas without knowing what they truly stand for. Social media makes it easier to speak first, react second, and listen last.

Though I don't have an account on Twitter, I've heard epic tales of bloody word wars waged between my schoolmates there. While the pen is mightier than the sword, I doubt whoever wrote that meant the "pen" to be hate-filled snippets of text 140 characters long. We may be so caught up in the moment, equipped with the tools for reacting to others almost-instantaneously, that we don't stop to think about what we're doing, at how we're tearing down others' self-esteem.

Are we who the online world perceives us to be and our worth measured by others' envy? I can't speak for all youth, and speak for none but myself. I can say this, though: your worth is not measured by the number of likes on your posts. The full complexity of *you* cannot be defined by a handful of hashtags, and nor can you hold your soul within 160 characters. The world is closer than ever, and we may be overwhelmed by all the voices that tell us who we should and shouldn't be. In the end, though, it is our choice whom we listen to, and in turn, what we say. Learning to live in harmony with society is one thing, but forcing ourselves and others into unwanted roles is another. If you are to perform on the stage of social media, dance like no one's watching, sing like no one's listening, and simply be. To thine own self be true.