

This material has been excerpted from

***The Empress Has No Clothes  
Conquering Self-Doubt to Embrace Success***

by Joyce M. Roché with Alexander Kopelman

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Copyright © 2013, All Rights Reserved.

For more information, or to purchase the book,  
please visit our website

[www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)



Joyce M. Roché  
with Alexander Kopelman



# The Empress Has No Clothes

Conquering  
Self-Doubt  
to Embrace  
Success

**The  
Empress  
Has No  
Clothes**

*This page intentionally left blank*

**Joyce M. Roché**  
with Alexander Kopelman

# The Empress Has No Clothes

Conquering  
Self-Doubt  
to Embrace  
Success



**BK**

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.  
San Francisco

a BK Business book

# The Empress Has No Clothes

Copyright © 2013 by Joyce M. Roché and Alexander Kopelman

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the address below.



**BK**

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

235 Montgomery Street, Suite 650

San Francisco, California 94104-2916

Tel: (415) 288-0260, Fax: (415) 362-2512

[www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)

## Ordering information for print editions

*Quantity sales.* Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the "Special Sales Department" at the Berrett-Koehler address above.

*Individual sales.* Berrett-Koehler publications are available through most bookstores. They can also be ordered directly from Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626; [www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)

*Orders for college textbook/course adoption use.* Please contact Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626.

*Orders by U.S. trade bookstores and wholesalers.* Please contact Ingram Publisher Services, Tel: (800) 509-4887; Fax: (800) 838-1149; E-mail: [customer.service@ingrampublisherservices.com](mailto:customer.service@ingrampublisherservices.com); or visit [www.ingrampublisherservices.com/Ordering](http://www.ingrampublisherservices.com/Ordering) for details about electronic ordering.

Berrett-Koehler and the BK logo are registered trademarks of Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

First Edition

Paperback print edition ISBN 978-1-60994-636-4

PDF e-book ISBN 978-1-60994-637-1

IDPF e-book ISBN 978-1-60994-638-8

2013-1

Cover design: Irene Morris. Cover art credits: Desk and office © Dmitry Kutlayev/123RF; woman behind desk © Eric O'Connell/Photolibary/Getty Images. Book producer and designer: Detta Penna. Copyeditor: Kirsten Kite. Proofreader: Katherine Lee.



I dedicate this book to the incredible women who are  
or have been a part of my life, beginning with  
my mother and my Aunt Rose  
and including  
my biological sisters  
and the dear friends who are as close as sisters.

You have given me the strength to go beyond  
what was expected, supported me in whatever path  
I have taken, laughed and cried with me,  
and have always been my biggest cheerleaders.  
I am what I am today because of you.

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Contents



Foreword by Edward E. Whitacre, Jr.	ix
Preface	xiii
Are You an Impostor? (Take the Test)	xvi
Chapter 1 Breaking the Silence	1
Chapter 2 It's Not What You Wear	15
Chapter 3 What If You Have No Silver Spoon?	31
Chapter 4 Gender Matters	47
Chapter 5 What Color <i>Is</i> Your Parachute?	65
Chapter 6 But You Are So Young	79
Chapter 7 Climbing the Ladder	93
Chapter 8 What If the Naysayers Are Right?	109
Chapter 9 The Weight of the World	125
Chapter 10 What Did You Do to Get Here?	141
Chapter 11 Listen to Your Heart	157
Chapter 12 Joy, Zest, and Power	173
<i>Afterword:</i> Strategies for Confronting the Impostor Syndrome and Embracing Success	187
Acknowledgments	195
Index	197
About the Authors	203

*This page intentionally left blank*

## Foreword

I wasn't surprised when I heard that Joyce was writing a book with the idea of helping younger people deal with this thing called the impostor syndrome. I've known Joyce for many years and have always admired her for her compassion, courage, and generosity. I have also been personally inspired by her life's story, so I was touched and honored when she asked me to write the foreword to this book.

I've had a pretty successful life and career by most measures, but there is still many a day when I get out of bed in the morning and feel like I am just not sure I am up to the task. There's this nagging doubt in the back of your mind that says, "Maybe I don't know this as well as somebody else. Maybe I'm just a fake."

I think that most people feel this way at one time or another. It's just that nobody talks about it. That's why I was so pleased when Joyce first started speaking publicly about these feelings she's had, and why I think this book is so important. In my time as CEO of a couple of large corporations, what I've become absolutely convinced of is that every business is a people business. And no business can really flourish if your people aren't comfortable in their own skins.

You are not going to know everything as well as the next person. And in any new job, you're probably going to feel like you are drinking from a fire hose for a while. But if you relate to people, if you help create an environment where they are important and accountable, they are going to give you all of the education you need and odds of success increase greatly.

When I look at my life, I know that was what allowed me to do the things I've done. And if I can do it, anybody can do it. I grew up in Ennis, Texas, a town of five thousand at the time, south of Dallas. My dad was a blue-collar union guy. He drove the trains for Southern Pacific railroad. My mom was a housewife. Dad didn't finish high school and Mom dropped out of college after one semester. I was a pretty average student and had no idea what I wanted to do, but Mom made sure I stayed in school and went to college.

I went off to Texas Tech, which was a state school, for the best of reasons: I had two or three friends who went there and tuition was seventy-five bucks. I got an engineering degree because I had heard most of my life that engineers get good jobs and I was pretty good in math.

From college, I went right to Southwestern Bell Telephone Company as an outside plant manager. Talk about feeling like an impostor. I was all of twenty-two years old and had this crew of veterans working for me, about eight or ten of them. That was when I learned the most important lesson of my career. Not only did I think I didn't know anything, but I was shy to boot. All I wanted to do was to hide out in my office and try to bone up on the things I didn't understand.

Well, the guy who was the manager for my department (he was my boss's boss) must have noticed. He came down one day and said, "C'mon, I want to look in on your crew." We drove out to where they were working. We got out of the car and were just starting to look around. I got to talking with the men, turned around, and my boss was gone. The message was pretty clear, but the next day he made sure I got it. "You have to be out with your people," he told me, "instead of sitting in

the office.” I never forgot that lesson and have throughout my career made it my highest priority to get to know the people I work with.

And what I discovered was that it helped me deal with my own self-doubts, especially as I advanced and eventually became a CEO; I wanted a company that was sort of a family. It was just my personality, but it also worked okay for me from a business perspective. At AT&T, it helped me build a company, and at General Motors, it helped me rebuild one.

When I went over to GM, on day one I went down to the company cafeteria, sat at a table right in the middle, and ate lunch. For two or three days, I ate alone in this place with maybe a thousand or two thousand people around me. They just didn’t know what to make of my being there. By the fourth day that changed and I started to get what I needed to know to get the work done. We’d have lunch and I’d say to people, “How are things going? Tell me about what you are doing.” You learn a whole lot more that way than looking at a bunch of slides and numbers all day. And then people start to believe they are a vital part of the business—and they are.

You know, I am an engineer, so over the years as I dealt with challenges, I often would write down my good points and my bad points on a sheet of paper. The bad points far exceeded the good ones for a long time. But no matter what, I always had confidence in my ability to get along with other people. And I guess after a time, I learned to get along with myself as well. It’s not that I didn’t feel uncertain of myself or even like an impostor in new situations; it just took less time to find my balance and to give myself credit.

I never had one great mentor, but I learned from different

mentors and emulating people I admired. Eventually, you take all of that, put it in a washing machine, and you come out. You become your own personality.

Learning how to get along with yourself and others to accomplish the objective, I think, is what success is really all about. And it is something you can learn how to do. This great book is going to help a whole lot of people learn to feel successful.

Edward E. Whitacre, Jr.

*Former Chairman & CEO, General Motors Co.*

*and retired Chairman & CEO, AT&T, Inc.*

April, 2013

## Preface

Right around the time I first began thinking about writing this book, I heard Cory Booker, the dynamic young mayor of Newark, New Jersey, speak about his vision of what young people need to succeed. I found the speech moving, especially when in summing up, Mayor Booker said: “You’ve got to learn to metabolize your blessings.” It seemed as if he was at once describing my own journey to embracing success and pointing the way for all of us who have faced the kind of self-doubt that has made us feel like impostors.

The inability to recognize and celebrate our own strengths and accomplishments is at the very heart of what is known as the impostor syndrome—that feeling of being a fraud and not deserving of our success. We look at the objective evidence of our success, and all we can see is a false facade that will inevitably come crashing down, unless we work tirelessly to maintain it.

“There were times I remember,” says Dr. Ella Edmondson Bell, Associate Professor of Business Administration at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, “I felt like I was a con artist. I felt I was being something I’m not.”

Too many of us fritter away too much time, talent, and emotional energy on hiding who we really are because we are afraid we will not be accepted or acceptable. One of the most devastating aspects of the impostor syndrome is that by its very nature it isolates us from other people and forces us to keep our innermost feelings secret.

I lived with the secret feeling of not fitting in and the fear of being discovered as not being up to the task for much of my professional life. I know full well how heavy a burden that secret

is, and I know what a wonderful relief it is to open up and to begin to question the voice that keeps repeating “you are not good enough” and “you don’t belong here.”

This book is an invitation to everyone who suffers from impostor feelings to realize that you are not alone and to begin working toward embracing your success. The purpose is not necessarily to answer the question of why you feel this way but to focus on the fact that you do not need to allow the feelings to define your life. As I learned through my own journey, the essential work of managing and ultimately conquering the impostor syndrome lies in learning how to metabolize external validation to turn it into the core strength of internal validation.

The root causes of the impostor syndrome are complex and manifold. And so are the situations that trigger them. (Your answers to the questions about impostor feelings at the beginning of the book may give you a glimpse of your own experience.) In the coming chapters, I will share stories of key milestones in my life when the fears of being discovered as a fake were particularly strong. Each chapter will focus on specific panic points, the times when my heart started to race and I was gripped with fear. Situations that I know will speak to some of your own experiences.

In each chapter, you will also hear the voices and stories of a group of some of the most amazing and successful people I know (both men and women), all of whom have dealt with the impostor syndrome, even though you never would have known it as an observer.

Throughout the book, I suggest strategies from my own experiences and those of others that you can use to begin to wrestle with your own sense of being an impostor. You cannot

silence panic; you can only calm it. The best way to do that is to open up, at least to yourself, and to take an honest assessment of how you got to the place where you are and ask yourself whether you deserve to be there—in other words, to exercise the muscles of internal validation. The more you learn how to own your success, the more you will thrive on it.

If there is nothing else you take away from the book, I want you to know that comfort does come with time. My wish for you is that this book will help you achieve it quickly.

## Do You Feel Like an Impostor?

If you are like most people, this might be the first time you are hearing the term *impostor syndrome*. We all feel uncertain of ourselves to some degree or another at times. The impostor syndrome, however, is a much more complex phenomenon than simple insecurity. The sample test (excerpted from the comprehensive test developed by Dr. Pauline R. Clance, the psychologist who has pioneered research and treatment of the impostor syndrome) will help you glimpse the feelings triggered by the impostor syndrome and see whether you have experienced them. Please keep in mind that this is not in any way a diagnostic test. The full test is available on Dr. Clance's web site [paulineroseclance.com](http://paulineroseclance.com).

### Sample Impostor Phenomenon (IP) Test

There are individuals who consistently demonstrate a high level of success, but who fail to incorporate their competency into their identity. In spite of very real achievements, these persons experience an inordinate fear of failure.

For each question, please circle the number that best indicates how true the statement is of you. It is best to give the first response that enters your mind rather than dwelling on each statement and thinking about it over and over.

From *The Impostor Phenomenon: When Success Makes You Feel Like A Fake* (pp. 20–22), by P. R. Clance, 1985, Toronto: Bantam Books. Copyright 1985 by Pauline Rose Clance. Reprinted by permission. Do not reproduce without permission from Pauline Rose Clance, [drpaulinerose@comcast.net](mailto:drpaulinerose@comcast.net).

1. When people praise me for something I've accomplished, I'm afraid I won't be able to live up to their expectations of me in the future.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

2. At times, I feel my success has been due to some kind of luck.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

3. Sometimes I'm afraid others will discover how much knowledge or ability I really lack.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

4. When I've succeeded at something and received recognition for my accomplishments, I have doubts that I can keep repeating that success.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

5. I often compare my ability to those around me and think they may be more intelligent than I am.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

6. If I am going to receive a promotion or recognition of some kind, I hesitate to inform others until it is an accomplished fact.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

## Scoring the Impostor Phenomenon Test

The Impostor Phenomenon Test was developed by Dr. Pauline Rose Clance to help individuals determine whether or not they have IP characteristics and, if so, to what extent they are suffering.

After taking the Impostor Phenomenon Test, add together the numbers of the responses to the six statements. If the total score is 12 or less, the respondent has few Impostor characteristics; if the score is between 13 and 18, the respondent has moderate IP experiences; a score between 19 and 24 means the respondent frequently has impostor feelings; and a score higher than 24 means the respondent often has intense IP experiences. The higher the score, the more frequently and seriously the impostor phenomenon interferes in a person's life.

## Chapter 1

# Breaking the Silence



The impostor syndrome, at its core, is a distortion in the way we see ourselves. The trouble is that we believe the warped image to be reality—the “truth” we’ve somehow managed to hide from the rest of the world. We are petrified that we will be discovered and spend nearly all our energy guarding against that possibility.

One of the most difficult aspects of the impostor syndrome is the fact that it demands that we keep our feelings a secret. Don’t stay silent. Find a way to speak about your fears. Whether you do it with a trusted friend, a coach, a mentor, your partner, a therapist, or in a journal, give voice to all the feelings churning inside. (Writing to yourself can be one of the most effective methods to face the impostor syndrome. It was for me and many others.)



I looked out the wall of windows of my corner office at the masts of the tall ships tied up at South Street Seaport and at the span of the Brooklyn Bridge just beyond. Cool, wintry early-morning sunshine filled the large room. The city was waking up but still quiet. And I had the entire office and the next hour and a half to myself.

“I have the best job in the world,” I said out loud, filled

with the contented knowledge of being in just the right place at the right time. I had been President and CEO of Girls Inc., the nonprofit organization dedicated to inspiring all girls to be strong, smart, and bold, for just over five years and was more excited than ever to get up every morning and go to work. Helping hundreds of thousands of girls shape their futures went way beyond job satisfaction, it fed my soul. At long last, I felt like a real success.

It had not always been so. In over twenty-five years of singular achievements in corporate America, I had risen to unprecedented heights for an African American woman, becoming the first to be named an officer of Avon Products, a Fortune 500 company. Just about every new accomplishment, however, came with the stultifying doubt that I did not deserve the success and that sooner or later I would be discovered as an impostor.

I glanced at the book galleys on my desk. The journalist and author Ellyn Spragins had asked me to contribute to her book *What I Know Now: Letters to My Younger Self* and had just sent me the proofs as the book neared the final stages of production. I picked up the galleys and reread the letter addressed to Joyce at thirty-three.

Dear Joyce,

You may not have set out to be a pioneer, but here you are, out front, one of the few African American women working up the corporate ladder. You achieve more every year, but each leap exerts more pressure. Who would have thought success could feel so much like a burden?

Yes, you thrive on it. You love marketing, and the more you

work, the more you're consumed and fascinated by it. Here at Revlon, you're setting a personal record, working morning till night—and both days on weekends. Exercise? Forget about it. You can't even plan a lunch, because chances are a meeting will be called at noon.

You're not complaining, because, strangely, there's a giddiness in such hard work. You risked a lot every time you seized an opportunity that presented itself. Laboring ever more intensely shows you're worthy of the chances you've been given. It also props open the door for every African American woman who might be coming behind you.

This is what you tell yourself—and it's all true. But it only goes so far. The way you drink up that steady stream of praise and recognition is a tip-off. You did a good job. You belong here. We want to make you an officer of the company.

Ever wonder why the glow wears off so soon? Because somewhere, deep inside, you don't believe what they say. You think it's a matter of time before you stumble, and "they" discover the truth. You're not supposed to be here. We knew you couldn't do it. We should have never taken a chance on you.

The threat of failure scares you into these long hours. Yet success only intensifies the fear of discovery.

Stop. It. Now. You're not an impostor. You're the genuine article. You have the brainpower. You have the ability. You don't have to work so hard and worry so much. You're going to do just fine. You deserve a place at the table.

And at the end of it all, people will remember you not for hours you worked but for the difference you made in the world.

Love,

Joyce

That letter was a turning point for me. As I had thought about it, an odd phrase kept popping up in my mind: “The Empress has no clothes. The Empress has no clothes.” It was so strange and seemingly out of context. But it was insistent enough that I thought I had better pay attention to whatever its message might be. The only thing I could think of was to go back and reread Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, in which the Emperor really has no clothes.

What I—as most of us, I think—remember about the famous fable was that the vain Emperor goes parading through his realm naked because neither he nor any of his people want to admit that they cannot see the new “suit” the grifters posing as weavers had “made” for him. What struck me now, however, was the clothes’ purported magical quality: “[The weavers] proclaimed that they knew how to weave cloth of the most beautiful colors and patterns, the clothes manufactured from which should have the wonderful property of remaining invisible to everyone who was unfit for the office he held, or who was extraordinarily stupid.”

In the story, it is the fear of being seen as unfit for one’s office or as being stupid that keeps everyone, except an innocent child, silent. I recognized that fear immediately as the one I had encountered so frequently throughout my life—the terror of being unmasked as an impostor “unfit” for my post. I thought about all the times that fear had kept me from speaking out, had insisted that I work twenty-hour days, had whispered in my ear that I did not deserve the promotions and recognition. “They’ll find you out,” it kept saying. The letter for Ellyn’s book came straight from all those memories and a newfound confidence to confront my fear of being an impostor.

That quiet morning in my office, as I took in the words, I felt a new sense of pride. I had not only succeeded in spite of all these fears, I had learned how to quiet them enough to enjoy my success.

I leaned back in my chair and looked at a brightly colored tugboat guiding a barge downriver. In a wink, I was transported back home to New Orleans, a young girl watching barges carefully threading their way along the Industrial Canal. I could almost smell the diesel of the tugs mixing with the heavy scent of Mississippi river mud as I crossed the bridge that divided the Ninth Ward from the rest of the city.

I was just a year old, the youngest of nine children, when my mother moved the family from our hometown of Iberville, Louisiana, to New Orleans after my father was killed in a hit-and-run accident. She had two older sisters in the city, neither of whom had children of their own, and figured that raising us kids would be a whole lot easier in a place where she could get steady work and help looking after us. By the time I was old enough to remember, our household spanned between Mama's house and Aunt Rose's house a few blocks away.

Neither Mama nor Aunt Rose had gone beyond the eighth grade in school because they had had to go to work. However, they reminded us every day that education was our ticket to doing more in life, to getting beyond the limitations other people would try to put on us. This was the South in the 1950s, mind you, so, as young African Americans, there were lots of limitations we had to face.

"Joyce Marie," I heard Aunt Rose's familiar voice in my mind, "if you work hard and study, there is nothing in this world that can stop you. Get an education, and you can make something of yourself."

As I surveyed my life on that bright New York morning in 2005, I knew that Aunt Rose and Mama would have been proud—much more so of the person I had become than just of the things I had accomplished. And I wondered why it had taken me so long to become proud of me and to trust that I was worthy of success.

I flashed on the exact moment I became aware of the change, when I felt more confident and comfortable with my success. After nearly two decades at the company, I had risen to the post of Vice President of Global Marketing at Avon. And I was doing a great job, leading the establishment of the company's first global marketing organization and creating strategies that generated close to a billion and a half dollars in worldwide sales. In spite of that, when a position with even more responsibility became available, I was passed up for the promotion. Needless to say, I was not happy. I had encountered the proverbial glass ceiling on several occasions before, but this time, rather than doubting myself, I decided to embrace my success and to step out and believe in my abilities. I knew I deserved that position. Somehow, without even realizing it, I had internalized my success as something I had earned. It was as if a spell had been broken.

I had traveled so far in my thoughts, I was a little startled when I heard Yolanda, my executive assistant, say, "Good morning, Joyce."

The workday had begun, and I would have to return to exploring thoughts about the meaning and the price of success at another time.



I had occasion to revisit this theme in just a few short months, when my letter, along with two others, was excerpted from Ellyn's book in advance of publication in *O Magazine*, in early 2006. The calls, e-mail messages, and letters started coming in immediately. Their volume only increased when the book came out in April. Everyone, it seemed, from young women just entering college to male CEOs of blue-chip companies, wanted to talk about their own fears of being unmasked as impostors.

My very personal reflections had struck a raw nerve for thousands of people. By their very nature, impostor feelings tend to keep people silent. They are secret fears that we are lacking in some way. Who wants to admit to not being worthy of their post, right? But they are also a terrible burden to carry around by yourself. So when they read my letter, people wanted to talk, to share, to get the weight off their chests.

One of the most surprising conversations I had at that time was with Ed Whitacre, former chair and CEO of AT&T, on whose board I served. Ed was as buttoned-up as they come, and was someone whom I felt could not possibly have any self-doubt. So I was more than a little taken aback when he came up to me after a meeting and said, "Great letter, Joyce. And a brave thing to do. But you know, that feeling you describe, it doesn't affect just women and minorities. I've had my share of moments when I felt people would find out I didn't make the grade." I could see in his eyes that he had shared something with me he had not told very many others and nodded my acknowledgement. With that, he moved off to shake hands around the board table.

Through all the conversations I have had, I kept thinking what a shame it was that many smart, talented, accomplished

people were so tortured by doubt they could not enjoy the success they worked so very hard to achieve. I knew firsthand how awful it was never to feel quite sure enough of yourself to relax, and I wondered what caused so many of us to feel such anxiety.

I heard the term impostor syndrome for the first time during a panel discussion in which I participated with two other women whose letters appeared in Ellyn's book, Eileen Fisher, the clothing designer, and Shannon Miller, the Olympic gymnast. During the question-and-answer session, a young woman directed a question to me: "Joyce, you spoke of the encouragement and support you got from your family. How do you reconcile that with the impostor syndrome you describe in your letter?"

"Well, it helped that I didn't know I had a syndrome," I joked. "Seriously, though, that's a great question. The support and encouragement gave me the strength to take the risks I took in the first place. Without them I would have just done what was expected. But that's the conundrum of this whole thing. I was the one taking the risks, and yet I felt as if I was only getting anywhere because somebody else was giving me a chance. And I had to work harder and harder to be deserving of those chances."

That evening, when I got home, I went online immediately and started searching for information. Now that I knew it had a name, I wanted to know what exactly the impostor syndrome was and what caused it.

I did find some references but very few, and all almost exclusively concerned with academia. The one I found the most fascinating was what I later learned was the seminal article on the

subject published in the fall of 1978, in the journal *Psychotherapy Theory, Research and Practice*, by two psychotherapists, Pauline Rose Clance, Ph.D and Suzanne Imes, Ph.D, “The Impostor Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention.”

The article, based on the doctors’ work with “over 150 highly successful women,” defined, for the first time, the impostor phenomenon:

Despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, women who experience the impostor phenomenon persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise. Numerous achievements, which one might expect to provide ample object [sic] evidence of superior intellectual functioning, do not appear to affect the impostor belief.

The authors went on to describe the experiences of these women, suggest possible root causes of the phenomenon, and propose ways to treat it. Although I identified with many of the feelings the women described, frankly, I found some just too extreme to be believable, like the insistence of a woman with “two master’s degrees, a Ph.D, and numerous publications to her credit” that she was “unqualified to teach remedial college classes in her field.” I had to remind myself to remain kind, calling to mind the kinds of mental gymnastics I had resorted to over the years to keep believing my success was a fluke.

And then I got to the last sentence, which described what happens when a person lets go of her impostor feelings: “She begins to be free of the burden of believing she is a phony and can more fully participate in the joy, zest, and power of her

accomplishments.” Wow, I thought, that is how we all ought to live, with joy, zest, and power. I just kept repeating those three words: Joy, zest, and power. Joy, zest, and power. And every time I said them, I felt like doing a little dance.

But it was another line from the article that really lodged itself in my soul: “If one woman is willing to share her secret, others are able to share theirs.” I had seen just how eager people were to unburden themselves, and I began to hear a call. People started suggesting to me that I write a book based on my own experience with the impostor syndrome and that of the people who had responded to me. What appealed most to me about this idea was the prospect of helping thousands and thousands of people break the silence that makes the impostor syndrome such an isolating and heavy burden. I knew firsthand how liberating it was to let go of the secret and to speak of the fear out loud, and I wanted to pave the way for others to shake off their stultifying secret so they could start enjoying their success earlier in life than I had.

Eileen Fisher, founder of the iconic clothing company, Eileen Fisher Inc., found that comfort as she developed effective strategies for quieting the voices that say, “You are not good enough. You don’t belong here.” Eileen launched her business in 1984, with \$350 in savings and a desire to create simple clothes that make the woman important, that let her relax into herself. She is now the chief creative officer of the \$300 million employee-owned company.

In our conversation, Eileen spoke very movingly about her own path of overcoming the feeling of being an impostor and her wish for her own children and all young people to learn how to be comfortable with who they are as human beings.

## **Eileen Fisher: *Relaxing Into Ourselves***

I grew up in the Midwest, in a suburb of Chicago called Des Plaines, the home of McDonald's. I am from a family of six girls and one boy. My dad used to say jokingly that children should be seen and not heard, and that was pretty much the idea. My parents weren't stern or anything. It was just that our opinions didn't matter, and we weren't drawn out. We were part of a bundle of kids.

My mother was overwhelmed by the kids, the house. Our general idea was to hide from her, stay out of the kitchen, stay out of her way, just be invisible and avoid what we used to call "ranting and raving."

We were a Catholic family, so I went to Catholic school for twelve years. There, if you stepped out of line a little bit, you got yelled at. And so you just always kept yourself small, tried not to be seen.

So none of us kids ever stood out or gave our opinion. We had this desperate need to fit in. I spent my life as a girl trying to make myself small—not seen and not heard.

At the same time, I must have had some need to break away, because I wanted to go to college. That was kind of a shock to my father. He said, "I'm glad, but we don't have the money to send six girls to college. I'm saving the only money we have for your brother."

I put myself through college at the University of Illinois and ended up with a degree in home economics. After that, I moved around a bit. There weren't very many jobs in the seventies.

I finally came to New York, with my Midwestern portfolio and my home economics degree, trying to be an interior designer. It was a hard, hard road. I worked in interior design and graphic design, but

I didn't feel like I was a real designer. I sort of felt like an impostor. I struggled getting clients and getting jobs and projects. I don't think I would have been able to get a job as a clothing designer. I had to start my own company to believe in myself.

The amazing thing is that even as I became successful, I kept getting this message from people around me that I was the last person they expected to do well. What kept me going was the sense of rightness I felt once I started the clothing business. It wasn't just about business, it was about making something that made women feel good, about clothes that created confidence. I felt I had found my spot, and that gave me validation.

I began to develop confidence in myself as a designer, to believe that I understood something meaningful and that I had a talent. But I didn't have confidence in me. I wasn't at all sure I was OK.

I found communicating with people especially hard and began to realize I was not going to succeed if I had to explain my designs all the time and negotiate about why this one was better than that one. Even today, I am still terrified of standing in front of groups and speaking. I guess it throws me back to my childhood, when I was not supposed to be heard, when it was important to be invisible because someone might not like you.

As I've gotten older, though, I don't feel like I have to know everything or be everything. But I did spend many years in therapy—along with journaling, yoga and meditation—to get here. And I keep up my meditation practice, and I find that it really helps me stay centered on a daily basis.

I think a lot of us build our careers believing that titles or money will help us get respect. And they do, to some extent. But professional success can leave that hole there right in the center of who you are, that missing sense of I'm just OK.

The message I want to give people—what I would have wished for myself—is that the most important thing you can do is work on your core personal confidence as a human being.

If people understand and are comfortable with their essence, they are able to do many more wonderful things. I feel like I'm just coming into my sense of myself and realizing that I'm more than a clothing designer, that I can have a joyful life, that I can contribute to the world in lots of different ways—supporting leadership in women and girls is just one of them. I'm getting to that place of really feeling comfortable and confident about who I am. It's just taken so long. I feel like I went the roundabout way. And I would like it to be different for my son and my daughter and young people everywhere. I want them to work on who they are as human beings rather than what they do.



I invite you to entertain, for a moment, the possibility that the way the rest of the world sees you—as competent, knowledgeable, accomplished, and successful—is actually more accurate than the way you see yourself. It is difficult, I know. But if you can tolerate the discomfort, you will probably glimpse the kind of joyful life Eileen describes. After many, many years of struggling with the anxiety of feeling like an impostor, I assure you that such a life is well worth the effort required to gain a more balanced view of yourself.

*This page intentionally left blank*

This material has been excerpted from

***The Empress Has No Clothes  
Conquering Self-Doubt to Embrace Success***

by Joyce M. Roché with Alexander Kopelman

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Copyright © 2013, All Rights Reserved.

For more information, or to purchase the book,  
please visit our website

[www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)