



Unhiding myself

by Rick Belden

1. Wounded wonder boy

I'm having a hard time trying to communicate with a teenage boy I know. He's smart, sensitive, idealistic, fiery, and full of potential. He's also been wounded and traumatized more than he feels he can bear, and he's come to the conclusion that the only way to keep himself safe in a world he's repeatedly experienced as unsafe is to hide.

There was a time, not so long ago, when he was eager to stand in front of the class and happy to share the stories he'd written. He was seen as a leader by both teachers and other students, and he liked it. He ran for class president and won. He enjoyed being recognized at school assemblies for his academic achievements. He was comfortable being seen. He expected it.

Now he's wary and terrified of the unwanted attention, both positive and negative, that can come with being seen. He hasn't been the same since a beloved sixth grade teacher stood him up before the class and then savagely criticized him in front of everyone in a surprise attack that was as vicious and unwarranted as it was completely unexpected. In the aftermath of that experience, he began to have terrible anxiety attacks any time he had to stand up and speak to the class. This was new to him. He'd felt excited before speaking in the past, but never scared. He began to feel himself shrink inside whenever his name was called and he just wanted to disappear.

He didn't know what to do about what he was feeling and things only got worse in junior high when his elementary school class merged with classes from the other elementary schools in his town. There were so many new kids he didn't know, but

somehow a lot of them knew him. Or thought they did. Everywhere he went, kids he didn't know said things to him like "Hey genius!" and "There's the brain!" He didn't know them, didn't know how they knew who he was, and didn't like the names they called him. He felt like he was being mocked for being smart. He'd never experienced anything like that before from the other kids at school. It was weird. It made him feel unsafe and ashamed. He felt like a target.

Some of the girls came up to him and told him things like "You're going to be rich someday!" and "Someday you'll be famous!" He didn't like this either. He felt like they wanted something from him and he didn't even know who they were.

Everywhere he went, he encountered people who'd already decided who he was before he'd ever met them. He felt like he'd had no chance to form his own identity with these new people. Instead, a preformed identity with all sorts of preconceptions, assumptions, expectations, and responsibilities was being cast upon him, and much of the attention he received as a result was not just unwelcome, but negative and hostile.

Among other things, he now found himself to be the target of numerous malcontents and bullies. Again, these were not people whom he'd wronged or even knew. Some of the abuse he received from them was verbal, some was psychological, and some was physical.

He no longer felt safe at school. It no longer felt like a positive place to be. He felt overwhelmed and on edge all the time. He had severe panic attacks every morning before school and felt like throwing up all day long. Most days, he didn't eat much of anything until he got home after school. He felt scared all the time.

Giving presentations to the class became harder and harder. He always did well, but he was a nervous wreck beforehand. He still excelled academically, but was increasingly teased and tormented for it. He won his categories two years in a row in his junior high science fairs, but felt nearly paralyzed with terror before each presentation. One of the judges, a science teacher at the high school, was so impressed with his eighth grade science fair entry that he was invited to repeat his presentation for students in the teacher's high school physics classes. He declined. It was just too scary. This was the first time he ever said "no" to an invitation to be seen and recognized for his work. It would not be the last.

In high school, all of these trends continued and his patterns of fear and avoidance of attention deepened. As a freshman, he ran for student office and had to give a speech in the auditorium before the entire student body. It was a miserable experience for him, utterly terrifying, and for the first time he didn't even feel like he'd done a good job, stumbling over his words and shaking as he spoke. He wouldn't try anything like that again.

The mocking continued: nerd, geek, brain, head, genius, etc. He was getting tired of being ridiculed and coming to resent the attention he received. Even when it was positive, it came with all sorts of expectations, especially from adults, about who he was and what he was going to do. "You're going to be a scientist. You're going to be an engineer. You're going to be a mathematician." Sure, he got good grades in math and science, but he wasn't that interested in either subject. He loved drawing, writing, and music; he was rich to overflowing with creativity, imagination, and ideas. But no one ever talked with him about making a life for himself with any of that, so he assumed it was not possible and that none of those things that moved him so naturally and so deeply had any value in the "real world" of adulthood he'd be entering soon.

He felt trapped in an identity, or a set of identities, that he'd never chosen. He was miserable, scared, and nauseous every day. Everybody thought they knew who he was and either liked him or didn't like him based on whichever identity they recognized. Some people saw him as a hero who was going to make everyone proud; other people wanted to hurt him or make him fail. He didn't ask for any of this. It was all wearing him out and he saw no end to it.

That's when he decided there was only one safe course of action. He decided to hide. And he's been hiding ever since. Hiding and feeling safe. But not happy. Not happy because the light that he used to share so freely is still there in him and still wants to find its way out. He knows this because he can feel it. He can feel it all the time. He feels frustrated that he can't let himself shine like he used to, and he feels frustrated when he sees how well others have done in their lives while he's been hiding. But when he thinks about coming back out again, all the old terror and dread comes crashing down on him, so he pulls back into the safety of the shadows.

2. Hiding man

I've been living with this kid who decided to hide himself as a strategy of self-preservation for forty years now. He's an identity I formed for myself in reaction to all those other identities that were being imposed upon me, not just at school but at home and in my extended family as well. As I've written in my poem ["life decisions at sixteen"](#):

*I want to be left alone
I want to be anonymous
I'm tired of standing out.*

*I don't want to be in the spotlight anymore
I don't want to be recognized
I don't want to be seen.*

*I don't want to be seen
as a "brain" or a "genius" or a "head" anymore*

*I don't want all the pressure to be
"the smartest" anymore.*

*I don't want all the expectations anymore
I don't want all the responsibility anymore
I don't want to be a leader anymore
I want to drop out and be left alone.*

That was my life at sixteen and I'd had enough of it, so I rebelled. I pulled the plug on a life I could no longer tolerate, one that felt unbearably oppressive and threatening to my well-being, by pulling myself out from the spotlight of unwanted attention and expectations. I went into hiding and I was proud of myself for doing so. I actually *liked* myself again for the first time in years. I felt like I was in charge of my life for the first time ever. I felt empowered. I didn't feel like a target anymore. And I finally began to feel a bit safer again after so many years living with relentless fear and anxiety at school every day.

I did everything I could to destroy all those false identities that had been put on me that I hated so much. I shocked everyone by signing up for welding classes at the vocational school, which was widely regarded at that time to be for the loser kids who couldn't cut it academically. I tanked my grades so I wouldn't be the valedictorian because I didn't want to have to make a speech at graduation. I ignored offers from universities and went to work in a sawmill after high school. While most of my friends were leaving home and going off to college, I was living in my parents' basement, dodging logs and stacking boards ten hours a day at work, and doing exactly what I'd set out to do: being anonymous.

Not surprisingly, that life also started to get pretty old after a while. I began to feel trapped again and started looking for a way out. Eventually I found one, and my life began to move forward, but I can see now that I've continued to aim low and try to keep myself invisible and anonymous throughout much of adulthood because that desperate kid who bailed out of everything and went into hiding to save himself is still with me.

He's still making decisions for me, too. In a lot of ways, he feels like the strongest part of me. In some ways, perhaps he is. He is the one who knew what he had to do to survive, he did it, and I can't fault him for that. He was in a bad situation, feeling totally overwhelmed by his life, and had no one to whom he could turn for help. I often wonder what my life might look like today if that boy had only had the knowledgeable and compassionate assistance and guidance he needed to deal with the attention, feelings, and experiences that were overwhelming him. It is a tragedy that he felt that hiding himself was the only way to survive.

Now I find myself coming face to face with him again, perhaps for the first time as an adult. I've done a lot of inner child work with myself, covering various ages, but I've done almost no work with this teenage boy. In some ways, I think I actually feel more protective of him than of some of my earlier age incarnations because I know how vulnerable he really was, and is. But he also scares me. He's angry, he's powerful, he's stubborn, and he's willing to walk away from *anything* if he feels threatened in terms of either safety or integrity.

3. The challenge of un hiding

Teenagers, in general, are a puzzle for me. I'm very comfortable with kids up until they hit about age twelve, after which they seem more and more like walking mysteries. I don't think this is a coincidence. I was eleven when my sixth grade teacher bullied and verbally abused me in front of the class. That was, in many ways, the end of childhood for me and the beginning of learning to hide myself. It was also when I began to separate from some major aspects of myself and to become a walking mystery to myself.

Hiding myself has kept me safe, or at least *feeling* safe, for many years, but it has also cost me dearly. I'm beginning to see that now in a much deeper way than I ever have before, and it hurts. It hurts to know that by hiding myself I've also been blocking myself from the meaningful, creative life I've been wanting so long and working so hard to have, the life I know I'm capable of having and that I know I deserve.

Words are inadequate to express how I feel about this. There is a massive sense of loss, a deep and powerful sadness. I'm ashamed and disappointed to realize how I've been failing myself. I'm filled with grief about the life, *the lives*, I've given away in exchange for keeping myself hidden so I could feel safe. I'm scared and worried that I've been hiding myself for so long, that it's so native to my way of seeing and functioning in the world, that I won't be able to recognize when I'm doing it, much less change it.

Painful as it is to admit, I can see that while hiding myself might have been my best option for keeping safe all those years ago, it's actually having the opposite effect now, and has been for some time. Often the strategies we choose when young to survive and keep ourselves safe no longer suit us and begin to fail us later in life, and can even put us at risk if we adhere to them too long. Hiding myself still feels safe but it isn't. *Unhiding* myself feels profoundly *unsafe*, but it's increasingly obvious to me that doing so is fast becoming not only an issue of safety for me, but of survival.

The prospect of un hiding myself is profoundly frightening to me in a variety of ways. I also know that I can't change what I've been doing without the cooperation of that teenage rebel, the wounded wonder boy, inside me. He stands astride the path to change, guarding it fiercely, and is determined that I will not pass because he does not want me carrying him back into the dangerous territory he once left, swearing never to

return. He is powerful, he is dug in, and he is used to making the decisions in this area of my life. If I am to move forward at all in this task of un hiding myself, I'm going to have to deal with him: his fear, his sadness, his vulnerability, his anger, his frustration, his creativity, his determination, his pride, his absolute certainty that there is one and only one way to be safe.

How do I approach him? Perhaps the key lies in something I wrote earlier about the absence of knowledgeable and compassionate help in his life. Perhaps I'm in a position to give him something like that now, somehow, if I can only reach him. I know that, deep down inside, hiding was never his first choice, just as it was never mine. Perhaps we can find a way to unhide ourselves together.

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Rick Belden is a respected explorer and chronicler of the psychology and inner lives of men. His book, [Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood](#), is widely used in the United States and internationally by therapists, counselors, and men's groups as an aid in the exploration of masculine psychology and men's issues, and as a resource for men who grew up in dysfunctional, abusive, or neglectful family systems. His second book, [Scapegoat's Cross: Poems about Finding and Reclaiming the Lost Man Within](#), is currently awaiting publication. He lives in Austin, Texas.

More information, including excerpts from Rick's books, is available on his [website](#) and [blog](#). You can also find him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).