

I used to pride myself on the fact that ‘I don’t play games’ in my relationships. I thought I was a straightforward, simple sort of person, which made me superior to people who set traps or try to read minds. I simply told my loved ones what I wanted, and I asked them what they wanted from me. My hands were clean.

Of course, this was ego-stroking. We *all* play games in our relationships. We tease, trap, and betray like we’re on a soap opera and vying for an Emmy. Yes, even you.

What do I mean by ‘playing games’? By game I mean any time we say we desire one thing, but really we desire another. For instance, I may say I don’t care whether you stay or go, but really I want you to stay and hold me and tell me everything will be okay. On a superficial level, we can play games deliberately or without realizing it. However, I think all games ultimately fall into the latter category—the unconscious kind. For even when we are deliberately deceiving our friends and lovers, this deception will not ultimately bear the desired fruit, so it is merely a more nuanced kind of self-deception.

By definition, a game results from a conflict between what we desire internally and how we engage with the external world to get the object of our desire. We are dimly aware of two selves—the internal yearning and the (inadequate) external expression of that yearning. This schism between the internal and external selves leads to mixed signals, and to conflict in our relationships and activities.

I do not wish to take a strong stance on the question of whether the internal/external schism can ever be reconciled. Rather, I wish merely to point to the schism, to our unconscious attempts to reconcile it, and to the defensive maneuvers by which we avoid acknowledging it.

When our attempts at happiness fail, we have several options with varying degrees of disagreeableness. We can (1) blame the external self, (2) blame the world beyond the self, or (3) accept the internal/external schism, that is, the inevitability of disappointment. This essay is mostly about the first reaction—blaming the external self for failing to realize the desires of the internal self.

In a word, this first response can be thought of as a yearning for competency. People who frequently adopt this stance habitually blame the external self for its incompetency, that is, for failing to attain what is perceived as attainable. We will unpack this idea further, but first, let’s take a closer look at the internal/external schism.

For most of my life the ‘Gaibelan’ daydream, like all my daydreams, never struck me as anything more than another a bizarre romp through my imagination. Today, though, I see it as being about the internal self’s struggle with the incompetency of the external self.

Sam dates back to my teenage years, probably around the time that I met Luna Lovegood in the Harry Potter books. The daydream where Illyrio gives John a poisoned handshake, rendering him deaf and blind, came several years later. Gradually, those daydreams came together in a frequently-visited scene when a deaf and blind John discovers Sam in his bed on the spaceship. Again and again, I return to that moment. I suppose I find it romantic, even though it is also sad and strange.

In some versions of the daydream, John’s relationship with Sam is cute, happy, and straightforward. In others, it is rocky and ends in disaster. John, and by extension I, is/am never quite sure what to do with Sam. Perhaps it is fitting, then, that this daydream gradually became grafted onto the one in which John is deaf and blind. He meets Sam, wrestles with his conscience, and then is plunged into dark, murky confusion.

John feels guilty about playing games with Sam, and about luring her into danger. At the same time, he still craves connection with her, and so he continues to send her ambiguous signals. His desire is clear: he wants her. But worldly concerns of how and whether to realize that desire are complicated.

One interpretation of the bedroom scene is as a metaphor for the visceral feeling of being stymied by our external ourselves. Scared and alone, John reaches out into the darkness for Sam. However, he is unable to receive her love because he is trapped in a foggy, murky sort of cage. The external self is conflated with the body. The body, the self that is reaching out into the world, is defective, while his true self is buried deep inside. Clearly, some part of my unconscious mind

resonates with this feeling—an interior loneliness searching for love, foiled by a deaf and blind exterior. The external self, rather than the external world, is blamed. In the imagination of the able-bodied person, physical disability evokes the schism between the interior/competent and external/incompetent selves.

Now that we have an image for the schism, and perhaps with it, a fuller definition than words alone can give, let us turn to an example of when this conflict has driven my behavior in everyday life.

The story starts when I was a college freshman. As the school year progressed, my new college friends began to notice a change in me. They saw how I was obsessed with nutrition, how I might call a fistful of brussels sprouts a meal, and how I started going to the gym twice a day. They didn't know that I was binging and purging, too, but they didn't need to know. I was thin as a rail, and it was clear that something was wrong. Eventually, they held an intervention for me right there in my dorm room. Sitting in a circle, they told me how upsetting it was to watch me torture myself. "You've lost your glow," said one friend. They vowed that they would no longer stand by and watch my problem escalate. They swore they would monitor my plate in the cafeteria, and they proved true to their word.

After that, I kicked the habit, for a time. I suppose the intervention made me feel loved, but mostly it made me feel deeply ashamed. I remonstrated myself for wearing my insecurities on my sleeve. I was disgusted with myself for acquiescing to their pressure, and disgusted with them for pressuring me. The intervention got my eating on track, but it only deepened my resentment, isolation, and self-hate.

Having weaned myself off the chemical high of righteous starvation, I continued nurturing my self-hate in private places for the next couple of years. I contented myself with the occasional put-down—"I'm too ugly to be friends with her," or, "I'm too fat to look cute in anything." I cringed at cameras and mirrors. Time passed, and the incident of the dorm room intervention was forgotten.

Then I began experimenting with starvation again. It never reached the level it had reached in my freshman year, but it resurged whenever times got tough. The main trigger was fights with my boyfriend (later husband, later ex-husband). Nothing quelled the post-fight resentments like a tub of ice cream followed by a spoon down the throat. Pop an antacid and you're good to go. No drama, no meltdowns. Just a therapeutic cleanse.

It was my little secret for several years, until I finally decided to tell him about it. I can't remember the conversation clearly. It was one of those conversations that had devolved into a wound-measuring contest, with each of us fighting over the role of the righteous victim. I'm sure I didn't present it as, "Hey, I think I might have a problem." It was more like, "Hey, pay attention to me!"

His reaction to my bombshell was distinctly disappointing. I recall he didn't say much. In the foggy realm of my memory, it included a shrug. As he returned to his painting or his cooking or to whatever he'd been doing, I thought to myself, "Seriously? Don't you even care?"

So let's review. I resented my friends' intervention, but I also resented my ex's lack of intervention. The friends' attention made me want to be alone, and the hubby's cold shoulder made me crave support. I both wanted and didn't want attention. Does this sound like someone who doesn't play games?

This confusing and contradictory game can be explained by a closer look at my yearning for competency. It is tempting to define the yearning for competency as a yearning for self-sufficiency. Surely, one may think, competency means the ability to go it alone, to build our little cabin in the wilderness and live off the land. Surely competency means crafting a body that is not *defective* but *effective* in getting our needs met, so that we don't have to be dependent on anyone else.

This is an overly simplistic view of competency. It fails to recognize that there is an inherent contradiction in the very notion of competency: competency means self-sufficiency, yet self-sufficiency is inevitably alienating and unsatisfactory. To be a fully competent, independent individual is to be left feeling unfulfilled, and so one can never really be competent. Self-sufficiency is never, in itself, sufficient.

No one truly wants to be alone. Even the most adamant introvert will, upon honest reflection, admit that they crave connection, if for no other reason than that it is 'good for them' in some vague and mysterious way. Those who stubbornly go on claiming that they truly, absolutely want nothing to do with anyone else are clinging to some combination of denial and ingratitude.

The yearning for competency is, deep down, the yearning for connection. Competency is simply a means to an end, not an end in itself. The only reason that incompetency bothers us is because the interior self craves connection, and incompetency impedes that connection. It is for this reason that people who are most obsessed with competency and self-sufficiency are usually hopeless romantics. Those who wall themselves off from the world, or position themselves on a higher or lower plane from others, do so because they are terrified of losing connection, so terrified that they would rather preemptively deprive themselves of it than be deprived.

The problem of honing a satisfactory external self is complicated by its two-fold nature as both personal tool by which we interact with the world, and spectacle that is gazed upon by the world. The external self is constantly being seen by the world, whether we like it or not. Thus when we direct our blame, and our energies for improvement, upon the exterior self, we also blame the image. One cannot alter the exterior self without also altering one's image. Likewise, the effort to alter one's image appears, to the immature, like a feasible strategy for controlling the exterior self.

Even if you have never struggled with an eating disorder, I'll bet you have taken this route at one time or another: trying to master the external self by mastering your appearance. Of course, this is a naïve strategy that does not work. Nevertheless, we all do ridiculous things to prove our competency to others, and these ridiculous things make us look unattractive. For example, we may attempt something we aren't ready for, like an advanced yoga pose or dance move, in an effort to win admiration. Alternatively, we may achieve our goals, but the obvious effort we poured into them reveals our foolish insecurity. This is the case for anorexics, people who have had too much plastic surgery, or people who give and give until they wear themselves thin (or fat, as the case may be), whose exhausted appearance stands as a testament to their sad obsession with earning love. Finally, even if we do manage to achieve competency without disgracing ourselves, we still find that it is lonely at the top. We have become pure image. We may succeed in becoming a top model or top student, but we find that being the object of others' envy is not the same as being their lover or friend. All the success in the world will not feel like true competency/connection until one is able to be vulnerable, ordinary, and even flawed with another human being. In all these examples, the struggle to *appear* competent actually leaves us feeling more incompetent than ever.

We should not be surprised that the struggle for competency fails to get us the connection we crave. After all, competency is about being superior, and connection is about being an equal. The more we succeed at excellence, the more we fail at averageness. This is not to say that competency and connection are mutually exclusive. However, they can, and typically do, *feel* mutually exclusive.

Anorexia is a physical manifestation of the yearning for competency/connection. We all occasionally have the deep, visceral sense of some inept external me that is failing to do simple things—support worthy causes, find a lover, think before we speak, etc. I promised myself I was going to call Janet once a month, yet here I am, six months later, and I still haven't done it. I promised myself I wasn't going to get into an argument with Uncle Joe at Thanksgiving this year, but here we go again. The anorexic feels this incompetence most acutely, like John reaching out for Sam in the darkness, constantly blocked from connection by his own inept exterior. The anorexic is not really trying to master the body, but trying to master their incompetent exterior so that they can get the connection they crave. Anorexia epitomizes the universal tendency to confuse the external self as spectacle with the external self as tool. The anorexic is trying in the most extreme way to bring out the hidden internal self, the one that yearns for connection purely and passionately, the one that will do anything, absolutely anything, to be able to give and receive unbridled love.

(Of course, this is an oversimplification. Eating disorders are as diverse and complex as the people who suffer from them. There are biochemical and genetic factors to consider, there is the question of trauma, and there are social and cultural pressures of which gender is just one. I must concede that I am telling my own story as if I speak for all anorexics—nay, for all humans—which of course I cannot.)

Though we should not be surprised that our struggles for competency/connection through image are consistently foiled, we are. We are surprised every time. We cannot understand why our hard work and sacrifice fails to get us the kind of attention we want. How do we respond to this proof of our naïveté? With obstinate denial, of course. I insist that I pulled my hamstring during an ambitious yoga pose because the hamstring acted up, not because I was being a show-off. My friends were wrong, unfair, or meddlesome when they told me to slow down and take care of myself. When someone fails to appreciate my specialness, it is simply that—their failure, their blindness, not mine. When our efforts fail, we blame everyone and everything except the one thing that is actually at fault—our failure to discern what we think we want from what we truly want. In other words, we play games, denying that we are manipulating our appearance because we are desperate for connection.

Naturally, anorexia failed to get me the kind of attention I wanted. Everyone but me could see that I was mistaken about the true cause of my unhappiness. When my college friends tried to offer connection directly, it became clear that connection was what I really wanted all along, and I felt humiliated. My ex made the same point, though in a different way. In withholding connection, he revealed my compulsive, all-consuming need for it. In both cases, the truth was laid bare: in struggling to obtain connection, I was merely getting further from it, and making a fool of myself in the process. Faced with this bitter pill, I blamed and denounced the very people I'd been trying to connect with. I warped and distorted the message they were trying to send, and so I trapped myself in the same murky confusion that made me yearn for connection in the first place.

Modifying one's body is not the route to competency/connection. On the contrary, competency/connection is the route to a more desirable body.

I have a much healthier relationship with my body than I used to. I exercise frequently and I have a robust and reasonable diet, complete with various treats and vices. I accept that I will always have certain body parts I don't love, like my saggy belly. I have largely ceased to give a shit. Funnily enough, the fewer shits I give, the sexier I feel.

I did not develop this healthier relationship with my body through positive affirmations or little goals like, "I'm going to walk 15 minutes a day." These tactics do not address the root of the problem: a loss of contact with what we really want. These tactics actually override the body's signals and feelings, rather than bringing us deeper in touch with them. The flaw of these tactics is revealed by reframing them like so: "I'm going to insist that I love myself *no matter how I really feel*." "I'm going to walk 15 minutes *no matter how I really feel*." The idea is to master the body through force and trickery, rather than to sense and respond to the body's messages.

If my body is not up for a 15-minute walk, I honor that. If my body is just being lazy and trying to cheat itself, I've learned to catch that. I've also learned to discern when junk food is spiritually nourishing and when it's not. I don't say these things to boast that I'm better than you, but to illustrate how I found a route to a healthier self that actually works.

Most importantly, I've learned that the connection I truly desire is not just with other people, but also between disparate parts of myself. Loneliness is never just yearning for a human companion. Loneliness is a sign that one is not enough for oneself, that the self is unsatisfactory. The reason I craved connection so badly was not just that I felt estranged from people, but that different parts of myself felt estranged from each other. All my life, navigating the world felt like driving a remote-controlled toy car that frequently sped off in the opposite direction from where I was pointing it. I was frustrated with the car, so I tried to control it. However, I have found through time and experience

that the car was often going its own way for good reasons. The key to successful navigation has not been to acquire total control, but rather to learn the art of skillfully relinquishing control.

My way to a healthier body was through ceasing to give a shit about my body's image, and focusing instead on my psychology. No amount of diet or exercise would heal the wound that was at the root of my body shame: a deep dissatisfaction with my worldly external interactions. I was obsessed with how I was seen, and obsession with the image is also necessarily an obsession with the way we move, talk, act, and interact. These were what had to be disciplined, but through patience rather than force.

It is possible to accept our blindness and deafness, our murky confusion about the world, without labeling it as incompetency or a problem. It is nobody's fault that I don't know everything, or that I make mistakes. It just means that I must rely on the resources that are available to me. To do otherwise is to be like a blind person who holds their nose because their powerful sense of smell reminds them of the uncomfortable fact that they are blind. I cannot fit in one or even a few paragraphs the process by which I went from stubborn anorexic to a reasonably self-aware adult. Suffice it to say that part of the solution is to heal the schism between the internal and external selves, and part of it is to accept that the schism cannot be healed.

I do not mean to promise that any of us will ever be cured of body shame or self-hate. I still struggle with these issues and I probably always will. As a case in point, this essay, which was supposed to be about letting go of the body image, ended up containing some rather sound advice for improving it. Still, I have made headway on the matter by turning inward and examining the true motives behind my behaviors. This sets us upon the long road of learning to discern when it's time to follow through on our urges, and when it's time to override them. Learning to connect with ourselves and with others is a lifelong process. The body, the soul, the self—these are mysteries that unfold slowly, and there is always something undiscovered on the horizon. Nevertheless, I do believe that self-discovery, unlike denial, is a game we can actually win.