

Self Portrait



my self portrait

by Hong Nguyen

Who am I?

I'm weak

I'm ordinary

I'm **not good enough**

I'm boring

I'm **lonely**

I'm **scared of people...**

I remember waiting for my dad in the car. As I looked outside the window, I see a girl, about the same age as me being pushed by her mum in a stroller. She stared at me and all of a sudden, sticks her tongue out menacingly. I remember feeling un-liked and not good enough but didn't understand why. It was one of the first moments I could recall feeling inferior. I must have been about four. **What's wrong with me?**

During the early years of primary school I often felt a sense of powerlessness. Pushing into me, I can vividly recall the threats as she held me by the neck of my jumper. I was in grade two and she was in my class...I thought she was my friend.

Why is this happening?

I can still feel the tears rolling down my cheeks. I was in grade three, it was Sports Day and I was separated from my friends. As I waited quietly in line, a group of grade six girls pushed me around as if I were a rag doll. I still remember their laughter and cruel taunts.

Why are they doing this to me?

He was on top of me and I didn't want him to be. From about the age of seven to eight I experienced repeated incidents of abuse by someone close to me. The same feelings of being scared, alone, confused, and ashamed were all there. I pushed these feelings aside and kept all these experiences to myself. No one could know.

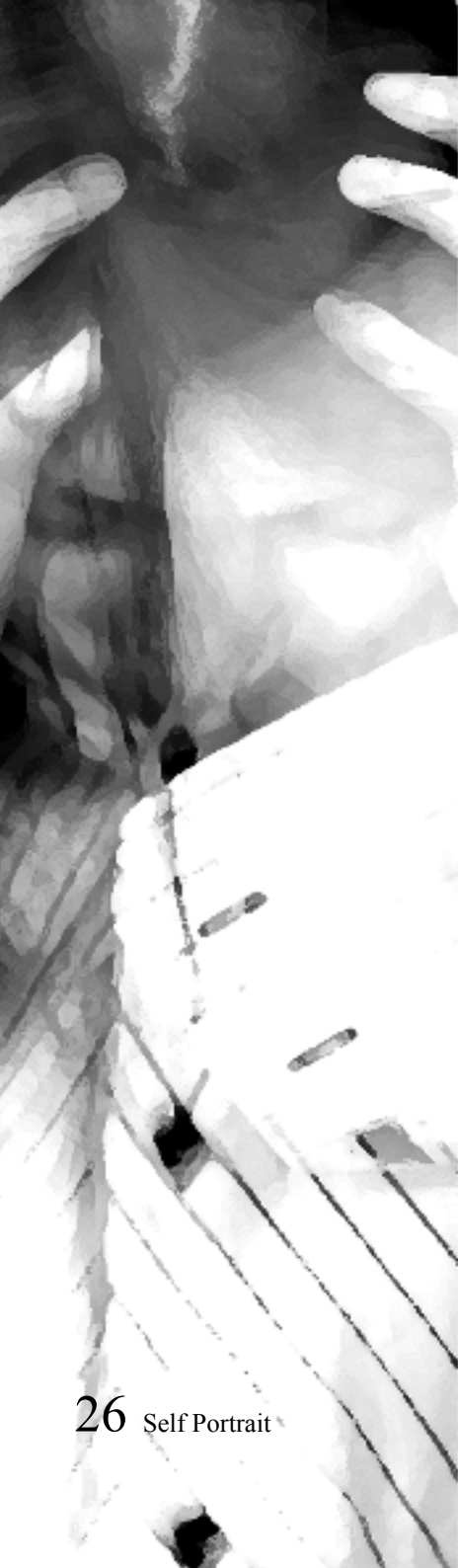
This can't be a coincidence, I must be weak.

In my family I was the quiet, reserved and shy daughter. I often remember being compared and comparing myself to one of my sisters. She was sociable, confident and charismatic. It was so easy for her to make friends, initiate conversation and engage others. Whenever she was around, I felt like her dull shadow. I clearly remember the fear that consumed me when my parents would take us to parties at their friends' houses. I always stuck close to them and stood in the corner. One time I hid in the car for hours alone. **I'm scared of people.**

Throughout my school years the same self portrait perpetuated. I was one of the quiet, reserved and shy girls in class. I didn't feel comfortable raising my voice and participating in class discussions. I never broke the rules and shied away from attention. Even though I had good friends and was a straight-A student, I always discounted my qualities and accentuated the negatives. **I'm not smart, I'm just hard-working. I'm useless at sport. I take too long to write an essay. I can draw but not as well as others.**

During year eight I was accepted into MacRobertson Girls School. It was a boost to my self esteem, however I remember feeling intimidated by the other girls on Orientation Day. For some reason I felt like I didn't belong there. As I had only recently become comfortable with and had made good friends at my high school, I decided not to change schools. The fear of being the 'new girl' again was overwhelming.





During year 11 I applied for several part-time customer service jobs but was unsuccessful. My self esteem was contaminated with thoughts of “what was wrong with me?” The truth was I already knew the answers. **I’m not confident enough. I wouldn’t be good with customers. My sister would have won the managers over.**

“A good Vietnamese girl is reserved, submissive and stays at home to help the family”. That was a common phrase that mum and dad repeated. Growing up in Australia, it was obvious that my parents had traditional Vietnamese values. I remember the countless times mum would remind me about the importance of maintaining my “purity” as a girl. Although I always excelled at school, my dad used to continually reinforce the message that education was the top priority until I graduated university. I wasn’t allowed to have a boyfriend until then. I envied my “Australian” friends and their seemingly carefree lives as I remained the dutiful daughter.

Being Dux of Year 12 was definitely an achievement although missing out on my first preference to do graphic design at university confirmed what I had known all along. **I’m just ordinary.** Out of the thousands of applicants I didn’t expect to be accepted. Even though I was successful in gaining a place in a graphic arts diploma at TAFE, I felt pressured to take advantage of my high Enter score. Like most Vietnamese parents, my parents only valued a university degree. To compromise, I decided to do a combined Multimedia and Business Marketing degree.

In my first year at university I started doing work experience in graphic and web design. After two weeks, the manager was happy with my performance and hired me as a casual employee. I started to develop a greater sense of self belief whilst working there as I felt valued not only as an employee but as a person.

I’m multi-talented? I’m intelligent? I’m a leader?

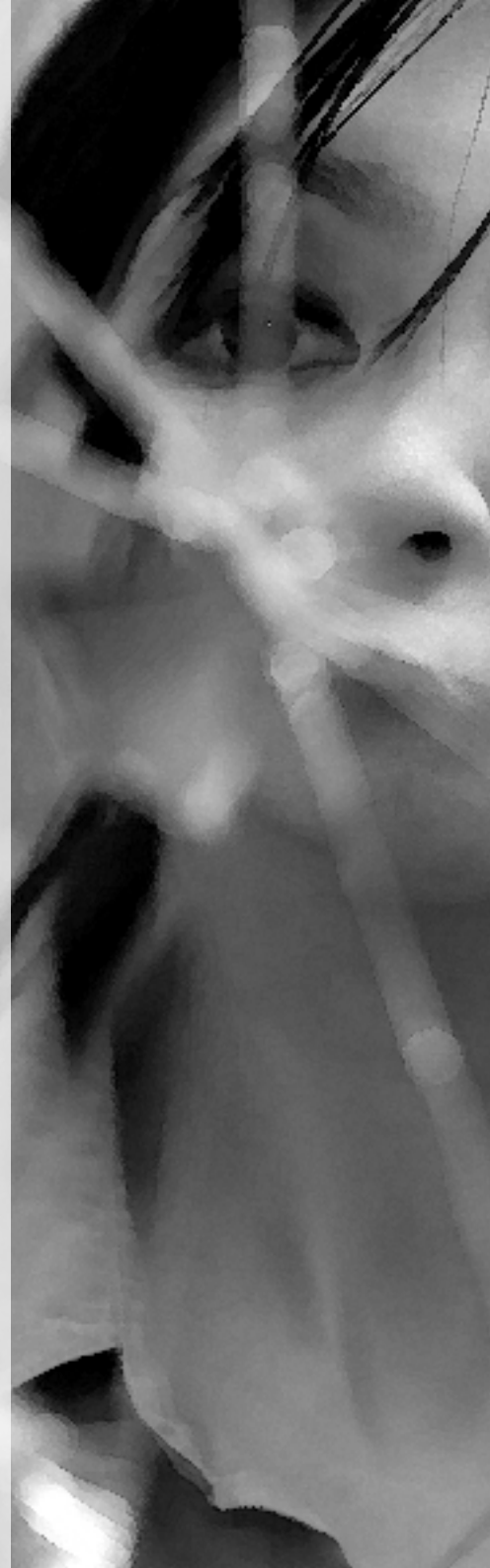
Although it was reassuring, I found it hard to accept compliments. My manager saw me from such a different perspective that I felt challenged, confused and uncomfortable. When I was promoted to a managerial role, I remember feeling inexperienced and was afraid to accept the position. "Lead with an iron fist in your velvet glove" he encouraged. I never thought of myself as a leader until that day.

At 21 I felt unfulfilled and uncertain about my future. Even though I had graduated with a degree and had a full-time job where I was respected, I didn't feel as if I was really living life. I liked my job because of the people I worked with, not because of what I was doing. As fate would have it I heard great things about and enrolled in a life skills and self development program with the catch phrase, "Live a life you love and live it powerfully".

For the first time in my life, I saw the 'fish bowl' around me. Like a gold fish circling in unchanged water, my world was confined to this fish bowl, contaminated with self destructive thoughts. I was trapped in an identity of repetitious negativity spiralling from certain childhood incidents. I thought that the past no longer affected me however I realised that my "self portrait" was a collage of disempowering memories obstructing true self expression.

It then became clear why I still felt intimidated by strong females, why I dreaded walking into a room full of strangers, why I didn't like standing out, why I spoke very softly, and why I never saw myself as a leader.

I finally dismantled the self portrait that had been such a strong fixture in my subconscious. It was an impressive work of art, created with the innocence of a child. For so long, I had identified myself as a person that was weak and ordinary, and lived as if this was true. It was time to identify myself as someone that was extraordinary. It was time to break the fish bowl.



With this new perspective, I began to make things happen. I overcame the obstacles that had previously stopped me from realising my dream of living overseas. It actually wasn't as difficult as I had imagined. Instead of resenting me, my manager actually gave me an amazing work reference; instead of disowning me, mum expressed her desire to have me back; and instead of thinking that I didn't have the confidence to be a good teacher, I focused on all my positive traits. Within a few months, I successfully landed a position teaching conversational English in Japan.

I'm choosing my life.

And choose a life I did. I will always cherish my experience living and travelling abroad. I had time to be "me" and learn who that "me" was. I wasn't bound by anyone's expectations of my identity and could be whoever I wanted to be. I no longer had to hide behind the aura of my sister.

With a stronger sense of self belief I was able to participate in things I had been too afraid of. Whether it was letting loose at Karaoke, performing silly moves with my friends on the dance floor, making class challenging for Japanese university professors, exploring a foreign country without knowing the language, mingling at parties and meeting new people, teaching and entertaining large classes of primary school children, training fellow teachers who were more experienced or battling a typhoon whilst climbing the iconic Mt Fuji. Life without barriers was no doubt challenging but it was so much more fun.





I am now 27.

Over the past two years I have been volunteering and working on various community projects back home, and last year I completed my Diploma in Community Development. I have learned so much and am thoroughly enjoying the variety of roles that I now have. I work for an organisation whose mission is to improve the education and employment outcomes for young people. I also work in the learning department of my local Council, celebrating the positive achievements of community members and promoting lifelong learning as a cornerstone of social inclusion. I am also a proud member of an evolving group of dynamic young Vietnamese Australian women. I feel privileged to be part of a team who are passionate about demonstrating, celebrating and inspiring leadership amongst young Vietnamese women. **Let yourself shine, so that others can too.**

I think back to when I was four and waiting for my dad in the car. Perhaps that girl was trying to get my attention? Perhaps she had something sticky on her tongue? Perhaps someone stuck their tongue out at her earlier and she was imitating them? Whatever the reason, I can now see that it wasn't about my failings as a person.

I was and have always been good enough.

I'm courageous

I'm extraordinary

I'm **happy** I'm fun

I'm loving I'm loved

That's who I am.