

Think You Are Shy?

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Although the Fourth of July was still a few days away, fireworks came early at this year's annual meeting in the form of Bring-the-Family speaker Phil Zimbardo's dynamic presentation. In a multi-media presentation featuring film, television clips, cartoons, and other illustrations, Zimbardo enthralled a standing-room only audience on the topic of shyness. Always a highlight of the annual meeting, this year's Bring-the-Family address, titled *The Personal and Social Dynamics of Shyness*, was especially well-attended by adults and many children as well. And despite the fact that Zimbardo spoke for an hour and a half- a half hour over his expected time-attendees steadfastly remained at their seats, while latecomers crowded into the back of the room, in order to catch everything Zimbardo had to share.

A professor at Stanford University, Zimbardo has studied the causes, effects, and implications of shyness and published several books on the topic. He is considered an expert in the field and is often quoted in news stories on the subject.

"I don't think of myself as a shy person," he said. "I think of myself as a person whose mission in life is to help bolster the human connection, to help people relate better, to help people enjoy and to make people feel special about themselves. "

Shy Like Me

Zimbardo was introduced by his wife Christina Maslach, a professor at the University of California-Berkeley, who included a story about her husband in her introduction. When Zimbardo was a child, said Maslach, he spent six months isolated at a hospital with whooping cough and double pneumonia without any close physical contact with his family.

Maslach said that this may have been a factor in Zimbardo's dedication to studying shyness and to helping to foster the human connection and personal relationships.

"Last night was a wonderful experience for me," said Zimbardo in an interview the day after the address. "I had not really expected to have a full house with so many children. The topic was right because it is a topic of concern to adults and to children and in a sense, shyness is fascinating because it is part of the human condition- it is universal. At one level it is the appropriate defensiveness we all have in a new situation. The question is, why is it that some people carry this over into all situations-familiar and non-familiar- and what are the costs? [Shyness] is not an esoteric concept and children can relate to it." In mild forms, said Zimbardo, shyness is considered quaint, and even a desirable trait—even the butt of jokes," he said. "But the point is that we don't see the extremes of shyness, because when shy people are effective in doing what they do, they hide it, they conceal themselves and they become anonymous. What happens is that you develop a whole lifestyle around that. You can choose an occupation that does not involve a lot of socializing and you can arrange your life to limit your human contact," he added.

Quiet Coffee Shops

But shyness is not only a personal problem for individuals, said Zimbardo. Factors in society and technology are laying the groundwork for shyness to become a more menacing parasite on the human connection. Advances in technology, from email and voice mail to ATM machines and computerized operators, have further removed people from one another.

To illustrate his point, Zimbardo described a coffee shop in San Francisco in which one might see 50 people, none of whom are speaking to each other. Instead, they are reading newspapers or typing on laptops.

“Although I consider myself an optimist, I am really pessimistic about this confluence of social trends, all of which are moving us in the direction towards increasing indifference to others, alienation and isolation,” said Zimbardo. “It is now possible to arrange your life so that you never talk to another human being. What is lost is the sense of joy of a face-to-face interaction with another human being, with verbal feedback and touching. You can’t get that electronically, or through a computer chip.” What this could lead to, said Zimbardo, is a new generation of people who are not social animals. “In the past, I and other people have used shyness as an index to other problems and now I think we should use shyness as an index of social pathology,” said Zimbardo. “That is, if shyness is increasing-and it now looks as if it is, at about 1 percent a year-then it ought to be considered as a measure that something is wrong with society, not with shy people. In the same sense of an epidemic where a person caught in the vector of a disease is not responsible for the fact they got small pox or tuberculosis or whatever, in the same way, a person can become shy not because of inadequacies or fears of rejection, but because they are not learning basic social skills and not interacting with other people.”