



## Crestwood Recovery Resilience Solutions

Hello readers,

The following narrative is the speech that Kells gave at the conference we talked about when I was in the audience. I hope you take the time to read it through to the end. It's very informative and helpful for those who struggle some of these problems, which is most of us.

Lori

### **Kells Speech**

I am simultaneously so happy to be here with all of you and also so terrified. I've spent my whole life wondering if I was allowed to take up space, asking permission to be where I am, fearing that I was the wrong person to be in the room. Even when I was informed I'd been chosen as a Keynote speaker I couldn't help but think there had to be someone better, someone more accomplished, someone more deserving than me to be up on this stage sharing their story- and my fear is a familiar one many of us share.

The problem with the story I tell myself is that there will always be someone who seems more deserving and so it perpetuates this idea that I, and people like me, don't belong in spaces we've traditionally been shut out of. Imposter syndrome is generally defined as "the persistent inability to believe that one's success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved as a result of one's own effort and skills". From my perspective there is an additional way of looking at imposter syndrome as internalized oppression which is a concept where a marginalized group feels they must accept and incorporate the oppressive message of the dominant group in order to survive. In this way imposter syndrome is not just personal, but systemic, and I feel can live in our families to be passed down as generational trauma.

My mother has spent her whole life trying to prove she deserves to exist in it because her parents traumatized her and their parents traumatized them. I have been passed down the same trauma from the adults in my life and internalized the idea that it was better for me to stay silent because someone more worthy would speak up instead but that's not how it works,

is it? When we don't use our voice someone else will speak for us, but they won't share our story, they'll share their version of our story or nothing at all.

From an early age I was different from other kids. I was loud, brutally honest, sensitive, impulsive, and I was always getting in trouble. For years in school, I couldn't understand why other children were able to listen or become friends so easily with each other, no matter how hard I tried I always was on the outside. I saw school counselors but they just thought I needed more worksheets, and my parents didn't know what to do with me. My bio parents were divorced and I would fly back and forth between California and Kentucky, then Oregon, when we moved out here in '99. My mother tried the hardest to understand me, but it was a struggle for her because she was overworked, overwhelmed, and dealing with years of unresolved trauma.

My family both immediate and extended, as a rule, didn't really "believe" in mental health. Sometimes when my bio parents were frustrated, they would threaten to send me to a therapist which made me hate the idea of ever talking to someone who was paid to listen to me. What irony then that I turned out to be a peer support specialist.

During all of this time I was dealing with abuse from the adults in my life who were supposed to protect me and I was hearing the message over and over that I wasn't worthy, I wasn't good enough, I was a burden to the people who loved me. It followed me throughout my childhood into my teenage years and into adulthood. It made me question every aspect of my identity; from the time I realized I was queer to the time I realized I was trans. It may surprise you to learn this, especially if you experience the privileges of the dominant culture, but there is such a thing as queer imposter syndrome ["Queer imposter syndrome is homophobia in action," says Corey More, a trans non-binary sex worker and sex educator] Those in the audience who also have a marginalized identity will probably know what I'm talking about, but for those who may be unsure, when we look at imposter syndrome through the lens of queerness the idea of being a fraud is still very much present, but in this case pertains to a specific identity the dominant culture expects to us to perform in ways that are often rigid and dangerous to deviate from. For years this was one of the major reasons I didn't even acknowledge I was trans because I thought I wasn't "trans enough", since the most socially acceptable form of being transgender for decades was the binary of either transitioning to a man or a woman Being non-binary, which is not fully identifying with either was viewed as being less legitimate, more fraudulent, if you will, because it didn't conform to what a hetero-patriarchal culture expected to see a transgender person do. If you then add in the intersection of other identities, being plus size or being BIPOC there is even more pushback from the dominant culture on how to perform queerness "correctly". Those of us who walk through the world experiencing intersectional identities have an additional layer of messaging from the system we live in when it comes to feeling like an imposter and must always keep in mind how present the identity is to other people.

I'll give you an example: If I'm the only queer person I'm aware of in a room that is made up of straight and cisgender people, I am very cognizant of how I behave in comparison to them, especially if we're discussing topics around sexuality and gender. The more formal the setting is the more cautious I am because I may be one of the only out queer people they know, and I don't want someone to form an opinion of all queer people based on my actions. This can mean worrying about smaller issues like, what will this person think of me if they ask if I'm going to Pride and I tell them I'm not really interested, but that doesn't fit with what they think a "good queer person" does? They might seem confused or even put off, and now I might feel self-conscious that I'm not performing queerness in the way they expected me to, even if I logically know that for as many queer folks that do go to Pride, there are just as many who don't go and that doesn't make either identity more valid. Here's an even more impactful example: Let's say there's a person who is cisgender that has only been exposed to transgender identities through pop culture thus far, and when I tell them I'm trans they seem confused and perhaps, dismissive, of my identity because I still present relatively feminine to them, and I was assigned female at birth. Their exposure may only be to binary trans people, and so they may not understand why I currently choose not to take hormones, but I did get top surgery. This doesn't fit the conventional narrative of how the dominant culture views being transgender because there is often an assumption made that all trans people want to fully medically transition. For those of us who only do it partially or not at all, we often will have it reinforced that we're not performing this aspect of our identity the "right way", not only systemically, but individually, or even from other members of our community.

Imposter syndrome is really challenging because it can exist in so many forms and show up in so many ways. Between being neurodivergent, queer, and experiencing a significant amount of trauma, my view of myself is distorted when my identity doesn't match up with the dominant culture's expectations. Having ADHD (which I do) is another great example, I have always struggled with deadlines at jobs, but when you reach a certain leadership level an expectation is that you are supposed to be able to perform and function in your job the way a neurotypical person does. This can fuel the belief that you "shouldn't" be in a role like this, especially if your colleagues don't seem to struggle the same way you do.

Even knowing this, I always feel it's okay for other people to show up in the way that best represents them, but it's harder for me to accept that I can as well. I bet other people here today feel similarly. This is probably why, though I was passionate about mental health I didn't enter the world as a professional until 2016, because at that time I thought the only valid way of entering the mental health world was through a degree.

Even in spite of the feelings of inadequacy I carry, I've always been determined. I pursued peer support when I found out about it in an intensive outpatient treatment, because it resonated with me in a way that nothing ever had before and gave me hope that the diagnoses that the medical

world had labeled as deficient about me were actually strengths I could leverage to connect with the people surrounding me. The first peer training I had came from MHAAO and I got a scholarship at a time I was totally broke and had no other path ahead of me. The first peer job I had was at company that didn't fit me or my values and almost made me quit peer support forever. It brought back all of the doubts that I was an imposter, that clearly I was not meant to be doing this after all.

Then, out of desperation, I gathered myself up and took a chance on a company called Luke-Dorf, now New Narrative. I became a peer support specialist at a drop-in center called Comfort Zone and within a couple months I became the manager of that program and ran it until April 2022. Throughout that entire time I became more confident, more sure of myself, more capable of sharing my voice. There were still times I would worry I was the wrong person for the job but being in a place I felt seen and heard made a world of difference for my ability to sit in the discomfort and take up space. I started to speak up more, to push back on things I thought we could do better or differently, with our policies, our programming, and our services for the people who came to our agency.

In December of 2021 I applied for the VP of Peer Services job at NN and in March 2022 I interviewed and I didn't get it. This was a job that didn't exist for years while I worked there and was something I had passionately advocated for alongside many other peers at our agency. Many of us understand the importance of a voice that's traditionally been silenced, occupying a seat at the table where decisions are made. I'll admit, it was a blow to me initially. I struggled with it, even though I also believed in the person who got the job. It was a weird space to inhabit, but the CEO of the company who had been my first boss at NN, Julie, offered me an alternative job that hadn't existed either: the Director of Peer Support Services. As I weighed whether or not to take it I admitted to Julie that I was hesitant because I felt like an imposter even accepting the job, and she responded she often struggled with that herself. It surprised me at the time, that this person who I admired that was so competent and accomplished could share the feelings I had, but it was an important reminder of how universal this experience is.

You may have guessed by this point that no matter what I, or many of us achieve in our lives, imposter syndrome continues to follow us and often will make us second guess our decisions to keep going. After I became the Director, I couldn't believe it and the confidence I had steadily built up started to fade because every day I felt like I had tricked all these people into believing I knew what the hell I was doing. I feel even today that there is probably someone better than me who should be in my position, but I'm always going to feel that way, so I try to work with it, or at least around it. You may also sit here wondering what the hell you're doing and wrestling with the idea that you're an imposter too.

Let's do an exercise, show of hands, how many of you in the audience today have felt like imposters?

Okay.

Keep your hands up if you feel like it has prevented you from doing something you really wanted to do.

Now keep your hands up if you've done a whole bunch of things in spite of it.

Yeah, that's right, even when we feel like imposters we still get things done! We still came to this conference to be in this space together, we're still learning and trying to grow, and that, to me, is how we take away the power imposter syndrome holds over us. While I was writing this speech I was spiraling, panicking, telling myself that no one wants to hear this and I should just give up.

And yet I stand here before you today and I speak.

Even if only one person leaves this auditorium being able to relate and feel validated by this speech, that would be worth it to me. The power of sharing our experiences is what makes peer support so transformative, and only the system benefits from our silence. I'm tired of being quiet so others can speak for me, and I know a lot of you feel the same way which is why you're here.

And I wonder when we think back to the times we've felt like there was someone better who should be in our place, who is this theoretical "better person"? What do they look like? Do they resemble someone we know? Are they the same race as us, the same gender? Do they have a specific degree or award? A specific title?

What do they bring that we think we don't, and if we switched places with this person today who would it benefit?

If we remove our voices and experiences from the conversation, there may very well be someone who replaces us, but that doesn't mean they are the person most qualified to be there.

And here's where there's a bit of an abrupt but relevant tonal shift if you'll indulge me.

Trauma is an experience that can destabilize our identity and divide us from our sense of self.

There is a story about my life that I don't like to tell because it makes me feel vulnerable and ashamed.

This story is a familiar one for some of us, unfortunately.

When I was 14, my stepdad took away my voice by sexually abusing me. I had experienced up to that point in my life every abuse but this one, and this is the one that almost snuffed out my voice entirely. For a year I didn't tell anyone and I know some of us never tell at all, and I learned the hard way why. When I told a school counselor she told me because she was a mandatory reporter she had to tell CPS and either she or I had to tell my mom within the week. Panicked, I delayed it as long as I could and when I finally told Mom she was angry. She was angry at him, yes, but she was also angry at me, and said we both should have known better. When she got home she confronted him, but in 5

the midst of that she asked me what I wanted her to do, call the cops and send him to jail or let him stay at the house? And when I thought of my sisters, when I thought of how the divorce of my parents weighed on me, and all the burdens, pressure, and panic I was feeling I told her he could stay, even at the cost of my own wellbeing. And CPS? They didn't do anything. They told the counselor they didn't feel like it was enough and to my knowledge they never investigated it. Talk about imposter syndrome to an extreme, when you feel like even your abuse is not good enough! That's given me a real complex about how valuable my experiences are. That's a little trauma joke by the way, I like to use humor to deflect processing emotions.

Back to a serious note, until once I turned 18 I lived like a ghost in my own home, and it became increasingly clear to me that my voice didn't matter. Everyone around me at that time didn't want the truth of my story because a version that absolved them of responsibility was easier to digest, and it didn't even come from my mouth, it came from my mother's. I really believed for years that it was better to just let other people tell my story, even if it traumatized me further, even if no one really understood, until 2018, when I was 30 years old, 16 years after it happened, and I had enough.

I cut my stepdad out of my life when I was in my early twenties, but one of the proudest, messiest, and most difficult decisions in my life was when I cut my mother and my aunt out for a year until I set very firm boundaries with them both about how they were going to speak to me and talk about my trauma. They were allowed to be a part of it again after I made sure they understood the only voice that would be telling my story from now on was me. The reason I share this story is because imposter syndrome is often viewed through a specific and narrow lens in our culture, focusing almost exclusively on personal performance and very little on the systems outside of us that create and reinforce these beliefs. A family system may create trauma that is the beginning of our earliest stories about ourselves that turn into the larger narrative of being an imposter, because we forget how to use our voices once they are taken from us. Systems of oppression, such as racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism may tell us there is something deviant and inherently wrong about who we are based on the identities we hold. Societal institutions, such as education, government, and yes, medical systems may say that the visions we see, the voices we hear, and the experiences we have are pathological and must be removed for us to "correctly" exist in the world. As peers we already know there is no one right way to be and there never has been, and since there is no standard human experience how can any of us be doing it wrong?

Imposter syndrome is spoken of often as a personal experience that originates from the beliefs we hold, when in reality these messages originate outside of us before they become internal

That is why though I would love to provide a sanitized professional achievement that made me push back against my imposter syndrome, it wouldn't capture the whole story. And the truth of my story, like so many of yours, is that the reason I feel like an imposter is complex and tied to



moments that are messy, vulnerable, and larger than myself. The beauty of this is that peer support is all about vulnerability, and the way we grow through that. It is also about reclaiming your voice from the systems that take it from you every day as an act of power and radical self-acceptance in the process of supporting others to do the same.

It doesn't matter if the way we show up in our lives and our work is messy and imperfect, because that is what makes us relatable to someone else going through it. Who cares if we had to crawl through an open window or break in the back door of the house the medical model built, because now we can prop up the front door so other people like us don't have to fight every step of the way just to get inside. Maybe you were the only voice speaking up in a crowded room once where the people who held power didn't want you to be and demanded to know why you were there, but someone has to be the first person to speak up. These systems don't change by themselves so there is always something valuable in your voice and in your presence. If we are all worrying about being imposters while still changing the way that society looks at us, then we must be the best con artists in the world.

[Read Jennifer Lee's quote here: "If I've learned one thing, it's that self-doubt is one of the most destructive forces. It makes you defensive instead of open, reactive instead of active. Self-doubt is consuming and cruel. And my hope today is that we can all collectively agree to ban it ... Think about all the crazy ways you feel different from everyone else. And now take the judgment out of that. And what you are left with is such a wholly dynamic, inspiring character who could lead an epic story."]

If I had given up on this at any point in my life I would be a lot less fulfilled personally and a lot less connected to my community. I have seen the value of peer support in small individual ways working at the drop-in center and in bigger ways speaking at the systemic level. I have seen so many of us advocate from a place of lived experience to people who have never heard our stories and may have even been speaking for us before we got there. So please, please, never let the voice of other people or even yourself, say you don't belong here. We're all imposters sometimes, but I would much rather be an imposter speaking up with a quivering voice than be a silent and passive observer. Your voice is the gift you give the world and your story is a reverberation of hope you give to others. Let's be imposters together.

Thank you.