Sample translation

Introduction

I must have rewritten the first sentence of this book a hundred times, because I wanted it to be perfect. For everyone to recognise themselves in it straight away and want to read on. And so it was never right. Never finished. Never quite me.

The silly thing is that I know my perfectionism, and at the same time I know how familiar this is. Because what I see in myself, I also see in the women I talk to: behaviour you'd like to be different, but keep repeating anyway. Sound familiar? That you do or say something and think afterwards that's not me at all. That you say yes more often than is good for you. That you get angry about small things and regret it later. That you're tired in a way you can't explain. That somewhere you have the feeling you've lost a bit of yourself.

And the most frustrating part: rationally, you know exactly what you'd like to do differently. But you don't do it. Time and again you're stuck in the same pattern and you can't break out of it. You're not the only one.

How our masks are formed

We learn early on to adapt to other people, situations and surroundings. When something feels tense or unsafe, you do whatever makes you feel safer. That might be being very sweet, or funny, or making sure you don't stand out. And what works, you repeat. Makes sense, doesn't it?

You carry these experiences into your adult life. Into your work, your friendships, your relationship. And before you know it, you're helping with someone's DIY for the umpteenth time when all you really wanted was to lie on the sofa. That behaviour keeps landing you in the same pattern. In this book, I call these masks. Your masks have brought you to where you are now, and that's probably a long

way. But the patterns that once helped you can also stand in the way of who you want to be.

My own mask

I was in my early twenties when I started my first job. Full of energy, full of plans. I thought success was about working hard and being good at what you do. But I soon noticed something else was expected of me. I had to be more visible, give my opinion and radiate confidence. So I paid close attention to how I came across, which tone worked in meetings, which words sounded professional, how I could look confident even when inside I felt anything but. I adapted. A little more each time. Without really realising how much.

Until 2014, when everything fell away at once. My father died after a long, hard period. Instead of being able to say goodbye to him in peace, I was at the same time arranging a divorce, because six months earlier I'd discovered that my partner had been in another relationship for quite a while. On the Friday I spoke at my father's funeral, the next day I moved out because I couldn't stay in the house I'd shared with my ex, and two weeks later I was back at the meeting table. Sharp suit, smile on my face. I put on the mask I knew: keep going. No complaining, stay strong and above all don't feel too much. Chin up, get on with it.

My body, though, wasn't convinced. My breathing was shallow and fast, my back and shoulders hurt, my jaw was clenched. For weeks I lay awake and binge-watched Dexter until deep into the night. Not exactly comforting, but it kept me occupied so I didn't have to feel. During the day I was quick to irritate and picked fights over nothing. My friends didn't know how to reach me, and to be honest, neither did I.

Again I did what I was good at, keeping going, and so I went looking for insight. Courses, books, therapy, coaching. With all that knowledge, after a while I understood exactly what was going on, but I still felt miserable, empty and lost.

That changed when I did an embodied leadership training. There I experienced that understanding why you do something doesn't mean you can do it differently. During one exercise I was standing in the middle of a circle. The people around me were saying warm, sincere things. I heard them. But I felt nothing. Emptiness. As if I'd been cut off from myself. Until the trainer took hold of my chin and gently moved it. Then the tears came, fierce and uncontrolled. For the first time in a long while there was no mask, no posture of I'll be fine.

From that moment on, not everything was magically better. But for the first time I could see how far I'd drifted from myself. And I saw that change doesn't begin in your head. It begins in your body. That insight changed my life, and my work.

What is embodied leadership?

To me, embodied leadership means leading yourself from what your body tells you. From what you feel in sensations, in tension, in the way your body responds. Out of your head and into your body. My head had understood for years what I wanted to change; my body was still living something else. I could only really change something once I started listening to what my body had been trying to tell me all along.

I see the same in the women I talk to in my work as a sociologist and trainer. Every one of them is a smart, ambitious woman who understands perfectly well why she does something; she analyses it with friends, can even name it precisely. And yet the next day she just does it again. That's because patterns don't just live in our heads, but in our bodies too. It's in that clenched jaw, the hurried breath and the pain in your shoulders you've been ignoring for weeks.

By learning to listen more closely to those signals, you can make your patterns visible and, from there, make more conscious choices in your work, your relationships and your friendships. Choices that truly fit you. Science has been showing for some time that real change needs your body. Your clever body can learn a new way of showing up.

Why I wrote this book

Over the past few years, through my companies Doors Open and The Female Hub, I've talked to women and men I won't easily forget. Professionals, entrepreneurs, partners, mothers. People who have already put a lot into their development. Who read books, take courses, think about who they want to be. They long to show up differently, respond differently and relate differently to the people around them. I kept hearing the same questions. Why is it so hard to change? Am I the only one who has this? I saw in them the tiredness of adapting yourself a little every day. And sometimes that feeling of standing alone, while surrounded by people.

Out of all those conversations, my own story and years of working with behaviour change and embodied leadership came the wish for this book. Because change really is possible, even if you've already tried everything. I know that. I've seen it and lived it. That's why I wanted to write this book.

What this book gives you

This book offers you a way to change through your body. You'll learn to recognise when a mask takes over, so you understand why you keep doing the same thing. The most beautiful thing I see in the people I work with is that something changes in how they're present. You feel it when you're with them. They radiate more calm, more confidence. They're really there. The context often stays exactly the same, and their masks are still there. But now they can choose how to use them. They say no more easily. They make choices that truly fit them. They notice it at work, in their friendships, in how they are at home. They have more energy, because they're spending less of it on adapting. And they discover how good it feels to simply stay (true to) themselves.

How to read this book

You don't have to read this book in one go. Take your time. Some chapters will hit home straight away, others only later. That's fine. Change won't be rushed. In this book, personal stories, theory, reflection and exercises take turns. The stories show

what masks look like in everyday life. Sometimes you'll recognise them, sometimes you won't. Use them as an invitation to look at your own patterns with curiosity.

The theory helps you understand what's happening in your body and nervous system, so you have more words for what you already feel. The exercises then set that in motion. So I invite you to do them. You don't have to do them perfectly, but do do them. The biggest change comes when you both understand the exercises and experience them. Do you notice the exercises stir up a lot, or that you feel overwhelmed? Then seek professional support from a qualified coach, therapist or psychologist. Everyone responds differently; take the time you need.

The four parts take you through step by step. In Part 1 you discover which masks you wear and where they come from. In Part 2 you learn to recognise your body's signals before a mask takes over. In Part 3 you practise a different way of responding in real life: at work, in your relationships and in your daily life. And in Part 4 you find out how to hold on to that change, even when life gets busy again or things go against you for a while.

About the examples in this book

In this book I write a lot about women and use women's examples and experiences. That's because in recent years I've worked for women's equality and for a world in which they can be seen as themselves. In many contexts, women have needed more masks to join in, to be seen or to be taken seriously. But the patterns I describe are human, not just female. Anyone who recognises themselves here is just as welcome.

So I hope everyone finds something of value in this book. Where I talk about partners, families or relationships, I use examples that don't cover every possible form of family or relationship. Read them as illustrations of patterns, not as the norm.

Finally

I want to say one more thing to you, the reader of this book.

This book asks you to look at yourself. At your patterns, your body, your masks. That isn't always easy. It helps if you do it with recognition: what you've developed once helped you. You're not broken. You don't need fixing. You're not too late.

But I've experienced for myself what becomes possible when you wear your masks a little more loosely. How you can breathe again. How you can be present in a conversation without calculating at the same time what the other person thinks of you. What it feels like to effortlessly stay yourself and stay with yourself. I see it in the people I work with too. Again and again. Every time, it's something special to see.

I hope this book gives you some of that feeling. Happy reading, lots of wonder and, above all, lots of feeling.

With love,
Suzanne

Part 1 How your masks are formed

There's nothing wrong with you.

That's how I want to start this book. Because this sentence, more than any other, matters for everything that follows. Maybe you're reading this because you feel stuck, or because you just keep going. Or because somewhere deep down you sense you've lost a bit of yourself along the way. If so, the first thing I want you to know is that you've done nothing wrong.

You've probably become very good at adapting, sensing what others need and carrying on. Many of the women I talk to are strong, smart and engaged. They take responsibility, look after others, work hard and push on when things get difficult. From the outside it often looks powerful, as if they've got it all together. And yet they tell me a different story. That at certain moments they hold back. That they don't always say what they really think. That they adjust to what's expected of them before they've even felt what they want themselves.

Often without noticing, they've developed ways of protecting themselves. Of not giving too much of themselves away. Sometimes they wonder: am I good enough? Am I seen? Do I belong? Our nervous system is constantly looking for a yes to these questions, because that's the only answer that makes us feel safe.

In this book, I call the ways our body tries to protect us masks. I use the word without judgement. A mask isn't bad or fake. It's human. It's what you show the outside world, while inside there's often more going on. The word mask comes from the theatre. Actors wore masks to play a role and to give their voice more power. The Latin word persona literally means a stage mask: a face shown to the world, while the person behind it stays hidden.

Many women recognise this image. On the outside, they show what works. They're professional, strong, caring and rational, while inside there are often other feelings, doubts or longings. Maybe you smile just a little longer than you feel. Maybe you

work on for a bit even though your body is tired. Or you say yes sooner than you'd like. Usually it happens without you noticing. Over time those reactions become so automatic that you hardly register them anymore. Which is why we start here.

In this first part, we look at how masks are formed. The aim is first to understand where they come from and why certain reactions seem to run on autopilot. We explore why it's sometimes so hard to do things differently, even when you really want to. And we look at the patterns you may have been carrying around for years. We do that with curiosity. Masks serve a purpose too: they protected you when you needed it. But sometimes they keep you away from what you really feel, want or need. It happened to me, and I'd like to show you how in my own story.

Chapter 1 The masks you wear

My mask

My story: I was twenty-six when I started my first job, at Shell. Two degrees in my pocket and a head full of plans. I was going to prove myself at this multinational. In that grand building full of opportunity, I was going to make my parents proud. I was curious, motivated and above all eager to learn. I thought success was mostly about working hard and being good at what you do.

After just a few months, I noticed that something other than hard work was expected of me. I heard I hadn't been selected for a young talent programme. A group that, as it turned out later, was made up almost entirely of white men. The feedback I got was that I needed to show more confidence, be more visible and speak up more forcefully. A male mentor advised me to dress differently so people would take me more seriously: no more dresses, no skirts, no heels. And to top it all off, I heard something I've never forgotten: behind my back, people at work called me 'the tropical surprise'. Because my father is from Curaçao.

Nobody said in so many words that I didn't belong, but I felt that I stood out. That I was different. Apparently there was something about me that gave other people licence to comment on it. Those comments got to me more than I wanted to admit at the time. I felt insecure, angry and sad. At the same time I was determined to show that I mattered. That I did deserve to be taken seriously. Now I know what I wanted most of all: to belong.

So I adapted. I put on a grey suit, just like the men around me, pulled my shoulders back and put on a serious face. In that suit I turned into the grey version of myself: serious, critical and above all not too cheerful. In my head I'd decided this was exactly what was expected of me. At the time it felt

> perfectly logical. If this is what it takes to be taken seriously, then that's what you do, isn't it? I did it, and it was easy. Bit by bit. Until one day I thought when did I actually become like this?

It turns out I'm not the only one who's asked herself that question. Almost every woman I talk to recognises the constant adapting. For one it happens at work, for another in relationships. The movement is the same. Before you know it, it feels as if the mask is who you are.

This is my story. You have your own, even if you may not know it from beginning to end yet. In this part, I'll help you map out your patterns and masks. We do that by reflecting on the moments when you adapt. For instance, when you have a good idea in a meeting and hesitate about whether to say something. You're just about to open your mouth… and then you swallow your words after all. You smile, make a note, and a little later you hear a colleague put forward 'your' idea. That's when it happens: you put on a mask. You stay quiet, present yourself as someone other than who you are and say yes when you mean no. Often you don't even notice it in the moment.

Masks show not only in what you do, but also in what the little voice in your head says to you. The pleaser who whispers that you're not allowed to say no. The perfectionist who makes you read that email one more time. The imposter who warns you that you're about to be found out. And the critic who piles it on and thinks you should be harder, faster, stronger and better. Once you start to see when you put on a mask, you often notice how normal it's become.

Masks in everyday life

Masks show up in the most ordinary moments and situations. At work you say 'I'll do it' when someone leaves a task lying around. You say nothing and smile along at a 'joke' at your expense. You say you'll make a deadline while your diary is already so full that eating lunch behind your laptop has become the norm. And

sometimes you let your voice drop a little lower and more businesslike, because it carries just a bit more weight.

When your partner asks if something's up, you say 'No, I'm fine', because that's your standard answer. Your kids burst in full of excitement and you automatically put on a cheerful face. You sort the groceries, the sports bags and the appointments. Often before anyone else has even thought of them. You're the one who keeps track of it all and likes it when everything runs. When you feel you're needed.

Masks come out among friends and family too. You play the clown with your old girlfriends, because as long as you're the one cracking the jokes it stays 'fun' and hopefully nobody asks why you look so tired. With your little brother, who's 42, you slip straight into the caring role. And when your mother rings, you hear yourself say everything's fine, even when it isn't. Or you put on a mask when you want to show how independent you are. You tell anyone who'll listen, breezily, how much you love the freedom of being single. Sometimes that's genuinely true, but if you're honest there are moments when you feel pretty lonely. On a Sunday, say, or in the evening when you get home and nobody asks how your day was.

Why we wear masks

Reading all this, you could almost think masks are always a bad thing. They're not. Everyone adapts. You're constantly tuning your behaviour to the situation and the people around you. That has nothing to do with being fake; it's part of being a social human being. You may be different at work than at home, and different again with friends than with your parents. That's normal, and it's part of living with other people. Sometimes a mask is even necessary. You don't always have to show what you feel. I still laugh when I think of my daughter, who at the age of two would lie down on the supermarket floor and scream at every frustration, without a shred of shame. I sometimes thought how lovely it would be if I could just do that too. But then… as an adult you don't usually get away with it. Adapting a little simply makes life with other people easier.