

Why I Don't Like Being "Ahead of My Peers"

I'm often told that I'm "very mature for my age," and even that I'm "well ahead of [my] peers" (whatever that means**).

I appreciate the intention. These words are meant to compliment. And admittedly, I sometimes feel like I have a 30 year-old and a 50 year-old bouncing around in my 21 year-old head. I left home, became financially independent, and dove into the work world earlier than a lot of Americans, so my life experience has meant that I diverge from my peers in a lot of ways.

I won't lie – it's nice to be told that you have a leg up. I'm a competitive person just like anyone else, so it's great to hear that some of my life choices have put me "ahead." But despite all of the ego gratification I get from being told that, there's part of me that really doesn't like the idea. And another part doesn't believe it's entirely true.

First of all, if I am ahead of my peers, it's a bloody tragedy. I can still barely figure out how to be decent, consistent human being. I am still figuring out how not to make a fool of myself, how to keep my big mouth shut, how to maintain healthy habits, and how to follow through on my commitments. I don't know much about the world, and I'm afraid of a lot of it. I'm still a novice at my trade and often make mistakes I should know better than to make. I can be defensive, lustful, weak, arrogant, inconsiderate, cowardly, and unreliable.

What are those good things that somehow make me exceptional for my age? To the people who pay me the compliment, it's usually that I work seriously at a job, that I own full responsibility for my life, that I relate well to older people, and that I have independent thoughts which I can express well. I can credit the life choices that I made at 18 for most of those good things.

If I'm somehow ahead just for these things, it's no cause for celebration. There must be something wrong with my generation.

But that theory also has holes. I know there are people even younger than me who are smarter than me. I know there are people even younger than me who are more skilled than me. I know there are people even younger than me who are braver and more honest and more eloquent and more kind than me.

They're the ones who by rights should be ahead of me, or at least neck and neck. I don't think I would be that exceptional in a world that honored these young people of my generation.

Unfortunately, we don't live in that world.

There's probably not something terribly special about me. And there's probably not something terribly wrong about the peers who I'm supposedly ahead of. But there is something terribly wrong happening to young people, and it is holding them back from maturity.

It's school.

Environment is never the only factor in a person's character, but it's a big one. With its claim to 16 or more years of the life of the average 21 year-old, school is nothing if not formative. And the environment of school is **great** at insulating young people from the things of adulthood.

Schooling keeps many of them out of the workplace for their formative years. It keeps many of them in horizontal networks, wrapped up in social cocoons with other people their age when they could be connecting with people who are older and wiser. It keeps them dependent on parents and administrators and bank loans when they could be gaining their independence. It keeps them stuck within academic echo chambers and identity-political games and the best practices of the last decade when they could be developing and expressing their own thoughts in the field.

It's no wonder the average 21 year-old has some stunted growth. And while it's ultimately their responsibility how they choose to spend their time, I have to feel a little anger on my peers' behalf. All their lives they were told that this was their stepping stone to adulthood. Now it's just holding them back.

I would not be considered "ahead" of too many average 21 year-olds if I had not chosen to opt out of this world myself. So I'm not congratulating myself too much on any current lead I have. I think young people will wake up to the Faustian bargain of college soon*.

And when they do, I'm going to have a whole bunch of serious competition** out here in the real world. It's going to be great.

** I already see it with the young people of Praxis and other college alternatives. These people give me a run for my money and make me hopeful that "21 year-old" can mean something other than "inexperienced, irresponsible, entitled millennial."*

*** Also, life is not a competition, yo. The whole concept of ranking people as being "ahead" of others makes some huge assumptions, including that we all have the same goals and values. That's not the case. We're all running our own races over here, and we're competing against ourselves more than against anyone else.*