

Family Ties



Send him mail.



"Insight for the Young and Unrestrained" is an original weekly column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found here. IYU-only RSS feed available here.

I've been thinking a lot about social bonds lately, as it has taken me an unfortunately long time to learn how to really connect with other people. I think the experience of coming from a place of psychological isolation from my others has given me a unique perspective on the process of friendship and familial bonding. It's also made me so very appreciative of how far I've come in learning the skill of connection.

It seems it's in our nature to generalize the identities of the masses of people we tend to only marginally interact with every day. Our brains simply aren't shaped to construct and recognize personal identities for every single face we pass in the street, or everyone we share a few sentences with as we go about our days. We handle this by generalizing individuals with common traits into large and ill-defined groups. There's not really any harm in this, initially, and in fact it seems to be a necessary aspect of how our minds make sense of the world and other people.

It becomes a problem when the stereotypes and generalizations we construct or inherit about people prevent us from actually getting to know them as individuals. It takes a surprising amount of effort and mental acuity to invest the energy necessary to really come to know someone else, and I think it is primarily this laziness which prevents most people from really getting to know each other. They only recognize each other as the social identities and masks they wear to get by in a world of superficial anonymity.

The people we really bond with are those who we've allowed ourselves to get to know more personally. Ultimately, we see them as extensions of ourselves. The frequency with which we accomplish this depends on the quality of the people around us, but more importantly on how open we are to making these bonds in the first place, which may mean expanding ourselves further than we are comfortable doing. The moment we start to care about someone else, we open ourselves up to a whole new world of emotional sensitivity, which means greater joys and also potentially greater sorrows.

The people we learn to call family are the ones we've fully accepted into the folds of our minds. It's easiest to reach this level of social kinship with the people we've grown up with, especially if they are blood relatives and thus share many physical and psychological attributes. But there's no reason to end the continual expansion of this process as we age. It may become harder to keep growing and letting new members into the club as our identities solidify, but that's only all the more reason to keep ourselves forever loose and growing.

I'm so incredibly grateful for the people I've learned to love and accept into my growing sense of identity, and who in turn have reciprocated this care and kindness back onto me. Love is a skill that must be honed by those who lack it, or they will remain damned to walk the earth alone. But healthy socialization isn't just a luxury for the extroverts and social butterflies of the world. It's a necessary part of the process to becoming a fully-functioning human being in an insane world. For me and many others, it's among the most difficult of steps along the journey.

If you truly cherish what you have with your "family", don't let it stop. Keep growing and spreading this gift onto any others in your life who are worthy of your attention. Sometimes all someone needs is a little push in the right direction. It was only a series of little pushes which eventually brought me out of the shadows of isolation and has allowed me to see others as they really are. This has made all the difference in the world to my quality of life on earth.