

You Are Someone's Stereotype

I realized recently that I am a stereotypical native of Charleston, South Carolina. Yes, unfortunately it's true. I wear boat shoes and occasionally even what might be described as "preppy" clothing (it's unintentional, I assure you). I sail boats. I know how to dance the shag. I have an unusual proclivity for Southern hospitality and old-fashioned gestures.

I'm also a stereotypical startup dude. I use a Mac, I "work hard and play hard," I listen to Tim Ferriss and "Masters of Scale," and I use the word "startup" too much.

Now don't get me wrong: I love Charleston, and I love startups. What I don't like about them is the sameness that comes out of both of them. You probably feel the same about your own community, background, etc. Like me, you have probably cultivated yourself as someone who is unique, who stands apart from all the lemmings marching in lockstep.

Then, like me, you realize that (at least in some ways) you embody the sameness of some community, somewhere. And no matter how special you are, you realize (like me) that in some way, you are someone's stereotype for something.

Maybe you fit the stereotype of a runner, or a heavy metal fan, or a weight lifter, or a vegan. You may be different from other runners, heavy metal fans, weight lifters, or vegans in all other respects, but insofar as your pursuit of a passion is shared with others, it's bound to create some common characteristics in all of you. A stereotype will catch up to you in the end.

This is a humbling realization. You are special in so many ways, but in some, you are just like a lot of people.

Maybe that's not a bad thing. A good goal in life isn't specialness – it's meaning. And if meaning for you comes from running, or moshing to heavy metal music, accepting the stereotype of a runner or a metal fan isn't the highest price you could pay.

And to the extent that meaning does require true uniqueness, you won't find it by denying the things you love. Lean in to the passions or strengths or roots that you love. A worthwhile uniqueness will come from authentically remixing all of your stereotypes into a type that has never been seen before.

In my case at least, I'm probably one of the most Charlestonian (overly polite, rarely fails to wear a collared shirt) startup dudes you're likely to find. I'll live with it.