

The Irreplaceable Survives the Interchangeable

Conformity may be craven, but it is a powerful and common survival strategy throughout nature. “Blending into the herd” works often enough. But for many reasons, conformity fails in the long run.

Why? Because in imitating the crowd, the conformist becomes interchangeable with every other member of that crowd. If he is lost, it is no great loss – he is standing right next to his replacement. So his conformity may buy him safety in the moment, but it will hide any advantage he might offer to the group/person presenting a danger to him.

The nonconformist on the other hand takes a big risk of being killed or otherwise eliminated. But in standing out, he clearly establishes a unique sense of value. Think of the “crazy” artistic genius, the brilliant political dissident, the rogue inventor and entrepreneur. He may have ups and downs in the short term due to his intransigence, but he will also be seen as someone harder to replace, and in that sense his safety may improve over that of the conformist.

Whether or not you choose to be a conformist might depend on your idea of safety. It’s true that the conformist may never be killed, but in hiding in the group he may also miss his opportunities to reproduce, or to leave some other kind of mark in the world. This is an extinction event all its own. The nonconformist may risk short-term discomfort or even destruction, but in the long run his works are more irreplaceable and therefore held with more care by the rest of the world.

This has practical implications.

Communities that try to become like every other community – say, by adding a bunch of fast food restaurants – will be interchangeable, ultimately replaceable, and ultimately not maintained by their citizens. A community with hundreds-years old churches and buildings and memory will last. Anything else you wish to preserve should follow this principle and be unafraid to stand out.

Originally published at JamesWalpole.com.