

Trade Peer Pressure for Past Pressure

“Tradition means giving a vote to most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. . . Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about.” – G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy

Peer pressure is shockingly sneaky. Despite all the warnings against it, I’ve ended up falling into many of the lifestyle choices (high-consumption, etc) of people around me – even while being able to break the mold of peer pressure in other ways (skipping college, etc).

I want to try to live my own life, as fully as possible without the (unconscious) rule of following the masses. Maybe that’s possible for me. Maybe I’ll fail. But I have discovered at least one way of thinking about peer pressure that’s helping me on my way:

Even if it is impossible to break free of the sway of others, why settle for such a poor pack of peers?

There’s no particular reason I have to let the pressure of my 21st century late millennial, city-dwelling, and social-media driven peers be my only guiding light and influence.

I’m looking a little further back – and biographies have been helping to change my perspective on who my peers can be.

With the great “cloud of witnesses” of those long-dead I can pick and choose a much better cross-section of peers to pressure me.

I can look to people like Cato to learn how to resist corruption and face death bravely.

I can look to people like Frederick Douglass, who stood up to claim his manhood and freedom from slavery.

I can look to Richard Winters (of the 101st Airborne, *Band of Brothers* fame) to learn how to lead people well.

I can look to Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin and other Americans of the Enlightenment era for inspiration on becoming a learned and accomplished man.

I can look to Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Sophie Scholl or Pino Lella to learn how to act from faith and justice against a system of darkness.

Spend enough time around the good and dead people of the past and you will grow in their direction – just like you might grow in the direction of your millennial peers. Our brains don't seem to mind treating the dead recorded as if they were living. Several hours listening to an audiobook about Benjamin Franklin might have much the same effect of spending time with the man himself, and being influenced by him.

Listen to the words of wise, good men and women. Read their biographies. Imitate them – play-acting if you must. This past pressure is a far better and far more productive kind of peer pressure.

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