

When I Grow Up



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.

When they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I had no idea how the meaning of that question would change for me in the coming years. They tell you to look around and pick from a list of social roles one which you’d feel good about donning the uniform and duties of. You say you want to be a firefighter, a police officer, or a doctor, because these identities seem important and noble in their respective ways. It seems only natural to equate theatrics with importance. I scoffed at those boring old desk jobs: the accountants, the cubicle warriors, the retail chain store managers. I wanted my life to be the embodiment of excitement and adventure. I wanted to laugh in the face of conventionality and social normalness. I wanted to be a champion among ants.

My goal today is simple, but no less grand in its ambition. I want my actions to instigate change in reality. I want my existence to operate at a net gain, not a loss. I want there to be more opportunity in the world as a result of what I did with my life. I want people’s lives to be better. I don’t know how I’m always going to fit into society’s mold of established professions. I don’t know what titles I’ll be using to describe the kind of man I am or how I earn my bread. But I do know what kind of man I will be so long as I am fit to keep living.

I don’t know what the world of tomorrow will look like. I was already lavishly underprepared to try to carve out an existence for myself in the world of today acting on the teachings of yesterday. I don’t know what I will do to sustain myself in an environment which never stands still long enough to make up its mind about what kind of champions it needs. Today might be the day I realize the right path for me, only to have it supplanted by a superior one tomorrow or next week. The world grows smaller every day as my understanding of it grows larger. Will my worldview ever stop? Will I ever be able to put my foot down in utter achievement and proclaim that I have finally done it? “I’ve finally figured out reality! Look out world. I’m ready to act now.” Not likely. The question of who I want to be has to shift to address who I am at my core.

I am a man who acts. My actions can have many labels ascribed to them. My identity could be summarized with one or many words, depending on what you consider important. What I consider important is that I create more good than evil in each passing day. That I produce more than I consume. That I find a way to sustain my existence which does not necessitate force against my fellow man or leave me as a burden on another's efforts. I will be many things in my life, but I will not be a thief or a mooch.

The world needs many things. It will always continue to need. What it needs most are men capable of acting, and I am always shocked to find how few of us there are. They talk. They bicker. They debate. They whine. They daydream. They blame. They project. They vilify. They do everything they can to avoid acting. Then they have the self-inflated nerve to criticize and condemn those who do act. They hate others for doing imperfectly that which they are incapable of doing at all. The second worst thing a man can do is refuse to act. The worst is to attack and destroy a man who does. When you produce nothing of value, your only semblance of fulfillment comes from tearing down others who do so you will have nothing to be compared to. For many, self-esteem comes not from the pursuit of personal excellence but the degradation of the excellence of others. They are the real criminals in the world today, and do more to hold back progress than all the warlords and policymakers combined.

As the the needs of the world only continue to accelerate in their rate of change, the importance of willing productive action will grow ever stronger. I can't let myself be frustrated by circumstantial externalities anymore. My life is my own to make or break, to create or devastate, to overcome or succumb to obstacles. What do I want to be when I grow up? An actor, as in one who acts. One who grows and adapts as necessary to always ensure his own survival and the enrichment of his immediate environment. Someone who but for a brief time was able to overcome the universal flow of entropy as it ravaged his body creating disorder and chaos everywhere except where he applied his mind and hands to build new structure.

I want to be a producer. I want to be someone who didn't give up and surrender despite everything working against him. I want my life to influence others to do something worthwhile. I want to create something, anything, so long as it somehow better the world. The job opportunities in this field are ample, but only available to those brave and clever enough to go after them. If my opportunity to influence reality comes packaged in a suit and tie, so be it. If it means spending countless hours inputting numbers into a database simply to ensure a steady production line, so be it. If it means scorn and vilification from those who are themselves afraid to act... So be it.

Excellence wears many hats. When I'm stuck shoveling shit, you can bet I will shovel shit like hell until a better opportunity emerges. The true mark of a man is how he acts when times are hard and he has to think outside the box and operate beyond his comfort zone.

I'll wear many hats in the decades to come; hopefully each of them more productive and prestigious than the last. But never will I let myself follow into the trap of a narrow and idle mind. I'll adapt as the needs of the world call for it, and in the process attempt to retain some of my youthful zest as I keep my mind in a state of perpetual novelty and learning. The most inspiring old timers I have ever known were those who refused to slow down and embrace retirement from the world. When we stop producing, we stop living.