

You're So Much Bigger on The Inside



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.

Don't for one second ever let anyone put you in a box. Life is hard and the world is full of obstacles, so there's really no sense in letting anyone else impose more onto you. Maybe you've noticed, as I have, that however you first introduce yourself to people or the first real impression you create upon them is how they will hold you to act indefinitely, for better or worse. People do this because they can't easily change an idea once it's been rooted in their minds. It's the same reason a successfully indoctrinated idea triumphs even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The mind goes rigid. This is why first impressions can be so important if a person's long-term opinion of you will affect your life significantly. Even the views our own friends and family have of us, which we usually consider to be positive connotations, are holding us all back from being everything we could be. Maybe you've experienced a time when you lost old friends because you changed in some way and they didn't like it. You might have seen this as personal growth, but they saw it betrayal and abandonment.

As absurd as this sounds, it's extremely common human behavior. It's so common, we almost always start to unconsciously conform to the preconceptions of ourselves the people closest to us have grown comfortable with to avoid rocking the boat and upsetting the equilibrium of our social lives. Maybe this is why the so-called "spiritual" adepts (the monks, the swamis, the Jedi, etc.) have historically chosen lives of relative seclusion and without significant personal attachment. Psychological attachment of any kind can be limiting to personal growth because it anchors us to the perceptions others desire to maintain of us. The moment we try to step outside of being A and become B or C, the teeming masses will scream, shout, and restrain us, insisting that we have always been and will always continue to be A, because that is how they prefer to think of us. It doesn't matter what A is. It doesn't even have to be anything negative or looked down upon. The resistance to change, especially after adolescence, is almost universal.

Recovering alcoholics and drug addicts know this. They almost always have to separate themselves from the social influences in their lives who know them as a “user” because the persistence of that psychological imprint in their rigid minds makes changing extraordinarily difficult. Change becomes no longer just a battle against yourself, but against everyone around you tying you to the very past you are trying to move away from. If, instead of insisting that you are the person they prefer to see you as, they welcomed with childlike curiosity the wonders of personal evolution happening to you and became eager to see what you would turn into next, they would become assets to your journey instead of dead-weight. This is also, incidentally, how prejudice and bigotry are born. “John is X, and all X’s are Y”. It doesn’t have to be race, gender, religion, political affiliation, sexual orientation, or any of the other obvious social boxes. It has to do with the identity even the people who “know” you hold onto when they think of you.

If ceaseless personal improvement is your goal, it means you can only optimize the process by surrounding yourself primarily with people whose personalities are as fluid and accepting of change as your own. But don’t worry about having to break old bonds, because you won’t even be the one to cut the ties to your outdated associations. They’ll probably do that for you the moment they notice you no longer fit into the tiny mental box they’ve made to store you in, along with all the other characters they keep in their psychological possession. When you no longer favor the characters in a sitcom, you stop watching it. And that’s all you are to most of these people: another character in the movie that is their life. They will eagerly switch you off the moment the programming is no longer enjoyable for them. You deserve better than this, and when you get over the initial shock of losing someone you once regarded so highly, you will wonder how you ever let them occupy so much space in your life when there were so many other quality people out there worth bonding with.

The real trick is applying this on the flipside. Can you, in all honesty, learn to see the people you have known for years in the same light as the strangers whose back story and potential futures you have no predefined conceptions of? Can you let go of the limiting labels that are immediately brought to mind when you think of others, even if they seem to openly embrace these labels? You already know how hard it is to become more than what you are used to being when everyone around you is reinforcing the old identity. I’ve always thought that the role of a good teacher is not merely to explain how something works or transfer knowledge in some form, but to see potential in students that they cannot see in themselves and push them toward it. A true friend or companion should never demand that you sacrifice growth to maintain their illusion of comfort- or perpetuate the plot of their personal movie. Someone worth bonding with or including in your life should celebrate any proactive change in you, even if it means a shattering of the comfortable and familiar.

I don’t presume to suggest I know how big you really are on the inside, or how far you can

go. I think we all spend our entire lives trying in vain to see further and further past the curve in the road ahead of us. Every new development or revelation may lead to previously unpredictable aspirations, talents, passions, and physical opportunities. But I do know that the gross majority of humans I have ever met go to extreme lengths to artificially limit just how big they can grow. The world around them grows larger every day, but they remain stuck in tunnel vision on the path that was laid before them by a scared and naïve cultural perspective dictating who they were and how the world works. Changing from a limited path to one of greater opportunity means short-term losses in exchange for long-term gains, yet so few people will have the bravery and self-honesty to make this exchange in any transition larger than a few baby steps at a time.

I think the only universally applicable principle that all people can and should follow is to do whatever it takes to know yourself. Find out who you really are when you strip away all the external identification vectors and inherited cultural voices demanding you to play a part in their show. For some people, a scarier idea than this does not exist. What remains when all the attachments you use to find comfort in a chaotic world no longer apply? The fundamental aspect of whatever you are. Terrifying, I know. Then comes the really scary part: learning to be that thing in spite of all the distractions and anchors unconsciously trying to box you into all their comforts.

It's probably pretty easy to be yourself 100% of the time when you spend all day meditating alone in a cave on a mountaintop in the Himalayas. It's quite another thing to willingly enter the fray and dodge the bullets of personal judgment and subjective classification that are an inescapable part of society. It's not even other people's fault. It's the only way they can comprehend what you are, by forcing you into the locked mental framework they've come to know reality through. But I do believe that a person who knows himself strongly enough gains a sort of immunity to this effect, or at least a strong resistance. He can take on whatever form and personality is called for in a given situation, and use its strengths to his advantage and then discard it when he no longer needs it, as easily as he might change a set of clothes. It's only when you've been wearing one pair of jeans day in and day out for as long as you can remember that you might actually make the insane mistake of thinking them to be your actual skin. Just be prepared to face the social ramifications which unfold when you decide to try on a new pair of pants or, heaven forbid, be truly naked for once in your life.