

Too-Tight Fit

The high school stereotype that popular media broadcasts is that either a student is an eccentric outcast in a normal community, or an eccentric community outcasts a normal student. There's always the dichotomy, the typical coming-of-age story that involves coming to terms with society via some sort of dramatic clash.

But what if fitting *in* wasn't the problem, but standing *out*?

I've always been at peace, even very comfortable, with the school community—I don't hold grudges against my classmates, and (hopefully) neither do they to me. There is a sense of stability in the Barlow community that comes with the three years' time of my education there. I participate in class, do my homework, study for tests. I run cross country and track, bowl on the school team, compete with the mathletes. People recognize me for who I am and what I do, and therefore I am established into the school community.

But I'm really too comfortable.

It started to become clear when I filled out the application for the National Honor Society that I needed to be more of a leader. I had service roles in community, and I had not infringed school rules or broken the peace. But when the leadership section of the form came up—this section the NHS officers emphasized—I found nothing for myself. The only “leadership” roles I had considered myself a part of were the ones that they discounted: helping others study and “leading by example.” It was quite disappointing: three years of school and nothing I took leadership of. Nothing I did to take control. Despite all the effort I had spent on trying to get ahold of my scholastic life and become a part of the community, I had taken no thought into the idea of instigating anything for myself.

I realized that I was exemplary at the ordinary. An exemplary ordinary, but not an ordinary exemplar. I was Auden's “Unknown Citizen,” the one to do everything right and do nothing at all. I had tried so hard just to fit in and continue fitting in; my mind was Greg from *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, looking to find comfort in the familiar. But the battle had not been won, my mind was not at peace, not even a resolution so cheesy and simple as that of Greg's diaries could be discovered in the dark misgivings of my subconscious.

This knowledge only gave the impression that, although ostensibly the opposite, I was exactly what I thought I was least: struggling in vain to catch the train of society. Although not in the traditional sense of fitting into the social norms and customs of a high school community, my thoughts were the battlefield of my identity. I was different because I was trying to be different, distancing myself from the others, who found safety as a homogeneous group.

But this wasn't quite the kind of “different” that I was looking for. I was hoping to become some inspirational, angelic superhero to my people—that is, to epitomize the spirit of a specific club or group at school. To be the one that teammates can look up to and call “captain” with surging pride, and whose opponents would recognize as formidable in his prowess. Although this view is the sensationalized view I hold in my head, I also picture the captain of any team or club in a similar, albeit reduced, manner. While I haven't attempted to achieve the prestigious rank of captain yet, I have been an active member to the full extent: a leader in all but name.

Thus, by my own contradiction, the problem was resolved. I fit in, but I stand out. Just as a lottery winner might feel wealthier if he had previously been homeless, or as an immigrant might feel if he had previously been a refugee of national crisis, I was aware of the problems that I faced, and thus felt more relief when I realized my differences.

Reading the essay “I Am Awesome” has helped offset some of these fears. It observes that we dwell on our inadequacies, with “humble” inaccuracies considered socially acceptable—but it argues that this is wrong, allowing our own deceitful thoughts to control our action. The situation here is reversed: the shortcomings of my action is propelling the doubt in my thought.

It appears that the entire struggle to fit in or stand out is really a struggle in vain. There is always a blend of the two—superficially or not, deliberately or not. Beginning by thinking or doing will already trigger the cycle in “I Am Awesome” or its inverse. The wheels are also turning. Just think positive!