

Being an outsider can be a good thing

I have never been, and likely never will be, one of the cool kids. One of the “generally accepted” kids, maybe. But never one of the cool kids.

There’s something different about me in whichever group I find myself in. It’s not that I don’t think or act like anyone else on the planet; it’s just that when I’m in a group, when I’m categorized, there’s always just enough to make me slightly incompatible with the rest of the group. Like being an artist who excels in calculus, a Christian who’s a free spirit or a girly girl who’s a gym rat.

If we didn’t have a love affair with labels in America it probably wouldn’t matter, but we default to it. And not quite fitting into any group can make for a lonely life. In fact, several years ago, the web-site eHarmony rejected me because it was too difficult to box

me into a category, making it impossible to match me with anyone.

At least, that’s how I took it. Verbatim, the screen that appeared when I clicked “Submit” after I had spent several hours completing their personality inventories said, “One of the requirements for successful matching is that participants fall within certain defined profiles. We are so convinced of the importance of creating compatible matches to help people establish happy, lasting relationships that we

sometimes choose not to provide our service rather than risk an uncertain match.”

It continued, “Unfortunately, we are not able to make our profiles work for you. Our matching model could not accurately predict with whom you would be best matched.” Yes, I save such proud badges of individuality.

While I don’t mind telling the eHarmony story to anyone willing to listen, I sometimes do mind having to pay out the nose for a cell phone plan that allows me to talk to people who are like me but with whom I can’t hang out because they don’t live in Louisville.

Sometimes, sitting at a table with a large group of people but still sitting by myself is disconcerting. There are times when it bothers me to watch people who are incredibly charismatic reach a level of success far beyond what their level of education or experience would predict.

And I would estimate that there

have been at least 150 times within the past two years that the varied experience on my résumé — the absence of a straight trajectory, the perceived disconnect between my college major and my job experience, the indication that I didn’t know what I wanted when I was 19 and therefore couldn’t choose a career path right then and there — have steered potential employers toward someone who was a more certain match and away from the applicant who had the novel idea to pursue a multitude of interests.

But being an outsider has its benefits, though. I learned that during Thrivals 3.0 at the recent Idea Festival. At the event, I heard scientist, former rock music journalist, photographer, paleopsychologist, entrepreneur, undercover relationship guru and general genius Howard Bloom speak. He told an audience of mostly teenagers that exploring all your interests while you’re young helps you to avoid an identity crisis later on, and he

recalled having to build a team of friends through inspiring, albeit dead, historical figures and finding comfort in books when the other kids adamantly and unequivocally rejected him.

“As a perpetual outsider,” he said, “you can see the inside of things in ways that nobody else sees them.” Using that point of view as a public relations executive, he was able to change the careers of people like Prince, John Mellencamp and Michael Jackson.

Hmm. Makes me relieved to know it’s not all about the ability to work a room, and happy that, though I’m not a general genius, greatness in multiple areas is possible. And a little wistful that I am generally accepted. But just a little. ♣

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