

Conformity and Identity

Most people want to belong, but for some, like Brandon Carson, the price of membership is too high. He writes:

I like who I am. I have come to accept myself on psychological as well as physical terms. I not only like myself, I like everyone around me. Today, for some gays and especially our youth, that is really hard to say. To learn to accept yourself as you are, and then to start liking yourself completely, is an obstacle some people never overcome. That alone is tough, but to finally do that and then start living a complete and fulfilling life is really too much, isn't it? Is it really too much to ask, for us to be able to go out into society and hold jobs and pursue careers and live the "American Dream"? Should we stay closeted and have to hide our feelings, forever living in a make-believe world, hoping that no one finds out about us? The pressure is inevitably on at full force, and even the smallest decisions could radically change our lives.

At sixteen, Carson decided to stop pretending and accept himself. His family and friends had more difficulty doing so. Carson still recalls the way a close friend responded. At the time, the two boys were sharing a post-office box.

*I received a package one day that was torn at the edges. [My friend] didn't really think any harm could be done by opening the package, so he did. The package contained some books on gay youth that I had ordered. Now the cat was out of the bag. He asked me about it and I decided to stop denying it. I came out to my best friend. I told him I was a homosexual, and that I was receiving literature about it. At this stage of my life it is still too painful to discuss the consequences of his rejection. I haven't gotten over the loss of my friend yet, and I probably never will. But I've learned some real valuable lessons about life, and I've learned them early, hopefully to prevent any further losses. I've learned people are unique in their own peculiar ways and I've learned that most people are more readily able to accept old ways than they are able to accept new ones. I could go on and discuss the loss of my friend, the painful nights crying and wondering, the disgusted looks he gave me at school, and the fact that I had to face pain too early. But why should I tell what each person has to learn by himself...
Everyone experiences pain, the emptiness of losing someone you love very much. But why should we be tormented and ridiculed? There are so many unanswered questions.
Maybe someday, someone will realize what a ridiculous predicament society puts homosexuals in. Until then, I guess we must keep the faith and never stop fighting.²⁴*

CONNECTIONS

Carson wonders, "Why should we be tormented and ridiculed?" How would you answer his question? What does it suggest about the way society shapes an individual's identity? About the difficulty of going against the group?

Eve Shalen (reading/video) maintains that "usually people are made outcasts because they are in some way different from the larger group." Do you agree? How do Carson's experiences support your view? How do his experiences call your opinion into question?

Carson writes of the pain of rejection. It is a universal experience in that almost everyone experiences that pain at one time or another. Why does it hurt to be rejected? Are all rejections equally painful? Or do some hurt more than others? How did Carson handle rejection? How do you and your friends handle it? What strategies seem to be most effective?