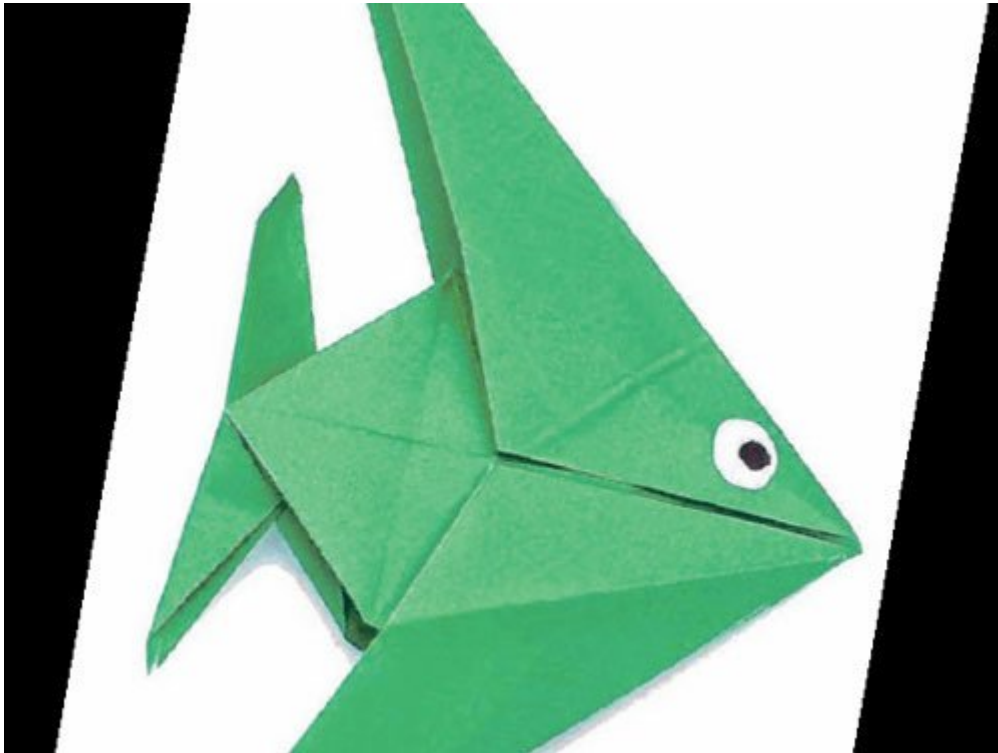


I want to break free

DH deccanherald.com/content/530110/i-want-break-free.html

February 20, 2016



I want to break free

Until I read Tim Challis's two-year-old blog post titled 'Why my family doesn't do sleepovers' recently, I had not heard anyone speak against sleepovers. An empty-nester now, I still feel a pang when I hear a young mother excitedly planning one and sometimes wonder if my decision to never allow my child sleepovers was right.

All kids do it is the only reason I feel I may have made my daughter forgo a childhood experience. My reasons against it were to do with my gut sense and wisdom. I know the daughter may have felt left out; she may have been bullied too, but I also know that she understood my reasons, and in the long run it may have instilled in her an important lesson for life — the need to not fit in always.

We always have a reason for doing or not doing a thing — the worst can be because everyone else is. Why always blend in? We're not clones, nor robots. Why go against our grain just to stay within the circle of social approval? It is those who have had the courage to stand away from the crowd that have shown us the true worth of life and living. So the question we must ask every time we are called upon to act or decide is, why am I doing this?

Blending in

I notice just how many urban, middle class children wear braces these days. Not all have crooked teeth that require aligning, but every child (and their parents) wants perfect teeth. Whatever we can attain within the accepted parameters of appearance, we try to — colour of skin, shape of nose, lip or body. Irreversible psychological damage is caused to people when they are shamed for not being like others. For all the uproar over letting a child be, we know how people who are different are alienated. There is no merit in being quiet or being a listener — a shrinking violet, one is branded.

A young person who wants to take even one year off to figure out life and calling, is compared to peers in jobs and universities. Someone who refuses to be part of gossip groups is considered arrogant. A male friend who wanted to be a chef was pushed into doing ‘anything else except that’, and two decades later, he has still not found his bearings in any job. He continues to cook exceptionally well for friends and family. Another friend does not drive. I cannot imagine how many times he must have been derided for it. In any way, a person tries to be their own nature, they are made to feel less by others. By and by, the world prods and pushes us into becoming who they want to see, and we lose who we are.

The need in people to fit in is associated with their self-worth, and it is believed that those with lower self-esteem and confidence are crowd followers. People who bow to peer pressure fear rejection. All of us fear rejection in varying degrees. Acceptance is what we want most.

Thinking for oneself, the one quality that sets each of us apart is unfortunately almost always confused with being selfish and inconsiderate, especially in Indian families. Children are always ‘told to do’ because elders know best. Traditionally, ‘listening to elders’ has been a matter of deference. Even today, in most families, children and youngsters are not encouraged to discuss their points of view. Important decisions are made for them by parents and elders. A lot of young people go through life without questioning much; growing into adults incapable of making decisions on their own.

Ill-equipped to think for ourselves, we resist change because change requires decision-making. This feeling of helplessness makes many of us put all the faith that we should have in ourselves, in godmen and swamis. We want them to make all our decisions for us. We don’t want to be accountable for our own choices.

Social approval

People are more content when they are true to their nature. The reason for strife in families and social ills like honour killings, dowry, gender discrimination and female foeticide are all the result of our need for a social face to blend in with all the other faces. The stories of how we suffer because of this mindset are familiar and keep repeating themselves.

A high-schooler once told me that she was finding her studies so hard that several times during the day she shut herself into the bathroom and cried without letting her parents know. Her parents wanted her to be an engineer and she had little aptitude for math.

Today, she's a budding media professional who quit mathematic in college and pursued the subject of her interest. Were those torturous years worth anything? How do parents cope when children take extreme steps when thus pressurised to study, take up jobs, or marry against their will? Why must we scar our own psychologically for societal approval? My househelp's married daughter ran away unable to bear the circumstances within the family.

The lady was distraught. But, as soon as the daughter returned, she was coaxed into going back to live with the abusive husband and mother-in-law. The mother refuses to accept that there can be another way out of the situation. She is ready to bear the mental agony of what may happen to the daughter, but not the social stigma of having her live with her. So many young women, ill-equipped to live on their own and earn, find themselves in such helpless situations, and unable to cope, many end their lives. They are not always from poor or uneducated families. Whoever tries to do something different runs the risk of ridicule, social ostracism and failure. "Fear binds people together. And fear disperses them. Courage inspires communities: the courage of an example — for courage is as contagious as fear." (Susan Sontag, writer, filmmaker).

Harbingers of change

At another level, this lack of conviction manifests in the absence of moral courage — a helplessness to do what we should, but can't because no one else is. Courage comes from convictions and convictions formed from being told to, do not constitute a good grounding in morals. We look away from the crying person on the street because no one else is stopping to ask; we pay bribe to get work done because that is how everyone else got their work done; we do not speak up when a person in power claims their right out of turn. Every time we do not react to acts of corruption or injustice, we succumb to this pressure. It lowers the moral fabric of the nation.

It is not enough for me to wish that my house-help takes her daughter back; it is my moral duty to convince her to help her daughter lead a better life. My father made it a point to attend every inter-caste marriage he was invited to. He said people needed to show support for such social changes. We must give strength to those who are attempting to bring positive social changes.

If we must blend in, it must be to come together for common good. In a country where most kids (and their parents) still dream of becoming software engineers and landing a job in the US of A, it must have taken immense willpower on the part of Madhu Chandan SC to give up his software job and settled life with family in San Jose, California to return to farm in Mandya, Karnataka. When his passion for farming began to pull him back, he listened not to what others would say or do in a similar situation, but to being true to his own nature, his calling. Thanks to his move, he went on to create fulfilling lives for himself and other farmers. Madhu Chandan SC saw the plight of the farmers in Mandya who were not able to find market for their produce and set up the hugely successful organic farmers co-operative, Organic Mandya.

We are at the cusp of amazing social change — taboos are being broken, people are questioning age-old beliefs. A lot of the credit for this goes to social media networks. Not just are these highlighting stories of amazing moral courage and conviction, they are enabling support for new ideas, thoughts and innovations. People gravitate towards their deeper calling and find support and encouragement from others.

Recently, in Gujarat, a person invited thousands of widows to his son's wedding. Widows are kept out of auspicious functions, especially marriages, lest their fate befall those getting married. This Republic Day, in an initiative by the state government, girls with the highest educational qualification hoisted the national flag in Haryana villages, while the state Education Department did not just send invitations for Republic Day celebration to families with infant girls; they also addressed the invitations in the names of the girls. Kudos then to, "The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules... Because they change things. They push the human race forward..." (Rob Siltanen).