BE YOURSELF

Jack Helfrich

8/13/2020

A couple weeks ago, I got set up with a date for the first time since winter break last year. I don't have much experience going on dates and have historically not found much success in them. So I asked my outgoing friend for some flirting advice. The advice he gave was this: "be yourself." I appreciate the sentiment, and chose to take it as a sort of compliment, but found it to be completely unhelpful. The problem with saying "be yourself" is that "yourself" could mean anything.

"Be yourself" is good advice if "self" is interpreted as an objective descriptor. Don't actively pretend to be someone you aren't. Don't tell your date that you're the point guard for the Lakers when you're really a college sophomore at NYU. Don't tell your date you're from Paris when you're really from Denver. Don't say you love Kodak Black when really you have no clue what his music sounds like. Don't tell blatant lies. Telling the truth is never what people mean when they say "be yourself," but nonetheless–good advice. Plenty of people tell lies to seem more appealing, to protect themselves, and  to convince their date to sleep with them. But when trying to establish a trusting relationship with someone, it's important to be honest. So I agree with the advice in this sense.

But self is a fluid and dynamic thing. We are constantly changing and growing and in turn, we often define ourselves more by our subjective traits than by our objective traits. We are made up of our feelings, opinions, desires, and many other traits which are subject to change. When people say "be yourself" I find that they often mean: don't force yourself to like things you don't like and don't do things you don't want to do. I don't consider myself a pathological liar, but if I'm on a date with a girl who loves Kodak Black, I might say I like his music even if I find it boring and unrelatable. It's not a total lie; I know his music and I don't think it stands for something which I am completely against. However, it is a misrepresentation of how I see

myself. Maybe this is what my friend's advice meant. Maybe he was saying I should hold onto these subjective parts of myself because they are what makes me who I am. But taste is fickle and dynamic–why should I treat it as if it is otherwise?

Why should I try to be myself if myself is someone who dislikes Kodak Black's music? Just because it is who I am, doesn't mean it's good. I should try to be better than who I am. I should try out the perspective of the girl I'm on a date with. I should look at her and realize that no matter what faults she might have, she sees something in Kodak Black's music which I do not see. And I should want her to share her appreciation with me. Not all music is inherently good, I don't want to have an appreciation for nazi punks, but there is no reason to believe that all music we don't understand is bad.

Maybe what my roomate meant by "be yourself" was "be the best version of you."  This is to define self as an elusive ideal; to think of it more of a "true self" than self in the practical sense. On a certain level, I think this is what I assumed he meant because I took "be yourself" as a compliment. I thought he meant "you should try to be you, because you are amazing." Under this context, "be yourself" is a nice encouraging complement (which could certainly be a helpful confidence boost), but it is not good advice because really it's saying the opposite of what it means.

It confuses the person who I am with the person who I want to be. A conceptualization of our ideal selves is important because imagining who we want to be is the only way to become who we want to be. But to think of the self as an ideal is to believe that growth can come from introspection alone which is not the case. Growth comes from looking outward, toward the external world, the objects, creatures, and people around us. These are the things which we must use to build our ideal self, not our internal greatness. If my roommate was talking about self as an elusive ideal, then what he really meant by "be yourself" was: "be the person who you want to be," which is not who I am.

My roommate is not the first to confuse the idea of a "true self" with actual identity. The idolization of "true self" is perpetuated by a seemingly endless well of inspirational quotes from famous artists and creatives: "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken" (Oscar Wilde), "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment" (Ralph Waldo Emerson), "Follow your inner moonlight; don't hide the madness" (Allen Ginsberg), "Don't you ever let a soul in the world tell you that you can't be exactly who you are" (Lady Gaga). These quotes seem profound, but make no sense. They're all telling people not to let others tell them what to do. They are vague mantras which sound encouraging but don't constitute actual advice.

Good advice offers clear guidance which points toward action. "Don't get between a mother bear and her cub" is good advice. It might not be relevant to most people, but it calls for specific action and is clear enough that anyone could understand it. It is far harder to come up with good advice when it comes to universal subjects such as identity, creativity, and dating than bear safety. However T.S Eliot did it in his collection of essays *The Sacred Wood:* "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different*"* (Eliot, page 71). Eliot's words are much more inspiring to me than any variation of "be yourself" because they offer practical guidance toward how to be a poet. It notices that anyone who wants to learn anything in any field must start by taking the time to observe what's already been done. A poet should look at what the great poets of the past have done and build upon their ideas. The great thing about imitating others is it can transcend time and can give new life and meaning to the great artists and creatives of the past. Unlike self obsessed, inwardly focused creation, art which "steals" draws from a universal well of knowledge which can far exceed the capacity that any one person has to learn and grow.

T.S Eliot's advice isn't restricted to artists alone, it's a universal truth which extends to all fields. When it comes to scientific development, the greatest discoveries have come from external observation and study, not from closed off inner pondering. Consider the design of planes, contact lenses, bikes–they mimic the design of nature. Relative to human history, these

are all fairly recent inventions which could never have been achieved by one person alone. The bike could not be invented if not for the minds and collective wisdom of countless humans. It could not have been made until after the wheel, the pulley, the gear, and all the other tiny parts which make up the bicycle.

Not every mathematician needs to reinvent calculus. Infact, someone who fails to study calculus would probably never be considered a mathematician at all. But for whatever reason many artists seem to think copying what has been done goes against creativity. Thinking about the arts as shared ideas which have progressed is helpful for encouraging creatively. Music made today is not necessarily greater than the music of the past, just as iPhones are not necessarily a more brilliant invention than the printing press, it just couldn't exist if not for hundreds of minds throughout history.

Lead singer of the alternative rock band Wilco, Jeff Tweedy, speaks about the dangers of creating in isolation in a video he made with the youtube channel Topic:

Punk rock forced you to shun even Neil Young when I was growing up. We made fun of our friends who listened to Neil Young because he was a hippie and we thought that hippies were the enemy. I don't know where we got that idea because it was outrageous. It was stupid. You know I think rock and roll culture and counterculture, the sixties and the notion of teen rebellion and just the general idea of a generation gap is a bill of goods that was destructive, and sold to people as marketing, and it's ridiculous. It doesn't help anybody to seal yourself off from the wisdom of people older than you that have been through more than you. I've always thought it was an outrageous demand for authenticity or seriousness as an artist to claim, I don't know, like you were somehow able to transcend time and deify yourself as a young person.

The deification which Tweedy speaks of is what makes the idea of "be yourself" dangerous. We turn ourselves into gods when we say that the secrets to greatness are within, and that's too much responsibility for anyone to bear.

Tweedy also explains how our obsession with our taste holds us back from the benefits of appreciating things. It is our obsession with holding onto our taste and desire which incline us to turn against what we don't understand. Classifications such as punk and hippie often define us more by what we dislike than what we like. It is good to question widely accepted notions, and good to find the things we don't like about types of music or movements. But there's no point in ignoring the good parts of the things we don't like.

Tweedy talks further about how he personally tries to avoid holding on to his own taste in music:

> I don't ever trust that my opinion of anything will ever remain intact. I don't try and form fully established opinions of other peoples' music. If anything I listen to a lot of music that I hate all the time because I always want to give it another chance. I always assume it's something wrong with me, that I'm just not getting it. I think its a healthy humble place to be to remind yourself that you can be fallible in your initial assessments or your current assessment of something. Yah, I've had that experience so much that I probably listen to music that I really don't like more than even music I love.

Most reasonable people wouldn't say that their taste in music is what defines good and bad music, but most people also don't bother listening to music which they don't have an appreciation for. It's hard to actively listen to things which aren't enjoyable. No one likes going to the gym for the first time, and most math majors wouldn't say they enjoy reading math textbooks. But it's important to work out to have a healthy body, and it's important to read things which are confusing to grow intellectually. Appreciation for art is no different. And for that matter, dating is no different.

Just as we should learn to understand the music we hate, we should learn to understand the people we hate. And just like music, not all people are inherently good, but just because we don't like someone doesn't mean that they are necessarily bad. If we consider our taste to be entwined with the "ideal self" then it follows that the people who we don't like are bad people. To idolize the "true self" is to give the self an unreasonable capacity to reject those who are different.

This sense of consistency being a virtue was instilled in me through Sunday School. I remember my Sunday School teacher using the story of Peter denying Jesus on the day of his crucifixion to teach the class integrity. The message was: "being a Christian is always being Christian, not just when you're at church." Beliefs are an important part of who we are, and they generally transcend the label of "subjective traits." They are far stronger than taste, and yet still dynamic. For a lot of people their political, religious, or philosophical beliefs dictate more about them than anything else, and I have no authority to claim that people should abandon their beliefs, even the unproven ones.

But what defines the self is not simply our objective traits, or our taste, or our desire–it is our character. This is perhaps where most people feel the most trapped and where external observation is most important. Most people look at their character as a hand they have been dealt and not a part of themselves which they can change. This too I would like to challenge. Character growth should be achieved by the same means which all other growth is, through observation of the external world.

I started my date out by taking us to dinner at an NYU dining hall with some mutual friends. My plan was to take her to a concert at Nublu–a 21+ jazz club in the East Village. I had invested in a fake ID a couple weeks prior and was prepared to use it for the very first time that night. I put it in the front pocket of my wallet and moved my real Colorado driver's license to the back where I keep business cards. It was a cold night, so we were walking as fast as possible. We

arrived at Nublu far sooner than I was expecting. The street was completely empty besides me, my date, and the huge bouncer who instantly sized us up. I quietly asked the bouncer, "Is this Nublu?" He looked at the two of us–cold and with a palpable first date nervousness–and silently nodded. I turned to my date for some encouragement, then back to the bouncer, then muttered, "We're here to see Mono Neon." He remained completely expressionless as he said, "ID" in a firm deep voice. Maybe it was the nerves from the first date, maybe it was because it was my first time using my fake ID–but whatever it was, I handed him both my fake and my real ID. He looked at me, obviously confused. I turned my head to the sky and uttered a defeated, "fuck." There was no second date.

Bibliography:

Eliot, T. S. *The Sacred Wood*. Dodo Press, 2015.

Jeff Tweedy: Learning to Love the Music You Hate | Monologue | Topic
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd8ES224BV4https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd8ES224BV4