

## Stay Weird. Stay Different.

Graham Moore's acceptance speech at the 2015 Academy Awards touched me. The loud applause that greeted his words showed I wasn't alone. He said:

“When I was 16 years old, I tried to kill myself because I felt weird, and I felt different, and I felt like I did not belong. And now I'm standing here, and so I would like for this moment to be for that kid out there who feels like she's weird, or she's different, or she doesn't fit in anywhere. Yes, you do. I promise you do. Stay weird, stay different.”

When I was about the same age, I didn't feel like killing myself. Rather, when I drove by the liquor store in my small rural town, I thought about throwing a rock through its window.

I didn't want to rob it.

I wanted to show my friends, teachers, and other people that I wasn't who I seemed to me. I wasn't the Smart Kid, the Good Kid, the High Grades Kid. This was an outward appearance, not my inward reality.

Inside, I was struggling to handle not only the usual stresses of adolescence, but the alcoholism of my divorced mother. Her drinking and drunken rants became more bizarre at just the wrong time for me.

Like Moore, I felt weird and different as a teenager. At the time, this was disturbing. Now I realize that those feelings of strangeness were, and are, the most vital, important, and precious part of me.

Why? Because the world is really strange. If we deny strangeness, weirdness, differentness — pointers to the mystery of existence — we deny reality. At our peril.

Intuitively, everybody realizes this. Imagine how much applause Moore would have gotten if he'd said, “Stay bland, stay like everybody else.” Probably zero. We admire those who step to the beat of their own drummer, as Thoreau put it.

So what makes us disturbed when we feel out of step with our companions? Why did Moore attempt suicide, and me seriously contemplate the smashing of a liquor store window?

Tough questions to answer. Being philosophically minded, I'm going to jump to this level of explanation, eschewing psychology and sociology.

Simply put, we humans fear reality.

Sure, after a sporting event I often hear "it is what it is" uttered by a player or coach on the losing team. This is spoken with an undertone of regret, though. Rarely, if ever, does someone triumphant detachedly speak the same words.

Unlike other animals, people have a remarkable ability to imagine life as being different than how it actually is. This is good when it opens up new possibilities; bad when we deny who we truly are, or what is truly happening to us.

Same applies to our fellows. As clearly as possible, we need to see others as they are, not as an idealized image.

Everyone is unique. Our lives are distinct. Expressing and embracing individuality isn't an option. It is reality. Strangeness is our birthright up until our last breath.

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