

Lowell Speech – Conformity and Freedom are Compatible

When I was younger my mother constantly told me - No me hables como si yo fuera su amigo – do not talk to me as if I were your friend. My mother always told me this, yet I never quite really got it. Why couldn't I talk to my mom the same way I talked to my friends? Or to my teachers the same way I talked to my boys? These were some social norms that I had to learn quickly and follow in order to avoid a butt whooping. But was this a bad thing? Should I have stood my ground and preserved my individuality by talking to my parents in any way I desired? By conforming to these norms, did I violate a tenet of independence that America cherishes? No. These early life lessons of positive conformity helped me overcome my disadvantaged situation. What I did is normal, I would venture to say that most people do it, and, what is more, positive conformity is necessary for progress.

Conformity is human nature. Studies by Andrew Meltzoff in the 1970s showed that newborns imitate their parents' faces within a day of birth. Other studies suggest that job interviewers prefer candidates who reflect their own actions and emotions, such as smiling when the interviewer smiles. Conformity is ubiquitous and we may not even be aware that we do it.

But where do we draw the line? When is too much conformity a bad thing? When people you grew up with no longer recognize who you are, then you've lost something precious.

I grew up in Union City, NJ, an inner city of working class people, consisting primarily of recent immigrants. Growing up in the inner city, I always found myself gravitating towards the projects, not because I derived pleasure from the aesthetically pleasing brick prisons, but because I thoroughly enjoyed the people that lived there. There were so many kids my age living in such close quarters. All of us would always play basketball and hang out from dawn to dusk. These people with whom I spent most of my childhood and even adolescent years hold a sacred place in my heart. Although many of them have suffered from the typical ailments that plague inner city youth such as

drugs, incarceration and teen pregnancy, it would be extremely bothersome if I were to go back there, as I still do very often, and see someone I knew, and not be able to connect with that person. It should not matter that I am at Harvard and blessed with the many opportunities this place provides. I am lucky and grateful that I am provided with these blessings, but I know that I am no more deserving than any one of my peers growing up.

However, something I believe may have helped me get past the common pitfalls of the ghetto was positive conformity. I didn't negatively conform to the prevailing norms amongst the kids my age that school wasn't cool, that girls are property, that selling drugs is the best and easiest way to make a lot of money. Instead, I bought into the positive notion that education was my vehicle out of my adverse predicament. I wasn't as inflexible in my juvenile ways and was able to conform to what my teachers and coaches were offering. When I was in important occasions, I didn't dress the same way I dressed when I was with my friends. Similarly, I didn't talk the same way I talked to my friends when I talked to people I perceived as important. I was hyper aware of my environment and the situations I was involved in. I believe this positive conformity is what set me apart from my peers and may be a major contributing factor as to why I am here.

Nevertheless this should not change how I carry myself. I pride myself on the ability to relate to anyone no matter on what rung of society that person resides. This humble social connection provides each person with a basic sense of dignity that he or she deserves, and it also builds bridges across communities of people from all facets of life.

I propose a path that worked for me – one of moderate positive conformity and compromise without losing one's self. Conformity is necessary to bring together people who are different and make them seem similar and comfortable. This creates the possibility of agreement and progress. Dr. Erich Fromm, renowned psychologist and sociologist, once said, "Conformity and freedom are

incompatible.” I would say the opposite – conformity and freedom are compatible, and both are necessary for progress of any kind.