

To each their hall of mirrors

We all have our own perspective, our own point of view. And we all so often think we come to know a thing by our experiences with it. (This is known as anecdotal fallacy, in which personal experiences are extrapolated to make dangerous generalizations.) But we don't. Not really. Not even close, actually. Especially when it comes to people.

How could we? We are infinite beings in an infinite universe; there's no way anyone could really understand you. Even your closest loved ones can't possibly articulate all of you. Except you. You are the only one with the key to all your mirrors — all the angles into your soul that, when brought together, comprise YOU. Others have access only to a handful of your mirrors and, as such, can just make out pieces of you: the pieces you let them see, the pieces they want to see. They are blind to the rest. (This idea is inspired by John Green's novel "Paper Towns.")

That's where the fallacy comes in. We make assumptions about someone based on our limited collection of their mirrors. Then, once we've rationalized and categorized them, we label them (think "The Breakfast Club"). Heck, I pick people apart before I've even met them. Tall dudes sporting varsity jackets? Frat bros who only eat at Kraft. Professors who don't curve exams when the average is a 60? Horrible people who deserve to have their tenure reconsidered. I could go on.

Whether those labels are true or not doesn't matter; regardless, we've stripped them of their infinity and squashed them into a one-dimensional Flat Stanley. Because that's how we can explain them to ourselves. But there's more to varsity jackets than burgers and sports, and there's more to no curves than sadistic fascination with student suffering.

Let others squash you — they ain't got the mirrors to understand you anyway. Whatever you do, though, don't squash yourself. It's all too easy to pretend some of your mirrors aren't there. I know, because I've done it.

I used to think that Real Me was a good person, that I was naturally amiable, respectful, kind. Sure, I am those things... most of the time. But sometimes I'm irritable, standoffish, annoying. I scowl at teachers and professors as I stalk into their classroom early in the morning. I ignore friends and cancel hangouts. I pout in pictures (pitiful, I know). I half-ass work. I self-sabotage. I don't follow through on projects, relationships, meetings. I show up late. (I think I should stop now....)

I would write those times off as bad days, telling myself excuses: I'm not acting like myself because I'm not feeling like myself. If I were feeling better... I'd smile. I'd be the life of the party. I'd work hard. I'd take care of myself. I'd be on time. I'd be the good, fun, joyful person I know myself to be.

The problem? I hooked my identity on conditionals, telling myself lies to save face. I refused to acknowledge the parts of me I didn't like, instead blaming their manifestation on my circumstances. I willed myself to believe the only accurate mirrors were those that reflected me on good days.

But the bad days were Real Me too, those mirrors just as accurate. Just because my day, month, year, life wasn't going the way I wanted it to go didn't make my response to it — and the person I was in that moment — any less real. (In fact, I'd argue the opposite: It only matters who you are when things get hard. Anyone can do good when they feel good.) It wasn't life forcing me to take my problems out on others; it was me. My mirrors don't lie.

So long as I ignored my mirrors and remained in denial about who I was, I stayed stuck in the same ol' shit with the same ol' me. How could I possibly change when I ignored the possibility of needing to change? When I accepted that I wasn't a perfect little angel — that I was, in fact, a crappy person half the time — I was finally free to begin taking steps toward changing myself for the better. In this way, I came to like and appreciate Real Me, instead of fantasizing about how awesome Pretend Me was.

You ain't perfect. Odds are, you kinda suck. Don't pretend. No one's fooled. Deep down, not even you.

You might be thinking, "Why should I care if I'm an asswipe? I'm already awesome in other ways. I'll just work on making the awesome parts of me even better." But you can't separate the good from the bad. I tried. And — spoiler alert — I failed.

I had so entrenched myself in the belief that I was awesome and perfect — that Pretend Me was Real Me — that the only way I thought I could get any better was through improving the reflections of me I already liked. So that's what I did.

I was athletic, so I wanted six-pack abs. I was gifted, so I wanted success. At face value, those desires were okay. But I wanted them so badly I didn't stop to acknowledge my tendency to go overboard — especially when it comes to my ambitions (hence my impatience to accomplish them). So, when I started pursuing these goals, I failed to go about them in a healthy, sustainable way.

I became anorexic and lost twenty pounds. I threw myself at internship applications and resume boosters, to the point where I was so stressed and exhausted I could hardly walk (check out my other articles if you want more on THAT drama). I had abs and bullet points, sure, but I'd broken those mirrors — those pieces of myself — in the process.

But what if I hadn't been pretending?

I would've recognized Real Me's excessive ambition as a byproduct of not being enough for myself. I would've understood that, so long as I remained in this state of self-discontentment, I was a threat to myself — because I was willing to stop at nothing to change the person I saw in the mirror (literally). I would have seen how I could end up hurting myself and consequently been able to ensure that didn't happen by adapting my method of achieving those goals — working out more rather than eating (wayyy) less, for example. In this way, I would have accomplished what I set out to do without compromising myself and my health in the process.

So, not only did my pretending forfeit any chance of fixing the bad, but it also stunted the good. Way to go, me! Needless to say...

Don't do what I did. Your mirrors deserve better. You deserve better. You can run, you can hide, you can break, you can lie — no matter what, you cannot escape yourself. So, go ahead: Stare at your reflections until you've come to terms with who you are. You don't have to like what you see — you may even hate it — but you have to be ok with it. After all, you can't choose the mirrors you want to keep; you're stuck with all of you. And, if you really do want to better yourself, you can't expect the best of yourself without first accepting the worst. Otherwise, you'll launch yourself off the deep end and wind up hurting yourself — as I so brutally learned so you didn't have to. (You're welcome.)

You can't possibly discover all of your mirrors; infinity is a pretty big number, after all. If you go looking, though, you can get pretty damn close. So you might as well get started. Your very own hall of mirrors awaits.