

Let your freak flag fly

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When I was in middle school in the late '80s, I was so jealous of the girls who got all their clothes from Gap that when I finally got my first Gap sweater I carried the signature blue drawstring bag it came in for a year!

I think of that blue bag as a symbol for how desperate I was to be a part of the "in crowd" in middle school and high school. What a waste of energy.

Then in my sophomore year, I started dating a senior who dressed like an old man (seriously, his clothes were different than anyone else's), carried a yo-yo all the time, and drove a clunker of a car. He didn't give a darn what anybody thought of him. Dating him for three years was one of the best things I could have done to begin to free myself from the desire to be popular. It helped me expand my comfort with weirdness and with embarrassment, holding my head high when we got funny looks.

It helped. Yet even in adulthood, there have been countless times when I wish I could just be cool.

But in the last few years, I've stopped caring so much. I'm no longer embarrassed by being a terrible cook and horrible at crafts. I admit I'm uncomfortable around most dogs and I'm afraid to be in the deep end of the pool (and strongly prefer not to be in the pool at all). I don't know anything about what's on TV and I don't know what songs are topping the charts. I dance at weddings even though I'm not a great dancer. I dance in public sometimes if I'm trying to make the kids laugh. I danced in the office yesterday because I figured out an Excel trick that will potentially save me hours on a certain type of report. I drink water when everyone else is having beer. I wear mom jeans, including some handed down to me from my actual mother. I love keyboard shortcuts! And my laminator! And office supplies! And Broadway soundtracks! And giving speeches! I'm a dork, through and through.

Letting your freak flag fly means being yourself, proudly, and embracing your inner weirdo. Life is easier when you stop trying to fit in. And sometimes you realize what you think makes you weird isn't actually that out of the ordinary. I can't tell you how many "You hate to cook?" "Me too!" moments I've had with women who are relieved to hear me say it because they've been embarrassed by their lack of culinary skill for years.

When we embrace our nerdiness, we connect with other nerds. A few years ago we were on vacation with another couple and their two kids. At the campfire one evening, the topic of Microsoft Excel came up, and all of a sudden my friend's husband and I had this excited and lengthy discussion about building formulas, setting up pivot tables, and concatenating! (Luckily his wife and my husband were able to find something interesting to talk about while we did this.)

And when we share what we're nerdy about, or how we're "not cool," other people feel more comfortable being nerdy or not cool too. It is joyful to live life as you are, instead of as you think people want you to be. As Elizabeth Gilbert says, "Don't ever be ashamed of loving the strange things that make your weird little heart happy."