

C. Fischer

Lessons in Growing Up an Outsider

Growing up in a small town has both positives and negatives to it. Everyone knows everyone, and at the same time, everyone knows everyone. If you did anything, in a short amount of time, everyone knew about it. Welcome to Bentworth; the weird combination of conservative values and modernity that makes you throw up your eyebrows.

So, when I was in grade school, I was known the “weird” kid who cried a lot. I didn’t interact with many people, I was respectful to the teachers, and I paid attention. I tried not to get in trouble. I was sensitive and I didn’t like getting dirty. On the warm spring days, we would have recess outside. The sun came down on the blacktop, which heated up the areas all around. In the distance, the daily game of kickball was in full swing. Overlapping chatter created a wave of noise, though that didn’t matter much.

I spent my recess time under the cool of the concrete pavilion, sitting and plucking blades of grass as my best friend and I got lost in our own conversations. One day in the fourth grade, I remember her passing a card to me while we were sitting in class. We were holding back giggles since we had just finished getting scolded by our teacher. The card read, “Isn’t it strange that every day we laugh?” I would confide in her as much as possible, way back then and now.

I didn’t know this at the time, but my weirdness wasn’t based on who I talked to or how I was raised, it just happened. My personality was defined into four letters, which, nobody knew what that meant at the time. I was a young INFP.

Susan Storm, author on psychologyjunkie.com says, based on research by “Schoolyard taunting, news headlines of war and famine, and often being told to ‘toughen up’ can make

young INFPs feel that they aren't meant for this world." She continues on, explaining how children who fall into the INFP category deal with their emotions.

"Yelling and strict punishments are especially traumatic for the young INFPs. Because they are so private, they may not readily share their feelings or emotions with others, but bottle them up inside. They feel unable to share these intense feelings unless they are with someone who has gained their absolute trust. At the same time, they often feel things so deeply and intensely that they may react by crying very quickly."

What does it mean to be an INFP? Well, in the Myers-Briggs "16 personalities", INFPs are described as "the Mediator". The dominant traits of the INFP are Introverted, Intuitive, Feeling, and Prospecting. Simply and quickly, INFPs keep to themselves, they are imaginative, they think with their hearts, and they "go with the flow".

Eighth grade was the peak of my social blunders- I was too shy to stand up for myself. I would constantly take whatever verbal insults were thrown at me and just "laugh" them off. "These people won't matter to me once I get out of here." Though, inside, my brain, they would hit me, and cause my stomach to flip. My face would flush. I felt the tears well up. This was the time that I asked my mom if I could go to therapy. Someone who said they were my friend was being awful to me. "Is this what friendship is supposed to be?" I asked myself. After I was able to process that toxic relationship, by empathizing and understanding that she had her own stuff going on. Her own insecurities and fears about growing up.

High school only made it worse. It all bubbled up and exploded the spring of my junior year. I was constantly picked on, I ignored it, fought back when I could, but it still hurt me nonetheless. I'd ignore the feelings with the job I had gotten. Which was in a Superstore- loud,

constant movement, hundreds of people to interact with on a daily basis, a number of which were just as judgmental as the people I dealt with in school.

I tried to distance myself from taking things personally, but sometimes it was hard. I had my intelligence questioned numerous times. One particularly slow night, when I was working at the returns counter, I had a difficult customer come in. I had never seen her before, but I felt something was off. “I’d like to return the product care plan off of this item.” She handed me a receipt. “Are you returning the item?” I asked her, as I tapped the screen and got everything ready. “No. I’m just returning the care plan.” I looked at her, my face twisting into a confused expression. “I don’t think I’m able to do that.”

“Well, I’ve had people do it for me before.” “I...don’t think that my system will even let me do it...Let me ask my manager.” I got the answer, and I said that I can’t do it. We go back and forth. She says, in a demeaning tone, “I don’t think you know what you’re talking about. Go get your manager.” I felt my blood boil. Usually, people were understanding of (despite being unhappy with) policies, however, I had never had anyone basically tell me I was an idiot. So, I snapped. “Alright! Let me get my manager so they can tell you the exact thing I just told you.” She did not like this. She basically followed me to get my manager, yelling at me the whole time. I apologized. She said that me “being in a bad mood doesn’t mean I should take it out on the customer.” Comfort came when I found out that she was trying to scam us, but it still started to build onto the foundation of insecurity.

Unfortunately, since I started working almost 32 hours a week since age 16, I was unable to have the same social experiences of my peers. I always had to pass because I was at work. I had sold my soul to Sam Walton, and I was worse off for it. Jeylan T. Mortimer, a Principal

Investigator of the Youth Development Study and the University of Minnesota had some insights about teenagers in the workforce.

Some developmental psychologists...warn that employment may cut short, or even deny, youth an essential “adolescent moratorium,” a stage of life free from adult-like pursuits, stressors, and responsibilities (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986; Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991). They believe adolescence should be a time of exploration—a time to figure out who one is and what path one should follow. According to this point of view, too much work may have severe opportunity costs with respect to healthy identity formation.

I was essentially trying to escape social anxiety by working in a place that would only make it worse. I had graduated high school, anxious, and misanthropic. I had one and a half friends that I rarely saw. (I say one and a half, since she was the one who’d previously given me hell, and I couldn’t escape her until graduation. We had a better relationship than before, but still not strong enough for me to trust and confide in her.)

My anxiety about going to work in such a huge place started to build and build. I had started throwing up due to my anxiety fairly frequently. I had gotten it relatively under control, until May 2021. I was just starting to get better and then I took a sharp plunge. One night, I decided that I had enough. I sat in my car, wanting to sink into the seat. I rolled down my window, trying to take in the warm summer breeze after a particularly awful shift. I had at least three different negative customer interactions. I felt defeated. I wanted to sink into my seat. I got McDonalds on my lunch break and had a McFlurry left to eat when I got home. I drove with all the thoughts stirring in my head. I made it home, and as I was pulling the ice cream out of the cupholder and across my seat, the lid popped off. It was slightly melted and got all over my seat. I broke down right there in the driveway as I cleaned it up. Sobbing, literal tears streaming down

my face, and screaming into the night as I wiped the cream and cookies off. The first step to getting better was leaving Walmart.

I've found a new job, one that is a lot less stressful, and way less people. I was able to reflect and calm down for the rest of my summer. In November 2021, I took up journaling. Honestly, it takes a lot to think about what you've done up to this point in your life. Starting to write your thoughts down so you can read them back and understand them. Checking what you've thought about with your therapist, almost like you're looking for approval. That's what I've always done- what I'm used to. Having her to talk with me through the various courses of action to take. I've found that writing helps a lot.

Not like I was actually super hard on myself before; I was always soft. Sure, I dealt with feelings of inadequacy, though I never felt like I had to impress anyone in an academic setting. I never was direct in assigning myself the box to fit into. All the analytical work is done on my own, in the late hours of the night. Nobody's around to tell me how to think or how to feel about my own growth. It takes work, writing and using my brain like this. Recalling the major events of the day and refining into the nitty-gritty afterwards. When an idea hits me, I feel a jolt of energy, like a spark, and I go hard and fast with it. Sometimes I forget to write stuff down because I'm so wrapped up in my ideas.

Frankly, I believe that realizing myself, how I interact with the world. Understanding how I fit into that world. Gaining the confidence to surround myself with those who actually want to be around me. Slowly, yet surely, becoming my best. My heart collaborating with my brain to tell me that this is the path I have to be on. Introducing myself to self-love and confidence was the best thing I could have done.

Part of the problem was because of my past experiences. I was watching other people, observing how to act- emulating them. Avoiding being myself, trying to fit in. Understanding that structure is important, but, learning that doing what feels right is how I should be taking charge of my life. I should be the one to direct my life. I need to have experiences that I choose to understand what I like, what I want to do, who I want to spend my time with, how to interact.

I am not fearful of the person that I am becoming. Learning to love myself and that my quirks are okay is the best thing that I could have done for my mental health. I'm still a work in progress, I don't have everything figured out, nobody does. I can be satisfied with the growth I've had and in staying true to myself.

Articles Used

- 1.) <https://www.psychologyjunkie.com/2016/01/03/the-struggles-of-being-an-infp-child/>
- 2.) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2936460/#R4>