

In 1999 at Seton Hall University, I enrolled in their Business school and started on a path towards Accounting because I was told it would be the most profitable path. Thankfully, Brian David Russo quickly awoke and got the hell off of that road. Now, it probably didn't help matters that I fell asleep during half of the sessions on Micro-Economics, but that's really neither here nor there and if you're an Accountant or Economist, I salute you fine sir or madam. Eventually, I discovered what I deemed to be my own passion and began studying Experimental Psychology. During which I was able to tend after little white rats, with long serpentine tails and blood red eyes, and began running them through various trials and studies, all of which were physically harmless I assure you.

Perhaps the most interesting of these studies was on the process of Extinction. A rat would be placed into an apparatus called a Skinner Box. Over the course of several weeks, the rat would have to learn how to manipulate the box so to receive a reward: a food pellet. In the beginning, the experimenter (me) would randomly push a button and down a chute came a pellet, thus teaching the rat that sometimes for certain actions they would be rewarded with food. During the next stage, the randomness of that administration would come to an end and the rat would have to learn that only being in the vicinity of the chute triggered the reward. Upon the next trial, I would cease to reward the rat based on location, thus conditioning the rat to figure out that something new was being demanded of it. Namely, the rat would now have to press on a lever so to retrieve its own food. Ultimately, by the end of the experiment, the rat would have to learn how to pull on a rod so to engage a light, and that only when this light was on in the box, would the original lever work, and thus upon its pressing down, a food pellet down the chute to be consumed.

So there I was, witnessing this once clueless rat from several weeks ago, now running insanely around this box like an addict, pulling on rods, turning on lights, pressing levers, eating food. Rinse and repeat. But then...Extinction. All of a sudden nothing worked. The light was on. The lever could be pressed. The rat was in the right location, but there was no food. Amazingly, this little rat, who just ran faster sprints than Usain Bolt, resorted to do nothing at all. Disinterested in the light, disinterested in the lever, the rat sat squarely in the middle of the cage and tried nothing new. So entirely reliant and dependent, so utterly conditioned to act only upon reward, that when the prize went into extinction so too went any drive to do anything creative, or really anything at all.

Can you draw the parallel? If your life has been molded by outcomes born out of decisions made not of your own volition, then what becomes of your sense-of-self when it all goes away? It's like the syndrome of the dependent girlfriend or boyfriend. If you cast everything you are into another's net, when that net loosens or breaks entirely, so too does the remaining ruins of your identity.

But here's the good news: this doesn't have to happen to you! You don't have to be like this! Shocking as it may be, you are not in fact rats. There is no great race, even though your over-scheduled life probably feels like one. You are not stuck in a box, nor a puppet in a grand experiment. So don't live as if you are and instead be the individuals you were called to be when born into this free existence. Within moral reason and physical limitation, you can do whatever you want to do. You can become whatever you want to become. You are the sole-controllers of your life and you are pressing the buttons. You can adapt and evolve into something bigger and better than you that can presently even conceive of. It is possible. All it takes is a change in thought. A renewal of your mind.

So please, do not parrot. So please, do not conform. Rather, construct your spiritual towers based on your own thoughts, your own doubts, your own inquiries and your own answers. Journey onward and be transformed into something more than that from whence you started. Enhancing your own image though that which we find in Jesus' – your eternal friend who saw the world as it was, with all of its rules and standards and conventions, and said “nope, that's not me, nor the will of God.”

In 1951 at Swarthmore College a psychologist by the name of Solomon Asch conducted an experiment. Participants were selected by Asch and then placed into experimental groups consisting of seven peers. The group's task was simple: they were to match the lengths of lines. Specifically, the group was first given a card with a single line on it, and then they were given a second card with three lines on it (Line A; Line B; and Line C). They were then asked to answer aloud whether A, B, or C matched the line on the initial card shown, and they were asked to do this over 18 trials.

In the control group, made up of just the participant and the experimenter, the results demonstrated an error rate at less than 1%. In the experimental group however, a staggering 75% of participants gave at least one wrong answer. What then could have possibly accounted for such a chasmic disparity? Well, in the experimental group, the peers of the chosen participant were in fact all confederates, or actors, and their job was to correctly identify the obvious answer for the first two trials. But on the third trial they were ordered to unanimously answer incorrectly. Asch hoped that this surprising yet commanding response would subsequently condition the participant to also answer incorrectly despite visual evidence to the contrary. This hope, at the end, became reality and thus he exhibited the astonishing influence of conformity over our decisions and our daily lives.

Conformity: behavior in accordance with socially accepted conventions or standards. Upon the definition alone, bending to the ever-evolving standards of society of 2015 doesn't seem like something all that bad or deconstructive in nature. After all, the more that people get with the times, and support such agendas like gender-equality in the workplace; black-lives mattering; and marriage for all, the better off, surely, we will be. But... the act of conforming also implies a passivity of character and a void in critical thinking. Jumping on the bandwagon only for the sake of sitting next to that new and pretty face, and to take an Instagram of it, is not in and of itself a good thing. Jumping on the bandwagon because you affirm and approve of the direction it is driving, well now you've done something active and commendable and even, dare I shoehorn it in, transformative.

“Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds (Romans 12:2).” Though 2,000 years-ancient, Paul understood the psychology of conformity (συσχηματίζεσθε in the Greek). The tense he employs is passive and that, according to the NET Bible commentary is rather

telling. For it suggests that the act of conforming to the present world happens, in part, subconsciously. Accordingly, we all then, at some point, match line C with line A, even though we know it not to fit nor make any sense. Be it when we join a certain friend group, dress ourselves a certain way, or talk in a certain manner when in the company of certain others, these are decisions we perhaps make unawares to how they agree or disagree with who we actually are or want to be. Perhaps...

But the NET goes on to say: "At the same time, the passive here could well be a 'permissive passive,' suggesting that there may be some consciousness of the conformity taking place." Why did the participant choose line B when line C was clearly the obvious answer? Oh, but to fit in! For to be an outlier, an outcast, a whisper in a loud room or a bull in a China shop requires of us a willingness to be different. To stand out. To be an individual. To be uncomfortable and even alone. But dangling out on the most fragile of limbs is often too scary a notion for the lot of us. Instead we have been conditioned to follow the masses and fall in line. We will upgrade our 5 for the 6, not because we can't already do everything with the 5, but because the 6 is... well... a 6, and 6 is the next number after 5, and thus, 6 is greater than 5, and so this phone that looks exactly the same as the one previously is inherently better because the sixth integer in our numerical system is one progression past the fifth. Yes, Ken Lovett and Brad Pennington are right in calling me a Luddite. And may you find no happier smart-phone machine-breaker than me.

Recently, Anya and I have been reminiscing about our youth and watching *The Wonder Years* on Netflix –great show. Not too long ago, there was episode where Kevin (Fred Savage, the main character) somehow gains the approval of the cool kids in Robert F. Kennedy's Junior High School. And apparently, what cool kids did in the 60's was work on the Yearbook committee, and come up with funny quotes to match the pictures of every graduating 8th grader. Kevin, an otherwise moral and kind-hearted boy, discovers that in order to continue to gain access to these cool kids, he needs to come up with meaner and nastier things to say about his peers. Eventually he offers a quote for his exceedingly nice but overweight friend, Peter Arbuster. He contributes: "Oink, oink." Naturally this gets the fiercest laugh out of all the cool kids and instantly cements Kevin's status as being one of their own. Now, thankfully by the end of the episode, Kevin is overcome with enough guilt to try to change the quote (but doesn't in time) such that he escapes from the reach of these cool kids, apologizes to Peter, and reverts back to being the relatively innocent kid we typically root for and commiserate with.

Now honestly, how many of us have ever been guilty of the same? Even if not penning "oink, oink" how many of us have conformed to the point where we side-stepped who we actually were so to goose-step with those whom we perceived to be in greater positions of authority, power, and coolness? If the Church universal had hands made of flesh, it would be waving them in the air.

Earlier this week I read an article on CNN about how millennials are leaving the Church in droves, and not because they are becoming atheists, but because they find this whole enterprise to be outdated and boring. One of the quotes was: "Christianity in the United States hasn't done a good job of engaging serious Christian reflection with young people, in ways that would be relevant to their lives." I pray, but honestly believe, that we at PCCH are not among the indicted. If the Faith Statements manufactured during Confirmation (some totaling 9 and 12 pages; the arithmetic mean being 6) and the discussions at Theology and Pretzels were any indication, I think we are doing quite alright in that area. But nevertheless, the charge is out there and the evidence suggests that when these teens grow up, on average they will abandon the religion for the more attractive alternative of church-less Sunday mornings.

Now in response to this charge, a man I only know by the name of Jonathan at theologyinworship.com wrote a piece called: "Dear Church: An Open Letter from one of those millennials you can't figure out." He argues that it's not out of boredom that young adults are abandoning the faith. Rather, boredom is a quality we need to harness and make use of – that church is supposed to be boring! Because it's through boredom that our frontal lobes are engaged, opening our creative centers so to dream of and consider, even to doubt, the vast and impressive mysteries of this faith. But instead of paraphrasing his words, rife with wisdom, let me close today by reading them for you unadulterated. I pray that in this reading, we will all hear the good news that PCCH is on the right path, even if there is always still work to do.

"Be yourself [Church], and you just might shake us out of our technology-induced, entertainment-craving slumber. Keep giving us Jesusy versions of mainstream entertainment, and there's no hope. You can't compete. You'll lose every time. We don't need more youth group lock-ins, more senior adult outings on beekeeping and genealogy. We need more of each other. We need to look into the faces of old and young, rich and poor, of different colors, races, and ethnic backgrounds, so we can learn to see Jesus in faces that don't look like us. So we can remember that the kingdom is bigger than our safe, suburban bubble. That's right, we need community, not based on age or economic status or skin color, but wrought with the hammering of nails on a wooden cross.

Our internet connectivity is just fine. The rest of our lives is a different story. We are hopelessly disconnected. Church, you can be a powerful remedy if you stop posing as a Fortune 500 company scheming to sell a product. Welcome the toughest, deepest, grittiest, most desperate, most shocking questions. We have lots of questions. More and more, what we see in the world doesn't jive with what we grew up hearing from the pulpit. You have done more damage by requiring politeness, by refusing to engage, by brusquely rebuking honesty and vulnerability. You're better than that, church. At least you should be. You should be a safe place for struggling, grappling, doubting.

*Allow us to be real with each other, to avoid the temptation to gloss over the crap going on in the world with easy, tidy, Jesusy clichés. You've always taught us how the world is black and white, just like *The Andy Griffith Show* and *I Love Lucy*. But, and excuse us for noticing, the world is mostly gray, gray like Ricky Ricardo's dinner jacket and Barney Fife's nightstick. Let's embrace that grayness together.*

Most importantly, we need you to show us how to be the hands and feet of Christ, to struggle with us in making it more on earth as it is in heaven. It's not too late, church, but your tactics aren't working. It's time for a new strategy. It's time to be uncool. To be radical. To be different. [It's time to stop conforming.] It's time to be yourself."

Amem.