

Being different is something I've always found desirable. As a child, I learned that my maternal grandparents—both of whom had died before I was born—had been accordion players. I immediately vowed to learn to play the accordion someday, a vow I kept once Grandma Cleo's instrument turned up from a distant family member when I was in college. Not many people in my circles or age group know—or are excited and proud about knowing—how to play the accordion, making me “different” from most. Check.

In 6th grade, the city changed the configuration of grades housed in each school, making my originally K-8 building now K-6. We 6th graders were now top dogs in a school building that still contained amenities for older students. Locker rooms were one of these vestiges and, feeling more grown up, I began to bring shorts and a T-shirt to change into for Phys. Ed. classes. No one else followed suit; I was the only one. No problem. Not only did I like to be different, I didn't much care what others thought.

This indifference to others' perceptions of me only grew stronger as I aged. I remember turning 40 and feeling particularly liberated by it. “I am 40 ... and Woman ... hear me roar!” And once I reached 50, it almost felt like a rite of passage to flip the bird of my indifference at the world. In fact, I came up with a reworking (maybe even a reclaiming?) of a well-known adage to express my attitude:

“Indifference hath no champion like a woman in her 50s.”

Take *that* world! Patriarchy! Outdated expectations of proper behavior!

I thought I was pretty clever ... until I recently came upon this quote from Elie Wiesel: “Because of indifference, one dies before one actually dies.”

Well, shit ...

Had all of my proud indifference built a cage around my heart that had actually imprisoned me all these years, walling off potential experiences that would have provided basic opportunities for living life to the fullest?

A friend—who also happens to be a therapist specializing in grief and trauma—recently shared that when we close ourselves off to pain (a very understandable desire) we also close ourselves off to joy. It's like drawing the curtains closed. You pull the cord, and the two sides move equal distances, covering the same amount of window on the right as the left. You can't just close one side and not the other. So trying to avoid pain or sadness or discomfort or betrayal also prevents us from fully experiencing the emotions and realities on the other end of the spectrum: happiness, excitement, delight, and connection.



In other words, the cutting off of the extremes ultimately results in a narrow, milquetoast existence. A premature death of sorts. Yuck. That's not being different; that's being foolish, even irresponsible. It's nothing to be proud of. And it certainly isn't liberating.