

Social Pressure

Like it or not, we are all part of a network of relationships we did not choose. Our parents, relatives and neighbors were handed to us at birth. The assignment was not fair or rational, just the luck of the draw. Our family formed us until we were strong enough to start forming ourselves; after that they became as much a burden as an asset. We love them, no doubt, but our elders can be intrusive and demanding at times. They made choices about their own lives, implied in our upbringing, and inevitably they want us to follow in their footsteps.

Anyone trapped in a prison of their own making usually wants you to join them. The more they have sacrificed, the more they want others to make the same sacrifice to affirm the wisdom of their own decision. Your place is neither to follow them nor to change them. Your place is to make the best decisions you can for your own life, even if it means tiptoeing around your elders and their sensitivities.

Romeo and Juliet had it tough, with their families at war and their love explicitly forbidden. Any pressure you may face is probably a lot more subtle. “When are the two of you going to get married?” your mother may ask. Or maybe she doesn’t even say it openly. You just see it in her eyes, her disappointment in you. It is like you’re not a real grownup until you have joined the club. Then your mother can relax and stop worrying about you.

It is natural to want to please your parents. They made a huge investment in you. Aren’t you obligated to pay them back? Don’t you have a responsibility to perpetuate their religion, business, political beliefs and lifestyle? Centuries ago, the answer was unequivocally “Yes.” If your father was a blacksmith, you would become one too. Modern cultures accept a different philosophy: that each person has the right of self-determination based on their own unique desires, skills and opportunities. The blacksmith may be disappointed that his son does not follow him, but no one outside the family would question the son’s right to choose his own path.

Frankly, it is not possible to follow in your parents’ footsteps even if you wanted to. Virtually everything about the world has changed in the 20-plus years since they were married. They alone insist that it hasn’t, because they are deeply invested in the past world. They need to believe that what was good for them is good for you. They don’t want to see you making a success of yourself doing the opposite of what they did, because then they would have to question their own decisions.