

When Ralph Waldo Emerson said to “insist on yourself; never imitate” during the mid 1800’s, it was the period of transcendentalism, which encouraged people to march to the beat of a “different drummer.” In more recent times, nonconformity has been viewed in a negative light. And even those striving to do something “different” fall into the category of followers, simply following what the “rebel” trend is at the time.

Come on, everybody is doing it! Everybody is getting tattoos. Everybody is getting a sexy tan. Everybody is driving around with their stereos cranked up loud enough to be heard in the next state. Everybody is playing down their intelligence so they won’t get called a nerd.

As your dad always asked you, perhaps rhetorically, when you were young, “if everybody was jumping off a bridge, would you do it?”

Think about it. In twenty years, that tattoo “everybody” got on their upper arm will be sagging down to their elbows. “Everybody” who had that luscious dark tan, will be at a high risk for skin cancer. The hearing aid companies are going to make a lot of money from “everybody” whose hearing was affected by their loud music (my sister, the audiologist, calls it job insurance). And those nonconformists who risked being called a nerd and applied their intelligence will be ruling the world and making all the money. They might even be the ones with the hot spouses. You never know – look at Bill Gates.

Nonconformity is a beautiful and powerful thing. Some of the most influential people in history have been different, maybe even a little weird, but definitely individuals.

During the early 1900's, Eleanor Roosevelt stayed true to herself even though it often defied what the majority considered the acceptable role of women. Roosevelt became the First Lady in 1933 and completely reformed the position. As a devoted wife, she tended to her husband during his prolonged illness before the White House years and acted as his eyes and ears from his illness until his death. Throughout, she managed to remain an independent, influential woman in her own right. In times before Roosevelt's stint as first lady, most Presidents' wives did not take an active role in politics, but Roosevelt broke these precedents. She held press conferences, traveled the globe, gave lectures, and wrote a newspaper column. Her syndicated column, "My Day," allowed Roosevelt to express her views candidly, something no first lady had ever done before. Even after leaving the White House and her husband's death in 1945, Roosevelt remained active in political affairs. She served as an American spokesperson to the United Nations until her health began to deteriorate in 1962. Because of her refusal to emulate other women whom had held the same role in the White House, Eleanor Roosevelt became one of the most revered women of her generation.

The examples don't stop there, author Flannery O'Connor also exuded individuality in her writing and everyday life. Truly original in her work, O'Connor combined humor with tragic plots and brutal honesty. She wrote about unusual topics, choosing to express the Protestant's flair for the dramatic rather than creating stories centered on her own Catholic heritage. Her eccentric personality, O'Connor claimed, caused her to be unable to "write about anything subtle." Her short stories, considered her greatest works, included strange characters who often border on criminality and a

crisp, dry, maybe even off-color, sense of humor. Even the peacocks, which she raised, made appearances in her stories. During the final years of her life, O'Connor claimed to "write every day for at least two hours and ... spend the rest of [her] time largely in the society of ducks." Obviously not your everyday author. Stricken by lupus at a young age, O'Connor only completed two novels, thirty-one short stories, and a few speeches and letters before she died in 1964 at the age of thirty-nine. In spite of her limited repertoire, O'Connor remains popular and significant.

The most influential artists, scholars, musicians, and inventors have had one thing in common. They came up with a new idea. Maybe their new idea didn't fit into what the world considered normal at the time. Columbus was laughed at for saying the earth was round. Galileo was excommunicated from the Catholic Church because he asserted that the earth traveled around the sun. In 1956, the Ed Sullivan Show would only show Elvis from the waist up.

Perhaps the nonconformist in you isn't going to change the way we look at the earth or our universe. Maybe you're not going to kick start the next musical revolution. But if you don't step out of the box, quit conforming, and start being a little "weird," you may never know.

My advice is to take Katherine Mansfield's advice. "Risk! Risk anything! Care no more for the opinions of others, for those voices. Do the hardest thing on earth for you. Act for yourself."