

## Make Sure Your Life and Dreams Are Your Own

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was around 10 years old, my mother had a college friend, who brought over her son (who was my age) and he thought it would be amusing to take some of my mother's lipstick and put it on. Then he started putting some sort of mascara (or something similar) on me.

My mother walked into the bathroom and went absolutely ballistic. I had never seen her have this sort of reaction. Instead of laughing and thinking it was amusing (which is something I think most mothers would do), my mother instead became extremely angry. In fact, she started yelling at me and the boy. She got so angry that the boy's mother became very uncomfortable and they left.

"That's disgusting. You're a boy—not a girl! You should never dress up like a girl. If you like dressing up as a girl you are going to have a horrible life," she screamed. "And I am not going to have anything to do with you. You're also going to get beat up a lot!"

I am not going to comment on whether or not I approve of my mother's reaction. What I will say, though, is that she frightened me a great deal and made the thought of dressing up as a girl, or doing anything mildly "gay," incredibly distasteful to me.

I thought about this episode recently because one of my daughter's friends is a 3 ½-year-old boy and he dresses up as a girl (all the time) and even takes ballet lessons with other girls. Although my daughter has been friends with this boy for more than a year, only recently did she learn that her friend was, in fact, a boy.

The parents of this boy are very supportive of their son and allow him to behave and act just as he prefers to. If the child turns out to be gay, or later wants to have a sex change operation, I am confident that the parents will be extremely supportive. Indeed, at this point in his life, they even take him shopping for little girls' clothes. They are nurturing him and allowing him to be the person he wants to be.

- *What if my mother had walked in when I was dressing up as a girl and encouraged it?*
- *What if she suddenly sat down and helped put on the makeup and told me I looked great?*
- *What if she subtly encouraged me to do more of the same?*

The message I was sent by my mother was that under no circumstances was behaving like a girl at all appropriate. I was expected to be a man. Sometime later, I got in a fight at the park one day after school. My mother learned about the fight and when I told her I lost, she had one of her "tough" male friends come over and give me fighting lessons. The message I was being sent was that I was expected to fight, be manly, and so forth. Within a short while, I was aggressively standing up for myself and fighting anyone with interest in doing so. I was sticking up for myself and most people ended up backing off.

The way we develop as people is very complex. I certainly do not have an innate need (or desire) to dress up like a girl, like the boy my daughter knows does—but *what is the result of certain behaviors being encouraged by our parents and while others are not?* The result is that we develop certain skills and ways of behaving that determine the outcome of our lives.

I work in an office all day long. Most of my interactions are various exchanges of pleasantries with people over the phone. Nevertheless, things do go wrong; and when they do, I need to stick up for myself. Much of what goes on in the business world relates to others' attempts to intimidate those around them. People are trying to intimidate me all day—and the ability to fight and stick up for myself is something I learned early on that has shaped the outcomes I have gotten in my life.

One of my closest friends growing up turned out to be a very good artist. He was always encouraged with his art when he was young, and his parents sent him to art class instead of allowing him to play sports. When he was younger, I do not recall him being a particularly good artist—but he was wildly encouraged to be good at art. His mother would ask him to paint her flowers and do other art-related things. If he wanted to take an art class (or anything else that could be construed as feminine) after school, she would always drive him. If he wanted to do a sport, I remember he was on his own. Accordingly, all of the interests he pursued were feminine in nature.

"My mother always wanted a girl," I remember him telling me several times when we were younger.

His mother dressed him for school each day and encouraged his feminine side as much as she could. By the time he was 14 or 15, I started to hear rumors about him having sexual-type experiences with boys our age. I did not know him after the age of 13 or so because we attended separate schools, but the last time I saw him, he was around 19, gay, and working at Kinko's, enjoying being around graphic art and so forth. Two years later, when he was 21 years old, he died of AIDS.

I am not making any judgments here, whatsoever, about whether a parent can shape our ultimate sexuality—this is certainly beyond my level of expertise. What I can surmise, though, is that we tend to blossom and grow in the direction that is encouraged by those around us. Sometimes that can be for our benefit and other times, it cannot. Just as a plant that is fed will grow, so too will people fed with encouragement.

One of the strangest experiences I had growing up involved my relationship with my stepmother—who was my stepmother for approximately three years before my father got divorced. Her daughter had dropped out of school at the age of 13 and had experienced multiple suicide attempts. During her various stays in mental hospitals, the mother had been brought in and told that part of her daughter's problems resulted from the fact that the mother never approved of anything she did. Various doctors and psychiatrists drilled into the mother that her daughter's emotional health depended on her getting support from her mother.

To my amazement, the daughter was incredibly promiscuous. Despite not even being in the same school, she ended up

screwing around with many kids in my school. Moreover, she would come home and tell her mother about various sexual and other exploits with all sorts of men. The mother would act approving and even congratulate the daughter. I had never heard of nor seen anything like it in my life. The daughter would have her friends over to watch porno movies on the VCR and then tell the mother about what they had watched.

Predictably, the daughter grew more and more promiscuous over time. Sometimes she did not come home at night. Soon, she was even bringing home sex toys she purchased and leaving them around the house. I could not believe it. The mother was encouraging all the way.

What was so interesting, though, was the relationship I had with the mother. When she first became my stepmother, I was a very bad student. When I would come home with bad grades, she would be very nice to me, take me out to eat to offer me solace, and show me love in her own way. Within a short time, however, I turned into a good student and when this happened, she started ignoring me and being very mean. She stopped talking to me. She looked for all sorts of reasons for me to get in trouble. Every few days she would write down all my faults (left a fork in the sink after a meal, forgot to hang a towel up in the bathroom, was five minutes past curfew) and sternly lecture me about my faults.

"I think she only likes you when you are not doing well because this makes her daughter look okay," I remember my father telling me on one occasion. "She is probably doing to you something similar to what she did to her daughter before she tried to commit suicide."

Regardless of what it was, I think that the message I was being sent was that *"It's okay not to do well academically and I will love you if you do not do well—it's wrong to do well academically and I will make things difficult for you if you do well."*

The message her daughter was being sent was: *"I will love you and encourage you whatever you do with yourself—even if you are out of control."*

In my case, I was able to resist the negative messages I was receiving and fight against it. Instead, I thrived on other forms of encouragement—such as that of teachers and my father--and I ended up growing in that direction.

Most of us grow and expand in the direction of our encouragement. When we are younger, it is our parents who encourage us and help us grow. Their encouragement can impact things as diverse as how comfortable we are with one type of sexuality, what sort of students we are, whether we play sports, whether or not we choose to fight when confronted.

In the case of your [career](#), there is a good chance that you too have grown in the directions you have been encouraged. You may be in a certain profession and doing a certain sort of job because bosses, coworkers, and others at one point encouraged you to be a certain type of person.

The encouragement you have received from others is a good thing. This encouragement, though, may have had more to do with someone else's wants and needs than your own:

- Since I was my mother's only son, perhaps some sort of genetic motivation geared toward propagating her genes kicked in when she saw my friend putting makeup on me—she wanted to make sure I had offspring. Had I been the sort of man who wore makeup, the propagation of further ancestors of hers would have been less likely. She explicitly made her love conditional on my being "masculine."
- Since my friend's mother had always wanted a girl, she encouraged him to pursue more feminine pursuits and be girl-like. She seemed to have made her love conditional on his being somewhat feminine.
- Since my stepmother did not want me to be better than her daughter (for reasons having to do with her own feelings based on the results she had raising her daughter), she explicitly made her love and approval conditional on my doing poorly in school.
- Since my stepsister was encouraged to be promiscuous and received love for this (at the time this was about the only thing she was accomplished at), this behavior expanded and grew.

Is all of this messed up? Of course it is! But you can see from the examples above that the direction we grow in our lives can be massively influenced by others and whether or not we are given approval for various behaviors and ways of behaving. The approval of others is often also influenced by their own needs—which have nothing to do with us.

Most people grow in the direction in which they receive the most approvals and acknowledgment. The problem with this form of growth, though, is that it is not always in our best interest—and may instead be in the interest of someone else. Think about all the careers and lives that have been destroyed by the parent who encourages a child who might be a great musician, to instead become a doctor. Or the person who is extremely gifted in science, who is encouraged by their parents to instead become a singer.

Allow me to go out on a limb here:

- Are you doing what you are doing because of someone else's dreams and not your own?
- How much of your life—from your friends to your hobbies—is the product of someone else's dreams and not your own?

### ***Is the influence of someone else holding your life back?***

Many people go into the wrong vocations and make many, many wrong decisions in their lives due to the directions they receive approval for—and the ones they do not receive approval for. The smartest thing you can do is question why you have received approval for certain things and not others—and ensure that your life and dreams are your own and not those of someone else.

### **THE LESSON**

Make sure that your life, dreams, and goals are your own rather than somebody else's. Most people grow and expand in the direction that they receive encouragement. Such encouragement, however, might often be in someone else's interest rather than your own. Question why you have received praise and approval for some things and not others, and you will ensure that your dreams and aspirations are truly yours.