

Feral Children, Puzzles, Jews, and Filters

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

I remember growing up around kids with books of puzzles and games in elementary school and junior high school; these were always the kinds of kids that did not fit in. They also got beat up after school, were awkward during gym class, got pushed around on the playground, and sat alone or in small groups looking like outcasts during lunch.

They would sit there all through the lunch hour screwing around with these little puzzle books. The kids doing the puzzles would draw the grimaces of other so called "cool" kids. On the weekends these kids who liked their puzzle books would spend time doing things like playing Dungeons & Dragons. I know this is what they did because I once spent the night at a sleepover with a *puzzle kid*, and he insisted on me being a Dungeons & Dragons character while he played the game against me. I had no idea what the hell was going on.

I went to a public school right outside of Detroit for a good portion of my early [educational career](#). To my observation, the smart kids were the ones who liked puzzles. There was always something very isolating to me about these puzzles and they seemed to make loners of the kids who enjoyed them. At a very early age I came to identify these puzzles with something to stay away from. Sometimes a couple of tough kids would approach these smarties and rough them up. I remember once witnessing a kid trying to unlock his bike from the rack, getting pushed to the ground, and punched in the lip. Things like this happened a lot.

I happen to know that most of the *cool kids* now do things like work in hardware stores behind the counter, or mow lawns, and shovel snow for a living, while most of the *puzzlers* are working in important [jobs in major cities](#). It's funny how life works out.

Looking back on all of this, I think puzzles are actually a pretty good thing. They stretch your mind and force you to think in new directions. It is like a healthy form of exercise. There are many studies that confirm the positive effects of puzzle play. For the past several years I have had a little Nintendo thing I carry around with me everywhere, playing all sorts of puzzles on it. My favorite games are Brain Age and Brain Age 2, which were developed by a neurologist. It is proven that playing these kinds of games regularly can actually make your mind much quicker, and therefore, make you smarter. I play puzzles every chance I get.

I managed to avoid puzzles for most of my life; honestly, it was mostly out of a fear of getting my ass kicked. However, when I got into my early 20s I had to study for the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT). I enjoyed every single part of this test except a portion of the test called games. Games was a section of the test that presented me with various puzzles, having me put lists in order and so forth. I never did as well as I could have on the LSAT, and almost all of it had to do with the games section of the test, which was a complete disaster for me. Every other section of the test I aced or missed only one or two questions.

When I first saw there was a games section on the test I remember I looked at it with a certain amount of disdain. Everything about those puzzle-playing kids who got their ass kicked on a regular basis came back to me. I did not want to be associated with the games. I thought they were ridiculous and beneath me. I did not put a lot of myself into studying for the games section because I had programmed myself to stay away from them.

For such a long time I had associated puzzles and games with so many horrible things--like the person I did not want to become. So, at some point I simply decided I was not going to apply myself to such a "waste of time" despite the fact that I needed to. The more I think about it, the crazier this now seems to me.

I had worked hard in high school to get into a good college. I was seriously self-disciplined in college, and after years of intensive study I remained one of the top students in my class. I had been involved in all sorts of leadership activities and other things that made me look good on paper, but when it came right down to the wire I refused to study and apply myself on this one portion of an incredibly important test. All because deep down it represented something that I absolutely did not want to become: One of the kids who get beaten up on the playground.

I did not realize any of this at the time of the test, of course. In fact, I just realized this recently. At the time I just knew that I was not interested in the games section of the test, and that what it represented was not me. My aversion to the games was both for conscious and subconscious reasons. Suffice it to say, as a consequence I did not do as well on the test as I should have.

Now as you are reading this you might be saying to yourself something along the lines of "that is so completely messed up." And you would be right to say so; it is totally messed up. This has literally influenced the course and direction of my life. However, my question for you is this: What sort of filters do you view the world through, which are influencing your life in the same way? I am sure you have a ton of filters about what things represent, which are influencing the choices you make and how much you apply yourself every single second of every single day. Many of these filters are not helping you at all.

Here is an example: Prejudice. When I was in college, during the school year, I was dating a really nice Jewish girl with whom I fell madly in love at the time. The Detroit neighborhood where I came from was almost 100% white and Christian. Out of the 25,000+ people living there I think there were a couple of Indian families who were also doctors. I never met a single Jewish family living in the area during my entire time growing up in this city. I had never known prejudice until I came home from college and announced to various people that I was dating a Jewish girl. The level of prejudice I encountered was unbelievable. There were people in the town (my age) who I am 100% confident would never be friends with a Jewish person, simply because of their preconceived notions about Jews.

"Why would you date a Jewish girl, they're all slimy and greasy!" one girl I was friends with said to me.

"Why would you date a Jewish girl, all they care about is money!" another guy I was friends with said to me.

These people had prejudices about an entire group of people that makes up a decent portion of the population. Somehow these folks had decided, for one reason or another that they would never have anything to do with this portion of the population. So they willingly deprived themselves from that type of experience, knowledge, and growth that can only be obtained by associating with different groups of people, of different religions and cultures. And it was due to some filters these people were using to look at the world.

Think about how limiting this is. All of their associations and friendships are centered around getting to know only those people who are similar to themselves. Doesn't this sound ridiculous? It is absurd and something that is shocking on many, many levels.

The same thing happened to me due to my own silly preconceptions; I missed out on potential opportunity. If I had chosen to turn off my filter, I could have done better on the test, which may have opened up new doors in my life and career at the time. However, my preconceived notions ended up shaping my destiny on that fateful day of the LSAT test. It is crazy to think about, but it is the something that we all do. Our approach to the world is shaped by preconceived notions we have about this or that.

Everything that happens to us and our entire response to the world is shaped by the filters that we use. For example, if someone smiles at us we are likely to smile back. If someone yells at us we are likely to get defensive or yell back.

I read the most incredible story today in the *London Times* about a girl who was raised by dogs and cats. This is a real paper, not a tabloid, and I am confident that this is a true story:

A feral girl who has spent her entire life shut up in a flat in the company of cats and dogs has been taken into care by police in Siberia.

The child, 5, was unable to speak and acted like a dog when officers discovered her locked in a squalid, unheated flat in the city of Chita.

"For five years, the girl was 'brought up' by several dogs and cats and had never been outside," police said in a statement.

"The unwashed girl was dressed in filthy clothes, had the clear attributes of an animal and jumped at people."

Police said that the girl had had a lack of contact with humans, despite sharing the three-room flat with her father, grandmother, grandfather and other relatives, the Ria-Novosti news agency reported.

The girl, known as Natasha, is now being monitored by psychologists in an orphanage. She has the appearance of a two-year-old, although police have established that her real age is 5.

The child refuses to eat with a spoon, insisting on lapping up her food straight from the plate, and has taken on many other behaviours of the animals with which she lived, police said.

"When carers leave the room, the girl jumps at the door and barks," the police said.

Her mother was taken in for questioning when she called at a police station after her daughter was taken away. Her father has not yet been found.

Feral children, the stuff of folklore all over the world, usually exhibit the behaviour of the animals with whom they have had closest contact.

The condition is known as the Mowgli Syndrome, after the fictional child from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, who was raised by wolves.

Such children have usually built strong ties with the animals with whom they lived and find the transition to normal human contact traumatic.

The girl could understand Russian but could not speak it and tried to communicate through barking instead. She was more comfortable with her animal companions than with her relatives.

She is being given medical and psychiatric treatment.

Police are treating the case as a criminal investigation into alleged child abuse.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article6373089.ece>

The quality of our lives is not determined by the things we own, the jobs we do, the friends we have, the city we live in, the vacations we take, or the world we live in. Instead, the quality of our lives is determined by the filters we use to view the world.

- In the extreme, people will look at the world like an animal would--barking at doors and lapping food off the floor.
- In another extreme, someone will blow the most important test of their life due to a deep seated insecurity that being good at puzzles will make them a loser.
- In yet another extreme, people will refuse to associate with a group of people, prejudging them based on their culture and religion.

And this brings me to you. Your life and career are being influenced, for better or worse, by a set of conscious and unconscious filters, which you are using to interpret the world around you and make decisions.

How we use these filters is probably the most important fuel in our decision making. I believe the secret to a happy and fulfilling life is to have filters that empower our experience, rather than limiting our experience. We should be aware of our filters at all times, as we think and feel our way through life.

THE LESSON

The quality of your life is not determined by your job, city, or lifestyle, but rather by the filters through which you experience these things. These filters shape everything in your life, and influence your life and career for better or worse. How you use these filters are the most important factors in your decision making; develop filters that empower rather than limit your experience, and you will unlock the secret to a successful life and career.