

Unstrange Mind REMAPPING MY WORLD

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Labels are for Soup Cans?

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There's something that kind-hearted and well-meaning people say that can hurt. Well... there are lots of things like that, but today I want to talk about the anti-label statements.

It goes something like this:

"Let's go around the circle and introduce ourselves."

"Hi, my name is Sparrow. I'm a writer, artist, musician, and astrologer. I live in an apartment with my cat, Fermat, and I am Autistic."

"Oh, Sparrow, I don't think you should call yourself autistic. Labels are for soup cans, not people! You're such a sweet, intelligent young lady. You don't need to use that label on yourself any more. We all accept you here. You're just like us and seem totally normal to us. Don't label yourself."

The person who says that is trying to be progressive and enlightened and kind and accepting. It is so hard to tell them that they are hurting me because their words so obviously come from a place of love. But those words also come from a place of fear and misunderstanding, so it is only by explaining why it hurts me to tell me not to label myself that I can help others to perfect that love they are trying to express.

In my opinion, labels are valuable tools.

Labels help us to find other people with whom we resonate. How many dating sites would people bother with if you couldn't use labels to tell prospective dates that you identify as: male, female, (on more enlightened sites, there are more gender options), Jewish, Neopagan, Christian, atheist, agnostic, Muslim, Buddhist, etc. African-American, White, Asian, Native American, etc. smoker, non-smoker, and so on. Those labels are crucial if people are to find dates with the sort of people who "ring their bell" and try to form intimate partnerships with them. Imagine trying to find a date on a



(<http://unstrangemind.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/autistic-soup.jpg>)
image: a bowl of alphabet soup with the word "Autistic" floating in it.

site where all the people were just randomly jumbled together.

Labels help us to find groups with which we click. I wouldn't be studying Morse code right now if I weren't able to label myself as a ham operator and find other people who also call themselves hams. I would have missed out on a lot of great friendships if people from the Rainbow Family refused to use labels and didn't call themselves Rainbows. People use labels all the time when they are seeking groups with which to associate.

Labels help us to understand ourselves better. Yes, they are a sort of heuristic — a short-hand and reductionist way to identify things that doesn't encapsulate the entirety of who and what a person is — but they are so useful. A woman who notices her stomach getting bigger and bigger is comforted by remembering that she is pregnant. Pregnant is a label. When I get frustrated that I have to slowly reason out people's words and actions and cannot interpret them immediately and on-the-fly, it comforts me to remember that I am Autistic. Autistic is a label.

We've all heard someone say — either joking or seriously — "that's because I'm a man," or "I feel this way because I am transitioning," or "that's because I'm a woman," or "it's because I'm still a kid," or "come on, I'm a grown-up!" or any variety of these. Man, trans, woman, kid, grown-up — all labels. And all useful.

Abandoning labels is well-intentioned — it tries to seek to avoid harming others. But it can cause more harm than good. I view the drive to abandon labels as a close relative to person-first language. Both seek to assert one's humanity in the face of something considered dehumanizingly horrible. We

don't find people insisting on person-first language for conditions considered positive or neutral, like being an artist, musician, male or female, etc. People only get cranky about the "person living with Thingness" construction when being a Thing is thought to be something terrible.

Likewise, people who say that people shouldn't be labeled ("labels are for soup cans, not people") have no problem with labels like "man," "woman," "artist," "musician," "writer," "astrologer," "Nobel Prize Winning Physicist," and so on. They only pull out their anti-label rhetoric when they are cringing about the particular label a person has been given or has given to themselves.

Now, when that label is a genuine pejorative someone else is using to restrict or hurt a person, it's great to fight labels. Many people reading this have fought hard to wipe out the R-word and I love you all for that! But when someone has embraced their label and is proud of it and feels that it conveys important information about their identity — like "Autistic," for example — it is a painful squashing of their identity to refuse to accept their label.

In some ways, it's even worse than person-first language. Person-first language says "I want to separate you and your autism and put you first to remind people that you are a human being because autism is such a terrible thing that they might forget you are human if I don't linguistically separate it from you." Anti-labeling says, "I want to deny the existence of your autism altogether. It is inherently dehumanizing so I want to use language to pretend it out of existence entirely."

If someone is being bullied with labels, it is great to step in and stop it. But when someone trusts you enough to share a core piece of their identity with you, it is a slap in the face to tell them that labels are for soup cans, not people. When you say something like that, you are trying to keep the soup and throw the can in the trash. I am Autistic and if you try to throw that in the trash with the soup cans, you are throwing me in the trash and it hurts. Enjoy my soup (I think it's tomato-basil soup. I hope you like it.) and learn to accept my label without cringing because I love my label. Autistic is who and what I am. Yes, it is a heuristic — I am so much more than that word. But if you reject that word, you are rejecting me.

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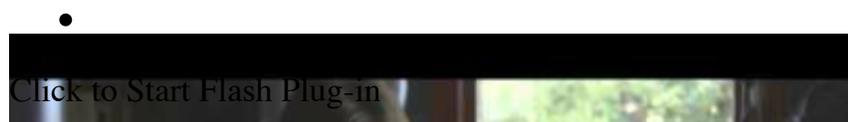
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