

They lied to me in school

Petra Gimbad, originally published 13 July 2006 in [The Sun](#)

My flatmate and I were watching Oprah, who asked: "What is missing from your life?" Often, she said, the answer lies in our ability to love ourselves. This is true. Without vicious intent, our family draws painful awareness to ourselves when we step wrongly; society constantly tells us who and what we should be. There is little acceptance for one trying to discover oneself. The only approval that we are free to receive in public before reaching adulthood is praise for academic ability. It was only when I studied overseas that I discovered that the Malaysian habit of freely comparing the number of A's so-and-so's son or daughter achieved was not a global phenomenon.

Few friends were allowed to experiment with what they liked and were barred from pursuing what they truly wanted, yet they were expected to make the right career choices at 18 that would make everyone happy. It is tragic when one crosses one's teens without ample scope to discover what one loves, particularly in a society that prides itself for its pragmatism. Study your math and science not because you love it, but because it will feed you; learn the piano to be "cultured", it looks good on your CV; avoid volunteer work because it is dirty, there is no point in doing work unless there is money involved. We read to be "smart", not for love of knowledge. Practical choices must be made, yes, but surely there is room for doing things we love too?

The friends with whom I shared my schooldays are now in their early 20s, and many of them are lost. It was easy at 18 to predict the choices most of us would make: top students aimed for medical school, the boys applied to engineering schools, those lacking in confidence did accounting. There was the occasional computer science student and biomedical science student. Parents twisted and wheedled: "You want to help the world? Be a doctor." "You're so good at language and writing, look - be a lawyer, not a journalist."

I asked a friend who graduated cum laude about her passion and what she wanted to do with her life. "Hee hee," she giggled. "Uh, I like to shop? And do stuff with my boyfriend?"

There is not much help for the jaded in university. We were assured constantly: "Oh, theory is always boring. That's accounting. Just stick with it. Wait till you get into the real world - that's when the fun starts." Perhaps, but friends who have graduated seem to lead the exact same lives we led in college or secondary school; but instead of waiting for the bell to ring, they wait for 5pm. They still mamak with the same friends - different faces sometimes, but essentially the same characters. Their conversations sound similar - gossip about everyone's personal lives, the latest girl (different name, same person) and the newest mobile phone (usual Nokia of increasing hideousness). Underlying it all is a restlessness which drives constant complaining and the urge to pick apart everyone but themselves.

And how they cling! Breakups are painful, but they are worse for those who have relied on their partner to provide all companionship, reassurance and fulfillment. Too many are caught in stranglehold relationships because of what they lack, which may include a truly fulfilling career, a family they can really talk to and friends who actually challenge them to be all they can be while accepting them for who they are. Many are crippled by the lie that you need someone else

to complete who you are, without realising that each one of us is a whole person fully capable of providing for his or her needs. The thought that we are responsible for our happiness seems to frighten us or meet disbelief. We don't trust ourselves capable of this because we do not know our worth.

Societal norms all too often impose limitations on the people we are expected to become, influencing how we will allow ourselves to grow for the rest of our lives. It is so easy to lose the unique voice each one of us was gifted and neglect our soul's potential as a result.

Nobody wants to be a pauper. Still, I am now more firmly convinced than ever that being successful in terms of prestige and money does not make finding happiness any easier.

Petra likes feminism, social justice, and working on the online magazine, Vox. She is a law student in her spare time. Comments: feedback@thesundaily.com