

## Twin Individuality

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“Hey, which one are you? Are you Andy or Colin?”

Damn it. I was trapped. I turned around to see who had accosted me. It was Bridget. She sits in front of me in Spanish, and behind my twin brother in Religion.

“Umm...I'm Colin,” I managed to say, hesitating as if I was actually contemplating what my real name was.

“Really? Because I was gonna guess that, but I didn't want to sound stupid if I guessed wrong.” She was unusually cheerful about playing the “guess the twin” game.

“No ... you wouldn't have sounded stupid,” I replied. “The way I see it, you have a fifty-fifty chance of getting me right.” I usually tell this to everyone who attempts to guess my identity, like I was some probability game.

“Okay, good,” she said, as she began to push me against the hallway lockers, “Let me look at your face so I can see the differences. I've already looked at Andy.”

“What?” I mustered, but Bridget was too strong. I was pinned against my locker being examined as if I were some rare species. She started touching my hair, and poking my cheeks. She closed one eye, then the other, then both. Her little game had gone on far enough. I was not her lab rat to be poked and prodded. I tried to break free of her hold, but she seized me with both arms in a sort of suffocating embrace.

“Well, I think I found the difference. I'm gonna go find Andy. I think I got you two down now.” With her observations complete, I was left standing trying to catch my breath.

“You could just ask what my name is,” I shouted after her, “it's not like I'd mind it.”

If you haven't guessed yet, I happen to be a twin. In fact, I account for one out of every thirty-two births ("Twin Facts"). I guess that makes me special, right?

As a monozygotic individual, I am used to certain things. "Which one are you?" happens to be the most popular question that I am asked, which is almost always followed by "You're Colin. No, wait, you're Andy!" I have two names: one was given to me at birth, and the other is usually thrust upon me in a random, haphazard way. But I've gotten used to responding to both Colin and Andy; it's just something identical twins do.

As an identical twin I am also used to sharing. I have shared just about everything I have: toys, Batman, friends, and an identity. I am usually not considered a single individual, but rather, I am just one half of a "twin unit." It's a good thing I am best friends with my other half, because if not, my life could get difficult. Rosemary Theroux, a sociologist and psychologist who has studied twins of all forms for over twenty years, states that identical twins share a friendship that is closer than any other relationship between human beings (6). This is understandable given that my brother and I shared a very cramped fetal "apartment" for nine months. You don't get closer than that. But just because we split from the same egg, doesn't mean that we "share a soul" or something.

My twin brother and I are as different from each other as caramel sauce is from gravy. We have different personalities, we enjoy different kinds of music, and I am even taller than he is (by a quarter of an inch). We are different; separate; individual. I have always been taught that I should maintain my own individuality; that I should be my own person. But if people are constantly mistaking me for my twin, how can I be my own person with my own identity? For nearly nineteen years I have been confused, mixed up, and mistaken. Do I have my own identity, or am I just one piece of a two-part special?

Lynn Perlman, a psychologist and twin herself, explains that the transition of twins from the twin unit to separate individuals can be a difficult process. It's a process that must be made on a "child-by-child" basis (2). There are, however, many things parents, family, and friends can do to support a twin's individuality. Or, at the very least, there are things that can be avoided to promote individuality among twins.

### **The Bobbsie Twins**

Twinsburg, Ohio is home to a festival that is unlike most festivals. If you haven't guessed from the town's name, Twinsburg, Ohio hosts the world's largest twin festival. It's a time when twins can dress up in matching outfits and not feel like they are under scrutiny. There is actually a competition for the "most identical" twins (I have no idea how they judge this contest). This type of behavior is what I am discouraging. In order for both individuals to become independent, twins should attempt to look and dress differently from the other. Different appearances not only allow outsiders to differentiate the two, but twins also learn to view themselves as individuals, not as a combined unit (Friedrich 238).

Looking through old picture albums, I can only remember seeing one picture out of hundreds where my twin and I were dressed in matching outfits. As you can imagine, it was taken while we were both toddlers, during the peak of our terrible twos. We were dressed in matching sailor's outfits, with matching hats to boot. I was in red and my brother was in blue. We were the exact same, just in different colors. After this photo op, my mom realized that this Doublemint Gum-twins attitude was not going to fly. Years later when I commented on this lack of Bobbsie twin moments, my mom just smiled. She told me matching twins were "the cutest" things she'd ever seen, but that had to stop. If we were ever to become Colin and Andy, we were going to have to dress like Colin and Andy, not as "the twins."

Many experts argue that twin names should also be different (Theorux 8). We don't want names like Timmy and Tommy, or Billy and Bobby. Elizabeth Friedrich, author of *The Parent's Guide to Raising Twins*, wasn't one of the select few on this planet to be born a twin, or a multiple for that matter, but after years of research on twins and multiples alike, she has become a voice amid the confusion of twins. Friedrich contends that names that sound similar will only lead to more confusion (238). I know identical twin girls who are name Kristen and Kirsten. Do you think they're happy?

To foster individuality, parents, relatives, and friends should call twins by their individual names, which are hopefully dissimilar. Calling me Colin and my brother Andy helps reinforce our identities (Theorux 8). Calling younger twins by their names not only helps them learn their own names, but it also helps siblings and friends learn the separate names of twins (Friedrich 238). I remember my mom telling me that my younger, singleton, brother didn't know my name until he was four. To my brother, it was Andy and Andy. I guess having two brothers that were identical in every possible way confused him.

### **Competitions and Comparisons**

As a twin, there was always someone who was right there with me. As I mentioned earlier, Andy and I were in all of the same classes and we played all of the same sports. Andy was this person that I could immediately compare myself to, whether it be through academics or athletics (Stewart 102). I have constantly been asked, "Which is the smarter twin?" and "Which is better at sports?" or the question that always annoyed me, "Which twin is the evil twin?" These questions automatically establish comparisons, so whether or not Andy or I knew it, competition always took place (Friedrich 246).

According to Elizabeth Stewart, author of *Exploring Twins* and a psychologist who has

studied relationships between infant twins, competition between twins starts at an early age (Stewart 102). Competitions to eat first, or have the best toy dump truck can seem insignificant, but these competitions soon escalate to more serious matters. When I was eight I would constantly ask my parents which twin they loved more. Competition for parental affection was constant. I always wanted to impress my parents the most, and so did Andy.

We would have races for everything: crawling up the stairs, eating hotdogs, biking to school, drawing a picture. My youngest brother was always kind of shoved into the background during this stage of my life. Competition for the top grade was unspoken, but was by far the most intense competition of them all. I had to get an 'A' on the science test because Andy was going to get an 'A' and I didn't want to be "the stupid twin." This period of competition probably lasted until sophomore year in high school. It was at this time that we realized that we were equals; or, rather, we had proven ourselves equal.

Throughout these races and competitions the bond between my brother and me only increased. Stewart explains that in competition, the bond between twins may strengthen (103). I may have won the first race, that is to say I may have been born first, but Andy was a close second. Andy pushes me to do the best that I can, and I do the same for him. Our competitions were always friendly in nature. Andy and I are roughly equal in whatever we do, and because of our abilities, I feel that we have only grown closer through our competitions.

There is one thing, however, that I do not like about twinhood, and that is the comparison game. I don't like the questions that ask which twin is better at this, or which twin is better at that. I will accept physical comparisons, because these generally involve observations. For example, my head is slightly rounder and larger (like Charlie Brown's head), while Andy has a narrower, longer face and chin. Physical comparisons, like height and weight, or even shoe size

(although I don't know why someone needed to know that) don't bother me because these comparisons can help people tell my brother and me apart. My grandma would never get us straight if she didn't know I have a scar on my nose from when I had the chicken pox. But don't ask me which twin is smarter, or which twin is cooler, because I'm not going to answer those questions.

### **Telepathy**

This may seem like an outlandish topic but you would be surprised how often it comes up in conversation. To be honest, I have never shared a telepathic connection with my brother. I cannot read his mind; I am unable to sense his emotions and feel his pains, and my brother can't either. I have never met a single pair of twins that has had any ESP-like experiences, but this whole telepathy thing sure makes a good story.

I think we have all heard about some bizarre twin studies. The studies that take twins and make them sit in adjacent rooms and draw pictures of objects one twin was looking at, or the experiments that ask twins to read the other's mind. It's a bunch of nonsense if you ask me. Twins don't have telepathy, they don't share a brain, and they don't share a soul. Twins share their toys, but definitely not a brainwave.

### **Twin Shenanigans**

Twins can easily be clumped together as a unit; this much is certain. But the twin unit also tends to have another connotation in society. Twins can often be seen as “double trouble” (Stewart 160). I see it in movies, commercials, and advertisements. Twins are supposed to be rowdy, fun-loving, prank-pulling units. They come at you two at a time, tag-team style. But this could not be farther from the truth. If the twins' personalities are prank-pulling tricksters, then yes, there will be *twin shenanigans*.

My brother and I, however, have yet to play one of these tricks. Call us boring, but we never were really interested in going to the other's classes. We went to a grade school with one class per grade, and, by "random" seating assignments, we were always at opposite corners of the classroom. I don't know how it happened, but it even continued through high school, too. My brother and I never had the opportunity to switch classes or engage in such rabble-rousing. I guess we don't live up to the typical twin stereotype.

### **Too Much Togetherness**

Though my brother and I certainly break away from the "double trouble" stereotype, there is such a thing as "too much togetherness" (Friedrich 232). Twins can come to depend on their twinhood for receiving attention and making new friends in new situations (Friedrich 232). It is of great debate whether twins should be separated in school. There is no universal answer to this question. This issue needs to be resolved on an individual basis. One such benefit of separating twins in school is that they will not have direct competition in the classroom (Theroux 112). There will be less of a chance of "twin shenanigans" (Theroux 112), and there will be less chance of "disruptive behavior" (Friedrich 260). Twins separated in school will have a better chance of developing individually and achieving a sense of independence from the "twin unit" (Perlman).

One advantage of not separating twins in school, an advantage that I experienced, was not being alone in a new school. My brother and I went to a Catholic high school, which no one from our grade school attended. We were the only ones we knew. It was a scary first day with all the new faces, but there was one face I knew. The same was true for college, only to a lesser degree. We were still best friends, but we had grown less dependent on each other. We had learned to make new, separate friends. We learned to be ourselves. We learned to be individuals.

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