

INTRODUCTION: THE GEEK ASCENSION

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WHERE DOES it begin, this sense of being the Other? It can come early on, when you find yourself alone in your childhood bedroom, raising tropical fish, composing a poem, writing code, meeting friends mostly online, playing by yourself. Or in middle school, when the jocks turn on you and you pray you will get through gym class alive.

Or maybe it comes in high school, where you find yourself on the outside looking in, getting jostled in the halls, watching TV on weekends while everyone else goes to parties.

After some time, there's an accumulation of slights, hurts, realizations: You don't have a lot of friends; other kids avoid you; you're not good at sports or interested in shopping; the teachers seem to like their other students a lot more. There are few school activities you want to be part of, even if you could. The things you like aren't the same things most other people like.

The alienation is sometimes mild, sometimes savage. Sometimes it lasts a few years, sometimes a lifetime. It depends on where you live, who your parents are, whether there's a single teacher who appreciates you, whether you can cling to one or two friends, how well you can hide your brains.

Increasingly, your lifeline is technology. Computers and the amazing power they give you—to install a new operating system, to confide in like-minded allies three time zones away, to slay tormentors on the screen even if you can't do much about the ones at school—are your passion. They give you skills and competence, or distraction and escape, or direction and stature, or all of the above.

Eventually, many of the people who call themselves geeks report a coming out, not unlike coming to terms with being gay or lesbian: a moment when you realize and acknowledge who you are and who you're never going to be.

“One day in my sophomore year,” a kid named Jason e-mailed me, “I was sitting in the school cafeteria watching the kids at the other

tables laugh and have fun, plotting how I was going to get home early and start playing Quake. And I suddenly got it. I was a geek. I was never going to be like them. They were never going to let me in. So I came out as a geek. . . . I can't say life has been a breeze, but after that, it was okay."

Some say they get comfortable with themselves afterward; many never do. But however long it lasts, at some point somewhere, you brush against this outsidersness—among geeks, it's the one common rite of passage. A few carry the scars around with them for good. Sometimes they hurt themselves. Sometimes—rarely—they hurt other people. But if you're lucky, you move past it, perhaps to a college where Others go. You find a community, a place where you're welcome.

For the first time, you're important, vital, on the inside; a citizen of an amazing new nation. You can instantly connect with the others like you. Being smart isn't a liability; it's usually the only thing that matters.

Whether you're a programmer or Web designer or developer, an artist, help-desk geek, or tech supporter, a filmmaker or writer, you're a part of the Geek Ascension. People need you. They hire you. They can't afford to be contemptuous. Life isn't a breeze, but it sure is different. You have an open invitation to what is, at the moment, the greatest party in the world: the Internet and the World Wide Web.