

he is the incarnation of "the norm." He embodies it; he personifies it. Everybody else in his loser neighborhood wants to be like him insofar as they want to conform to the cool Disco stereotype. Things are cruising along just fine until one day a series of events begin that start awakening the poor jerk to just what a fool he's been. He begins to realize that to embrace the lowest common denominator, and to do it well, is to *excel in mediocrity*, to live in two dimensions only. By the end of the film, his dreams have awakened, just a bit. He sees a glimpse of a broader vista and decides to leave his loser buddies and dead-end, hedonistic lifestyle behind.

On a completely different level, one could look at Hermann Hesse's spiritual classic *Siddhartha*. Here is a novel about a young man in India in the days of Gotama Buddha. He passes through several stages of a personal quest for identity and enlightenment, largely paralleling the personal odyssey of the Buddha himself. Siddhartha tries out the harsh life of monasticism, the wildfires of hedonistic abandon, the settled existence of family life with its heartbreaks. At one point he actually considers becoming a disciple of the Buddha, whom he meets, but at the last he turns aside to continue his quest in his own direction.

The Buddha's own spiritual biography shows that he, too, was an innovator, a rejector of norms, a spurner of well-trodden paths. And Hesse's point seems to be that if one is to follow such a spiritual master in truth, the last thing to do is to take the same path he himself trod! Did the Buddha follow anyone else's path? No! Well, if you are to take any inspiration from him, neither must you follow *his* path! You must strike out on your own, even as he did. You cannot follow the example of a trailblazer by walking a well-marked path—even if it is the trail he blazed!

The real individualist does not create a new norm; rather he urges others to decide for themselves what *their* norm shall be. How often great thinkers have gone unheard by their closest followers! Why are the most eager to hear also often the deafest? Recall the scene in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* in which reluctant messiah Brian of Nazareth, drafted as a savior by his fans, urges the crowd, "You've got to think for *yourselves!*," to which they adoringly reply with one voice, "Yes! We've got to think for ourselves!"

Conformity is comfortable; conformity is easy. Individuation is difficult. You have to try to make sense of all the conflicting signals, to piece together the truth from the chaos you're picking up. This takes patience. Picture yourself, let's say, an android escaping from the Mass-Production Zone, trying to survive by altering your own programming. You've got to pause, rewind, replay. A dormant memory chip begins to warm up. Here comes the flood of memories from when you used to be a human being: you sample them at random—there! Hold the one you need.