

## We Contain Multitudes by Chad Dickerson

Walt Whitman once wrote, "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)"

It's possible to be a person with all of a multitude of experiences all at the same time. You can be a kid barely removed from a trailer park with an illiterate grandfather and disruptive mental illness in your family and go to Duke and study Shakespeare and build a successful career and eventually go to New York City and take a company public as a CEO. I actually think we would be better served if we had more people in leadership positions in public and private life who have known what it's like to be broke, to see the tragedy of a grandfather reaching the end of his life not knowing how to read, to win admission to a fancy school and feel like you shouldn't be there at first but then dig deep and carve out your place there and in the world beyond. Any leader of any organization of sufficient size will work with a diverse group of people and having a diverse set of experiences can only help build empathy.

In my personal life, I get invited to fancy dinners and such. Sometimes when introducing themselves, people lay out their professional accomplishments and I find myself wanting to know the real person, not the LinkedIn profile. I'm wondering: what were your struggles? What were your parents like? When did you feel uncertain and how did you overcome it? How did you get here? I realize that no one is obligated to share those things with me and I never press. But some of my best conversations at those kinds of events have come when I've let my guard down and told the person beside me a little about my real not-LinkedIn-profile self. Quite often, that person opens up in some way. We laugh about the first time we went to a dinner like this and had to figure out how the place settings worked, or about how we felt when we interviewed for our first big job in a strange city. Or the person beside me might have grown up wealthy but suffered difficult challenges in life that wealth can't address and overcame them. Some of these conversations have become the basis for deep loving friendships that I treasure.

Maybe if we all gave each other the space to be complex people — not reduced to public perception, our professional bios, our LinkedIn profiles, others' narratives of who we are — we might understand each other better and give ourselves the room to be messy but wondrous human beings.

As Whitman wrote: I am large, I contain multitudes. We all contain multitudes. Or as George and Tammy sang together on "Two Story House": I've got my story, and I've got mine, too."

And so do you. We should all tell them proudly and in their full complexity.