



What's your Nate/Ted percentage?

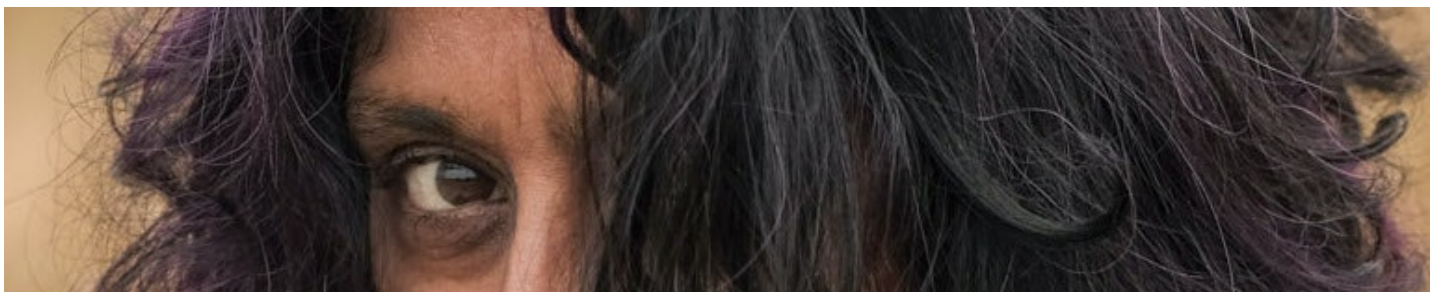
We are a little of both. (TED LASSO SPOILERS!!!!)



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[SPOILER ALERT: Please skip today's essay if you intend to watch the multiple Emmy-winning, Apple+ streaming show Ted Lasso--and yes, you should watch Ted Lasso even if it makes you feel like a cultural conformist. This is an excellent bandwagon on which to jump.]



Whatever else he does, Nathan Shelley surely stands out. In a story stocked with a dozen riveting characters, Nate, an alternately groveling and arrogant, cheerful and vengeful, victim and perp of a young man, is a sight to behold and a soul to pity. The end of the show's second season has Nate turning coat on his once beloved mentor, the titular Ted, to work for Rupert, the manipulative former owner of the Richmond soccer team and now its arch-nemesis. We are primed for a third season--the final act of this classically structured narrative?--in which these various damaged inner children, housed in adult bodies, are heading for a, um, pitched brawl. (Futbol nerds are allowed to groan here.)

The fantastic actor who plays Nate, Nick Mohammed, has issued a series of cheerful yet slightly defensive-sounding Tweets to show that his character's emerging Dark Side was evident from S1:E1. In particular, the writers took pains to hint at the way Nate's cold bully of a father and out-to-lunch mother helped create the pathetic and destructive force he turns out to be. There are also various easily-missed moments when Ted unwittingly insults or brushes past Nate. I suspect these same very clever writers knew exactly what they were doing when they gave Nate the same last name as Mary Shelley, who wrote a famous book about a "father"

bringing to life a “monster,” the patchwork creature who turns violently vengeful when deprived of paternal love.

Suspension of disbelief notwithstanding, some viewers are quick to judge fictional characters as if they are real people. These folks have been talking up their actual “hatred” for the suddenly “evil” Nate. It’s ironic and sad because Ted Lasso is the opposite of a comic book. It's a story deeply invested in subtle interpersonal encounters and psychological gray areas. And it advocates for a vaguely Buddhist, vaguely self-help-ist, personal heuristic that Ted gets to articulate: **Be curious, not judgmental.**

Brief digression. I’ve only met one person ever who explicitly claimed to be *really not judgmental at all*. She was a kind, noncritical person in most ways, but she was hung up on people’s looks, her own and everyone else’s. I understood her obsession, given certain aspects of her upbringing, but it sometimes caused her to say questionable things. I remember her complaining about the exorbitant cost of her hair stylist, but when I recommended my less expensive person, she said, *Oh, no, my hair’s way too important to me*. I tried not to take that as an insult to my own coiff, which up until that moment I’d considered a nice one, not a cheap one. Another time, she raved about a nanny she was vetting. She praised this woman for being educated, fun, competent--but also *very attractive*. I didn’t understand the implication that a good, responsible caretaker needed also to be hot. Then again...I found myself judging her harshly for her judgment in this matter. Sigh.

We should probably all be auditing ourselves for our near-constant judgments--an evolutionary adaptation run amok?--and instead aim for curious understanding, even when people abandon or hurt us. Also when we do hurtful things that shame us. I think there’s a proportion of Nate-to-Ted in many of us, if not most. Some part takes our wounds and use them to launch a personal quest for compassion and empathy; another part receives great pain and boomerangs it back out into the world, transmogrified, metastasized, Frankensteined.

When I saw and heard the commentary calling Nate evil, or nasty, or a shithead, I felt a little exposed. I’ve never been anywhere near as vengeful as the character, and yet I recognize the way his self-hatred curdles into jealousy and judgment. Just like Nate, I’ve sometimes redirected rage at an actual parent toward a too-familiar parental boss/mentor. I too have sometimes been deeply ashamed about a faux pas (like Nate’s “Wonder Kid”), tried to cover it

up, and stewed about it, rather than admitting it and laughing it off. Nate's feelings are familiar to me, even if I've grown out of them before letting them fuck up my life and relationships too badly. I'm lucky to have enough genuine Lassocian sunshine in me that my inner Nate has no lasting power. But he's in there. I'm going to say he is rarely more than 10%, but sometimes, under duress, spikes to 35 or 40%. Inner Ted ultimately regains calm control.

Early this year, when pandemic-induced conflicts were all the rage (so to speak), I was subjected to a genuine personal and professional abandonment. I was estranged by someone who'd previously offered me--in my mid-50s!--the kind of loving support and career-enabling good advice that other people get from their parents or mentors in youth. The reasons for the sudden rift were half understandable, half murky. I was unable to plead my case, ask for an explanation, or hold anyone to account. It was an ongoing relationship one moment and a gone one the next.

Only later did I realize how much this incident caused me to fear being abandoned by an entirely *other* person in my life, someone with zero connection to the estranged former friend. I basically became Nate, displacing my grief and rage from that now absent person onto the present-and-accounted-for "Ted"--a proxy to catch my bad feelings. As my anxiety mounted, I did and said weird things that ended up motivating this person not to disappear but definitely to retreat.

This is a common and terrible irony. When you allow fear of abandonment to rule your thoughts and actions, you end up doing things that make people want to flee. I know this well from another angle: decades of closely observing my mother, whose very intense fear of abandonment--and the personality disorder it seems to have engendered--caused her to rant and rage, to make poor decisions, to try to buy people's love when she couldn't earn it, to view every difference of opinion or nonconformity with her values as a personal betrayal, to puff herself up and seek obsequious acknowledgement of her accomplishments, and to be so simultaneously needy and hurtful that she has now ended up friendless in her final years.

She has been a very, very difficult person but not a thoroughgoing villain, not a cruel Rupert. Before dementia distilled her fundamental character, she was 70-80% Nate, 20-30% Ted. Now she's all Nate all the time, but it's easier to forgive the fear-based raging. Life is about to abandon her.

My mother surprised me once, thirty years ago, when a college friend was killed on her bicycle by a motorist. She was about 27 or 28, as were we all in that group. Fledged from the nest, but not yet fully formed. My mother's words of comfort on the occasion were beautiful and simple. They were also a complete shock coming from a woman who almost never opened her mouth except to judge, criticize, belittle, or gossip.

"We think we don't really need people," my mother said, her voice unusually gentle, mournful in solidarity. "We think that we are fine on our own. But we're wrong, we do need people and we miss them so badly when they're gone."

That telephone call is one of a few cherished, uncomplicated memories I'll retain about my mother when she dies. One of her too rare, too brief, 100% Ted Lasso moments.

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Annie Nov 18

Your writing makes me feel human again. Thanks.

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