

My Pandemic: What I've Learned So Far

My whole life, I've never felt like I truly belonged anywhere - that I was always an outsider looking in on the world. I lived under the assumption that I, inherently, was not good enough for anything or anyone; and that no one would ever truly accept me for who I truly am. These core beliefs about myself fueled how I interacted with the world, and I focused all of my attention outward, rather than inward. I unconsciously (yet whole-heartedly) engaged in activities that prioritized the needs and desires of others over my own, ultimately making it impossible for others (and myself) to access this "true" version of myself I desperately wanted to be recognized. I ignored my own internal cries of discomfort and distress, and would wonder why I felt so empty and neglected at the end of the day. I would equate the emptiness to needing more validation from others, and I would endlessly perpetuate this unfulfilling cycle. I was sure it would satisfy my desires to believe that being the most authentic version of myself is acceptable and worthy of love.

In the months leading up to the pandemic, I was in a particularly bad place. I was slowly becoming aware of how unfulfilling my life was, yet was unwilling to face the reality that my choices were only perpetuating the very core beliefs that caused me great pain and distress. I was choosing to be ignorant of myself and what I truly needed, and life felt stagnant. I chose to pursue what I thought would "complete me" in the moment. I went to parties and social events where I would become incoherently intoxicated every week, and engaged in many encounters of casual sex. I was still surprised to find how unfulfilled I felt, especially in regards to my sex life. For a brief period, I believed what I was doing was empowering myself - I'd had countless conversations with my peers about how they felt liberated in how they were making the choice to explore their bodies sexually, and I assumed I was doing the same. I'd felt an overwhelming support for them in their moments of sexual pride, and wondered if sex would enable me to feel that same pride in myself. My first experiences with sex lacked my consent, so I felt empowered by the idea that I would be making a choice to engage with another person sexually. Because of my experiences, I believed I was better equipped to be aware of and vocalize what felt right to me and what didn't. I couldn't have been more wrong - when it came to these moments, I found

myself silent and fearful of speaking up. I felt like my body was just a conduit for another's pleasure, and that me saying anything would cause them to violently reject me. Rejection was just something I just couldn't handle (even if it would ultimately protect my well-being), and everything I did seemed to be in avoidance of this fear I had. Everything I did was a reflection of my warped sense of self and core beliefs of my unworthiness as myself - I felt I had to meet the expectations of others, even at the expense of myself, to be appreciated and valued.

Unsurprisingly enough, this mindset even presented itself when COVID began to emerge in the United States as a threat to public health. Towards the beginning of the pandemic, (when masks weren't mandated but recommended), I found myself feeling conflicted. Not because I was opposed to wearing one - in fact, I knew I would feel much safer wearing one with all the talk of how viral COVID was - but because I was worried about whether or not the people around me would be doing the same. I've always been a person who is afraid to make decisions for themselves, and tend to trust what others decide over what I truly believe is best; my worst fear has always been not fitting in - worrying about being singled out and ridiculed for making a different choice from the status quo, potentially being the only one to wear a mask.

It was shocking for me to realize how my patterned thinking came into play even with a matter of something as globally severe as a pandemic, and I was only put all of these pieces together because of quarantine and the social isolation that came with it. No longer able to find distraction from myself through other people the way I had become accustomed to, I had to face this deep-rooted dissatisfaction with and fear of myself, and all of the patterned behaviors I've adopted to facing this truth.

I was lucky enough to not have to delve into such uncharted territory alone. I had met my current partner right as campus shut down, and we continued to maintain our connection remotely. He was (and continues to be) so supportive of me recognizing myself, my needs, and my fears, and has honestly been the first person who has really genuinely accepted me without judgment (which I am so grateful for - I love him so much!). I contribute this security and intimate connection partially to our quarantine-circumstances. We were, essentially, forced to be in a long-distance relationship, which is heavily reliant on direct and certain communication of needs and boundaries. With him, I was able to question and explore my boundaries in a space that felt safe (which I had never really done at all - try to establish my own limits). I felt able to

say what I needed, or what I didn't want, without fearing harsh criticism, rejection, and abandonment.

However, as the pandemic gradually subsided and things slowly began to open back up, I found setting boundaries to be an entirely new experience - one that, as I had always feared, could be met with judgment and criticism.

Columbia had decided to open dorms back up for my junior year, and I planned on living with two of my closest friends, which I was initially very excited about. However, things soured as the year progressed, and one of my friends began asking too much of me. She was in a very toxic relationship at the time, and would constantly come to me crying about it. I was empathetic at first (she was my friend, and I hated to see how much she was hurting); however, it quickly became too much for me. I couldn't go out on my own without her spamming my phone with calls and texts begging me to come home to cuddle her because she was sad. She would barge into my bedroom in the middle of the night, asking me to comfort her. Things got more severe when she would use me to contact her now ex-boyfriend, who had blocked her weeks prior. She was willing to do anything to reach out to him, including exploiting one of her close friends.

It became clear my needs did not matter in our relationship. I'd dipped my toes into the waters of establishing boundaries between us, explaining how her actions caused me great anxiety, and how I couldn't be available at all times of the day to support her. She seemed understanding at the time, but this agreement was thrown completely out the window very shortly. She grew bitter when I would spend more time with my partner than I did with her, and she often went to great lengths to make herself my priority, regardless of what I was doing, where I was, or if I was in the right headspace to support her. I began staying at my partner's for extended periods of time that only increased as my boundaries in what was supposed to be my home, to the point where I was only in my dorm for a few hours every week. I was terrified to spend any more time in that apartment.

Things reached a climactic point when she tracked down where my partner lived to find me so she could spill even more of her emotions about her ex (this was months after they had broken up). It was 5 am, and she showed up unannounced (after calling me repeatedly, which I ignored because I had to go to sleep), and burst straight into the doorway when my partner opened it, looking for me.

I felt trapped. My attempts to establish boundaries had failed, and I didn't want to just cut my friend off entirely - I didn't want to leave her in a painful place all on her own. However it was what had to be done. I was suppressing my own pain to cater to her needs. I'd pushed myself into so many uncomfortable situations for her, yet she couldn't recognize or even be cognizant of my discomfort.

I ended up cutting her off entirely (which made things extremely uncomfortable for the remainder of my living situation there), but it was an eye-opening situation for me. I believed my boundaries had been clear from the start, and that I would only have to set them once - but learned something very different. I realized I had equated setting boundaries with loss, worrying that people would reject (and ultimately abandon) me for asserting myself and my needs. I had been denying myself, yet again, of an experience of valuing myself over others.

That leaves me at my present-day self and my current place in my journey. This summer has offered me time to reevaluate my relationship with my former friend (as well as others from my past) - I've been very fixated on finding a "source" to my feelings of inadequacy and fears of judgment and rejection. I've found it in my childhood, particularly in my relationship with my parents. I've found how the emptiness and inadequacy I feel comes from my inner child, who still feels the neglect and lack of acceptance from my parents, who weren't ready to have children and were unable to recognize their children as individuals with their own needs and desires. I grew up molding myself to fit what would make my parents most comfortable because that guaranteed their "love" and, by proxy, their motivation to help me survive (in a very primal, biological sense). I've grown up convincing myself that this is what I have to do to survive. However, I'm coming to realize how I believed these ideas were true as a child because I had to - as an adult, I don't need my parents' approval to be fed, sheltered, and know what to do in the world; I've learned how to adapt and adjust. And, most importantly, that I don't have to meet anyone else's expectations to be valued - I am of value and worthy of love, attention, and support just for being who I am.

I've grown so much in the past year, and it feels strange and surreal to say that a global pandemic was a catalyst for my introspection and self-growth. The events that transpired because of its severity and virality have allowed me to recognize and start to understand and break out of patterns of thought and behavior I've developed in an attempt to protect myself (that have actually proven to be far more harmful to me than helpful). I am no longer afraid to face

myself, and am no longer running away from my truth. As I learn more about myself, I am gaining better self-compassion skills, as well, reminding myself that although I am a human being who is prone to making mistakes, I am still worthy of love and acceptance, just as anyone else is.