PERSONAL ESSAY

Listen to your inner child

Why I still live for my younger self.

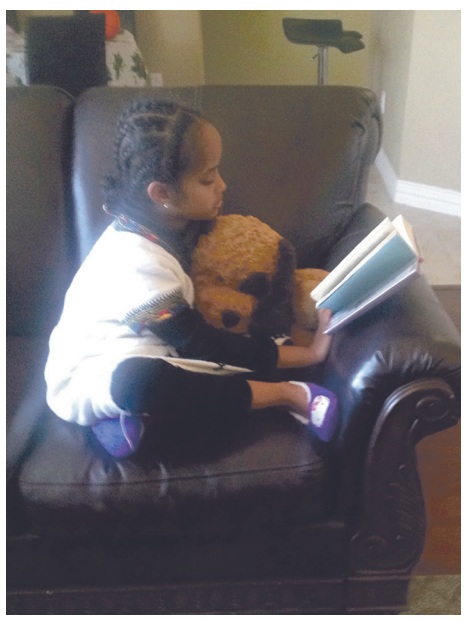
// BY HANA TILKSEW



I've always felt oddly haunted by the thought that everyone else is growing up while I stay the same. Sure, I've gotten taller over the years. My voice is lower and my wisdom teeth have come in. But my inner world is still relatively unchanged since childhood. And don't think that was a happy accident: I've made a conscious effort to stay the girl I once was.

My childhood friends and I were artistic nerds that wrote short stories together and talked about book characters like they were our pals. We wrote original songs and performed them at a frightening pitch on the playground. At the time, several of us said we'd grow up to be creatives. Now, I'm the only one of the group actually pursuing a creative field. When we got older and I discovered that most of the girls who acted out scenes from "Frozen" and illustrated "Dork Diaries" knockoffs with me were now pre-med, I was befuddled. Was I the only one who truly meant what we said in that third grade classroom? Was I the only one who took it all seriously?

The promises I made to myself in elementary school — that I would become a writer, that I would dress like a character out of my favorite video game "Style Savvy," that I would never date a loser — come to the forefront of my mind the minute I'm tempted to break any of them. Overwhelming guilt that washes over me when I consider relaxing any one of these guidelines. Should I change my major from English? Should I give that guy a chance? 10-year-old me would say no, so no it is.



On the outside, I've definitely changed. I wear my hair differently and talk to strangers. But these differences are less about evolution and more about self-actualization. My approach to personal growth has never been about changing who I am, but about becoming closer to who I have always felt I was. Being a child felt like a cage in which I was never free to express myself fully. There were school dress codes and authority figures' rules to adhere to. Now that those barriers between my inner self and my expressed self no longer exist, I'm free to make the choices that I've always wanted to.

Others have criticized me for my rigidity. I'll admit, there are possible downsides to my approach to life. Maybe my childhood self was an idiot without enough experience, and her worldview can't help me do anything meaningful with my life as an adult. Maybe my life's calling is to be a surgeon and there's no point in denying it just because 10-year-old me would be offended at the prospect. Maybe it's a waste of time to let a juvenile's taste rule your life.

But consider this: Christ said, "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Louise Glück wrote, "We look at the world once, in childhood. Everything else is memory." If the child me was the most lucid, upright, blessed form of me, why would I not listen to her?



I stumbled on a series of childhood photos last night and cried. I cried because the girl in those photos has come a long way and she would be endlessly happy if she knew who the 20-year-old version of herself had become. What's the alternative? Being confronted with your childhood self and crying out of regret? Knowing that a more optimistic version of yourself had a certain vision for your life, and you allowed something as silly as pragmatism to disrupt those dreams?

No thanks. I'll stick with my inner child.

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PERSONAL ESSAY

Suffering and opportunity

On being a first-generation student

// BY ESMERALDA VASQUEZ-FERNANDEZ



My mom ran for her high school's track and field team and survived El Salvador's civil war. Her classes were interrupted by routine bombings and torched schoolhouses. My dad survived extreme poverty and did not graduate middle school. He worked at a factory in Mexico City once his family realized he could only find work in the city, not in their town. They survived. And somehow I'm the one who got the opportunity to go to college.

In high school, I ran cross-country and track, like my mom — except I sported carbon-plated shoes at races. I've been to Mexico City, but when I went I bought local artisan cuisine without thinking too much about the price. My first job was at a beach shack called The Stand, and the hardest part was taking out a 25-pound bag of compost around the back. When I couldn't read, and my parents couldn't help me with my first grade reading assignments, they got me a tutor. I grew up in the suburbs of Orange County, California, where I didn't have to worry about bombings.

At 14, I thought I had it hard making acai bowls for $14 an hour. My first car was a 2002 Jaguar that I bought for $2,000 and got picked on for having. When I was 18, I became a server and thought I'd learned the art of working a real job. But no matter how hard I thought I worked, or the fact that I maintained a 4.0 GPA throughout it all, my parents were working 12-hour days of manual labor. I knew I couldn't change that by working extra hours or repaying my parents for the privilege of thinking I had it hard.

Around a year ago, I finished working a full shift at Ike's Love & Sandwiches and then ran to an extended family dinner. My sleeves were still wet from washing dishes for hours when I arrived at the table. I'd found out a couple weeks before that I'd gotten into Yale. My cousin, who wasn't able to graduate high school, congratulated me on my college acceptances. She said it must be nice to like school.

For the first time in my life I questioned if I deserved the opportunity in front of me. I had never thought about it. Had I earned the privilege of attending school? Why did I get to work an easy job? Why was I the one from my community college to get accepted to Yale? Why, of all the industrious and hardworking people in my family, was I the one to go to an Ivy League school?

I smiled and thanked her. I knew that my parents didn't have the luxury of asking if they deserved the few things they had. I had the luxury of looking the gift horse in the mouth.

There's pressure that comes with the opportunity to break generational barriers. Navigating an unfamiliar world is daunting. For most of my time at community college, the stress kept me on a strict regimen that offered little space for creative outlets. I do not regret living so rigidly because I can't confidently say I would have gotten into Yale otherwise.





In my "Life Worth Living" course at Yale, I have learned to see hardship in a different light. Some people suffer hardships. Some people don't. There's no reason behind it; that's what makes it so frustrating. My mom is stronger than me. My dad has a better work ethic. My entire extended family works harder than me, just to make a living, while I panic over having to write a five-page essay. I felt inconvenienced by my fast food job and somehow was still deemed worthy of the opportunity to pursue an education, even though I'm not the best candidate, not even within my own family.

I could spend the rest of my life questioning whether or not I deserve the opportunities set before me. But what good would that do? Questioning why I'm the one who found a path to education won't help my more deserving family members. Opportunity and suffering are random. It's not about who deserves what.

My parents survived immense hardship so that I could have the opportunities I do. I won't take that privilege for granted.

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