

Shame, Validation, and the Pursuit of Authenticity

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Writing 101: *Coming of Age and Happiness*

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PROLOGUE

The car is dead silent. I dare not speak a word.

I rest my cheek on the backseat window and allow my eyes to lose focus on the blur of passing traffic. The rhythmic thudding of my head on the glass distracts me from my growing headache.

All my fault.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see my dad gripping the steering wheel with both hands, his knuckles turning white. Sitting next to me, my brother sketches my mom from behind, as she silently rests her hands in her lap and pretends to stare straight ahead while stealing discrete glances at me through the rearview mirror.

We make a sharp turn into a plaza of one-story office complexes.

The therapist's office is nestled between a massage parlor and a vitamin supplements shop. My dad found this family therapy specialist after my most recent suicide threat. He turns in his seat to let us know that we've arrived, though I can hardly bring myself to look him in the eye. I'm furious at him for caring so deeply about me, and furious at myself for allowing my parents to find out about my weakness. For putting them through so much pain.

Walking into the waiting room made me lightheaded, kinda like that feeling when you stand up a little too quickly after a nap. My heart beat so quickly that I could hear it in my chest. Still, none of us speak a word.

"Johnson family? Come on in." The therapist is a tall, slim man, well-dressed, with friendly eyes and well-defined laugh lines. "And you must be Adam?" He stares directly at me.



Adam Johnson

Who am I? Am I defined by my words and my actions? Or is my identity determined by my internal self-concept? Perhaps, the question is irrelevant, with my destiny written

into my DNA and the instincts of my primate brain. Or, maybe, it's not even worth considering, since I wake up each morning a different man than I was the day before.

These were the types of questions that I considered while taking *Writing 101: Coming of Age and Happiness*. For the first time in my life, I was provided with a community where it was O.K. to not have all the answers. I was presented with a judgment-free space to explore my ongoing coming of age story, allowing me to carefully examine the toxic behaviors that, for so long, had left me feeling like a spectator in my own life.

Growing up as a young gay kid in the South - discovering my political views, sexuality, stance on religion, and the conflict between my perfectionist ideals and flawed humanity - I protected myself from hypothetical social ridicule by conforming my personality to meet the expectations of those around me. Throughout my first year of college, I continued to avoid individualism and authenticity at all costs, as, ironically, I was terrified of ruining my chance at the fresh start college provides by being too much like myself.

Aided by the temporal and spatial distance I had gained from my childhood home, I was finally able to notice my behavior, which raised questions about the definition of my identity. Who am I behind the various personas I've constructed? Why did I feel the need to rely on them for so long? And, how can I allow my authentic self, whoever he is, to be free? My struggle to find the answers and work towards unconditional self-love is ongoing, and this essay was a difficult, but necessary first step. It is my sincere hope that my vulnerability will inspire others to move into their own relationships with radical openness, as it is up to each and every one of us to take responsibility for our minds and stop allowing ourselves to become accomplices in our own disconnection and discontent.

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I stand up straighter, unclench my jaw, and relax my furrowed brows.
Stay calm and act natural, Adam. You don't need his help, and you don't need everyone thinking there's something wrong with you. Get through this, and you'll never have to come back here again.



"That's me. Nice to meet you."

We make our way into his cozy, well-decorated office. My dad gestures at a photo hanging on the wall.

"Great shot! Where was that taken?"

"Thanks, Steve. That was from a skiing trip my husband and I took in Colorado last year."

Husband...?

My ears perk up involuntarily and my eyes dart upwards. The therapist was speaking to my dad, but his eyes were locked on me. We hold eye contact. It feels like

he's looking right through me, despite the emotionless expression I thought would protect me.

What the hell? How does he know...?

I'm only 13, and my sexual identity is something that exists only in the dead of night, behind locked doors. There is not a soul on Earth who knows, except me, and now, this random man whose job it is to know people better than they know themselves.

I quickly look away and pretend to scan his bookshelves.

It's just a coincidence... How could he possibly know? This might be harder than I thought...

The session proceeded as expected. Probing questions, psychological thought experiments, and mini-interviews with each family member. I don't speak unless spoken to, and even then, I make it as difficult as possible for him to get anything helpful out of me.

My mom mentions my emotionless responses to 'How are you honey?' make her cry when I leave the room. My dad describes how trying to get me out of my bedroom is like pulling teeth, and, over time, he has stopped trying to get me to do things because he doesn't want me to hate him.

My heart aches. I feel horrible for what I put them through. I want to break down and apologize and rip my hair out and beg for forgiveness.

But I sit silently, stone-faced, and say nothing.

The session eventually reaches its end, and the therapist addresses us as a family. I tune out his predictable platitudes and psychological analysis. I can't take it anymore.

"The importance of family... remain vulnerable with each other... there's no reason to be ashamed..."

I wonder if he really knows I'm gay... Is it obvious?... I love that painting...

"Adam..." The therapist had turned to me, and all eyes were focused on my face. I snap back to reality.

Here we go. He's gonna prescribe me some antidepressants and we'll be on our way. Let's get this over with.

"I think that you are an expert manipulator. You know how to get what you want, and you play other people's emotions, like your parents', easily to that end..."

What? How dare you...

"You felt trapped and afraid, so you lashed out. It's why we're all sitting here right now. You have our attention. Now, you sit here and feign apathy because I don't think you ever wanted my help. You think you have things under control."

I want to stand up and make a scene.

Who does he think he is? He doesn't know shit about me!

Instead, I let out a nervous laugh, like he had made a joke, but I can't hide the concern in my eyes. This man, whom I had known for only an hour or so, saw right through the facade I rely on to protect myself from this exact feeling. This exposure. This isolating, shameful vulnerability.

"You don't have to respond or say anything right now, but I want you to think about that. Hopefully, we'll talk more about this sometime soon..."

Blood rushes to my head, and the only thing I can focus on is my gripping headache and the pounding of my heart. I desperately blink back tears as they begin to well up. Overwhelmed by humiliation and outrage, my mind races, and my eyes dart around the room to gauge whether my panic is noticeable. I had failed to protect myself from being exposed, and even worse, my parents had now witnessed my dishonesty.

But as I wipe my angry tears away, a strange sense of relief takes their place. I want nothing more than to be angry at the man who had just seen right through me, but instead, my chest feels, somehow, lighter. Never had someone understood so much about me, and yet, he wasn't upset, or disgusted, or judgmental. Instead, he sat calmly in front of me, with a gentle smile in his eyes.

Even while managing this deluge of confusing emotions, I remain convinced that nothing would be worse than letting my parents worry. So, as we rise to leave, I smile and shake hands and make sure no one in the room can tell that my heart is racing even faster than my mind.

The therapist had done his job and done it well. Nobody speaks on the car ride home, but this time, my mom turns the radio on, filling the silence with mindless noise and distracting us from ourselves.

At dinner, I tell my parents that nothing the therapist said resonated with me. I tell them it was a waste of time.

I never wanted to see him again; he knew too much.

But deep down, I knew he was right, and I couldn't stop thinking about what he had said.

I think about all the times that I had pretended to enjoy Boy Scouts so that my dad would be proud of me. I remember when I stopped showing my passion for academics in middle school so that I could fit in better with the other kids. In my head, I replay the many family gatherings where I would sit off to the side, alone, avoiding interaction with my cousins. I was scared they wouldn't like me if I acted like myself, and I knew that I could get sympathy and attention from the adults no matter what.

I would do anything just to avoid negative attention. To fit in, meet people's expectations, and be the person I thought would be most palatable for everyone except myself.

I lay awake in bed thinking about why I had been driven to suicidal ideation only a few weeks prior, at the start of my 8th grade year. The therapist was right; it was a cry for help, meant to get the attention of my parents so that I could avoid the humiliation I would face at school when people would see the cracks in my ostensibly flawless persona.

I clench my sheets in my fists and try to force myself into sleep, but the thought of being so deeply known worms its way into my head. If the therapist had been able to see who I really was, despite my constant effort to the contrary, what else could have slipped through the cracks? If people were able to see my flaws and



imperfections, my excitement and my shame and my true emotions, then how could I protect myself from their snap judgements? Their stinging critiques? Their slurs and jokes at my expense?

I try to stay calm, but deep down I know that no meticulously crafted exterior can protect me from the harshest critic of all: Myself.

I begin to drift off and my scattered thoughts become clear.

Never let it happen again.

THE ATHLETE

“RISE AND SHINE, IT’S ASS-KICKING TIME!”

My dad’s voice echoes through the hall and his incessant pounding on my door shakes my bed frame. I crawl halfway off my mattress and blindly grasp for my phone, legs still under the sheets, clinging to any remaining semblance of hope that he might take mercy on me and let me go back to bed. Sleep was already in short supply from long nights spent studying for the SAT and trying to keep up with preparations for the impending college application season without being woken up at 6 am every weekend. I groan loudly enough to make sure he can hear it in the kitchen. He jokingly calls me a big baby. My mom laughs.

One hour later, my brother, my dad, and I are biking through the sprawling pine scrub and river marshes of Florida’s Jonathan Dickinson state park.

“Let’s go, Adam! Pick up the pace! If you would just put some power into it, you’ll glide over the roots like they’re nothing.”

The roots in question jutted out at least 6 inches from the muddy trailhead, and I had almost no momentum to carry me over. I started pedaling faster. I knew he was watching, so I puffed out my shoulders and filled my chest with air. *You can do it this time. Stay focused. Here it comes...* My wheels lost traction with the muddy trail, and I rode head-first into the tree. Mud caked my legs and my arms were submerged in the swampy earth.

While I brushed the dirt off my soaked sneakers and attempted to find what was left of my dignity, I watched my brother breeze over the terrain that had just gotten the better of me.

Fuck.

I could see the way my dad was looking at me. I was used to that stare by now. I could tell that he wasn’t upset, but that somehow made it worse. He had gotten used to my failure to live up to his expectations of machismo.

He tried everything, but I just wasn’t interested. Rec basketball was going great, until I accidentally scored a goal for the opposing team. His skateboarding lessons in elementary school always ended in tears.

I admired his strength and confidence, but each time I tried to make him proud in the way that I knew he wanted, I couldn’t help but let him down.

There were times when his rugged independence and authority inspired me, but what I didn’t admire was his temper.

When he would raise his voice so loud that I would run to my room and cower underneath the covers, hoping that if I was just quiet and still enough, then he wouldn’t find and berate me further. Or the time where something I said pissed him off so badly that he threw my brother’s miniature wooden chair at the ground so hard that it ricocheted and almost hit me.

So, I never really felt like I could be too open with him about emotional stuff.

I stood up and mounted my bike again. I could hear him yelling at me from farther down the trail.

“Shake it off son! We can always turn back if you can’t handle it. You alright?”

I wasn’t. My face was red with embarrassment.



Why can't I do this? Why do I have to fall on my face every time?

This wasn't the first time that he stared at me with that exasperated grimace. But, as I held back the tears of frustration, regained my composure, and stared into his eyes, the shame I had become so accustomed to somehow felt different.

I knew I would never be everything that he had always dreamed his son would be. The look in his eye was one that I had seen so many times before. The look of disappointment, frustration. He had come to expect me to fall short, no matter what. Humiliated, I was determined to never let him have this power over me again.

As I straightened up and wiped the mud from my handlebars, my mind, which would usually be clouded with countless obscenities I would never dare speak aloud, began to wander. I considered the inevitable shame I would feel if I ever came out to my dad. I didn't want to give him anything that would validate him in perceiving me as less of a man. My identity would help explain away my disinterest in skateboarding, and my mediocrity at basketball. It would explain why I got good grades, why I was best friends with a girl, and why I wasn't like all my male cousins who wear camo and dream of joining the Navy.

"I'm fine. Don't wait up."



THE MUSICIAN

I stared up at my high school band director. The sweat dripped off his furrowed brow as he stared down the trumpet player sitting three seats from me.

"Go."

The poor kid trembled as he lifted his horn. Sixty pairs of eyes were trained directly on him, waiting with bated breath to hear what would happen next. He barely got through two measures before my director cut him off.

"Unprepared. Zero. Get out, and don't come back until it's perfect. Next."

My director always got like this before a big performance. We had been rehearsing for weeks for the final concert of my junior year, and each night, I painstakingly analyzed every note and rhythm in my part to make sure that they were flawless. Failure was not an option.

All the hours spent playing the same two measures over and over, and the rage that inevitably came when they never sounded quite right, the sleepless nights, and my silent pep-talks in the bathroom mirror before class had to pay off. I knew I didn't do it to be prepared for the performance, or because I wanted to improve as a musician, or because I feared the wrath of my director, but because I had to avoid the inevitable, scathing self-hatred that would accompany even the slightest flaw in my sound. The paranoia and the belief that all eyes were on me. That everyone was secretly laughing at me after class. The inevitable rush of blood to my head. The invasive, unwelcome thoughts that I had failed myself and let everyone down *forever*. I had to be prepared for the moment that would show everyone whether or not I was a fraud.

My clammy hands fumbled with the trumpet on my lap. I stared at my part, rehearsing it over and over in my head as I had done a million times before. *Remember, that note runs flat, so lip it up. But don't get too tense, or you'll miss it entirely. How did that fingering go again...?*

I glanced around the room at all my peers who had known me since the sixth

grade. Back then, I was a trumpet prodigy, as one of the only sixth graders in my middle school's advanced band. I considered the kids playing alongside me to be some of the most talented people I had ever met, yet despite making music with them for years, I never gave myself the same



credit. Each rehearsal and performance were a chance for me to show them that I wasn't worthy.

I imagined how everyone would think of me differently if I failed at something; if I couldn't be the best at music, or in my math class, who was I? In the practice rooms, just before each rehearsal, I would only rehearse sections of my music that I knew were flawless, because the thought of anyone hearing my imperfections terrified me.

My director continued down the line. One kid passed and sunk back in his chair with a sigh of relief. Another was thrown out of the room, stifling his tears on the way out. It was nearly my turn.

Looking into the eyes of my fellow musicians, I wondered about who they saw looking back at them. Was I the quiet kid that they never paid much attention to? Did they think I was talented? Friendly? Was my painstaking effort to construct a flawless persona paying off?

My best friend sat a few rows in front of me with the other clarinets, listening to the developing trauma of the brass players behind him. When his eyes locked with mine, they seemed to convey his sympathy and best wishes.

I felt guilty.

I thought about the unspoken divide that had grown between us before we began high school, when I disappeared in the 8th grade. I never told him, or anyone, the truth about what happened to me.

My trumpet teacher made some changes to my embouchure that set my playing back by a few years. The thought of walking into a rehearsal, much like the one I was suffering through now, with all my friends and mentors watching, and hardly being able to play a note made my heart feel like it was going to split in two. I began to spiral.

What will everyone think of me? I used to be the best, but now everyone is going to know that I'm a fucking failure. Why is this happening to me? Why? Stop whining, it's pathetic. Get a grip. Shut up, Adam. Nobody understands what I'm going through...

I attempted suicide twice. I thought it would be better to have everyone remember me as a remarkable young talent, tragically gone too soon, than just another disappointment, lacking any unique or interesting qualities. I attended online school so my parents could keep an eye on me that year. I told my friends that I went to a boarding school in Miami because they had a great math program. They never brought it up again, but I could tell they knew I was lying.

My director called my name, and I snapped back to reality.

My turn.

I lifted my mouthpiece to my lips. It was cold and uncomfortable against my face because of how long it had been resting on my lap. I pushed past it because nothing was more uncomfortable than being the center of attention.

My preparation served me well, and I made it through the passage.

The stress drained from my body, and I felt like I could finally take a deep breath again.

My director continued down the line. I tuned everything out and began planning how to avoid failure tomorrow, and the day after that.

You got lucky this time, Adam...

THE BLANK SLATE

The walls of my dorm are almost completely bare.

Last semester, I justified it by saying that I simply forgot to bring decor when I moved in. Whenever I called home, my mom would ask, "Why are your walls so empty? It's depressing. Go out and get a poster or some lights or something!" I told her I would, and started searching online for decorations, but then never went through with buying anything.

It's too expensive. A dumb poster isn't worth spending any money- I'll just live with it. I don't mind.

Except I do mind. Some mornings, I wake up, look around my room, and am struck by how bleak the expensive little box where I spend most of my time actually is. I only have a few drawings from my little sister to remind me of home, and a tiny 3" by 2" framed picture of me and my best friend that she gave me when I saw her over break. There are no posters to remind me of my favorite musicians, or my favorite movies. There's only peeling drywall.

Occasionally, I spice things up and paste sticky-notes on the wall around my desk. Each one contains a hastily scribbled message to myself with a motivational mantra that I found on social media, or a reminder of an upcoming

deadline that I always inevitably miss anyways. My personal favorite simply says, "EAT SOMETHING!!!" with a hastily scribbled pink smiley face underneath, because I often need reminding. Knowing that my past-self cared enough to make sure that I take steps to meet my basic needs is enough motivation to leave my private safety bubble, even if it means I'll have to encounter other people along the way.

Even though my room's decor is pitiful and essentially nonexistent, it's the only space on campus where I truly feel comfortable and relaxed. I'm a different person when I'm alone in there. Nobody can see me, so I whip out my classic disco moves and violently stomp whenever I get tired of working, which usually only takes fifteen minutes, max. I get blisters on my toes from how much I bop around, but I don't hate them because they were fun to make. Sometimes I feel like I should send a formal, written apology to whoever lives in the room beneath mine.

I give myself permission to laugh, and to yell about how much I hate physics and my wonderful Florida senators. I call my friends and my brother, and rant for an hour straight about how much I wish I could abandon civilized life and be a park ranger in the middle of an isolated mountain range. I have long conversations with myself about why humans just had to go and invent money, and when I tire myself out, I lie on the floor and belt whatever song I'm obsessed with at the moment until I fall asleep.

These unremarkable things are special to me because they remind me that I'm human.

My humanity does not leave the boundaries of my little box. Even in my room, I usually listen to my music with headphones in so that nobody walking by will know what I like to listen to. I could be hitting every move of the famed dance break on my imaginary world tour one moment, but the very next, when I open my door to go to class or grab food, the energy and excitement drains from my body.

Suddenly, I'm Adam Johnson: The quiet, awkward guy who only wears black, gray, and dark blue. The guy that grew out his beard and deepens his voice ever so slightly so that his toxic male peers wouldn't call him "faggot" in passing, unprovoked, like their younger Floridian counterparts used to. The guy that has so much he wants to say, but has difficulty making conversation because he sticks to carefully calculated, boring responses that lack substance because he thinks that's what others want to hear.

Last semester, a friend of mine knocked on my door so that we could work on finishing a project for our engineering class. My mind was so occupied by the stress of my upcoming

midterms and assignments, that I let him in without thinking about it. As soon as I realized what I'd done, my heart sank.

What the hell, Adam? He's gonna think you're a freak. The only thing you have on your walls are those insane sticky notes that are a perfect example of your inability to function like a normal person. Great.

He stared while I rushed around the room, nervously smiling and ripping all my hastily written reminders and messages off the walls and stuffing them into the trash. I hardly thought about what I was doing, but my subconscious mind had to protect itself from vulnerability by casually debasing me in a way that was arguably even worse than just owning it. I played it off like a bit of spring cleaning, and he didn't acknowledge it.

Nice going, Adam. You're a real class act.

When he left for the night, I collapsed into my chair and stared at my walls, now completely barren. I considered resuming my online search for decor but couldn't bring myself to open my computer. It never had anything to do with money. The idea that someone might come into my room and learn what my interests were, or what parts of pop culture spoke to me enough to warrant taking up my limited wall space made me viscerally uncomfortable.

But wasn't someone coming in here and witnessing that so much worse? Isn't living in an empty, unmarked box worse? Why do you have to torture yourself?

As I lay in bed that night, staring up at the ceiling, my mind raced, grasping at straws to soothe my frantic breath and anxious, lonely heart.

Don't worry. Tomorrow, I'll start opening up a little more. Take it one day at a time.

But, deep down, I knew that nothing would be different tomorrow. Or the day after.

I'm so tired of being surrounded by blank, empty walls. I just wish I had the courage to start breaking them down.

ANALYSIS: TRAPPED INSIDE

The Adam Johnson that I know and love only exists within 200 square feet.

Alone, I allow myself to be free from the confines of irrational fear. Despite this fleeting psychological freedom, I keep my walls as blank as possible, so that if anyone stops by, they leave knowing no more about me than when they came.

When I set foot outside of the confines of my bedroom, the walls follow. The person that I talk to in the mirror when I'm alone, and the person who wants to be seen and understood so badly, disappears.



In his place is an infinite catalog of empty, stock personalities. The teacher's pet. The college bro. The perfect child. The cool musician. The supportive best friend.

I watch my life unfold through the eyes of an empty shell that nobody can connect to, trapped in my own head by insecurity. Even on the rare occasion that the real Adam wrests control, however momentarily, and says something authentic, perhaps about his passion for a particular piece of music or video game, he immediately retreats and hyper-analyzes the reaction he gets from the people around him.

Was that too much? Your voice probably sounded so gay. They're annoyed by me, I can tell...

The culture shock of coming to college allowed me to become aware of this toxic behavior, and the negative way that it was affecting my life. Suddenly, I lacked a childhood friend group, people who had known me for almost a decade, to fall back on. My classmates appeared to be making connections and friendships with each other in only a few weeks, while I was terrified of leaving my room and saying the wrong thing.

It stung. I felt like a failure. I had no one to help me except myself.

I didn't view my social blunders like they were just mistakes on an exam. I viewed them as the shameful consequences of my flawed personality.

Walking around campus and seeing people laugh and smile and spend time with each other made my heart ache for those kinds of connections. I noticed people openly discussing their failures on exams or arguing about politics. There were people singing and playing guitar for each other, in front of everyone, and others running around with a frisbee, not caring whether people saw them fall or miss a pass. It started to click for me that my peers were able to form these connections and friendships because they didn't shy away from their flaws. They were vulnerable and authentic and real with each other.

Which was exactly what I had been avoiding.

The pieces started to come together. The desolate walls of my dorm room. My obsession with hiding mistakes in my music classes. My inability to open up to my dad. The panic attacks. The paranoia. All symptoms of a debilitating disease which has prevented me from forming deep personal connections with other people. A disease which often leaves me terrified of the world and hating myself for not being able to *just get over it*.

A cancer of my psyche, my fear of invalidation has infected me, and spread so deep that I can hardly remember my life without it.

Yet, despite the ubiquitous influence of this fear in my life, I do not believe that it arose from a single source; instead, my path through life thus far has allowed me to accumulate multiple voices and perspectives which coalesced to spur my feelings of intrinsic inadequacy.

Perhaps these toxic feelings began in elementary school,



when I was praised for perfection and success, but only if I outperformed my classmates. With every passing year, my academic and musical success became increasingly tied to my self-concept and identity. In middle and high school, no matter how hard I worked, it became clear with each band rehearsal that harsh criticism and public humiliation were features, not bugs, of my art school education. The passion for music and trumpet playing I once cherished was slowly torn out of me - collateral damage in the pursuit of accolades for the Palm Beach County School District - and replaced by cynicism and anxiety. If my band director singled me out in class, the consequences were far greater than brief embarrassment: Failure meant losing a part of myself.

Maybe they arose while growing up as part of a massive family of white southerners, many of whom are lovely people, but also members of a quintessentially American sect of devout Christians who would allow their religious beliefs to take precedence over respecting their left-leaning and queer children or believing in climate and public health experts. No wonder I try not to reveal much about myself, even around family I've known my entire life, given my "radical" political ideology, my sexuality, and my atheist identity.

My experience discovering my sexual identity has significantly informed the way that I express myself. Throughout my childhood, I learned that being my true self would cause me to face homophobic bullying, name-calling, and, worst of all, my parents' subtle disappointment. Instead, I opted to tolerate passing homophobic remarks, and tried to fit in to save myself the pain and stress of sticking out. In recent years, I developed an interest in developmental psychology to help myself understand and overcome my fears. No amount of reading, podcasts, or TED talks I came across resonated with my situation as much as the book, *The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the Pain of Growing Up Gay in a*

Straight Man's World, wherein clinical psychologist Dr. Alan Downs analyzes the consequences of the various aspects of coming of age as a young gay man that had made my life, at times, almost unbearable.

I knew from an early age that I was different from my peers and siblings. I could tell from the way that my father reacted to my lack of natural aptitude for many of the traditionally masculine pursuits he exposed me to. No matter how much we loved each other, this friction in our relationship led me to grow into my young adulthood without having had a truly open and honest relationship with a man. I was constantly aware of my behavior, desperately trying to avoid disappointing him, or further embarrassing myself in his eyes.

As a natural consequence of this unspoken rift between myself and my father's expectations, I turned my attention towards pursuits more valued by my mother, hoping to receive precious validation. In my desperate attempt to prove I was more than a disappointment, I began to base my identity and self-worth on excellence in art, music, and academics, over athletics and traditionally masculine pursuits. As Downs describes, "the end result of these strained family dynamics was that the only authentic validation [I] may have experienced as a young man came from [my mother]...Hence, the feminine qualities...of [my] true self were validated the most" (14). With each academic accomplishment and solo musical performance, my true reward was the pride in my parents' eyes, validating my identity as an excellent student and an even better son.

By attempting to escape this persistent invalidation, first by my father and later by my peers, I learned to conform to the expectations of others early, instead of following my own instincts. I tried to become the best student in class. To be a prodigy at piano and trumpet. I tried to blend in socially, so as not to draw unwanted attention and ridicule. I became "dependent on adopting the skin [my] environment imposed upon [me] to earn the love and affection [I] craved" (Downs 16). As I buried myself under so much toxic shame because of my internalized self-doubt, I became unable to appreciate the positive aspects of my authentic personality or validate my own experience (Downs 16).

My self-worth became tied to my performance and success, and, predictably, this had disastrous consequences as I got older and things no longer came as easily to me. When I received a bad grade in class, it wasn't because I hadn't studied

enough, but rather because I wasn't smart enough. When I missed a note in band, it wasn't because I hadn't practiced enough, but rather because I didn't deserve my seat in the ensemble.

I lost myself to the unrelenting, self-imposed pressure of perfection. Burying my authentic self deeper with each passing day, I prayed to a God I didn't even believe existed to take away my social anxiety, my gayness, my clumsiness, and my abusive mind. Eventually, my fear of vulnerability and my desperate addiction to the avoidance of shame became the most powerful driving forces in my life. I wanted nothing more than for the Adam that was a constant embarrassment to me to just disappear forever. To die.

I didn't get what I wanted, but I know that I'm one of the lucky ones.

Given my reliance on conforming to the expectations of others to gain validation from my loved ones, it is no surprise, then, why inauthenticity forms the foundation of many of my casual relationships. People know me as some strange amalgam of personality traits that my subconscious mind thinks will be most accepted, with the components I deem shameful carefully hidden away. For so many years, I've pretended this behavior was normal, while it slowly eroded my sense of self. At school, I allow my inhibitions to control me in a misguided attempt to avoid hypothetical alienation, which is, ironically, the source of my disconnection from my friends and classmates. At work with my dad, installing overpriced artwork and tasteless nude portraits of random

women in the homes of wealthy men, I endure and humor countless misogynistic and homophobic "jokes" whose punchline is the inferiority of "fags" in comparison to supposed masculine men, like themselves. By avoiding vulnerability, I expose myself to emotional torment, because the alternative - being truly, deeply known - is far more terrifying.

After coming to these realizations, I still struggled to understand why I was having such trouble finding fulfilling social interaction with the people in my life until I read the 2008 article, "Valuing Vulnerability: New Definitions of Courage," by Dr. Judith Jordan, Assistant Professor of Psychology at the Harvard Medical School and leading educator on relational psychotherapy. Dr. Jordan redefines the crucial role of vulnerability in interpersonal relationships. She states



that the separate, individualistic self, much like the one I've created to protect myself from vulnerability, is an "unrealistic expectation that cannot be humanly attained"; so, in and of itself, it "becomes the source of shame and disconnection" (Jordan 209). Years ago, this shame and disconnection led to my suicide attempts, and the beginning of my struggle to connect with other people. In a toxic feedback loop of shame and fear, the more I hid myself from the world, the easier it became, and the more ashamed I grew of my authentic self.

Upholding this false persona has been, and continues to be, draining, leaving me exhausted after any amount of social interaction. The stress of maintaining a perfect public image of my deeply flawed, deeply human self- catering my words and actions to each individual situation- is compounded by this unending cycle of shame. So, I tell myself I prefer my independence and my solitude. I prefer my disconnection.

In my free time, I'm usually alone. I eat alone. I exercise alone. I never ask anyone for help with assignments or work, and I do all my best studying alone in a secluded spot on campus.

I can go an entire day without uttering a single word to another living soul and be completely fine. Happy, even. Not because I don't enjoy interacting with others, but because my performative perfectionism is an emotional burden and a blight on my conscience.

For my entire life, I've thought that my independence and invulnerability were good things. They meant that I could accomplish anything with hard work, and that my success was mine alone. They meant that I wouldn't have to rely on anyone except myself. They meant that nobody could criticize me or ridicule me because I kept to myself and minded my own business. However, the reality is that "bringing [myself] authentically into relationships leads to inevitable conflict around difference, and the courage to move into conflict is essential for growth and change" (Jordan 211). If I avoid cultivating vulnerable relationships, how can I be challenged to improve as a person? Who will be there to help me when I lose my way, or provide much needed wisdom? Most importantly, how will I be able to increase my confidence in my sense of self, and improve my ability to interact authentically with others, if not through experience and practice?

Embracing vulnerability, therefore, is a requirement for my personal growth that will enable me to begin living life, not as a caricature, but as my truest and complete self. It is the key to improving my familial relationships, growing closer

to my fellow musicians, and creating stronger friendships. Vulnerability is one of the most powerful tools available to bridge the gaps between people, because "When we are vulnerable, we are capable of being 'moved' by internal affective experience, as well as being affected by other people. In an empathic or compassionate milieu, we honor emotional openness and reward trust with care and respect" (Jordan 213-214). My daydreams since coming to Duke often revolve around what life might be like if I lacked any fear of true vulnerability. I might be able to enjoy more friendships that are meaningful and not merely superficial, where people know more about me than my name and my major and a few fun facts. I might be able to find people who could help

me in times of need, and who could count on me in turn. I could love and be loved, flaws and all, because my every waking moment wouldn't be consumed by insecurity, but rather, honesty. I might be able to enter relationships, not hoping for mere acceptance, but for mutual respect.

Rather than defining vulnerability in terms of some perceived threat and personal weakness, I now understand that the context of the

situation allows vulnerability to be reframed as something that can benefit, rather than harm me, creating closeness and enriching my life.

Of course, living vulnerably is terrifying. It will be one of the most difficult things I've ever had to do. The reception to my authenticity will not always be positive. But the past few years have forced me to learn that there is no room for love in anxiety. Vulnerability is the only cure to the fear that has terrorized me for so long, and I want nothing more than to escape its suffocating grasp. I will do whatever it takes to break through the blank walls and overcome the self-hatred.

To be free.

EPILOGUE

Writing this essay forced me to confront myself.

I never kept track, but for each hour I spent writing, I probably spent two lost in thought, analyzing the choices I've made in my life that brought me to this point. I thought deeply about the evolution of my relationship with my dad; how it has affected my perspective on the world, but also, where he was coming from. I've come to realizations about my avoidance of shame and invalidation that had never occurred to me before. I realized that, for so many years, I lived in denial of my fear and shame because I didn't want to believe that they were holding me back. Each new revelation



left me speechless, staring at my ceiling and contemplating my past behavior with new insight that made things start to make sense.

Now that I'm finally aware of my behavior, I've started putting immense pressure on myself to fix things all at once. To burst out of my room singing and dancing, and telling people what I really think, feel, and love, no holds barred. To suddenly act differently around everyone and engage with them in a way that feels authentic to me. But the tricky thing is, after years of manipulating my behavior around others in every situation, I'm not sure what it means for me to act authentically, even if I were brave enough to do so. I've repressed the parts of myself that are true and vulnerable and real for so long, that they no longer naturally express themselves in me. For most of my life, my every waking moment was dedicated to meeting the expectations of others. But now that I'm aware of my behavior, I'll have to learn how to meet the expectations I set for myself above all else.

I feel confident that, with time, I'll be able to break out of the cycle and start interacting with other people as the truest version of myself. I'll try to stop berating myself when I talk about my interests. To be open about who and what I love and surround myself with people who do the same. To break the self-imposed shackles of perfectionism, and prioritize my self-improvement as a means of self-love, rather than self-hatred and unhealthy comparison. To allow myself to have flaws and fall short of what people expect from me sometimes, because my life is not for anyone else to define or control. Coming to these realizations is a significant first step,

but it'll take a lot of practice to start breaking the habits that I've spent years perfecting.

Regardless, I believe that the biggest obstacle I face in overcoming my avoidance of shame and the resultant inauthenticity is my tendency to overthink things.

Thoughts become actions, and actions define who we are.

I've always thought of myself as socially inept, anxious, and unworthy because I never allowed myself to open up and reveal my flaws around other people. For years, I beat myself down, then tried to pretend like my anxiety and low self-esteem were someone else's fault, like my band director's or my dad's. In reality, I pummeled myself into submission to avoid hypothetical failure and invalidation.

What I've realized is that when I have a limited belief about who I am, or who I can be, I limit what is or is not me, or what I am or am not capable of. The moment that I expand my perception of myself and what is changeable in my life, is the moment I become the person I never thought I could be.

Now that I better understand my behavior, and forgive myself for everything I put myself through, I'm finally able to start to love who I've become.

I still have a lot more progress to make, but I know that if my 13-year-old self were able to see me now, he would be so proud.

In ten years, I want the version of myself that wrote this to be proud of me too.

My life is under my control, and it's about time I started acting like it.

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