

## An Act of Balance and Discovery

Esiete (Mahi), May 2025

Maintaining a journal, for me, has been an act of self-discovery, reflection, and at times, an intentional excavation of thoughts and experiences that I hadn't fully explored before. As I sifted through the entries I've written over time, the process of looking back and reflecting on different aspects of my life has allowed me to not only recall forgotten moments but also glean deeper insights into the person I am becoming. From the humbling presence of nature to moments of vulnerability and survival, these reflections have woven a narrative of how I navigate personal growth, decision-making, and the relationships I have with both myself and the world around me.

One of the most striking things that emerged as I read through these journal entries is the theme of balance. I see it in my experiences with personal growth and vulnerability, and it runs through many of the decisions I make. Whether it's the struggle to push myself to the edge of my mental limits or the quiet humbling I feel when facing the vastness of nature, balance has always been my pursuit, albeit often unknowingly. The theme of balance stands out strongly when I look back at how I've navigated both physical challenges and emotional moments. The kayaking incident with my cousin was one clear instance of that delicate balance. Despite the risk of being on water without knowing how to swim, the thrill of the experience outweighed the danger in my mind. It wasn't just an adrenaline rush; it was the understanding that there were safety nets in place. The memory of flipping the kayak, followed by panic, taught me that balance isn't just about weighing risks—it's also about learning how to find stability when everything around you seems to be in turmoil. As I tried to get myself back into the kayak, feeling the panic of being submerged and helpless, I realized that balance isn't just physical; it's mental and emotional too. There is a fine line between embracing risk and acknowledging the boundaries of your own comfort zone. I had to quickly assess my surroundings, calm myself, and adapt to the situation. This sense of balance shows up in so many areas of life, such as my experiences with adjusting to unfamiliar environments, from traveling to a foreign country to even the shifting weather patterns I encountered. The Minnesota cold, the snow-covered streets that seemed peaceful yet oppressive, reminded me of the balance I needed to maintain to keep calm. Being exposed to those elements tested my limits, and I had to find my personal equilibrium to handle the discomfort. As I bundled up and learned to live with the cold, I recognized that survival, in many ways, is an ongoing act of balancing the forces of discomfort and acceptance.

This theme of balance extended beyond just physical challenges; in the journal entry about pushing my mental limits, I reflected on how I would often stay up for hours—sometimes even 36 hours—pushing myself to keep going, regardless of the toll it took on my health. The recklessness of those sleepless nights was an embodiment of an unbalanced state. In hindsight, it was clear that such behavior didn't serve me in the long run. There was a lesson in rest and recovery that I came to realize, which was as much about knowing when to stop as it was about pushing forward. The migraines, the exhaustion, the hangover headaches—all of these physical manifestations of pushing myself too hard served as a clear signal. By setting a rule for myself that I would not go below six hours of sleep, I found a balance between productivity and self-care, recognizing that while my body could endure a lot, it could not run indefinitely without consequences.

Reflecting on these moments of personal challenge also highlighted an important aspect of my life—resilience. Whether it was managing to calm myself after flipping the kayak, navigating the uncomfortable experience of adjusting to a new environment in a foreign place, or pushing through sleepless nights, resilience has been a key theme. I've come to understand resilience not as an innate trait, but as a learned behavior, an active choice I make when facing adversity. It's about how I respond in the face of discomfort, the decisions I make in moments of crisis, and the mental flexibility I exercise when things don't go as planned.

One entry that particularly stood out in this regard was my reflection on the time I spent away from home, experiencing the unfamiliarity of a different country. The cold, the overwhelming whiteness of snow, and the way I had to bundle up in layers to survive—these sensory details captured in my journal became metaphors for the emotional challenges of being away from home. The exhaustion of the environment mirrored the emotional fatigue of adjusting to a new place. And yet, it was precisely this discomfort that allowed me to stretch the limits of my resilience. I wasn't just navigating the physical discomfort of the cold; I was learning to adapt to new surroundings, to find peace in the discomfort of unfamiliarity, and ultimately, to come out stronger. The humbling moment when I stood outside, feeling the icy air hit me, taught me that even in the most uncomfortable of circumstances, I could find a way to endure, to adapt, and to thrive.

In addition to resilience, these journals also made me realize how much self-compassion plays a role in maintaining mental health and balance. Many of the entries touch on moments of self-doubt, like when I was recovering from the painful burn in the kitchen after a cooking accident. I could have easily spiraled into self-blame or frustration, but instead, I took a step back and reminded myself to act with kindness toward myself. I sought help, applied burn ointment, and acknowledged the pain without letting it define me. The self-compassion I showed in that moment—despite the trauma of the accident—reminded me that survival isn't just about getting through tough situations physically; it's

also about taking care of myself emotionally. This idea of treating myself with care and understanding—of meeting my struggles with gentleness—has become central to how I navigate challenges, both big and small.

What also became evident through these reflections was how much perspective influences my reactions to life's challenges. In moments of feeling lost—whether in a new place or in the chaotic experience of my mind—I have learned to take a step back and adjust my perspective. For example, when I reflected on my moments of getting lost in unfamiliar places, I realized that while panic initially sets in, the key to finding my way back always lies in changing how I look at the situation. The GPS, asking for help, and even recalibrating my expectations helped me realize that being lost isn't permanent, and finding my way back is always possible with patience and a change in perspective.

This idea of perspective ties into my reflection on the vastness of the world and how it affects my sense of humility. My reflections on standing by the ocean, imagining myself walking into the water despite not being able to swim, beautifully encapsulated how I feel when I face situations that feel bigger than myself. The ocean's vastness reminded me of the enormity of life's challenges and how, in the grand scheme of things, my own worries often seem small. This humbling realization didn't diminish my problems but allowed me to see them from a different vantage point—one that wasn't dominated by fear or panic, but rather by acceptance and understanding. The horizon, stretching out endlessly, is a symbol of life's complexity and unpredictability. It made me realize that sometimes, survival requires stepping back and acknowledging that not everything is within our control. The chaotic moments in life—like my experience flipping the kayak or dealing with personal setbacks—don't feel as terrifying when I can see them in the context of something bigger. When I stand by the ocean, I feel connected to something vast and timeless. That perspective brings a sense of humility, reminding me that I'm just one small part of this world, but that doesn't make my existence less meaningful.

I don't know if I should say I've experienced being lost. I've had moments where I've felt off course, but never without a general sense of where I am—there's always a thread, a loose line connecting me back to something familiar. Getting lost feels more like a mismatch between assumptions and reality. Like when I thought I'd get off at the right stop and end up in a place that didn't look at all like what I'd imagined. I mean, I'd be watching the bus number, the GPS, and yet still, something doesn't align. That feeling, that tension between what I thought I knew and what is, is when I pause and realize I'm lost—but not entirely. It's like being misplaced in a puzzle you mostly understand. What I do in those moments is what matters. I check signs, pull up my phone, sometimes ask people even if I'm cautious about it. Being cautious isn't a weakness. It's just another layer of awareness. When I walk around neighborhoods near home, I skip the GPS. I know my surroundings well enough, so I set a timer in my head and how long I've been walking. I make decisions in those situations based on knowing I'll be

back in an hour. So in that sense, getting lost isn't just physical—it's a question of being misaligned for a while. And still, there's something affirming about finding your way, even if you were never fully gone to begin with.

I guess coming here counts as one of those misalignments, too. That morning, waking up to whiteness outside my window—it wasn't something I had the language for. Not in the moment. It was peaceful in a disturbing way. Snow covering everything felt unnatural, not because I hadn't seen it before in media or books, but because I'd never lived inside of it. The air smelled different. The AC in the house made things worse. I could smell the burning metal, and that made the place feel foreign inside and out. Still, I would open the door and let the air hit me in the face, just to remind myself where I was. It became a routine to check my gear—layer on layer—and test whether I was warm enough before leaving. But no matter what, there was always that moment of stepping outside, hoping my body had adjusted, telling myself it'll be fine. And more than anything, I wanted my family to know I was safe. That's what I would write in a journal for them. I would tell them exactly what the snow looked like, how it muffled sound, how the silence wasn't empty but thick with presence. I'd write about getting ready to leave the house, carrying the weight of not just the weather but also the responsibility of reassuring people who weren't there. I'd want them to see the scene through my eyes and know that I wasn't just surviving it—I was slowly learning to belong in it, even if it felt distant from home.

It's funny, too, how weather has made me think more about climate change. It makes you realize how interconnected everything is. It's not like climate change only matters in big disasters or headlines; it's also in the small shifts—how you dress, how you plan your day, what foods are in season. Culture changes with the seasons. Celebrations do too. And if those get shaken up, it doesn't just mess with convenience—it affects identity, and memory. That's what I've been thinking. How can I live in a way that acknowledges that connection? So far, I've made little changes: tossing trash in the right bin, avoiding buying what I don't need. But I know it's more than that. It's a personal responsibility, and at the same time, one that should be shared. Right now, I haven't reached into my community yet—I'm not that far along—but I've started with myself. The biggest shift isn't the recycling or the shopping habits; it's the growing awareness that every action builds into something, even if you can't see the immediate impact. Living somewhere new changes you, not just because of the temperature or the language, but because it gives you a mirror to see yourself differently—and maybe act differently, too.

And underneath all of this, there's something more constant, more defining: I want to be useful. I want my life to matter—not just in terms of what I achieve, but how I show up for others. It's hard to explain, but I feel like honoring my roots means doing something that reflects the values I came from. Not because I have to, but because I want to. I want to make a meaningful impact, even if it's small, even if it's just in how I treat people. Coming here, being surrounded by different systems, different

ways of thinking—it's challenged me to ask what "usefulness" looks like in a place where no one knows where you've come from. Maybe it's in how you help someone who's just as confused as you once were, or maybe it's in the quiet ways—like writing something that lets your family understand your world. I know I can't fix everything. I've never had that illusion. But I can be intentional. I can live in a way that builds something—not necessarily big, but honest. And even though there's distance now between me and where I started, I don't feel separated from it. If anything, the distance has made it sharper, clearer. The more I learn to navigate unfamiliar roads, the more I feel tied to that original hope: to be someone who contributes, who doesn't just pass through. Even if I'm not sure where I'm going sometimes, I think that desire to be useful is what keeps me from being truly lost. It gives direction, even when the map feels unclear.

Ultimately, the recurring theme throughout these journal entries is the tension between comfort and discomfort—how I have navigated, endured, and embraced both. I've learned that it's through these very moments of discomfort that I grow the most. It's about recognizing that growth often comes not in the easy moments, but in the hard ones—the moments where I push myself to the edge, the times when I experience something completely new, and the times I encounter setbacks and challenges. And through it all, I am learning that the discomfort, the mistakes, and the challenges aren't just something to endure; they are opportunities to learn and transform. The entries I've written have shown me that growth is not linear, but rather, it's a series of ups and downs, twists and turns, and recalibrations. By reflecting on my experiences with resilience, self-compassion, and perspective, I am beginning to see that every experience—good or bad—contributes to the person I am becoming.