It’s 2 a.m. I wake up to that characteristic Skype jingle. It was Kath: I won’t be getting much sleep tonight.

She opens her mouth to speak. Through the painfully pixelated screen, I just barely catch sight of a single tear breaking free, before she turns away to the darkness of her room. I can hear her staggered sniffling in between the audio breaks we’d come to associate with these midnight sessions. They’re quiet: she probably doesn’t need any more berating from her dad.

I muster a soft, “Hey?”

I’ll never fully comprehend what she feels, being one of the fortunate few who aren’t subject to the familial issues she endures. Still, when I see through her eyes—the culture around her that views parental authority as absolute, the attribution of any of her troubles to “teenager hormones”—I realise it's not pity she needs: it’s an ear.

I listen—well, as much as I can through the underlying static—as she describes the argument of the day, eventually sensing an incoming breakdown when the fullstops in her speech disappear.

Not good.

“I mean, it can’t be as bad as Brian confessing to you in the canteen yesterday,” I interject, in as calm a voice as I could put up. After all, we don’t need two panicky people, do we?

She responds with a mixture of crying and snot-filled laughter. Phew. Close call.

Coming into secondary school, I’d never viewed myself as shy—I wouldn’t be doing everything in my power to get out of that big party. Though, you wouldn’t have found me bouncing in excitement, either. Instead, I spent my time within myself, walking down the hallways of my memories, picking up and inspecting a few of the hanging picture frames. It was almost a hobby of mine, to peer inside and ask, “Why?” Why’d I pass off that invite to hang out? Why aren’t I bothered by that? I, admittedly a tad too self-absorbed, had never felt much need to interact with my classmates beyond, “How much homework do you have today?”

That changed with Kath aboard a plane three years ago—her deeming me trustworthy enough to answer a passing question, “Why are you so excited to leave town?”

As with her, I’ve since sought to learn from and about my friends. The hours spent dissecting my own actions have given me the tools to live through the stories and understand how they define others’ choices.

How Kathleen uses dark humour to cope teaches me to laugh in the face of adversity.

From Joanne, who adopts the persona of BMO the merry robot from Adventure Time, I learn to walk my own path and not derive my worth from others.

Keane’s encyclopaedic knowledge of trains and stations reminds me of the exhilaration of learning to simply satiate a craving for knowledge.

Those late-night Skype calls were invaluable to my role as Head Prefect. During projects, I look out for the tiny mannerisms that give away something more: how over-eagerness to keep finding new tasks—a frequent one from new members—may show insecurity about belonging and feeling out of place. I’ve tried to instill this same interpersonal awareness in others by proposing the Buddy System, where prefects help tutor assigned peers struggling academically. Having the lockdown put a brake to our plans as we were confined to our homes left us glum, but I continue to satisfy my yearning for connection by preparing for upcoming exams with classmates through Zoom and Google Meet.

Be it sharing tears in calls with my best friends when we should be sleeping, working with prefects long after the school’s ACs have been shut off for the day, or testing each other for cracks in our understanding of Math, my experiences have all culminated in allowing me to empathise with others. I still continue to visit that hallway I spent so much time in, except nowadays I’m glad to find newly added doors labelled with my friends’ names, and their photographs placed beside those dusty picture frames.

Hi Aaman,

It’s amazing how your experience with Kath teaches you a few things and changed how you connect with your friends and surroundings. I believe that this experience could be used to answer the prompt.

I have a few suggestions that I think would make it even stronger.

I think structure-wise, there are 2 parts to this prompt:

1. The experience that changed you.
2. Detailed descriptions on what you’ve learned and how you’ve changed over time.

**The experience that changed you.**

I would suggest elaborating on the experience that sparked the change in you (The experience with Kath three years ago). Is there a story that you could develop here? Possible details you might be able to include if possible:

* The background of you and Kath being aboard on a plane.
* Why did the question make you feel trustworthy? (Did you feel untrustworthy before?)
* How did your relationship with Kath changed or grew after that?
* Did you change immediately or how did Kath help you to learn more?
* Did you experience any difficulty or unpleasant experiences with your friends/surroundings while changing?

I think we could focus on this for the first part.

**Detailed descriptions on what you’ve learned and how you’ve changed over time.**

I would suggest probably focusing on 1-2 things, and talking in more detail about the importance of that change.

For example if one of the things you’ve learned from the experience is the ability to empathize, you could give an example by the Skype Call you had with Kath to show how you’ve changed and share why do you think empathizing is important.

Another thing you could possibly talk about is the importance of walking on your path and not deriving your worth from others.

* Is there any experience/story you could share about this?
* You could talk about why this is very important.

I think we could focus on these two areas first to create a more solid structure, and to really show the impact of the experience.

**Conclusion.**

I think the conclusion you’ve written down is good! You included the change in being able to empathize and how that shaped you. I would suggest mentioning the experience that sparked your changes briefly as well, and including the 1-2 things that you’ve learned (if you talk about 2 things).