1. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

“We need to talk” Lauren walked up to me, clenching her wrists.

“What’s wrong?” I asked in a cynical tone, desperately trying to sound gullible

A bitterness crept into her face. She stayed silent.

I rolled my eyes and let out a breath: “Go on”

Lauren said that she often feels forgotten and ignored, as if I treated her like a stranger with conversations merely about school work despite being friends for over 7 years. She complained about how I missed all the important things happening in her life—from her basketball matches to our daily after school study groups.

Desperate to talk with everyone, I was always jumping excitedly from talking to one person and another, never having a deep and personal conversation with anyone. This made her feel trapped, as she wanted to share her problems with me, but I kept steering the conversation away from personal topics, ignoring her need for advice whenever she brought up her struggles. As a result, she became more hesitant to talk to me—it seemed like I didn’t care anyways.

As a generally chatty and sociable person, I’ve always been used to simultaneously making small talk to everyone in the room—and see it as no problem. Small talks didn’t make me ignorant, the way I see it, small-talks were easy: it lightens up the mood in the room without getting too serious and tense. I avoided deep talks as I didn’t want to make my friends uncomfortable—as I would if those questions were directed to me.

Still oblivious to the situation, I let out a slight smirk and raised an eyebrow. She might just be overthinking things, I text and talk to her on a daily basis, surely there’s nothing wrong with our friendship.

“What are you so scared of?”

She asked, after saying that I didn’t want to get too personal for my convenience.

*That’s right, what was I so scared of?*

After pondering upon those words for a while, I started to see some truth to it. Terrified of losing control over my emotions by being vulnerable, I have been avoiding conversations that would lead to personal questions. I never saw the need to interact beyond what was an obligatory chit-chat. This made my greetings less personal and I had kept her—and everyone else—at arm’s length.

By asking a simple “how are you?” to sharing my thoughts and opinions to her daily problems, for the sake of our friendship, I started listening and opening up to Lauren.  Slowly however, when I moved the center of my priority away from my fears, I realized that I was able to communicate to Lauren beyond our usual superficial conversations, as if I was introduced to an entirely new side of her. Exposing myself to Lauren’s problems developed my own empathy.

From laughing over our inside jokes to shedding tears when our favorite TV shows ended, I slowly realized that by getting involved in the ups and downs of her life, I made a difference. The strength and resilience I felt when we persevered through problems together brought me a sense of gratification I never knew I needed.

Outside of my friend group, being vulnerable has not only allowed me to become a better role model by resonating with my juniors when mentoring them, but also a better student from listening to my teachers’ comments and a better leader when I was able to accept my team members’ input, complaints and struggles.

From seeking and showing support by sharing my daily struggles to scheduling frequent calls to check on my friends’ wellbeing, I have since actively sought to forge meaningful bonds with others and partake in the journey of their lives. After all, what do we have if not each other?