

Happiness is not what you're looking for

Happiness: that good feeling when you ace a difficult exam or find a friend in the person you're sitting next to in class. But that's all it is — a feeling, nothing more. Like all feelings it comes and goes, flitting out of one mind and into another; trying to hold onto it, contain it, only drives it away. Its elusive nature spurred me to pursue it relentlessly.

As a general rule of thumb, middle school sucks. For me, it was no different. I had wrestled with severe anorexia beginning toward the end of my fifth-grade year, losing twenty pounds — after starting at a healthy weight — before my mom forced me to see a food therapist on threat of hospitalization (I was scarily close to that point). As I finally gave in to my body's aches and began my recovery, I felt as if I were taking a step backward. The fatigue I'd felt building up in my bones — I had ignored it in an attempt to convince my mind that starving myself was ok, that I could still function without food — overwhelmed me. I spent the remaining part of my summer couch-ridden, too drained to walk to the neighborhood pond.

By the time school came around, I was still largely incapacitated: I remained in a constant state of exhaustion, and I struggled to focus due to lack of mental clarity and common migraines. But I was not one to miss a school day (I was the kind of kid who tried to convince his parents he wasn't sick), let alone a month or year, so I mustered my courage and decided to go for it. Boy, did my young self need to be brave.

Teachers scolded me for eating in class — even though I'd received special permission from the principal — and classmates ostracized me for sitting out during PE. Looking for a distraction, I turned to my studies, funneling all I had into my schoolwork. By the end of each day I had no effort left to give, but I came home full, satisfied. I was proud of myself for fighting

so hard, and I took comfort in knowing I could still do something well — could still do good for myself — despite my health complications.

As I continued to invest myself in my classes, my grades climbed higher than they'd ever been. Don't get me wrong: I'd always been a solid student. I'd just never applied myself to my studies with such vigor. I felt like it was all I had left, and I was treating it as such — and reaping the benefits, too. Teachers and classmates took note of my success; they began to see and treat me as “gifted.” At first it was validating; I was being recognized for my efforts, sometimes even by those who had previously mistreated me because of my special accommodations. Then came the expectations.

What had before been something for myself — I was studying hard for my own good — now felt as if it had been released to the world. And the world wanted so much: advanced classes, club leadership, academic competitions, blah blah blah. I wanted no part in the blueprint laid before me, yet I began to internalize it. The pressures of the world became voices in my head. They sucked away my contentment, filling the void with desire and ambition. They screamed at me to take advantage of my talent, to not let my giftedness waste away. Eventually, I listened.

Good grades were no longer enough; now it mattered what everyone else got too. Every class award I failed to bring home was fuel to push myself harder the next year. Eighth grade was my year: I won all the awards. But by that point, I didn't care. I was already too focused on high school to notice.

Over the years, I grew to expect more and more of myself, hoping each bullet point I added to my resume would be the one to reassure me I was good enough, to fill me with the happiness I believed came with greatness. That comfort never came — I wouldn't let it. I feared

taking the time to acknowledge and celebrate an accomplishment would turn me soft, harming my ability to accomplish more — and (theoretically) be happier — in the future. So instead, I filled my time with more to-dos, more goals to strive restlessly for. The boiling pressure within me to discover something meaningful through my grind self-perpetuated an endless spiral of torment: The unhappier I was, the harder I worked, and the harder I worked, the unhappier I became. With each day I was driving myself further into the ground.

My relentless drive is the reason I'm here at Duke. But it is also the reason I almost had to leave it behind.

Last semester was a clean slate: I had stored up a bit of energy from a slightly less work-filled summer and shed the responsibilities I'd forced myself to endure throughout freshman year. My course load was its hardest yet — I was taking only higher-level STEM classes — yet I held onto hope that I would go easier on myself this time around. It started off well. My classes were tough but manageable, and I enjoyed the content I was learning. When approached with opportunities, however, I couldn't refuse — how could I pass up on another shot to fill the void inside me? I accepted a job tutoring student-athletes. And then a leadership position on a research project. And then a part-time role at a tech startup. Suddenly I was inundated with more pressure to perform than ever before, my dreams of starting fresh dashed within weeks.

With my new commitments, I was working constantly. Out of necessity I shut down other areas of my life, canceling on friends and skimping on meals, showers, classes. Sleep was an afterthought, and the ZZZs I did manage to catch were filled with dreams involving problem sets and email drafts. I locked myself in random classrooms, not leaving until I completed what I felt had to be done. In the rare moments where I wasn't actively working, I could think only of all the

work ahead of me. There was no reprieve. Yet I had done this to myself, willingly, and I wasn't about to give it up, no matter what. At least, that's what I thought....

Throughout my semester slog I developed malaise. I tired easily, and my muscles ached; I attributed it to a cold I couldn't shake. As my symptoms worsened, however, I knew that wasn't the case. I pressed on, telling myself I just had to make it to the next break and could rest then. Deadlines don't stop when classes do, though, and I found myself filling my "time off" catching up on projects and clocking hours. Despite being back in my own bed, there was no rest to be had.

When I returned from Thanksgiving break, my mysterious sickness exploded within me. Tiredness morphed into fatigue deeper than I thought possible; aches settled into a stiff numbness. Walking felt like wading through water; I thought I might need a cane. I ate and ate, searching for the energy I needed to escape the living corpse I was trapped in. Yet I felt nothing — my stomach was a black hole. Any attempts to work devolved into staring blankly at my screen, my cognitive abilities blocked by a mental fog too thick to sift through. Deadlines and obligations gave way to survival. It was all I could do to sit there.

My self-neglect had caught up to me, some primal instinct shutting me down before I could wreck myself further. I had been brought to my knees, and I could only watch as the world I had built up over the last decade came crashing down. There was nothing left to shield me from the truth. My truth. I was not — and could never be — enough. Unless I quit the chase and gave myself a chance.

What I had disguised as a quest to better myself, to find the lasting happiness I was missing, had instead been an all-out war between who I am and who I could be. I had torn myself down in the present to build myself up in the future. But I understood now that such a future

could never be realized — not in that way. The only way to be content with who I could be was to be content with who I am, right now, in this moment. It was then that I began to reconcile the pieces of me — and with it came peace that was better than any happiness I could have found in my pursuits.

As humans, we have an innate ability — known as hedonic adaptation — to quickly adjust in response to life-changing events (whether good or bad), enabling us to maintain a somewhat stable level of happiness regardless of our circumstances. Encouraging as it is to know we have a built-in emotional homeostasis to fall back on, it can also have unintended consequences — ones I often fall prey to. On the days that are particularly hard, all I want is to not feel so terrible. I attribute my current unhappiness to feeling bad, thinking good health will remedy my dissatisfaction. Yet when I feel better I take my health for granted, worries about making it through the day superseded by worries about what I'm going to fill my day with. I feel no happier, no lighter, despite having the good health I wanted so desperately the day prior. We think we know the cure-all for our pain; when we taste the medicine, though, it does nothing for us. We hinge our contentment on what we think we need, rather than what we have. The world doesn't make us unhappy. We do.

I lost so much last December: my health, my purpose, my drive, my identity. But those dark moments spent staring at walls and blinking away the days forced me to sit alone with myself and confront who I was, without the accolades and abilities by which I'd come to define myself. I was hurting and exhausted and scared, unsure of what might become of me... and I was okay with that. I had to be — broken me was all I had left. I accepted myself, at my worst and most vulnerable. Despite everything, I thought, I am enough.

For ten years, I refused myself this peace. I toiled and writhed in denial of myself. But you don't have to do the same. You may never be enough for this world — parents may disapprove of your major, companies may scoff at your resume, professors may ignore your FLUNCH requests — but you can be everything to yourself. And that is all that matters. Let go of the mistakes. Let go of the expectations. Let go of the fears that strangle you. Just be. There is so much opportunity in the current moment, if only you have the courage to embrace it. I dare you to plunge headfirst into the spectacular now and let the current of life carry you. Wherever you end up, I promise you will not be disappointed.