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The Best Parts of You

Oil, Video

As if in each of us
There once was a fire
And for some of us
There seem as if there are only ashes now
But when we dig in the ashes
We find one ember
And very gently we fan that ember
Blow on it, it gets brighter
And from that ember we rebuild the fire
Only thing that's important is that ember
That's what you and I are here to celebrate
That though we've lived our life totally involved in the world
We know
We know that we're of the spirit
The ember gets stronger
Flame starts to flicker a bit
And pretty soon you realize that all we're going to do for eternity
Is sit around the fire

Jon Hopkins

The other day I was having a really hard time. I loathed not only myself but my painting. I was trying so hard to put as much meaning as I could into my painting, and now looking at the finished product, I feel like it doesn't reflect who I am at all. It was incredibly difficult to be at Oxbow, surrounded by so many passionate and beautiful people, while I was simultaneously spiraling into a dark hole. I was texting with my Dad and he asked me if I was having a better day. I told him I was trying. He texted me back and said: *I'm glad you're trying. When you get a minute go outside and find the sun, and put your face towards the sun, and soak in it for a few minutes. It will make you feel better.* Although I am not pleased with this final painting, I am so grateful for the space I was given to create so many other pieces while being here.

The Best Parts of You



Karley M.

The Oxbow School

OS47

Writer's Note: This paper delves into topics of adolescence, the inevitability of comparison, and self actualization. Through writing this paper, I discovered internalized issues I face today connected to my childhood. I write about the difficulty of vulnerability and letting go of control. Especially regarding people's perceptions of me. I begin to describe feelings of embracing who I am becoming, while referring back to these questions: How does comparison challenge self acceptance? How do we define self acceptance?

I. Delusion

When I was three years old, I slept in between two twin beds. My two older sisters, Madison and Hanna, claimed their sides, and I was swaddled in a garden themed quilt. Each night I fell into the crack between the beds. My family laughed for years about it, calling me the 'crack baby'. I laughed each time, unbeknownst to the butt of the joke as a child. Once I was four, we got separate rooms. I hated this. My mom shared with me that I "wailed for my crack back". This was quite entertaining to my family. The amusement on my parents' faces confused me. But here I was, beside myself, begging for the comfort of my two older sisters next me. Looking back, I think my mothers efforts to control my sister's inclusion of me, was slowly slipping away. She wished so deeply for us to have a close bond, and she couldn't control that.

I was persistently trying to gain approval from my sisters, but they reminded me of their annoyance with me, and proceeded to kick me out of the room. I was definitely closer with Hanna, but her emotions towards me were always hot and cold, challenging to read. I idolized my eldest sister Madison, I wanted to dress like her, talk like her. I looked up to her unlike anyone

I had ever known. But she didn't even look at me. At the unripe age that I was, it stung that I couldn't control her feelings towards me.

I grew up in a home where my parents shared a boundless amount of love for each other, constantly demonstrating to my sisters and I what love can look like. Despite my sisters and I constantly fighting, I remember my mom would set up tea parties for us. She kept a dress up trunk for us to escape into our dream land, and my dad volunteered to coach our softball teams. He would drive us to games and buy sunflower seeds and gatorade at the local gas station. These are the blissful memories I will hold forever, but through raising us, my parents haven't always succeeded.

I'll never forget my mom finding seventeen-year-old Madison's fake ID and weed in a shoebox in her closet. My mom was livid. She decided to take everything out of Madison's room. Every piece of clothing, anything that was pasted onto the walls, desk and bed gone. It almost looked like she had moved out. I think mentally Madison had checked out from the family that day. Because I was only ten, I had no idea why this had happened. I felt so bad for her, I cried. Again, with my persistence for approval and out of genuine care for my sister, I decided to take my favorite books and place them on her empty shelves, along with my blue nail polish. I remember so vividly her yelling at me to get out, she didn't want my shit. I was confused and left the room crying. I couldn't grasp what was wrong with me.

I remember quite clearly in middle school, whenever I had a crush on a boy, it was not reciprocated. I questioned myself, my value as a human in this world. What was wrong with me that is undesirable? I don't remember the boys, or what they did to attract me, but I remember the way I felt after. Sheer disgust and utter frustration for the inability to change my appearance.

I remember sobbing to my mother, telling her I wanted to cut my legs off and get a nose job. She looked at me in disbelief. In her attempt to comfort me, I was even more angered. Why could she not fix this? She did not understand, I did not want to accept this body. Consumed by this inferiority, I lacked development with my inner self. All I really understood about myself was that I struggled with the things I could not control and felt my physical body was all I was worth. Alicia Nortje, a research fellow at the University of Cape Town, studied the social comparison theory and wrote that, “We compare our behavior to an unrealistic benchmark and subsequently develop low self-esteem.” I felt vulnerable when I couldn’t control other people's perception of me. And I feared never being accepted, that my body would ruin the entirety of my existence.

II. Discovery

Throughout the early stages of my adolescence, I wasted so much of my time ignoring all the love in my life and was absorbed by comparing myself to my peers. I was also struggling with forming genuine connections with classmates. This control issue I was experiencing prohibited me from emotionally leaning on friends and trusting them. In a Ted Talk, Bevy Smith articulates her journey of finding her “authentic self”, she explains that a result of comparison, “You've suppressed your inner self, your core self, the best parts of you because you took on these other identities, and these personas in an effort to make our life better.” I couldn’t see this version of myself, I didn’t even know it existed. It wasn't until I entered quarantine in March of 2020, that I was entirely forced to be alone with myself. This is something I had always dreaded. When I was alone I was consumed by my own horrid self loathing thoughts. In reality, this was one of the most pivotal moments I recall during my adolescence. I learned to be alone without being lonely.

I altered my perspective, putting myself first and began embracing who I wanted to become. Joav Merrick, a professor of pediatrics and human development wrote an article on 'seizing the meaning of life' describing that, "Somewhere deep in life exists the finest sweetness, the greatest quality in life, the pure joy of being alive that emerges when we are fully present and life is in balance". I found joy in living, and discovered my love for the Earth. The bark on trees, the salty air near the ocean, bugs crawling in my mom's garden, and anything else that lived amongst me. Wondering why the birds fly the way they do, or getting hypnotized by waves, as they ever change on an endless loop. I practiced grounding myself, getting in tune with the beauty of meditation. I found a love for music, whether it was retro soul, indie, or surf rock I was interested in anything I could get my hands on. I opened my surroundings up to new possibilities. Amy Winehouse, Mazzy Star and Bobby Womack filled the walls of my home. I remember clearly the dance nights I had with my sisters, our chests aching from laughing. We let loose, and our free expression was flourishing in that home. From these revelations, I unearthed a confidence I had never seen within myself. I tried new styles, dyed my hair, learned how to roller skate, and retrieved the love for art I once had as a kid.

III. Development

Patti Smith continues to inspire me as an artist, her ability to articulate the beauty in innocence, struggle, discovery in the human journey. She highlights the fears and insecurities that are not unique to the majority of young adults while we navigate this terrifying world. Smith wrote in her book *Just Kids*, "It seemed as if the whole of the world was slowly being stripped of innocence. Or maybe I was seeing a little too clearly." When I had read her book I was in this period of my

adolescence where I felt an urgency to grow up. When I approached a level of maturity, my sisters suddenly began to accept and include me. Because of this, I viewed it as a good thing and started gravitating towards kids that were grades above me, and held myself with prestige.

I didn't realize until writing this paper that this could be harmful. Darius Cikanavicius and Kubala Kendra write in their study of "The Effects of Trauma From Growing Up Too Fast" that, "Growing up too fast is a euphemism because it is used to minimize the pain that the person feels as a child when their needs aren't being met...believing that you always have to be strong". Once school resumed after the pandemic, I began neglecting my sleep routine, eating, exercising and overall checking in on myself. When I worked in a restaurant as the only sixteen year old, I found that I was able to distract and numb myself from these needs. But, I finally felt in control— if I could maintain this maturity, I could feel seen, and that comforted me. Cikanavicius and Kendra also wrote, "it fundamentally robs the child of their childhood and innocence." Although I do agree with this to some degree, I still feel that growing up faster than others made me stronger. I felt good about myself, being told "You are so mature for your age" or "I am so proud of you for being so independent" was empowering. Because my actions had been getting positive recognition, I felt unique, I felt confident about who I was becoming. I didn't care for the fact that I was losing the kid in me. 'She' had been excluded and criticized, why would I care for her?

Although there are some negative qualities to maturing too quickly, I take this maturity with pride. It allowed me, "To be responsible means to see yourself as the cause of your own existence and state of being" (Merriam). I gained the ability to walk with confidence, trust my relationships, and not apologize for being myself. I learned to give space for others to be themselves because I know transparency is challenging. Throughout the years, my sisters and I

have worked through our childhood trauma and created a bond that I cannot compare to anything I have ever experienced. After talking to my dad about this paper, he responded by saying, “The love that you and your sisters have, no one will ever take that away”. We lean on each other, share our opinions openly, speaking from experience, curiosity, and empathy for each other. We have created a loving environment with each other, and I give a lot of credit to them for supporting me through this self discovery journey. As I am still on this journey, I feel it is crucial for me to take in as much knowledge, guidance, and advice as I can to assist my navigation. Madison always reminds me to ask for help early and often, that learning will be the key to your success. Observe, experience, try new things, believe in yourself and take your time. I practice this daily.

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