

My year in review. Well, I suppose it's ironic that I'm writing this right after a breakup - my second of the year, actually. While it's a bit difficult to reflect on anything at the moment, this is my most sincere attempt.

I think the first big lesson I learned this year was that sometimes, you have to leave. As a society, we're so accustomed to the idea of being left and feeling worthless that we forget we can also be on the other side of that. Sometimes, we have to leave a person or a situation that we don't fully want to let go of.

The first time I realized this was in October, when I made the decision to quit learning dance from my teacher. I'd been learning for nearly eight years at that point, and I had practically grown up in that studio. However, our teacher created an extremely unhealthy environment, especially for young children. I'm sure nobody expects their first toxic relationship to be with a dance teacher in her 60s, but it is what it is. She would always make comments on our bodies, saying we needed to lose weight or put some on, that we needed bigger breasts, larger butts, and had to look sexier. Imagine saying this to *little kids*. Aside from that, she was very irregular with class timings, always showing up hours late and not letting us leave on time. We all missed events, birthday parties, other classes, and even family vacations because she wouldn't allow us to go. The worst part was that all the parents were wrapped around her finger, so no one ever stood up for their children.

I could go on for hours about the problems with that class, but the point is that eventually, I decided it wasn't worth it. Here's the thing: from an outside perspective, it seems like the obvious choice. Why wouldn't you leave an environment that was taking a toll on your mental health and ruining your schedule? Why would you even think twice about it? My simple answer is change. When you're so used to something unhealthy, healthy feels unnatural. A quote I discovered that really helped with this is from Rosa Luxemburg: "Those who do not move, do not notice their chains." That is, if you won't see how much a situation restricts you until you try to leave it. After such a long time, I finally felt the chains chafing my ankles, and I decided to move.

The aftermath of quitting dance wasn't pretty. It involved lots of tears, worrying I had undone all my progress, and a few diss tracks. About a month later, I started dancing with a different teacher, who had new methods, new expectations, and new ideals. I basically had to start back at square one with her, but it was almost...shocking how healthy it felt. Now, almost 10 months later, I can confidently say I made the right decision. And so, I learned this lesson for the first time. Because while the flower pot may be comfortable, if not replanted, eventually the rose will die.

Unfortunately, leaving that dance school was the easiest goodbye of the year. The second gets more personal. The person I was with for two and a half years was my best friend. I met him in middle school, and we would talk for hours, switching from philosophical conversations to laughing so hard our stomachs hurt. Over the years and through many bumps and trenches, we settled into a quiet, gentle kind of love. For months, it felt like it was going well...until I started to notice certain issues bubble up again and again. My own insecurities led me to overthink and

question everything he did, the worry consuming my entire day. We started to grow bitter with each other, and neither of our mental health was very strong. Eventually, after months of battling with the idea, I decided to break up with him. It was, to this day, the most difficult decision I have ever had to make. I cried for weeks straight, and even brushing my teeth in the morning took immense effort. I was mourning not only who he was, but the person I was with him.

Here is where the lesson returns. A situation can drain you and still make you happy sometimes. I clung onto the good conversations and let them overshadow all the bad days. And seeing the past through rose-colored glasses makes it much harder to convince yourself you made the right decision. You may think, *I wanted change, but not this much!* It only makes sense; a barren desert pleads for rain, not a thunderstorm. Regardless, the storm is often what we are given. It could last for days, weeks, months, even years. But eventually, *eventually*, flowers will start to grow from the water.

Now, months later, I can say with confidence that my flowers grew back. I started smiling at myself in the mirror, started loving my crooked grin, messy hair, tired eyes. Yes, the storm still returns sometimes, and yes, I did just get broken up with, which is a whole other hurricane itself (I haven't made it through this one yet to understand the lesson, so I'm afraid I can't tell you). But overall, I am much happier and at peace.

So, no matter your age or situation, if you take advice from a 16-year-old girl once in your life, let it be now. *It is okay to leave.* Even if it hurts, even if you feel guilty, even if you're scared. If it isn't making you happy, it isn't worth your effort. And remember, just because it hurts to go, *doesn't mean it's wrong.* Trust yourself, and trust the person you are. If it makes you cry, believe that something will grow from your tears. And if your feet take you away from something, trust that flowers will bloom in your footsteps.