

A Pause I Didn't Know I Needed

By Olivia Hillier

I never noticed it before, but when I was younger, I went through life kind of in autopilot, if that makes sense. I would wake up, go to school, come home, eat something, watch a show or a movie, take a shower, and then stay up until my eyes went dry. The next day, things would restart in the same mindlessness they always did. One thing I'm beginning to regret about those days is that I never took a second to appreciate or even notice my surroundings and the blessings I had.

Honestly, at one point – I don't remember exactly when, but I kind of just told myself to grow up. And I know what you're thinking like, 'that's kind of a weird thing to say to yourself'. However, those were the right words I needed to hear at that specific moment. I took a second to look back at my existence and realize that I can't keep living the same way every single day. I couldn't keep going through life on autopilot like a machine – no one can.

For example, when I was ten years old, I had major doubts about my self-worth. So, I decided to look at all the things I was good at – and being human, I could only notice the flaws and disadvantages. However, at that time I received many applause for my so-called "exceptional" grades. So, I did what any other person would do – I devoted myself to my studies, to my grades – just so I could prove to myself and to everyone else that I was worth *something*. That I was worth more than just an annoying little girl who never seemed to stop talking.

Almost every day, I would try – try so hard – to study. I would try to study in the mornings before school, during breaks in school, when I got home from school, sometimes even in the middle of the night. I would beat myself up over every grade that wasn't 3.5 (A) or higher. And honestly, in a way it paid off. My report cards seemed to never concern or disappoint my parents. But of course, it was just *too* much.

I wasn't under a huge amount of pressure like, 'you're going to die if you don't get perfect grades,' but it was more like everyone *expected* me to get good grades. And that was fine; it was just my brain that wouldn't shut up. It never noticed the good parts, just the bad. "My science grade lowered by 0.3," "I can't believe my math grade went down by that much." and "I have 3 classes with grades under 3.5.". I'm not trying to complain, but every time I'd voice my concerns, they'd think I was bragging in a way that made it seem like I was complaining.

So, eventually I lost myself in school.

It wasn't I *wanted* to get good grades anymore. I *had* to get *perfect* grades. That was my mindset, but I couldn't. I couldn't get the perfect grades I wanted – not with the plan I had made.

It really did not take me too long to realize that I was so far lost in school that I didn't have a life outside. Sure, I played tennis sometimes but that was it.

So, I took a step back. And looked.

When I took a step back, I noticed things I wouldn't be able to see just a week earlier. My mother worked two jobs while my dad worked from 12 to 12 every day just so they could provide for my family. My sister listened to me and talked to me if I truly needed it. The realization seemed to hit me like a lightning bolt.

My family cared.

My friends cared.

It was just my brain telling me they didn't. That they thought I was a disappointment – but they didn't. They never did and they still don't. That day I felt a new kind of appreciation I'd never felt beforehand. It warmed my insides and influenced me to fix my life for the better. Of course, I still – even now – fall back to my old habits, but now I know that I'm not alone. Someone is always going to be there. No matter what.

I'm so glad I took a step back that day and looked.