

This winter didn't look the way I expected it to. Instead of rain and snow in Washington, my family and I were in Hawaii on winter vacation, where one small, unplanned decision quietly changed the pace of my break.

After we landed in the evening, we rushed to join a manta ray night snorkeling tour simply because it was the only activity still available that day. When we got on the boat, it was cold, and I was exhausted from traveling so late. Honestly, I didn't even want to go. I also couldn't wear my favorite mask because it wasn't allowed on the speedboat, which made me feel even more disconnected from the experience.

But when I slipped into the water and began to float, everything changed. I saw them: enormous, majestic manta rays sweeping up toward us from the fathomless sea. The guide said they like noise, so we shouted as loud as we could, and it felt almost as if I were a manta myself, watching sound waves ripple through the water, down, down, down. Then one huge white body rose beneath me, nearly touching my face, and gently bumped my elbow. I could see its gills fluttering, its great mouth scooping plankton, and its dark back flecked with white and blue in the fading light. It even turned and looked straight at me with calm, gentle eyes. In that instant, time seemed to pause, as if the world were holding its breath so I could truly see it.

When we finally climbed back into the boat, everything felt quiet. I sat there, trying to hold on to every detail of what I had just witnessed. The moment stayed with me like a handprint on my heart. I didn't want to talk or move. It felt as though the world had slowed down so I could finally be present inside it.

That feeling followed me through the rest of winter break, settling into me in a peaceful way. Soon, what I felt with the manta ray—time slowing, awareness sharpening—returned in a completely different setting while hiking the Kīlauea Iki Trail. The path wound through the crater of the Kīlauea volcano, a landscape shaped by destruction, hardened lava, ash, and sharp black rock, surrounded by lush green forest. Looking down, I saw frozen lava bubbles and jagged stone rising from the ground. And yet, life was already returning. Small plants pushed through the cracks, bright red flowers bloomed against the gray, and young green trees reached upward with delicate white buds. Even in a place that seemed ruined, nature was quietly beginning again.

As I walked, I realized the trail was teaching me something deeper. Awe can make time feel as though it stops, like it did when I floated face-to-face with a manta ray. But time itself can also create awe, slowly, patiently, as life rebuilds where it seems impossible. The Kīlauea Iki Trail reminded me that change does not happen all at once. Growth takes patience, but it is always possible. All it needs is a small crack in the stone.

This winter, I stopped trying to rush through life and chose to slow down and truly notice the world around me.