

CHOOSING GROWTH AMIDST CHAOS

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Quarantine is isolating—severely disruptive to personal support networks and daily routines—a morbid reminder of a once vibrant and dynamic world stopped in its tracks by a pernicious pandemic.

Quarantine is frustrating—coping mechanisms we have built over the course of our lifetimes feel as if they have been thrown out the window. Life moves on as if you're stranded in the deep end, wondering how you let the ground slip out from underneath you.

Quarantine is distressing—society as we knew it has ceased to exist but that does not mean our day-to-day and long-term problems did, and this is a source of concern for many of us who wonder about how to reconcile these at-time conflicting pulls.

Quarantine is changing things—not having safe access to our regular coping mechanisms and self-care rhythms including time with friends, family, and a multitude of stress-relieving activities we've learned to identify as effective stress reducers, which imposes a choice upon all of us: *Do we buckle under or give into the stress or do we forge onward on our journeys of self-discovery and growth?*

To be clear, this is not an easy or clear choice in the current moment. Choosing growth in an environment that is least conducive to growth is itself a daunting and challenging process, yet one we are not altogether unexposed to if we really think about it. The moment we were born, each of us embarked on our own journeys of growth and we've been facing adversity in countless forms ever since that moment of our beginning. Times and experiences of adversity serve to shape our interests and ambitions and solidify our strategies for tackling challenges and learning and rebounding from our mistakes and misunderstandings. Had the pandemic never happened, we would have continued along a more or less linear process of growth, right? While the pandemic is the most globally pertinent crisis, but we all have inner struggles and demons too, and we need to remember those because they are important to our growth and development now and in the future. Struggles and issues we were already facing when the pandemic struck that don't just disappear because a new challenge has arrived. We must attend to these issues and struggles as we move ourselves forward into our growth in this new moment in the world.

The good news is that we've all faced adversity before so we have some skills we bring to this time in our lives. Much like Newton's Third Law, for every stress-inducing event there is a coping outlet that can be either positive or negative. And we give ourselves power when we realize we have choice in this. For example, when I was a kid, I used to really want candy from the supermarket every time I went. My mother would wisely advise against it, so what did I do? I would get upset that I didn't get what I wanted and, I'm ashamed to say, I would throw a temper tantrum. That tantrum was an outlet for the frustration I felt to the 'adversity' at the time. This phenomenon has generally tracked throughout my life but as I grow older, I have learned to channel and expel that frustration in more productive ways that move me forward. Whether it be on the court playing basketball, making short films, writing and self-reflection, reading, or any of the other ways I interact with and learn from the people and events around me. This is a growth mindset and building mine has been my project of this pandemic.

The crux of the learning for me in the pandemic is this: I knew that bottling everything up was not the solution, but I never truly understood why that was the case until the pandemic. Why is that the case I wonder? I think it may be because the pandemic, and the ways we have needed to adjust to new rhythms and routines, abruptly took away most, if not all, of my coping mechanisms. I was left feeling alone and cut off from the rest of the world. The demons that followed me seemingly rejoiced at the opportunity to overcome a defenseless target, disarmed of his once-proud coping mechanisms.

Honestly, I struggled at the start of the pandemic. I couldn't shake the pestering anxiety and found myself uninterested in my responsibilities or even my earlier interests. I dropped into an unhealthy freefall until I accepted that the loss of my coping strategies was indeed a form of adversity itself. A new form of challenge that has required that I innovate an equally new path for my healing. For example, I have learned that humans are not meant to live completely isolated from one another. I see now that when I would get frustrated at my frustration with loneliness, a comically vicious cycle ensued that couldn't be broken without that initial frustration being voiced and heard. This is a discovery that leads to more growth.

As uncomfortable and foreign as it was, I started voicing these feelings to selected friends and family. Their acceptance and

affirmation of my emotional states has validated my sense of self, my understanding that I am allowed to be affected by these challenges, or what I keep referring to as my demons. This then enables me to see the whole field—including myself in it—much more clearly, with compassion and clarity I did not have access to before. And while there's no miracle cure for struggle, I learned the hard way that I couldn't just open up once and hope that would make all my problems disappear. I have learned that I need to intentionally and consistently set aside time to talk with friends and family. As well I sought out a mentor to speak with regularly. All of this has helped me to learn that many people share these experiences of isolation and struggle, of feeling like they have demons. I have learned that while it's natural to feel guilty unloading negative emotions onto someone else, it's important to recognize the symbiotic nature of this type of conversation. It isn't one outsourcing their own emotional labor onto another, it's mutual sharing of each other's emotional labor, a coming together that elevates and connects us to each other. A grueling solo mission suddenly feels like a team effort as you take on each other's turmoil together. The illusion of complete isolation vanishes and I'm able to handle my responsibilities with confidence, free of anxiety and negative self-talk and full of a desire for connection and compassion—for self and those people around me. We become each other's light on the path to growth and happiness.

The biggest lesson I've taken away so far is that choosing growth is a choice that has to be made every day, every hour, every minute, every second. Our emotional state is capable of reacting to thoughts and feelings at a whim if we are not intentional and in touch with ourselves. There have been too many times to count when I've been steadily working on a project and I randomly spot my demons in the rearview mirror; within seconds my anxiety skyrockets and any chance at maintaining productivity in that state disappears for the immediate future. In that moment it is absolutely critical that I do the following:

1. Remind myself that I have a choice I can make.
2. Choose growth over anguish.
3. Reach out to the people who are part of my growth team.

I can still make the decision to give into despair at any point, but the benefit of quickly recognizing this choice at these emotional crossroads facilitates a much quicker and more elastic rebound to a healthier emotional state instead of continuing to linger in the darkness of my dark thoughts. Choosing growth and light is not easy. I remind myself that triggers come in countless forms with varying levels of impact. Without warning, a trigger can sink you so deep into your sympathetic 'fight/flight' drive that you don't see the light above the surface and, even more devastatingly, lose hope of ever seeing it again. We're all susceptible to succumbing to the darkness. The most important lesson I've learned as I continue to claw myself out of that 'dark place' is to never, ever, lose hope or connection. In my darkest moments at the start of the pandemic, I desperately clung to the hope that, one day, I'd love and forgive myself. As I let this light in, I can begin to see my own light reflected back to me. It is in these moments that I feel myself living into my questions with more patience and with a sense of true hopefulness.

I end with the words of the poet Rilke,

"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

I am grateful for this pandemic time to learn and live into my questions and struggles. The old ones and the new ones. All lead to my continued growth, my sense of connection and possibility in the world.

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