

“Choose Growth Over Comfort:” A Letter to My Descendants

Lev Burstein - 11th Grade

Science Leadership Academy; Philadelphia, PA

Dear Descendants,

If I can share any wisdom I have learned from life in the pandemic that began in 2019 and continues at the time of writing this in April 2022, it is: “Choose growth over comfort.”

My freshman year of high school started well. There was not anything dramatic and or out of sorts. It was a smooth and much-anticipated transition into high school for me. I was living my version of a fourteen-year-old boy’s life. I was excited to go to the same high school as my older brother, Ari, who was in 11th grade. I met his friends when I shadowed at SLA the year before, made a few friends there, joined the basketball and track teams, and imagined my future as a happy high school student at Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia.

As spring arrived, I started hearing about a virus called Coronavirus, later named Covid-19. At first, this news and the ideas of a global virus meant nothing to me—though I did feel sincere compassion for the countries enduring it. Italy was hit first and hit hard, and a lockdown ensued. It seemed remote and unreal, far away as if it would not touch us. Then Covid-19 came to New York City. After that, things seemed a bit closer and more real. Somehow my family, the people around me, and I did not really think that it would affect us in the same way as what we saw on the television and read online. I felt personally unscathed by the unfolding international drama until I got an urgent text from my mother: “Lev, my colleague who works for the Philadelphia School District just texted me, due to Coronavirus you guys will need to clear out your lockers tomorrow and then you’ll have off for the next two weeks while they sort this out. Make sure you take all your stuff home today. You may not be able to go back again.”

I read my mother’s text but didn’t think too much of it at the time. I thought maybe it was a misunderstanding on the part of the District or someone in the medical community. I went to Engineering class. I remember we were making popsicle stick bridges for an experiment. We joked around and music was playing, it was chill and fun. Then, we all got an email at the same time. It said that we wouldn’t have school for the next two weeks due to Coronavirus. Honestly, not realizing what would come to be, we were all pretty excited for this time off. But, I recall, some of us were also a little bit worried and a few teachers seemed to be freaking out. After

school, I said to my friends, “See you in two weeks.” Little did any of us know that we wouldn’t see each other for over a year. Those two weeks turned into two months, which turned into the rest of the school year, which turned into the whole next school year. I did virtual school at home for a whole year sitting in a folding chair in the corner of my mom’s room because that was the only spot in my house that was not occupied and that had good enough Wi-Fi for Zoom School.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I was somewhat dazed, and remember that I felt apathetic. As I look back, I can see that I was in an ongoing state of shock and confusion that led to a kind of depressed feeling setting in quietly. In reflection, I can see that instead of using this time to improve myself, at first I chose to be comfortable. I became what I now see as kind of lazy—something I never was before the pandemic. I barely worked out, and I didn’t improve any of my skills or try to develop new interests or hobbies. I had so much free time but used little of it to actually do anything of value. For months, I let the time go to waste. Throughout the whole year I felt lethargic. I think because I was feeling bad for myself. I missed sports and my teammates, and I felt lonely without seeing my friends or my grandparents.

I look back on this time with more compassion for myself—something that I’ve learned in the pandemic is of the utmost importance. I can now see that it was my mindset that caused my struggle in those first six months of the pandemic. If I were to go back in time, I would address those confused feelings directly in order to better understand what I was feeling and then use the time to my advantage and to the advantage of my family and the broader society. For example, I would have pushed myself to work out more because I think not working out contributed to my lethargy. I would have put the time to use learning a language, working on my social impact business, and bettering myself as a person. As my mother always says “shoulda, woulda, coulda,” which is her way of saying I need to go easier on myself because it is easy to judge ourselves from behind, but we need to remember that we were doing our best with what we knew at the time. Since it was an unprecedented global pandemic, I needed to realize that I was doing the best I could at that time. It was hard for me to adjust to doing school online and to not having any real social contact or engagement in sports. I can see now that despite feeling down, I still worked hard at school, maintained and built friendships, and got closer with my older brother and parents.

“Be curious, not judgmental.” – Walt Whitman

After a full virtual sophomore year, I was more than ready to enter my junior year of high school in person. Since I developed habits of being too comfortable—making me a bit lazy and therefore not as apt to leave my comfort zone—that’s exactly how the beginning of my junior year started off. When school was over each day, I went right home and just sat on the couch looking at my phone and watching television until late at night. I went to bed very late as well. I felt directionless. This behavior pattern wasn’t helping me in any way, and I knew it. It

bothered me, but I lacked motivation to change it at first. My friends said they experienced the same thing, so it wasn't just me who felt this way, yet that did not help motivate any of us, in a way it validated not doing anything, at least for a while.

I felt that I wasn't bettering myself, and my life felt like it was plateauing, like I was becoming stuck. I knew I needed to level myself up as a person. To do that required developing more discipline. Further, it required that I become curious about my behavior and thought patterns rather than judgmental. It turned out that this stance was the key to positive change. When I judge myself or judge others, I shut down possibilities. When I am curious about myself and others, I invite and create new and different possibilities. Inviting possibility helps individuals and groups to see farther, reach wider, and go deeper.

“Don't choose comfort over growth.” – a friend

It was at this time of personal pandemic reckoning that a close friend said something powerful that jolted me into a new line of thinking. He said “Don't choose comfort over growth.” When I heard him say these words, I knew I needed to keep repeating them so that the meaning would sink in. And I did, it became my personal mantra. It motivated me and it encouraged me to break out of my comfort zone which I realized had become like a cage.

I imagined myself fifty years from now looking back at the photo memories on my phone, and that all I would see are photos of food, selfies, and me generally looking lazy and feeling bored. I didn't want to have feelings of regret and unfulfilled potential or to miss out on building meaningful interactions and creative possibilities for things that were not important to me such as laying around the house and watching tv. Then, I reframed my reality using this idea and projecting it forward in a positive way. I imagined looking back and seeing photos of myself working hard in school, working out at the gym, building my social impact business, while also doing meaningful things with my friends and family. I would have a rush of pride at the meaningful times we shared and feel happy that I built a good life and had a positive impact on myself and on others.

Upon reflection, I see that while the saying “Don't choose comfort over growth” resonated with me immediately, I didn't yet live by the edict to choose growth over comfort. That took more time, which cost me my happiness and peace of mind for a year. But I learned a lot from this experience. I learned that choosing growth is better than choosing comfort, every time. Comfort keeps you back, whereas growth takes you somewhere new.

I hope you, my future descendants, always live by this no motto matter what age you are and no matter what the circumstance is. I recently started to live on my growth's edge as a core value. It has improved many aspects of my life, including my physical and mental growth, sense of happiness and fulfillment, reduction in stress and anxiety, development and strengthening of friendships, building better daily habits, the ability to focus on my school work and my business, and much more. I challenge you to try to live by this value for one full month, and I believe that you'll see how motivating it is. I know you will see positive change in yourself and in your lifestyle choices. If it works for you, be sure to tell your close friends and family about it and watch them step into their growth.

Over the past few months, new Covid variants keep emerging: Omicron, Delta, and others. These variants spread fast and are much more contagious than earlier versions of Covid. A lot of people I know have recently become sick with Covid. It seems to be spreading rapidly in a way that is scaring people and making us feel there may be another lockdown. I would hate this with a passion. This time, however, I am more prepared. I will better myself in all aspects of my life and within myself. I will do this, reciting to myself "Don't choose comfort over growth" whenever I feel lazy or feel like giving up on something. I will also work on being more compassionate to myself because that helps me not get too comfortable or to be too hard on myself, which is another important lesson of the pandemic. When we are doing our best, we should try not to be hard on ourselves.

I end with the words of Yung Pueblo, which translates to 'young people,' whose poetry lifts up my generation:

Inward by Yung Pueblo.

we live in a unique time, where fear-driven and hateful emotions are coming to the surface so that they can be completely released, so that we can create a new world where institutionalized forms of harm are no longer a factor in our lives. as it works for the individual, so does it also work for the collective of humanity — we can't heal what is ignored, nor can we live happily and freely if we continue running away from our own darkness.

personally, my faith is in people. our courage to turn inward in the hope of uncovering and releasing all that stands in our way of becoming beings of unconditional love is what will bring harmony and peace to our world. unity with those around us is most possible when we become internally whole and loving. wisdom more easily flows through us when our minds and hearts are no longer reacting to the suffering of everyday life. this does not mean that it makes us cold or distant; it means that we learn to respond to the changes in life without causing ourselves misery, we will learn to respond to life as opposed to blindly reacting to it.

humans affect one another deeply, in ways that the world at large is just beginning to understand. when we begin healing ourselves, it sets off waves that connect us to those who have healed in the past and those who will heal in the future. when we heal ourselves, it gives strength to those who need more support to take on their own personal healing journey. what we do reverberates throughout time and space—like a rock thrown into a lake, the circles it creates move in all directions.

When you turn inward, my dear descendants, remember to put your faith in people, in yourself, and in everyone around you—including those you cannot see, and especially those who may need you nearby or in the distance. Illuminate inward, uplift outward, and always choose growth over comfort.

Sincerely,
Lev Burstein