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Growing Up: Advice For My Younger Self

Nick Lewis

Dear Past Nick,

It won't happen quickly, nor easily. You're just getting to know yourself, and even as I'm writing this to you there are many things that I still don't understand. You'll spend some nights lying awake in bed, staring at the ceiling, pondering life and the complex emotions you're feeling. Others, you'll spend playing video games or watching YouTube videos. You haven't fully realized it yet, but that's your way of trying to salvage some fun and freedom out of your days, which seem to always be too jam-packed with school and work for you to have any free time. Before you know it, you'll rarely feel like you have time for you anymore. Sometimes, feeling like your work is stealing your freedom will eat you up inside. But even in your lowest points, you will come to realize that this whole experience is part of growing up. You'll never truly understand how much the freedom to choose your own path means to you until you've lost that freedom and fought to regain it. The value of choice is just one of those things that you can only learn the hard way. And don't worry, it gets better.

Eventually you'll drift off to sleep, only to be woken up by Mom a while later to resume the grind. Some mornings will be especially tough – you'll swear that you're more tired than you've ever been, and work and school will be the last thing you ever want to do. As you brush your teeth in front of that small bathroom mirror on the wall, you'll stare into your eyes, bloodshot and heavy, and guess how little you slept last night. Many times, your guess will be so pitiful that you'll just laugh. What else can you do? And then you'll think back to when you used to have a bedtime – 9:30 every school night. In some ironic twist, what you once disliked with a passion has become something you wish you could relive. Splashing cold water on your face snaps you back to reality. You don't want to do this.

But why not? You've gotten through school days exhausted before, you've even worked long hours on little sleep without any break. You've made it this far, shouldn't you keep going? One day you'll realize that this isn't you fearing the school day. You're afraid of the future. You're afraid

of growing up. Again with the ironic twist, perhaps your greatest want of old has become your greatest fear. When you reach this point, that voice inside your head will tell you: “You just have to do this. It’s for your own good.” You’ll suck it up, grab your backpack and a quick breakfast and walk your way to school. Doing things for your own good, even when you don’t want to. You’ve made it one step closer to adulthood.

As you juggle an ever-increasing workload, you’ll realize that everything has a way of working itself out. No matter how busy you get, as long as you stay focused, prioritize, and take things one at a time, you’ll get your work done. The trick is to not let yourself stress out over your work. Part of growing up is accepting that you’re gonna have tests that you don’t study for, presentations that you don’t practice, papers that you push off until the last minute, and shifts that you show up late for. When you get that grade or performance review back, good or bad, life goes on. Don’t sweat these things, you won’t remember what you got on your geometry test three years ago, last year’s performance review or even your Spanish test from last week. Remember, a grade or review on its own holds no value outside of school or your job. Don’t let your future teachers or employers convince you otherwise. Understanding that whatever happens, life goes on and you’ll be okay – you’re on your way.

What you should care about is effort and the intentions behind your work. If you ever feel burnt out, ask yourself these two questions: are you giving it your best? Are you doing this for yourself or for a grade/for money? Be honest. If you cannot answer with “yes” and “for yourself”, you are wasting your time. If you’re truly working hard and you really do want to improve your life through your work, it will happen. This is why you should not be afraid to chase your dream – it’s easy to do your best when you love what you do. And you’ll naturally want to improve at something that you’re passionate about. And don’t worry, I can confidently say that if you stay on your current path, you’re gonna be a dream chaser. But I guess you always kinda knew that. Refusing to be denied from being/prioritizing yourself and doing what you love – you’re growing up.

But how do you improve at something? Well, eventually you’ll find that taking piano lessons since first grade has taught you things about life and yourself that you would’ve never imagined or learned without taking lessons. Let’s say you’re practicing piano and you want

to expand your repertoire by learning a new song. If you want to learn it properly, is your first priority in playing going to be speed or accuracy? Remember what Mrs. Wright said and how you always had to practice: “Accuracy is the base, without it you can never play a song effectively. If you focus on accuracy first, speed comes naturally once you build that strong base.” Not only is this completely true with piano, but it’s the same way with life. If you want to be great at anything, you have to establish a base in the fundamentals. Set goals, put time into them and practice constantly until you’ve achieved that goal or are satisfied. This is the process of getting good, boiled down to the simplest fundamentals. Learning how to practice – that’s another big step toward growing up.

Junior year, you’re gonna go up onstage for your seventh piano recital and somehow, you’ll forget everything that you practiced. The night before, it was perfect. You were gonna crush it. Where did it all go? How do you play Wild Horseman? Your hands will shake as they touch the coolness of the keys and you frantically try to remember something. “Anything.” Then comes the sinking feeling. This is one of your greatest fears realized – you are about to fail onstage in front of an audience which includes your family. You never believed this would happen to you, not even in a nightmare, but here you are. Backed against a wall, one last thought comes to mind like a gift from God: “Screw it, you got this.” Reality hits you like a freight train. You are actually sitting down to play a piece that you don’t know for an audience who assumes that you know it. You’ve already accepted that you’re going to fail, yet you’re still doing it. That’s badass! This is the day that you’ll discover you grew a pair. All that fear you had turns to warmth and confidence. With that confidence, a memory rushes back to you; “The ‘A’ section!”

Like a magician makes a dollar appear out of thin air, you pound out that ‘A’ section, end the song obviously early, the crowd applauds, and you take a bow. Yah, you failed and everyone knew. But it was damn stylish. You never cracked. Let’s see anyone else in that auditorium pull off a performance like that. Plus, you learned your lesson – better practice more next time. The value of practice and the true power of self-confidence – these are two more things that you will come to understand on your journey to adulthood.

My point with all of this is, don’t be scared. You’re closer to being an adult than you

think, and as you've seen from some of your future stories, life has a way of handing you the tools to success and teaching you the lessons that you need to know along the way. I believe that discovering your purpose in life is about answering the big questions about yourself. Who are you? And what do you want?

You don't have to have a sure answer. I still don't fully know who I am or what I want, and that's okay. Life is fluid, like a river which flows within you, and as I've gone with the flow I've learned that discovering and understanding yourself is a process that has no clear beginning or end. But if you ask yourself these two questions before every decision that you make, you'll come to notice and understand things about yourself that you never thought about before. As I'm wrapping up my freshman year of college, I feel that I have grown up and am closer to knowing myself and my purpose in life than I've ever been before, and I'm stoked to see what the future holds.

One last thing. Unless something is obviously harmful, try everything. You'll find out that you regret things that you never try a lot more than things that you do try and end up failing at. So try out for the Carmel basketball team every year even though you probably won't make it. Make a YouTube channel or a podcast, even though you know it probably won't catch on. Ask Ava on a date, even though she probably doesn't like you that way. These are just a few things that maybe you'll end up doing, and maybe you won't. I wouldn't want to ruin the surprise.

Sincerely,

Nick