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Alone, But Not Lonely

Faith Uyeno

CW: This piece contains themes of suicide.

Keywords: suicide, kids, loneliness, suicide prevention, mental health

I have always enjoyed being by myself, as I often find the presence of other people mentally taxing. My mom has even told me how throughout my life I preferred my own company. As a child, I had told everyone that I liked being alone, so they simply left me alone. Despite living in a house with 8 other people, I rarely saw or interacted with them outside of necessity. As much as I liked being alone, I didn't fancy being lonely. Children have a hard time managing their emotions, and I was no different. My personal neglect—amongst other variables—led me to grow up incredibly lonely and depressed. Eventually, that loneliness and depression led me to spiral mentally to a point of destruction when I was only 11 years old. At 11 years old, I was in 6th grade, 4 foot 9 inches, missing 2 teeth, liked hair bows, and had yet to start my period. At 11 years old, I wanted nothing more than to stop feeling and to stop existing, so I tried to do just that. Luckily, the destruction I wanted to wrought on myself was not fatal, but the damage was already done. It took a long time for me to mentally recover from the event, and even longer to think about healing. It took years before I was able to pick myself up and want to live life for all its grandeur. Eventually, I met some people that made me realize something that would save my life: no one is truly alone.

In my freshman year of high school, I was required to take a language class, so I simply took what I thought would be the easiest: Spanish. The classroom was set up so people sat in pairs at each desk. The first day I sat at an empty desk and waited for someone else to join me. Right before class started, a girl came in and sat

next to me. We didn't talk until the teacher told us to introduce ourselves to our partners; we did just that. I found out that her name is Leslie, she was a freshman like me, and she was in the advanced dance classes at the school. This last bit of information caught my attention, which led us to talk about our mutual love and interest in dance. By the end of the class, we had exchanged numbers and were excited to hang out again. We would soon find out that this was our only class together, but this didn't deter Leslie. She was adamant that we hang out more outside of class, since we didn't share many. We would hang out during break, lunch and after school whenever we could. We tended to talk about our mutual passion for dance and our interest in choreography. I didn't try out for the higher-level dance classes prior to starting high school because I didn't know they existed. Leslie helped me convince the dance teachers to move me to a higher level dance class due to my experience, but unfortunately, they could not move me to the highest level dance class—which Leslie was in—because it was full. Leslie and I were disappointed that we couldn't share the class together, but we still tended to learn and choreograph dances together for class. I would eventually try out for the advanced dance class that Leslie was in the following year, and get in. From sophomore to senior year, Leslie and I had the time of our lives dancing, choreographing, and just enjoying each other's company together.

It didn't click with me at first, but eventually, I realized that Leslie didn't make me feel mentally drained by being around her. I don't often enjoy spending a lot of time around people, and I tend to be very awkward when I do. It takes so much energy out of me to have a mundane conversation with anyone whether it be a friend, peer, teacher, or family member, but with Leslie, something was different. Something about her just made it easy for me to be comfortable with her and talk to her. Leslie would eventually go on to be one of my best friends throughout high school and even to this day. She really made me realize that as much as I like being alone, it sucked to be lonely. And merely being in her presence made me feel less lonely.

Leslie ended up being the first person I became comfortable enough with to tell of my previous attempt on my life. I remember the day after I told her so vividly. She came up to me during break and broke into tears before she could even begin talking. She told

me that she didn't realize, until much later, that when I said I tried in 6th grade, I was only 11 years old. She didn't realize that 2.8% of the 46,000 people who successfully die of suicide each year are 10-13 years old (CDC). She couldn't even find out the number of kids from 10-13 that tried and failed, yet 1,288 kids still succeeded; kids just like me that were still losing teeth and trading Pokémon cards at recess. It didn't take long for me to begin crying with her and to comfort her, but she stopped me to explain that she was sorry that I felt such a way at an age when I shouldn't have. She told me that she wished she had been there for me to show me how much she loved and cared about me, but since she couldn't change the past, she said she would settle for being here for me now and in the future. At that point, we were both crying and hugging each other, and it remains one of my fondest memories. Even as I write this, I can't help but tear up and smile fondly.

Unfortunately, I would again reach a breaking point my sophomore year of high school. All of the stress and loathing I had been feeling came to a head. I was spiraling again and this time, I didn't want to. In that moment of hesitation, I remembered Leslie or some of my other friends when they were there for me, had something nice to say, laughed with me, cried with me, and just made me feel less alone. Above all else though, I remember those words Leslie told me that fateful day I told her about my last attempt. The memory of all of the times I spent in good company was enough to bring me back from the brink of destruction. In that moment, I was physically alone, but for the first time in a long time, it didn't feel like I was.

That moment changed everything for me. It completely shifted my mindset and even led me to seek professional help with my mental health issues. I still struggle mentally, but now there is a self-assurance that I feel whenever I am physically alone. I can't get rid of the feeling, but I can replace it with another, stronger, feeling. Now, it is easy to simply remember all of the words, people, and memories that bring me comfort and joy to replace that loneliness. This has led to more self-confidence and self-assurance in myself and my place in life. It has also led me to be more present when I am around people because it made me realize how kind words, compliments, and concerns can help and reassure people.

As painful as it was at the time, I no longer look back at these

experiences with a heavy heart. Depression and suicide are not hardships you are meant to face alone. As tempting as it may be, those who choose to fight them alone are the ones that lose. Funnily enough, people often say there are paths that you must walk alone—which I think is true; sometimes you must physically walk the path by yourself, but that does not mean you are alone. I still tend to spend most of my time by myself, but knowing that I—and everyone else—am not alone has helped me tremendously. People do not have to be physically present with you to be there with you. Any person dead or alive, friend or family, lover or stranger, and fictional or real that has made you feel comforted, loved, or cared for is always with you. My time with Leslie is a prime example of just that. Memory is a powerful thing and it's the memory of every moment you were not alone that ensures you never feel alone even when you physically are.

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About the Author:

Faith Uyeno is a Liberal Studies major at California State University, Monterey Bay with aspirations of becoming a teacher. She grew up in Fullerton, California as one of four kids to her Hawaiian, Japanese father and Caucasian mother. Faith is an avid book

reader, a lover of cats, and an amateur artist.