

## LOVE ♥ LETTERS



### Experience: A Way Out of Depression

As I have shared quite openly, I struggled in my teens and twenties with depression, anxiety, disordered eating and suicidal ideation. I had a super rough go of things, and quite frankly, I'm lucky I'm here today. Getting therapy was one of the most helpful things to keep me alive.

I recently came across a paper assessment of my initial visit. It was quite heartbreaking in general, but one thing stood out. My psychologist wrote, "Patsy needs life experiences." I was 17 and in desperate need of varied life experiences. Life experiences are like the food we eat, the air we breathe, the blood coursing through our veins. We are evolutionary and experiential beings, on the leading edge, advancing ALL THAT IS, literally creating LIFE through experiencing. (Hence the opposite of experiencing is constriction and restriction.) My dear friend and teacher @kelsey.ayurvedayoga (Insta) recently quoted her teacher Dr. Ramadas, "We experiment to experience." YES!!! THIS IS IT!!

At 17, I had been denied any experience that wasn't sanctioned by the extremely narrow and conservative views of the church we were involved in. I am wildly expansive and dynamic (can't you tell), and being in this constricted environment was almost lethal to me. I couldn't experiment in any way because I was taught that left to my own devices I would choose sin and burn in hell forever. If you haven't been raised in religion, you might not understand the effect that this has on a child.

To stay safe and beyond reproach and punishment by parents and God, I contained myself and was a good, little, perfect girl and young woman. I colored within the lines and honored my father and mother. Layer this with the message that because Jesus had suffered on my behalf, I wasn't deserving of any form of satisfaction or pleasure. He was always on that cross dying for me, the filthy sinner. To top it off, my grandmother had a mantra I lived by, "Cheer up, death is coming."

My sole purpose was just to endure my life to get to death so I could get to heaven and finally be happy. Imagine a 17-year-old running around with all of these layers!

My experience of depression had me spend a lot of time in my room alone crying and desperate with no hope. I was so unhappy that I even for a time looked into legal emancipation to get some type of freedom and escape. I would tell some friends that I was unhappy, but overall no one really knew the personal hell I was living in. I had one group of dear friends that I credit with being my bright spot in those days. But beyond that, I never had boys interested in me or asking me out which made me feel like there was something fundamentally wrong with me at that age.

After high school, I went to a small conservative, Southern college which was actually a good step for me into life. I was still pretty contained my freshman year, but I was in active therapy and slowly taking some risks in stepping out. Something magical happened for me the summer between my freshman and sophomore years. I went back that fall a changed person and started broadening my experiences even more. I started drinking a little, joined a sorority, became a fraternity little sister and did the Greek life thing, which in many ways was very healthy for me. And, I started experimenting with guys, finally.

But I wasn't out of the weeds yet. It was a long, slow crawl out in my 20s with many ups and downs, advances and relapses. I had also chosen to take antidepressants while staying in active therapy. Becoming sexually active was definitely one of the big healers for me. Getting there was a terrifying scale up a mountain with an amazing therapist guide who helped me deconstruct so that I could actually have sex for the first time at about 23. Where she stopped, I had some really great guys that took me to new levels of experience.

All this to say that for me, experimentation was critical to my experiencing life and moving beyond constriction toward expansiveness. It was absolutely my way out of depression. Now, I also want to be clear that when you're in depression, it's extraordinarily difficult to get motivated to do anything or move the dime in any direction. It's the nature of the extreme constriction and grip of depression.

So fast forward to the age of 37/38. While I wasn't depressed, I was incredibly stuck in my life, a life that to any outsider seemed perfect with a great job and great guy. But once again, I found myself lacking new, life-giving experiences, and things felt narrowed and cramped. I think a lot of us end up in that place in midlife where we've attained what we were supposed to after building in our twenties and thirties, and we hit a status quo that is stifling because we've stopped expanding and growing. I was quite literally starving for Life.

These are the skinny branches of life, I say. There is often an invitation, a beckoning to take a bold step in the direction of exhilarating life experience once again. It's simultaneously terrifying because that call is most certainly accompanied by a desertion of people we have loved, activities that once served us, careers that fed us and a radical shift in relationships as we navigate the necessary change to the other side of stuck.

I can say on the other side that this is what I know. Yes, it's painful, but it would have been exceedingly more painful to outstay that stage in my life. Yes, things shifted, but they shifted in surprising and miraculous ways. In order for me to remedy depression and stuckness, it required a bold bust out and life experiences. And finally, I now know that life is a series of expansions and contractions. I've had mini mid-life crises since 40, and they will continue until I die. It's the nature of Life.

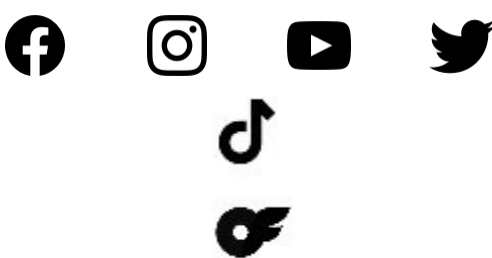
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