

Sense of Self
By: Anna-Lisa Barrett:

“What is this?” I thought to myself as I stood at the self-checkout at my previous job on March 13th 2020. I used to work as a cashier at a local grocery store pre-pandemic, and during the pandemic, and let me tell you the consistent thoughts of the unknown and “what if’s?” can take a huge toll on you. However, that day was life changing in its own way.

Seeing the havoc blow up right in front of you can scare anyone, especially a 19 year old who just got news that her classes will be canceled for two weeks. Going into work felt like I was heading straight into the belly of the beast, equipped with a fanny-pack full of gloves and hand sanitizer, on one of the most unforgettable days of my life.

I vividly remember the emptiness of shelves. We see it now in 2023 when it comes to child and adult medications, but the fact that people were running for toilet paper, still to this day makes me laugh. I saw more people with over three or more packs of toilet paper than I did canned food. You would think if this felt like the end of the world to many, you’d gravitate to potentially maybe one or if you’re pushing it two packs of toilet paper and the rest being necessities to help you survive such as canned food, but no, everyone’s main focus was getting as much toilet paper they could for over \$18.00.

Back to how I felt though. I remember seeing the panic in people’s eyes and that’s when I knew this two week fiasco potentially could go further than that. I remember messaging my friends who were all excited for two weeks off of school,

“What if this goes further than two weeks? What if we can’t see each other physically for a while?”

None of us wanted to believe it would take over two weeks, and we all promised that once it passed and school finished we would all try to see each other. I think that’s why the first lockdown is so romanticized now, or nostalgic for those who can remember it, especially for my age group. We saw it as a break, finding new hobbies, talking everyday on Discord, Zoom, or FaceTime, and even watching movies together either on Disney+ or Netflix Party, or playing computer games together up until 3-4am. It felt comforting, relaxing, and even peaceful, until it didn’t.

When September 2020 came around, six months after the potential two weeks, all students were thrust into online school for the next school year. I hated every moment of it. I felt as if online classes weren’t as fulfilling as being in person, my university experience was taken away from me, and what made it way worse was the constant feeling of being alone in either my bedroom, kitchen, or spare room just constantly on my computer. My computer throughout the year of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 was my only real companion as everyone I saw was just through a screen.

I never truly understood the real meaning of loneliness, specifically taking a toll on everyone’s mental health until that point. It even got to the point where my own company, even when I would do things that I truly loved to do, felt meaningless.

I remember one point in 2021 where I had an out of body experience. I couldn’t even recognize who I was, and it frightened me. It frightened me so much to the point that I felt that how could anyone recognize who I was, if I couldn’t even recognize who I was?

I had to take a huge step back and look into myself from the past to present and see what was going on. Luckily, I will say this benefited me in the long run because I had to realize some things had to change in order for me to excel in life.

The biggest change was listening to myself and how I was feeling. The reason behind this feeling of loneliness and meaningless was me starting to realize that I was not listening to my own thoughts and feelings. Think of it like this. The loneliness was as persistent as a clock, hands ticking every second, a perpetual reminder of my life passing by while I was stuck in time. The only way to get through this was to learn how to take solace in my own company.

What I mean by this is that I learned that I loved being on my own, and I was just realizing that by being on my own and starting to do things that I love because I wanted to. I felt comfortable on my own, gaining my own energy such as recharging my own social bar. I started to enjoy my alone time and the only way I got to do that was listening to my feelings and what my body and mind needed in order to be a functioning human being.

When I was brought back mostly in person when it came to school I put myself into listening to my instincts and feelings into gear. I've realized throughout the last two years of doing this, that everything I've been doing was because of a feeling. Now it's like, by listening more to myself and focusing on myself, there's a reason why it's been working in my favour so far, and I'm hoping it continues.

I believe because of the pandemic, and that out of body experience I wouldn't have realized that I was neglecting myself, and what was right for me. I consider it kind of like the butterfly effect. What I mean by butterfly effect is that it began with that self-realization and it led to me being content with myself and my life as of today. I finally got a sense of who I am as a person, and what I need to continue to thrive in life and so far, I'm loving every moment of it.

The End