**"What would happen if..."**

Addie Vogt

The other day I watched this movie about Hans Christian Andersen, the author of the Ugly Duckling and The Little Mermaid. In the movie he's a storyteller, so he tells this story of a King. The King ordered a suit from these tailors, and when they arrive, they hold up their hands and say that the suit is made from the finest material, and that the fabric was invisible to anyone who was stupid or unfit for their position. In reality, there was nothing there, but not wanting to look like a fool, the King agrees with them, saying "That's the most beautiful suit I've ever seen." So he calls in the Queen and shows her his "new suit" and not wanting to look like a fool, she agrees and says what a beautiful suit. The King plans on wearing this new suit to a parade, so they spread the word of this new suit to everyone in the town. The day of the parade comes  and by now everyone knows about the suit, except somehow, there was one little boy who hadn't heard. As the king walks down the street wearing "his new suit," the little boy looks at him shocked and says "... the king isn't wearing anything at all,” So of course the whole town suddenly realizes this, one by one realizing he’s actually naked, and freaks out.

This story is obviously just a story, but I think the message is something that is more common in our everyday lives than we might think. In the story, everyone goes with it even though it's absurd just because everyone else is doing it and they don't want to look like a fool. I think at least most of us have dressed or acted a certain way around certain people because we think we have to.

Next story: Since sixth grade, I’ve shaved my legs. Probably around November of 2010, being in the girls locker room in sixth grade, I thought "oh all the other girls have smooth legs and i'm one of the only girls with hair on my legs" so of course, in order to fit in/not look weird, I started shaving my legs too. Before this moment I hadn’t really felt any need to shave them. Fast forward to November of 2016, the phrase “No Shave November” starts coming up, so I decide that I’m not going to shave my legs for the entire month. I heard many comments along the lines of “Gross” and “Ew, you look like a man.” My response would be along the lines of “If hair on my legs make me look like a man, why do women grow hair on their legs in the first place??”

So far I've talked about a naked King and hairy legs but the point of my talk is that this applies to a lot of things in our lives. I didn't want to look like a fool, but also, when I was like 11 years old I didn't even have the thought to shave my legs until it was to impress someone else. And why did I care about their opinion so much in the first place? For years, I followed groups that didn’t miss me when I was gone, and realizing that helped me break away and spend some time alone, not chasing something I realized I didn’t need. I would put a lot of my time and energy into people who didn’t put time or energy into trying to be my friend, not realizing that there could be someone somewhere else that would treat me the way I deserved. One of the biggest lessons I learned was that I shouldn’t put up with things that I didn’t deserve, and it seems simple, but it took me five years to learn this.

How can we learn to be alone? I don’t really know the answer but I mostly just want to propose the question. Once we figure out how to be alone and be vulnerable, that’s when we find the answer to the question “How can I be ok with myself?” From one of my favorite books Beloved by Toni Morrison, “Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another.” It's human nature to want to fit in with the group, and purposely trying to stop having that fitting-in mentality is hard because you have to make yourself feel vulnerable. But for me, I had the most power after the part when I felt vulnerable, because I think you have to put yourself out there and feel uncomfortable before you can rise up. This is how you form your identity. This is how you learn to have power as an individual.

Despite the confidence I have in my message, sometimes I have my doubts and get self-conscious and go right back to thinking about what it would be like to fit in and if it would be better. There have been a lot of moments when I think maybe it would be better to try to be a part of a group I don’t even relate just so I don’t have to be alone. But ultimately I think learning how to be alone is the the first step to forming authentic relationships with both yourself and other people.

Here’s my last story: Throughout middle school, my Mom would pick me up at 3:15 for music lessons and I would be watching everyone else go off to sports practice. I cried to my mom a lot during this time about how I wished I played sports like the other kids, and in response she would tell me “your day will come.” I pretty much ignored that for years, not really caring about the future because as of “right now,” I didn’t care because I felt like I didn’t fit in. Even now as a senior, it’s the same way, with everyone, pretty much everyone, playing sports, and I still have those moments where I feel left out or weird or stupid because I don’t play sports. But I really love what I do. I loved it back then too but I wasn’t able to put all my energy into it because I was also thinking about how to fit in. If I had tried to fit in all these years I probably wouldn’t have gotten to where I am today. For me, it was sports and music that made me feel left out. You might have a similar story with different variables. The first step to happiness is to stop caring about what everyone else is doing and do the best you can at what you really want to do.

My favorite question to ask people when I’m getting to know them is “What makes your heart sing?” I think that’s the most important thing in this world, to find what fills you up. For me, music is that thing that makes life so worth living. For me, it’s art and it’s ability to share what words can’t. For you, it might be making sense of the world through math and science or taking in the world through another lens. Maybe you’re already doing what you love, but maybe you’re not. If not, ask yourself, “what would happen if I did?” If you know there’s something you love, you should go for it if that’s what makes your heart sing, not something that you don’t even like just because you think you’re supposed to do it.

What I hope you take away from this talk are the questions I asked:

Why do we do the things we do?

Who do we do them for?

How can we learn to be alone?

How can we be ok with ourselves?

What makes your heart sing?

No one can answer these questions for you because it’s different for every person. I think I’ve given this some thought and it’s empowered me and I am a more conscious person than before. If I never allowed myself to be alone, be vulnerable, and do something against the norm, I probably wouldn’t be able to do what I’m about to go do. It can be challenging, but I hope you can have power, confidence, and claim ownership over your freed self.