



The
**QUARTER
LIFE
CRISIS**

tales from the trenches

**ONE WEBSITE
34 WOMEN
+ A BOATLOAD OF
HONEST REFLECTION**

by Molly Mahar and 3 years of Stratejoy Bloggers



In the midst of a Quarterlife Crisis? I hear you, cupcake.

As an over-achieving Ivy League grad who suffered a total “QLC” in 2007 after landing my dream job at a sexy boutique hotel in Seattle, I know how it feels to think you’ve done things right, only to realize you’re still missing something. **I know how it feels to do everything you were supposed to do, yet still want something more.**

I was there. It sucks.

I drank a bunch of wine and cried an ungodly amount. I complained and bitched and blamed myself for getting so lost. I finally quit my job. I sold everything I owned. I traveled around the world with backpack and boyfriend in hand to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I began studying Buddhism. I decided I wanted to work for myself. I started trusting my intuition. I stopped trying to please everyone.


And finally...I started a little blog called Stratejoy in 2009 that is now a thriving coaching and training business!

(Hallelujah)

Over the past three years, I’ve had 33 amazing women write about their own Quarterlife Crisis journeys in six month “seasons” on the Stratejoy blog. They shared their stories in real-time—the ups, the downs, the lessons learned, the celebrations and the growth.

These beautiful souls and talented writers helped spread the word that the Quarterlife Crisis happens to the best of us: to students and mamas, entrepreneurs and artists, wives and party girls. They helped challenge the stigma that this “Crisis” is a failure and that somehow we could have avoided it, if only we had everything figured out.

Those of us who have experienced/are experiencing the QLC haven’t failed. **We are not selfish Gen Y-ers wallowing in some perceived notion that life should be handed to us on a golden platter.** We’re not blaming



our parents and our education for encouraging us to go after it “all” when society’s definition of women having it “all” is impossible these days.

We haven’t failed.

We’re simply admitting that we don’t have it “figured out” at a time in our lives when we thought we would. **And we are gutsy enough to take control of our happiness.**

As long as you don’t allow your QLC to take you down and out, you will be stronger, healthier and happier for it. It will force you to really examine your life, to challenge expectations and to carve out your own definition of success.

I know I owe my happiness today to the QLC. It shook me up and smacked me upside the head with discontent so that I would stop just putting up with my life. It demanded that I declare my own worthiness, value my well-being and really start living life on my own terms. And I think 33 contributing writers are gorgeous, sassy, living proof of the same thing!

I hope this book provides juicy points to ponder, inspiration to keep fighting for your happiness, a feeling of camaraderie and tons of laughter.

And please remember, lovely one: You are meant to flourish. This feeling of being lost will pass. Open your heart, trust your gut and dream big.

You owe it to yourself.

XOXO,
Molly

MOLLY MAHAR
www.stratejoy.com

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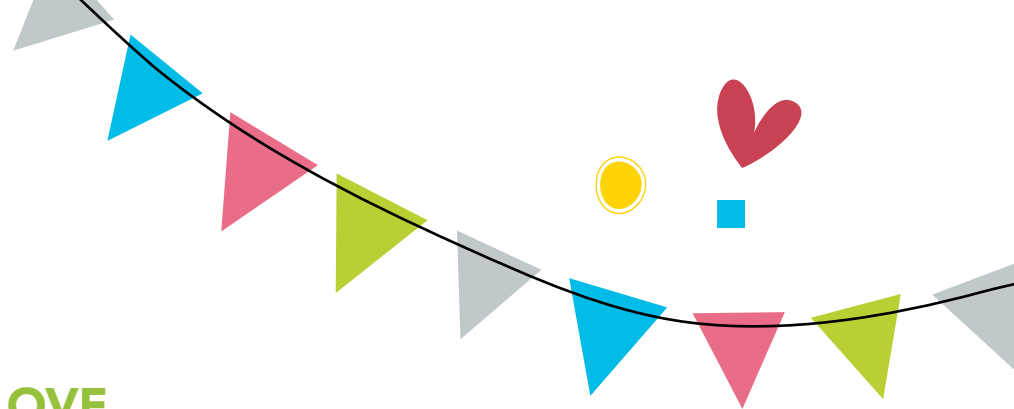
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THE QLC

I'm just going to tell it to you straight: **The Quarterlife Crisis is a real experience for women in their twenties and early thirties.**

It's a slightly silly term for a real period of change. Of seeking. Of sorting out our best lives, on our terms, with the resources we have. The term might be silly, but the process of growth is anything but.

And, love? You are not alone.

If you feel disconnected from your life, confused about your next steps, disappointed in your day-to-day, or

overwhelmed by all the possibilities out there—you are not alone. If you feel like everyone else is getting ahead, like being an adult is not all it's cracked up to be, or like there's got to be something more—you are not alone.

If you simply feel totally unlike your awesome self—you are not alone.

Why are so many of us suffering a QLC?

Today's quarterlifers grew up with the promise that we could be anything we wanted to be, and if we worked hard enough and did everything right, we could have it "all." Sounds incredibly exciting, right?

We could be glamorous career women with corner offices, amazingly creative mothers who finger-painted the bathroom with our kids and be tigers in the bedroom—complete with our toned bodies and matching lingerie—all at the same time.

Or maybe that's too far in the future?

Well, at least we could be fashionable city dwellers with diverse groups of hilarious friends all trying to make it in the world, downing cocktails and have dating adventures and taking hot yoga classes three times a week while our bosses take us under their wings and support our career dreams to make an impact in the world.

Those are some of the shiny, glossy versions of "all" I hear—others involve rich husbands, start-up companies and venture capital, political office, small-town back-to-earth organic living, social entrepreneurship with a healthy dose of world travel, or blogging to book deal to fame fantasies.

None of these dreams are out of the question, impossible, or without merit. But when we expect them to magically happen, or when we haven't examined



which dreams of “all” are really and truly ours, we are setting ourselves up for QLC meltdowns.

Nobody has it all “figured out.” That cliché about life being a journey? It’s so true.

Many of us feel disappointed, lost or disconnected when the real world kicks in because we internalize those unexamined expectations. When the safety of school is over (or the glamour of our first job wears off, or our first serious relationship ends), we feel a sense of crisis because we definitely don’t have it “all.”

And we don’t have a clue what to do about it.

The plus side? When life begs you to examine your

definitions of success and having it “all” at this young age (and, yes, 32 is young!), you have the ability to truly re-evaluate and make changes.

You’ve just got to be willing to go for it.

You’ve got to be courageous enough to admit that the life you wake up to every morning isn’t actually the one you want. You’ve got to be ballsy enough to take stock of your life and seek clarity about how you really want to show up in the world. You’ve got to be brave enough not to settle.

You’ve got to care enough about your life to do something about it.

And as long as you don’t allow your Quarterlife Crisis to get the better of you, you’ll be so much better for having gone through it. It will require you to think about your life and identify the values you want to craft that

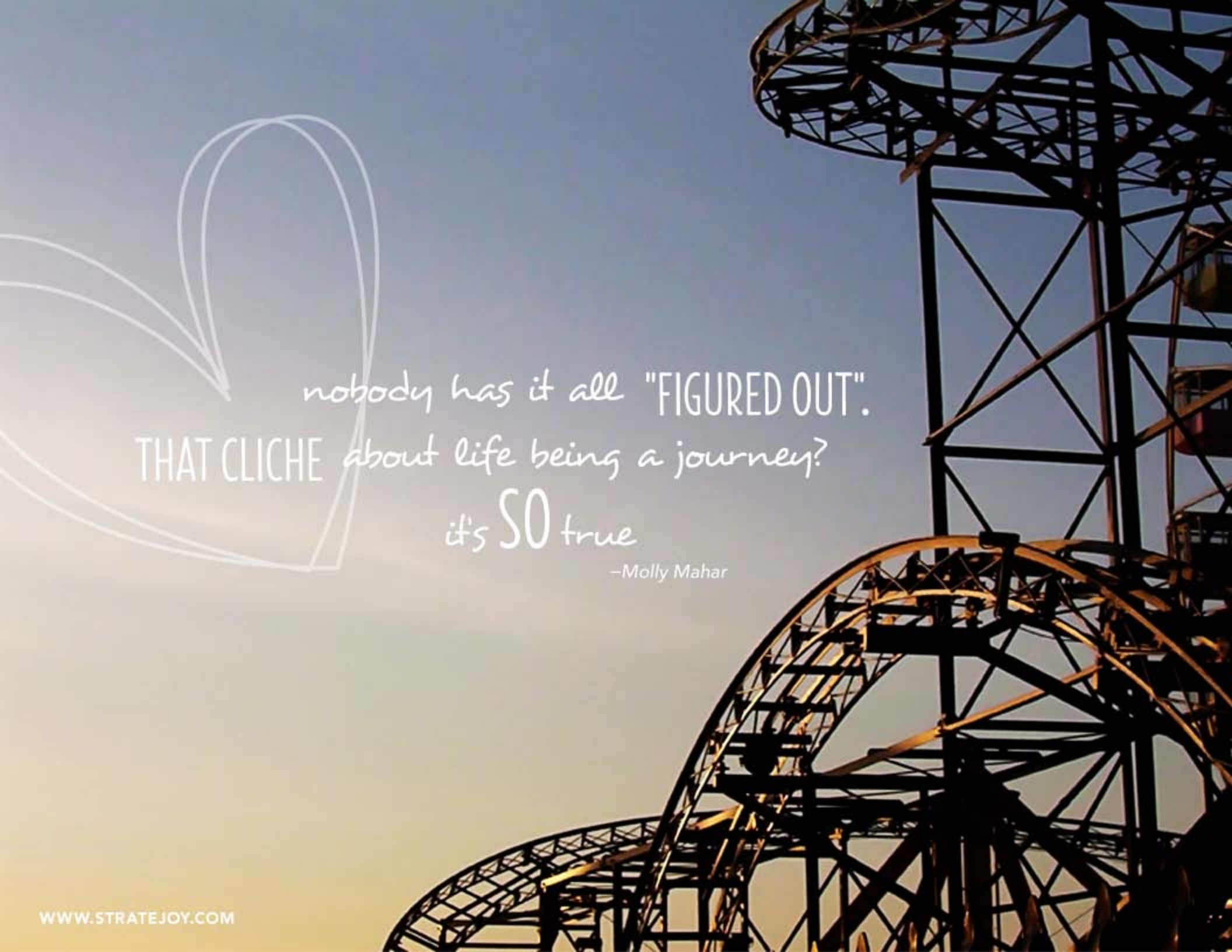
life around. It will beg you to start believing in yourself, to work for your big dreams, to surround yourself with people who support you.

The QLC will force you to admit that alignment between your values and your choices—and not your bank account, your closet, or your upcoming vacation—is what creates fulfillment.

The Quarterlife Crisis is a rite of passage.

Embrace it. Use it to grow and learn and laugh hysterically. Use it to affect positive change, or polish some rough corners, or make some major shifts in how you live your life.

It’s your life, honey. Dive in!




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THAT CLICHE about life being a journey?
it's SO true

-Molly Mahar

The One Time When I Was Lost. And How I Got Found.

by Molly Mahar



It was four years ago that I wore suits to work, expensed fancy lunches and worked my tail off as a sales manager at a sexy boutique hotel. It was four years ago that I admitted that what I thought I wanted felt hollow and unfulfilling. It was four years ago that I felt utterly lost—disconnected from that girl who knew she possessed gifts of inspiration and influence, the one who was a natural leader and boatloads of fun to boot.

It was also just about four years ago that I actually did something about it.

At the time, I had never heard of a Quarterlife Crisis. I had no term or website to explain the phenomenon that had spun me into a massive rut—one that I couldn't fake or please or ignore my way out of. It wasn't quite depression (I'd been there before), but definitely an

extended period of blah, numbing with a large quantity of wine and plenty of existential questioning.

I didn't know anyone else who was going through it either—my friends seemed happy enough at their jobs, or didn't seem to be questioning their lives in the same way.

But I knew that "this" wasn't my life. That I wasn't tapping into the part of me that could really make a difference, the force that would give my life meaning and excitement and, dammit, happiness.

What could I do that would allow me to access that potential? I had no clue. I did, however, have a boyfriend who'd just flipped a condo and had a major case of wanderlust. I did, luckily, have a true desire to rediscover myself and a willingness to turn my life upside down.

Four years ago, I put in my 2-week notice at my full-time job and, a short two months later, left on a backpacking trip around the world. As cliché as it sounds now, I set out to find myself.

Why am I telling my story again? I forget that newcomers to this amazing community don't know my past.

You don't know that it was only four years ago that I was in your shoes. Totally and completely stuck, unsure what the frick to do about it, feeling alone and scared and like the weight of the world rested on my next decision.

Obviously, the outcome of that 10-month adventure through Central America, Europe, South Africa, India and Southeast Asia (besides many crazy stories, new friends and lessons learned) was Stratejoy. From three journals full of self-exploration, to any personal development book I could get my hands on, to at least four ideas on how I wanted to serve, came this community.

Came YOU. And me. And our journey together.

I didn't want any other young woman to feel like she was alone in putting her happiness first. I wanted a place we could gather where it wasn't foolish or selfish to concentrate on creating blissful, meaningful lives.

It's been an amazing journey thus far.

Of course, I'm still figuring things out around here! I do know, however, that my vision is coming true. That this site (and the workshops, and coaching groups, and products) is a positive corner of the Internet. One that is totally accepting of differences and forthright honesty and big dreaming. **One where it's okay to say you don't know what's next, but that you are dedicated to doing it on your own terms.**

My message for you—the one I want you to hear loud and clear—is that I've been where you are. I've felt overwhelmed and disenchanted and utterly lost. I've been hopeless and blah and without a plan and running out of money and gaining weight. I've cried myself to sleep and bitched at my partner and wasted entire days researching grad programs in Brazil.

You are not alone.

You are here. And you are safe. And loved. And recognized for the brilliance

that is just waiting to shine if you give it chance.

I'm so very glad you found me. Found us.

And I'll do anything in my power to help you realize your gifts. To rev up your internal beliefs into hopeful nuggets instead of negative Nellie bitch slaps. To take inspired external action. To play big. To love life and yourself exactly as you are in the moment: enough.

I want you to feel happy when you wake up in the morning. And you know what, sugar? **I know it's possible to go from the depths of a boozy and broke Quarterlife Crisis to living a life of intention and joy.**

I'm freakin' living proof.

Of course I'm still scared of things and have shitty days and doubt my path from time to time. That's called life. But I do know that if I hadn't made a

major change four years ago, hadn't given myself time and space to create a new definition of success for myself, hadn't done something, anything, about the black hole I was sinking into—my life wouldn't be where it is today.

I'm grateful everyday that I was gutsy enough to admit I wasn't happy and to do something about it. If you need it right now, I wish the same for you.

Journey on, sister.



MOLLY, Stratejoy Founder...

a free spirit with a passion for mindful entrepreneurship and a tendency to swear a fair amount. After surviving her own Quarterlife Crisis, she founded Stratejoy in 2008 to empower women to live life on their own terms by valuing their worth and happiness. She is a writer, speaker, coach, joy enthusiast and fierce love advocate. She also laughs loudly, swims naked, and wears a lot of costumes. She bases her adventures from a sunny porch in San Diego and a cabin on the river outside of Seattle that she shares with her husband and tiny boy person. Molly's goal every year is to become, "More Molly." Obviously.

Getting Back in the Driver's Seat of My Life

by Caiti



HERE I WAS WITH
EVERYTHING I WANTED...
YET I ONLY FELT NUMB.

I don't know why most of my emotional breakdowns occur while driving my car. Perhaps it's the fact that I'm in charge of 3,000 pounds of metal and mechanics that have the power to potentially kill me if mishandled, yet I barely feel like I'm in the driver's seat of my own life.

My subconscious can't seem to handle the irony.

Until recently, I have been a "by the books" kind of girl. Midwestern born and bred. Top of my high school class. A scholarship to my first choice college (University of Missouri), where I majored in something that seemed practical and responsible (journalism/strategic communications). I fell in love, attended grad school, got engaged the very day I finished my Master's degree, and promptly moved in with my mister. How about a job related to my major? Planning a wedding and getting married? Buying a condo? Moving on to jobs #2-3, complete with a nice salary bump? Check, check, check and CHECK. On the road of life,

I was cruising along and passing all the major milestones right on cue.

Here I was, with everything I wanted—scratch that—with everything I thought I wanted, yet I only felt numb. An incredible amount of time was spent glassy-eyed, zoned out of the world around me. It was all I could do to get through the days without crumbling into a pile of flesh and tears. Work was a blur of time bookended by forced morning conversation at the coffee maker and counting down to 5:00. The major I chose in college for its practicality led me to an industry that was slowly suffocating me with its sea of gray cubicles, florescent lights, and people who seemed all too comfortable with the status quo. Even the parts of my life I claimed to love—my relationship with my husband and my friendships—were just shrug-my-shoulders fine.

During the long drive home from work on a day much like every other, I had to brake quickly in the stop-and-go traffic, a completely routine annoyance. But for a moment, the fog lifted. I looked out the windshield over my white knuckles gripping the wheel and saw the highway in front of me for what seemed like the first time that day, that week, that month. How did I get here?

No, really, HOW DID I GET HERE?

Had my life really turned into a series of beige blurs between Point A and Point



B, stopping only to check the box next to each “accomplishment” on the List of Things to Achieve to Have a Solid & Stable Life? Wait, who the hell wrote that list anyway? It surely wasn't me. Where were the check boxes for passion, for the people who are so smart and funny and creative it makes my heart hurt, for the projects I could get lost in for days? Where were the adventure and traveling and learning about the world?

I was living a life that wasn't mine. It was society's. The expectations and opinions of certain influential people around me. Fear-avoidance. I had become a passenger in my life, simply along for the ride instead of owning it.

My Quarterlife Crisis in a nutshell:
I CAN'T KEEP LIVING HALF ALIVE.

After enough stress to cause an ulcer ten times over, I made the one change that was weighing on me most heavily. I quit my job. With no plan. With no real idea of what I want to do professionally. But somehow, in the process of grabbing the wheel, I've been able to start to steer myself down a new road that doesn't seem so bleak. Within the first month of this year, opportunities that seemed like pipe dreams have lit me up—from the chance to feature my artwork in a magazine to steadily growing my blog.

And in a crazy turn of events, my life will actually be hitting the road as my husband and I temporarily relocate to Dublin, Ireland, for his job.

It's time to feel alive again, to feel the fire burning in my belly for my work, relationships, and new experiences. My “by the books” life will become a life worth writing about, and I can't wait.



CAITI, Season 6...

is a designer, dreamer, wife, writer, wanderluster, and all-around creative explorer from Chicagoland. Life before her QLC consisted of bad marketing jobs, fading friendships, and disengagement as her coping mechanism of choice. Having “woken up” and realized that she can write her own story, Caiti hopes to have a vibrant year full of joyful passion, boundary-pushing, stamps in her passport, and maybe even a tattoo. In 2012, Caiti has been learning to love Guinness and trying not to drive on the wrong side of the road while she and her husband temporarily relocate to Dublin, Ireland. Stay up to date @CaitiSantaMaria.

Letting Go of Control and Expectations

by Heather Rae



I'm going through something these days. There's a piece of me that's ready for a jail break, ready to be freed. I keep getting these urges to step outside my comfort zone—as if some part of my being has been stifled all these years and is finally ready to show itself.

I'm not sure what's going on. Or why I feel the need to do things so out of character. I find myself craving adventure and the unknown—I want to jump out of airplanes (despite my fear of both flying and heights), go skinny dipping, have wild sex, go hang gliding and quit my job (oh wait, I already did that).

All my life, I've been in control. I've done everything just so and have fully expected said things to turn out exactly as I planned. Why? Because I needed them to.

The truth is, I put a lot of pressure on myself to be perfect—a perfect student, a perfect employee, a perfect friend, a perfect fiancé, a perfect daughter. Only now have I stopped to ask myself where this pressure came from. Who was it that first told me I couldn't make mistakes? Is there even such a thing as perfection? That level of perfection sounds more like a Stepford Wife than a real person.

As you might expect, life hasn't often met this expectation of perfection. Sometimes things have worked out the way I envisioned. The opposite has generally been truer—things have worked out in completely different ways than I anticipated. And in these situations, I often ended up feeling lost or out of control. I know it may seem odd, but I've just now realized that being in control of everything isn't even close to possible.

And this ridiculous need to control every outcome has had a way of making life rather difficult. So, for some reason, I've found myself moving in the exact opposite direction. I'm taking chances,

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risking failure and putting myself in situations I don't know how to navigate.

I actually want to make mistakes just to see what happens. Loss of control is a weird feeling. It's new to me. At times, I find myself trying to control my loss of control. And what could be more ridiculous than that?

Interestingly, I feel like I've just described a midlife crisis rather than a quarter life crisis. It's the type of thing you see all the time when a middle aged man hooks up with a twenty year old, buys a Porsche and goes bungee jumping—he's taking chances and risks and letting go of control. At least I know



people, ask for help and count on friends for support. I want to cry on someone's shoulder and feel okay about it. I want to be an open book for others to read. I hope one day I'll figure out how to do all that—without hiding behind a smile and vague niceties.

I'm not the only one facing such confusion in life.

So, right now I'm working to let go of expectations. One way of doing that has been to let go of my need for control.

When a person wants to control every aspect of life, they often end up feeling the need to do everything themselves, as counting on other people for that level of perfection is almost impossible. I don't want to be so independent anymore. I want to learn to lean on

Here's what I do know: I have so few answers and so many questions. And maybe life isn't about seeking answers. Maybe it's just about experiences. And growing. And learning. And finding ways to accept yourself for exactly who you are.



HEATHER RAE, Season 2...

lived in Pasadena, CA by way of Las Vegas while blogging for Stratejoy. She has a master of public health degree and loved her studies in school, but soon realized her joy was elsewhere. So, she mustered the courage to leave her day job and pursue her passion for writing. She wants to step outside her comfort zone and plans to travel the world solo, learning another language, dancing, painting, writing a novel and—most importantly—savoring every step of the journey. Two years and a world of change later, Heather has returned to Las Vegas and, in a happy turn of events, has become a high school biology teacher. She loves her work and takes advantage of the plentiful time off by traveling to exotic locales and continuing to write. You can find her on twitter at @insearchofsquid.

The QLC Under a Microscope

by Elyse



■ We bloggers and readers spend a lot of time writing about, reading about and discussing the Quarterlife Crisis on Stratejoy, even while others say that the “Quarterlife Crisis” doesn’t exist, that the Crisis is fabricated for one reason or another. So, I wanted to take this chance to really explain what that term means to me, how I’ve defined it, and how day-to-day life can sometimes feel within the Crisis.

As I went through major after major in college, I always joked that I was going through a Quarterlife Crisis without even realizing that this phrase and situation actually existed. Fast-forwarding to a fateful student teaching experience, and I started sinking deeper and deeper into some kind of bottomless hole. Part of it was depression, which I recognized, but the other part was something new.

I had this incredible yearning for a life that didn’t seem to fit the norm or the standards for which many of us measure a good life. Take that yearning and mix in a healthy dose of having no freaking clue what I wanted to do with myself and that was when I realized I was in a situation that really qualified as a crisis. I realized then as I realize almost two years later that things have to change.

Emotionally, it registers on a very manic scale. At certain times I feel an intense sadness which can rocket to laughter at the fact that I know nothing for sure. It is amusing and funny because I thought I was doing everything right. I finished high school, and borrowed a hell of a lot of money for college because I was told by society that that was the only way to get a good job, and that the good job would help me pay off those loans. Then, I could get married and have babies and buy a house on credit. **Work hard, retire and die. Sounds like So. Much. Fun.** Thus, laughter and tears commence in strange combinations. Some days, I’ll feel like I’m enjoying the exploratory journey,



**Work hard,
retire and die.
Sounds like
So. Much. Fun.**

and others, I just want to tear my hair out for lack of any cohesive life plans.

The Quarterlife Crisis started as a chance for reflection, but I’m certainly far into the transformation stage by now which means some progress has been made. I’m still doing a lot of thinking

and exploring to find a life that fits me. I don’t need any more proof other than the life I have lived that the Quarterlife Crisis does exist. And, it isn’t necessarily a bad thing! We’re at a historical crossroads in America where the American Dream is being challenged, class wars rage, and many of us have no idea what the hell we’re supposed to do with ourselves.

If a Quarterlife Crisis has popped up in your life, it means some part of you recognizes that the way society and culture has asked us to live is unacceptable. It means you don’t recognize one way of living as gospel, that the powers-that-be don’t have all the answers, and you deserve so much more than what is mediocre and draining.



It not only can change you but might help change the world we live in by demanding meaning and purpose in our lives.

Now, in light of these deep musings, I'm going to go dress like a zombie, do a zombie crawl around my neighborhood bars and possibly get really, really drunk. Happy Halloween, everyone!

In the end, admitting you are having a Quarterlife Crisis can make you "different" in your peer group. You're admitting you aren't as confident about your life as others appear to be. It is scary to admit, but once you admit it and the sky doesn't fall, you can go about making real change in your life.

EMBRACE THE QLC, PEOPLE.



ELYSE, Season 5...

thought she knew where her life was headed after college graduation until she was slapped by a Quarterlife Crisis, forcing her to re-evaluate everything she was ever passionate about and believed in. Finding temporary solace in monkeying around at the local zoo, she currently resides in Cincinnati, OH and is exploring alternative ways to live and be joyful. She has no freaking clue what the next step is, but is learning to enjoy the journey in the meantime. Follow her journey @elyse_lohrbach.

Vulnerability as My Tipping Point

by Laura



VULNERABILITY. One word that summarizes my tipping point. One word that describes the difference between pre-QLC me and current me.

Dictionary.com tells me that vulnerable means:

- 1 capable of being physically or emotionally wounded or hurt
- 2 open to temptation, persuasion, censure, etc.
- 3 liable or exposed to disease, disaster, etc.

Those definitions leave out a lot, don't they? They make it seem like being vulnerable is a bad thing. Which I suppose it is, if you're in a war zone or a red-light district.

But to me, being vulnerable means allowing yourself to be **WHOLE**. It means accepting the bad with the good. It means exposing your heart and your soul, knowing it could backfire but trusting that it won't.

And if it does, believing there's something really valuable to be learned. It means acknowledging that you're not perfect and you're not capable of everything. You have limits. You don't know every answer, you can't infinitely work harder and harder, you can't avoid emotions forever, and you can't make it through life without leaning on people. We're human, that's just reality. Things like marriages, families, friendships, neighborhoods, and cities exist because we need each other.

Acceptance, support, advice, laughter, love, conversation, comfortable silence, teamwork, generosity, kindness, honesty. We **thrive** when we give and receive as much of those things as we can. To me? Embracing that truth and all of the imperfection that goes with it is what vulnerability is all about. But that fierce sense of independence that's an innate part of who I am? Well, it doesn't really allow for vulnerability. That's the key lesson I learned last year that catapulted me into a QLC.

Don't get me wrong, I was never a cold, unfeeling, non-social person. Oh no. I love spending time with people and I love feeling part of something bigger than me. I love being supportive, compassionate and considerate. I love being a good daughter, role model and friend. I've been with my boyfriend for 10 years and would like to think I've contributed a lot of great parts of myself to that relationship. But in doing all of that, I've always kept a little something to myself. I've always held a little bit back.

I wasn't completely honest about how I see things; about how I see the world.

I didn't verbalize my dreams and how much I want to contribute BIG, inspiring things.

I never defended my wish to be an artist, because it seemed frivolous and far-fetched.



I didn't long to get married because I was afraid of losing part of my identity.

I wanted to be self-sufficient, successful and stable. Not because I'm risk averse, but because **I've always been terrified of three words: I NEED YOU.**

So I made a lot of choices that guaranteed I didn't have to say them. In doing so, I missed out on opportunities for authenticity, creative expression, and passionate, enduring love. I missed out on opportunities to just be me.

The remaining piece of my story you need to know is that last year, I set out on a journey to shed that fierce independence and replace it with fierce vulnerability. I may not have described it that way at the time, but that's exactly what it was. I took on a personal challenge posed by my BFF, who wondered: How would life be different if we said yes to 30 things we'd normally say no to? The answer? **It would be knock-your-freaking-socks-off different.**

I could share with you the list of 30 things I did, but what's on the list doesn't explain what happened because of it. At first glance, it doesn't tell you that I embraced my talents, started letting go of my money-related hang-ups, spent countless hours creating a business model I believe in, and became really comfortable with not knowing the answers to stuff. It doesn't tell you that I had eye-opening moments about my relationship and realized how unbelievably lucky I am. It doesn't tell you that I slowed down and started taking the time to really see, hear and feel things. (Well, I dabbled in it. I need to do a hell of a lot more of that from now on.)

By saying yes to 30 new things, I said yes to becoming whole and vulnerable. It was one of the best decisions I have ever made. I now know how much I value

creativity, authenticity, fun, kindness, momentum, and big-ness. I now realize how awesome it would feel to **create, read, write, laugh, and play** every day, at least a little bit.

What do I have to do and what habits do I have to create to turn those wants into realities? I don't know. Yet. But that's what my QLC, what my life right now, is all about.



LAURA, Season 4...

is a writer, strategist and believer in better. In 2010, she started her pursuit of authenticity. She quit her cushy PR job, launched a communications consulting business, said yes to 30 things she'd normally say no to, and started learning to be vulnerable. Leaving old assumptions and coping strategies behind, this Canadian girl has turned her life in Halifax into an unfamiliar world. In the midst of a QLC, she's felt like an adventurer without a compass, but she couldn't be more excited about it. Today, Laura (@mynameisbigL) is focused on living her values more fully while managing a growing biz, nurturing a new marriage and home, and setting juicy, creative goals for the future.



Life is Not a Lottery, Winning and Happiness are a Choice

by Lindsey

THE ABILITY
TO DO-WHAT-I-WANT
AND LIVE-MY-BEST-LIFE
DIDN'T EXIST
IN MY MIND

Ever since I was a moody little spark plug of twelve or so, I'd always have the same wish when I blew out the candles on my birthday cake: "To be happy."

Vague, right? But, I figured, if I were just happy, everything else in my life would magically fall into place.

Woo hoo! Happiness fairy! Thank you for finally granting my wish! Now I am truly alive!

Yep. Not how life works, much to the chagrin of my naïve young self.

I wouldn't say I lived an unhappy life, just unconscious.

Unaware of who I was or what I wanted, and therefore, unable to even begin to understand my happiness. I didn't have my priorities worked out, because that required introspection. To just exist, glide along, and fill the societal-defined mold of "success" as I had done doesn't really require any inner work.

The ability to Do-What-I-Want and Live-My-Best-Life didn't exist in my mind, when obligations to grades or career responsibilities were more valued than taking time to explore the concepts of passion and authentic happiness.

Happiness, for me, is a choice to be passionate rather than stoically, blindly driven towards someone else's vision of success.

Last year, I left on a post-college freedom fighting tour of the country, seeking to do only things that made me happy. **IT WAS AMAZING. I had time to breathe, and be introspective, and get the butterflies you can only get from fully immersing yourself within your passions and experiencing complete happiness.**

But I hit a wall. Enter: Quarterlife Crisis.

Or, several months of optimistically flipping from "Ah, I'm a snowboarder and a traveler and I'll start a business and be free to do whatever I want," and "Life is awesome and full of happiness. I can just keep on livin' on the fringe and do what I love," to "Holy shit I am a complete failure!" and "If one more jackass drinks 8 diet cokes with their Applebee's Fiesta Lime Chicken dinner I will bring a samurai sword to work!"

(Oh, hi, by the way, I am kind of crazy. In an endearing way.)

I was successful in defining my happiness and dreams, but achieving them with a minimum wage job sucks. Turning towards a responsible life: well...but...I DID that already...and it definitely didn't feel authentic. Yet something was still missing from my life.

There is a part of me that loves to dance like crazy, jump off cliffs, and laugh far louder than any situation will demand. That feeling I get snowboarding deep powder or lifting off in a trans-continental jet or (well, there is a lot, I will spare you). These things make me happy.

They are my passions; they make me feel alive.

On the flip-side, I have a deep sense of responsibility. Not the lame, "oh, I must make money to put in my 401K," but a sense that I have something to contribute to the world (other than

awesomely-bad dance moves). And just thinking about following through on this makes me feel even more alive.

I know what makes me happy, and I now know how to have it. But my mission has evolved into more than to simply be happy. I want to **define, create, and live out loud a completely authentic life.**

I'm a person of extremes. Driven, passionate, and hopelessly dramatic. Since I don't actually plan on living in Crazytown forever, finding balance is super important. Actually, I am working

on Stratejoy's Joy Equation right now and have even declared BALANCE to be one of my Core Values!

This Quarterlife Crisis revolves around finding balance in the far edge of extremes, in creating a life where it's okay to live completely, authentically as yourself. Sometimes that means cliff jumping and hiding out on a secluded beach for weeks on end. **But other times it's about contribution, of the mind and heart, to something greater, even if that something greater is simply being the best person you can be, and sharing that with your world.**



Lindsey

LINDSEY, Season 3...

is an engineer by training and a waitress by employment who returned home to rural Michigan after spending a year as a nomad and meeting her Quarterlife Crisis along the way. Redefining her vision of success to exclude the cubicle and focus on passion and innovation, she is plotting out an independent career in sustainable community development while exploring her loves: Ashtanga yoga, snowboarding, cooking local whole foods, traveling the globe, photography, ukulele, and writing. Since her time with Stratejoy, Lindsey has sailed the Caribbean, lived in San Francisco, backpacked through Thailand, farmed in Kauai and finally relocated to San Diego to take her long-distance relationship to the next level. Growing a garden, building a home, finding stability & committing to healthy habits—that's what's happening now. She tweets—rarely—as @lknee, but say hello & make her feel special!

The Quarterlife Crisis Sucker Punch

by Bri



"The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong in the broken places." —Hemingway

How do you explain to a new friend how having parents who battle addiction has shaped you? How do you talk about the times you let your guard down and ended up heartbroken and devastated? My Quarterlife Crisis hit hard when my live-in boyfriend of 3.5 years walked out a week before I defended my master's thesis (talk about timing, eh?). My best laid plans for my future came tumbling down and 5 weeks later I was living on my own for the very first time, in a new place, in a new job; totally alone. The Quarterlife Crisis sucker-punched me. Hard.

My friends called me brave: moving to a new place and making a new life. I didn't

feel brave. I felt like I was in survival-mode. It took months before I let myself feel much of anything, and when I did let myself feel I was overwhelmed with the pain. I didn't know how to be sad. I was supposed to be "the happy one." I ran from the loneliness and dove into new experiences hoping to find something to numb the pain. Eventually, I couldn't run anymore and I had to **deal** with the pain. I had to learn that to be truly happy, I had to learn to be sad as well. I had to learn to embrace the Quarterlife Crisis not just as a crisis, but as a way to embrace new chances.

This past year has been transformative and hard. I focused on fixing my heart. I learned how to be alone. I had to learn the basics of who I was all over again. I created community. I began to fall in love with my life.

Here is some of what I learned:

Despite the scars of pain, I am hopelessly romantic and optimistic. (Sickeningly so.) I am not just open to new people, loves, experiences...I am

HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN TO A NEW FRIEND

HOW HAVING PARENTS

WHO BATTLE ADDICTION

HAS SHAPED YOU?

SO EXCITED for what's to come I can hardly stand it.

I don't have to do it alone. I went from knowing no one to having a friend-family in what seemed to be 3-seconds. The creation of a community that I love is the source of a gratuitous amount of laughter and they are what carries me through the hardest times. I am not only talking about my local friends, I am including my blogger friends in my community-of-love. Friendships built over blogs, Google Talk, Skype, and phone calls; just as real, intentional, powerful, and important as my local community. I am surrounded by love and friendship in a way that boggles my



This is the year I am going to decide what I want to be defined by. I know I am not defined by my Quarterlife Crisis. I know what I am not defined by: heart-break, parents with addictions, or that really awful outfit I wore the first day of school years ago.

mind. My community is the proof that I am doing something right.

I chose happiness. I've been told that my happiness is infectious and I can find beauty everywhere. I think that every single hard day makes these two qualities more beautiful; my happiness is not naive...My happiness is my truth. I know the world is full of more happiness, love, and beauty than you can even imagine.

So, what's next? I can feel that big things are coming; huge, momentous things.

This is the year for really figuring out what I want and need and then GOING AND GETTING IT. No more waiting. This is the year I take ownership of my life and make it spectacular.



BRI, Season 4...

was sucker-punched by her Quarterlife Crisis after a particularly horrendous breakup in 2009; five weeks later she had defended her master's thesis and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. For the first time she had a grown-up job, was living alone, and was trying to start over. Today, Bri lives in Sunnyvale, CA where she spends a lot of time laughing far too loudly and cajoling people into making dates to drink wine and coffee. She's been working on living boldly, falling in love with her life, and figuring out what the hell comes next—which turned out to be marriage, baby, and bliss with her husband and son Miles (born 11/6/11!). Keep in touch with her @habbala.

Time to Smile

by Marisa



I take the streetcar to work every morning. It's a simple ride, easy and smooth while listening to my iPod.

Recently, it's been more fun in the mornings. People are smiling when I walk to and from my stop. People are smiling at me.

And I only just realized it's because I'm the one smiling first.

For the first time in a very long time, I have the confidence to say that I am truly happy. **I'm happy with who I am as a person, who I've become in the past six months and who I am in this very exact moment.** I smile a lot more lately and express myself more too.

These passions of mine, these interests and outlets, have shaped and polished me to be more, well, ME.

I'm desperately trying not to fuck this up. I have a job. I have a life. I have confidence. I can do anything and everything. **And the best part about it is that I know it's from my Quarterlife Crisis and how I chose to deal with it.** In the past, certain ideas and limitations about who I should be or what I should be doing with my life bogged me down and hindered my confidence, my ability to truly believe in myself and believe that I am worth it.

I am worth it. Sometimes it feels like a switch or a light bulb sputtered to life in my soul and the world somehow recognized it. I used to think of myself as someone plain in all aspects. I never gave myself credit with my wants, desires and dreams. **I hid from the world and lived just enough to fulfill a basic existence without risking anything new or even true.**

I don't know why I'm reflecting so heavily right now.

It's insane how happy I am. **Who knew you could reach those dark crevasses in life without a traditional plan and still come out rosy on top?** The unknown always symbolized a

frenzied panic in me. This uncontrollable entity was something I always chased and never caught.

I can't pinpoint exactly when or where life for me became something ideal. It's most certainly ideal now, and perhaps not meant to always be, but I am strong enough and smart enough to know when I have a good thing going and appreciate the hell out of it.

Having this QLC forced certain unknowns to come to light and, while I still get that panicked tickle in my stomach or that rush of blood throughout my body, now I simply smile and let that light bulb slowly flicker on to brighten my day.

And smile.



MARISA, Season 1...

was living the unemployment life when she met Stratejoy. After being "let go" in March 2009, she decided to take advantage of her Quarterlife Crisis and seek happiness. You can find Marisa at most shows in Portland, learning to play the drums, and in her kitchen, cooking & baking. She's a fierce seamstress too, hems almost anything.

6 Months Worth of Lessons in Under 600 Words

by Nicole Antoinette



When I started writing for Stratejoy, I had just up and moved to San Francisco with no job, no money, no friends, no place to live, and no plan. I had a crush on a boy and a love for the Golden Gate Bridge, but that was about it.

In the time that's passed between then and now, I have found an incredible job, a stable income, a place to live, some of the best friends I've ever had, a plan for the future, a relationship with a new (and infinitely better-for-me) boy, and a continually renewing love for the Golden Gate Bridge.

Taking this weekly pause to write about the more serious side of my life has helped me reflect on who I am, who I want to be, and how to best close the gap between the two.

In those moments of reflection, here are the lessons I've learned:

Take the time to talk things out with the people you care about. Honest communication solves most problems before they become problems at all. And don't just talk, listen.

Understand that different doesn't have to mean bad. I'm me and you're you and our differences can help us bring each other closer to where we want to be.

Send thank you cards. Sincere expressions of gratitude let someone know that what they did mattered to you, and most of the time what we need is to feel appreciated.

Make plans. The only thing better than having something delicious to look forward to is feeling the plans turn into memories and knowing you'll be able to fondly remember them forever.

Treat yourself better than you treat anyone else. Understand that selfish

and self-care are two different things, and that you can't show up for anyone else if you don't show up for yourself first.

Remember that your greatest freedom is the freedom to choose. You can choose which impulses to follow and which to ignore. You can choose who you let into your life, how you spend your time, and what occupies your thoughts. Think good thoughts.

Find what inspires you, and then mainline it on the regular. There's no such thing as too much inspiration.

Stand up for the people you love and the beliefs that move you. Let yourself be passionate, even if it means your ideas and feelings will be

isolating to some. We're not here to please everyone and there's no glory in being watered down, overly accommodating versions of ourselves.

Stop wanting what you don't want. Learn to tell the difference between what you actually want and what your ego wants. Tell your ego to shut the hell up.

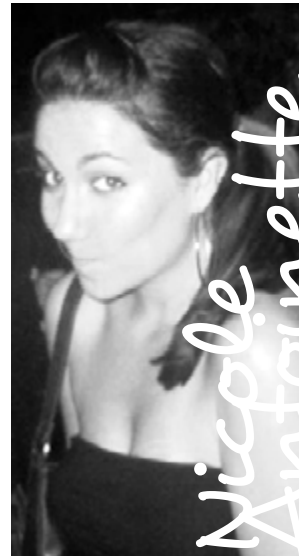


Understand that selfish and self-care are two different things...

Ask questions. Other people can't read your mind, so don't assume you can read theirs. The fastest way to find out what you want to know is to just ask.

Give people room to make mistakes. High standards give you great results, but unrealistic standards give you nothing but disappointment.

And lastly, take risks. If you don't jump to try to reach your best possible life, who will?



NICOLE ANTOINETTE, Season 2...

is constantly in pursuit of what she calls "a life less bullshit" (aka a life lived on your own terms). She's a blogger (at nicoleisbetter.com), small business owner (shatterboxx.com), and an unconference host (bloggersinsincity.com) with an overwhelming passion for endurance running, clean eating, and strategic goal setting (lifelessbullshit.com). After spending 2009 & 2010 bogged down with drama, she's thrilled to be settled in Los Angeles and coming out on the other side of her Quarterlife Crisis.

FAMILY & FRIENDS

As you navigate your QLC, you may start feeling like everything in your life is up for debate with the added potential to radically change at any moment. As you start ditching others' expectations and honoring your own vision of life, that's exactly what will happen.

Sometimes this is easy and freeing. Sometimes it's messy and incredibly hard.

Friends and family don't escape the scrutiny of aligning with your chosen path.

Long-lived friendships may feel stifling or too safe. Family may balk at life changes you feel compelled to make. Co-workers may think you've gone crazy. Mere acquaintances may begin to hold more importance in your world as your values line up. Someone who used to repel or scare you may become appealing as their once-seemingly ballsy or unconventional attitude starts to make sense to you.

As you start owning your life and making choices that support your own personal definition of success, people in your life will have their own reactions to your path.

Some will be supportive and positive and serve as soulful sounding boards as we blossom into authentic versions of ourselves.

Others will kick and scream as you change. Your growth may threaten their "comfort" with an unfulfilling existence.

Your seeking may shine light onto their fear of examining the dark corners of their own lives. They may simply disagree with your forward movement, as it's different. Different from what they do. Different from what you used to do.

There are friendships and family relations worth fighting to save.

There are others that need you to practice grace and acceptance as they naturally fade away.

There are still others that are so toxic that they require bravery and an honoring of yourself in order to be cut out of your life completely.

Will it seem lonely as you progress out of your QLC with a changed landscape of friends and family? Scary? Refreshing?

That part is up to you.



With every friend that refuses to support your dream of working for yourself or moving to Africa or writing the next great screenplay, there will be a new friend who will get it. For every family member that declares your desires naïve or selfish, there will be a new soul sister who will show up and support you as you make changes to honor your life.

Do what you need to do to fill your life with cheers, kind-hearted challenges, belly laughter, trustworthy tears, stimulating conversations and respect for difference.

Do what you need to do to release petty backstabbing, the comparison game, negative language, attempts to keep everything the same and undermining.

You deserve to be surrounded with friends and family that have your back and support your growth.

Don't be scared to seek out those relationships and retire the ones that no longer work.

Find your people.

Hold on tight.


find YOUR
PEOPLE

...hold on tight

-Molly Mahar

Friendship: a Reason, a Season or Life

by Lindsey



I grew up in a town of about 5,000 people, so I knew the same kids my whole life. More than half the cherubic faces in my preschool class photo were in my graduating class. Thanks to a combination of Facebook and my being home for the summer, I know all about what each of these people are doing with their lives, for the most part. We're life friends by default.

When I left for college it was this huge rush of people and friendships. Some lasting, some not. And more and more people have come into my life in my travels. Lifetime friendships and temporary friendships. The common bond of elementary school no longer exists.

It seems like it'd be easier to always have friends that you'll know forever. But there are a lot of people in this world,

and it's just impossible to consider everyone a lifelong friend.

There is that saying: People come into our lives for a reason, a season or life. I think that is such a lovely way to say, "Hey, you know, I've loved our time together, but we are two individual people, and we must move on our own individual paths." I like to have this feeling of okayness.

A REASON

We are all teachers, even if we don't assume the title. I learn valuable lessons from the people in my life every day. I connect with people easily; I am open and friendly and make fast friends with people of all ages and backgrounds. (My best friends in Tahoe were a 75 year old man and a 46 year old woman.)

These fast friendships, while not always lasting, are always reflected upon with pleasure. There was a lesson in that friendship, brief as it may have been. Maybe the end of the relationship came about because of a move or a disagreement or simply a lack of time.

But I am a strong believer in finding purpose in our choices. The choice to meet this friend, and share certain experiences or conversations. The

choice to end the friendship, for whatever reason. These choices help me understand myself. And hopefully, the effect was mutual.

A SEASON

Friendships grow and friendships fade. Sometimes people walk out of my life loudly, or sometimes it's a gradual fade out. It's sad to know that this person who I've shared a special bond with is gone, and it's strange to realize that our friendship was, indeed, a season in my life.

Seasons change. Life is change. I think it's incredibly healthy to embrace this change, to love everything that happened and was learned. But also to love that you've changed and are moving on.

Seasonal friendships are reflections of personal growth.

OR LIFE

Lifetime friends aren't always around, but there have been so many reasons and seasons we've shared together that I know they'll be around for life, no matter where I am in the world.

Even in this strange period of life, where I'm going back on my words (saying, "Yep, I am definitely moving to [awesome city where friend lives] soon," then not living in that city and living a nomadic hermit life instead, completely out of touch with so many people), my life friends are always there to support me.

The internet has made these lifetime friendships easier than ever. But nothing substitutes for the real thing. In my QLC, where I am absolutely confused about everything, it helps so much to have these friends that know me and all my quirks and fears and complexes. We've taught each other lessons, built bonds that last through secluded summers and flirty falls and wayfaring winters and silly springs.

It still seems weird to me, after being gone for so long, that I have these

lifetime friends. Even if I abandon them, I'm still Lindsey. And they still love me, and I them.

We're all connected

Human interactions happen all the time. With the right perspective, you can get the most out of them. I look for reasons in all relationships. Like, right now, you're here, and you're reading me as I spill my guts. Our relationship is small, but you reading, that makes me feel really connected, and hopefully there is something you get out of this.

Then, maybe we'll start emailing. Or meet in real life. And go to music festivals and hula hoop. Or bake cookies and ride bikes. But I'll move to Argentina. And you'll fly to the moon. And the season will end.

But maybe when I get back from the southern hemisphere and you get back from outer space, we'll realize that we should still be friends. I teach you Spanish. You teach me about moon rocks.

Who knows? All I know is that my friends are awesome. All of 'em.



LINDSEY, Season 3...

is an engineer by training and a waitress by employment who returned home to rural Michigan after spending a year as a nomad and meeting her Quarterlife Crisis along the way. Redefining her vision of success to exclude the cubicle and focus on passion and innovation, she is plotting out an independent career in sustainable community development while exploring her loves: Ashtanga yoga, snowboarding, cooking local whole foods, traveling the globe, photography, ukulele, and writing. Since her time with Stratejoy, Lindsey has sailed the Caribbean, lived in San Francisco, backpacked through Thailand, farmed in Kauai and finally relocated to San Diego to take her long-distance relationship to the next level. Growing a garden, building a home, finding stability & committing to healthy habits—that's what's happening now. She tweets—rarely—as @lknee, but say hello & make her feel special!



Those Dark Places

by Amanda

I'VE BEEN WATCHING
THE CRACKS FORM
AROUND THE EDGES
OF MY LIFE
LATELY

I've been watching the cracks form around the edges of my little life lately. I've been waiting for them to become large enough for me to fall into. Part of me hopes that it will provide me a bit of respite. I know it won't.

Molly once wrote a blog post on Stratejoy about feeling overwhelmed. When I read it, I knew that we'd been living in the very same place; a place where everything looks sudden, urgent, and necessary. Everything becomes a top priority (therefore, nothing is a priority anymore). And, while I've been busy treating everything as a reactionary cause, I've been losing sight. Again.

I've been told more than once that I need to **slow down and settle** into my new role of mamahood. "Enjoy these next few months because you'll miss them when they're gone."

Part of me wants to believe them.

Sure, who wouldn't want to be eight months pregnant, suffering through nasty bouts of heartburn coupled with abnormally swollen ankles and the onset of what can only be described as "Holy Shit Mood Swings"? It does seem rather enviable, doesn't it? I'm bipolar. I've never been shy about that. It's not what defines me but it is a part of me. Lately, everything makes me cry. Lately, I'm faced with dark corners that I hadn't thought of before.

Friendships. Relationships. Inward reflection. External journeys. Doubts. Hopes. Dreams. Fears. Failures.

Standard stuff, really.

And while part of me wants to "slow down," the other part is terrified to.

I have too much going on right now to even consider slowing down. I give pause and think about decorating the nursery from time-to-time only to turn my attention back to more important, pressing concerns (again with the reactionary). People inquire about my excitement levels all the time. I don't know what to tell them anymore. Most often, I lie and say, "Oh, sure. Who wouldn't be?"

Note the verb.

Lie.

I have to **LIE**.

In polite conversation, people want to know that my impending mamahood is the only thing that matters to me right now. In polite conversation, I have to grit my teeth and agree. My father and I have often agreed that we go around with blood in our mouths from just... biting back our responses.

So, am I excited?

Of course.

But not.

And then I get an **overwhelming dose of guilt** as I try to figure out why it is that I can't seem to get excited about the baby's arrival. It's another one of those dark places, lovelies; a dark place where I'm convinced that I'm going to be a **neglectful** mother that would much rather run off to New York than attend her kids' recitals. It's a fucking **hard** place to be—this dark place—but I'm forcing myself to figure out why that place exists at all.

A few weeks ago, I watched a friendship implode. **VIOLENTLY**. I was left reeling, in spite of my best efforts not to react. Or, at the very least, to make a conscious effort to react in a somewhat positive

way. Did it hurt? Of course it did. Do I get a nasty pit in my stomach every time I think about this person? Damn straight. But was I going to sink into the same dark place this person was? No. I care about said person, in spite of the ire that was loosed on me, and it would serve no purpose (except some self-indulgent rambling and raging) to hurl insults.

Inside, I was no better. I wanted to hurtle insults. I wanted to fall into that nasty place, too. It would've been easy—much easier than brushing myself off and saying, "I love you, but I can't do this. I wish you well."

I was angry. I'm STILL morose.

But those cracks are starting to get bigger.

This person found a very apt way of making sure I knew that. Drawing attention to my rather sore spot of being over-sensitive in the first place is an excellent way to locate a major fault line in my foundation. And then throw a stick of dynamite down it to see what happens.

Nothing says, "I love you" quite like a stick of dynamite, after all.

Our dark places are scary. Overwhelmingly so, even. It's good to examine our dark places—in the mirror, on paper, during meditation. It's even good to set up camp there once in a while.

I refuse to live in that dark place.

Tomorrow will be brighter.

I know it.



AMANDA, Season 4...

is a geek by nature and by trade. An education in computer science and interactive design left her with a bad taste in her mouth, so she picked up her small-town life and moved to the big city. After spending a good while job (and soul) searching, she found her entrepreneurial spirit to be alive and kicking. Amanda now runs violetminded Design, a location-independent digital agency, and speaks to groups about the importance of personality and context in design, all while growing a new baby and snuggling her adorable son. Follow her @AmandaJFarough.

First Comes Love, Then Comes Marriage, Then...?

by Caiti



Here's a bit of Life Math:

- I'm 29 years old, and my husband is 30.
- We have stable finances and we own a condo.
- We have been married for almost four years now, cohabitating for six, and annoying lovebirds for eight and a half.

Love + marriage. Yet there is something missing from the equation, per the infamous playground rhyme.

Baby.

And as if I hadn't noticed this fact, we have had many a well-meaning relative or overly-nosy acquaintance (tomato, tomahto) inquire when we're having

kids. We've been told that a grandchild would make the perfect birthday/Christmas present, and one particularly prolific cousin suggested we take over the childbearing duties so she could take a rest. A few more even predicted that we will be coming home from Ireland with quite a bit more than new passport stamps.

But what people don't see are the hidden parts of the equation. The vast majority don't know that I have an endocrine disorder called Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS), which comes with a host of fun symptoms including hormonal imbalances, difficulty losing weight, acne, hair growth issues, and it possibly puts me at a greater risk for heart disease, uterine cancer, and diabetes later in life. PCOS also happens to be a very common cause of infertility.

Last year, I sat in a flimsy paper gown in a cold examination room, staring at my feet while a doctor told me that my 40-50 day cycles and irregular blood panel most likely mean that I will not be able to get pregnant without medical intervention. I think you

...I'VE FOUND MYSELF
IN THIS ODD

LAND OF LIMBO WHERE

I FEEL TOO MUCH AND
KNOW TOO LITTLE

could probably hear the sound of my sinking heart in that moment. All those years I was on birth control pills? Those pills did a better job hiding my PCOS symptoms than actually preventing me from getting pregnant. And now the doctor just wanted to put me on a different pill to try and make it happen.

We don't have enough evidence to label ourselves "infertile" yet. We're not actively trying to have a baby right now in that ovulation-testing/temperature-taking/legs-up-the-wall-post-sex kind of way, but we're not NOT trying. So I've found myself in this odd land of limbo, where I feel too much and know too little.

At this stage of life, I seem to know more people who are pregnant or have

But hope is scary in itself, because it makes me vulnerable to the disappointment that might come after it.

kids than those who are childless/child-free. The internet only amplifies this; it seems like every day I see a new “We’re expecting!” Facebook status or blog post. While I smile and congratulate with genuine joy and love, I do start to long for what they have. They make it seem so...easy.

It sucks to feel frustrated by your own body. I mean, we’re talking about one of life’s most basic biological functions. And I feel sort of broken. The best I can do right now is adjust my diet and exercise (or turn to hormone drugs, but I’m personally not ready to go there yet, if at all) and then wait and see if that takes care of the symptoms and gives me at least a glimmer of hope. But hope is scary in itself, because it makes me vulnerable to the disappointment that might come after it.

It’s taken me a LONG time to reach this point where I know I want a family someday. I fought through baby ambivalence a few years ago, and it almost brought Mark and me to an impasse. With a little space and some serious self-exploration, I discovered that my apprehension was actually insecurity and a fear of parenting stemming from my experiences as

a child of divorce and a tenuous relationship with my father.

Now, with a wonderful man beside me as we stand on the secure foundation of our partnership, I do dream of a family. Mark does as well. Every now and again, he’ll utter the most heartfelt sentiments, like when he told me that he hopes we have a daughter someday so that he can be the kind of dad to her that so many of the women in his life didn’t have. I want us to have that. I want to be able to give him that.

Deep down, I know we will have a family one day. Even if it means a less traditional route to parenting such as adoption, which is a no less worthy path to creating a family. But if we choose adoption, I know I will still go through my own grieving process for our inability to create life and experience pregnancy and childbirth firsthand.

Until very recently, I’ve been very tight-lipped about my health condition and our potential struggles—after all, it seems so personal and intimate. At first, I shrugged off our family’s prodding about babies. But the more I learn about my condition, the more



their casual comments hurt me—but of course they had no idea, since I wasn't talking about it. It's often too easy to take pregnancy and childbirth for granted and assume that everyone wants to or is able to have a child. Once you hear a couple is expecting, you don't think about what may have preceded that point—and for some couples (probably more than we realize), it may have meant tears, confusion, treatments, heartbreak, and pain.

I'd like to be a part of the group of people that opens up dialog about the fertility struggle as we face it—and I don't just mean participating anonymously on PCOS or infertility message boards. If this is going to be a

part of my life journey, then I don't want to hide it. I don't plan on over-sharing, but I think there would be a lot of value in saying, "I'm going through this hard thing, and I could use your support." I've been so inspired by the openness of other women in similar positions (even some that are a part of the Stratejoy community), and I hope that my own honesty will help make others feel less alone and help with awareness of fertility issues among those who haven't experienced it.

I suppose it's appropriate that I'm thinking about this issue as we approach Mother's Day. I not only think about all the wonderful mothers out there in the world, but also acknowledge and honor all the women who dream of having a child someday. I think about all the ways we nurture each other as women, regardless of offspring.

So I say, Happy Mother's Day to ALL the women who have mothered, mentored, nurtured, consoled, and supported another person, regardless of whether they themselves are mamas or not. You all inspire me to remain open and loving as I face the journey ahead.



Caiti

CAITI, Season 6...

is a designer, dreamer, wife, writer, wanderluster, and all-around creative explorer from Chicagoland. Life before her QLC consisted of bad marketing jobs, fading friendships, and disengagement as her coping mechanism of choice. Having "woken up" and realized that she can write her own story, Caiti hopes to have a vibrant year full of joyful passion, boundary-pushing, stamps in her passport, and maybe even a tattoo. In 2012, Caiti has been learning to love Guinness and trying not to drive on the wrong side of the road while she and her husband temporarily relocate to Dublin, Ireland. Stay up to date @CaitiSantaMaria.



Dear Baby A

by Bri

YOU, MY LOVE
WERE NO ACCIDENT
BECAUSE WE WOULD
DO IT OVER AGAIN
IN A HEARTBEAT

Dear Baby A,

Hi, it's your Mama. This is the first of many, many letters you'll receive, I'm sure (I'm not the scrapbooking type). Right now, you are 10 weeks old and just over an inch long. That may not seem big to you, but the first time I said "Baby is this big," while measuring out an inch between my thumb and forefinger, I just about fainted.

One day, you will ask Daddy and I how we met, and we will tell you the story about how we had known each other for about a year, then one night Daddy walked into a room and it was like someone activated a magnet, while also turning on a light switch and setting off fireworks; all three things happened at once and we knew instantly we were both about to have our lives changed. That night your Daddy kissed my earlobes. If you end up being a boy, I hope you have the same genuine romantic soul your Daddy has. If you're a girl, I cannot wait for someone to set your night on fire like your Daddy did to mine.

While we knew we were starting something amazing, we didn't know just how quickly our lives were going to change. You'll do the math one day, because you'll be insanely smart like your Dad, and realize that you were born literally 40 weeks after that night. You were conceived 2 weeks after that night, little one. (When you're older, we'll talk about how "it only takes one time," but that talk can wait.) I don't know anyone who plans to start baby-making after two weeks, but that's exactly what happened.

I never want you to think you were a mistake or an accident. Those words were never ever uttered by me or your dad. Accidents are things that you would take back if you could, like the decision to try giving myself bangs when I was 20. You, my love, were no accident because we would do it over again in heartbeat. You are a surprise; the kind that makes a heart flutter and changes everything in the best possible way. After we found out you were coming, there was never a second that you were not wanted. We want you. We've always wanted you.

I want you to grow up surrounded by love. The primary piece of our love-family-puzzle will always be the fact that your Dad and I are crazy about each other; I know you'll see it and grow up secure in your parent's relationship and that makes me incredibly happy. Your Dad and I have spent hours daydreaming of the



family we'll be when you get here. We've talked about nightly dinners, Christmas traditions, and how much you'll love swimming in the summer. You're going to have a magical childhood; protected and safe from all the things that make children grow up too fast. Lucky for you, your Dad is a teacher and gets summers off. You two are going to have the best summers exploring and playing together. You are going to be the only kid in our group of friends; you're going to have a ton of "Aunts" and "Uncles" who are going to completely fall in love with you.

We're never done this before, so we're totally going to mess up along the way. I just wanted you to know that we love you. I love you. I love you more than I thought was possible already. I haven't even felt you move yet, but I can feel my body changing and getting ready for you. I already love you with every part of me. You're amazing, sweet one. From the very beginning, you made everything sparkle. I can't wait to hold you in my arms.

Love, Mama



BRI, Season 4...

was sucker-punched by her Quarterlife Crisis after a particularly horrendous breakup in 2009; five weeks later she had defended her master's thesis and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. For the first time she had a grown-up job, was living alone, and was trying to start over. Today, Bri lives in Sunnyvale, CA where she spends a lot of time laughing far too loudly and cajoling people into making dates to drink wine and coffee. She's been working on living boldly, falling in love with her life, and figuring out what the hell comes next—which turned out to be marriage, baby, and bliss with her husband and son Miles (born 11/6/11!). Keep in touch with her @habbala.

The Colour of Love

by Amanda



I worshipped at the altar of motherhood for the first time in my life.

As dawn broke on the eleventh day of the seventh month, **I welcomed my son into the world** alongside a small birthing team of doctors, nurses, and family members. The final push, followed by a sensation of “empty,” and suddenly this small mewling creature was on my chest. He was quiet. Peaceful, even. His head was a bit misshapen but he was unmistakably mine, with a head full of thick black hair.

Two days of pro dromo labour and twenty-four hours of active labour. At four thirty in the morning, **I was exhausted and completely awestruck all at once.** I watched my husband’s eyes underneath the harsh lights as they cleaned my son’s passageways and checked his vitals at

a station near my bed. In my husband’s leaf green eyes, I watched the expression go from overwhelmed to overwhelming love. After all, I’d spent almost two days in varying amounts of pain. No one likes to see their loved ones in pain.

When they placed him on me—very little blood and almost no filmy layer of vernix, in spite of not being cleaned—I couldn’t see him. The lights blinded me. **But I could feel his warmth. I could feel his tiny fingers as they grasped for sustenance.** I could partially see the head of black hair (this child was certainly pieces of me).

“He’s perfect,” I heard myself say. “He was worth all of this and more.”

As I write this, my three day old son is laying in the same bassinet that I used when I was that small. We have been challenged. We are tired and scared and anxious. We question ourselves. We question our assumptions and research everything.

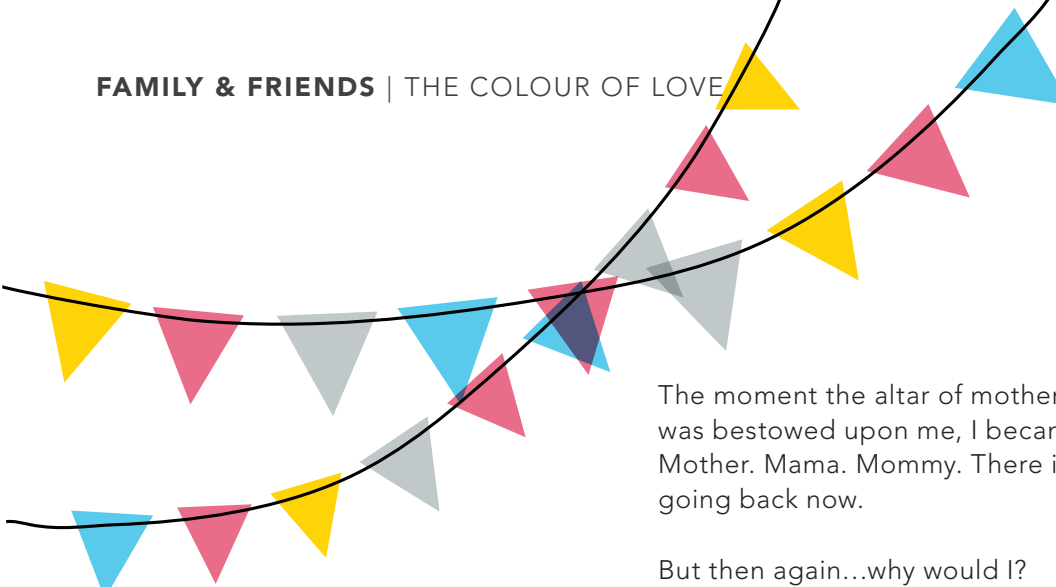
WE HAVE BEEN
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WE QUESTION OURSELVES.

Google has become our only web page as we investigate remedies for late breast milk, the pros and cons of using pacifiers, the best breast pump to use and buy to bring in more breast milk, and so on and so forth. We are patient with each other. I’ve cried that I’m not a good mother because how can I be a good mother if my milk won’t come in? I’ve cried that I miss my parents—they went home the day after Gabe came home from the hospital—**and that I wish I could be near my mother.**

I look into the big, steel grey-blue eyes of my child (which are sure to change colour at some point soon) and know that in spite of the sleep deprivation



The moment the altar of motherhood was bestowed upon me, I became a Mother. Mama. Mommy. There is no going back now.

But then again...why would I?

and the tears and the anxiety, he truly is worth everything.

Today, I'm weeping openly about where I've come from and where I've yet to go. I started off as this nonchalant mother-to-be with very little concern for the things that I thought maybe I should be concerned with, even if they were superficialities. I graduated from nonchalant to pensive, considering options and philosophies.



AMANDA, Season 4...

is a geek by nature and by trade. An education in computer science and interactive design left her with a bad taste in her mouth, so she picked up her small-town life and moved to the big city. After spending a good while job (and soul) searching, she found her entrepreneurial spirit to be alive and kicking. Amanda now runs violetminded Design, a location-independent digital agency, and speaks to groups about the importance of personality and context in design, all while growing a new baby and snuggling her adorable son. Follow her @AmandaJFarough.

Mothers and Daughters

by *Laurenne*



I remember a time when I would tell my mom that I couldn't wait until I was old (like, 26). Then I would have a husband and a lot of kids and she would live with me.

"Oh, I think you'll change your mind about that one," she said.

"No way, Mommy. I never want to live without you."

We had that conversation over and over. And when it came time to go to college, I only applied to schools out of state because I couldn't wait to live without my mom.

The mother/daughter relationship is so strange and always changing. I don't get it. I can pick my nose in front of her, but I don't want to tell her if I'm dating someone new. I want to be just like her,

but I cannot stand the thought of being just like her. I guess it just means she's my mom, and even though I don't want to live with her forever, I want us to be part of each other forever. And we will be. We'll always be able to sit in PJs all day long together, tell each other if we look fat in a shirt, contemplate religion, cry about the past, plan for the future, fantasize about ideal worlds with no tax breaks for the 1%, and embarrass each other with childhood trivia.

Recently, I found myself wishing my mom was different. Recently, I wrote in my journal about how great it would be to have a mom who talks about her feelings and gives hugs. Recently, I thought it might be nice to have a mom who cooks pot roasts (vegetarian ones). The kind of mom who always calls to check in and ask me how my day was. The kind of mom who knows exactly what's going on in my life. The kind whose love for me is obvious.

Well, my mom is not an obvious kind of person. And that's probably why I've wanted that kind of mom. Isn't it crazy how our brains work?! Green grass. Greener grass. My kind of mom shows



**Recently,
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different.**

her love differently: She chose to work at a job she didn't love for 20+ years because the hours meant she could come to all my sports events and be there for me. (Yes, she pretended like my cheerleading competitions were as important as I thought they were. Now, that's a mom.) When she Skype's with me, she blows her nose in her sleeve so she doesn't have to leave me hanging.

And all I did for a whole day last week is pout and wish I had a mom who knew how to show me her love and be open with emotions. But after I sat for a while and thought about our relationship, I discovered a few things. Maybe it's not my mom that has to be more effusive.

Maybe it's me who has to be more observant. Obviously, she loves me. But I have believed in this falsity that says mothers show love in this one way and that way is the best.

Says who?

After telling her that my ideal mom would call me more and ask me more questions about my life, I had a realization: What if my mom told me that I



wasn't acting how her ideal daughter would? What if she said that she would rather have a daughter with a stable life who wasn't afraid of commitment and who used her savings, not to travel, but to buy a house and settle down with a lawyer in the suburbs? What if my mom said she sure wished I was more like her ideal daughter? I would be crushed. But she never would. She accepts me.

And it's finally time that I accept her just how she is, just how she loves me. It's been 31 years of her loving me fiercely, tightly, beautifully. It's time I saw it, accepted it, felt it, loved it.

I'm not ready to go back to the time when I wanted to get married and move in with her, but I am ready to just be happy with what I have. Because it's pretty amazing. If I just open my eyes, I can see how lucky I am. And if I was really given the choice, I would never ever want any other mom. Even if she baked cookies. Nope. No way. I prefer the weird, funny, coupon-clipping mom that I have, no matter how green the grass looks in the yards of those other ideal moms. My mom is the one for me.



LAURENNE, Season 5...

is a blogger and freelance writer living in Venice Beach. Her QLC began at 25 and is still going strong. Or almost wrapping up. Or just plain becoming the norm. She quit her job to travel around the world in 2009 where she discovered what she wants to do with her life: write. Since then, she's been drinking coffee and writing all day every day, hoping to eventually get paid for it. She pretends to know a lot about wine and cheese, collects pot holders, and rides around town on her baby blue moped. She's also a certified Spiritual Psychologist, which means she shops at Whole Foods and then analyzes her decision to shop at Whole Foods.

More Like Mom

by Alisha



I spent most of my childhood feeling distant from my mother. Though we look a lot alike (A LOT), our personalities could not be more different. My mother is from Jersey, one in a family of nine. She is loud and she has a laugh that can fill a room. She's never afraid to say whatever is on her mind—whether it is good or bad. (This is usually problematic when it comes to dining at restaurants.) She lacks what my father and I call a "filter;" thoughts just flow straight from the brain and out of her mouth. It's a personality that you either love for its honest (sometimes brutal) truth, or hate. I remember lowering my head in embarrassment on more than one occasion. **I kinda hated it.**

Middle school and high school were strange times for me. (They are strange for everyone though, right?) We didn't talk about boys. We never had a sex talk.

We didn't talk about what it is like to become a woman. In fact, I could barely stomach the idea of asking her to help me buy a pad when I got my period. We did, however, do the usual mother-daughter stuff: shopping for formal dresses, shoes and getting manicures and pedicures. Somehow, that open and honest person had difficulty communicating with me. I just figured that she didn't "get" me... that our personalities were too different for us to ever become best friends.

That began to change after the start of my Quarterlife Crisis. Our conversations became more open. We talked about money, men and meaning. We discussed religion, race and romance. **I started to realize that we weren't so different after all. I saw her in a new light.**

Her lack of a "filter" simply means that she always lives **her truth because she is never afraid to speak it.** Wow. I wish it had not taken me 20-some-odd years to appreciate that.

Now, as I continue on this journey through my

Quarterlife Crisis, that trait of her's that used to cause me to lower my head in shame? I covet it. The people-pleaser inside of me often bites her tongue. She's afraid to ask for her own needs to be met. She lets others dictate how she is to live her life.

I don't think that I'll ever get rid of my own filter. It's a part of me, and it's actually useful at times. But I do want to be a little more like Mom.

I want to be comfortable enough with myself that I can walk out of the front door each morning and say, **"Hello World. This is me. Love me, or hate me. This. is. me."**



ALISHA, Season 3...

is a wife and mother living in Chicago. At 22, pregnancy and marriage left her dazed, confused, and deep in the Quarterlife Crisis. Now that she's coming out of the fog, she's hell-bent on rediscovering her dreams and making them come true—no easy task while raising small children. Since 2011, Alisha's added another one to the brood and finally feels like she's THRIVING! When she's not knee-deep in poop and dirty laundry, you can find her blogging, tweeting (@alishasommer), and crying while watching *The Biggest Loser*.

Parents Just Don't Understand

by Juliana



If you think this entire post is just an excuse to include a DJ Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince reference in the title...you're only half right. I want to talk about parents. Specifically, my parents, but I think some of you may have similar experiences.

In some ways, my parents have always been my biggest fans. In high school, they would come to every choral and theatrical performance I was involved in (and by every performance, I mean every performance). If we were doing multiple shows, you could bet on my mom and dad being there on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday's matinee, even though they had already seen it. My mother especially would gush over how talented I was, and they both loved seeing how I could entertain people. When I had my very first solo gig as a musician (in Asheville, North Carolina), my parents drove up from Atlanta to be there.

So, as far as support goes, I had plenty of it in that my parents readily acknowledged my talents and skills in the performance department, and did not forbid me from auditioning for shows or pressure me to be a pre-med major instead. My friends commented on how lucky I was to have such supportive parents who took an interest in my artistic life—and they were right.

Under all of that, however, I always felt an underlying message that went unsaid: *This is nice and all, and you're good at it, but when are you going to get a real job?*

They saw my artistic endeavors as amusing, but ultimately hoped I would find a stable career and accomplish things that were tangible and normal. I see now that, to them, a real job meant security, benefits, a regular paycheck and not wondering whether all the bills would get paid. It meant safety. They were worried that their daughter would be living the life of a "starving artist" and never be able to reliably take care of herself.

I never finished college. I went three times (twice to the same school) and

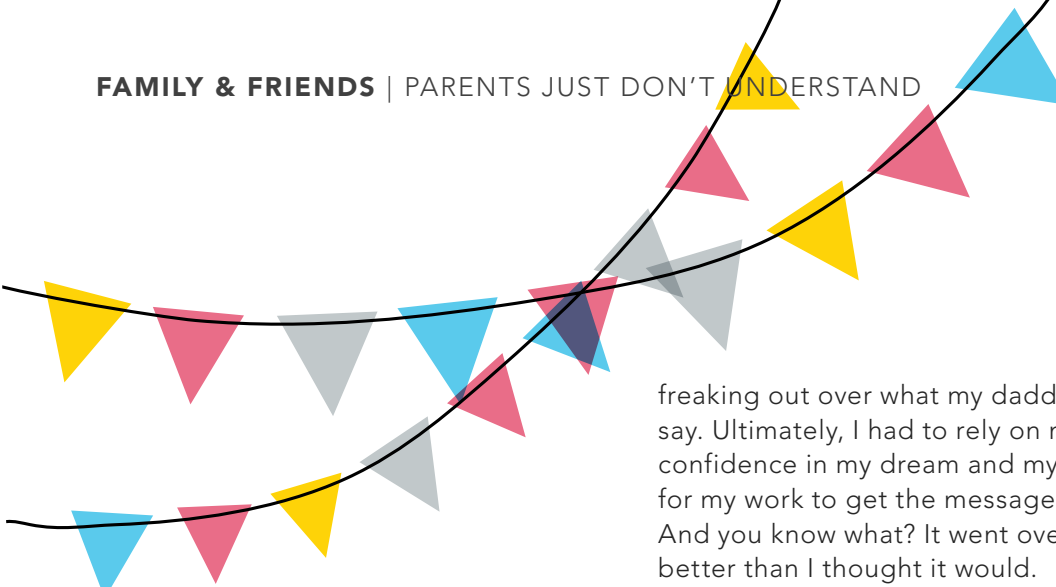
it just wasn't for me. A combination of personal crises, the ADD I wasn't diagnosed with until I was 23, and the fact that I have real problems with "busywork" and doing something just because I'm "supposed to" (ok, so I have authority issues...that's why I'm an entrepreneur) made it nearly impossible for me to push through and finish. This made my parents even more worried and even more sure of my certain doom to a life of eccentricity, poverty, and a small apartment full of cats.

A little over three years ago, when I got my "real job" at an incredible company and loved my work and the people I was working with, something interesting happened. My relationship with my parents improved a

whole lot. They didn't criticize me or my choices as much. They didn't "check up on me" as much. But, they also didn't ask about my music or writing as much. I think in some way they were relieved, and also assumed I had discovered a career and would be relegating my music & theater work to the hobbies they should be. I don't want to paint them as villains here, because I think



This is nice and all, and you're good at it, but when are you going to get a real job?



freaking out over what my daddy would say. Ultimately, I had to rely on my confidence in my dream and my passion for my work to get the message across. And you know what? It went over WAY better than I thought it would.

My relationship with my family is still good, and my parents regularly ask about how my career is going. These days, though, they don't have that tinge of worry in their voice. They ask questions about what I'm up to, trying to "get it." They really just want to know how it's going...and I tell them it's awesome.

their reaction was out of love, totally. They felt that I had a stable, secure job and that they wouldn't have to be so worried about me anymore. I was going to a "real job" in an office every day, like a normal person who has a house and a marriage and does not have to sleep in their car at rest stops. I think a lot of parents would react similarly.

I gave you all of this background information to tell you this: Sometimes the people who love you the most cannot make the right choice for you, because they are clouded by concern. Working against convention frightens them, not because they don't believe you can do what you want to do, but because they want you to be healthy and happy, and a conventional life has been touted for so long as the way to achieve that (despite lots of evidence to the contrary). They love you, but they don't always understand. So you have to take their advice with a grain of salt, or sometimes a whole bucket of it.

All of this was part of the reason it took me a long time to leave that job, even when I knew working in an office wasn't the right fit for me anymore. I was worried that the relationship with my family would deteriorate again, and that they wouldn't understand my choice. The hardest part about leaving to work on my art full-time was telling my parents. I am 28 years old and I was



JULIANA, Season 4...

is a singer/songwriter living north of Atlanta. She came face-to-face with her Quarterlife Crisis after working 3 years at a (pretty awesome, but not her calling) day job, where she put on 60 pounds and stopped taking the joyful risks that foster her creativity. Now she's becoming a full-time artist, and spends her time putting a new band together, writing her soon-to-be-healthy butt off, and reuniting with her inner Folk-Rockstar.



The “Transparency” Theory

by Dee

WHY DO WE THINK
THAT THE PEOPLE WE LOVE
WILL BE UNABLE TO HANDLE
THE TRUTH ABOUT
WHO WE ARE?

There is not a spelling error in the title. Because I’m talking about parents here. Parents, and that they get it more than we think they do. Parents, and the anxiety a relationship with them can create for the average awesome person in the midst of their QLC (me) (you) (so many others). Parents, and letting them see who we really are.

Personally, my relationship with my parents (Hi Big Steve! Hi Little Debbie!) has always been one founded on mutual respect and their complete understanding that I *will* do it my way.

From a young age, Steve and Deb tell me that I was exceptionally independent, opinionated, and driven. I was raised in an environment that fostered my desire to make decisions for myself, to navigate my own path, and to follow my instincts. I don’t remember ever asking for permission as a child or adolescent, I don’t recall giving two hoots what anyone thought, and I certainly don’t think I had any trouble expressing who I was or what I wanted.

That all worked for a while. I was successful and the formula was working; I was in complete control. Until, YA KNOW, crisis struck. I found myself an early twenty-something that suddenly didn’t have anything under control. Not my personal life, not my professional life, not my finances, my future, my relationships, my health. Nothin’. I needed support.

Looking deeply, the problem was that I was scared to let my parents see me as a real person. As things in my life were rapidly spiraling out of control, I found ways to cover the truth, to hide from reality, and convince my parents that I was still thriving. They’d never had to worry about me before. Worry seemed like a burden I couldn’t bear to place on them. So I shut them out. And I forced them to ignore their parental instinct that was telling them that everything was not okay. And I fought with them and yelled and told them to “Get out of my life!” Yikes.

Why did I do that? Why do we think that the people we love will be unable to handle the truth about who we are? Why do we forget that we are cut from the same cloth? Why do we assume that they just won’t understand?

There’s a movie that was released in 2009—“Everybody’s Fine”—in which Robert De Niro, the patriarch of a family now scattered across the country, sets

Did I fear that the life I was leading made me unworthy of a connection with my parents?

out to visit his children. The truth is that they are all terrified to host him in their homes, for fear that he'll learn who they really are; one, a lesbian with a child he doesn't know exists; another, a drug-addicted, homeless artist; and yet another, a troubled mother secretly going through a divorce. The story goes that the children spent so much time and energy hiding their truths from their father that their relationship with him became nothing but an exchanging of pleasantries and conversations about the weather; a relationship they were completely disconnected from and exhausted by.

It couldn't have resonated more. Did I fear that the life I was leading made me unworthy of a connection with my parents? Did I not have the courage to tell them who I was? And wanted to be? Could I let go of who I thought they wanted me to be in order to show them who I really am? Was it shame? Was it fear? And if it was fear of a disconnected relationship, well, that was stupid because what kind of relationship is one based on secrets, anyway?

I was so freaking tired of the anxiety. So worn out from excuses and lies, the talking myself in circles to convince the people that loved me

the most that I was alright when I was anything but. I was drowning. I wanted a real, adult, honest relationship with the two people I love most in the world. I wanted them to know me and everything that includes.

They have seen me at my best and at my worst. They've wiped my ass, for heaven's sake. What gave me the right to decide that they didn't deserve to know me as a human being, an individual, and that they couldn't handle it or wouldn't want to?

And when I finally had the conversations I needed to have? I felt released, understood, safe, and energized, simultaneously. It wasn't excruciating. It was, yes, at times, heated, emotional, and uncomfortable. It required explaining that, although they, like many other parents, want life to be easy for their children, that has never worked for me and never will. Easy does not do it for me. I want what I want, and it will be hard to get but they've got to let me try. And if I fail, I want them to be there for me. It was a lot to say and a lot to ask. But, it was so not worth the years of time I'd wasted being afraid to let them understand me.

"I don't know what about the person I am made you think I wouldn't love the person you are. That's just crazy." -Big Steve

Sure, they haven't always agreed with the decisions I've made, like when I decided to steal the car and drive my own ass to town at the age of 14, or like when I decided to take out an extra loan to travel, or when I decided to sneak out of my bedroom window because their eleven o'clock curfew was absurd and limited my ability to drink Bacardi Razz past midnight. Whatever. Parents usually get over that stuff. Because they love us. They just do. And, they pulled those stunts once, too. Especially mine. They were in a band in the 70's. Helping me

through my Quarterlife Crisis is probably a cake walk for them when they consider all the mischief I am genetically predisposed to find appealing.

And I know that they probably won't agree with some of the decisions I make from this point forward. I know that now, though, I can be straight forward about the woman I am and the goals that I have. Parents can handle that stuff, and they want to handle it. Not everyone's parents will embrace them and their QLC as mine have. But, I suppose, the question is: how will we ever know them and how will they ever know us if we don't give them a chance to see who we are?

Healing my relationship with my parents has been more valuable than anything else I've worked to overcome during this QLC. It was step one in a long journey.

What an amazing relief it is to let our parents see the complex women we've become. What an extraordinary opportunity for stronger connection and deeper love.




Dee

DEE, Season 4...

is a dreamer working in the PR world. She's officially studying journalism and religious studies in Columbia, Missouri, while unofficially studying interesting people, good music and film, and how to play the fiddle. She thinks "QLC" should stand for "Quarterlife Challenge," and has strong opinions about self love, Diet Coke, and introspection. Maybe graduate school is the next step for her. Maybe she'll get a bunch of tattoos and start a band. In London. Maybe she'll set off across the country with her beagle, her horse and a case of wine. The future's wide open, but for now, she's focusing on making each day special.

The Memory Keeper's Granddaughter

by Sarah



For the third time that evening she asked me where I live.

You know where I live, Grandma. Same place I've lived for a long time now. With Dan and Kate. The house with the black shutters? Remember how my daffodils are coming up? We talked about that.

My family moved to Virginia the summer before my eighth grade year. We picked a house five minutes down the road from my Grandma. She'd been a widower for a while by then, still living in a house much too big for one person. But she kept herself busy, worked a couple of hours a week.

Middle school was a rough time for me. I was the new girl with a mouth full of braces and curvier than my narrow-hipped friends. And my parents and I

got into it with the usual teenage angst stuff that ended with me slamming my door and it coming off the hinges as punishment.

But I had an ally.

My Grandma Rosemary, my mom's mom, and for whom I get the Rosemary in Sarah Rosemary, became my confidant.

I'd call her up when my mom refused to buy me the latest and greatest jeans, and she'd drive on over in her white Subaru and take me shopping and out to lunch.

After school, I'd walk over and she'd pour me a diet Coke and offer me her signature, baked-to-a-crisp, chocolate oatmeal cookies while I whined about mean middle school girls and how my parents didn't understand me.

When I got my driver's license, she let me drive her all over town. Whenever my parents said no because they were in a hurry, I knew I could count on my Grandma. She'd hand over her keys without my asking and away we'd go. She never cared where we went, hassled me over my following distance, or braced herself when approaching a stop sign.

One time, my parents were out of town, so my sister and I spent the night at my Grandma's. I needed to get up early for my morning shift at the vet, so I jumped into my parent's van at the top of my Grandma's curvy driveway.

It was dark. I was a new driver. Backing up was not my best thing.

Misjudging the path down the driveway, I veered too far to the left, smashing into a fire hydrant.

I slammed the van into park and got out to assess the damage. I broke the tail light. Bits and pieces of reflective red plastic littered the grass.

My Grandma padded down the driveway in her dog-chewed slippers and picked up the largest piece of tail light. Maybe we can glue it back together, she said.

She told me she'd take care of it; that I should just get back in the car and go on



to work. I spent the day in knots, wondering just how my parents planned to kill me. When I got back to my Grandma's house she said she had a plan.

This is how it's going to go, she said. I'm going to call your dad and say I did it.

I was pretty sure letting my Grandma take the fall for me would rank me up there as one of the Worst Grandchildren in History, so I told her thanks, but no thanks, and to let me face my parent's wrath myself.

She nodded and started dialing my Dad's number. When he answered, she put on her best gruff voice and said, Now Michael, Sarah has something to tell you, and you better not yell at her. It's not her fault. She's only 16.

I got in pretty big trouble for that broken tail light. And I shelled out \$80 for the repair. But my Grandma softened the blow.

But now, when I look into her eyes, I see symptoms of the disease taking over her mind, her thoughts. I repeat the same answers over and over again. Calmly explain, Remember, we had to sell your car, when she calls me up and asks what happened to her Subaru. Print out a list of family members and friend's names, phone numbers, and birthdays in size 100 font to tape up on her fridge.

My Grandmother's 85. But it feels like she left me years ago. She gets frustrated and angry. Upset with herself, my mother, me, the cashier at CVS. Doesn't understand this world we live in.

When I suffered through my mini-teenage crisis, my Grandma came to my rescue. Now, at this

Quarterlife Crisis stage, I can't call her up to moan about feeling lonely in motherhood, or complain about Dan's travel schedule because I'd have to remind her who Dan is.

It's almost as if we're both moving through a life crisis, her at the end of her life and me, in so many ways, just at the beginning. When I brace her for a hug, I wish her mind would come back and she'd be my confidant, help me through my QLC with her sage-y grandma-isms. But I know she won't. So I'll help her. I'll keep reminding her, repeating answers, filling those gaps in her memory to keep her spirit alive.



Sarah

SARAH, Season 6...

lives outside D.C. with her toddler, engineer husband, and a garbage-eating dog. Since she moves at warp speed, she earned two degrees, got married, bought a house, and had a baby in quick succession. These major life transitions added up to a whopping QLC, where she finds herself caught in the balance between motherhood, marriage, and what she wants for herself. When she's not chasing her toddler, Sarah can be found blogging (www.sarahrosemary.com), tweeting (@sarah_rosemary) and freelance writing, drinking lots of coffee, and teaching aerobics classes.

LOVE

Many times, our biggest bouts of self-reflection get kicked into gear because of a change in a relationship, especially those changes that leave us alone.

You get dumped, you break up with someone, or you swear off the friends-with-benefits extension. He chooses her over you, she stops calling, or he refuses to commit. You file for divorce. She moves out.

All major. Some of these changes allow for amazing shifts, while others can leave you unexpectedly devastated.

Either way, change is in the air and your current evaluation of self is shifting because you've left a partnership. You ask yourself, "Who am I without him?" or "How will I survive without her?"

Well, my strong, capable woman—you are still you. Lovable, ambitious, vain, creative, loyal, neurotic... Whatever it is, it will remain regardless of who is by your side.

You are you as you grieve, celebrate, start over and seek to love and be loved again. You will get back in touch with the strength and capabilities you've forgotten you had but that have been there all along.

This is probably the biggest lesson of love I can share: **Be yourself in love.** And be yourself out of love.

You, in all your authentic glory, are lovable. You are always enough and never too much. When you are

honestly sharing yourself with the world, you will attract the right lover. You will be strong enough to ditch the toxic relationship. You will be able to trust your intuition because you've stayed true to yourself.

Being seen and loved for who you truly are (the good, the bad, the beautiful and the messy) is magical. Giving someone else that gift is twice as sweet.

You know this. I know you do.

Now, practice it! Enjoy the ease of being you, even as romantic love ebbs and flows.

When you're in a relationship, holding tight to this self-connection helps ground you. Love can show us our greatest strengths—our compassion for someone else's journey or our capacity for giving, for loyalty, for affection. Sometimes we are our best selves when we are in love. But love can also show us our greatest weaknesses—our jealousy,



our self-consciousness, our struggle with trust or fear of intimacy. We can second guess ourselves, over analyze and drive everyone around us crazy with our doubts.

By staying connected to yourself, you can make deliberate choices about what is right for you and how you want to show up in this world.

You can recognize when you've found a meeting of equals—two people who challenge and support each other, a relationship full of mutual respect and fabulous sexual energy. You can work toward it by being vulnerable and loving hard, even when things aren't easy. You can

make the right sacrifices and ask for what you want. You can support the dreams of your partner, without giving up on your own.

You'll also be able to know when it's time to move on. When you are in tune with yourself and your strengths, you understand that it's up to you. You create your own experience, stand up for your non-negotiables and find the balance of compromise. Sometimes you call it quits, sometimes you fight to stay. You don't put up with less than you deserve. You understand that you're deserving of so much. And you know you're capable of giving just as much, too.

Your QLC can shake your faith in a lot of corners of your life.

Don't lose faith in yourself, beautiful one, because you are loveable.

Just as you are.



BEING SEEN
AND loved
for who you truly are
IS MAGICAL
giving someone that same gift
IS TWICE AS
sweet

-Molly Mahar

How Does a Logical Person Define Love?

by Nicole Antoinette

Love is what we all have in common. And yet it's the most impossible thing to describe. More than anything, love is our intangible common denominator.

I'm a logical person, a person who thinks things through, and then over-thinks them, and then thinks about them some more and some more still—and yet I don't know that I can define love. And the cliché about love, of course, is that you'll know it when you're in it, right?

I used to think it happened explosively. That love was something astronomically powerful that not only swept you off your feet, but knocked you down on your ass and soaked through your skin and became an overarching force that was impossible to ignore. But, what if that's not it? What if love is quiet and soft? What if love is gradual and

delicate? What if love isn't an explosion, but is instead this calm feeling you get when you wake up one Wednesday morning and realize that there's nowhere else you'd rather be than next to this person whose quirks make you laugh until you can't breathe? What if, more than anything, love isn't what all the romantic comedies have made us believe it is?

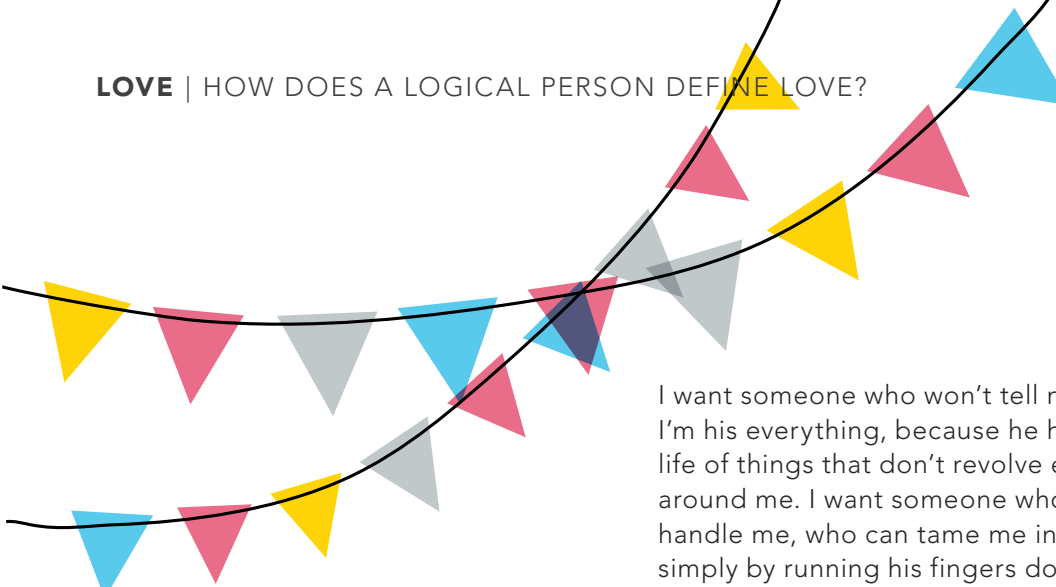
Over the past six years, I've thought a lot about love. I've defined it, I've been in it and out of it, I've thought I was in it and then realized that I wasn't, I've wanted it, not wanted, and on and on.

Lately, I think I've stopped trying to define it and have started to believe that being in love is about more than just explosive emotion. And yet, it's also about more than just finding someone to coexist with in the same space at the same time. Love is about finding someone who lights even your tiniest parts on fire, and everyone's tiny parts are different. It's about finding someone who makes you more you, who will even surprise you every now and then by

AND THE CLICHÉ
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IS THAT YOU'LL KNOW
WHEN YOU'RE IN IT,
RIGHT?

knowing you better than you know yourself.

For me, it's about finding someone who is as enthusiastic about cheese plates as I am, someone who thinks that when it comes to laughter, sex, and alcoholic drinks, the more intense the better. Love, for me, needs to be somewhat spontaneous; I need someone who will just up and take me on a cruise. Someone who won't tease me because I have to wash things in a specific order in the shower (shampoo, face, conditioner, body), or who won't laugh (too hard) when I'm hungover and can't do anything except lay on one side with my eyes closed and ask repeatedly for someone to squeeze my head.



I want someone who won't tell me that I'm his everything, because he has a full life of things that don't revolve entirely around me. I want someone who can handle me, who can tame me in a way, simply by running his fingers down my spine and settling his hand on my lower back. Someone who knows how much I like to be whispered to and who isn't scared off when I'm crying. Someone who can sense when I'm overwhelmed, who just knows when life is too much and who will, in those moments, stand close enough to me to block everything else out.

And you know what? Even after all the thought and the over-thought, after all the defining and the re-defining, what I want from love is actually quite simple: I want (as Chelsea of chelseatalkssmack.blogspot.com said) a safe place to rest my lips. I want someone who will keep me in his heart because that's where I'll be warm and safe. I want someone who will look at me when I'm at my messiest and kiss me on the forehead, someone who thinks I'm lovely in the morning, and at night, and during all the in between times. **I want someone who isn't afraid to live, really live, who identifies what he wants from life and then demands it, loudly and without hesitation.**



NICOLE ANTOINETTE, Season 2...

is constantly in pursuit of what she calls "a life less bullshit" (aka a life lived on your own terms). She's a blogger (at nicoleisbetter.com), small business owner (shatterboxx.com), and an unconference host (bloggersinsincity.com) with an overwhelming passion for endurance running, clean eating, and strategic goal setting (lifelessbullshit.com). After spending 2009 & 2010 bogged down with drama, she's thrilled to be settled in Los Angeles and coming out on the other side of her Quarterlife Crisis.

Collision Course

by Doniree



I had this crazy revelation a couple of years back about love and relationships. So crazy, in fact, that it changed the way I looked at relationships as a whole. It changed what I was looking for, and despite the fact that every single romantic comedy I had ever seen had told me otherwise, I now knew the following to be true:

I do not want someone to complete me.

I do not want to complete someone else.

I don't want to be a puzzle piece, a void-filler, an other half. I am a whole person. I want another whole person to complement the whole woman I am, to make me twice as loving, giving, and powerful as I am on my own. I want to be that to someone else. I also realized that this conflicted with

just about everything our culture tells us, everything Jerry Maguire taught us ("You...complete...me."), and everything Hallmark wants us to believe about love and relationships.

ROLLERCOASTERS AND WILD RIDES

I didn't decide to be single for so long—at first. One pseudo-relationship ended, and it was years before an actual real one began again. In those years, I worked for an ad agency, became a blogger, trained to become a yoga teacher, pursued freelancing full-time, and developed a serious case of wanderlust.

Maybe it's that I didn't have time for dating, maybe I didn't notice if anyone had been interested in me, **maybe I was so fiercely independent that the idea of bringing someone else into my life seemed like the worst possible idea, cruel even.**

Maybe the right guy was still halfway across the country living in a mountain town and plotting his own move to Boulder, Colorado.



I do not want someone to complete me.

Or maybe it was all of the above. I was, at least, aware that the "fiercely independent" part was true. I remember telling a friend at some point that it just seemed rude, this idea of subjecting some innocent partner to my Wild and Big Dreams Life on top of the fact that I didn't want to settle in any one place in particular for years and was also becoming some hybrid of colorful, quirky blogger that was still figuring herself out.

COLLISION COURSE

Sometime in the middle of yoga teacher training (which started in September 2009), I decided I was going to leave my hometown

of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and move somewhere new. Just because. Just...to explore. I arrived in Boulder, Colorado the second week of January 2010. I knew I was in the right place. Right around the time I made that decision to pursue the teaching certification, a certain web designer with his own curious spirit and adventurous heart moved from a Colorado mountain town down to Boulder-town, seeking a more social social life and the opportunity for new relationships.

In February 2010, our paths crossed for the first time, thanks to Twitter. By mid-March, we found ourselves randomly running into each other at happy hours around the small, super connected town. During the first week of April, that all changed somewhere over the course of one particular happy hour that turned into bar-hopping that turned into trivia night that ended with the realization that this guy was Something Different.

Something important.

GOING MY WAY?

It's funny. We have the story we tell people about how we met, and it usually starts with, "Well, the short story is: on Twitter." And then we launch into the longer story about the business he owns, about how I found it online, and about how we then met in a coffee shop one afternoon because of all that. That's what we tell other people and our friends when they ask. The story we

tell ourselves is much simpler: **We were on a collision course**, our separate decisions leading us to the same place, turning the same page to a new chapter.

The chapter that was born out of a complete upheaval of decisions, of career, and of direction. A page that turned only after I followed my heart to a big little town in Colorado, to a commitment to myself and my yoga mat, and to a career made possible by an Internet connection and an obsession with writing.

There was an idea of this **whole person** who needed to be as sure of herself and her decisions as she was of the sunrise every morning and the sunset every night. My intentions and convictions were tested and put through the fire, and at some point I emerged a more authentic and complete version of me. And it was almost immediately after that that my heart opened and our worlds collided, and **here we are**.



DONIREE, Season 3...

is a Minneapolis ex-pat who lived in Colorado when she began blogging for Stratejoy. She's always looking forward to her next adventure. In November 2009, she met her Quarterlife Crisis head-on and left her ad agency job in pursuit of Location Independence and more creativity. That's when she started stretching her creative muscles on doniree.com, discovering an entrepreneurial spirit she hadn't met yet, and learning how to stay true to who she is and what she wants—one bottle of champagne and aska practice at a time. Doniree has since moved from Colorado to Portland, Oregon, where she is a full-time social media consultant and strategist, and most recently, the founder of EffYeah Media. She's enjoying a renewed commitment to her yoga practice (and thus, herself), and spends her free time seeking Portland's best outdoor happy hours. Keep in touch with her @doniree.



Limbo, Not Just a Party Game

by Rachel

LIMBO AND I
ARE OLD FRIENDS.

I FEEL LIKE LIMBO AND WAITING
GO HAND-IN-HAND,

AS VARYING SHADES OF GREY.

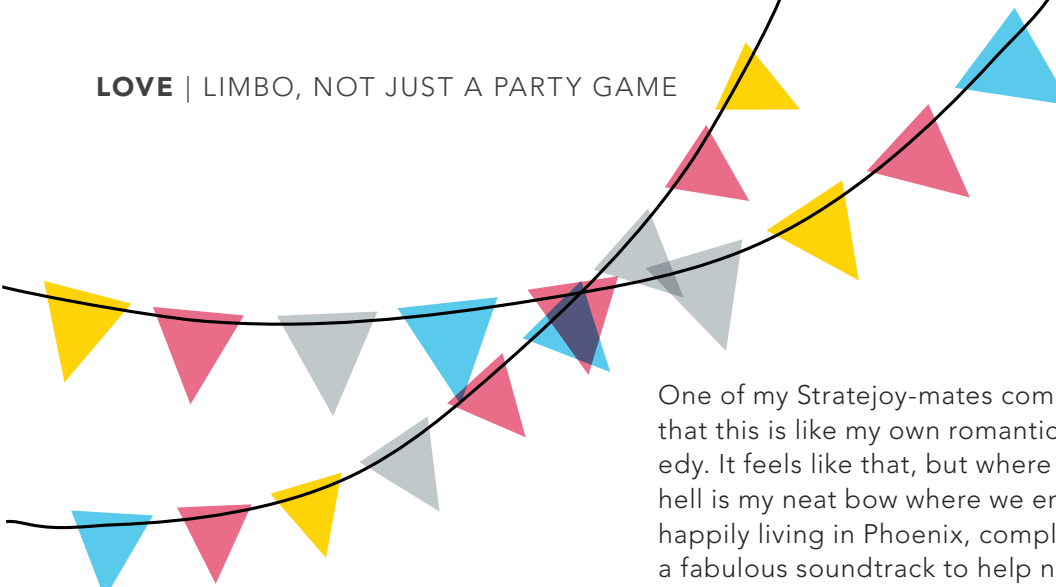
I'm on the road again, driving the 3.5 hours distance towards Yuma, AZ. Last night, I woke up from a nightmare and had no idea where I was for the first few seconds of groggy grappling-in-the-dark-for-a-light-switch. I ran to Victoria's Secret to buy more clean underwear. My DVR is full, and I am currently keeping multiples of things like shampoo, conditioner and toothpaste. I ate half a bag of stale Fritos for lunch, and sucked the crumbs out of the corner nook while whizzing down the I-85. My exercise regime, aside from sex, is currently null and void. Yes, you guessed it—I'm in a long distance relationship.

Limbo and I are old friends. I feel like limbo and waiting go hand-in-hand, as varying shades of grey. And, you know, I'm a champ at waiting. Limbo is its calmer, chiller cousin. It's waiting because of circumstance, not because of fear.

I need a little limbo in my life, though I never would have said that 6 months ago. I've waited in limbo for jobs, relationships, and school, but this one is frustrating and joyful. It's the melding and creation of two lives into one. That's not something that can be done in mere moments. I go back and forth on the long distance; is it a frustrating or good thing? I'm torn between the two—one moment I'm on team frustrated, the other on team good for us.

We are learning a lot, being in an uncomfortable position. All the little stuff that normally comes up seems stupid, and somehow the small annoyances don't matter. On the other, I'm freaking sick of feeling unsettled all the time. I'm living out of a bag, even for the few days a week that I'm home in Phoenix. I dump laundry into the wash, and then pack them back up again out of the dryer. I've forgotten what it's like to cook in my own kitchen. I miss my little photo studio office. But despite the discomfort and the longing for my material consolations, I wouldn't trade what's on the other end of that travel for anything.

There is an adventure to this. We appreciate our moments together more. It is humbling to yearn for each other. And as we start to feel quite blue, I remind us that military families would be grateful for only 3.5 hours of separation.



One of my Stratejoy-mates commented that this is like my own romantic comedy. It feels like that, but where the hell is my neat bow where we end up happily living in Phoenix, complete with a fabulous soundtrack to help narrate my life? I would also love the fabulous wardrobe and perfect hair and make-up when I wake up.

Mr. Paul Child has a roommate. Very nice guy, but it's pretty funny to be making out on the couch in varying states of undress and hear the garage door opening. Making eggs in your underwear is suddenly impossible. Sex on the pool table is non-existent.

I have no space. A nomad with a car full of cooking equipment.

Mr. Paul Child has brought calmness to my life. He lets me be me, and loves when I get a little nutty. The distance sucks, but it's not something we can't overcome. He's this incredible anchor for me—letting me create my business, dream, be nutty, and all the while tethering me to reality and safety.

There is nothing normal about my/our journey. It is deliciously unique and I cherish that. Everything that's happening feels so right. I'm not controlling it. For once in my life, I'm not trying to. I'm allowing myself to float down the lazy river of love.



Rachel

RACHEL, Season 6...

is a pastry chef and soon to be entrepreneur living in Phoenix. She's tangoed with her QLC a few times and is hoping this is her last turn around the dance floor. Feeling stuck in her most recent restaurant job, Rachel left to work towards creating her own pastry company. It's not all cupcakes and croissants, but life is starting to get sweeter (a few glasses of wine helps too). When not working on her recently launched pastry business, www.pistolwhippedpastry.com, Rachel is usually writing and photographing for her food blog, croissantinthecity.com, hiking, collecting cake stands, and learning to make cheese. She's also writing for numerous publications, and has fallen madly in love with her dream man, Mr. Paul Child. Find her tweeting @CroissantITC.

Love Doesn't Own a GPS

by Ashley



When I was a little girl and imagined myself in a happy relationship with my future boyfriend, it never occurred to me that we might not live in the same city. Or even the same country.

I was under the impression that I would meet my husband in college and we would get married after we both graduated. We would find steady jobs that we both enjoyed and then create a family together a few years later. Oh, little Ashley, you were so naive.

Obviously, that is not how things happened. Here I am, a fresh 27 years old, living in a one bedroom apartment in my hometown, while my boyfriend is over 2,600 miles away in freakin' Canada. **Not cool, universe. Not cool.**

Our story begins back in early 2008, when I first began blogging. Somehow, he and I ended up reading the same blogs and "running in the same circle." Occasionally, we commented on each other's blogs (PeterDeWolf.com and ThatSuperAwesomeBlog.com, if you're interested). Once in a while there would be an email exchange back and forth. But it wasn't until June 2010 that things began to move forward.

I remember reading his blog and thinking, "Geez, I wish I could find a guy who treated me like this! I totally deserve someone like him!"

Yeah, it might seem narcissistic, but in the relationship department, I am completely aware of how awesome I am and wasn't willing to settle for anything less. **I believe that is called self-confidence and knowing your worth.**

So, June 2010. We're emailing, every day, constantly. This is a full-on, mind-consuming, butterfly-inducing crush.

Over the next few months, we started talking on the phone and soon graduated to Skype.

Looking back, we probably should have discussed it sooner, but it wasn't until late 2010 that we began seriously talking about the distance. I guess we wanted to be sure that this was for real and not just some internet romance that would die out in 3 months.

We knew the distance was a huge obstacle (hello, 12-hour day of traveling and goodbye, huge chunk of a pay check), but we were determined.



...I am completely aware of how awesome I am...

The first time we saw each other June 2011. It was beautiful, awkward, so much fun, a learning experience, and it felt like home. Within the first two minutes, we knew this was only the first visit. We knew this was the beginning of

something so much bigger and better than we could have imagined. Since then, we have spent five glorious days together in August, have another trip planned for October, and are hoping we will be able to spend New Year's together for the first time.

It takes a lot of work, but I don't always mind that most of our conversations are through video cameras and microphones. It makes us put in the effort

as we build our foundation. **We are actually talking, learning how to solve misunderstandings, and are continuously getting to know each other.**

I have learned that it's more important to listen than it is to talk. Patience can solve any disagreement, even the ones born out of a misunderstanding. I have learned that love is more about giving something away than asking for something in return. Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose, but neither of you are keeping score. I have learned that once you find someone who cherishes you and treats you like they never want to let you go, hold on tight because, baby, this is for real.

In case it's not already blatantly obvious, let me put this out there: I love him. I love his kind heart, how he is always thinking of others, how he is the most thoughtful person I've ever met. I love that he is incredibly smart, that his interests include sports, astronomy, writing fiction, and his adorably cute niece. I love that he talks about our future and isn't afraid to share his feelings. I love that he makes me feel like I'm part of the best team out there.

Naturally, my friends and family have concerns. They worry that we "met online" and that perhaps, "he isn't really who he says he is." I hope I put that fear to rest with the first visit, when he was, in fact, himself. They worry that I will decide to move to Canada and in the process will be giving up part of myself for a man.

And this is where it ties into my biggest battle: trusting myself, and figuring out what I want MY life to be.

I don't want to create a riff in my relationship with my family because I am trying to follow my heart. I don't want to disappoint them, but I also have to remember that I am an intelligent, strong, independent woman and I don't want to disappoint myself either. I don't want them to think I'm giving anything up because, honestly, **I feel like I would be gaining so much more than anything I might lose.**

I would be gaining closeness and a life of love with this man, my love. I would be pulling that trust, loyalty, humor, and respect so much closer. And, to me, that is what life is about.

Sure, the idea of moving to another country freaks me out a little bit (and of course there are visas, and jobs, and living situations, and other crap to figure out), but when the end result is him? It seems totally worth it.




ASHLEY, Season 5...

spends her 9 to 5 as a counselor, but that doesn't mean she has it all figured out. After living abroad, then grad school in New York, she found herself unemployed and back home in Austin, TX, staring her Quarterlife Crisis in the face. So she began picking up the pieces and is on a mission to be brave, rediscover her dreams and make them come true—fueled by cheese, 90's pop music, and spontaneous dance parties. Since wrapping up her Season, Ashley has launched her own business, YourSuperAwesomeLife.com, where she empowers teen girls to live a life they love, visited Peter 3 more times, and is planning to move to Canada in 2013. Woohoo!

Love and the Single Girl

by Nikki



I'm still figuring out what love means to me. I've only been in love once; it was young, my first, and—not to take anything away from it; it was real and it held strong for years—but I didn't know what it took to have mature, marriage-worthy love.

I almost wrote about that first love, almost fleshed out the whole story and all its lessons. But then I realized that it's in the past, and though it's affected my thoughts on love, that's not who I am now.


Now, I'm a single girl who's about to turn 30 as she watches all her friends get married and have babies. It's a weird, in-between place to be, but it's not a bad place. Despite what most movies, parents that want grandbabies and our recently married friends may tell us, ladies, it's OK to be single. It's OK to not want things in the standard time

frame. And no, this does not mean we're Old Maids.

And by the way, I am so sick of movies and books portraying any single woman over the age of 25 as being a workaholic in a high-paying, glamorous job. As though a job and a relationship are the only things that validate a person, and if by that age you don't want babies, well, you must be career-obsessed. Get with it, Hollywood; show me some real women who can't be summed up in two words. Can I get an Amen!?

Although I'll admit, sometimes I let it get to me and I do feel like an Old Maid; that has definitely been a factor in my QLC. When I'm a third or fifth or seventh wheel in a mob of couples, I freak out a little bit that I'll end up alone, working a crappy job in a crappy apartment after a long string of sad endings, friends shaking their heads in pity while I dress my cats like kids and wait desperately in bars. God, please, no.

So there's a polar division in me; as I stand in the pews or proudly in a bridesmaid dress, beaming on as friends upon friends take their vows, I feel two opposite truths: I want to get married. And I'm so glad I'm not getting married.



From my past relationships, I've learned the art of missing, the beauty of companionship, and how to know when it's not right. I've jumped in over my head and I've waded, waiting, cautious. I've learned to recognize what's not good for me and what my deal-breakers are. All of those relationships have ended, and that's a good thing.

I was never the little girl planning her wedding; it never even occurred to me to think about it until the past couple of years, when I was suddenly snowed in with save the dates and RSVP cards. Once, after complaining to my mom (oh, I'll admit, I have my moments of weakness—"Whyyyy is everyone getting maaaaarrriiiiieed??? I'm soooo left ouuuuut!!"), she snapped me back to reality: "Nikki, if what you wanted was to be married, you'd be married by now." Touché, mamma, touché.

It's not marriage I'm looking for; it's a love that makes me believe in marriage.

I'm not jealous of people getting married; I don't look with envy at the glinting diamonds or the fluffy white dresses. But when I see my friends—of both sexes—that are excited about getting married, who, after years together, are giggling with joy, no nerves, only giddy tears, as they vow forever, that sparks a wonder and a pang of selfish sadness in me.

They know who they are and have found the person who balances them. I know not everyone who gets married is that self-aware or perfectly matched, but these friends I'm talking about are; they've gone into it with eyes open. They see the challenges ahead and believe it's worth it. Forever is a long time, and they'd rather spend it together than anywhere else.

And you know what? Until I have that, I'm OK with not being married. In fact, I've decided that if I haven't been married by the time I'm 40, I'm throwing myself a huge damn party with all my friends and family (because, really, when else in your life—other than your wedding—do you get everyone you love in the same room?), and I'm even going to register for gifts. All right, maybe I stole that a little from Carrie Bradshaw, but...

Also, until then, **I am so grateful for and content with all the other forms of love I DO have in my life.** The friends that

I know I'll have forever. I'd vow on that. My family, cheering me on no matter how far from them life takes me. My love for travel: the thrill of the new, independence, and exploration not just of place but of self. And my love of performance: the thrill of collaboration, creating a show and having it feel like giving birth—painful, joyous and life-affirming. My love of Thai coconut chicken soup (my mouth waters at the thought!) and Ben Gibbard from Death Cab for Cutie (talent crush to the max!) and the feeling of the wind singing in my hair as I bicycle down a hill (swoooooosh!!).

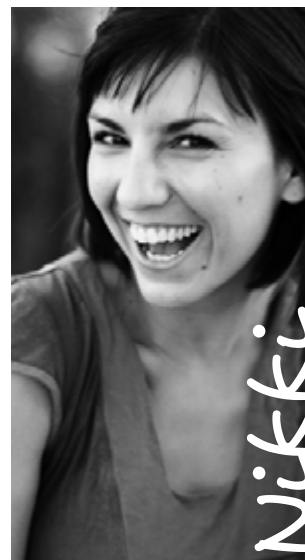
But the most important love I've found is the love I have for myself. Slightly cheesy but deeply true.

I like my own company. I'm not actually lonely at all. Yes, it'd be nice to find a great big Love, but I don't need it to be happy. I love who I am, and who I am is, partially, a product of all those "failed" relationships; I don't regret any decisions I've made. I don't have the high-powered job and I don't have the guy, but, dammit, I'm OK with that. I am just fine.

Although, if I ever do start dressing up cats and calling them my kids, please stage an intervention.

My dad said to me once, after I told him I'd broken up with my most recent boyfriend-ish guy, "You're so lucky to have had all these experiences. You will be more ready than most for a forever relationship, when you find it." I think he's right.

To all the single ladies out there who aren't waiting for some guy to "put a ring on it," I say rejoice with me. We are sure of ourselves, of what we want and who we are, and we will not buckle under societal pressures. We will be thrilled for our friends that choose lives different from our own, and we will be confident in ourselves; we will trust that we are exactly where we need to be, right here, right now. Now put your hands up! Whoa woh woh oh oh oh...



NIKKI, Season 3...

is an actor recovering from Los Angeles. She slammed into her Quarterlife Crisis in 2008, quit chasing L.A. "success" and escaped to Australia, where she only owned what she could carry and only did what made her happy. Returning with a new perspective, she intended to move cross-country and balance her life. She wasn't sure yet where she belonged or what she was gonna do, but she believes in the healing powers of gratitude, creativity, and bicycles. In the time between Season 3 and now, Nikki has experienced how very sweet life can be when you trust one step at a time, and now has a job she loves as an event planner in L.A., a funny little dog with a moustache, and a renewed faith in God that keeps her smiling.

The Wisdom of Little Women

by Kristen



I remember reading “Little Women” and going to see the Winona Ryder and Susan Sarandon movie with my mother when it came out. There’s the scene in the movie (as well as the book) when Laurie tells Jo of his love and desire for her to be his wife. When she says no—choosing an independent lifestyle and writing career over him—I remember so distinctly coming out of the film and saying to my mother, “Why would she say no to such an offer and a cute boy?” She told me that one day I would understand. After sticking up for myself and choosing to live an authentic life over staying married, I finally understand what my mother (and Jo March) was telling me.

I definitely was boy crazy—maybe it was too much TV, too many teen romance books, or perhaps just a whimsical

vision of what life was, but I always had mbeing married’ in my sights. But I now understand, looking back, that it was the man and the idea that I always wanted.

I never once thought about what being married meant, or what I wanted out of a relationship.

I was more concerned with finding a guy who dressed well and said sweet things to me, than I was with thinking about the type of person and characteristics I’d want to spend forever with. Or even what forever meant.

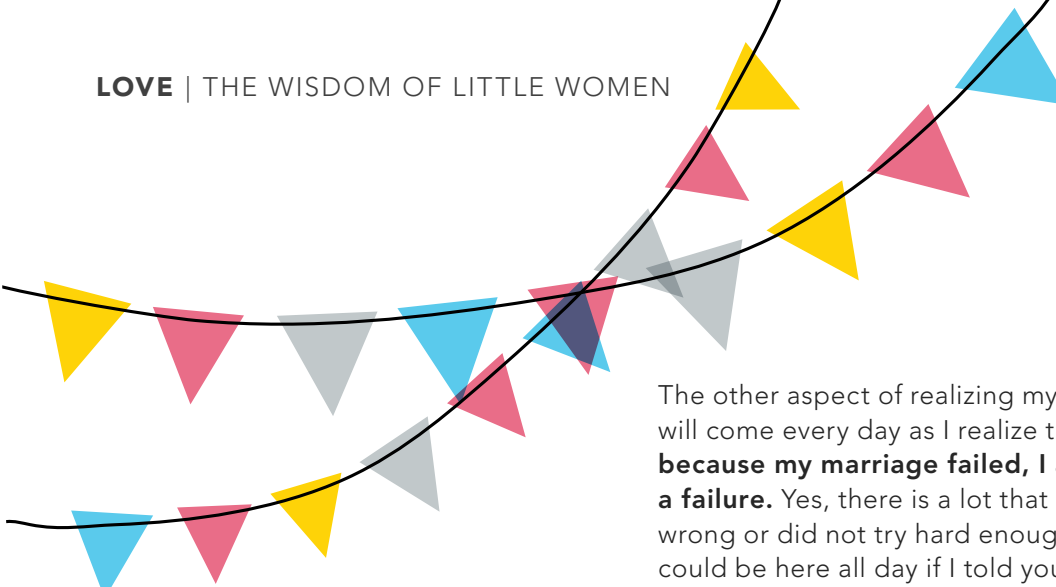
When you’re ending a marriage on fairly decent terms and trying to be amicable, it can be emotional torture. There’s this gray area of What are we? Do we still go out together for dinner? Do I need to know your after work schedule and who you are with? Do we split the bills? But the toughest part is the emotional minefield that divorce is.

Seriously, the doubt and moments of uncertainty are often overwhelming. Since we’re sort of on this slow roll-out plan of telling people, there have been

I NEVER ONCE
THOUGHT ABOUT
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times when we end up pretending really well that life is cheery between us. This sucks—it’s like the slow rip-off of the band aid.

But, my eye is on the prize (happy single life and resolution of QLC). My resolve is to listen to my gut—it is too loud to ignore, especially after years of shooining it away like an annoying fly. It was also exhausting being strong and successful at work, but a lump on a log at home. In the midst of the Quarterlife Crisis, I never felt comfortable enough with myself outside of work to speak up for what I wanted or to do anything without worrying what people would think.



I need to begin moving forward. I've spent considerable time thinking and planning about life after—ripping down old wallpaper in my house, buying luxurious bed linens. These things may seem trivial, but these are tiny examples of things that bother me or things I desire that have been put aside for a while.

These are the outward examples of ways I have denied my essential self. I need to start doing.

I've realized I put many decisions and happiness factors in the hands of other people—parents, husband, and friends. It can't be that way anymore. I have to make my own decisions. Having this house all to myself will be a huge action item of this goal to be decisive and assertive.

The other aspect of realizing my worth will come every day as I realize that, **just because my marriage failed, I am not a failure.** Yes, there is a lot that I did wrong or did not try hard enough at—we could be here all day if I told you how bad I was in this relationship. But that just means it was this relationship, it doesn't mean I am not lovable or cannot be married again. It means I have to work on myself and what I want for my life. A failed marriage, paper, test, etc., are all opportunities for learning, for growing, and for finding greater purpose.

So, like Jo March, I'm doing what's best for me and not denying my instincts any longer. I also like to think that this ending in my life is going to bring a lot of new beginnings. Blogging for Stratejoy is a perfect example of that. I want to finally go to those local tourist spots I keep saying I'll visit, go to museums that have been on

my list, and finally get around to refinishing the desk I pulled out of the neighbor's trash in 2009. I want to be a motivated, productive person who loves life and goes after it—**who tries and experiences and lives.**



Kristen

KRISTEN, Season 5...

lives in Somerset, MA and works in Newport, RI. After years of hard work and a master's degree, she's a museum curator—her dream job. She loves all things food, a great book with a cup of tea or a glass of wine, and her crazy close-knit family. Her Quarterlife Crisis began after she bought a house and got married in 2010. After a transformational experience in an art gallery in 2011, Kristen is in the process of divorcing and figuring out what life on the other side looks like—embracing honesty and learning how to trust her gut again. Kristen was bit by the blogging bug after writing for Stratejoy and is now loving having her own blog, Life By Kristen (lifebykristen.wordpress.com).

LIFE LESSONS

We all know that ups and downs are part of the deal. The days that we are head-over-heels in love with, and the days we wish never happened, are both part of the journey. They flicker back and forth, lighting us up and dragging us down.

And then there are all those days that would fill up the bell curve of our lives, hovering near the mean or the mode of our experiences.

Those are the days you have the most capacity to influence. **Those are the days where your intention and attention**

can make the biggest splash. Those are the days when you are learning the real lessons of your life—the lessons of patience, or action, or forgiveness, or bravery.

One of the earliest phrases that graced my site was, “This is life. Are you LIVING yours?”

Though some believe there is nothing we can do to create our own luck or guarantee fulfilling lives, I wholeheartedly disagree. **I spend a lot of my time thinking about choice, and living, and the lessons we each are learning about valuing our happiness.**

And I want you to really think about it, too.

Yes, unexpected, uncontrollable, dark events occur all of the time. That’s when you do your best to protect your loved ones and yourself, stay strong and try hard to be present.

But I also believe we are the navigators of our own lives.

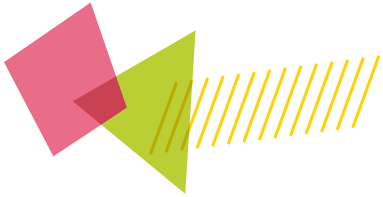
You have control over your experience. You pick the map. You glance at the compass. You invite your road trip companions to ride shotgun as you dial up your favorite station and roll those windows down. You learn from your mistakes and from your wins.

You make the choice to LIVE your life.

Practically, what does this mean?

It means we craft our lives with intention and we pay attention to lessons bestowed upon us by the Universe. **It means making deliberate choices with our personal resources of time, money, energy and love.** It means allowing ourselves the full range of emotions (feel your feelings, dammit!) and not running from the darker experiences of grief or anger or jealousy. It means fighting for our happiness.

How?



Pay attention. Process through writing or talking or painting. Be as humbly honest as you can with yourself and with others. Make choices that are intentional; choices that reflect your values, the woman you want to be, the self-aware human you are.

Life has already gifted an amazing amount of lessons to you about your strengths, your desires and your capacity for goodness. Use those lessons!

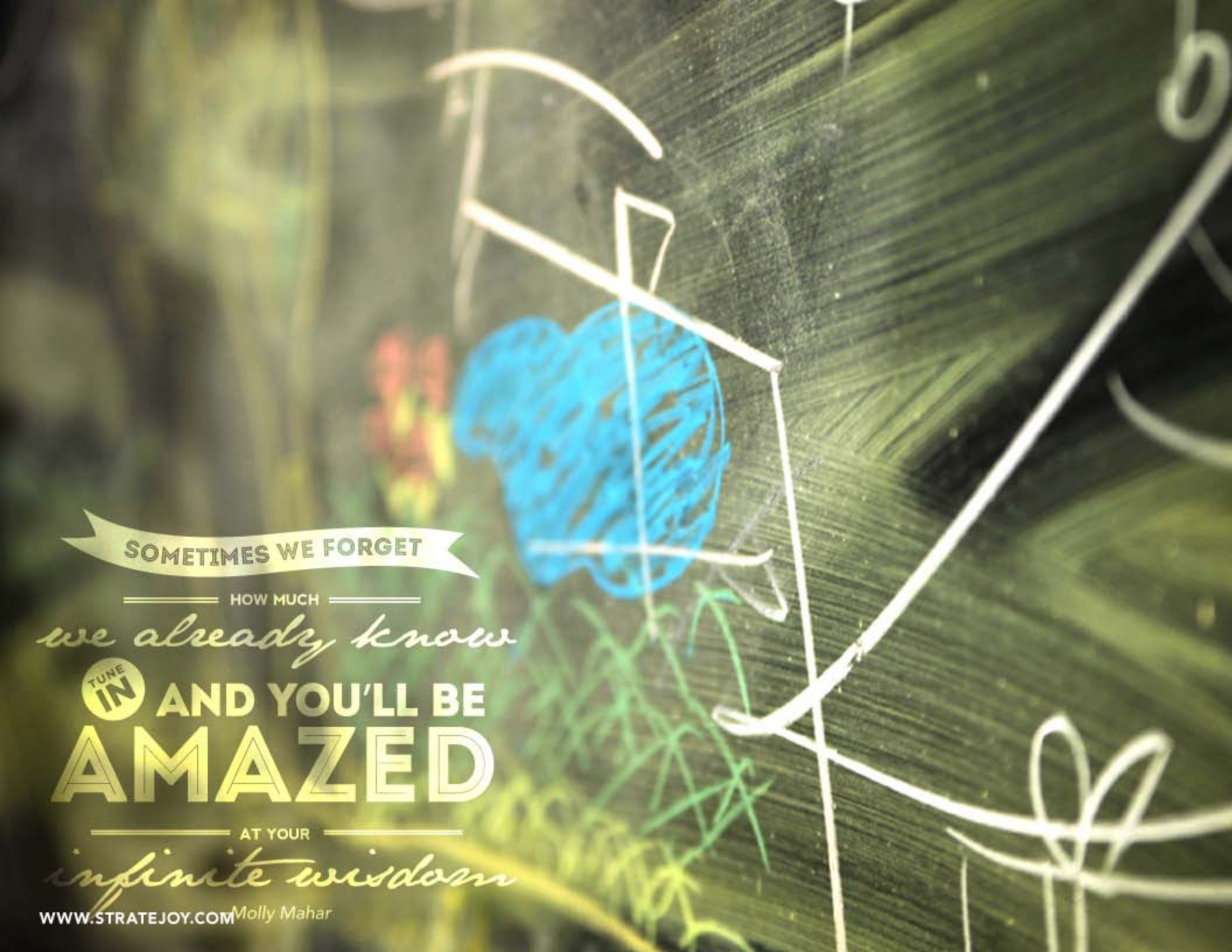
Sometimes we forget how much we already know. Tune in and you'll be amazed at your infinite wisdom.

What are you supposed to be soaking in right now?
What insights are waiting just below the surface of your day-to-day?

I am safe.
It is time to go bigger.
I am capable.
Take a step towards love.
I am enough.
It is time to forgive.

Life is always teaching us lessons—rules for being our best selves, for playing our biggest game, for loving hard—so take them in and use them!

Pay attention and live with intention. You'll be golden.



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WWW.STRATEJOY.COM Molly Mahar

5 Reasons Why the Quarterlife Crisis is Good for You

by Molly Mahar



Having a Quarterlife Crisis is not normally seen as a positive event. I get that. I mean, the word “crisis” is present. And most of us don’t associate anything great with a quarterlife “crisis,” or midlife “crisis,” or identity “crisis,” or even a wardrobe “crisis” for that matter!

But there is a silver lining to this Quarterlife Crisis.

I’ve been thinking a lot about how my life has changed in the last four years, and how it wouldn’t have been possible without hitting my personal rock bottom first. I’ve also gotten a rash of emails and phone calls from old clients who’ve experienced so much positive change in their lives since facing their QLC (or midlife or new mama or I’ve-been-fired crisis) head on.

It’s cemented. These times of transition and seeking and pain can be good for us.

5 REASONS WHY THE QUARTERLIFE CRISIS IS GOOD FOR YOU

1. It forces you to re-evaluate your priorities. When your life turns upside down, you have no choice but to really examine: What do I care about? What’s not working in my life? What does seem to be working? And the biggie: If this isn’t working for me, what might instead?

So many times we act on the expectations of someone else (society, our parents, that influential first husband) simply because we don’t know any differently. We think that doing things correctly is our ticket to happiness. Do well in school, get a great job, snag that promotion, find an amazing partner, check, check, check.

No one ever taught us how to define our own personal values or the importance of happiness as the fuel to success. But by sloshing around in the pit of a crisis, we have no choice. Picking ourselves up and moving forward forces us to re-examine priorities on our own terms.

2. It opens you up to new possibilities, crazy as they may seem. When your first (second, third) version of your life doesn’t make your heart sing, you eventually come to the conclusion that your path may require something else from you.

Something wild. Something new. Something different.

Your new possibility is probably something you had never even imagined back in university. Or perhaps you dreamed about it, but dismissed it as crazy. Entrepreneur? Gluten-free Baker? Stay-at-home Mama? Movement Therapist? Writer? World Traveler? Pshaw.

But when the only world you know comes crashing down around your ears in an over-committed, over-alcoholized, over-making-every-one-else-happy pile, you are forced to consider those “crazy” options.

Consider them and try them on for size and find the most amazing you version of you.

3. Sometimes hitting bottom is the only way to rise to the top in a meaningful way. I always think of this quote from Po Bronson when I'm looking back, fondly, on my own Quarterlife Crisis: "Failure's hard, but success is far more dangerous. If you're successful at the wrong thing, the mix of praise and money and opportunity can lock you in forever."

What if I hadn't hit bottom? Would I still be a sales manager in my black suit and heels and fake mask? Would I be happy? Would my life have the meaning and richness it does now?

I think not. I thank my QLC for showing me the fissures in my own life, for giving me the chance to rediscover myself in such a juicy, fulfilling way.

4. It allows you to declare a personal emergency. Emergencies require immediate attention, right? A Quarterlife Crisis requires attention too. It requires support from people who've been there or are in the midst with you. It requires you to put your "life plan" on hold so you can craft a more authentic version.

Giving your apathy and confusion a name allows you to become the boss of it, instead of letting it sneak into every corner of your life and paralyze you with its wily doubts. It allows you to declare battle, to approach it with the strength of an Amazon warrior.

You are suddenly on a quest to save your own life. And that's a pretty special experience.

5. Your compassion expands exponentially. Suddenly, you (the girl who always had her shit together) are experiencing not knowing what to do next. Not knowing what to do right now. Not knowing how you got to this point in the first place.

Your compassion for the world, for those who are struggling in any capacity, expands because you suddenly know what it feels like to lose control over your life.

Obviously, a Quarterlife Crisis is by no means a devastating natural disaster, revolt, or life threatening illness. But in experiencing your own personal upheaval, you

develop the capacity to hold space in your heart for others who are hurting. Hold space and then take action to help.

After all, practice makes perfect...

Conclusion

Even if you're right in the middle of the QLC, can you see how you're growing? How it's changing you? The (ahem, ahem) advantages of having to rethink everything?

What else have you learned from this crazy adventure, dear one?



MOLLY, Stratejoy Founder...

a free spirit with a passion for mindful entrepreneurship and a tendency to swear a fair amount. After surviving her own Quarterlife Crisis, she founded Stratejoy in 2008 to empower women to live life on their own terms by valuing their worth and happiness. She is a writer, speaker, coach, joy enthusiast and fierce love advocate. She also laughs loudly, swims naked, and wears a lot of costumes. She bases her adventures from a sunny porch in San Diego and a cabin on the river outside of Seattle that she shares with her husband and tiny boy person. Molly's goal every year is to become, "More Molly." Obviously.



Me and My Jeep: A Love Affair Through My QLC

by Dee

ONE NIGHT, I PACKED
EVERYTHING
I OWNED INTO THAT JEEP
AND TOLD MY PARENTS
WHERE TO STICK IT

There's a white Jeep Cherokee that knows me best.

You know, the old boxy 90's model. Not the fancy-dancy rounded front models of recent years. She's got a tape deck and a camel-colored leather interior. **She's a beauty with a battery problem, but she's my girl.**

SHE'S A CLASSIC.

Through towns with one stoplight, over the river and through the woods, we've gone together, carrying big ideas and dreams, sometimes packing a heavy load of burden, and usually low on gas.

I've set out on many journeys with my faithful Jeep, making trips for countless reasons: from epic travels across states to **sneaking into the corner drug store at midnight for some chocolate or, you know, a pregnancy test.**

I got in that Jeep and went home when there was nowhere else to go and everyone around me had let me down. **More than once.**

I've had many a first kiss in that front seat and, ahem, second, third, and fourth kisses in the backseat.

One night, I packed everything I owned into that Jeep and told my parents where to stick it.

Then I got back in that Jeep a few weeks later, realizing that I don't want to do it all on my own, not when so many around me want to support me. My dad met me in the driveway and helped me unpack, while I hung my head in defeat.

I picked myself up, got back behind the wheel, filled my gas tank, and headed back into the real world to take all I wanted from life, under my own circumstances.

My Jeep has taught me about the importance of giving myself time. Time for reflection. Time to get there. Time for good music. And about speed limits, both the law's and my own.

It has been a place for me to go to listen to what I want, be as warm or as cold as I please, to look out at an open road and see possibilities. She's been a

This is the time to put it in 4-wheel drive and plow through the muck that has been holding me back.

patient, constant, and usually safe place for me to understand that I'm a **dynamic, capable, vibrant woman**, and I deserve all the love I can give myself, in addition to the occasional pit stop for some Ruffles.

In it, I've had a place to turn it up loud, turn it down low, cry, smile, yell, and let it all go over these past few tumultuous years. She has been a witness to so many emotions as I've navigated to where I am, through the search for my passions, down the road of deep, dark depression, past the point of having any effing idea where I was going, and now, confidently down the road less traveled. I wish her walls could talk to me.

She'd scold me for some of the places I've made her take me. Like to the mall way too many times, and those dumb trips I made to see that rude boy. I bet she'd comment on the amount of Diet Coke I've consumed, for sure. She'd applaud me for going to see my grandma all those times, and for confidently driving away from a bad situation once or twice. **And she'd probably tell me to turn the damn music down because one of these days the speakers will blow and I'll have no one to blame but myself.**

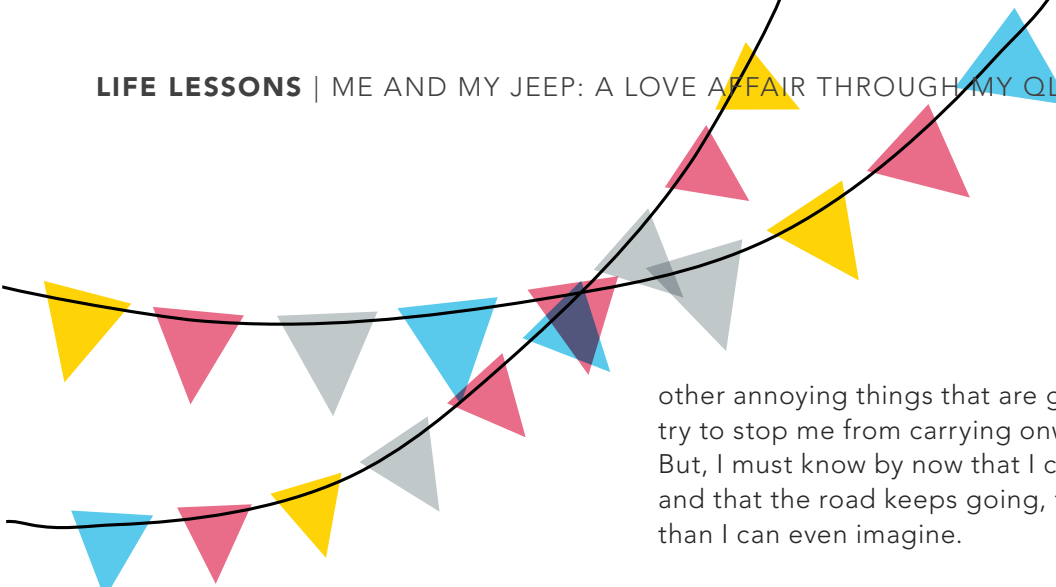
With my beagle riding shotgun, my most defining moments of clarity have sparked when I was sitting behind the wheel, alone. I do my best thinking in my little white Jeep.

Yesterday, she got me through a snowstorm. In the midst of that blustery wind and one working windshield wiper, I saw clearly that this is the time for execution. **This is the time to put it in 4-wheel drive and plow through the muck that has been holding me back.**

I turned up the heat and decided to set some concrete goals for the next few months, holding myself accountable in huge ways like, oh I don't know, publishing them on the internet. Big, fat goals like **making it a point to finish everything I start** (like a semester of classes, my yoga practice, and a healthy eating plan), goals about developing an honest relationship with money, and goals about doing something special, unique, or new each day.

YEAH!

I know my Jeep's going to help me rock out in smaller ways, too. I know she will take me to the music store to finally buy those instruments I've been longing to



practice, to the craft store for the sewing goodies I need, to the camera store to ask more questions, to my gal pal's for dinners over wine, to concerts, to flea markets, to restaurants, to cities all over America, here there and everywhere to fulfill all of my bursting desires for a big, exploding, full life.

She'll also continue giving me a place to calm down with some coffee and some folk music when I need it most.

She's a reminder that this Quarterlife Crisis is so not about a destination, but so much more about the journey, where I allow it to take me, and all the scenery along the way. **I'm going to break down, run out of fuel, and pull over to the side of the road, feeling stranded.** There will, undoubtedly, be a million

other annoying things that are going to try to stop me from carrying onward. But, I must know by now that I can fix it, and that the road keeps going, farther than I can even imagine.

She's forced me to spend time with myself, taught me how good it can feel to find simple joys like a summer day with the windows down, helped me work up the courage to take different roads and turn back around when I wasn't honoring my authenticity. **She's given me a place to find the certainty that I can go anywhere, be, do, create, love, and run wild.**

But, the lesson that trusty Jeep has taught me that is most valuable is that, when I look deeply within myself, when I give myself the space I need to listen to my truth and/or some John Mayer, I'll get where I need to go. And I'll always have enough gas in my tank to get there.



Dee

DEE, Season 4...

is a dreamer working in the PR world. She's officially studying journalism and religious studies in Columbia, Missouri, while unofficially studying interesting people, good music and film, and how to play the fiddle. She thinks "QLC" should stand for "Quarterlife Challenge," and has strong opinions about self love, Diet Coke, and introspection. Maybe graduate school is the next step for her. Maybe she'll get a bunch of tattoos and start a band. In London. Maybe she'll set off across the country with her beagle, her horse and a case of wine. The future's wide open, but for now, she's focusing on making each day special.

NOW and THEN

by *Laurenne*



I dipped my toes in the Russian River this weekend.

I traveled to Northern California to celebrate my friend's upcoming nuptials, and it was set up to be the perfect weekend getaway. There would be majestic wilderness. There would be good wine and tasty brunches. There would be a six-foot blow-up penis and a hot tub (for bachelorette-y purposes). There would be twelve girls dishing about girly things. And there would be relaxation.

Sort of.

That was the plan. On Friday, I would hand in all my assignments and have my life organized so that I could spend the weekend floating on a raft in a green Californian valley. THEN, I would be able to relax. That's what I had told myself for

weeks. "Just deal with this big project, Laurenne, and THEN you will be able to relax on the river."

The idea that a cool river awaited pulled me through August and popped me into September. And then I was there. I finished every single thing I needed to finish, and I was there.

But I wasn't relaxed. I was more anxious than ever. In fact, as I floated with my feet dangling into the green river, one of my many thoughts was, "Maybe I need some anxiety meds."

And then I realized: THEN doesn't exist. Yet, I keep waiting for it.

I tell myself that I need to color my hair. THEN, I can feel pretty.

Once I publish my book, THEN I can stop trying so hard.

Once I have more money, THEN I can relax.

Once I have a garden, THEN I will be happy with my living situation.

AND THEN I REALIZED:
THEN DOESN'T EXIST.
YET, I KEEP WAITING FOR IT.

Once this project is over, THEN I will email my friends back.

But I'm perpetuating this agonizing wait. I'm torturing myself by actively NOT appreciating what I have NOW.

I'm always waiting. Waiting for the next. Waiting for more time. Waiting for something better. Waiting to finally be recognized. Waiting to feel successful. Waiting to believe I'm worth it. Waiting for THEN to come. But, as I sat in all that wilderness, wondering about my next project and what will happen THEN, I realized that THEN will forever loom in front of me if I don't figure out how to replace her with NOW. I want NOW.



This constant need for more, for THEN, has sparked my ambition. It has served me in the past and it has gotten me here, so THEN isn't all bad. But NOW is nicer. Now says I am worthy right now, that I am successful now, that I am beautiful now, that I am happy now, that I am comfortable now, that I am in the wilderness surrounded by nature NOW.

I want that. I want NOW.

I'd like to say that it all hit me right there in the wilderness and that I'm suddenly only living in the NOW. But I have a trip to IKEA planned today because I feel like I won't be comfortable in my apartment until I get new curtains and bedding. So, I'm not quite cured. But

I am finally aware of my tendency, and that's the best I can do.

I've always thought it was cheesy when people talked about how life is the journey and not the end result, but, dangit, it's true. When I look at pictures of college, I think about how much I could have relaxed then, how little I had to worry about, how free I was. But I was worried about THEN too. I didn't enjoy the fact that I was in college, a crazy time for learning and exploring. I know when I have kids and responsibilities and book signings to attend, I will also look back at this time and think about how free I was, how great life was, how young I looked. I need to enjoy this time for the struggle that it is, marvel at how much I'm doing, really feel the excitement of not having any idea what I'll be doing in a month.

That's what's NOW, and if I let myself feel it, it's actually pretty nice.

I hope I can also thank myself when I look back at pictures of NOW. I hope I can say, "That was the time when I stopped thinking and starting looking around."

Yes, that's exactly what will happen.

After IKEA.



LAURENNE, Season 5...

is a blogger and freelance writer living in Venice Beach. Her QLC began at 25 and is still going strong. Or almost wrapping up. Or just plain becoming the norm. She quit her job to travel around the world in 2009 where she discovered what she wants to do with her life: write. Since then, she's been drinking coffee and writing all day every day, hoping to eventually get paid for it. She pretends to know a lot about wine and cheese, collects pot holders, and rides around town on her baby blue moped. She's also a certified Spiritual Psychologist, which means she shops at Whole Foods and then analyzes her decision to shop at Whole Foods.

Boycotting Thanksgiving – Gratitude and the Freedom to Choose

by Dusti



My family likes to ruin holidays. No, really. They create drama of epic proportions.

This time last year, my bigot of an uncle had a real gem to share. Over pumpkin pie, he was discussing how he and his Army buddies used to beat gay kids with socks full of padlocks—because soap only left bruises and didn't break bones.

Yeah. Can you tell that my family is a generation out of the trailer park? Of course, he wasn't aware that his niece, *ahem* moi, was open about her bisexuality. I'll leave the falling out of the evening to your imagination.

This year, I am boycotting my family and their tradition of drama-making in the name of gratitude for the freedom to choose.

In almost everything we do, we have a choice. We choose how we respond to

what's around us. We choose tomorrow based on actions we make today. We can choose to stay the same or to change. We can choose happiness or apathy

They say you can't choose your family, but I disagree. Family is who you spend your time with. They are the wonderful community of people who you can trust. They are who you don't mind sharing the last piece of apple pie with.

For me, that's my sweet little girl—who is with her dad this Thanksgiving—and that handsome guy I live with. No turkey for us—we're making something delicious and simple, because I'd rather spend the extra time making pies. (I make seriously gorgeous pies, and I've got limited energy to expend. Best to put it where it counts.)

I'm going to take some time and reassess my choices this year. How have I chosen well, and how could I choose better? Could I be in better alignment with my values? It's all on the table. The idea is to give thanks that I can choose.

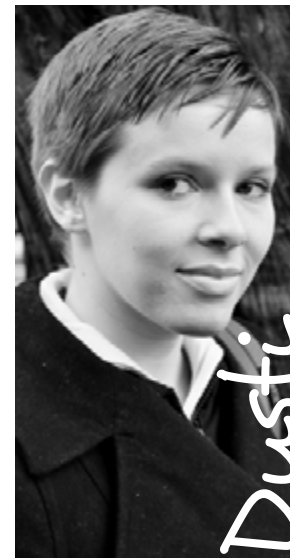
And, I've got a feeling this

Thanksgiving will have amazeballs written all over it when it's over.

I'm not sure if there are other countries with similar traditions, but I think it's pretty cool we have a holiday based on gratitude.

Could you ask for a better reason to stop what you are doing and thank the universe for this moment, this breath? How beautiful is it that we have an opportunity to step back from our daily lives and just be grateful we have the right to choose who we are and how we live?

Happy Thanksgiving, Stratejoy Tribe. May your holiday be full of joy and chock full of love. (And pie. Good lord, enjoy lots of pie—and don't feel guilty for any of it! You can choose better tomorrow.)



DUSTI, Season 5...

is a writer, student, and mother from Portland, OR. After a few years of floundering, where she found herself having a baby during her first round of divorce, she started listening to her heart. She's fully immersed in the QLC with a daughter, time left on her bachelor's degree, a growing business, and baby number two on the way. Somewhere in that, she's also attempting to discover her philosophy, apply to grad school, travel, and learn French.

Do We Have Control Over Our Lives?

by Andrea



■ Hmm...Now, this is really a loaded question: Do we have control over our lives? I took a lot of time to think about this and, honestly, my answer changes on a daily basis.

For most of my life, I think that I was under the impression that, yes, we do have control over our lives. **That was my answer, until I started to lose control over my life about a year ago, at the advent of my Quarterlife Crisis.**

Since then, I have learned a thing or two about life!

One of which being that, actually, we do NOT have control over most aspects of our lives.

I've learned that we can control our actions and our reactions, but we cannot

control what happens in the world around us or the people that may walk in and out of our lives. All of these factors affect who we are so, in essence, we are constantly changing based on the environment which surrounds us.

Over the past year, I've been struggling tremendously with the issue of control. I still am.

So far, the most important lesson I have learned is that, at this point in my life, it is better to shake loose that idea of having 100% control. When I try to plan my life, it never goes the way I expect and that often leaves me stressed, disappointed or frustrated.

In that time, I've also realized that a happy life is more about learning what you can control, rather than worrying and stressing about the things you can't.

Usually, it's the big things in life that we stress about. These are the things we like to think we can control. Although, oftentimes when you really stop and look at it, we have the least control over



...at this point in my life, it is better to shake loose that idea of having 100% control.

big major life challenges. You know, like job issues or frustrating family members. When I think of the times I've tried to maintain control of a plan, person, event or situation, I see that it never really turned out the way I had hoped. This almost always led to me feeling majorly disappointed. When we try to control life, we put very high expectations on others and ourselves.

When we're let down, we somehow feel as if we've failed. And that is no way to live. If anything, we can control the little things in life, like our responses, reactions and actions. Sometimes, you just have to let go of control and see where life takes you. Letting go of control = less disappointments.

I tried something new a few months ago and started to push away those thoughts or attempts to have control 100% of the time.

Now, I am not superhuman, I am not perfect and life does not always go as planned. A lot of times, I use the mantra, "It's okay, everything will be okay," just to remind myself that, no matter what happens, the sun will rise tomorrow. And



Control is a tough topic. I think it's different for everyone. I don't have an answer yet to whether or not I have control over my life.

I'm leaning toward, "No, I don't," and accepting that the LACK of control may just be what life is all about.

tomorrow will be a new day, a fresh start and a different take on life. No matter what happens, it can be fixed; there is always a plan B or even a plan C.

Ironically, I have been so much happier since I lost the idea of total control. Don't get me wrong though, I still have challenges: some days I feel my life is totally spiraling out of control, and other days I feel completely balanced and at ease. It's been a roller coaster of a ride for me the past year and I'm not done yet.



ANDREA, Season 1...

was living in Washington, D.C. by way of Buffalo, NY when she blogged for Stratejoy. Originally from a small town, she suffered her Quarterlife Crisis a year after her big move to the city. She loves to read, write, blog and tweet (@AndreaGenevieve). She always takes the road less traveled. She hopes to see the world, learn how other people live, enjoy the present and figure out how to quiet her chaotic mind. In the words of country star Terri Clark, she wants to do it all! Since 2009, Andrea has moved to Austin, TX and explored 8 more countries. She's chopped off all her hair and let it grow back, started her own career consulting business for twenty-somethings and became a momma!



Good Enough is Good Enough

by Renee

IS THERE
ANYTHING
MORE FRUSTRATING
THAN NOT ACCEPTING
WHAT YOU PRODUCE?

I sat down to write this post, got halfway through it and decided there was no fluidity, no form, no voice, and the whole thing was crap.

It's writer's block and it terrifies me. As someone who thrives on feeling productive, knowing that I just scrapped an hour's worth of work **makes me feel helpless and worthless.**

I pride myself on my writing efficiency. In undergrad, I could knock out a 3-5 page paper in less than an hour. It would be a coherent, comprehensive work, too. Often, these papers would earn A's, especially if it was for a class I really enjoyed.

Today? **The writing isn't coming easily.** So instead I refill my glass of water...tap out a couple more words...I check the mail...reread what I've written...I grab some string cheese from the fridge...delete a paragraph...I put another coat of nail polish on...and decide, screw it, this idea is just not happening today.

And what can I do? **How do I find inspiration when my energy turns negative?** How should I expect myself to produce top-notch content when I feel sour about every word I type? How do I keep that Judgey McJudgerson voice in my head from constantly judging?

Is there anything more frustrating than not accepting what you produce? Be it music, art, writing, calculations, or whatever your line of work may be. It's like, you don't accept it so your client or readers or whatever sure as hell won't accept it, either. But you know you're your worst critic, so you try to look at it with someone else's eyes and it actually just looks worse than you thought it did and **please would that judgey voice STOP being all judgey in my head?**

You're certain when you submit it, it's all mumbo-jumbo and you're certain you're just about to be fired because whatever you just submitted is total crap and your four year-old goddaughter could have created something way better than this. Is it naptime yet?

But then I take a step back. **I take a deep breath.** I roll out the tension in my shoulders. Each article, blog post, paper I write **doesn't have to be perfection.** It doesn't always have to break glass ceilings and burst through uncharted territory and thrill each and every reader. But it has to reach a level of acceptance.

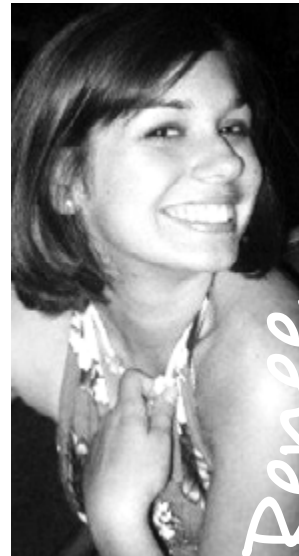


hook from time to time and, for God's sake, Renee, just relax. **Being authentic doesn't mean being perfect**, it means being the best version of yourself and meeting yourself where you are and being OKAY with that.

It's gonna be okay. Relax.

One of my idols, Jane Fonda, writes in her autobiography, *"Good enough is good enough."* Sometimes, that's the best I can do, and if I put forth a good enough effort, then it's good enough for me and it's good enough for my audience. I can be proud of that.

I'm afraid of silly things—revolving doors, salmonella poisoning, things that go bump in the night—but I'm most afraid of not living up to my own expectations. I need to let myself off the



RENEE, Season 3...

hails from a quaint Chicago suburb by way of northern Indiana. After graduating from Saint Mary's College, she landed her dream job with the federal government. Six months into it, Hello Quarterlife Crisis! She packed up her business cards and started slinging coffee. Renee is currently in a PhD program in Chicago studying new media and spends her summers teaching creative writing. You can find her tweeting @BelleRenee.

Under the Influence

by Arielle



When I was 15 years old, five friends and I sat in a circle, passing around a beer we had stolen from someone's parents. Though we only had a few sips each, we still giggled at the drunkenness we thought we were feeling.

At 16, after a few more incidents of sipping alcohol with probably no effect, I found myself on a cruise pounding shots of 151 with my friend while her parents slept in their room on the other side of the ship.

That's how my tumultuous love affair with alcohol began.

A survey of my first few Stratejoy blog posts reveals the following words: drunk beer-tears vodka hangover tequila Bud-Lights booze drinking big-drinker pub-crawl VODKA hangover

That's a lot of boozy words. More than I realized. It's like these words just kind of snuck themselves into my posts and embedded themselves there. In a way, that's what alcohol does in my life, too. It weaves its way seamlessly through my experiences, an indispensable accessory, tricking me into thinking that it doesn't have that big of a hold on me, until, just like counting the alcohol-related words in my Stratejoy posts, something snaps me into reality.

The thing about being told that you drink too much is that it's a lose-lose situation.

If you say, "You're right, I do drink too much," then you're an alcoholic.

If you say, "No, I do NOT drink too much," then you look like you're in denial, and then AHA, you're an alcoholic who hasn't accepted that age-old adage, "The first step is admitting you have a problem."

For what it's worth, I would like to submit to the jury the following statement:



The thing about being told that you drink too much is that it's a lose-lose situation.

My name is Arielle, and I am not an alcoholic. But I do love drinking.

Further clarification from the friend who confronted me about my drinking yielded that I need to stop relying on alcohol. Which, for the record, I totally agree with.

Yes, I drink to relieve stress. Yes, I drink to forget that I'm feeling particularly bad about myself on a given day. And yes, I drink to make myself bolder and more fun.

I'm not proud of any of it. Not of the fact that I drink to forget all the self-loathing

I may be feeling (which, FYI, sometimes backfires and makes me feel worse), and definitely not of the fact that I cannot imagine ever trying to flirt with a guy without the mighty alcohol buzz of courage.

The tricky part, though, is finding the balance between drinking for fun and drinking to escape. This is particularly complicated because I love going out. I'd much rather spend my weekends having drunken shenanigans than staying in and watching TV. I love brunches with

unlimited mimosas, happy hours, silly drinking games, pre-gaming for events, pub crawls, birthday parties, going to bars to watch sports, and being drunk to the point of thinking I'm the BEST DANCER EVER. Want to go out and collapse into bed at 5am? Yes, let's.

I definitely haven't been drinking more since my wonderful Quarterlife Crisis started. In fact, in an effort to save money, I've cut back on casual drinking, preferring to save my cash for the big nights out. Or, as I've started telling people, "I'm cutting down on drinking when I'm not trying to get wasted."

I know, I know. **DOING IT WRONG.**

So if my drinking habits haven't changed, and it's only the mentality behind the drinking that is occasionally unhealthy, how do I combat this? How do I separate the fun drinking from the stress drinking, the drinking that makes me feel wonderful from the drinking that leaves me sobbing and trying to calm myself down enough so that I don't make a scene on my subway ride home? (This is happening more frequently than I would like, lately.)

I cannot go through life relying on self-medication as a way of either forgetting what the hell is bothering me or enhancing who I already am. I don't want to change the part of me that loves seeking out happy hour specials and other fun drinking events, I just don't want to believe that the drunk version of me is the best version of me and the only version of me worth anyone's time. **I shouldn't need to down a few vodka sodas before feeling comfortable in my own skin or in my own life.**

It's all too obvious to me what I need to do now, and it scares me to the point that I avoided writing it in the first few iterations of this post because I don't want to actually become accountable for it.

I need to stop drinking, at least temporarily. So for one month, I'm giving up booze.

I've known for a while that I need to do this. To figure out who I am without relying on alcohol to tell me, and to really

evaluate the role that drinking has in my life right now and what role I want it to have going forward. But it freaks me the fuck out. The idea of going into social situations without a beer in my hand is completely frightening to me. Which I'm pretty sure is a sign that it needs to be done.

I'm already panicking. I'm imagining all the awkward situations that I can't drink my way out of, all the nights where I'm feeling less than stellar that I can't forget by coating my feelings in liquor. For one month, I'm going to face my life head on and clear-headed.

I'm ready.



ARIELLE, Season 6...

is living the dream in Brooklyn, NY. Her Quarterlife Crisis began in 2010 when she received her MBA and had no idea what to do with it. It escalated into full-on panic mode in December 2011 when she lost her job. She also realized that her diet of beer and buffalo wings wasn't doing her any favors, and is hoping that the millionth time's a charm for getting healthier habits in order. She is an avid volleyball player, owns enough silly hats to outfit an entire party, and is technically single but has deep feelings for her Kindle. Follow the fun @NotTheMermaid.

A Lesson in Forgiveness from a Pint of Guinness

by Caiti



I recently found myself nervous about imbibing a pint of Guinness in an Irish pub. My college self would be making SO MUCH FUN OF ME right now.

College Caiti knew how to have a good time, or at least a good time in that straight-laced-teenager-finally-off-the-leash kind of way that the beginning of college always seems to provoke. She worked her butt off at school during the week so that she could spend her weekends swimming in Jungle Juice at house parties on East Campus, or sneaking into the Music Cafe with her dorm mates, the one bar in town where they knew they wouldn't get carded.

While I could certainly come up with more than a handful of beer-fueled memories that I hope to hold onto

forever, a great deal of them make me cringe. Not being able to talk to guys unless I was at least two drinks in. Not knowing how to really be myself when I wasn't drinking. Never being able to decipher the line between "just enough" and "too much." A situation with some fraternity boys that barely avoided turning into the plot of a Lifetime movie. **And the beer tears, oh goodness, THE BEER TEARS.**

After a few years of this behavior, I flipped a switch. I was done with drinking. Dunzo. I was beginning to realize that the sense of self I lost whenever I indulged too much wasn't worth the temporary buzz. Not to mention the unofficial tally of hours wasted to nursing hangovers. That lost time frightened me.

Not everyone understood my change of behavior, though. I lost some friendships towards the end of college because of it, and was told, "You're a lot more fun when you're drinking." Ouch.

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THE TEMPORARY BUZZ

I thought my perceived lack of fun-ness didn't matter that much (though I prefer the term "old soul")—I graduated college, and moved to a town just outside of Chicago with a lot less of a twenty-something bar scene and more of a thirty-somethings-with-kids scene. I wined and dined with friends at restaurants and at dinner parties, but I'd duck out before the nightlife really kicked off. It was fine with me that my idea of fun didn't include trying to maintain a conversation at shouting volume in a dark, crowded bar, and DID include far more tea, NPR, and Scrabble than was probably normal for someone in their twenties.



Fast forward to a week or so ago in Ireland. Where, instead of Starbucks, there are pubs on every corner, and drinking is undoubtedly a part of Irish culture. And every time I was faced with the option of going to the pub for a pint, I found myself resistant and anxiety-ridden. When I envisioned “bar culture,” I could only think about the loud, over-indulgent environment of my college days and my former lack of control. I couldn’t stop holding onto who I had been, and—in the process—had inadvertently let it shape who I am. **And what kind progress will I ever be able to make in my life if I can’t let go of the past?**

So I said yes to my first pint of Guinness, on St. Patrick’s Day in a pub in Dublin, Ireland. But I think I also said yes to forgiveness. I think I’m realizing that the people we were yesterday will never matter as much as the people we are today. Looking backward, it’s easy for me to get hung up on extremes—the girl who partied and the girl who abstained. But we aren’t intended to be black-and-white creatures; we are a beautiful mix of color and variance and idiosyncrasies. I can have a drink at 9pm in the middle of the week when the bars aren’t packed, AND THEN go home and crochet while watching documentaries on Netflix!

And, really, this idea is so much bigger than to drink or not to drink, isn’t it? My past career “failures” don’t mean I’m a failure, or that I’m somehow doomed to a lifetime of professional drudgery.

And I don’t have to punish myself for the friendships that have faded, because tomorrow is an opportunity for fresh relationships, or new life for old ones. While we can often learn from the past, it’s sometimes far too easy to chain yourself to it, and I know I don’t want to do that anymore. It makes me ponder who I would be today and tomorrow if I had no memory of my personal history, which is a pretty thrilling thought. But I think I’ll need a fresh pint before I go there.



CAITI, Season 6...

is a designer, dreamer, wife, writer, wanderluster, and all-around creative explorer from Chicagoland. Life before her QLC consisted of bad marketing jobs, fading friendships, and disengagement as her coping mechanism of choice. Having “woken up” and realized that she can write her own story, Caiti hopes to have a vibrant year full of joyful passion, boundary-pushing, stamps in her passport, and maybe even a tattoo. In 2012, Caiti has been learning to love Guinness and trying not to drive on the wrong side of the road while she and her husband temporarily relocate to Dublin, Ireland. Stay up to date @CaitiSantaMaria.

TRAVEL & ADVENTURE

I know of no faster way to shake up your life than to tackle a new adventure.

New = something you've never done before.

Adventure = something that scares you a little.

Stepping out of your comfort zone and into new adventures and travel forces you to pay close attention to your choices, to question your automatic responses, to open your eyes. When you're outside of your normal routine, you get the chance to ask: Do I really want what I say I want? Do I need

a change? How would my life be better if I did...got more...tried...?

And in the case of tedious routines, soul-sucking jobs, stale relationships and loss of purpose (all hallmarks of the QLC), **pushing your boundaries in one slice of life gives you courage to shake it up in others.**

It's no secret that a 10-month backpacking trip around the world was both the aftermath of my QLC meltdown, as well as the inspiration for starting Stratejoy.

So very *Eat, Pray, Love* of me, eh?

As I explored, beached, wrote and ate my way around the world, I was able to rediscover the pieces of myself that had gotten buried. Buried under my corporate lingo and professional people-pleasing skills, there was a true leader. Buried beneath my modest

stacked heels and demure black suits, there was an idealistic, free-spirited seeker. Buried underneath my pursuit of traditional success and exhaustion, there was an ambitious, creative teacher.

My travels reminded me that I was a woman who wanted to use her gifts of insight, curiosity and charisma to empower others. As I opted out of the "real world" for a while, I discovered I could create my own definition of success based on my personal values. I could give weight to love and freedom and authenticity.

New experiences are fuel for inspired living.

Every new friend or vista or hellish 20-hour traveling day reminded me that I was so very capable. Each day on the road confirmed that I was allowed to seek pleasure and value happiness. Each new adventure allowed me to push my edges of comfort and to grow.



This is my plea to you—the you who feels trapped, stuck, unmotivated, questioning, or completely and utterly lost:

Get out there and get messy!

It doesn't have to be a trip around the world—it can be a camping trip, a meditation retreat, a weekend exploring a new town, adult jazz camp, or a conference you've dreamed of attending.

The part that scares you? Conquer it. Whether it's traveling alone, performing, striking up conversations with strangers, not planning every detail, or chopping your hair off as you allow yourself to become the "latest and greatest version of yourself"—brave the thing that frightens you the most.

I'm not promising it will be easy, but I am promising it will be fruitful.

Open your heart. Cannonball into the unknown. Trust your instincts.

You'll return refreshed and buzzing. You'll be able to see your "stuckness" with new eyes and perspective. You'll be able to give yourself permission to try something completely different if it strikes your fancy.

Your new adventure is waiting for you.



NEW EXPERIENCES ARE FUEL FOR

INSPIRED LIVING

GET OUT THERE AND GET MESSY!

—Molly Mahar





Is Home Where the Heart Is?

by Kat

FOR YEARS, I'VE BEEN
THE TYPE OF PERSON
WHO WILL REFER TO WHEREVER I'M
SLEEPING THAT NIGHT AS
HOME.

When I arrived in Paris, the acquaintance with whom I was staying apologized for his sparse apartment; he was going through a transition and didn't have very much stuff there. I pointed at the bags I'd placed on the floor a few minutes earlier and said that I understood. He replied, knowingly, "That's your home."

I've been thinking about the concept of home quite a bit recently; it was hard not to after I closed the door to my Brooklyn apartment one final time. I hadn't—and still haven't—signed a lease on a new flat; all I've got for the foreseeable future are friends' couches, hostel beds, and two carry-on bags. It's an interesting place to be.

For years, I've been the type of person who will refer to wherever I'm sleeping that night as home. I remember being on a trip—to Paris, in fact—in high school, and when other people would say something about returning to the hotel, it was just "going home" in my mind. At the time, I thought that I phrased

things that way for the sake of being concise; however, as I look back, I think there's more to it than that.

That trip to France at age 15 marked my first time on an airplane, as well as my first trip abroad. (Other than to Canada. And actually, when my family visited Ontario, we didn't need passports to go. In other words, it doesn't count.) I knew from the moment I set foot on the streets of Paris—well, except for an unfortunate incident involving a croque monsieur, which did not taste delicious when I was feeling nauseated and jetlagged—that I wanted to visit more places. A lot more. In fact, I wanted to be a fancy international businesswoman so that I could traipse all over the world and get paid to do it.

I'd caught the travel bug.

Though that initial dream of corporate-funded globetrotting never really materialized, I became a traveler. My mom even started calling me her little nomad. Since that first time in another country in 1997, I've lived* in 16 places and crashed in countless others—hotel rooms, hostels, friends' apartments, camps, farms, etc. Each of those has been home in my mind, even if only for a night. I'm happy that I developed that perspective, because without it, I think it would be very difficult to take this trip.



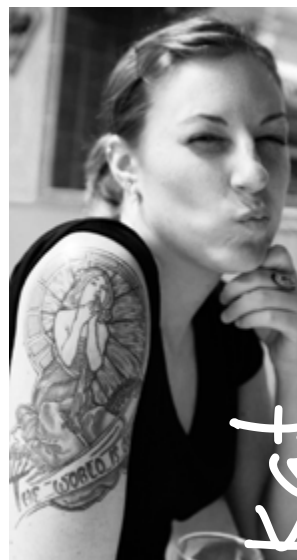
I found inspiration and new life. It's in experiences shared with friends and family, in meals and memories. Home is transient because I am, and my heart is with me as I go.

What makes somewhere home for you?

*In this instance, I'm defining places I've lived as anywhere I've paid rent (dorm rooms included) or houses where I've stayed rent-free for more than one month.

We all hear from a young age that "home is where the heart is." I wasn't sure until now whether that was true for me. I mean, if that quote is correct, shouldn't my heart be with my family, or best friends, or...something invariable?

And then it hit me this morning: that is exactly where my heart is. It's on the road, with my loved ones scattered around the globe. It's in cities where



KAT, Season 5...

is a photograph-taking, gluten-free pie-baking, knitting, tattooed yoga teacher and blogger—though it might be something a little bit different tomorrow. After finally acknowledging the QLC that had been sneaking up on her for several years, she gave notice at her New York City-based non-profit job in May 2011. She left Brooklyn in September 2011 to travel around Europe, and five months later, she arrived in Sydney, Australia, where she's currently kicking ass, taking names, and teaching yoga. Kat loves unique eyewear, Fluevogs, adventures, twitter, and the color red. Follow her @shinyredtype.

Change: It Does a Body Good

by Katharine



“What happens when we lose the things that anchor us?”
—The Good Girl’s Guide to Getting Lost

My ‘anchor’ consisted of a mediocre job, a struggling non-profit organization, unsatisfying friendships, and a burning feeling of inadequacy. It triggered my Quarterlife Crisis and I started asking myself those tough questions—What do I really want out of life? Will I ever be enough? Am I really happy?

“What if, instead of grasping at something to hold on to, we pull up our roots and walk away?”

I always thought the idea of walking away from something (or someone) was admitting defeat, giving up, or taking the easy way out. I thought that

by walking away, you became weak and vulnerable to everything (and everyone) around you. But walking away from an unsatisfying, mediocre lifestyle that I was living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania forced me to answer those tough questions and evaluate the self-destructing path I had created for myself. It forced me to realize that I wasn’t happy; I wanted something more fulfilling and gratifying.

“Before, some places just seemed too far, too difficult to reach, but once you start traveling, you never want to stop.”

Prague was just the tipping point. I want to backpack through Europe, lay on the beaches in South East Asia, explore South America, and take a Safari ride through an African Jungle. I want to see every hidden gem and set foot on every continent.

“What I found on the road was a tiny piece of myself. These past few years I had survived my own personal disasters and realized I was strong enough... to live my life without fear or worry or

doubt that nothing was going according to plan, as though such a plan ever existed in the first place.”

Traveling abroad for any significant amount of time truly changes your life. As you adapt to the different cultures and lifestyles, you learn that you don’t need things like cable television or central air conditioning (neither of which I had in Prague) to survive. You begin to learn the difference between need and want, and you learn to find pleasure in simple things, like laughing from your soul and smiling just because.

My life in the States was becoming too predictable—work, hockey, drink, sleep. Lather, rinse, repeat—and it really scared the shit out of me. Is this really what my life has become?! Before I decided to go to Prague, I had a major anxiety attack. The fear crippled me and I felt like I was chained to the floor. **I’m scared of becoming one of those people who settle for a mediocre life because they’re too afraid of being gutsy and taking risks.**



What if, instead of grasping at something to hold on to, we pull up our roots and walk away?



I didn't want to believe him, but as I started reconnecting with more friends and acquaintances, I discovered that he was right. I felt more lost returning to America than I did wandering the cobblestone streets of Prague.

I always thought that everyone around me was changing—new jobs, new relationships, making babies—but the truth is, I'm the one who's changing, and everyone else is standing still, feet stuck in the cement.

Five months ago, my biggest fear was moving to Prague. Those five months flew by, I survived living in Prague (and I truly loved it), and now my biggest fear is becoming inadequate, unhappy, and settling for mediocrity.

Two days after I returned to the States briefly to get my visa and work permit approved by the U.S. Embassy to teach in Thailand, I wanted to leave again to avoid falling back into a mundane, unsatisfying lifestyle that I once had in the City of Brotherly Love.

I thought working through the culture shock of life in Prague would be difficult, but as it turns out, my biggest culture shock was returning to the States and trying to fit in again. Nothing changed since I left, and people don't care about my stories now that I'm back. A friend had warned me about this over lunch.

So much of my life has changed (for the better) in a short amount of time. I guess sometimes change is exactly what we need to live our best life.




Katharine

KATHARINE, Season 4...

is a Philadelphia transplant by way of Pittsburgh, PA. She has successfully climbed the legal ladder and co-founded a nonprofit organization, but in December 2010, a devastating job loss and entrepreneurial failures bruised her ego and shattered her soul. So, in the midst of the Quarterlife Crisis, she traded the City of Brotherly Love for Prague, Czech Republic to pursue a TEFL Certification and travel the world. After living in Australia for the last 15 months, Katharine has again traded Aussie accents and Tim Tam slams for lesson plans and chopsticks and is now teaching English in Beijing, China and falling in love with life in Asia. Keep up with her travels @hatestweeting.

Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair

by Cassie



There's something romantic about trudging around San Francisco in the rain, soaked to the bone, cold and lost with a quickly dying phone. Old Cassie would have been scared to death. Old Cassie wouldn't have taken this spontaneous trip in the first place- especially alone. But there I was. Walking around in the rain, taking it all in stride and without being the least bit scared.

So let's rewind. Seven days earlier, I was out for a morning walk in my neighborhood when I stumbled upon a crack in the walkway. It was in the shape of a heart. I have this friend back in Chicago who spots hearts in obscure places with ease- whether it's a spill of milk, or a blister on her foot, she will find it. I knew she would love this and I try to practice letting people know when I am thinking

about them. So I took a photo with my phone and sent it to her!

She loved it. I knew she would. We continued to text back and forth for a good part of the day. We hadn't spoken in quite a few months. She told me that her boyfriend and she were coming to California in a week's time but unfortunately they wouldn't be able to make it to my neck of the woods, further south. Without even blinking, I replied, "No way! That's awesome! Of course, I'll come see you!"

It felt like a natural response they are coming half way across the States after all. I could at least go half way across one.

But wait. Here I am renting a small room, working a part time job, barely making it by. Now I'm taking a spontaneous trip to San Fran?! Highly illogical sounding. I felt compelled, though. It felt logical. The mere fact my heart wasn't racing in fear felt like it was the only comfort I needed to continue.

Weighing my travel options, I decided to go with the cheapest mode of transportation, which was bus. To make the most of my time, I would leave L.A. two hours after I got off of work Thursday

night and be in San Francisco 11am the next morning- a close to 10 hour trip. Returning agenda would be 4pm the following day, spending one glorious night with my friends and returning to L.A. by 2am totaling about 30 hours in the hilly city.

The question I kept asking myself and struggling with was, "How can I justify spending this money and losing comfortable sleep on a mere 30 hours in a city?" I thought about this off and on while I bought my tickets- and once I finally (and oddly confidently) pressed the "Purchase Tickets" button, there was no turning back. I was excited about my decision!

I filled my Fanboy and Chum Chum backpack with a clean pair of underwear, a pair of pants to sleep in, notebook, "How to Train Your Dragon" by Cressida Cowell, watercolor moleskin, watercolors, almonds, phone charger, toothpaste, toothbrush, and an ink pen. It's

Could I really be the lightly living and adventurous type?

what I secretly want in life, to live with the necessary items, traveling the world. Living lightly. Here, I'm about to get a taste of that!

It was my first time traveling by bus. It was packed and incredibly uncomfortable! Luckily my seat mate didn't speak a lick of English but found me really comfortable. I woke up to him lying on my shoulder with his arm across my leg, snoring. He woke up to me looking concerned out the window holding my backpack tightly. He apologized in Spanish, and I spoke what little I knew to let him know that it was okay. I

tried saying "It happens. Do not worry." but I think I may have said "If we don't shoot the dog, the president will." Parting was such sweet sorrow when he got off in Fresno. Incidentally, it was then I realized how cold the bus was! I missed my cowboy hat wearing Mexican heater a little.

My interaction with him was quite intriguing. He would try to have conversations with me and I would piece together fragments of what I remember from high school Spanish class. It wasn't so bad. Not understanding his language. Could I really be the lightly living and adventurous type?

Upon arriving in San Fran, I was tired. My eyelids were heavy. It was raining. Hard. I had no clue where my friends were staying. My phone was wet and dying quickly. I finally got directions from an off-duty bus driver who was smoking barely outside the doors of his bus to keep out of the rain but to at least try not to break rules. He looked tough and scary but once he opened his mouth, he gave me every bit of information I needed. I found the recommended bus and took it! Though, I ended up getting off at a street I needed to be on to find out that the bus was

going the same way and on top of it, it was up a few of those steep hills San Francisco is so famous for. (Though my thighs totally felt the love when a full inch dropped once I got home!)

My friends had bunk beds in their hotel room so I got to sleep in a real bed that night! But it was worse than a hostel. There were shared showers and bathrooms—but no toilet paper and what appeared to be a glory hole right in front of the women's toilet. In our room, there was a leak and a mucky smell. The curtain on the window was a sheet nailed to the wall with a red stain that we dramatically describe as "probably blood." The hallways reeked of weed. Sure, the place was cheap—but we were also pretty sure bed bugs were going to eat us in one swift gulp. We definitely looked in and out of all of the bed clothes! Originally we slept on top of them but it got sooooo cold, we eventually gave in and took the dive to sleeping under them. The next day they switched hotels. I was relieved. I hated the thought of them staying there once I left.

And even though I felt that way, I was so enthralled while we slept in this creepy smelly room. Would we

die before morning? It was so exciting! I couldn't wait to find out! My immortality is one thought I hate thinking about, but for once, it didn't frighten me.

Guinness on St. Patrick's Day beside Jack Kerouac Alley. Book browsing at City Lights. Great food. Great beer. A lot of food and beer! I even got to bust out my watercolor moleskin and take my cheap watercolors for a ride (see photos attached). I am so new to watercolor that I just played for the fun of it instead of worrying if it would be a masterpiece. My friends actually wanted to take a photo of the one I did of them! Instead, I wanted to give it to them—I didn't think for a moment they would like it to begin with. And there was walking—so much walking! My legs were frozen and the color blue from the rain rinsing the dye from my jeans. I saw a woman changing through a window while we ate Italian food—we didn't realize we signed up for dinner and a show!

We took a cab at one point with a very left wing personality. When he found out we were from "My Kind of Town," he told us how much he disliked Frank Sinatra but yet kept quoting his song lyrics. He told us he, too, was from the Midwest. I asked him why he made the move to San Fran as he had been there 33 years now. He said because they have acupuncture. Curious! I have heard of making a move for one's health but specifically for something so progressive

as it must have been years ago is one I haven't heard. Then I realized there is a TON I haven't heard or seen.

It's all just waiting out there in the world. It's waiting for me.

When I was determining what my core values were during the Joy Equation, I couldn't stop thinking about Adventure. I had never thought that it would mean so much to me that I would stare at it for so long. I consider my life purpose to be a storyteller, and what do stories entail? Adventure. It had eluded me—the connection. Not until this year, have I realized that I don't want to live a life without it. In fact, I'm being gutsy enough to work towards having a small online business that I can do from anywhere—on the road—from any country. Typically, I would be sooo uncomfortable with the insecurity of that idea, but lately, it just feels right. Of course, I could be a jet setting entrepreneur. Obviously! The audacity tugs at my heart strings.

I have never felt as free as I did during this trip. I promise myself I will seek out these opportunities, work towards my Adventurous dream, and get back to that

incredible Nirvana-like high. I felt like everything and nothing was out of my hands. What is the worst possible outcome? My answer is always, and illogically, death. I wasn't even scared of that. I felt like if it were my time to go by falling into the Sea Lion den, then it is my time to go. It's not my choice, the Universe has a plan and I just have to meet it half way. I can no longer try to save myself and stay protected, because, quite frankly, it's boring!

This is what I want my life to be. Full of uncertainty and excitement! It truly was a wonderful adventure and I can't wait for the next one.



CASSIE, Season 6...

is a writer and artist living in Southern California—2,000 miles from the comfort of her family back in the bread bowl of America. She's been so busy chasing her dream of working in Animation that she forgot to eat breakfast, brush her teeth, and to exercise. Thinking that she would take care of it once she got to her "ideal place life," her QLC is knocking at her door with a fist full of reality check. She now realizes that the journey is long, moments are fleeting, and she has to humor herself first. Catch her flittering on Twitter @cassiesoliday!



Let Me Fly with My Beaded Paper Wings

by Camila

I DIDN'T HAVE A REAL BED,
NOR A TABLE OR CHAIR,
BUT I DID HAVE BOOKS,
AND I DID HAVE
ART.

Multicolored telephone wire woven into baskets. Recycled newspaper crafted into 18-inch eagles. Used steel drums cut and transfigured into beautiful mermaids. I adore how simple materials, odds and ends that some people deem garbage can be morphed into beautiful and unique forms of art.

When I was living in Hartford, CT as an AmeriCorps member I was certainly lacking in what most people consider necessities. I didn't have a real bed, nor a table or chair, but I did have books, and I did have art. I had hand-sized masks from Santo Domingo on the periphery of my windows, paintings and giant collages created by my half-blind grandfather decorating my walls, and a tiled-metal-work mirror from Mexico adorning my "night table."

Thinking about it, both of my parents place a high value on art; it's simply an essential component of life. They took my siblings and me to museums nearly every place we visited, bought

paintings from local artists, and we always had a plethora of sketchbooks, colored pencils, paint, beads, and other craft supplies to entertain our minds' latest creative endeavor. There is so much I appreciate about this. Without a doubt it's a value that I would like to pass on to Geoffrey's and my future children and it is unquestionably part of why I want to go to graduate school to study...folk art. That's right, I want to go on in school to get a PhD for doing research on 1) the use of recycled materials in folk art, and 2) the way women's art cooperatives create financial opportunities and may help prevent issues of violence against women.

Deep breath. Yep. Oh folk art, how you make me swoon.

Last May, I went to visit my amazing, go-getter of a friend who was working at a health clinic in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. I knew I would be spending some time with her but I also knew I had to visit some artisans in Haiti. Since I was still an AmeriCorps member and knew I'd have a while before returning to school I figured I might as well get a head start and conduct some independent research while there and see if this was indeed what I wanted to dedicate several years of my life to doing.

Of course I could have researched Haitian folk art by skimming research

...there is something to be said about being out of my comfort zone that entices me to just go all the way and do things I wouldn't normally do...

papers and searching the web. I also could have very easily called up a few connections from the cowboy community I grew up in to interview artisans about their particular forms of metal work, basketry, and horse hair braiding... and I still very well might do so. However, there is something to be said about being out of my comfort zone that entices me to just go all the way and do things I wouldn't normally do, like ride a motorcycle on dangerous roads, unexpectedly hitchhike, introduce myself to random people, or take the initiative to contact and actually meet with artisans. I suppose this, coalescing

with my friend's descriptions of the art she encountered in Haiti was particularly intriguing to me and was the impetus I needed to see this art she so evocatively described first hand.

One afternoon, my friend and I journeyed to Croix-de-Bouquets, a neighborhood in Port-au-Prince of metal-workers. Walking through the dusty streets, men worked outside pounding out steel to shape into gorgeous wall-pieces. As we walked by, artisans beckoned us to enter their homes, to see what they had created. I was in love and perfectly content having my eyes scan the walls looking at tree-of-life after tree-of-life, roosters, elephants, people carrying baskets of fruit, profiles of women with hair spiraling out into the wind. Gasp, this was exactly what I wanted to do! What was preventing me from choosing this as a career path, especially when it was something that I loved?

Another day I rode with a new friend on his moto-taxi to visit a women's cooperative that created flip-flops, wallets, and bags from old chip bags and the woven plastic from bags of oranges. That was an interesting visit as most of what I learned, do to my inability to

speak Kreyol, came through hand motions and observation.

A third trip out into the city took me to The Apparent Project, a compound where men and women rolled strips of boxes and paper into spherical beads to thread into gorgeous jewelry.

That solidified it. Seeing folk art at my favorite museum, The International Folk Art Museum of Santa Fe, New Mexico, is one thing, to see it arising from the trenches of detritus is another thing entirely.

The innovation of ideas birthing art, the impact of art cooperatives on an individual's or a family's financial sustainability, the way that something can be created from nothing—all of these fascinate me and are precisely the reasons that of all the graduate programs I could choose, this is what I need to study.

One of the most intriguing concepts that visiting these three places brought to mind was the dichotomy between the creator of art and the way in which it is used. Who is purchasing the art? In many cases it is people outside of the



country or the upper echelons of society who are buying the art. I know that amongst the Croix-de-Bouquets artisans, pieces that would sell for around \$11 if purchased in person would easily be sold for \$50 in the United States. As such, who is the go-between? Who is really profiting from the creations that are being made? Who is the art made for and for what purpose? Is the art created merely for aesthetic purposes or is it functional or made for spiritual reasons? All of these questions merit exploration and this is precisely what I am willing to do.

Although I knew for the most part what aspects of folk art I was particularly interested in prior to visiting Haiti, my trip ignited my curiosity regarding the financial component that plays into the transition of art from its conception to

where it lands. It also raises the question of who really profits from the art and if it's being used for its intended purpose. There are just so many questions to ask and so many directions the answers can take based on the particular artisan and piece of work. Meaning...hopefully... there is much work to be done in the field of folk art research.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I was looking into schools in Portland, Oregon, where my fiancé and I are moving after our wedding. For a long time, I didn't know if I should look into sociology, anthropology, or women's studies. They've all been programs I've been considering but I never knew exactly which one I should pick. I mean, each one has its pros and cons. Then I found it. A couple of hours away in Eugene, if I apply, and I'm accepted, I can go for a master's and a doctorate in Folk Lore. What could

be more perfect than that?!? Then of course there's the question of, what countries would I want to focus on? What questions would I want to ask? How could I go back to school and also be a doula/midwife? And of course, there's the question that keeps popping up and I keep pushing aside the question of, what would I do next? Would I become a professor? Would I start or work for an NGO? I don't even know. Perhaps that's just another question for another time.



Camila

CAMILA, Season 6...

is a Colorado/New Mexico native currently transported from New Haven, CT to Portland, OR. After a year of financial insecurity, her Quarterlife Crisis slapped her upside the head and said, "TIME FOR A CHANGE!" in November 2011 when she found out from hearsay that she lost her job. Now she's breathing in the life of each day—using her spare time to create jewelry, spend time with her dashing husband and clumsy kitten, find a new job, and figure out how to make her dreams of becoming a doula/midwife/graduate-student-of-global-folk-art a reality. She tweets @ZiaCamila.

The Reluctant Adventurer

by Sarah



I do lots of stuff other people tell me they'd never do.

Start my own writing business.

Become a group fitness instructor.

Take on motherhood.

I lead a group of over 400 members for my local moms group. Spill my guts on Stratejoy and on my own blog.

Go to blog conferences alone, without knowing anyone, rooming by myself and have every bad thing I thought would happen to me, happen to me.

It's true, I get nervous and anxious about those things. But blinded by determination, I just hold my nose and jump in the deep end.

You would think I'm sort of adventurous.

But I'm not.

I'll strap on a mic and lead a group of 25 people through a step class and go right up and introduce myself to moms I meet at the park without thinking twice.

But I won't travel.

I've never been much of a traveler. I prefer my own bed and my own house and my own coffee maker and my own routine. As much as I like to change things up and take on new challenges in my life, I don't like to mess up my schedule.

Dan loves to travel.

Since he travels for work on a regular basis, nothing about traveling fazes Dan. He's an expert packer, moves through security like he's performing a graceful dance, rents cars and sleeps through the night easily in any hotel room.

Not me.

AS MUCH AS I LIKE TO
CHANGE THINGS UP AND

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IN MY LIFE, I DON'T LIKE TO

MESS UP MY SCHEDULE.

After Dan and I got married, he planned this elaborate honeymoon with stops in Capri, Rome, and the South of France. I didn't participate in any part of the planning. I didn't want to know about it because I knew it would freak me out. So I laid out my stuff and let Dan pack it all away and tried not to think about it.

Once we got to Capri, I did a little better. I took pictures, tried to relax, and eventually was able to sleep even though the bed wasn't anything like my bed at home.

But when we arrived in Rome, I wanted to go home. We'd been gone a couple of days, and the spontaneity of travel

wore on me. I got tired of finding places to get a reliable dinner, sick of living out of a suitcase, craving my routine.

Since I knew I couldn't just go home—and I really should enjoy the wonder that is Italy—I stuck it out and made it through the rest of the trip. I absolutely enjoyed myself. But there was a part of me that felt relieved to get home.

Dan's tried to get me to accompany him on various business trips, get me to plan weekend getaways. But I won't do it. The only other time he got me to go away was two years ago when he bribed me with an iPod Touch if I agreed to go to London and Paris with him.

What kind of a girl needs a bribe to take a fun trip with her husband?

Me. Miss Routine.

Anyway, this lack of adventurous spirit is not good for me. While I usually subscribe to the do what's best for you and don't force yourself mentality, I think this issue deserves an asterisk. There's a difference

between a genuine feeling of concern and an unwillingness to go anywhere because you prefer your own coffee.

Travel feels scarily spontaneous to me. I don't do stuff on a whim. I prefer to know how things are going to go. With travel, planes are delayed, hotel rooms get mixed up, and for someone who is directionally challenged, not knowing where I am, specifically, gets to me.

So while I can't change who I am at my core, being more adventurous is on my list of Things To Do. I want to get away because, really, my everyday mommy routine can border on mundane. Every day is starting to look the same. Like my own personal Groundhog's Day.

The thing about travel that I do like is the feeling of freshness. No matter how much I dreaded the trip, I always come back feeling renewed and inspired. But since I won't make travel part of

life, I don't get out enough, and those feel-good feelings wash away fast.

I promised Dan I'd help him plan a weekend getaway. Like, soon. I don't know the when or where. But I do know why. Every so often I need to get away from what I know, get a new perspective, change up my view so I can come back to my everyday life with renewed zeal.



Sarah

SARAH, Season 6...

lives outside D.C. with her toddler, engineer husband, and a garbage-eating dog. Since she moves at warp speed, she earned two degrees, got married, bought a house, and had a baby in quick succession. These major life transitions added up to a whopping QLC, where she finds herself caught in the balance between motherhood, marriage, and what she wants for herself. When she's not chasing her toddler, Sarah can be found blogging (www.sarahrosemary.com), tweeting (@sarah_rosemary) and freelance writing, drinking lots of coffee, and teaching aerobics classes.

WORK LIFE

We spend the majority of our daylight hours working. Or checking Craigslist's job openings from our childhood bedrooms. Or stressing out about hating our jobs while surfing the internet when the boss isn't looking, but never really doing anything about our situations. Or trying to reinvent our careers, but having no idea how to go about it besides going back to school to get a master's degree in... well, something.

It could be the economy or the emphasis our generation has on finding fulfilling

work, but your work life is a major focus when you're going through a Quarterlife Crisis!

The part that I dig about this? Not the fact that you feel stuck professionally (duh), but knowing that you don't just want to find a job.

You want to find a *calling*.

You want to find out how to explore your passions and activate them into a position, or a platform, or a business, or a meaningful career.

And that just turns me on.

My own unfulfilling job in the hospitality world was the true impetus for my QLC because I felt like I wasn't making a difference in the world. And I knew (as cheesy as it sounds) that I wanted to make a difference in the world.

There are so many people who will tell you to abandon your craving for meaning in your working world and just get a job.

You'll hear, "It's called work for a reason—it's not supposed to be fun," or that you've got to "put in your time before you get to do what you want," or "You should just be grateful that you have a paycheck."

This is because that is their experience of work. You can't blame them, but you don't have to believe them either. Perhaps they never found their calling. Perhaps they didn't care about activating their passion and were happy to slog through 40 years of soul-numbing work.

But there is another way to do it! It's not easy, it's not instant, but it is possible. I have found my calling and am practicing it to the best of my ability through coaching, speaking, writing and building a tribe of soul sisters.

My calling is teaching women how to value their own happiness and strength. My vehicle to do that is Stratejoy. My passion



work is the message I get to share with the world and I'm extremely grateful that I found my way here.

I can't imagine doing anything else.

Want some of that for yourself?

Spend the time, the investment, the mental power, the chance of failure and the possibility of success going after your calling. Explore your balance of passion work and paying the bills. Go after your dream position and place of influence.

Get on board with believing there is something you are meant to do and trusting in

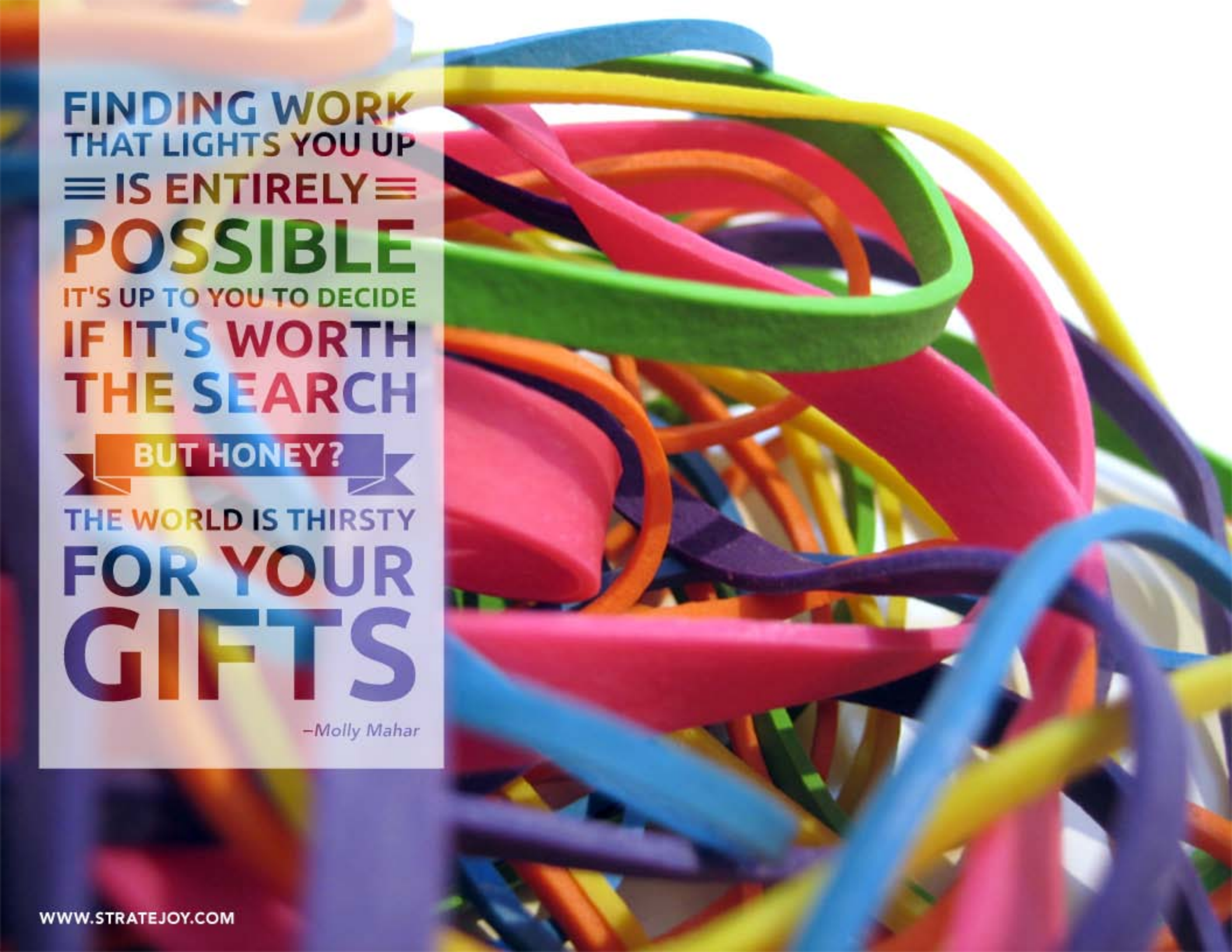
the fact that some part of you already knows what that is.

You've got all the ingredients, cupcake. Your strengths. Your values. Your talents. Your passion. Your must-haves. Your integrity. Your desire.

Now it's time for trust and simply putting in the effort, day in and day out.

You may have a dozen false starts and shifts in your passion work as you grow and transition (I've had quite a few myself), but the goal of fulfillment from your vocation should never be abandoned.

You deserve it, my dear. To hell with what your parents say.



FINDING WORK
THAT LIGHTS YOU UP
≡ IS ENTIRELY ≡
POSSIBLE

IT'S UP TO YOU TO DECIDE
IF IT'S WORTH
THE SEARCH

BUT HONEY?

THE WORLD IS THIRSTY
**FOR YOUR
GIFTS**

—Molly Mahar

I Feel Like a Zombie Come Back to Life

by Hannah



"There is no duty we so much underrate as the duty of being happy. By being happy we sow anonymous benefits upon the world." —Robert Louis Stevenson

As I write this I sit on the beach in Monterosso in the Cinque Terre in Italy. Kids squeal as they dunk each other in the deep blue green waters of the Mediterranean. Couples cuddle on beach towels giggling and whispering to each other in Italian. German tourists bare more than some of us want to see while trying to catch some sun. I sip cold, cheap beer and listen to the waves pound the sand near my feet. I'm trying to read my book like Mister who is sitting next to me, but I'm too caught up. This is a beautiful moment. People all around me are loving life. And so am I.

And I wonder, "What would it be like if most days we all loved life?"

"The idea that you have the right to a good job that you enjoy and pays well has got to be an almost entirely unique concept in the history of the human race that only my generation could assume." This bold statement on my 30 year old friend's Facebook page caught me totally off guard and I've been thinking about it ever since.

There were lots of comments, but this one got me the most: "I will concede the part about liking your job. That is something that our generation was spoon-fed along with our attendance and participation trophies." I don't know if it was that everyone agreed with him or that no one felt it worth their time to comment, but not a single person spoke up in disagreement. Is it just me? It made me so sad.

Kahlil Gibran wrote, "Work is love made visible. And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work."

At home I look around me and see people in every direction who are bored,



Work is love made visible.

complacent, or just plain miserable in their work. Most spend 40+ hours a week at their jobs for at least 45 years of their lives (if they don't start working until after college and actually retire at 65). After subtracting vacation and sick days, that's a total of 84,600 hours of something that makes at least some of us feel like uninspired, unsatisfied (dare I say?) robots. Are you depressed yet?

I am. And apparently so are a lot of others.

Katy Perry's song "Last Friday Night (TGIF)" has been on the Billboard Top 100 chart for the last 20 weeks. Rebecca Black's song "Friday" has almost 31 million views on YouTube.

Take Usher's stance on the matter: "Thank God the week is done. I feel like a zombie come back to life. (Back back to life.)"

I don't believe in working for the weekend.

It never once in my whole life crossed my mind that I might settle for a career that didn't thrill me AND pay the bills. My parents were supportive in whatever venture I took on. I felt that



the expectation from them was not that I make a lot of money and “be successful,” but that I find something I genuinely love that makes me really happy and actually be successful.

It is so sad to me that in our day and age my friend who is young, smart, and talented does not believe he deserves happiness, success, and yes, money, to live to a certain standard. And I’m sure he’s not the only one, which fires me up even more. I know I talk about this a lot, but it is so close to my heart. We deserve happiness. Every last one of us. We deserve to feel inspired, to love our lives, to learn and grow on a daily basis. We deserve to wake up every

morning without the dread of the day’s tasks weighing on our hearts like a bully sitting on our chests.

And I get it. I’ve heard and used every excuse in the book. It sounds silly, but it’s HARD to do what you love! It’s hard to take risks. It’s hard to let go of expectations. It’s hard to be weird. It’s hard! But I’m willing to work hard.

“The heights by great men reached and kept Were not obtained by sudden flight, But they, while their companions slept, Were toiling upward in the night.” —Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

I’m not trying to preach to you, but rather to preach to myself. Find

something you love and explore it with everything you’ve got. Embrace your form (or forms?) of genius.

You are deserving of a life that you love. A new mantra, maybe?

I AM DESERVING OF A LIFE THAT I LOVE! (Attendance and participation trophies optional.)



Hannah

HANNAH, Season 5...

is a newlywed living in Seattle and wondering how the heck she got to be 30 years old already. Her QLC slowly seeped into her soul leaving her restless, unfulfilled, and, okay, maybe a little snarky. If it weren’t for cottage cheese with tomatoes, sticky notes, singer-songwriters, good (cheap) wine, and the dream of being an independent business owner, she’d have lost it by now. She believes creativity is a muscle that needs to be worked daily in order for it to grow, and intends to practice what she preaches. Since blogging for Stratejoy, Hannah has officially become a full-time lover of life, having quit her nanny gig and taken her photography business by the horns. She revels in the little things every day.

For Anyone Who Feels Miserable in Their Job

by Laura



Dear anyone who feels stuck and miserable in their job,

I'm thinking about you today. It's hump day and I'm having a hard time getting any work done. And although part of me is feeling blah, the other part is elated. Because this kind of blah is so, so much better than the kind I used to feel...

back when being at work felt so icky, it hurt.

Luckily, I don't feel that way anymore. But if you do, we need to talk. 'Cus here's the thing: you are too important to not be happier. Your life is way too valuable to just trudge through it, letting the days pass.

If your job leaves you drained, uninspired, frazzled, and fragile, I feel you. If every morning you wrack your brain

trying to come up with an excuse for not going to work, I feel you. If you work for someone who questions your value, overlooks your intelligence, has you on the defensive 24/7, leaves you on the verge of tears, and causes a swell of anxiety to rise within you on a daily basis, I really feel you.

I've been there. In fact, I lived there, day in a day out, for four and a half years.

I dragged my ass to work and put on an Academy Award-worthy performance of grin and bear it. I worked long hours, felt unsupported, managed a numbing amount of details, and bowed down to a boss with a leadership style that I will never, ever respect. I didn't enjoy what I was doing, but I was good at it. And for a while, I figured that was the best I could ask for. I figured a job "in my field," a nice paycheck, a health plan, and responsibility that sounded impressive meant I was pretty damn lucky.

I was grateful for all of that, definitely. But here's the thing: being grateful and wanting more are not mutually

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exclusive concepts.

It's OK to be grateful that you have a job and appreciate specific things it brings you. **But it's also OK to question if it's what you actually want.**

It's even more OK to answer that question with "No. No thank you. This is NOT what I want."

There's no shame in that. None. Because life's too short to be miserable doing the one thing you do the most of: working.

I spent four and a half years in a tiring, difficult and authenticity-draining situation. Because of what I learned, the strength of character I was able to preserve, the financial compensation I

received, and the accomplishments I racked up, I would never take it back. But I also would never recommend it to anybody.

If you are feeling stuck, uninspired, disrespected, and below your potential, I need you to know that it's OK to walk away. It's OK to dream bigger and to believe you're capable of more. **You are capable of more. You deserve to be happy at work, no matter what type of work you do.**

Shhh .I know. I know the "but" you're about to use. I know them all. For starters, change is scary. Whether you're happy in your job or not, you've settled in there. It's familiar; it's your routine. You have friends there. And maybe a favorite coffee shop nearby, a security guard or regular customer with a warm smile, and a cheap parking spot or fast bus route; all of which you'd miss. And your boss? Even though he/she doesn't give you the respect, opportunity and room for growth that you deserve, the devil you know is better than the devil you don't. At least you know what to

expect. And all bosses and managers have quirks; you probably won't ever find someone who's a treat to work for.

Right?

Well, as someone who's been there and has since come out the other side? Trust me, none of that stuff is worth it. None of that stuff makes up for snuffing out your bright light and being the worker bee someone wants you to be, rather than the brilliant, jazzed up contributor you long to be.

You can find another job—or another career path altogether! You can be a star in your own right. You can find an outlet for the intelligence, ideas, creativity, and passion you're keeping bottled up. You can work in an environment that is based on trust, respect and collaboration.

I know from experience how much your

confidence and faith in yourself can be compromised by having that square-peg-in-a-round-hole feeling at work.

But I also know, now, that once you leave that environment, your confidence and faith—and so much more!—will be waiting for you. They will reclaim you.

Inspiration awaits. Go on...go get it!

Love,
Someone who's been there
xxoo



LAURA, Season 4...

is a writer, strategist and believer in better. In 2010, she started her pursuit of authenticity. She quit her cushy PR job, launched a communications consulting business, said yes to 30 things she'd normally say no to, and started learning to be vulnerable. Leaving old assumptions and coping strategies behind, this Canadian girl has turned her life in Halifax into an unfamiliar world. In the midst of a QLC, she's felt like an adventurer without a compass, but she couldn't be more excited about it. Today, Laura (@mynameisbigL) is focused on living her values more fully while managing a growing biz, nurturing a new marriage and home, and setting juicy, creative goals for the future.



I Followed My Plan. And Then it Blew Up.

by Sarah

AND THE MORE IT FELT
LIKE I DIDN'T GET
WHAT WAS GOING ON,
THE WORSE
I FELT ABOUT MYSELF.

I started my career in county government as a camp counselor. Charged with a dozen five-year-olds, I spent my summer leading sing-a-longs, helping chubby fingers hold paint brushes, and making sure no one drowned at the local pool.

I loved everything about that job. The kids ate me up, vying to sit in my lap, wanting to know if I could move in with them and their families. After that summer I knew I had to get serious about a profession, so I lapped in all that goodness and tried to hold onto the fun and responsibility of my summer camp career.

Soon enough I found myself on the verge of graduating and an uncertain future. So I did what any good undergrad from U.Va. did. I entered a master's program. I powered my way through my Master's in Public Policy while balancing my second job with the county: working at a teen and community center.

I adored working with the teens. Sure, they were surly and kind of rude. And forever making trouble. (Here's a tip: when you see a group of teenage boys walk into a bathroom with pool balls from a billiard table, call a plumber right away.) But they were also full of energy and spunk and challenged me to constantly think of new ways to entertain them.

As I wrapped up my master's degree, I knew it was time to move on. Obviously I couldn't stay. I got my Master's in Public Policy to, well, write and analyze policy. Not run a teen center and help 8th graders with math homework. So I applied for a job at the county's budget office.

And I got that job. I looked just like every one of those analysts in the office. A BA in government and a MA in public policy/administration. I could write, analyze, and use Excel. It would seem I fit right in.

Right away I felt underwater. Everything was complicated. I tried and tried and tried but nothing clicked. And the more it felt like I didn't get what was going on, the worse I felt about myself. I clunked around the budgeting computer system, trying to find the missing hundreds of thousands of dollars I mis-entered. The agency budgets read like Chinese.

I felt defeated. Wasn't I supposed to be good at this? This office was the next

logical step. It was in the plan. Why am I so bad at this?

Tears stung behind my eyes most days. I wanted to do a good job. And I so wasn't. I tried my best, always giving everything I had. But each day felt like I was jamming myself in a hole that didn't fit.

About a year into my job, I found out I was pregnant. I assumed I'd go back to work after my daughter was born. I never thought I'd be stay-at-home-mom. But as her due date approached and still no child care on the horizon, my husband and I decided to tighten our budget and for me to stay home.

Since I knew I wasn't the world's best budget analyst, I didn't feel sad about leaving my job. I assumed it was for the best. But a couple months into my stay-at-home gig, I realized I wasn't all that good at this staying at home thing either.

Then everything started to blow up. I felt alone, isolated, like I was the only one in the world feeling all misshapen and out of place. Clearly, I wasn't built to

be a budget analyst. But I wasn't doing so great at mothering all day either. This signaled to me that I'd never be good at anything.

Around this time, I happened to find the Stratejoy blog. I'm not exactly sure how I got here. I think amongst the Twitter and Facebook and blogging rabbit hole, I found the Stratejoy community and thought to myself these people are my people. I think they get me.

It seemed I wasn't the only one struggling. Whether it was motherhood or marriage or being a single girl or divorced or whatever, there was a lot of struggling going on. But also a lot of earnest. A sense of grasping for joy, a happier life.

That resonated with me. Yes, I am struggling. True, I am feeling identity-less. No, I'm not sure where I'm going. But, absolutely yes, do I want to live my best life. My blog is called Sunny Side Up. Because

no matter how down and out I've been (or will be), I am certain there's a path to a better way.

So here I am at Stratejoy, sharing my story in the hopes that something will resonate with you. So you won't feel alone. And I won't feel alone. And together we can come to terms with struggle and instead of letting it eat us up, we can work through it to live a life on our terms.




SARAH, Season 6...

lives outside D.C. with her toddler, engineer husband, and a garbage-eating dog. Since she moves at warp speed, she earned two degrees, got married, bought a house, and had a baby in quick succession. These major life transitions added up to a whopping QLC, where she finds herself caught in the balance between motherhood, marriage, and what she wants for herself. When she's not chasing her toddler, Sarah can be found blogging (www.sarahrosemary.com), tweeting (@sarah_rosemary) and freelance writing, drinking lots of coffee, and teaching aerobics classes.

Can I Get My Judgment with a Side of Pastry?

by Rachel



I'm terrified of being judged. For some reason, I worry what others will think of me, my business, and my decisions. I wish that I didn't feel this way, because it is limiting, and my word this year is **limitless**.

I don't have just one dream for my future. I'm a chef and a business-woman, and those are things I want to pursue. But I also want to be a writer and photographer. A food writer and photographer. I feel like my struggle with judgment is where I fall short with a lot of things, but the biggest struggle it impairs would be my blog.

I have this gorgeous little food blog that I would love to parlay into paid writing and photography work. I'm so afraid that people will judge me for what I write and the things that I do, that I spend so much time trying to filter what I'm

writing and saying, resulting in nothing being published. I kept my blog a secret from my industry friends for years. YEARS! I was so worried that they would make fun of me or judge me behind my back that I hid from them that layer of who I am. I felt safe keeping it from them, but it wasn't getting any traffic. No one was reading it because I was too scared to tell anyone. While I don't think that we should all walk around without a filter, I wish that more of my thoughts would be able to pass through mine.

I have this dream of a gorgeous bakery/wine bar. (Have you seen the bakery in the movie "It's Complicated"? My dream bakery looks a lot like that.) I love working with food. Taking beautiful ingredients and turning them into nostalgic treats. Watching my niece pound a chocolate cupcake, frosting smeared across her happy little face...that's why I love being a pastry chef. Recently, while getting some stuff ready for my online pastry business, I realized I need wholesale food pricing information. You can't get that 'til you get your business license, but I needed the information now, so I could figure out how I was going to price items. I sucked it up and sat down with an industry friend who I had been afraid to tell about my pastry business. She is a fellow pastry chef,

and I worried that she would be negative about my new venture. Now I look back and wonder why I was afraid, because she was gracious and helpful. She showed me so much support, and genuinely wants to see me succeed, yet I rocked defensiveness and approached her with my guard up.

I think sometimes we get jaded by people who want to see us fail, or by people who feel that there isn't enough success to go around. They slip their negative poison into our minds. Early on in my career, I was working as a pastry cook at a high-end restaurant. The other pastry cook that I worked with was a massive bitch. (Sorry, there's really no nice way to say that.) A phrase you may hear tossed around in the kitchen is to "set everyone up for success," which means, doing prep and taking steps to help the other people who will be coming in after you. Her perpetual mistakes and laziness would leave me hanging during service at night. I started to

...I carried that small-mindedness and judgment with me, closing myself off to others. Afraid to put my ideas out in case they were ripped apart.

come in early to be able to repair the prep she had left me so that I wouldn't be in the weeds for dinner service, and so that I could do the prep I had to leave for her for the next day.

When the chef de cuisine came to us and asked us to come up with some pastry specials, I was thrilled for the chance to be creative, especially in such a prestigious restaurant. The other pastry cook and I decided to bounce our ideas off of each other.

I did some research and started to put together a few dessert ideas with really interesting flavor profiles and textures. I carefully sketched up drawings of each dessert in my pastry notebook. When the other pastry cook and I met to discuss our ideas, she chuckled and acted like my dessert ideas were ridiculous. I showed them to the chef de cuisine and he acted the same way. Turns out, they had their corporate chefs send new dessert ideas and the other pastry cook had her ideas shot down as well, but it made me feel like I needed to be guarded about my ideas.

The next restaurant I worked at, I took those ideas and they turned out to be great ones! I sold a lot of

desserts, but I carried that small-mindedness and judgment with me, closing myself off to others. Afraid to put my ideas out in case they were ripped apart. I am still struggling with this, but I attempt to stop myself from judging, or allow myself to worry about being judged by others.

My website designer contacted me this week. The design mock-up for my new pastry website is finished. It's just a matter of yes or no. A feeling of terror and joy flooded me. Yeah, terror first, joy second.

It's here. One of my dreams, coming to fruition. The teal blue and grey logo and website design are perfect. Each step is falling into place, unfolding before my eyes. And yet, the overwhelming sense of nausea, as the bile rises in my throat.

There are days where I put my head down on my desk and cry. I honestly go back and forth on if I can make this business successful. After years of peddling my pastry wares in many successful restaurants, I want to break out on my own. Be my own boss. Build a business and a life where I can be creative, business-minded, interact with so many different kinds of people, feed my delicious treats to hungry bellies. I



have worked my butt off for my employers, and most were appreciative. But those few who didn't care, who weren't ever appreciative for the dedication, hard work, creativity, and money-making ideas, poured into their business to make money for them. That's why I want my own place. That's why I want to create a workplace where I'm proud of the product we put out, the environment we give our customers, the respectful workplace for our employees.

There is still that judgment tucked in the back of my mind. Who the fuck wants to buy my pastry?! Now this is all on me. I'm the center of attention. I'm the sole person to hold the blame. I am out there for the critique of each of my products.

On the flip side, I could kill this. I could pour my whole heart into this business and make it a huge success. People may flood the streets...er, internet to buy my goodies. I may be able to actually open the physical bakery/wine bar I dream about with the money I make from this business, and that thrills me to no end. So why the hell does this little baby step of the website mock-up approval freak me out?

Much like writing for Stratejoy, it's odd to think of putting myself out there for everyone to see. Allowing my lovely freak flag to fly and just being the uniquely odd pastry chef that I am.

I'm taking each step as it comes or correcting each negative/judgmental thought as it comes. I know that lots of addiction programs say one day at a time, and that's what I'm doing to

get through this...one decision or thought at a time. Approve the website. Step taken. Call a potential customer back. Step taken. Pricing sheets completed. Step taken. Negative thought. Knock it out of my head. I'm baby-stepping my way into business ownership and not caring what people think.

I know I'm probably going to end up crying on my desk (or in my wine glass with my friends) a few more times...maybe even later today when I have to write the check to the website designer, but not doing this isn't an option. This is my dream!



Rachel

RACHEL, Season 6...

is a pastry chef and soon to be entrepreneur living in Phoenix. She's tangoed with her QLC a few times and is hoping this is her last turn around the dance floor. Feeling stuck in her most recent restaurant job, Rachel left to work towards creating her own pastry company. It's not all cupcakes and croissants, but life is starting to get sweeter (a few glasses of wine helps too). When not working on her recently launched pastry business, www.pistolwhippedpastry.com, Rachel is usually writing and photographing for her food blog, croissantinthecity.com, hiking, collecting cake stands, and learning to make cheese. She's also writing for numerous publications, and has fallen madly in love with her dream man, Mr. Paul Child. Find her tweeting @CroissantITC.

On Finding What Was Never Really Hidden

by Arielle



One of the truly amazing things about life is that you never know when inspiration is going to smack you upside the head.

Shortly after Molly announced the names of Stratejoy's season 6 bloggers, I received a Facebook message from someone I didn't know. Lee Anne was a fellow Stratejoy tribe member and Brooklyn resident, and wanted to introduce herself because she was new to the area.

A few weeks later, she posted the following status: "Anyone up for this Mad Men viewing party at the Roosevelt tonight?"

As it turns out, I had been planning on going to that same party but my viewing buddy had taken ill (read: hangover) and was no longer able to make it. I told her

I was down.

During one of the commercial breaks, as we were standing amidst a sea of dapper men, whiskey cocktails and candy cigarettes, Lee Anne asked me, "So, what do you do? I know you're a writer, but what else do you do?"

I was flustered. "Oh... um. I'm not really a writer, outside of Stratejoy. I mean I like writing, but no one pays me to do it or anything."

She looked at me like I was stupid. "So? I'm an actor. I don't get paid to do it every day, but it doesn't mean I'm not one.

It doesn't matter if no one pays you, you're still a writer."

I was completely floored. I had never met this person before, and all she knew about me was whatever one could glean from my two Stratejoy posts that had been published at that point. But her words were powerful.



One of the truly amazing things about life is that you never know when inspiration is going to smack you upside the head.

Ever since that conversation, bits and pieces from my memory started popping up at random as I went about my day.

Writing "books" when I was young and covering the front with clear tape to make them look fancy and laminated.

Celebrating the 10th anniversary of my very first blog post (March 18, 2002).

Journaling. "This is what I did today" journaling to Joy Juice journaling to journaling as a method of escape during a rough patch I went through while studying abroad in Australia.

Finding joy even in writing insignificant "come with me to this random event!" emails to friends.

Taking a course called, "Career Changing In Your 20s and 30s," and doing an exercise where we had to reflect about different stages of our lives, and at those times, what we wanted to be when we grew up. "Author" appeared in every stage up until adulthood.

MY WHOLE LIFE WAS FLASHING BEFORE MY EYES. ONLY I WASN'T DYING, I WAS LIVING.

When Lee Anne referred to me as a writer, something I've never thought to call myself, it resonated with me because I was just beginning to rediscover my love of writing. You see, despite the fact that I've churned out hundreds of blog posts and thousands of pages of academic papers over the years, the times I felt truly alive while writing were unfortunately few and far between.

Until, that is, I started writing for Stratejoy.

All of a sudden, because of how deeply I care about each of these posts, the effort I started putting in far surpassed my average. Even in just those first 2 posts, I put in so many hours of writing and rewriting and "holy shit, when did it become 2am?" situations.

A huge part of my Quarterlife Crisis has been the uncertainty regarding what

I want to do with my career. Yet some innocuous words from a near-stranger somehow brought me this moment of clarity where I was finally able to see what's been staring me in the face for nearly my entire life. I can't help but think it should have been obscenely obvious this whole time. Like, DUH, OF COURSE I WANT TO WRITE FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE AND PROBABLY EVEN IN THE AFTERLIFE AS LONG AS THERE ARE LAPTOPS IN HEAVEN (or wherever I'm going to end up, which is up for debate).

Only now comes the hard part: the questions laced with doubt.

Am I good enough?

How do I get started?

What would I even write?

Could I really make a career out of this?

Does anyone care about what I have to say?

I know it might be awhile before I make any money from writing, let alone enough to support myself, but I'm happy that I now have this goal to work toward. For the first time pretty much ever, I can answer the question of what I want to do. And just knowing that makes me feel so much less lost.



ARIELLE, Season 6...

is living the dream in Brooklyn, NY. Her Quarterlife Crisis began in 2010 when she received her MBA and had no idea what to do with it. It escalated into full-on panic mode in December 2011 when she lost her job. She also realized that her diet of beer and buffalo wings wasn't doing her any favors, and is hoping that the millionth time's a charm for getting healthier habits in order. She is an avid volleyball player, owns enough silly hats to outfit an entire party, and is technically single but has deep feelings for her Kindle. Follow the fun @NotTheMermaid.

I Choose Joy

by *Laurenne*



Right after college, I went to grad school in Miami. I lived right on South Beach for a whole year. And then I had a year full of internships in London, Sao Paulo, New York, and San Francisco. What an opportunity, you'd think. You'd think I must have spent time on the beach or learning Portuguese. A friend recently posted a photo album on Facebook from that time. It was a celebration of people and beaches and parties and youth!

I wasn't in any of those pictures.

Everyone in those pictures took time out from studying to laugh and partake in the occasional youthful hangover. Not me. Nope. I was determined to get a job. I saw grad school as a place to get better, to study, to learn and only to learn. I wanted money. I wanted to not be poor anymore. I wanted to be

established.
I wanted.
Seeking.
Seeking. Never happy with the present moment. Never stopping to realize: HEY! I'M YOUNG AND HAVE NO WORRIES AND GREAT TITS!

My whole life has been filled with doing. Doing has always led to some reward or validation. That's because the doing has always been coupled with heaps of seeking. Seeking. Seeking. Doing. Seeking. Once I made a ring out of gold wire. I immediately made ten more and started a jewelry business. I could not make one ring for the purpose of simply enjoying the act of making something beautiful. It's not in my nature to do something that does not come with some reward in the end. I've never been able to have fun for no reason at all.

I did get a job right out of grad school, just like I'd planned. And the minute I got that job, I realized I wanted a different job, the beautifully torturous job of a writer. I've been writing ever since. I sit in cafes until midnight. I miss out on friends' birthdays. I go days without

I WANT TO MAKE CHOICES BASED ON WHAT

I REALLY WANT, NOT

WHAT I FEEL I NEED TO DO TO

FIND SUCCESS.

changing my clothes. Wanting. Wanting. Seeking. Seeking.

I don't want to live my life with a constant carrot dangling in front of me. I'll never get it. I want to be in more pictures. I want to be more spontaneous. I want to make choices based on what I really want, not what I feel I need to do to find success.

One of the assignments at my spiritual psychology school is to partake in self-nurturing activities. You can nurture your mind, your body, or your spirit. At first I got a manicure. I've been meditating. Then I thought the most nurturing activity for me would be something done strictly for the purpose of having



And he did! And I flew again.

And you know what I thought about when I came down? I wondered how I could quit everything else and make trapeze my full-time career. That's just how my mind works!

But I stopped it right there. And I flew again. And it was joyful and rich and amazing. And I felt for maybe the first time what it is like to truly have fun without any other expectation. Without thinking about my to-do list or whether or not I left the curling iron on or bla, bla, bla, thinking thinking thinking.

I simply flew. I smiled. I felt uninterrupted joy. And I realized that that's what I want my life to be about. More of that.

fun. NO OTHER REASON. I wanted to do something that would not require networking. Something that didn't involve getting my name out there. Something that didn't make me think about how I could turn it into something that would get me money, success, more, more, more.

I chose a trapeze class. A TRAPEZE!

I flew! I flew into the air toward the Pacific Ocean, trusting a strange man to catch me.

That's what's important. If I had a choice between that joy and having a successful career filled with stress and a constant search for validation, I'd choose the joy. I'd choose the option that doesn't let me think about the future, the option that doesn't base my worth on the exterior.

Or, I might just choose to run away to the circus.



LAURENNE, Season 5...
is a blogger and freelance writer living in Venice Beach. Her QLC began at 25 and is still going strong. Or almost wrapping up. Or just plain becoming the norm. She quit her job to travel around the world in 2009 where she discovered what she wants to do with her life: write. Since then, she's been drinking coffee and writing all day every day, hoping to eventually get paid for it. She pretends to know a lot about wine and cheese, collects pot holders, and rides around town on her baby blue moped. She's also a certified Spiritual Psychologist, which means she shops at Whole Foods and then analyzes her decision to shop at Whole Foods.

MONEY

I will admit to having a love/hate relationship with money.

I'm sure those manifesting money mavens would say that's why I don't have my dream modern home on the water, or the wardrobe my "authentic style" Pinterest board lusts after, or a new Mazda3.

(Don't mock my car cravings! Major fondness for tiny hatchbacks here!)

But you know what I do have? An understanding that external things don't make me happy. They may create

pleasurable experiences or a sense of purchasing giddiness, but they don't speak to the meaning or fulfillment in my life.

We determine the worthiness of our lives, not our bank accounts.

Really understanding that statement was one of the biggest takeaways of my own Quarterlife Crisis. I'm not going to pretend to have it all figured out five years later, but I have worked really hard to realize that fact.

One more time...

I determine the worthiness of my life, not my bank account.

There are so many lessons I've learned that align with that statement.

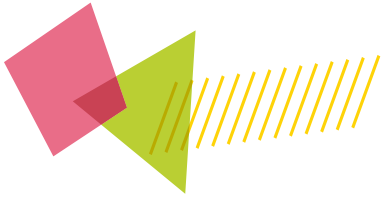
Making more money is only one measure of success; empowering more women, inspiring more self-love,

and touching more lives are other measures for me. Lack of money is not an excuse to avoid doing/going after something I really want. Anxiety about money is not anxiety about my abilities as a transformational teacher.

Abundance has many measures.

I love the exchange of money for true value—when clients pay me as a way of investing in their own well-being. I have pride in how I make my living. I love feeling nurtured and safe by my financial situation, but those feelings can also be created in other forms.

I will not remember the number in my bank account in 10 or 20 years, but I will remember the first evening of the retreat I've worked so hard to plan, and the way my tiny guy giggles at me, and the deep conversation I had with my mom about life and love.



During your QLC, the subject of money will come up over and over. You'll need to dive into your relationship with money, to examine your own beliefs, to craft your own personal money guidelines.

You'll need to determine where you stand on trading time for money, what you are willing to risk and sacrifice, and how important the trappings of material success are to you.

My loving reminder? Money is one piece of our lives, darling. It deserves your respect, attention and consideration, but it is not an emotional salve or happiness maker. It will not soothe your soul or guarantee fulfillment. Make

all the money you desire, but don't let its seductive pull become an obsession or the only measurement of the worthiness of your life.

To neutralize my own love/hate relationship with money and turn it into one of respect, I've concentrated on learning two skills: beautifully making money, and truly sourcing my happiness from things other than money.

Two separate desires, one end goal: To live an intentional and fulfilling life.



WE DETERMINE
THE WORTHINESS
of our life *not*
OUR BANK
ACCOUNT

—Molly Mahar

Debt, Addiction, and Recovery, Oh My!

by Katie

MONEY WAS MY
DRUG DEALER AND
SHOPPING WAS MY
HEROIN.



Growing up, I usually got what I wanted. If I wanted a doll, my mom would buy it for me. I can remember presents for days on Christmas. It would often take hours and hours of opening gifts Christmas morning. From what I can remember, my mom and dad were well off. Looking back now, it's pretty clear that they were doing something right because I recall having home improvements done pretty often.

I knew that for quite some time, my dad did the working, and my mom paid the bills. I can remember her keeping the checkbook, tapping "MAC" for \$5 for lunch, and doing the grocery shopping. I really had no concept of money, though.

When I entered middle school, we had this "Marriage Project" where I had to marry one of my friends, find a job, buy a house, buy a car, and pop out a kid. I was determined to spend every last dollar of the money allotted to us. We liked the \$6,000

car, but that would leave us with an extra \$2,000. In my mind, we had to spend that money. If we didn't then it would go to waste.

My husband suggested that we "save" it.

"Save it? Why? Why the hell should we save it when we can get a 1999 Ford Explorer instead of a 1993 Plymouth Reliant Station Wagon?"

I was pretty forceful. He gave it rather easily. To this day, I wish he would have put up more of a fight or at least had his mom call my mom to give me a talking to on the importance of saving.

Years would pass, and I would find myself tangled in a pretty little web of credit card debt. No sooner did I start paying it down, that I realized that I could get payday loans. 134% interest didn't matter to me. I was getting money without any need for more than my driver's license number. So began my addiction to getting money and spending it quickly. The more quickly I'd spend the money, the better I'd feel. When I was feeling super bad, I'd binge spend then go through days of remorse and "I'll never do this again" self torture.

Money was my drug dealer and shopping was my heroin. It made me feel amazing to walk into a store and buy

something expensive. I'd literally buy anything and everything until every cent that I had was gone.

The one thing that I didn't enjoy paying? Bills.

Car payments, car insurance and rent weren't nearly as fun to buy as new Old Navy tee shirts and new gadgets. The risk of being homeless and car-less was a thrill. Everything about the situation screamed addiction. I made the connection early on. I didn't want to stop, but I did start to feel bad. I found an awesome substitution that gave me the same thrill as buying things for myself without feeling selfish: buying things for other people.

So began that vicious cycle of insisting to pay my way plus the other persons, buying extravagant gifts, and loaning money. People would thank me, and insist they pay, but I'd shut them down and blame it on being so independent when in fact I had an addiction that would soon blow up in my face.

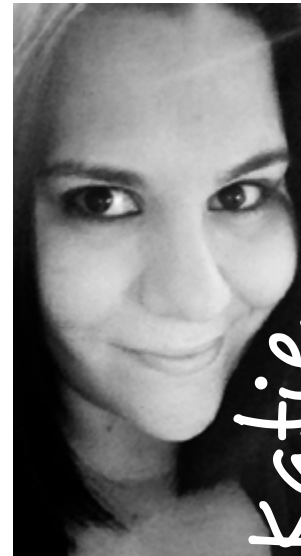
The blow up was huge. **I lost almost everything from my car to my apartment to the respect of many members of my family.** I hit rock bottom in every sense of the word. I'm endlessly grateful that my dad took me in. Luckily, I didn't burn all of my bridges.

Even now, a good year from the blowup, I'm still in recovery from it. I never went to a "Spender's Anonymous" meeting, but I did seek some therapy for it. I have an addictive personality, and a family history of addiction. I can't blame it all on genes as I willingly made my own decisions, but I did have a little bit of an unfair disadvantage to begin with.

These days, I've learned to be super careful with money. I don't have to spend every dime that I get. **I don't live paycheck to paycheck anymore.** While I'm not banking \$60,000 right

now, I have a comfortable enough cushion to where I could float a month of bills if I had to. Being in Freelance really helps me because sometimes, I don't know when my next paycheck will come in. So, when I do get paid, I need it for necessities, just in case the next check doesn't come in for awhile.

Hi, I'm Katie and I'm an addict. I haven't binge shopped in 8 months.




KATIE, Season 2...

was living the harsh reality of unemployment in 2010. While trying to enhance her writing career and making ends meet, she was on a search to find out who she was and what she wanted. She loves reading, writing, dancing, steak, wine, and coffee (not necessarily at the same time). Skip to 2012, Katie is rocking her late twenties the best she knows how with her girlfriends, Nook, and a good \$8.99 bottle of wine by her side. She currently lives in Philadelphia, but has the Jersey accent to prove where she's REALLY from.

Experiences, Priorities, and Too Much Debt

by Doniree



The money post. I had two directions I wanted to go with this. One was about money and limiting beliefs and abundance and manifesting millions of dollars. The other was about running myself into credit card debt in college and the hole I had to dig myself out of to learn what “financial responsibility” actually meant.

I went with the latter, because I know that debt in and after college is an all-too-familiar story, and I hope that not only can my lessons (I learned the hard way) help encourage someone else in that trap, but I also hope for inspiration and advice from this beautiful and savvy community for smart money-management from this point forward.

I should’ve learned financial responsibilities when I was a kid. Middle

school, even. I had an allowance—not much, mind you. A dollar per year per week, so that at age 10, I got \$10/week—or was it per month? I don’t remember exactly, but I should’ve learned then to manage it.

I should’ve learned how to manage my money when I was in high school.

When I told my parents I’d like a car and a cell phone, they said, “Great! Start saving!” So, I got a job and I worked and I had a car and a cell phone and enough money to buy Blink 182 CDs and those replaceable Nokia phone plates. By the time I got to college, I didn’t really have anything saved even though I worked enough in high school that I should have.

I should have learned financial responsibility in college, when I’m on my own, doing the “practice adult” thing, and paying for life and college through some combination of part-time jobs and full-time loans. The fact is it got worse in college because I thought loans were free money and when those ran out—there were credit cards!

By the time I graduated from college (age 22), I had 5 credit cards (Visa, MC, AmEx, Victoria’s Secret, and Express) all maxed out (not that the maxes were astronomical, but still), and

all on the brink of collections because my part-time job couldn’t afford to pay five maxed out credit cards.

Go figure.

And then they **were** in collections and angry credit people started calling me, wanting their money. Phone calls and letters from agencies were scary, so I dealt with them the best way I knew how—I completely ignored the problem.

Until one day I didn’t, and I realized that 22 was too young for credit card debt. I spent the summer after college working two jobs until by the end of the year I’d paid every card off completely. Seven years later, I’m finally seeing positive changes in my credit score.

FINANCIAL PEACE

A couple of years ago, my parents and I went through a financial planning course

together. Dave Ramsey's financial advice is solid, and I learned one thing in particular I wish I'd have learned before I left for college:

If you don't have the cash to pay for it, you don't need it yet.

If you don't have the cash to pay for it, you don't need it yet.

Broad statement, big statement, but since I was essentially forced to learn to live like that over the last five years, I learned that not only is it possible—it's **necessary**. For me.

**Exception: emergencies, which is why we have Emergency Funds.*

Today, I have one credit card with a \$300 limit. I have it because while I hate the idea of having debt to improve your credit score, I want to improve my credit score. So, I put small charges on this card and pay off everything but \$25.00 each month. Prior to the last couple of months, I hadn't bought anything that didn't come straight out of my checking account for almost seven years. I've traveled frequently, I have enough clothes and shoes, I moved across the country (twice!), I eat well, drink well, and own Apple products and a DSLR.

What I learned over the last seven years—and in the course we took—were these two really important things: how to prioritize and how to budget.

BUY EXPERIENCES, NOT THINGS

I have to credit my boyfriend for that little catch-phrase, but it's really been the cornerstone to a lot of the financial decisions I make on a daily basis. I'd rather spend \$30 on the experience of dinner and wine with him or my girlfriends than \$30 on a pair of earrings. I'd rather spend \$250 on a plane ticket than anything designer, any shopping sprees, or any additional housewares. I'd rather have a meal, share conversation, or take a trip than own things. **And this is a huge player in how I spend my money.**

EVERY DOLLAR HAS A NAME

One thing I'm still learning is how to budget. Not "how to later look at and analyze what I've spent," but how to actually plan what I'm spending. At 29, for the first time in my life, not only am I paying attention to where my money is going, but I'm actually creating **and using** a budget. Like, a spreadsheet budget.

I know I'm not the only one with a credit card debt horror story. I know the credit card companies target inexperienced young folks with the appeal of all of the things a credit card can offer, but I don't blame them for my poor judgment and irresponsible spending. I know that it took months of crazy work hours and a limited social life to pay everything off, but that—**of course**—it was totally worth it.



DONIREE, Season 3...

is a Minneapolis ex-pat who lived in Colorado when she began blogging for Stratejoy. She's always looking forward to her next adventure. In November 2009, she met her Quarterlife Crisis head-on and left her ad agency job in pursuit of Location Independence and more creativity. That's when she started stretching her creative muscles on doniree.com, discovering an entrepreneurial spirit she hadn't met yet, and learning how to stay true to who she is and what she wants—one bottle of champagne and aska practice at a time. Doniree has since moved from Colorado to Portland, Oregon, where she is a full-time social media consultant and strategist, and most recently, the founder of EffYeah Media. She's enjoying a renewed commitment to her yoga practice (and thus, herself), and spends her free time seeking Portland's best outdoor happy hours. Keep in touch with her @doniree.

Dollars vs. Dreams

by Kat



Money's been on my mind a lot lately. Long-term travel plans will do that to you, I suppose. I've got a variety of fears related to this trip, but the one that's most consistently present is the fear of running out of cash. I'm pretty sure I'm not alone here, and I suspect this fear is what stops some people from following their dreams of traveling, opening a business, and more.

My parents raised me to make very practical choices about money. My family is solidly middle class—perhaps even upper middle class in the economically-depressed area where I grew up—and they taught me from a young age to save. I've never been the type of person to accumulate a large sum of credit card debt, and while I was employed, I was putting money into a retirement account. I decided to leave my job

in Seattle to do AmeriCorps partly because the paychecks were sometimes uncertain. Even though I wasn't going to earn a lot of money during my AmeriCorps year, at least I was able to plan for that.

Point being: my nature is to make reasonably intelligent financial decisions and save money.

What the fuck was I thinking when I quit my job?!

I was thinking that I'd spent a few years automatically transferring 20-30% of my earnings into a savings account every month. I knew that someday I'd use that money to do something awesome, and that time had come. When it wasn't in my checking account, I didn't spend it; that automatic bank transfer is what tricked me into setting money aside and made this trip possible. It was like magic when I looked at the savings balance later!

I was thinking that I was tired of earning my keep in a way that drained me. I was doing so many things on the side that I enjoyed—teaching yoga, blogging,

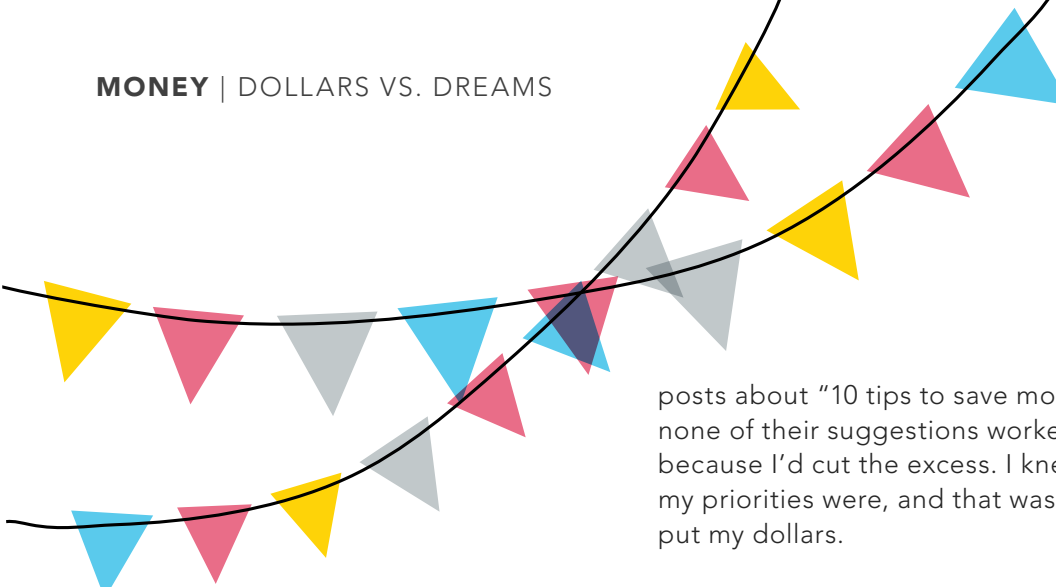
taking photographs—and I wanted more time to explore those options as a potential sources of income. While my job had some really wonderful positives, in the end, it wasn't how I wanted to spend the bulk of my time. I'd been with the same organization for five years, and I was no longer growing in the direction that I wanted my career and life to lead.



I don't want to wait my whole life to do something that I'm excited about now.

I was thinking that life is short, and that I've never really bought into the idea that we should wait until we retire to follow our dreams. A former coworker once said to me, "It's hard to dance when you have a walker, but it's easy to sit at a desk and type." I don't want to wait my whole life to do something

that I'm excited about now. I don't want to spend my whole life saving for something that might never happen. If we only get one shot on this earth (and even if you believe we get more than one, we only get our opportunity as this person once), do I want it to be behind a computer for 8-12 hours each day? Hell no. There is too much to see and do, too many people to meet. Plus, staring at a screen and typing was starting to hurt my eyes and my body.



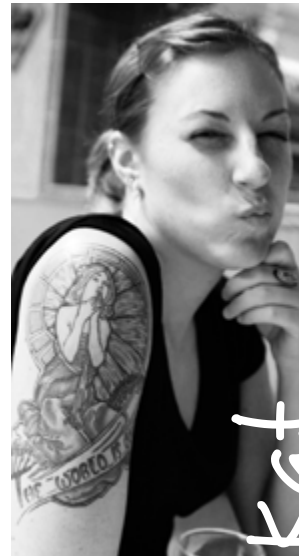
I'm not advocating racking up debt to fund crazy plans and diving into things with reckless abandon. That's not my style. I am suggesting that if we want to do awesome things, we need to make those a priority. I was able to save the money for this trip by living what some people saw as a spartan lifestyle. I spent money on the things that mattered most—travel and food, including eating out with friends—and I was cautious about the rest. There were certainly times that I missed living alone, but I saved hundreds of dollars each month by having a roommate. I rarely bought things like clothes, books, and other random items because those weren't in my budget. My spending was limited in a way that when I used to read other blog

posts about "10 tips to save money," none of their suggestions worked for me because I'd cut the excess. I knew what my priorities were, and that was where I put my dollars.

My dad said to me a few years ago that he and my mom had a hard time understanding me because they saw my brother buying things (new television, car stereo, etc.), and I wasn't like that. I like to spend my money on experiences. That's how I choose to live my life, and that includes the financial side of it. I'd much rather have dinner out with friends once a week than pay for cable every month, or a trip to visit friends than some new clothes. I replace or repair what wears out, and only buy what I'll use frequently or what is absolutely necessary. I'd much rather collect memories and photographs to share.

All of that—talking through the logic behind my decision—doesn't take away the fear of running out of cash. You know what's scarier to me, though? Planning around a someday that might never arrive and living a life that isn't authentic. I want to do my best to live without regrets and not wonder when I'll finally get to retire and take a vacation.

Of course, I've still got a semi-meticulous travel budget. It's not like I can get away from my upbringing that easily.



KAT, Season 5...

is a photograph-taking, gluten-free pie-baking, knitting, tattooed yoga teacher and blogger—though it might be something a little bit different tomorrow. After finally acknowledging the QLC that had been sneaking up on her for several years, she gave notice at her New York City-based non-profit job in May 2011. She left Brooklyn in September 2011 to travel around Europe, and five months later, she arrived in Sydney, Australia, where she's currently kicking ass, taking names, and teaching yoga. Kat loves unique eyewear, Fluevogs, adventures, twitter, and the color red. Follow her @shinyredtype.

Money Worry: It's a Family Thing

by Marian



A recurring argument in my family is that my dad will go to the grocery store and buy things we don't need. Now, my family is big. There are six of us total and when everyone is home we'll go through something like three gallons of milk per week. The weekly shop is epic, but my mother has now taken to accompanying my father to Costco so he doesn't go overboard. Not because he's an over spender, but because he is so crazed about sales. He'll drive miles out of the way to save a few pennies on gas. He'll buy a pound of shredded cheese that will go bad in a week because even three boys can't eat that many quesadillas.

My grandfather was also a hardcore coupon cutter. He bought things he didn't need. He hoarded. He bargained. He penny-pinchd. He passed those traits on to my father.

In terms of my own spending habits, I've always worried about money. I haven't always saved or budgeted, but the worry has always been there. Even if I have enough, I worry. For this I blame my paternal side.

To be fair to my parents, I was one of the few people at college who had worked all through high school, who had my own bank account with my own money, who understood the concept of a credit card. To be honest, I always felt a little smug because of this. **For this I thank my parents.**

However, much to my family's horror, I didn't take the traditional career route. I quit my safe job in favor of freelancing. I have yet to be properly insured, have no idea where the next check will come from and my boyfriend's the one that forked out the cash for our crazy expensive flight to New Zealand.

My father was surprisingly supportive when I quit my PR job, saying I should always follow my dreams. Despite his support, however, there was an

FRANKLY, I THINK BOTH PARENTS
ARE HOLDING THEIR BREATH FOR
THE DAY I'LL FINALLY THROW IN
THE TOWEL ON THIS WHOLE
SELF-EMPLOYMENT THING.

undertone of doubt.

"Hey, you're young and can make mistakes and be poor now before you have a family to support and bills to pay." Basically meaning he didn't expect me to make it big on my own. Frankly, **I think both parents are holding their breath for the day I'll finally throw in the towel on this whole self-employment thing.**

Maybe because neither grew up particularly wealthy but are incredibly successful now, they feel the only way to actually make a living is the traditional way. That in terms of money the only way to make it is the way they made it. And since I've only been freelancing for a year, I'm still not rolling in dough so I have yet to prove them wrong.



The thing is, I have a surprisingly awesome relationship with my parents. They are smart and supportive and raised me to be independent and strong-willed. I am proud of how they raised my brothers and me. That said, I harbor a small amount of resentment towards them because money is always on my mind. I figure 50% of that is The Curse of the Entrepreneur. That other 50%, though, is due to the fact that in every phone call I have with my parents, they bring up money. My dad tells me how much he made in overtime or my mom will say how little some newspaper is paying her. But I figure it's rude of me to say, **"Hey! I don't want to know this! My own money issues stress me out, I don't want in on yours."**

Because then I feel guilty. I feel guilty for the amount of money my parents have spent on me in my 23 years. I look back on the \$160,000 college education that I'm not really using, my hospital bills from a bout of surgeries my sophomore year. My trip abroad. My prom dress. I worry about money because they talk about it. I worry about it because I don't have any. I worry about it because I worry about it and I still don't really do anything to fix it.

That's the thing. I stress about money all the time. I woke my boyfriend up at 3 in the morning a few weeks ago sobbing because I had no idea how I was going to pay him back for that plane ticket. A few days later I got emails from three potential clients and stopped worrying for a bit, but now I'm at it again because I don't know what will happen when these projects are over.

I hate worrying. It consumes a huge chunk of my life, but what are my options? Take a "real" job? Go back to the 9 to 5 I hated so much? Play by somebody else's rules? Give up on my idea of what I want my life—my freedom—to look like?

No. I think I'd rather worry.




Marian

MARIAN, Season 3...

is a blogger, technically a social media "thug" (consultant is a stupid word) for authors and has a bad case of the Quarterlife Crisis. Her posts at marianlibrarian.com are usually "uncategorized," and when she's not blogging about nonsense, she has decided she wants to be a pastry chef slash author slash farmer in the woods. Hence, the QLC. She got the travel itch too and moved from New York to London to follow her heart, then headed to New Zealand in December 2010. Marian has now been living in NZ for two years and is about to complete her yoga teacher training while working full-time at a digital marketing firm in Auckland.

Money & Me

by Kristen



A little after completing Stratejoy's Joy Plan, I had a conversation with someone about what came up as my core values (FYI: family, leadership, independence, honesty, enlightenment, enjoyment, love, and strength). After I explained what each of those meant to me, he said, "You don't value money?" I told him while I needed it to pay bills, I didn't value money. After a debate ensued about his idea that needing money meant the same as valuing it, I started to think differently about my relationship with my finances.

Yes, I need money. And yes, I'd definitely like to have more of it now. As I move into a life sans a plus one to add to the monthly income, money is a topic frequently on my mind. I like to have electricity and to pay student loans so no one comes and tries to take me out

at the knees. And yes, I'd even like having some extra money so I can go on trips or a fun night out with my girlfriends.

But if tomorrow the government decided the bartering system was coming back, I would sign up immediately. Not just because money, balancing my checkbook and making a budget makes my head spin (I'm a historian for a reason—math isn't my bag, baby). I could barter for my gas bill with some very delicious baked goods. Grappling with the dollars and cents each month is tough and unless I am willing to make some huge changes in my life or win the lottery, it won't be changing any time soon. But my attitude towards it can.

For me, it comes down to worth. My time, my value. I love my job and I would do it for free (I practically do at this rate anyway!). But honestly I find so much more pleasure in doing meaningful work than I do in the amount of funds it brings into my bank account. Some of you might think this is an incredibly naive way of thinking (and at times I might even agree with you), but thinking this way about life and money has helped keep me sane in grown up financial land. Long gone are the days when getting mail meant chain letters, pen pals, or care packages at college. Now the

sound of the closing mailbox door is like that of impending doom and the heavy weight of the bills that sit inside. It's frustrating at times, of course—postdating checks so my account won't overdraft or having to wait to buy something until it goes on sale (hello Ben & Jerry's 2 for \$5 sale =score!).

As I've embarked on my new singleton lifestyle, I've been thinking and tracking where my money is actually going every month. I've used mint.com, which does all the hard work for you, and I keep track in a little ledger book too. It has been relatively easy to adjust my budget properly and be able to pay my bills on time. I'm not saying it isn't tight and that I'm not trying to find freelance writing opportunities where I can, but I feel like I have a good handle on my money reality. Thinking about it in a different way has been the thing that really has helped me come to terms with not having a whole lot of it. Because what's the worst that can happen? I go bankrupt.

I would still have my health, my family and friends. I am thankful that I am able to put away a tiny amount of money into savings and for retirement while still being able to make the bills every month. If I pay the minimum on my student loans from undergrad and grad school, I won't be done until 2032, probably around the time any potential children of mine will go to college. Despite those long years of debt, I wouldn't trade the education and experiences I had from those six years for any amount of money.

Having a tight budget and shifting my thinking is also making me think differently about how I spend my time. I would often spend afternoons and nights after work running around to buy things because they were on sale or because I had a coupon, even if it was something I did not really need. While I still employ the buy only on sale and/or with coupon, I only buy what is absolutely essential. This saves money as well as the amount of stuff coming into the house, but it also saves my time and gives me the time I need for the things that I want to be doing. Now when I run errands, I try to batch them all together in one block of time to be more efficient

and then allow myself the opportunity to have the rest of the day or night for whatever will bring me joy.

I've made some other changes—I'm trying to only buy things with cash and use the credit card for real emergencies only. I canceled cable, though once Red Sox season starts again, I'll need to find friends or spend a lot of time at my Mom and Dad's house watching games since the alternative is watching at bars, which would be counterproductive to the saving money initiative. Canceling cable is also going to allow me to focus on my goals of writing more, attacking my reading list, yoga, and spending time with the people I love to be around. And it's going to make me think about what I actually want to be doing because I won't have the crutch of mindless hours of TV watching. It's only been one day so don't congratulate me yet on this action item—I might end up at my parents' more nights than not to get a fix!

With the holiday season coming up, I know I will be frustrated that I cannot provide the things I want for everyone on my gift-giving list, but I'm really excited to write letters, make gifts, and a few other surprises for them that will show how much they mean to me, especially over the tumultuous last year. I've never been the most crafty person, but I'm doing a lot of new and different things that I never thought I was capable of before, so I am excited to push myself again. Whatever I create will be an awesome expression of love for them (and potentially something to laugh at for years to come, depending on the outcome!), and my gratitude and immense adoration for them is something money could never buy.



KRISTEN, Season 5...

lives in Somerset, MA and works in Newport, RI. After years of hard work and a master's degree, she's a museum curator—her dream job. She loves all things food, a great book with a cup of tea or a glass of wine, and her crazy close-knit family. Her Quarterlife Crisis began after she bought a house and got married in 2010. After a transformational experience in an art gallery in 2011, Kristen is in the process of divorcing and figuring out what life on the other side looks like—embracing honesty and learning how to trust her gut again. Kristen was bit by the blogging bug after writing for Stratejoy and is now loving having her own blog, Life By Kristen (lifebykristen.wordpress.com).

Coming Full Circle (My Childhood Definition of Success)

by Heather Rae



When I was a kid, people would ask what I wanted to do when I grew up. I answered with whatever I thought was fun at the moment. This went from wanting to be a ballerina to a soap opera actress to a fashion designer to an architect.

I had a lot of interests.

At some point in high school, things changed.

I would think of my future career and had this vague notion of what the work would be. But I really thought about what I would get from it—a corner office, tailored suits, a nice car, prestige.

I was taught that fun and pleasure seeking were somehow synonymous with being being irresponsible or immature. Plus, that's right about the time

I realized just how poor my family was. I became somewhat obsessed with the idea of doing better than my parents when it came to finances. I didn't want to stress over paying the mortgage, putting gas in the car or buying groceries.

And so my focus changed—I stopped thinking about having fun, and I started thinking about making money.

I think this was where I began to lose myself.

Don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with making money. We all need it to some extent, and feeling comfortable with your ability to pay the bills certainly helps put your mind at ease.

Studies have shown that once you reach a certain level of income, more money is just cake. At this level, your happiness is due to other factors and has little to do with cash. The level of income that brings you there? It's not that much. Really, it's just enough to live modestly without stressing about paying bills.

I've come to realize just how true this is. Since finishing grad school, I've had two

jobs. The first was an exceptionally well paid position with a local nonprofit. But it turned out that nonprofit was paying for my sanity, as they had every intention of taking it. Looking back, I credit that job with teaching me money isn't everything.

In time, I decided I'd rather make less money working somewhere that didn't provide a straight jacket as part of the uniform.

And that's where my last job came in. I worked at a great university that was a five minute drive from my house. I purposely sought a position that, although didn't seem the most exciting, wouldn't stress me out. The pay was okay and came with the added

perks of being able to bike to work and go home for lunch.

In short, I picked a job that would allow me to have a life. And, as far as sanity goes, it was a better choice. The only problem—it was really boring. Looking back, I credit that job with teaching me I really do want to be challenged in my work.



...I decided I'd rather make less money working somewhere that didn't provide a straight jacket as part of the uniform.



For me, happiness has more to do with fulfillment on a personal level. It has to do with finding work that is meaningful, taking part in activities that align with my own values and building lasting relationships with other people.

I want my life to be full of creativity, adventure, friendship and love.

And that's what this next phase is all about—seeking personal fulfillment.

The idea that happiness comes from material success? I dumped that with yesterday's trash, right where it belongs.

And so, in the five years since finishing grad school, I have slowly come full circle.

In a way, I've felt myself becoming a kid again—seeking a life that is filled with fun and endless possibilities.

I've realized that money truly is not everything—that the ability to buy designer clothes, purchase a large house and drive nice cars has absolutely nothing to do with happiness.



Heather Rae

HEATHER RAE, Season 2...

lived in Pasadena, CA by way of Las Vegas while blogging for Stratejoy. She has a master of public health degree and loved her studies in school, but soon realized her joy was elsewhere. So, she mustered the courage to leave her day job and pursue her passion for writing. She wants to step outside her comfort zone and plans to travel the world solo, learning another language, dancing, painting, writing a novel and—most importantly—savoring every step of the journey. Two years and a world of change later, Heather has returned to Las Vegas and, in a happy turn of events, has become a high school biology teacher. She loves her work and takes advantage of the plentiful time off by traveling to exotic locales and continuing to write. You can find her on twitter at @insearchofsquid.

SELF-LOVE

Your journey to live life on your own terms demands a lot from you. You've got to be courageous. You need to stand up for your own desires in the face of others' expectations. You must be dedicated to sharing your gifts and finding your voice in the world.

Sometimes, you've got to cut your losses and move on—leaving outgrown friendships, demanding more from your work and realizing you're deserving of true love. You may need to recommit to your health, your dreams, your creativity, your own happiness.

All of this? It starts with self-love.

My version of self-love includes a strong sense of self-worth, inner resilience and delicious kindness. I like to call it Fierce Love because it brings to mind images of a warrior princess fighting for her right to a beautiful life.

And who doesn't want to be a gorgeous warrior princess kicking ass and taking names?

Fierce Love is about believing in the transformational power of adoring yourself. It's a call to action to start at the beginning—at the very act of falling in love with yourself. Even when it feels hard, even when the light is barely shining, even if you're not sure you can do it.

It's vitally important, gorgeous one.

All of the rest of it—juicy goals, doing amazing work, finding your voice, sharing

your presence, putting yourself out there—starts with Fierce Love.

When you lack self-love, you may be hesitant to listen to your intuition, scared of making a transformation, paralyzed in the face of chasing a dream. You may spend time giving to others, but you've forgotten what it's like to give to yourself. When self-love is absent, you may be letting self-doubt and a lack of confidence hold you back or hold you down. You're most definitely getting in the way of your own gifts and brilliance.

Cultivating self-love is the springboard for "more," and "bigger," and "happy," and "fulfilled."

Fierce Love is a vital building block to an authentically joyful world. It's the secret ingredient to honoring yourself and the quiet whispers. It's the puzzle piece that allows your best intentions



and dreams to take form, to be realized.

Without Fierce Love, our efforts may get muddled up, lost in self-sabotage, stashed behind a dark cloud, or they may dwindle out slowly when we hit a steamin' pile of adversity.

And you and I both know nobody wants that!

I know that you have gifts to offer. I know you already have everything you need to activate your amazing strengths. I know that you can love yourself in this very moment—mistakes, quirks, fear

and all. I know that you can emerge from that dark place.

I know that Fierce Love is the start.

I know it. I want you to know it too.

Cultivating self-love **IS THE**
springboard

for more and bigger

and happy and fulfilled

-Molly Mahar

Self Love: I am Enough. And also, You are Enough.

by Molly Mahar

Most of you know that a good chunk of what I do here at Stratejoy is coach lovely ladies like yourself. It's an immensely rewarding part of my business. I am continually stretched, inspired and in awe of the women I talk to on a weekly basis. I learn so much from my clients—probably just as much as they learn from me!

Which brings me to this: **Part of this authentic joy we talk so much about seems to start with truly believing and owning the fact that “I am enough.”**

It wasn't something I thought too much about at the beginning of Stratejoy. I thought that our current situations, the current status of our lives, was a base level to start with, to improve upon.

Self-love? Self-worth? I would get there eventually.

My seeking brain loved to remind me: Of course I'm not enough! I haven't built an empire! I haven't made all of my dreams come true! I don't eat all organic! I should shave my legs more often! Tell my friends I love them! Stop watching hulu.com! My financial situation is definitely not enough! And on and on...

Well, I'm allowed to change my mind. Finding new truths is part of this amazing self-realization journey we're all on together.

So, I am now firmly on the “I am enough” bandwagon.

Does that seem at odds with a personal development site dedicated to “conquering a crisis” or “gaining clarity for ridiculously awesome forward movement”? I think not.

Before any conquering or forward movement, we must start from a strong, loving, secure base of self-worth. If we don't believe we are deserving of a big bold bright existence, it will never happen. And what I'm finding and exploring more and more is that this self-love, this ability to believe we are deserving, boils down to the ability to declare “I am enough.”

Try it. Say it out loud. I am enough.

What comes up? Do you feel like you're faking it? Do you immediately start adding buts, or sometimes, or ifs?

Part of the time I still can't say it.

I have a long laundry list of things about myself I'd like to be “better.” I'd like to call my parents more regularly. I'd like to conquer my fear of failure. I'd like to practice yoga every day. I'd like to be one of those girls who can sport dreads, ripped jeans, a nose ring and look unbelievably hot. I'd like to stop feeling slightly nauseous when I look at my bank account. I'd like to volunteer more often. I'd like to always have a clean home, sexy underwear in the drawer and an art project underway.

So much pushing. So many more's. When I think of that list, it's hard for me to get behind the “I am enough”

statement. But the days I can't believe it? Those are the rough days. Those are the days when hate email makes me break down into tears. (Yes, I get them.) Those are the days I can't shake off the fog. Those are the days I start doubting my path.

You'd think I'd have learned by now, eh? Because the days I can say, "I am enough, just as I am, right this very moment, with all my quirks and foibles, in all my ridiculous glory"?

Those are the days that rock.

I am enough. My name is Molly and I am enough.

I shall now launch into my enoughness manifesto. Not to brag or dance a little narcissistic dance in the mirror, but to inspire YOU to write your own.

I AM ENOUGH.

I am full of sparkle and compassion. I genuinely want to make the world a better place. I love hard. I practice kindness. I'm not afraid of the truth. I

am loyal, adventurous, supportive and surprising. I am a woman. I am enough. I make mistakes, but I own them and learn from them. Sometimes I make a bunch of mistakes.

I am enough. I am open, juicy, artistic, full blast. I am also vain, emotional, demanding and looking for answers. I am a woman who is open to mysteries, accepting of miracles. I am diving in, devouring, loving, protecting, peeling back the surface of petty desires to the hunger for connection, for belief, for truth.

I am less concerned with doing things correctly than I once was and more concerned with dancing, drumming, swimming naked.

I accept that a sense of wonder is something to cultivate. I accept that I sometimes self-medicate with alcohol, with filling my life full of busy-ness, with going into self-imposed isolation. I

accept that I crave financial abundance, a freedom to do what I want, when I want it. I am still enough.

I am a lover of ripe mangoes, stars in the midnight sky, stories around the campfire, the smell of rich coffee, laughing until I can't breathe, having someone reach for my hand. I am a lover, a sister, a storyteller, a daughter, a mentor and a student.

I am enough.

And I know in my deepest heart—you are enough too.



MOLLY, Stratejoy Founder...

a free spirit with a passion for mindful entrepreneurship and a tendency to swear a fair amount. After surviving her own Quarterlife Crisis, she founded Stratejoy in 2008 to empower women to live life on their own terms by valuing their worth and happiness. She is a writer, speaker, coach, joy enthusiast and fierce love advocate. She also laughs loudly, swims naked, and wears a lot of costumes. She bases her adventures from a sunny porch in San Diego and a cabin on the river outside of Seattle that she shares with her husband and tiny boy person. Molly's goal every year is to become, "More Molly." Obviously.



How Being Overweight Has Made Me More Powerful

by Juliana

IT TOOK A LONG TIME
FOR ME NOT TO JUDGE
MYSELF BASED ON HOW ATTRACTIVE
OTHERS DID OR
DID NOT FIND ME.

There's a picture of me from my last visit to my mom's home country, Italy. My cousins and I were visiting a place in Sicily called Valle dei Templi (the Valley of Temples) which is a long row of Greek ruins. In the picture, I'm standing by a column that is part of the temple of Apollo, still mostly intact despite centuries of weather, invasions, and development in surrounding areas.

I remember the day of this trip vividly. Being in the presence of something so much more vast and enduring than myself made me feel less significant, yet somehow stronger. I had such respect for the solidity and the stature of these columns, and wanted to take in some of those qualities.

Looking at this picture, I remember how I felt in general during that time in my life. At a size 10 and almost six feet tall, I believed I was "huge." I didn't feel very feminine and often wished I was more petite, thinner, that I fit into the mold better.

I wished to be like my fashion-forward Italian counterparts, with their small bodies and perfect grooming. Looking at this picture, I wish I could tell this girl to stop worrying about it, that she is gorgeous the way she is. But I wouldn't have been able to hear that message then, anyway.

Right now, I am 80 pounds heavier than the girl in the picture was. (When I started blogging for Stratejoy, I was 100 pounds heavier.) I have struggled with weight and fitness for three years now and finally feel on the way to being whatever my "right" size and fitness level is. I've also learned some very valuable things about myself that I may not have ever learned if I hadn't gained weight in the first place.

My value is not determined by my sexuality.

This is a big one for me. When I was thin and pretty, I got a lot of attention. It took a long time for me not to judge myself based on how attractive others did or did not find me. I felt validated by people desiring me, instead of feeling inherently valid. When I gained weight, people stopped giving me the same kind of attention everywhere I went. At first, this upset me, but now I realize it allowed me to finally shift into believing that I had true worth outside of my



physical body. My confidence grew because it was coming from something other than outside feedback.

Strength is more important than size.

I've gotten into strength training big time. I love being able to lift something, push something, achieve something and feel proud of what my body is able to do. Interestingly, I didn't start shifting weight until I stopped worrying about being thin, and started focusing on being strong. Now I know that, as tall as I am, being thin would not be a great thing for me. But I can be a healthy Amazon woman and love it. Working on my physical strength has given me

emotional strength as well: I now prefer to take up space and be counted rather than disappear.

I am beautiful. So are you.

We are beautiful right now. Not, "when I lose the weight," or "when I can afford that outfit," or "when I am in a relationship." I feel more beautiful when I am expressing myself, nurturing my body, or sharing a laugh with a friend than I ever did when I spent hours fussing over my appearance. I know now that when I am in touch with my deepest self, I radiate. I'm more able to see it in others now, too, and realize that they are gorgeous, radiant people too.

I wasted way too much time worrying about fitting in, when I should have been focusing on standing out, and

stepping into my real self. I am thankful to this extra weight I have carried for being my teacher and making me claim myself. These days I am feeling stronger, more enduring, and more willing to stand and face myself—much more like the ancient columns I admired a few years ago.



JULIANA, Season 4...

is a singer/songwriter living north of Atlanta. She came face-to-face with her Quarterlife Crisis after working 3 years at a (pretty awesome, but not her calling) day job, where she put on 60 pounds and stopped taking the joyful risks that foster her creativity. Now, she's becoming a full-time artist, and spends her time putting a new band together, writing her soon-to-be-healthy butt off, and reuniting with her inner Folk-Rockstar.

A Systematic Approach to Claiming Joy

by Dee



As a loyal Stratejoy follower, a central message that I've taken away from this community is that joy is within our reach. Every single one of us. The catch is that we've got some self-exploration and investigation to do before we can grab it and make it our own.

And, I know, I know. I'm always raving about Molly, her programs, and her generally awesome approach to life and rocking it right now.

The reason is not that I'm some psycho-obsessed fangirl (only a little), but because I've learned tangible, applicable, concrete, proven skills that I've applied to my individual quest for joy, authenticity, bubbles, laughter, and everything juicy good.

The point isn't that my life took a turn overnight when I put these skills to work. Of course not. But, the point is that with the strategies I've learned through my course in Deliberate Living, jotted down in my journal, and let Molly burn into my brain, I've been applying them at my own speed, at a rate that's healthy for me and works in my own day to day. I've tailored them to my own needs. Created systems of my very own.

We can think and talk and write all day long about how we want joy in our lives, but unless we go get it, we'll never have it. Here's how I go get it.

MY SEVEN SYSTEMS FOR GROWTH

Sabotaging Unproductive Habits—It's about identifying the habits I have that lead me down paths that don't

serve my best self. At first, it seemed as though I was tricking myself and that felt...wrong. Well, I was. "Wasn't my willpower enough?" I thought. No. It wasn't. And, I'd been giving myself concrete evidence for years that my willpower and desire were just not enough to prevent myself from falling into cycles of laziness, mindlessness, etc.



Because sometimes we just plain forget, lose focus of our goals, and need elementary reminders in plain sight.

For instance, I realized that an aspect of my life that was preventing me from moving forward was my habit of walking into my apartment after a long day or stressful event and straight to the TV remote. On. Trashy TV. Mindless. Numb. Day over. Instead, now I trick myself! Amazing! I keep the remote waaaaay back in a corner of my closet. If I want to watch TV, fine, but it's going to be a conscious, aware decision, by golly.

Putting Fierce Self-Love Within Eyeshot—It's about channeling my creativity in a way that builds reminders of the woman I am and want to continue to be. If you came to my apartment, you'd see positive sticky-notes on my bathroom mirror, colorful hand-made collages on my refrigerator, a framed picture of a hula-hooping 80-year old

woman on my dresser, photos of my near and dear, books that inspire, and art I've created. Because sometimes we just plain forget, lose focus of our goals, and need elementary reminders in plain sight.

Maintaining A Detailed Health Journal—It's about taking the precious time to sit, breathe, put pen to paper,

I do know that time is precious, trust me. Which is why it is a gift I've focused on giving to myself.

and focus on how I really feel. I do know that time is precious, trust me. Which is why it is a gift I've focused on giving to myself. I have a pretty, pretty journal, some bright markers and pens, and a calendar. I sit down and I track how I'm feeling from day to day. My body (sluggish, bloated, achy, energetic, rested?), my mind (clear, cluttered, racing, numb?), my heart (full, guilty, lonely, hopeful?). It doesn't only give me an opportunity to clear my head; this practice has helped me identify two of the most significant triggers to my mood swings. I was able to see, right there in my calendar, that I've got a classic case

of the winter blues and am in need of steady Vitamin D and that the week after my...ahem...menstrual cycle was hell for me. My hormones were sending me into a crippling depression that I was spending the other three weeks of the month trying to clean up after. Because I'd realized this, I was able to discuss options with my doctor and reach a conclusion that I'm not a headcase! I've got PMDD!

Establishing Self-Serving Routines—*It's about honoring who I want to become by giving myself a chance to find inspiration, check-in with myself, clear my head space, and realign.* What works for me is getting up early in the morning in order to prepare myself for the day ahead. Shower. Walk dog. Coffee. Makeup. Outfit. Breakfast. News. Hair. Twitter. Dishes in sink. Out door. And even though I have an equally if not stronger urge to stay in bed until the last possible second, I know that my whole day will follow suit if I don't put my feet on the floor and give myself what I need—that routine. The same goes for the evening. Computer off. Books for class put away. Bag prepped for next day. Lamps on at bedside. Makeup off. Inbox cleared. A little lotion on my hands. Something soothing

on Pandora. A quiet prayer. My journals, a book I'm reading for leisure or a favorite magazine in bed with me. The rest of my days allow for spontaneity, but those routines ground me. I need them. I know that.

Eliminating Toxicity—*It's about lifting the weight from my shoulders so that I can move forward.* A really effective challenge that Molly presented me was to make a list, no matter how long, of the elements in my life that were creating a cloud of dread. Big stuff to little stuff. Debt to that dress I need to have dry-cleaned. And yes, setting aside a whole day or longer, if needed to tackle it. That conversation I needed to have with my parents. The appointments I needed to make. Cards I wanted to send and drawers I wanted to clean. And when I made the list, WHOA! It felt so doable. Everything that I had been letting eat at me took one good afternoon to eliminate, essentially. Toxic crap comes up all the time. The trick I'm using it to give myself a scheduled block of time each week (really, only about an hour), to just do it and be done with it. Bills, errands, phone calls, whatever. I know that for me, that's what I do on my free Tuesday afternoons. Always fueled

by caffeine and with a happy hour with friends as a treat for taking care of it, obviously.

Using Gratitude As A Counter-Action For Stress—*It's about reminding myself of what I have (so much) in order to eliminate feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness.* My nasty, all-too-common tendency to dwell on the bad and forget the good. To think about the obligations, the rain, tests and papers due rather than the beauty of nature, my upcoming plans, my health, my fortune to be in school at all. When I walk my dog up the block, I try to mentally list as many things that I'm grateful for as I possibly can (the pretty color of that lady's dress, the smell from the restaurant, my mom's phone call earlier that day, all the plans I have that weekend, the lunch I fixed, etc). The walk helps to clear my head and by the time I've returned home, I'm a new woman. I also often jot down similar blessings in a journal that I've designated as my special Gratitude Journal. After a stressful day or period in my life, even if I think I can't muster a single thing to offer thanks for, I can look to that journal and remember that there is so much that makes me fortunate.

Making The Mundane Special—*It's about stuff I've gotta do anyway and how to make it lovely.* When I know it's going

to suck, I've got to incorporate an aspect of pleasant or I just won't do it. Sad, but true. Dishes to do? Light a candle. Gobs of homework? Film Scores radio on repeat. Toilet to scrub? Wear that sassy do-rag I tie-dyed in Austin. Dreaded phone call to make? Hot cup of tea. I find it really fun to think of ways that I can make what would otherwise be terrible into a chance for beauty. There are so many opportunities for joyful simplicity that we can marry with our obligations and life suddenly becomes a string of delight, with some responsibility mixed in. Paying bills is way better whilst wearing incredible lipstick, you know?

Certainly, those aren't the only systems I've been exploring. I am also working to incorporating a regular mindfulness practice, acknowledging those in my corner, practicing self-expression, and learning to ask for what I want among many, many other tactics. The point is that I'm learning what works for me. I'm putting in the time, thought, and effort, because, damn it, I deserve it. I deserve all the joy I can scoop up. And I'm working to build my own, individual

definition of joy. And, finally, I'm getting a return on my investment in myself.

It's crazy to me that just within the last year, I've become so very aware of what I really want, made such progress in actually going after it, and built so many supportive relationships. I'm so thankful that this community has given me the strength to dive right into exploring what I could do to make my life better. It's given me a place to take my temperature, so to speak, to know how I'm feeling, and not be afraid to think about how I can both maintain what works and improve what doesn't.

It's given me a place to share all that. Now, that's a system that really works.



Dee

DEE, Season 4...

is a dreamer working in the PR world. She's officially studying journalism and religious studies in Columbia, Missouri, while unofficially studying interesting people, good music and film, and how to play the fiddle. She thinks "QLC" should stand for "Quarterlife Challenge," and has strong opinions about self love, Diet Coke, and introspection. Maybe graduate school is the next step for her. Maybe she'll get a bunch of tattoos and start a band. In London. Maybe she'll set off across the country with her beagle, her horse and a case of wine. The future's wide open, but for now, she's focusing on making each day special.

Do the Things That Make You Happy

by Kendra



My friend and former roommate, Deb, a cow milking, tree hugging, policy making, chick from New York's Hudson Valley, positively flits through life.

She's the kind of girl that you expect to find with birds resting on her fingers like something out of Walt Disney's Snow White.

It's not that her life is perfect, or that she doesn't have the same troubles or worries that the rest of us do—she most definitely does—**she just seems to always find a way of getting through them with a smile.**

One day last summer as I lay in the living room of Casa Guilford (yes, we named our home), our sweet little house nestled in a tiny clearing in the woods of Vermont, Debbie bounded through

the living room 'Tigger-like' as was her wont.

I'd had enough.

"Deb," I said feeling very much like Piglet out of Winnie the Pooh as I fretted over this and that, "How is it you always seem so Happy?"

"Weeeeelllll," she said in her drawn out way that makes you feel as though you're about to be let in on a Super Special Secret. And then she paused, visibly flummoxed as though she herself hadn't given it much thought, before brightening and shrugging as she said, "I do the things that make me happy."

She bounced off to lie in the grass in the field outside of our house leaving me to ponder: How often do I really do the things that bring me pleasure? Not just the Big Things such as travel, but the little things like a mid-day nap in the shade of a tree on a sunny day, setting down a page or two in a scrapbook, or mixing up a batch of much beloved oatmeal raisin cookies for a special friend?

Or are these tiny daily pleasures the first to get shunted aside?

...I'VE GOTTEN INTO THE
HABIT OF BEING INFINITELY
MEANER TO MYSELF THAN I WOULD
EVER ALLOW MYSELF TO BE
TO EVEN MY WORST ENEMY.

For me, and I'm guessing for a lot of other people as well, the first things to go are the things that bring me pleasure. It's as my friend Steve pointed out to me recently, "At times, Kendra, it seems that you don't like to be nice to you."

And he's right, over the past year or so I've gotten into the habit of being infinitely meaner to myself than I would ever allow myself to be to even my worst enemy. I wouldn't imagine telling a child they couldn't eat until they'd finished writing a page of their essay, but I wouldn't hesitate to do that to myself.

Faced with a lot to do and very little time, I phase out the daily pleasures



and diligently working on my graduate school capstone paper, I've also spent my week scrapbooking, hanging out with friends, and just messing around.

And you know what?

For the first time in months, when people ask me how I'm feeling, some days I can honestly answer, "Great!"

that make life worth living. This is cruel, because it's these small pleasures that give us the clarity into figuring out the answers to the Big Questions, such as, "What am I doing with my life?" and "What job (if any) will bring me joy?"

Steve's words reminded me of Deb's so long ago and helped to jolt me out of my-nose-to-the-grindstone stupor.

Consequently, I've started to carve several hours out of every day for the things that give me pleasure. In the past week, in addition to sending out a half a dozen or so resumes, contacting a handful of people for networking opportunities,



Kendra

KENDRA, Season 1...

was struck by her Quarterlife Crisis at 25 and dealt with it by skydiving, quitting her job and moving to France. While finding her niche, Kendra lived in Montreal where, in addition to eating far too much poutine, she interned with the United Nations while she completed her master's degree in Sustainable Development. Three years post-Stratejoy, Kendra has written and published her first nonfiction book—Green Washed—and is thankfully, gainfully employed! Find her tweeting @kendrawrites.



Northwest Dust Bunnies

by Marisa

I SWEEP MYSELF
TO THE SIDE, ALWAYS
EXCUSING MY LIFE
WITH REASONS LIKE A
HEAVY WORKLOAD...

When I first moved to Oregon almost 10 years ago, I was stunned by the massive amounts of dust that collected inside a home. Sure, I lived in a prison cell sized dorm room with another person in super close proximity, but still, it was shocking. It continued when I moved into a larger house with roomies after moving out of the dorms... Those dust bunnies amassed to dust bunny armies, way more than what I was used to in Nevada.

It caused a new tradition of sorts every year.

I clean during the winter; clean to get rid of that dust, get rid of material items that weigh me down, and get rid of the dust that settles figuratively in my head.

I've had a lot of dust these past years. Most of it I've swept underneath the carpet only to have it pile up and cloud my mind recently.

This year's clean out is especially special. It's the one where I honestly look around my surroundings and make some decisions to affect this single life of mine.

So far, I've been able to materialistically place a very neat pile of items on the North side of my apartment. This fort of past wonders is for Goodwill and contains the 2008 & 2009 Marisa of unused clothes and furniture that could be of better use for someone else. It's funny giving up these items; they contain memories of where and when I bought them but hold no sentimental value really. **They are, in fact, just things, and I'm learning that heavy materialism is no longer a part of my vocabulary.** In fact, things look lighter and more open, just as hardwood floors should.

That was the easy part—moving furniture, sweeping floors and using citrus polish to make things look pretty and shiny.

What's hardest for me is shaking all that dust that I've collected emotionally over the years. I can admit now that being up here for the past three years without experiencing any real romantic relationship with someone has been, well, lonely. I swept myself to the side, always excusing my life with reasons like a heavy workload, only finding insanely lazy Portland guys and worst of all, the worst thing a young woman can do to herself, succumbing to a lack of



It's going to be difficult I think, to stay shiny and dust-free for a bit. And I'm bound to meet some more dusty guys, but hey, Spring-cleaning is only three months away.

I can totally do a quick Swiffer then. Just in time for SXSW.

confidence, that low self-esteem that says I was not worthy of finding such happiness.

But no more! I'm going to do it. **I'm taking that layer of dust off, Swiffering myself with a new environmentally friendly, cranberry scented cleanser, and I'm changing and challenging things starting NOW.** I've been building up to it too—going on dates, meeting new people, figuring out exactly what I want and hopefully what I need.



Marisa

MARISA, Season 1...

was living the funemployment life when she met Stratejoy. After being "let go" in March 2009, she decided to take advantage of her Quarterlife Crisis and seek happiness. You can find Marisa at most shows in Portland, learning to play the drums, and in her kitchen, cooking & baking. She's a fierce seamstress too, hems almost anything.

Showdown with the Bogeyman

by Nikki



I am scared of the dark. I will sit, staring wide-eyed into the night, hoping that my pupils grow to a cat-like diameter and allow me to see more than what my terrible imagination creates out of various shades of black and blacker.

I have been known to check not only under my bed, but behind dressers and in small linen closets—places no human could possibly ever fit—before turning out the lights. I have to convince myself, beyond any doubt, that there is not a killer waiting to pounce once my eyes are closed.

This is embarrassing to admit, since I'm almost 30 and therefore an actual, certified grown-up.

I'm also scared of commitment, which is a much more adult fear to have and

therefore not nearly as humiliating. However, it's pretty typical in our generation, so I kind of feel like a jerkface admitting it. All the cool kids are afraid of commitment.

Except that's not really true. The coolest people I know have committed to something or someone. I think that if you go into it with eyes open and gut leading the way, it is a strong person who is able to say, "This is what I want, and I know this One Thing is worth not having all those possible Other Things out there." That certainty kind of blows my mind.

I have never felt that sure about anything.

Which is why it's scary—it's less a fear of commitment and more a fear of committing to the wrong thing. A fear of settling. A fear of missing out on something that's good for me because I'm just not

sure, and of settling for something that's not great for me because I've never been sure.

The whole world is open to me, there are too many options, and if my gut doesn't feel strongly about anything, I have no compass with which to navigate through them all.



The whole world is open to me, there are too many options, and if my gut doesn't feel strongly about anything, I have no compass with which to navigate through them all.

I'm in the dark, straining to see more than shadows and trying to keep my imagination in check.

And because of that lack of certainty in myself, I have another completely unreasonable fear: the fear of what others think. They go hand-in-hand, merrily skipping

down the field of my psyche, trampling daisies and positivity. I start to question my choices and doubt myself, and my brain fuels it, building a bogeyman who grins at me with his wicked gleaming teeth and tells me what kind of a failure and shiftless lazy whiner everyone thinks



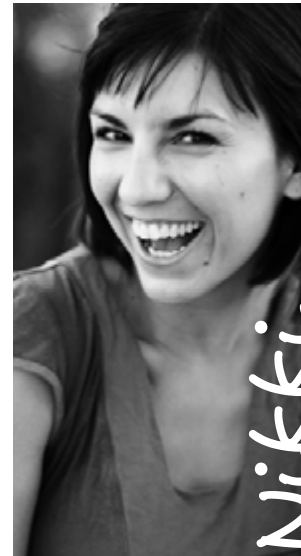
of all the things in life I've achieved that I'm proud of, and all the instances where I've proved stronger than I thought I was. Poof! In the light, the bogeyman that seemed so menacing a second ago is nothing but a pile of clean clothes in the corner that I've neglected to put away.

I am, and how I'm never going to get the life I want so I might as well settle for just OK.

I know he's full of shit but he's so persuasive. I want to hide under the covers but I know that when he appears, slinking out of the dark corners of my mind, the only thing to do is turn on the light.

I tell myself: **I have time. I make good decisions. I will know when something is right. If I make a mistake, it's never really a mistake. I can have my best life. I have friends who love me. I am a good, smart person. I am worth love and respect.** I remind myself

Fear will always be lurking behind that winter coat in the back of my closet, waiting to come out on dark days. But I refuse to let it terrorize me. I know that, as much courage as it takes to face it, all I really have to do is shine a little light to see that there is nothing to be afraid of.



Nikki

NIKKI, Season 3...

is an actor recovering from Los Angeles. She slammed into her Quarterlife Crisis in 2008, quit chasing L.A. "success" and escaped to Australia, where she only owned what she could carry and only did what made her happy. Returning with a new perspective, she intended to move cross-country and balance her life. She wasn't sure yet where she belonged or what she was gonna do, but she believes in the healing powers of gratitude, creativity, and bicycles. In the time between Season 3 and now, Nikki has experienced how very sweet life can be when you trust one step at a time, and now has a job she loves as an event planner in L.A., a funny little dog with a moustache, and a renewed faith in God that keeps her smiling.



For Marian, Forever Ago

by Marian

...EVERYTHING
YOU DO LEADS TO
WHERE YOU ARE NOW

Dear Marian,

You're a funny one, aren't you? I know high school is being a bitch and a half right now and your boyfriend is a crazy person and you pretty much hate everyone, but I promise: college classes are better than high school classes, you will not be with that boyfriend forever and, trust me, it isn't you; the people in Greenwich actually do suck.

You may attend a certain college for the wrong reasons, but it will end up being the right place for you. There, you will find a group of friends who adore you more than life, you will find out who you are without your high school sweetheart AND you will end up traveling to 13 countries in the span of a year. You will switch your major from Spanish to Gender Studies, just because it's more fun. And that's one thing I crazy

admire about you, Past Marian, you don't stress about what you should be doing. You just do what feels right.

And so far? It's played out pretty well. There will be a period after graduation where you'll feel 100% stressed and frustrated about what you're supposed to be doing. You'll make a huge effort to get a "real" job and you'll end up quitting it anyway to go solo. It's not particularly scary, but don't stress when you end up having to leave New York. There are bigger and better things to come. Also remember that you kind of always knew you weren't supposed to be at a desk so when everyone starts congratulating you about your "new life" and how exciting it must be, **don't freak out when you just smile and nod and don't actually feel any passion towards your cubicle and phone extension.** It's not you and I hope you celebrate that.

While I'd like to give you some grand advice to help plot your way through breakups and travels and horrible grades and great grades, everything you do leads to where you are now. Which is in sunny New Zealand with the greatest person on earth. And while you still may be floundering with the whole "What the



hell am I doing" part of your life, you are with the right person and you have the amazing flexibility to do and go wherever you want. You never succumbed to what was popular; you never pretended to be something you weren't; you never listened to anything but your heart.

Make sure you never lose that quality. Make sure you don't let other people's failures and bad advice get in your way. Writing this now, though, I know I have nothing to worry about. **While life doesn't get any less stressful in the next ten years, you've managed to kick so much ass. For this, I am completely and brilliantly proud of you.**

Love, Marian



MARIAN, Season 3...

s a blogger, technically a social media "thug" (consultant is a stupid word) for authors and has a bad case of the Quarterlife Crisis. Her posts at marianlibrarian.com are usually "uncategorized," and when she's not blogging about nonsense, she has decided she wants to be a pastry chef slash author slash farmer in the woods. Hence, the QLC. She got the travel itch too and moved from New York to London to follow her heart, then headed to New Zealand in December 2010. Marian has now been living in NZ for two years and is about to complete her yoga teacher training while working full-time at a digital marketing firm in Auckland.

What I Learned from My Dog

by Robyn



My girlfriend, Natalie, spent a lot of time and money training her dog, Morgan (who I also consider to be my dog). Morgan can sit, stay, give paw, and she's almost trained off leash. I've always been impressed with Morgan and how quickly she learns.

I'll even admit that sometimes I'm jealous of the dog.

I mean, she sits around all day, naps, gets constant attention, and is constantly spoiled! After living with her for about a year, I have learned a lot from just watching her.

Here's a list of things I have learned from my dog:

Always let the people you care about know how much you love them. It's

easy to get caught up in a routine and to take the people around you for granted. Take time to appreciate the people you care about, and never hesitate to show them how much they mean to you and how happy you are to see them. I can't remember a day when I walk home through my front door that Morgan isn't jumping on me and showering me with kisses. Her tail wags uncontrollably like it's the first time she has seen me in months, when really it has only been a few hours.

On the other hand, don't waste time on people who don't make you happy.

Friendships and relationships are two way streets, and if you don't feel like you are being treated how you deserve, then move on. When Morgan is outside at the dog park, surrounded by other people and other dogs, she will run around making friends, and once in a while, she will come across someone she must not be fond of. Maybe she is a good judge of character or maybe there is no reason

for it, but she doesn't waste her time around another person or another dog she doesn't like. She will run away, cower, and move on to the next dog/person.

Take time to relax. Balancing work and life and everything else weighs on me, and I'm sure it weighs on you. Even if it's just an hour each night, take time to do something relaxing. Read a book, take a walk, or watch part of your favorite movie. Morgan takes about twelve naps a day (here's where my jealousy comes in—haha!). She does what makes her happy—chewing on a bone, laying

in the sun, or digging in the sand at the dog beach. She does what she wants and always makes time for herself.

Let people give you attention. Don't be shy, and never pass a chance to open and up and let yourself be heard. I've never enjoyed being the center of attention—so much that sometimes I



Take time to appreciate the people you care about, and never hesitate to show them how much they mean to you and how happy you are to see them.



Take time to enjoy the little things.

Find pleasure in everyday life. Take notice of things you would usually be too busy to appreciate. Morgan is ecstatic to get outside for a short walk. She is thrilled when I let her run outside with me to take the garbage out. She can hardly contain herself when I give her a small bite of whatever I am eating. A pat on the head perks her ears up and makes her tail wag.

will downplay my feelings or accomplishments so that it's not such a big deal. I've worked on it, and I have found a better, happier balance. I enjoy sharing things with people more, and I enjoy their reactions to my sharing. Morgan will sit and stare at me until I invite her up on the couch to rest on my lap. She will nuzzle my arm and look at me with big puppy eyes until I pet her or scratch her behind the ears. She never fails to let me know when she needs me to make her feel special.



Robyn

ROBYN, Season 1...

graduated from Miami University with a journalism degree and moved to Chicago, where she tried to take advantage of everything the city has to offer, especially the Cubs games during baseball season. In the midst of her Quarterlife Crisis, Robyn was on the verge of something big...but was still trying to decide what exactly that might be. She's still living in Chicago with her dog and works as an account manager.

Table for One

by Kristen



On the last Friday of 2011, I went on my first ever date with myself. I have eaten alone before, but always in a coffee shop or while traveling, and never, ever on a Friday night.

After a particularly low time at the end of October, I had a personal coaching call with Molly at the beginning of November and she gave me the action item to go out for a solo glass of wine before the end of the year. It was not just my busy schedule through the months of November and December that delayed this self-date, but also my own personal fears of doing it. I know it sounds silly to say, but the thought of going to a bar or restaurant and sitting alone for longer than a meal seemed incredibly daunting to me.

What was I afraid of? People eat alone all the time—it is not that big of a deal.

I do other things like run errands alone, but that time is task oriented. My frugal aspect comes into play too—why go out for a glass of wine and dinner when I can do the same thing in my house in my pajamas for much cheaper? To me, going out to eat as a single seems so vulnerable. I am ashamed to say that in the past I made judgments of people who were out eating alone, though as I think about it now, perhaps it was a longing and jealousy that they were that self-aware and comfortable to be eating at a table for one—something I thought I would never be.

I realized in the second week of December that I promised Molly that I would go on my date before the end of the year. I wrote my date for myself in big inked letters in my planner and told my family and friends about my self-date. I needed people to know it was going to happen because I needed accountability. I know myself well and that when it comes to pushing myself to do new things, that I've often talked myself out of many activities or nights out in the past. This is due to the strong inner

critic who I listened to more than the positive Jiminy Cricket. I did not want this very important date and goal for myself to be one of those things that I kicked myself for not doing.

Even as I drove home from work that Friday, my interior monologue went back and forth at least five times about whether to go or not. I chose a restaurant in Providence that is quiet and laid back, yet chic. I debated changing the venue a few times, not going at all, waiting to go until after the New Year, or just getting take out from a local Thai spot. As soon as I got into my driveway, I ran into the house and changed out of my work clothes, put on a cute top, jeans, and heels, fixed my makeup, and





rushed out of the house. If I was going to do this, I needed to do it right away—if I lingered too long in my warm, cozy house, the inner critic would have won. And if I was going to do this, I had to feel great and confident about me—wearing my tired work attire was not going to cut it.

One of the things I thought I would struggle with was saying “just one for dinner” to the hostess. The inner critic was telling me how sad and pathetic this sounded, but when I got to the restaurant and said it, the waiter smiled and seated me in a posh room with a comfy chair by a fireplace. The only awkward moment was when my waitress came over and asked me if I wanted a drink while I waited for my guest; when I said it was just me, she

apologized. That was it—most awkward moment was not even that awkward. After those two moments I dreaded were over, I said to myself, “You’re here and everything is OK.” And I realized how long overdue this night was.

The night was DIVINE. So relaxing, so self-assuring, and all me. I armed myself only with a journal and pen to document any introspective thoughts I had. I tweeted a few times to share the experience with the world. I drank the most delicious glass of Malbec, dined on a goat cheese, sundried tomato, and spinach crepe, and had a scrumptious red velvet cupcake with cream cheese frosting for dessert (this spot is known for their crepes, tea, and cupcakes).

But the personal gratification and happiness that came out of that night far surpassed any aspect of

the enjoyable meal. It was an important step for me to go out and spend the time and money on myself because I deserve a night out every now and again (as budget allows). I don’t need another person with me to do it. I treated myself and gave myself the gift of time. Time to think, to process, to savor, to enjoy, and to love myself. I ended the tumultuous year of 2011 on my terms. And I showed myself I can do it—I can put myself out there on a Friday night alone in a restaurant and be confident in my skin. **If I can do that, overcome my inner critic and do something that always scared me, I can do absolutely anything.**



Kristen

KRISTEN, Season 5...

lives in Somerset, MA and works Newport, RI. After years of hard work and a master’s degree, she’s a museum curator—her dream job. She loves all things food, a great book with a cup of tea or a glass of wine, and her crazy close-knit family. Her Quarterlife Crisis began after she bought a house and got married in 2010. After a transformational experience in an art gallery in 2011, Kristen is in the process of divorcing and figuring out what life on the other side looks like—embracing honesty and learning how to trust her gut again. Kristen was bit by the blogging bug after writing for Stratejoy and is now loving having her own blog, Life By Kristen (lifebykristen.wordpress.com).

A Gratitude Cupcake with Love Flavored Frosting

by Jill



■ If growing up in the Midwest taught me anything, it's manners. Take your shoes off at the front door; address adults as Mr. and Mrs.; say "please" and "thank you."

"Thank you" is a big one.

Fun fact: I used to say "thank you" to my hands at night before I went to sleep. Then, I would say "thank you" to my feet so they wouldn't feel left out. Seriously. I was five! They did things all day! And I had impeccable manners!

Bring on a vengeful growth spurt and an ambitious overbite, and those body manners get hidden behind a killer case of teen angst and insecurity.

Welp, I'm not an insecure, angst-ridden teen anymore (or, um, at least not a teen),

and sometimes life comes full circle. So, I'd like to say "thank you" again—to the whole kit-n-kaboodle this time.

Without further ado, a thank you note

To my body,

You, my dear, are a pitch perfect combination of elaborate jigsaw puzzle and fridge worthy artwork, sprinkled with fairy dust and sunspots. You have your good days and your bad days, but you're always exclusively mine.

Thank you for waking up in the morning, going to sleep at night, and everything in between.

Thank you for committing to that half marathon. Yeah, you were holding firm onto that freshman-15 due to a rock steady love of pizza and beer, but you never felt stronger than you did right after crossing the finish line. You made me realize the superiority of feeling great over looking great.



You made me realize the superiority of feeling great over looking great.

Thank you for loving to nap topless.

Thank you for that piercing gut feeling you give me whenever something is wrong, and especially whenever something is right. I still can't explain why it was so important for me to full on sprint to my car that one night, or why God him/herself couldn't talk me out of moving to Los Angeles. You, gut feeling, lead me to those decisions. I am inexplicably confident that choices like these shaped, and continue to shape, my life in ways I'll never know.

Thank you for giant morning shits.

Thank you for being picky about the people with whom you are intimate.

Whenever I become determined to live up my slutty twenties, your defense mechanisms kick in. You make it so that sleeping with a stranger is like trying to fuck a hot stove. It makes the times I do have sex so much more satisfying.

On that note, thank you for orgasms. I'd also like to send a special shout-out to whoever invented the clitoris.



Thank you for cooperating with my love for animals/the environment and feeling like a superstar when I eat vegetarian, or vegan, or whatever level of PETA I'm feeling that day.

Thank you, eyelashes, for catching my sweat (Regina Spektor FTW).

Thank you for my awkward phase. Oh, boy, did I hate you at that time. Looking back, I can graciously acknowledge that those ugly duckling years were the best thing that could happen to a girl. It forced me to develop a personality, and to shut out superficial thoughts about other people.

I suppose now is as good of time as any to submit a formal apology for shaving your eyebrows before Homecoming. Forgive and forget?

Mostly, thank you for sticking with me, even when I scrutinize everything about you. You, Body, are the best friend a girl could ask for.

I promise to send you more love notes in the form of long runs and chocolate cake. I promise to stand up straighter. I promise to appreciate your unique beauty, and to be a loving spouse in this marriage between body and soul.

Exclusively yours,
Jill



JILL, Season 6...

hails from the land of Oprah and The Cubs. After one too many losing seasons, she packed up her iPod mini and headed west to attend San Diego State University (with a pit stop in Prague for an adventure-filled semester abroad). After graduating, she made the big move to Los Angeles to contemplate what she wanted to do with her life. There, she accidentally hit on her QLC at a sleazy dive bar, and now it won't leave her alone. She really, really, really likes her friends, filthy jokes, and cereal. She's still living the good life in L.A., and now spends her time trying to think of something that will top being a Stratejoy blogger.





From Self-Loathing to Self-Love

by Arielle

IT WAS LIKE
SOMEONE CUT TO THE
CORE OF **EVERYTHING**
I'VE EVER HATED
ABOUT MYSELF

October 24, 2007. My 24th birthday.

I was walking home from work when my cell phone rang. "Hi, I have a delivery for apartment 20. I'm downstairs in your building."

A delivery? For me? HOORAY BIRTHDAY PRESENTS! I ran the remaining 2 blocks to my building, grabbed the massive, unwieldy package from the man's arms, and hoofed it up my 5 flights of stairs.

I set the package down on the kitchen table. It was a huge basket from Edible Arrangements with tons of fruit shaped into flowers, resembling an actual bouquet. I hunted around for a card so I could figure out who sent this awesome present. I finally found it but I didn't see any "From" field on it. I flipped it over—nothing on the other side either. I decided to just read the card and go from there.

My eyes scanned the words. And then again. And again. There were only 6 little words on this card, but it took what seemed

like hours to process what I was reading, for my brain to finally kick in. Yes, Arielle. It really does say what you think it says.

"Eat some fruit, you're getting fat."

That's what the card said. The card on my BIRTHDAY PRESENT. I immediately knew which of my friends had sent it, and that this was his idea of a joke. I knew he didn't mean to offend me, but, well, he had.

I ran to my room and cried into my pillow. At some point, I cleaned myself up and went downtown to the birthday dinner I had planned with a few friends. I acted like nothing was wrong, too hurt to even think about retelling the story. I came home from dinner and continued crying until I fell asleep.

I still hate that story. I cringe thinking about how one of my closest friends thought he was making an innocent joke and instead ended up going for the jugular (we are no longer friends, though not because of this incident). It was like someone cut to the core of everything I've ever hated about myself and summed it up in the world's most painful 6 word memoir.

I now live a few short blocks from an Edible Arrangements store in Brooklyn. I pass it on my way to the gym, and every

time I see it I think of that birthday and how miserable that stupid fruit bouquet made me feel. I recently decided that in order to stop feeling hurt and rage every time I walked by, I needed to replace that terrible memory with a better one.

I went to the Edible Arrangements website to pick something out for myself. I wanted to buy the exact flower arrangement that I had received in 2007, but my friend had apparently shelled out way too much money in his quest to give me a hurtful birthday present, so I settled on something more affordable—a small box of truffles, tiny pieces of fruit that were half coated in chocolate.

Then came the hard part: writing the card. Lots of vengeful phrases came to mind, fighting words that I had never used against the friend who made me feel so awful.

Fuck you, asshole!

At least I'm not a miserable human being like you.

You're probably going to die alone, douchebag.

For some reason this didn't seem productive. I shouldn't focus my energy on being bitter; I should focus on me, right? Suddenly, I knew what I had to do.

During week 1 of the Stratejoy Fierce Love course, there's an assignment to write a love letter to yourself. After reading my love letter aloud to Molly, Katie and my fellow season 6 bloggers, Molly challenged me to read the letter every day for a few weeks.

Writing this card was the first real test of whether or not my attitude toward myself had changed since I started Fierce Love. Was I truly starting to love myself for who I was, or was I going to continue letting external negativity bring me down?

On April 24th, the day I turned 28 and a half, I walked into the Edible Arrangements store and picked up my truffles. I came home, ignored the fruit, and even though I had written it myself, went straight for the card. It contained a teeny excerpt from my love letter.

"You are amazing. You might still be waiting for a few of your doors to open, but I have no doubt that they will, eventually. You have so many wonderful, exciting things in store for you, and I can't wait to be there with you, watching you kick ass. I love you. And don't ever forget it."

—Arielle

The best part about this whole thing is that I really believe it. I still have insecurities and still need to work on my confidence, but I truly believe that I'll get there. Because I am amazing, and I am going to start kicking ass one day soon.

Now, walking past the Edible Arrangements store just makes me smile.




ARIELLE, Season 6...

is living the dream in Brooklyn, NY. Her Quarterlife Crisis began in 2010 when she received her MBA and had no idea what to do with it. It escalated into full-on panic mode in December 2011 when she lost her job. She also realized that her diet of beer and buffalo wings wasn't doing her any favors, and is hoping that the millionth time's a charm for getting healthier habits in order. She is an avid volleyball player, owns enough silly hats to outfit an entire party, and is technically single but has deep feelings for her Kindle. Follow the fun @NotTheMermaid.

Being Myself. No Matter Who That Is.

by Katie



When I walked into my Student Psychologist, Mrs. R's office during my freshman year of high school, I had no idea what to expect.

I was hoping, at the very least, for her to tell me how to stop feeling like a stranger in my own life, an issue that little did I know, would haunt me for years to come. The very first day that I spoke with Mrs. R, she gave me a mantra. After discussing my feelings of inadequacy due to my boyfriend at the time (who was 10 years older than me) and cheating on me constantly, she asked me to repeat after her:

"I am lovable, and loving, and deserve to be loved by a man who loves only me."

I looked at her cockeyed.

She insisted that I repeat it. I did. Twenty times. She then told me that I had to write this mantra over and over, 100 times, and turn it into her the next day. **She also asked me to focus on how it made me feel to say this.**

She told me to think about the things that make me doubt that statement, and keep those in mind when I write it.

Whatever, lady. I came here for help, not homework. Despite my negative attitude and lack of expectations, I did it. About halfway through, something miraculous happened.

I began to believe it.

This says a lot for someone who had zero self-confidence. Something clicked and made me realize that no matter what anyone did to me, said about me, or thought about me, I was who I was, and there are people out there who this will be good enough for. Wasting time with people who don't respect you, understand you, or allow you to be YOU is a waste of your time and theirs.

I wasn't cured in that moment. This was still freshman year, and I was still depressed, and had a very serious life

decision (literally) ahead of me.

I would run into another issue that still affects me now: trying to be myself with people who I care about but don't agree with my personal beliefs or actions.

I dated a man for a year and a half who I loved and thought was 'the one.' The problem? My writing, my political preferences, and friend selections, among other things, weren't the same as his. The first time I introduced him to one of my best friends, my best friend vetoed him immediately.

"He's not for you, Katie. He's too different. **He doesn't appreciate who you are so much as he wants to change you.**"

I ignored it, and dated the man who continually wanted me, as long as I wanted the same things that he wanted. The man who believed in me as long as I believed



in the same things he did. I started to be okay with changing myself, pretending to be something I wasn't, as long as it meant he would love me.

FACT: He loved me...but only IF [insert stipulation here].

TRANSLATION: He didn't love me. He loved who he wanted me to be.

Inevitably we broke up. It was one of the most difficult experiences of my entire life, because when we broke up, I had become so used to being whoever he wanted me to be, that I had no idea who I was.

After months and months of a deep depression, I finally went back to basics. Back to freshman year of high school with Mrs. R.

"I am lovable and lovable, and deserve to be loved by a man who loves only me."

"I am who I am." Whatever I was feeling was okay, because they were my feelings. Whatever I believed was okay, because they were my beliefs. **I owned**

the words "My" and "Mine" and made them very personal. I took pride in saying things that began with "My" or "Mine." Even now, before I say anything about myself and my personal stance, I rethink it before I say it.

I ask myself, "Is this who I am? Or am I just saying it to be accepted? Believe in what you're saying, and be honest."

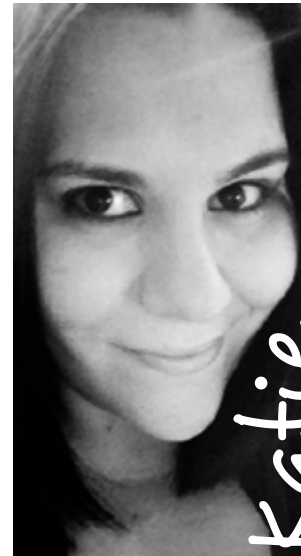
I literally sat down and got real with myself. With pen and paper in hand, I wrote down who I was, beginning with my name, and went through each area of my life that had meaning. From family values, to the way I like my steak cooked, I wrote it down. I posted different facts about me all over my house. Some on my refrigerator, a few on my bathroom mirror, and others on my front door. In a world that is constantly telling us what to do, or who to be, it's important to remind ourselves of the only person we 'should' be.

The person we're best at being—ourselves.

"I am who I am, I've been through what I've been through, and these things make up the person that I am, which is wonderful."

Being myself, no matter who it is, has been a difficult lesson, but most rewarding. How do you learn it? Find out who you are, and be who you are, no matter what. Don't be ashamed of your beliefs, preferences, or views. They are yours, YOU are yours.

Find out who you are, and own it.



KATIE, Season 2...

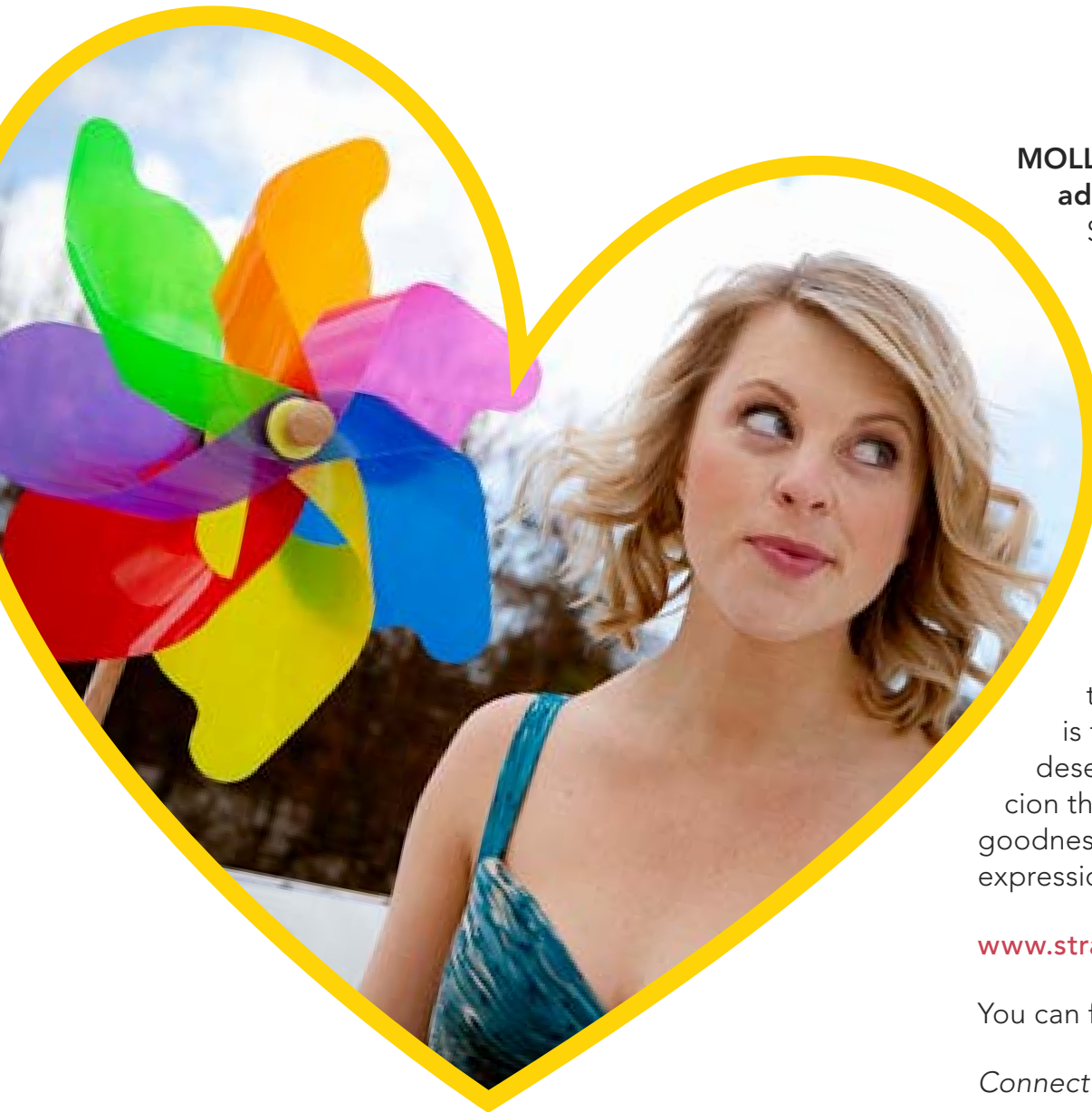
was living the harsh reality of unemployment in 2010. While trying to enhance her writing career and making ends meet, she was on a search to find out who she was and what she wanted. She loves reading, writing, dancing, steak, wine, and coffee (not necessarily at the same time). Skip to 2012, Katie is rocking her late twenties the best she knows how with her girlfriends, Nook, and a good \$8.99 bottle of wine by her side. She currently lives in Philadelphia, but has the Jersey accent to prove where she's REALLY from.

with gratitude...

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And to my Tribe: You ladies are the reason I do what I do. Thank you for believing in me and coming along for this incredible journey. And you know what? I believe in that big, bold, juicy version of your life and your complete ability to make it happen. I believe in **YOU**.



MOLLY MAHAR is a coach, speaker, writer, fierce love advocate and joy enthusiast. She is the founder of Stratejoy, a positive corner of the Internet that provides thousands of women with the tools, strategies and camaraderie to lead authentically joyful lives.

Her work is delivered through several live and digital group programs focused on creating your joyful world. Molly helps women in transition live life on their own terms, celebrate their worth and value their happiness. With enthusiasm! And action! She works one-on-one with clients who are ready for soul-level personal alignment and big shifts.

In her words, "I empower women to create lives on their own terms. I believe in going big, that honesty is the best policy and the undeniable fact that we all deserve meaningful, joyful lives. I have a sneaking suspicion that a world of fulfilled women equals radical acts of goodness, widespread emotional and physical health, creative expression, equality and true compassion."

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You can find Molly on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Pinterest](#) and [Vimeo](#).

Connect away!