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ENGL 1121
15 April 2023

Out of the Blue

Close your eyes and imagine you are on a sailboat drifting through the sea. Picture the water glistening like diamonds and the feeling of the sun's warmth on your face. The boat is peaceful, but then without warning, the sail starts flapping. You head to the rudder and begin steering the boat west – the spontaneous gusts of wind seem to be coming from the east. Amidst your efforts, storm clouds appear, and rain starts to fall. A once tranquil sailing trip now ignites fear. Fear is the initial feeling I encounter when anxiety arises. A peaceful day turns to a torrential downpour; a clear sky turns into an unforeseen storm. My first thought is to blame myself; I should know more about my triggers and weather patterns. I retrace my steps; it is like a tape on repeat that I cannot eject from my brain. There must have been signs that the storm, the anxiety, was coming; I was being reckless not to notice. Outsiders join in to blame me. My past mentality and the media caused me to fear my anxiety and see it as an inherent flaw within myself, something to conceal. Should I know how to mask the storms? The answer is no; like weather, fear is often unforeseen and unpredictable. My goal has evolved to embrace anxiety, not erase or conceal it – my anxiety does not disappear. There is beauty in what others see as a flaw.

The greatest battle I have had with anxiety is myself. Since I can remember, I have been an anxious person; I spent immense hours hating myself and the feelings of worry. I tried to figure out what caused my nerves, but I continued to fall short. As a kid, I would sit in class, and my stomach and chest would hurt. At that point, I did not know what anxiety was or that it was the cause of my pain. As I gained years, the fear did not relieve, though I was able to put a name

to my symptoms. I first heard the term anxiety around the age of ten, but it was not till I was fifteen that I fully understood the diagnosis. Once I came to terms with the fact that I had anxiety, I began disregarding my feelings. I was frustrated that I felt out of control of my body. There would be sunny days, blissful and happy. Then without an apparent cause, the wind blew me off my path. I became irritated, angry, and wanted to cry. I see my emotions as a body of water with a constant flood warning; a small rainstorm can change the direction of my day. As a kid, I would wake up and go to school, my day seemed prosaic, but when a teacher called on me to answer a question or I did poorly on a test, I could not continue - I became stagnant. I told myself I was strong, but when anxiety struck, I lost all hope in prevailing.

I remember the tension I felt as a kid and all the hate tossed around in my soul. There was no room for love or acceptance. I was a cavity for anger and pent-up emotions. Over time, I realized my self-hate was immoral. Although wrong, how could I change what had become normal? How could I find joy in the fear? It took time, but I realized my anxiety came from a lack of control. I feared unpredictability and when I would become turbulent. To counteract my emotions, I would plan every aspect of my life; I memorized everything I learned. I completed all my assignments days before they were due. No became my first response because yes meant I would miss deadlines. My mind became a cycle of control. What I thought was the solution to my pain caused more anxiety - whenever I broke my rigid schedule, my pond would flood. I realized I had to change my mentality; my pursuit could no longer be towards control. I had to pursue peace within the unknown. Although that statement contains few words, it has been my biggest challenge, and honestly, I have not fully learned how to do this. But overcoming anxiety is no longer my goal. I am learning to love and accept myself for all my "flaws." I cannot be perfect or in control. But I can choose how to treat myself.

As a kid, I broke down, but I would get back up. Then I would break down again, but, in this instance, I consulted the internet. Through a screen, I became more remorseful of my anxiety. The media is good at providing “quick fixes” for stress - downloading this app, buying this tea, and following this person who has overcome anxiety. At a young age, I accepted these ads as factual. As if people could overcome fear with a diet change or exercise routine. I became subject to the belief I was missing some internal strength. I tried drinking herbal tea, lowering caffeine consumption, exercising, drinking more water, downloading random apps, and listening to only classical music. Although the things I listed are good, they left me blue. I spent years trying these various solutions that sometimes would aid my anxiety, but shortly after, my fear would reappear at the same magnitude. I would tell myself I was weak because if these other people somehow overcame anxiety, I could also. I was the perfect target for the media’s game.

Something the internet never shared is that anxiety is different for everyone, and there are different kinds of panic, fear, and stress. People are unique individuals, and there is no calculated formula to standardize care for everybody in our population. When I was young, I took words at face value, with blind hope and a twinkle in my eye. No one told me that the media is full of falsity, a consumerist platform looking to make money, but even if they had, I would not have believed them. My journey with anxiety is not the same as others because I also struggle with being overly empathetic. When I was young, I assumed everyone had good intentions because I have always wanted the best for people, whether it helped me or not. When I watched someone discuss how they fought their anxiety, I did not see it as a ploy for monetary gain. Because I am optimistic, I was susceptible to believing people on the internet had my best interest at heart. I was insecure about my anxiety, and I lacked self-confidence. But after

a few years and some reflection, I realized when profit becomes more important than the consumer - insecurities turn to inadequacies. After my own feelings tore me down, the media was the icing on the cake. I realized I had a problem, and others also saw anxiety as a problem, then the internet conveniently gave me solutions to my said problem that cost money. Over time I began to understand that my anxiety was not disappearing and these solutions would not resolve my internal conflict. I began to question why my mentality towards anxiety was that it was a problem. Any "flaw" I was born with is not a mistake. My goal is no longer to escape fear; I will embrace my imperfections. Although some can conquer anxiety, my most vital discovery was that mental health is not standardizable. How someone learns to deal with their fear may not work for me, but that does not equate to a lack of internal fortitude. It means I am unique.

I have always had a personal connection to bodies of water. Oceans, lakes, and rivers have immaculate beauty; they are home to vast aquatic life and plant habitats. The beauty of water is that without it, life would not exist. But at the same time, because of water, life also dies. On sunny summer days, water radiates and embraces beauty. But on a stormy night, water can cause floods, tsunamis, whirlpools, and hurricanes. Anxiety is like a body of water. Anxiety can be beautiful, accentuating emotion and showing care. As emotions rush, life can flourish, and I can relate to others' heartache with great empathy. But then waves begin crashing, and I sink out of control. I used to believe that anxiety was a flaw, a disease I should learn to conceal. I did not see intensified emotions and empathy as good attributes. But through my journey with anxiety, I have learned not to be ashamed; my dream is to be a doctor, and many people told me I could not become a doctor if I broke down over insignificant matters. In those moments, I took those words to be true - but through self-

growth, I will be a better doctor because I care so much for my patients, and my empathy will speak for those who cannot advocate for themselves. Anxiety is a fear, a pain in my chest; rain begins to fall before I can plan an escape route. But by focusing on the negative parts of the storms, I lose sight of the beauty I hold and the value of every attribute within myself. I am no longer seeking to escape the fear. I am looking to embrace what I cannot control. Although it has been challenging, I am proud of the feet I have made.