

Enough: A Journey from Overcoming to Becoming

The fluorescent lights buzz faintly above me as I sit across from my manager. My knees are throbbing, a deep ache radiating upward to my hips. Each pulse of pain feels like a reminder: I've pushed myself too far. Outside the office, muted chatter drifts in, employees going about their day without the shadow of pain I've been living under. They don't know what it's like to wince at the simplest tasks—opening jars, walking to the store, just getting out of bed. My hands rest limply on my lap, their swollen joints stiff and uncooperative. Tears threaten to spill, but I focus on my breath. “Ayla, you're safe,” I tell myself, grounding my feet on the floor. “Feel the chair beneath you. Breathe. You can do this.” Fear comes in waves, my body urging me to run. To flee this moment. The thought of asking for what I need—of admitting I can't keep going—feels unbearable. The voice in my head whispers, “Fix it. Try harder. Don't make a scene.”

It's not the first time I've felt this way.

When I was a child, asking for what I needed was dangerous. In my family, emotions were burdens, something to suppress or silence. If I cried, I was dramatic. If I expressed frustration, I was difficult. Love came in the form of approval: a good grade, a trophy, a new achievement. I learned quickly that my worth was tied to what I could accomplish, not who I was.

I remember being seven years old, sitting at the kitchen table, struggling to finish my homework. My dyslexia turns every word into a puzzle, and my mother, exhausted and short-tempered, sighs loudly. “Why can't you just get it?” she snaps. The shame washes over me, hot and suffocating. From that moment, I understood: I'm a burden. My needs are too much.

Back in the office, my manager's voice pulls me out of my thoughts. "Ayla, are you okay?" His tone is gentle, but it's enough to crack the fragile composure I've been clinging to. I want to tell him everything—about the pain, the exhaustion, the endless cycle of trying and failing to push through. Instead, I force a smile, my practiced response. "I'm fine."

But I'm not fine. I haven't been fine for months. A year ago, I was thriving. As an leadership coach, manager, and yoga teacher, I spent my days moving, teaching, connecting with others. Movement had always been my sanctuary, the one place where I felt free. Then came the first twinge in my wrists, a subtle strain I dismissed as overexertion. Within weeks, the swelling and pain spread. My doctor diagnosed carpal tunnel syndrome, but the treatments didn't work. The pain became unrelenting, my joints stiff and inflamed. Even as my body screamed for rest, I kept going. Rest felt like failure, and I'd been taught my whole life that failure wasn't an option.

The first rheumatologist I saw dismissed me outright. "You're too young and pretty to have arthritis," he said with a smirk, his words dripping with condescension. Pretty. That's what mattered? Not the debilitating pain or the loss of mobility—just my appearance. The comment stung, but I'd heard variations of it my entire life. Be cute. Be quiet. Don't disrupt. Don't challenge authority.

The flickering of the lights snaps me back into myself, the doctor's dismissive tone echoing in my mind. My manager shifts in his chair, his eyes full of concern. "You've been pushing yourself so hard," he says. "It's okay to take a step back. Tell me what you need."

What I need. The question hangs in the air, heavy with possibility. For most of my life, I've avoided answering that question. What I needed didn't matter—not to my family, not to my teachers, not even to myself. My needs were inconvenient, something to suppress or ignore.

Another memory surfaces, this one from high school. I'm fifteen, sitting in the locker room after a competition. My coach is praising me for setting a new personal record, but I'm barely listening. My knees ache from overuse, my chest tight with exhaustion. "Great job, Ayla," he says, clapping me on the back. "You've got grit." Grit. That's what people value in me. Not my well-being, but my ability to push through pain.

And I did push, all the way to this moment in my office, where I'm finally confronting the toll of that mindset. My body, once a source of strength, now feels like a prison. Rheumatoid arthritis has taken so much from me: my independence, my mobility, my sense of control. But it's also given me something unexpected, even if I couldn't see it until later—a chance to rewrite the narrative I've lived by.

"Ayla," my manager says again, his voice steady. "You don't have to do this alone. I'm here to support you."

Support. The word feels foreign, almost unreal. But as I look into his eyes, it's as if a veil lifts, exposing something I hadn't realized I needed so deeply. His gaze is steady, like sunlight breaking through a dense canopy, reaching parts of me that had long been shrouded in shadow. In that moment, I feel my body begin to relax, each cell softening as though it's been given permission to exhale.

I felt like a tree in a forest that had only known years of drought. I'd adapted to survive on the barest trickle of water, my leaves brittle, my roots clawing desperately for nourishment. And then, one day, the rains come. Not a storm, not a deluge—just a gentle, steady rain, soaking into the earth. The parched ground drinks deeply, and I feel it: life stirring, strength returning. That's what it feels like to be truly seen, to be held in someone's care without judgment. It's not just a moment; it's a healing that stretches back through time, touching the wounds of generations. Dr. Thema Bryant writes, 'When we feel safe, our bodies unclench, our breath deepens, and we realize how much tension we've been holding. Relief isn't just a thought; it's a physical surrender, a softening into the truth that we no longer have to fight to exist. Healing begins the moment we stop bracing for impact.' I had been holding myself together for so long, carrying the weight of expectations, the fear of being too much. But now, I realize—I don't have to hold it all alone. For the first time in what feels like forever, I let go.

I take a deep breath, my hand resting over my heart. "I need to take some time off," I say, my voice trembling but resolute. "I need help."

The words feel like an act of defiance against everything I've been taught. Terry Tempest Williams writes, 'I write because it is dangerous, a bloody risk, like love, to form the words, to say the words, to touch the source, to be touched, to reveal how vulnerable we are, how transient.' Speaking these words aloud—telling my manager what I need—feels like that same risk. A gamble. A confession. But also, a beginning. They are a declaration: I am not a burden. I am worthy of care.

Over the months that follow, I learn to lean into that strength. Friends show up to help with groceries, to clean my home, to simply sit with me when the pain feels overwhelming. I find

doctors who listen, who take my concerns seriously, who help me manage my condition. And slowly, I start to let go of the belief that my worth is tied to what I achieve. Brené Brown says, ‘We don’t have to do all of it alone. We were never meant to. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but a declaration that we refuse to abandon ourselves. It is in our nature to be held, to be supported, to be lifted when we can’t carry it all. Letting others in is not an act of surrender, but an act of courage.’ For so long, I thought strength meant doing everything on my own, but now, I see that true strength is in allowing others to walk alongside me.

The greatest gift of my illness was the pause it demanded. And in that stillness, I remembered—I had always wanted to go to university. I had always wanted to become a psychotherapist, to dedicate my life to understanding and supporting others. I had just never given myself permission to pursue it.

For so long, my drive was fueled by the need to prove my worth. I built a career, excelled in spaces where I was seen as strong, capable, and relentless. But beneath that, I was running—chasing approval, outrunning the fear that if I stopped achieving, I would become invisible. The Rheumatoid Arthritis forced me to stop. And in that stillness, I didn’t disappear. I found myself.

I think back to that office, to the fluorescent lights buzzing overhead, my body aching, my breath shallow as I fought to hold it all together. Back then, asking for what I needed felt unbearable, like admitting defeat. But now, I know better. The same body that once clenched in fear now softens in trust. The same voice that once wavered with uncertainty now speaks with clarity.

Today, I'm writing this essay as a university student, something I once thought was impossible. I am here, not because I pushed harder, but because I finally chose to listen to myself. Because I let go of who I thought I needed to be and made room for who I actually am.

I've learned that it's okay to take up space, to have needs, to ask for help. The little girl in me—the one who felt like a burden—is finally beginning to feel safe. She knows I'll protect her, advocate for her, and remind her every day that she is enough. And for the first time in my life, I believe it too.

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