

Detours

For the last decade, I've waged a battle within myself, one that hid under hopeful words such as "meaning" and "calling." If only I could discover my destined career path, I reasoned, all would fall into place, and my world would find itself naturally void of negativity, boredom, and – most painfully – regret.

Throughout my youth, I committed myself to the role of the nice girl, the one who would obey, smile, and nod with the best of them. Perhaps this is an attribute learned in my Southern upbringing, the sole daughter of two mild-mannered and kind-hearted parents. I know I've led a blessed life with them as my guides, and I've always strived to gain their admiration, which they've gently given even when I've offered them my worst.

My 20-year-old self saw the peak of my otherwise rare boldness when, after around three years of college, I told my ever-encouraging parents that I longed to move to Los Angeles to pursue my acting dreams. Not only did they offer their support, but they also asked to go with me so I wouldn't face this admittedly frightening detour alone.

L.A. meant opportunity, whimsy, and a myriad of rejection as my resume slowly grew with auditions won and eagerly hid roles lost. In all my Oscar-themed speeches whispered into toothbrush microphones before steamed mirrors, I had always remembered humility. That critical demand to retain such an important trait ultimately manifested in shame as I made my way past the city's homeless on a daily basis... skinny latte in my hand and cups for change in theirs.

I don't recall the street on which the epiphany hit. I'd lost my path either way.

I moved back with my parents to our hometown, finished college with a degree in counseling, and began working in the world of nonprofits, namely human services. When my college professor looked down at me on graduation day and included a "lost dreams" reference in his speech, I felt a ping of regret that I'd forgotten existed. Of course, I wanted to help people and make that difference for which we all strive. That didn't mean that I'd forgotten my toothbrush and mirror gratitude, and it didn't mean that the ambition I took to the West Coast had dissipated. I felt it surging within me, but no longer knew its meaning or goal.

Frankly, this state of disorientation felt less than comfortable stewing in my goal-oriented, checklist-rendering Virgo mind. What would I work towards? What truly made me happy?

Why did I feel anything but while solving people's financial troubles and working with families at the brink of unraveling? Coworkers called that sinking feeling nothing more than "burn-out." I worried, however, that it terrifyingly indicated I'd messed up on my path to goodwill. I longed to do meaningful work coupled with work entrenched in my personal passions. Could I not have both?

The question haunted me as I jumped between sectors in the field and grasped at new projects and ideas with Type A fervor, only to face them with a Type B style. The one constant that followed me through gray positions and discouraging wages? A simple desire to better myself.

Every ethical dilemma beckoned dissection. Every utility bill for which I helped acquire funds propelled me to smile back at the client receiving it. Every elder whose story I discovered educated me on what I pray my years will hold. While I wasn't facing each workday with Disney songs of inspiration or traveling the world in glossy luxury, I woke up instead learning resourcefulness, empathy, frustration, and doubt. I ran the gamut from panic attacks, financial hard-knocks, and thank-you cards with kind words I'll forever hold dear. All the while, I grew a thicker skin than even Los Angeles rejection had offered me. The lost, directionless girl I'd searched for had grown into a woman I'm unabashedly proud I've found.

Identity is ever-changing, and that's such a blessing... one with which to make peace. If you long to discover yourself, fear you've misjudged your ambitions, or feel that gnawing ping of regret, fret not. If we only let them, those morning coffees and 9 to 5 struggles shape us into better versions of happiness than those our daydreams ever held. Within these "barriers" to individualism, we find the best and worst of ourselves.

I can't think of a better path to self-discovery. The detours are so often the best paths to identities found.