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The Journey of Age

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The Journey of Age

At 16, you get your license.

At 18, you graduate high school.

At 21, you get to legally drink alcohol.

At 22, you graduate college.

At 24, you have your whole life figured out.

Society has so much power. Television shows and movies perpetuate the expectations of where we are supposed to be at certain stages of our lives. For so long, we have allowed others to have this power. Understanding that this is not how it has to be is difficult to grasp. Because of this fictionalized living, breaking away from others' expectations and growing is more difficult and destructive than one might hope.

I'm the oldest. Growing up with three younger brothers, I kind of got used to always being the outcast but also the one in charge: different roles for different situations. I didn't really see being the oldest as something terrible when I was growing up and I don't see it as bad now, but I see it for what it has given. That's the way it was and there really wasn't anything I could do about it.

During high school and my first two bouts at college, I was the "correct age"; the age I was supposed to be for the situations I was in. The real age trip came when I left college. After trying two different schools in two different states, yet leaving without anything to show, I started working out in the "real world." That's when the psychosis began; at least that's what I've told myself.

Working out in the world is its own thing. Everyone is out there going to work for the sake of putting food on the table, but I had to work because my 6-month window of not paying my student loans had dried up and now I had to pay those off, *more people are probably in this boat now*. I didn't get anything from all my efforts and was paying basically just for my time there, *let's not go down that road*. Student loan payments were upon me and I had to start making money, but I discovered I really didn't have any skills to show for all that time of learning.

My only skill was that I needed a job and was willing to work hard, *which I have come to learn is more than can be said for most people getting and ditching jobs just because they don't like them*. This somehow worked because no one really wanted to work the 5am-1pm breakfast shift at Panera. But I will tell you, I volunteered for that shift not knowing what it meant and yeah, I got used to it, but it definitely took some time.

Getting back to the age conversation -- yes, I was the youngest person working in the food section. It wasn't so bad though because I knew I would be out of my element and that would be fine because a job is a job and that's what I needed in that moment.

Once I jumped into the Colorado Vincentian Volunteers, a lot changed. This was a program geared toward college graduates wanting to gain experience before they jumped into the real world. I was with a group of about 20 people, who were close to my age but mostly younger, for an entire year volunteering our time to help the community. This entire group of men and women were all accomplished in my eyes with a college degree hanging on their walls.

This program pushed me to reflect upon all that I had not accomplished in my life and how far behind I felt I was. Granted at the time I was 23, *wow really? I can't believe I made such a big deal out of that*, but not having my degree really shook me for some reason. I felt at the time they were more accomplished and obviously knew what they were doing with their lives, *was I sorefully and ignorantly incorrect*.

I can now say it was amazing, not for the program, but for the lifelong friends that I made there and the lessons I learned about accepting myself. The friends I met there accepted me as I was: broken, confused, and trying to figure out my life. *As I came to discover out of my ignorance and desire to be special*, no one knows what they are doing with their life. Everyone is confused and floundering, pretending their way through every day hoping no

one actually figures out that they are just a wolf in sheep's clothing, but far less scary and far more timid.

This was a rude awakening because I had equated having a college degree to knowing and understanding yourself. That's ignorance at its finest moment because these wonderful people that I was surrounded by broke away those green shaded glasses and showed me the truth, or at least the truth of that time. They showed and proved to me that no one gets it, everyone is faking it and figuring it out even if they have a diploma sitting in a box somewhere at home.

Turning 24 in this program brought up some beliefs that I had forced into my mind as a young child. I thought that once I turned 24, I would have my life all figured out. That's when I thought everyone started living the lives they wanted. I thought magically for some reason my life would be all set up for the future, living my best life. I laugh at this now because if that had been the case, I wouldn't have had the epic experiences of volunteering in Colorado or moving back to Minnesota or ultimately going back to school. By the time I left the program, I was 24 years old. I was still so young and bewildered but was starting to accept that I had been experiencing the "school of life"; a school that I came to acknowledge as a privilege more than an obstacle.

The pressure and anxiety of my next steps began looming after I finished my year in Colorado and my brothers were passing me up by going to college. The desire for something more and the want for a change of pace from everyday life as an employee in a company that was losing people left and right, was present and unresolving. I didn't want to admit to myself at the time that I wanted anything. My stubbornness and selfishness of wanting to know what to do on my own was keeping me stuck in the same place.

My youngest brother, John – *I will blame him until I am blue in the face*, is the reason I am back at school, ready to finish my degree, or rather to start a new one. Up until this moment, school was something everyone was telling me I should finish so I could get somewhere in life. But John spoke to me differently. We were sitting at the kitchen table talking through where he wanted to go to school and what he wanted to do. I, unsurprisingly, had some advice. I told him "John, don't worry about the money because if you love it you won't let anyone, or anything hold you back." He looked me dead in the eyes and said "Kate, why don't you go back to school? You are the one that actually likes learning and school-stuff. You shouldn't let the money hold you back." What a punch in the face! Geez. But he was right. I do love school and

learning. Yet I was still stuck in the *I'm too old and I don't know what I would go back for anyway* mentality. This is easily absorbed when you've been out of school for almost 5 years. Again, he blatantly said "Kate, why don't you go back for English? You like reading and writing." This was the moment I knew the decision was moving forward, and I was getting a little nervous. New adventures yet new challenges were ahead.

The University of North Dakota is where the situation exploded. I went back to school at the ripe old age of 25, finally in a sense knowing what I wanted to study but still behind.

I always think the worst of situations because then I am never disappointed by the results. I knew going back to school was a good thing; I could do something I love and make some amazing friends. Unfortunately, I always used to preface a lot of situations with, "I am a lot older than most people here." And while that wasn't completely true, it was true enough in my mind. Society made me believe my decision to go back to school was unusual and off the beaten path. I had trod this well-worn path before, but this time it was new to me because of everything that I was now going to be bringing in from my life outside of the schooling system, *the school of life*.

It's always entertaining when I do tell someone and watch their reactions. Anticlimactically, they say, "ohhhh...I just thought you were maybe 22." My friends are epic, though. They truly could not care less and even forget half the time because each of us are just trying to figure out our lives, on our own time with our own experiences. Whether those experiences came in the middle of college, before college, or after, I was craving love and insight and wanderlust at the end of my rainbow. It has become so easy and, still to this day, I find myself having feelings that I am behind and that it's going to be difficult to find a job because of my advanced age.

I'll be 27 when I graduate. I have to keep reminding myself that even if I had graduated "on time" and done everything "according to plan," I would have missed out on all these amazing people, experiences, and learning opportunities, because of my initial desire to go with the crowd and do what was expected. People at 27 are still looking for jobs whether they are just graduating or graduated back at 22 but want a change.

Maybe I just took that change a little sooner and made myself a life no one else had. It becomes so easy to allow that mindset to cloud my joy and excitement for where I'm at right now and what I'm doing.

I was always stuck in the mindset that if I don't figure it out when I'm 18, my life is going to be in shambles; working dead end jobs for the rest of my life because I didn't know what I wanted to do when the decision had to be made that one night filling out applications.

It would be easy for me to explain now that I am in school and learning about things I love, that my life is where I want it to be and I've figured it all out. But that would be a complete lie and as much as I love inspirational stories and the success for the future, it doesn't always work out that way.

Looking back on my story and seeing the complications and struggles that brought me here, through all the moves and different schools, decisions that were easy and the decisions that were difficult, I still have no idea what I am doing. I am struggling. Even though I have worked through the convoluted issues in my life surrounding age, I still take a pause in the morning to become more aware of my life. I want to recognize in myself that life is never going to be easy. There is always going to be someone else's opinion that is going to be rattling around wanting to trip me up and take over. I am not going to get it right 99% of the time. I will falter. I will question. I will doubt. But the one thing that keeps me moving, keeps me pushing past those imaginary plans that everyone put on me without my consent, is that society's expectations are stupid and do not define me. I've let other people run my life and my decisions for so long that I haven't been living my own life. I want to live as if I have all the time in the world. I want to live as if my dream life is only one more obstacle away. I am going to live my life with others and their opinions looking at me from afar wishing they were my age.

About Katherine Hayes

Katherine Hayes will be finishing her English degree in December 2020. A lifelong dream she never knew existed until 2 years ago. She loves wasting time reading the beautiful words of others and delving deep into the unknowns of other people's minds.