

Kaylyn Buehler

Personal Essay

My Almost Normal

When we got the email from the University of Colorado Boulder saying classes were cancelled, I felt my stomach summersault. In the next ten seconds, the days flashed through my mind of loneliness and solitude. My fear, driven by my extroverted, social nature, was real.

So now, I am 20 years old and living with my parents, not a place I ideally envisioned being in ever again. Then again, I couldn't predict a pandemic either. I am lucky to have a place to go to where I don't have to be alone. There are three dogs, two parents and two siblings to keep me entertained, and more importantly to keep me distracted.

My mom gracefully suggested the meet up with my friends where we could sit in the back of our cars. We sat reversed in parking spots six feet apart. I hadn't seen all of them since January. The four girls I spent everyday with for most of high school had become faces on a screen, our only communication through group FaceTimes, sporadic texts and snapchats. We all went to college in different parts of the country, and we rarely have the same work schedule. Even during summer and winter breaks, we all could see each other maybe once, twice if we were lucky.

They have felt far away for a longtime. These were girls who came over to cry with each other over getting rejected from our dream schools, not getting a good role in the school play or a breakup. We shared cars, beds, families, food, memories, but then suddenly I didn't even know who their friends are, I didn't know who they are dating, or even what their homes look like.

We sat, six feet apart, listening, laughing, reminiscing. We made fun of each other, ourselves and people we didn't like in high school. We sat in our cars trying, and failing, to feel normal.

The four of us rode the line of comfortable and uncomfortable. Life feels normal until something happens and pulls you back to reality. We are reminded of what is happening. We discuss the death toll, the grim feeling we get when we watch the news. A girl I have shared the deepest part of my soul with flinched when I got a little too close because her dad is high risk.

This whole period of time feels like an extended version of the feeling I got the first time I saw my mom cry. When I was kid, I believed adults grew out of emotion. It felt overwhelming, as a kid, every time I felt angry or sad. I saw my parents as magical, impenetrable forces who always had the correct emotional reaction to something. I remember the first time I saw my mom cry, vividly. It was November. A month that's difficult for my family. It is the month of my grandmother's birthday and the month when she died (my mom's mom). My mom sat at the kitchen table sobbing over pictures I couldn't quite make out from my hiding place on the staircase. I felt afraid and confused. Part of my understanding of adulthood, of the world, had been shattered.

I have since learned that adults do in fact have emotions, and they rarely have the "correct" response to things. That does not exist. When I watch the news now, I feel just like that shattered kid. No one has the answers anymore.

So sitting there in the back of my car, in my attempt to feel less lonely, I am once again reminded that the world is shattering. Everything feels almost normal. The uncomfortable energy persists. I have to choose how I react. That is what I didn't get as a kid, or a teenager. Now, I hug

my mom when she sobs at the loss of the rest of the school year. She's a teacher and this is hard for her too. I am suddenly an adult in the place where I used to make impulsive, emotionally driven teenage decisions. I am suddenly uncomfortable in a places where I used to feel my most ease.

I can choose how I react. I don't choose my emotions but I get to choose the ones on which I act. I have to choose not to dwell in my loneliness and discomfort. I feel more like an adult living at parent's house than I ever did at school. This world that we know live in has forced me to be in control of myself in a way I haven't had to before. There is no instinctual response to this. What remains are the people around you. I choose to cling to the small amount of normalcy I get around my friends and family. I have learned to choose hope rather than dwell in the confusion.

Why I Miss Theatre

I finally realize why I miss theatre. Broadway shut down in March of 2020. Not that it really impacts my day to day, but it's a timeline to understand where I am coming from. I haven't sat in a theatre since March of 2020. Before then, I used to see a show at least once a month, if not more. My mom splurged on season tickets to the DCPA. So, I drove down from Boulder to Denver see the shows with her. She got a Pinot Noir that they put in a small plastic cup (biodegradable plastic), and I got my Shirley temple because I am only 20. We sat in the seats in the orchestra section, usually around row W, somewhere between seats 20 to 25. We scanned through the programs looking at where the performers each went to college (an old habit left behind from before I went to college). Then we'd settle in and be immersed into a show. I always turn off my phone completely. The Bueller does not have great service anyways, but mostly, it is the small act of defiance I make to myself and the world. I prioritize art over everything. Because I can do almost anything on this small device, but I can't create art in a space, with people on my phone. I turn it off because for the next 2 hours, I don't need it.

I finally realize why I miss theatre. I was sitting on my bed, watching "What the Constitution Means to Me" by Heidi Shreck. All alone, sitting there witnessing one the most interesting plays I have experienced in awhile. And I was all alone. I didn't turn off my phone because I was just in my room in my pajamas taking a break from homework, when I remembered this play was released to Amazon prime. I sat there having this singular, and emotional experience. I felt the weight of the words Heidi Shreck had chosen to share with me. My phone went untouched for most of the hour and 44 minutes of the play. When I did pick it up, I was mad. Mad that the people texting me weren't emotionally or physically where I was.

How could they be? Then I realized I hadn't really consumed theatre in months. This was the first time I encountered my loneliness, because I sat on the other side of the screen watching while theatre happened without me. I felt immense jealousy. The audience was sitting in a space: the crammed seats of a Broadway theatre, crying, laughing, and not hiding half of their faces. They weren't thinking about how many germs were around, how many people had touched that chair or how many particles were flying from Heidi's mouth as she spoke. So while I watched this beautiful show pan over the audience, I realized why I miss theatre. There is something missing in the world, that is deeply important: the sharing of space, the holding of space. I missed this place where I allow something to be in my body, my mind even if it's uncomfortable, especially when it's uncomfortable. When I watch a show, and everyone around me is watching with me, something happens in the air. The air changes from particles of oxygen, nitrogen, and whatever else into shared breath. We collectively share that experience and hold it in our bodies together. Breathing in the air, we carry the weight of the moment unconsciously linking our souls to one another. I don't miss theatre for the reasons I thought I did, like sharing my show with my parents, or the applause at the end. Rather, I miss the energy the space holds.

Theaters exist with history. Ghost lights carry this history through nights and dark days. They hold the space for whoever will come next. I miss theatre because I miss holding space for things, people, events, and moments with others. It's lonely to carry the weight of the air alone in your room. It's lonely to consume theatre in private. I never really liked musicals on screen, and I could not express why. It's still the same music, dancing, and story, but now I understand. Mourning the loss of theatre is more than mourning the venues and companies that can't afford to pay their bills now, and it's more than the small list of nominations under the Tony Award

categories. As artists, consumers, citizens, we mourn the loss of community on a deeper level.

The connections we built are no longer accessible, and the feeling of isolation persists even when we are no longer alone. So maybe I don't miss theatre. Maybe I just miss people, but to me, that is what theatre is. I look forward for the days when I can hold space with others without fear looming in the air. I wait for the day that we can unplug the ghost light, and stand in the space together unafraid of the air we breathe.