**Help Yourself**

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A few years ago, I read my first self-help book. The cover was yellow and had a swear-word on it.

My friend had sent me a free download of the audiobook. I hadn’t been looking for self-improvement tips, but I wasn’t offended. She was a warrior on a quest for achievement and self-improvement. A conqueror of negative thoughts and vanquisher of wistfulness. A frenetic optimist who lived by the law of manifestation. This book was a small satellite that had fallen out of her busy orbit and floated as a foreign object into mine.

I was in my early thirties and living life as a realist. It’s not that I had a negative outlook on the world, but somewhere along the way accepted that sometimes, it’s the bad thing that happens. No matter how much you wished for the good thing.

I was new to New York and had arrived with a sore heart. I was homesick for Chicago and the life I had just tossed aside, which comparatively—suddenly—seemed so easy and pleasant. I felt more Midwestern than ever, and reluctant to jump into the jetstream of fast, aggressive New York life. I wasn’t cut-throat. I didn’t have, or want, a “high-powered” job. I wasn’t hungry like my friend.

I pressed play on the audiobook with skepticism. But by a quarter of the way through, I was laughing out loud at the author’s anecdotes and scribbling down lines that stirred me on a piece of scratch paper. Half-way through the audiobook, I decided to purchase the hard copy and read the rest. Somewhere before the end of the book, I happily joined my friend to see the author speak about her philosophies.

Soon after, I finished my dog-eared copy of the bright yellow book. And for the first time in a long time, I felt motivated. I felt excited about the future. And maybe for the first time ever, I felt that the world might just have amazing things in store for me. That the good things not only might happen for me, but probably would. *Everything you want already exists in the world. Just tell the universe you want it, then sit back and be grateful that it’s on its way to you*, the author coached us. The book was full of anecdotes of people, including the author, magically receiving *exactly* what it was they were in need of. A free place to stay for three months. Eighty-thousand dollars. It could happen to me, too.

I mined my truest desires. There were the easy ones: More money. More friends. More energy. And the ones I wouldn’t have publicly admitted: A more extroverted personality. A boyfriend. I was ready to *achieve*.

Years later, I did. At least most of it. Maybe in part because of the messages from that self-help book that I had scribbled on that piece of scratch paper, which now hangs on my refrigerator in the one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn that I never thought I’d be able to afford on my own.

I now live in that jetstream of fast, aggressive New York life. My version of it, anyway. Even in the intermittent, long stretches of solitude the pandemic forced on many of us, more things feel possible now, more opportunities available to me. There are more miles to run, and I want to run them. More people to meet, and I want to introduce myself. Now, I openly hope for the good thing to happen and occasionally tell myself that it will. The zeal and enthusiasm I felt after finishing that book has faded, but part of me has changed, probably forever.

But my core, I’ve realized, isn’t easily reformed. And I’m glad, because while there’s value in ambition and accomplishing goals is necessary, at the very least for survival, let alone fulfillment, there’s also something to be said for quietly reminiscing. For not propelling yourself forward. For staying suspended in the gel that is a past moment.

Sometimes, I watch memories in my mind of a past relationship as if they were five-second reels of film, reliving a catalog of moments: rushes of near-euphoria; true moments of anguish; sharp lines of dialogue, sometimes funny, sometimes mean, sometimes sad; and more than 600 takes of falling asleep in a dark bedroom with a warm chest against my back, a hand gently resting on my hip.

Other times, I take myself back to a winter weeknight in third grade. I can hear the conversations, laughter, yells of my siblings as we did homework or played Nintendo while my mom made dinner. We leaned into her with our full weight for our every need, and she provided, graciously and seemingly to no end. I can feel the warm, dim light of our home and see it casting a golden glow through the living room window onto the snow on our front lawn.

When I think of those memories, and other snapshots of my life that I can’t recreate, I feel like myself again. Immersing myself in those memories, which get me closer to no goal, feels good.

It feels like lying down in the poppy field, closing my eyes, and letting the pollen settle onto my eyelashes. No drive to move forward. No notice of what’s in front of me, near or far. Nothing to strive for. I’m content right here.

It feels like going back to the school gymnasium on prom night, after the dance is over. The gym is still decorated. Balloons float and bounce lazily over the floor, the overhead lights haven’t come on yet, and the disco ball is still slowly twirling, casting flecks of white light across the walls. Just an hour ago, energy coursed through this gym—people rushing toward what was next. But now, everyone’s gone on to what’s next, and it’s just me. I can stand in the middle of the floor by myself and slowly spin around.