

Everything, or at least something

Right now, I am in the middle of a gap year. This year I've been a waiter, a cross-country coach, a physics tutor, and a truck driver at a trash company. I was a good student in high school. I did well on the things that I liked—physics, math—and I didn't always try as hard on the things I didn't. I was uninspired, not reaching my potential. I realize all of this only now, looking back.

It wasn't a snap realization, but rather a summer filled with directionless days, lying in bed wondering what to do with each day. I had no desire for anything, yet at the same time a desire to do everything, or at least something.

120 push ups, 100 crunches, run five miles, I told myself. Apply for jobs. I cleaned out trash cans, served kung pao chicken, explained angular momentum to a twelfth-grader, audited a college course on linear algebra and another on Chinese history. Focus the body, focus the mind. I found discipline and inspiration, curiosity.

Curiosity. Example: I was 6, reading a book about how to build a robotic space rover because if NASA could do it, so could I. Example: I was 12, walking around an Ikea model kitchen trying every single mechanism until I knew exactly how it worked. Example: junior year, I saw Iron Man and thought it was the coolest thing in the world. I thought "that could be me." I was obsessed, fascinated, thinking every chance I got about how an exo-suit could possibly be built. That "could" turned into a "will." I will build an exo-suit. That spring, I started my first of two capstone projects with a dream to build a robotic exoskeleton arm. I achieved that dream. The next year, I did it again, except better. I put in over 200 hours that semester, most of it alone, working in the tech room at my school until 10 PM; that was the only time I was able to work on it. I currently have two working prototypes sitting in my room, as well as a detailed computer model of the entire arm assembly.

When school ended, so did my desire to continue working on my project. But 5 months later, I returned to it. It wasn't a gradual return. I had a single idea one day, and it was as if the floodgates opened in my mind. I saw in my mind a jet engine, miniaturized but still with an axial compressor, segmented to allow for vectored thrust. Then suddenly: will it work? how do jet engines work? I need to learn thermodynamics first. Where do I learn that? Can I build this? I was finally inspired. I went online and started teaching myself thermodynamics from the MIT website. I'm almost done with the course, by the way. Jet propulsion is up next.

Inspiration is fragile though. Some days I am still directionless, other days my mind is going a million miles an hour. One thing gets me through everything, and that is my dreams. I haven't mentioned that until now because only after reading everything I've just told you can you understand that at the center of who I am is childish curiosity and dreams of a better future. Dreams of myself flying around in a robotic suit. Dreams of my future house, of which I have designed several computer models. Dreams that with hard work will be a reality. All I need is those dreams and I can think for days.

I'm in the middle of a gap year. I could say that it's changed me, made me more mature and wiser, given me a window to the real world. I could say that it's taught me the value of education and the opportunities that it gives. But it hasn't. It's allowed me to recognize what's most important: I have the potential to do anything. Now I look at the hard work I have to do to achieve my dreams, and I am excited for the rest of my life.