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## Missing Opportunities in Life and Learning— And Being Okay with It

### Abstract

In “Missing Opportunities in Life and Learning—And Being Okay with It,” Chris Saucedo reflects on a lifetime shaped by the fear of making wrong choices and the slow process of learning to embrace uncertainty. His story comes alive through vivid descriptions of preparing for his first trip abroad and through his sensory depictions of Istanbul’s lights, architecture, and night air. What begins as a story of missed opportunities becomes a meditation on risk, discovery, and self-acceptance. Saucedo’s narrative invites readers to see how both careful planning and unexpected encounters can open paths toward confidence, curiosity, and a renewed willingness to explore.

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CHRIS SAUCEDO

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## Missing Opportunities in Life and Learning—And Being Okay with It

Late one night in early August, several years ago, I found myself disembarking a plane at the start of my very first trip to a foreign country. I say that I “found myself” there because I was exhausted from my flights, four of them over 26 hours, and the last flight had proven to be the most tiring and dehydrating leg of the trip. I had just arrived in the city of Istanbul, and all I wanted to do was check into my room and go to sleep. I was alone on my journey up to this point, having been the last to leave home for Türkiye. My mother insisted that I stay home for her birthday before leaving the next day, upset that I might disappear before we got another chance to celebrate. I made my arrangements around her request and before I left, she took a moment to cut off my shoulder length ponytail of hair which I asked her to donate, if possible. Years later, I found that lock of hair in a zip-lock bag in her home office drawer along with some other mementos.

Now, almost three days later, I was groggy and being assisted by the man assigned to receive me and was given a brief nighttime car tour of the old city. I probably would have enjoyed it if I could have kept my eyes open, but soon I was at my hotel and the service desk manager helped me to my room. Everyone I was supposed to meet was out and about already, so without much reason to stay up I decided to rest in until their return and promptly fell asleep. Visions of clouds beneath me and the walled city that now surrounded me ran through my mind as I tried to process the new sensations of city lights and foreign voices over my multiday trip to this quiet hotel. Then another voice soon wrested my attention and awoke me from my respite. Maybe an hour or two had passed before a loud banging came to my hotel door along with screaming in some foreign tongue. Though I tried to resist the urge to answer, I was strangely compelled by my zombie state to grant access to whomever was on the other side of the portal. Slowly I meandered out of bed and across the room to the door, all the while questioning why I would dare to answer such a clarion call. With a twist of the lock, I sealed my fate and as the knob turned, the door suddenly met me and I fell to the floor—a man in a white, long sleeve, button up shirt and tan slacks was pinning me to the floor; screaming at me in Arabic; all while two of my friends stood at the threshold of the entry, looking on in horror.

I bet you’re wondering how I got here.

I don’t want to sound like I am complaining, but there were certain expectations that I had in my life growing up that were never met on time, or at all. My parents were among the last of their generation to get things figured out early in life thanks to all the advantages of the time, and they made it look easy though I am sure it was not. Then there was television and movies, which made everything feel so exciting and interesting that I felt as if I could do anything. But what to do first? I wanted to do so many things with my life that I found the thought of picking just one career path was unfathomable. “What if I get bored, or the people suck, or I just don’t feel like doing it after a while?” I would think to myself. The constant

nagging “what if” scenarios kept filling my young mind with doubts, especially when it began to transform into this concept of the “one choice” I was to make for all of my life.

Then when I was very young, my only living grandfather died. It was the first time I had recognized that death was permanent and I would never see him again, or anyone else who would eventually pass. The realization sent me down a spiraling path of panic attacks and indecision that made even simple tasks feel daunting. Finding myself to already be a bit indecisive, this new terminal fear shook my young brain and made every choice that came before me a gauntlet of endless possibilities and risks. I became very risk averse, as it felt like every decision I made had to be perfect, often leading to a kind of choice paralysis in me that turned once trivial concerns into life altering decisions. Even something as simple as picking out the one toy that I could afford at the store was too much to bear as a child. I would stare for minutes at a time at the selections, afraid that the wrong choice would not bring me joy, until finally, my parents would demand I choose or we would have to leave and out of fear of disappointment, I’d leave empty handed. First world problems, I know, but when you’re a kid, that store is the edge of the world that you know and nothing else matters. Now imagine that same level of paralysis multiplied year over year by the looming threat of college, and careers, and getting old, and wondering if it was all worth it on your death bed. It’s not as fun as I make it out to be.

Even without all the trauma and drama in life, making choices never came easy for me, for I was, and still am, too analytical to just impulsively do something. I needed to know what I was missing out on. So it probably came as no surprise that I decided to try a little bit of everything in high school. First, there was Drama, or what they used to call in my high school “the dump class,” because that’s where thirty-plus freshmen would get placed to fill out their schedule; which in hind-sight was one of the best classes I could have been placed in. I made so many friends there, some I still have. Then there was Journalism, Architecture, Poetry Club, and Choir. These were classes that inspired me to be creative and to think, and not just to memorize things or simply be present and on time. So when the prospect of college came around, I was again troubled by the idea of having to choose a major and set my career path in stone; however, there were some financial concerns that had come to light by then that made it less of a choice and more a predetermined outcome.

Before I even entered high school, It had been made clear that my father was increasingly unwell in a very permanent and deteriorating sense and my mother, the breadwinner of our household, had made the sacrifice of her job to take care of him and we were now very much living on our savings. All those advantages my parents had up to this point were being put to the test and the only thing I could do was go to school and help take care of my father at home. The cost was great and so university was out unless I could find a way to pay for it, and in my mothers’ mind, I was not going to go into student debt for my education. You might think this was great for me. After all, I no longer needed to worry about tests for college, like SATs and whatever. I could just cruise through school. I was smart. I could do anything. But can you also imagine how demoralizing this would be for a thirteen-year-old—being told their options were already limited before they even had a chance to think about them? For once, choice was taken away from me, and it felt even more crippling and frustrating than any choice I had before. I felt like I already lost a game I did not know I was playing.

A few years into college and I was still trying everything but not finding any purpose in any of it. Then, it seems I made an impression on one of my History professors and he invited me and four of his students to travel with him that summer to see the Middle East we had been studying in class first-hand. Since there was not a study abroad program for this, we would all have to conveniently *meet* him at his hotel, and book the same tours, and plan the same meal times; you know, as one does. Unlike past decisions, this one came rather easily. The fear of missing out had turned into a question of how many of my limits could I test. At some point in college, taking so many different classes (Theater Arts, Computer Science, History, Choir, Engineering, Printing, Graphic Art Design, etc.) had slowly built up a sense of confidence in me that I did not notice had taken hold until I found myself scouring Expedia for plane tickets at two in the morning. I learned how to navigate the internet of things and became convinced that I could do this trip and do it for less than anybody else, partially because I had to, but also because I wanted to prove I could to myself. It became like a game to find the cheapest rates, opening multiple tabs and comparing departures and destinations, days and times, airlines and their offerings and deciding how to best accommodate my mother's birthday before leaving.

Late one night in June, I ended up with three round trip flights to Germany, where I would then pick up my round-trip tickets for Turkiye and before I knew it I found myself paying just \$800 for round trip tickets for eight flights (four in and four back) to Istanbul. Not my cheapest trip to date, but cheapest among my travel group, so I won in the end. Then it came down to getting the right sized suitcase and making sure to only take what I needed (a portable game to keep me entertained on flights, my camera, a notebook for personal reflection, toiletries, zip-lock bags for separating items, and enough clothes for a few days to cycle through) and not to overpack. I planned to bring souvenirs back so I needed some room for goodies. There were also customs inspections to prepare for, requiring printed documents and the details of the day-by-day journey for me, and my mother, to follow. The loss of these documents could have left me stranded if I misplaced them, so I took a manila envelope and placed everything I needed in reach of me at all times, lest I should end up like Tom Hanks in *Terminal*. And of course, there was the task of getting my passport. I did not have one before then, and even when expedited it still takes weeks to arrive. Fortunately, it decided to make an appearance a few days before I was to depart, ending my fears after an admittedly self-made mistake of waiting till the last minute to apply for it. With the last of my worries dealt with, the only thing left to do was celebrate my mother's birthday before leaving on my first international excursion the next morning.

Which brings me back to my Turkish hotel experience. The man screaming into my ear was one of my travel compatriots who decided to use the breaching skills the Marines taught him to welcome me to the Middle East. I was less than amused, but I did not find it disheartening. Quite the opposite, in fact, as the shock of it all made me feel that that was probably the worst of what I could expect to experience from my very first trip abroad. After some adjustment, I began to relax and slowly took in the new environment and all it had to offer. For most of us, this was the first time abroad. Many of our parents did not have a lot of money, travel experience, or a college diploma to guide us through this process, so we were learning on the fly how to walk and talk and tour respectfully. We visited the Blue Mosque, toured the undercity, and explored the Ottoman palace and the Hagia Sophia. At night, we took a taxi to get around town and one of my friends used her powers of negotiation to get

the best rates from the drivers. With so many in one taxi, we sat four abreast and I still had to lie across their laps (because I was the lightest by far), seeing only the streetlights whirl by while everyone else described the city to me. We played backgammon on the rooftop patio of a cafe downtown and watched the stars ignite as they rose from the horizon. When we toured the city, and later Anatolia in general, there was this magical feeling that came over me, like I had entered into a fantasy world where I was free to explore and learn like never before. I was inspired by the architecture, the culture, the feeling of the sun on my face and the ocean breeze, and the history all around me. We met our tour guide, named Borat, who took us to visit Muslim holy sites, ancient Greek cities and Illia (Troy), and told us what it was like to live in Turkiye. There were museums full of interesting artifacts, and ancient underground reservoirs to explore, and old forts to climb. There was also time to reflect. My Marine friend was going through some things (post deployment), as were many of us it turned out, and this time away from the world that we knew allowed us to heal and to reflect on all the decisions that we made, and some that we did not. Seeing another part of the world, even for such a short time, brought to us so much more clarity and conviction than any classroom had prior, and we all returned determined to do something with our lives, and not just coast from class to class anymore.

And to think I almost said no to this trip.

I made up my mind that I wanted to keep traveling after that. I also decided that it was time to move on from community college—which still took longer than I had intended, but I no longer regret the time that I spent. I cannot be upset that I did not get that one toy as a child any more than I can be upset that I did not know what I was looking for before taking a chance on the trip of a lifetime. There were, and are still, many challenges ahead, but I no longer see them as a burden or fear their outcomes. They are the kind of challenges I want to take up, because I do not feel accomplished anymore if I am not being challenged. It took a long time to realize that I needed that challenge and that I cannot let fear or doubt prevent me from going forward anymore. I cannot wait to find out what happens next.