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Over the last year, I endured the biggest change of my fairly predictable life. The two years leading up to college--filled with online school and social distancing--certainly made the transition stranger, as I did not fully grasp the truth of college. The reality of moving away to a different state barely arose as I attended graduation, worked my summer job, and packed up my belongings. Even as I arrived in Bellingham, the first few weeks felt like a vacation. I slowly became accustomed to college life, but still felt like a high schooler, internally. However, as time went on, I grew and changed in a myriad of positive ways, and the truth finally sank in--terrifying and freeing as it was. I am an adult.

My biggest fear entering college was making friends. I am quite introverted and socially anxious, and because I lived in the same small town my whole life, had never had the chance to break out of my shell. I overcame my trepidation of eating alone in the dining hall and going to the gym, by simply taking the step and doing it--it got easier each time. In terms of making friends, I realized that I did have a lack of experience, but I grew so quickly in these areas that after a while, my symptoms of anxiety lessened and I settled in. I made a few friends, but did not have a social group, and struggled with that during the many weekends my roommate drove home to see her family. I learned that you can't force friendships, and most bloom out of familiarity, so the people I grew closest to were those in the art studio where I spent nearly every weekend. However, that first quarter was the loneliest time in my life. I wasn't close to many people in my dorm, and even when I was isolated from my high school friends during covid, I had my family. This was a new level of independence.

Over winter quarter, almost everything changed. With an online start due to covid and my roommate attending from home, I expected loneliness, but made friends right away in ballet--my only in-person class. Plus, I hung out with those I had met the previous quarter. After my roommate returned and WWU went back to classroom learning, I was thrust into the opposite of fall quarter--busyness. My classes were much more intense, and my roommate decided to stay most weekends, which allowed for a friend in close proximity--someone to talk to, go shopping with. There were so many fun and exciting times, and my social anxiety lessened even further. However, new fears of the future arose. Finding a place to live is never without anguish, especially if you're trying to compromise with another person, and looking at off-campus apartments incited a crisis of adulthood. I had become comfortable with campus and classes, but to look into the future and know that I had to find and pay for a place to live for the rest of my life, with or without people beside me, was terrifying. This was the moment that the transition had sunk in, fully--I was going to get less help from adults as time went on, and it wasn't going to get easier--at least not for a while. I found that the only way to cope with this newfound feeling, the weight of the world, of my future--was just to accept it, to find ways to live within it.

In relation to what I pictured college would be like, it is more real, and more fluctuating than I had predicted. I was right that making friends would be challenging, but also so lucky in finding such a respectful roommate who I have grown close to. I have enjoyed college more than home in many ways, but also deeply missed specific things, like accessible hikes and the ability to make oatmeal. And overall, I have grown immensely in my social confidence, conversational skills, courage, and comfort.

In short, the advice I'd give to anyone experiencing the transition from high school to college is to lean into what scares you, and do it because you want to--you don't have to listen to fear. In a similar way, let go of expectations--college will not be the shining perfect life that

you've always wanted, but it will have pockets of incredible joy and tremendous growth, found in yourself and those around you. And remember that everything is lighter than you think--in the same ways life is scary and heartbreaking, it is also hilarious. When you lean into the change and confront the fear, you will grow more than you ever imagined.