

The Night Is Too Dark: Belonging, Taking Up Space, and the Search for Self-Worth by Sam Hurwitz

As I walked under the unforgiving night sky, I was sure that the world would never have space for me. The all-too-familiar sinking feeling in my chest biting with the cold wind, the rising panic grabbing my brain, venomous thoughts pulsing through my skull: *I don't belong. I am too different, I am too emotional. I think too much, I feel too much. I'm too naive, I'm too awkward, I'm not ready for this college thing. The night is too dark.*

This was a week ago now, as I was walking outside after an org meeting, and it was fully unsurprising. These moments have become commonplace, a lovely combination of fear, self-doubt, sadness, and isolation which results in the feeling that there is an indestructible glass wall between me and the rest of the world; I can observe what's happening around me, but I will never truly be a part of it. I could try to break my self-concept down into neat little solutions, explain why I am the way I am, but I believe a person's sense of self is shaped by every moment in their life. I will, however, point to certain key hardships that I would like to highlight, challenges that have built up this wall.

From a very early age, I was an anxious kid, and independence wasn't my strong suit; sleeping alone in my room was the task of a lifetime. These underlying feelings didn't change as I got older. Fear was an ever-present bully that seemed to follow me everywhere, and the older I got, the more complex it grew, branching off into other emotions like sadness and self-dislike. That all seemed to explode as I went through high school, and I finally discovered the label of obsessive-compulsive disorder after years of different therapists. Even as I write this, it's hard to portray OCD as the serious, debilitating torture it has been, hard to feel a sense of worth without that voice telling me I don't deserve to write

about it. It is the same voice that instills guilt whenever I can't focus on schoolwork or spend long days doing nothing but ruminating. Despite the daily battles of obsession, long moods of sorrow, and over-reliance on reassurance, the guilt is there, and the glass wall grows stronger.

My challenges are not only mental, however. I have had a stutter for as long as I can remember. Having a barrier in something as essential to life as speech, the most basic form of communication and expression, makes it hard to maintain a sense of worth. From being little and angrily stammering "I can't talk!" to being in the fourth grade classroom, noting that when all the kids took turns reading a line from a story, I was dreading my turn for some reason, analyzing how I would say each word. When it was my turn, the words couldn't leave my mouth, instead leaving awkward silences—and awkward silences want to be filled. Because of that, I can't exactly fault a lot of the kids, and even the teacher, for laughing . . . but it hurt. That feeling of over-analysis concerning speech only grew more present as I grew older. How do I introduce myself to someone? Should I raise my hand in class? What if someone thinks I'm being a jerk because I couldn't get through "thank you" when they held the door for me? How is belonging on the table when I can barely get out a joke in group settings?

All of this has combined to make the me I am today, with the worth I feel I have buried beneath layers of obsession that feel impossible to untangle, caught in questions of comparison with everyone around me—so much of my life spent behind that glass wall. That feeling only intensified at college, where it was hard not to lose sense of the things I loved about myself when it felt like I wasn't *doing it right*. When I was obsessing instead of hanging out with friends or worrying about how I couldn't get my words out instead of

seamlessly making jokes. But self-concept is complex and ever-changing. I know there is something there, fighting against my challenges to get out. It's whatever I feel in the scarce moments of fresh air, the moments when rays of self-love shine through the cracks, like sunlight filling the empty spaces of winter trees.

Returning to a week ago, there was no grand "reason" to feel shitty, just an org meeting. Before and during the meeting I was, of course, trapped in thought. Analyzing myself, worrying, stuck on a few obsessions. At the end of the meeting I introduced myself to a new kid at the org, and felt like I could barely get through the words. As I walked out of the meeting and into the biting cold, I was overwhelmed by fear. The meeting went fine, right? Perhaps—I for sure didn't feel that way. I was walking back to Cushing trying not to freak out, with complex mental images striking through my brain with the speed that only an obsession has, assuring me that I am behind this wall, that other people have something that I don't. How could there be a space for someone like this, someone who, even when things go well, still can't be satisfied? But there was no way for me to turn the sadness off like a switch. The night is too dark.

I got back to Cushing and sought refuge in my friend. I was sprawled in a parlor chair, spread out like a dead animal while they sat to the right of me, likely trying to understand, trying to be there for me. After I spoke, my friend paused and stared at me, taking the entire me in, before speaking.

“You know, it has been found that a lot of people who feel that they don’t belong are part of marginalized groups,” they said, with a curious, almost mentor-like glint to their voice. “The people for whom society has made it harder to exist—and that can be on the grounds of anything—are often the ones who feel like they don’t belong. And when thinking about my own challenges, I find that somewhat freeing. Because that means I’m not doing anything wrong. If the world is making me feel that I don’t belong because of something I can’t control, I can look at the world and say ‘fuck you, I deserve to be here.’”

I looked at them, taking in what they were saying but not speaking for a moment. It was making sense, but felt distant, felt like they were referring to people with *real* challenges, people who deserved to feel this way. That’s not me. But they continued speaking, giving an example.

“Like, a person in a wheelchair who approaches a building that they are unable to access might put the blame on themselves, and say ‘I don’t belong here because something is wrong with me.’ Or they can feel that they have the right to take up that space as much as anyone else, and assert that they should be able to get into that building. You’re telling me that you feel shitty about yourself, you feel like you don’t belong, in many ways because of your disabilities. Because you have OCD. Because you stutter. Because of these complex systems that have built up for you to hate yourself sometimes. Even if you know these things are okay to have, that’s still what you’re saying. And that’s exactly what I’m saying, that *we know* there’s nothing wrong with us for having these things that we can’t control but life makes it so damn hard for us to believe that.”

I thought back to my fourth grade class laughing, to the bully in my head saying I don’t deserve to write about OCD. “So what do I do about it?”

“You take up space,” they said simply, a passion in their voice. “*Taking up space is radical*, man. When you have those feelings, instead of trying to push your challenges aside to fit the spaces of others, say, ‘I am going to exist here. Even if it feels like I’m different from everyone else, I am going to talk to that person, I am going to be a part of that community, I am going to *exist*.’ Because you have the same right as everybody else to do so.”

Tonight, the org met again. Ever since my conversation with my friend, I have been trying to act differently, to not wait for a room to allow me to exist, but instead to exist in the room. At the meeting I raised my ideas with confidence, and I even walked to the library with the person I had introduced myself to last time. This is not to illustrate some Perfect Me, because that is far from the case. There were moments when I stuttered and there were moments when I was obsessive, ruminatory, and felt the urge to pin it all on myself. It wasn’t that any of these things went away; I don’t think they ever will. But what felt different was instead of faulting myself for having these challenges, I tried my very best to acknowledge them and still act with the knowledge that I, with the challenges, have a voice to share and the right to be here—to take up space.

I feel like what my friend said can be applicable for anyone, anywhere. A person doesn't have to have a disability; everyone has elements of themselves that they cannot control, elements of themselves that they feel insecure about. For me, it occurred to me that so much of my life, I felt that there was no space for me. I felt that I had to try extra hard to fit in, to make friends, to feel good about myself. At college it became hard not to get

trapped in an aim for perfection instead of acceptance, an aim for being a certain way instead of being myself. Because being myself, in my case, also means enduring the long sting of sadness. It means stuttering a lot, acting awkward, being a bit quieter, spending long periods of time obsessing and thinking and feeling. It also means the rays of love, the sun filling the spaces of the Winter trees. It means all that I bring to this world, through my stuttering voice and my anxious mind. I am exactly who I am, and there is no changing that. The night is dark, and that's okay.