

Prompt: *In what ways do you think hardship or challenges can shape who we are?*

The Challenge of College and COVID

I graduated high school during the pandemic. As someone who has always struggled with her mental health, I found that the previous year and a half of quarantine and online classes had really taken a toll on me. I found it easy to isolate myself, no longer reaching out to friends and not feeling like I had life by the reins. Thus, as the summer after I graduated came to an end, I began to feel uneasy about going to college. Moving from the middle of nowhere in New Hampshire to New York City—especially after quarantining for so long—felt like a giant leap I was unprepared for. The idea of resuming life as normal seemed so scary.

In the short time I did go to school in the city, my mental health really took a nosedive. Whether it was the right choice or not, my mom and I decided what was best for me was to take a year off. I felt really defeated, as if this wasn't me. As someone who had always prided herself on her academics and been in school since kindergarten, my identity revolved around me being a student. Taking a gap year felt wrong. I felt stupid, like maybe I wasn't as smart as I thought I was, because, why else would I have not been able to just do it? It didn't help that after I was granted a medical leave, a lot of my family members called me, asking me things like why I would leave such a great school, telling me I was throwing my future away for something so insignificantly temporary. For me, the obstacle was really just the decision to take a year off from school. I didn't know what the right decision was. My heart was telling me to put myself and my well-being first. My head was telling me to suck it up, that if I could just wait it out a little longer, maybe I'd be okay. I could prove to everyone that I was capable.

Ultimately, however, I did end up taking a gap year. It might seem random, but I camped a lot in the mountains of North Carolina and moved to a town called Asheville. During this time, I really worked on finding an identity beyond just "student." I met a lot of really cool people, and, as cheesy as it is, I found myself again. By the end of my gap year, I felt ready to return to college. I applied to smaller schools and tried to listen to what I wanted rather than what I thought would look best on paper to others. So, now I'm here at Bryn Mawr :)

Though I am very glad with my decision to take a gap year and switch schools, I believe it's only natural for us as humans to wonder, "What if?" Even if the decision was "right," I think it's normal for someone to wonder what their life would've been if they had chosen differently. Sometimes I wonder, "What if I had stayed in New York? What would my life look like now?" While there are many things in my life I still struggle with, I argue that challenges and hardship in life are inevitable. We are constantly experiencing new things. I believe that life is what you make of it. There are no "rights" or "wrongs," only

what we make from each situation. No matter the outcome, we always grow and learn, for it is impossible to experience life without growing. Thus, I argue that life shapes us to become who we are, for our experiences—good or bad—make us who we are; they make us unique.