
Sarah Kelsey: From Chaos to Clarity: An Ode to 2011

One of my oldest friends -- Laura -- recently made an astute observation that a lot of people on Facebook and Twitter have been calling 2011 out for being one of the crappiest years they can remember. Friends update their statuses with statements like «Dear 2011» then go on to discuss the litany of reasons why this year has sucked -- some people have lost family members, others have suffered through major health problems or even financial bankruptcy. I, too, recently took to Facebook to lament the year that's been 2011. It's been a tough one.

The catch is, though I wouldn't want to relive 2011, I certainly don't regret it happened.

This time in 2010, I would have described myself as difficult, disloyal, dishonest, confused, anxious, untrustworthy, unhappy, selfish, unforgiving, cruel, heartless and addicted. My 2011 involved everything from divorce to job changes to several health problems. But it also saw me evolve into a person I would describe as imperfect, honest, open, a conversationalist, compassionate, different, adventurous, curious, kind, warm, evolving and happy.

This transformation didn't happen overnight. And it absolutely involved me putting more effort into learning about myself than I've ever put into anything. I didn't lean on a therapist for guidance. And I didn't read books full of «tips» on «how to cope with life.» Instead, I turned inward. I really listened to what my body and mind was telling me I needed to do.

The interesting thing is, when I compare this list of «what changed me» with the lists created by friends who've had comparatively tumultuous years, our

lists look remarkably similar.

Realize You're Imperfect... And That's OK

One of the hardest things anyone can ever do is to open up to people and to admit, «I screwed up. I did something bad. I feel lost. The loss of so-and-so really hurts.» It exposes you for being imperfect -- and in our society, where perfection a la Martha Stewart is supposed to be an ideal, imperfection equals unworthiness. But no one is perfect. Everyone has done something (or many things) they're not proud of. We've all hurt people. We've all been hurt. We're human. We're constantly learning. And the way we go about evolving is by failing, by screwing up, by experiencing tougher than tough times and then by forgiving ourselves and others.

Find An Anthem

This may sound cheesy, but music really does help you get through rough patches, especially if you can find a song that resonates with how you're feeling and hope to feel in the future. It doesn't have to be anything mainstream or popular -- it just has to be something you can play when you're feeling like you need an «I-can-get-through-this» boost. My song (which I shared in common with my friend Susan) was «The Cave» by Mumford & Sons. The first few lyrics of the song go like this: «It's empty in the valley of your heart / the sun it rises slowly as you walk / away from all the fears and all the faults you've left behind... but I will hold on to hope / and I won't let you choke on the noose around your neck / and I'll find strength in pain / and I will change my ways / I'll know my name as it's called again.» It's my Phoenix rising from the ashes ode.

You Are Loved

I don't know about you, but when I'm down in the

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dumps the most prevailing emotion I feel is «I'm not worthy.» It goes like this: I put my foot in my mouth, so why would anyone ever love someone who does that?; I made some massive mistakes, which have gotten people talking, which means no one will ever love me/get to know me again; I'm not the perfect friend/partner/sibling/child, which means none of the people around me actually love me; I broke down at work because of the pain and loss I'm feeling, which means people think I'm a freak of nature. This internal conversation makes me feel incredibly alone, isolated, vulnerable and lonely. The catch -- and the hard thing to realize -- is if you have people around you, if there are people who you often talk to or share your time with, they hang out with you -- they talk to you -- because they want to. When we get stuck in this spiral of «I'm not worthy» or «I'm not strong,» we forget that everyone around us has free will -- they can choose to be near you or they can choose to move on. And if there are people in your life who, once you share your secrets or once you ask for their help, decide they can't be your friend, you have to ask yourself, do you really want them in your life anyway?

Clear Out Life's Riff-Raff

Which leads me to this next point: build a life buffer with solid friends, inspirational partners and loving family members. When you hit rock bottom (as I did last year) you have to have people around you who will listen to your stories, who will help you. They'll be the people that won't judge you for your «issues» or for your «imperfections,» because they know they have some issues and aren't perfect, too. They're never self-entitled. They realize hitting a life low point is something we all have to do to grow and to be a better person. They're the people who know you'll, one day, hit your stride again -- only you'll be better and stronger than ever.

Have Some Compassion

If you're experiencing hardship, you're likely not the only one. So open your eyes and look around you.

It's a big, big world out there. And you're not alone in suffering a little «why me» or «please give me a break, life» fatigue. There are seven billion people on this planet. Someone, somewhere, is bound to be having the exact same shit-go of things. So open up and share your experiences. Historically, we've told stories as a way to connect to others -- to relate. The concept holds true even today in this information age. We learn from each other. We grow into better people because we -- bravely -- reach out. We fill our lives with warmth and love by being compassionate and not judging those who are having a hard time themselves.

Life Couldn't Be Worse

When life kicks your ass, you have to do what works best for you. You have to be able to open up and express to people what you truly want or need. I really detest the advice «it could be worse.» Because, really, could it? On a macro level, sure, there are hundreds and hundreds of problems facing people all over the world -- cancer, starvation, environmental degradation and political injustice. Yes, it could be worse (and it's important to always remember that you're fortunate for living in a developed country), but that doesn't mean you can't feel as though your life feels like it's imploding... that it's ending... that it's forever been altered. On a micro level, your personal world could very well be experiencing massive changes -- and it's OK to focus on your feelings and to cope with your loss and to be selfish in your needs sometimes.

Self-Discovery Never Stops

Once you open the doors to self-discovery, to evolution, to admitting your faults and to helping others, you've essentially opened Pandora's box. You will constantly find the universe is testing your strength by throwing newer, crazier obstacles in your way. But as my friend Leanna pointed out, you're only ever given what you can handle. Remember that. You can handle whatever is thrown at you because you can look back to the place you were in when you

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hit rock bottom, you can take some pride in knowing you survived, that you're stronger and better and that you took on life. It's a scary process, but it's so worth it. And not everyone attempts this kind of adventure. Too many people are too fearful. So kudos to those who start this kind of journey.

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