

Radioactive Life

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People mask their feelings all the time, but why would anyone mask their own identity?

For me, academics comprise a significant chunk of my identity. I am the kind of guy who writes ten-page essays, stays awake until two in the morning toiling over homework, and aces almost every test. I work like crazy in my education because I care about learning. Learning is my talent, and I want to use that talent to achieve something great someday, whatever God wills. There was a time, though, when I didn't listen to God's will for my life. This started back in middle school, when I enjoyed playing basketball as a recreational pastime. When I hit high school, I realized that I needed to step up my game if I wanted to achieve greatness in sports. Almost forgetting to focus on academics, I dove into my high school basketball program headfirst and started working out, determined to become the best of the best. After all, I loved basketball – or so I thought.

During this time, my talent for learning was just beginning to shine. I had been the “Hermoine Granger” of my eighth grade science class, my hand shooting up like a rocket whenever the teacher asked a question. One year, I won my school's geography bee and competed in the state competition. I loved to learn, understood everything I was taught, and puzzled over why other people remained perplexed while I experienced glorious revelations. If my classmates had to describe me in one word, many would probably say “smart.” That was who I was, and that was how I liked it.

But it wasn't enough. I wanted to be good at everything. I couldn't let anyone else be better than me. I had to be good at basketball, too.

So I committed myself to the grind of training for the seemingly glorious season ahead. Soon I realized that I had little, if any, natural talent in the sport I supposedly loved. But I ignored my doubts, shoving aside the voice of reason inside my head screaming at me to stop, to focus on the areas where I truly excelled. I just drove right on. By the end of the summer, I was insecure and mentally exhausted, but I didn't care. Worse yet, COVID delayed my basketball season until the end of my freshman year, so I spent forever in an identity limbo where I failed to balance sports and life. And yet I cranked up my workout level during the winter, sometimes training for three hours a day – probably more than most of my teammates did. Often I broke down in tears because I couldn't succeed, couldn't make the baskets, couldn't rise to the top. All my intellectual prowess, my gift for knowledge, and my love for learning were drowned out by my obsessive drive to achieve something that wasn't my passion. I masked my own identity.

If only I had listened to myself during that first basketball season. When it finally came around, I realized that I hated high school basketball. I tried to deny it, but each practice I found myself on the verge of tears as I sprinted endless lines and did countless pushups as punishment for not being the best when I couldn't be the best. I went home completely depressed and thinking there was something wrong with me,

that I wasn't working hard enough. We only played two games that entire basketball season. It wasn't even fun anymore. All that existed for me was the grind, the grind, the grind...

And after it was over, nothing changed. My obsession continued into the next year with cross country and track and field. It wasn't until cross country season of my junior year that I finally broke free. I was struggling through the easiest runs and crossing the finish line, pale and weak after every race despite all my training. I didn't understand. My own body was betraying me, determined to keep me from reaching my dreams. Finally, during one of my races, a hundred meters before the finish, I felt the energy drain from my body and knew it was over. I slowed from running to shuffling, to walking. Then I fell. And with me fell all the hopes, the dreams, the goals I had carried over the years.

Later I would be diagnosed with anemia and the problem fixed, but the damage was done. The athlete in me was gone.

When my obsession broke that season, I stepped into a glorious new day filled with sunshine and promise. My eyes were opened to the things I truly loved. I refocused on academics and devoted time to activities I enjoyed – building on my 3D printer, solving random math problems, and competing in Science Olympiad and Knowledge Bowl. This time when I strove to achieve greatness, I knew I could because my focus fit with my identity. My stress levels plummeted because I was focusing on my true

passion for creativity and learning. I was developing the gifts God had given me, which was what He intended all along.

As a lover of science, I know that not every element on the periodic table lives forever. As an atom grows larger, it grows more and more cluttered with protons and neutrons and electrons until it throws out the excess in a shower of radioactive decay, returning to the safety and comfort of stability. When I lived under a false identity, I was like an unstable atom. I pursued an end I was not destined for and goals I could not reach. I chased the toughness and perseverance of an all-star athlete that I knew I couldn't keep, covering up my existing intelligence and curiosity. When I finally broke free from these chains, I became my old self again. I threw away the mask of sports to view with fondness my old yet true colors and displayed them once again to the rest of the world.