

A few days back, I was looking for something to write about. When I lose momentum on a post, I label it “draft” and set it free into the ether of my unorganized google drive folder. So, I searched “draft” in my account, and in addition to the dozen or so abandoned blog posts, I came across a paper I wrote for a graduate school seminar back in 2008.

This paper is something I spent quite a bit of time on – and have very little recollection of writing. Probably because it’s something I wrote *sixteen years ago*. Jesus. And looking at it, I both do and don’t recognize the writing. I know I wrote it, but it’s also totally foreign to me.

Now, any time I come across this kind of artifact from my past, I have an opportunity. I can look at it through a critical lens (the one we so often pick up when looking at our past) – in which case, I would read it and see how I spent *so much* of my academic writing citing a million sources in an effort to prove to myself and my professors that I knew what I was talking about.

In that paper, I can find evidence of my insecurity. My “oh my god, please tell me I’m smart enough to be here” desperation. I can see my posturing, and my attempts to prove I deserved to be there. Reading that paper could be a great opportunity to beat myself up for being such a bad academic writer.

Or! I can treat it as an opportunity to look back at who I was *sixteen years ago* and see how precious I was at the time. How I was just starting to figure it all out. How I was growing into myself, slowly and awkwardly – but in a cute way! In other words, I could choose to look at it through the lens of generosity and compassion.

This morning, looking back at that paper, I see myself as an [adorable little foal](#), trying to get her legs under her. It’s awkward, it’s clumsy, and it’s so stinkin’ cute.

But it takes effort to access that kind of generosity for our past selves. The inner critic would much rather take the mic.

The Cruelty of Hindsight through the Inner Critic’s Eyes

The inner critic likes to look at my past and come up with a big long list of “should have knowns.” It tells me I should always already know better. No matter what the circumstance, I am supposed to know better. To have known better. To have done better and been better without ever having to have been in the learning process.

How could I not see that I was over-relying on quotations in that paper?

How could I not see that I had a drinking problem?

How could I not see that the person I was dating wasn't actually very nice to me?

How could I not see that I deserved better?

How could I not see the ways that my insecurity and neediness were driving people away/turning into a self-fulfilling prophecy?

How could I not see how desperate I was?

How could I not see I was having emotional reactions that were disproportionate to the situation?

How could I not see that being suicidal in 8th grade because I was so mercilessly bullied for being overweight *does actually qualify as trauma*?

How could I not see I needed help?

Because I couldn't see it yet. Because I didn't know. And it's so deeply unfair and unkind to let my inner critic tell me I should have.

We Get to Choose the Lens

When we know better, we do better. Not before.

And the only way to know better is to work on it. To give myself permission to always be in the learning, and to continually look at where I am in relation to where I want to be and where I've been.

The past is an opportunity to look for growth. We can find evidence to feed the inner critic, sure. But what does that serve? What does being mean to our cute, little former selves do for us?

Not much good. Has being mean to yourself ever actually improved matters?

It hasn't for me.

What if I could look at my life like a rough draft? That every year (or equally arbitrary chunk of time) is just another chapter going through a revision process?

[For personal fun with this concept, I'm going to make a new copy of each version of this post as it evolves/each day that I work on it. Draft 1 is a great big brain dump that I already find comically sprawling. In Draft 2, I cut some shit and added in headers. Draft 3, I cut more shit and moved things around.]

The Generosity of Hindsight

What would shift if you looked back at your past self with the recognition that *you were just a baby*? Obviously, we need to go back a ways for this to work, but what if even just last year, you look back and see how adorable you were in trying to figure the thing out?

We are all always just trying to figure shit out. And I don't think that's a process that ever ends. I don't think I'll ever arrive. I won't hit mastery, per se, because I'm just going to keep tinkering.

I don't write academic papers anymore (thank fuck). I don't write [theater reviews](#). I don't write marketing blogs about cybersecurity. I write these blog posts, in the authorial voice that feels most resonant for me *in this moment*, and that will probably evolve over time.

Maybe in three years, I'll change my mind about writing so many sentence fragments. Or about starting sentences with conjunctions. Maybe I'll cringe at my liberal use of profanity or slang. I don't fuckin' know!