

Lauren

MAGAZINE





Dear Reader,

I had a great time compiling my favorite articles from my blog into a magazine format — from my best tips for yard saling, to my favorite girls' night cocktail recipe, to my tips for dressing your curves in a classy and flattering way. There's something so special about holding a finished magazine in your hands - I feel so proud of what I've put together and I hope you have as much fun reading this magazine as I did creating it.

The past few years have been difficult, and yet they yielded so much beauty in my life. This publication is a simple celebration of the fact that light can be birthed from darkness and the sometimes, the worst moments in our lives lead us into the best ones.

Best wishes,



Lauren Correa
Editor-in-Chief





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I Tried Minimalism, and Then I Quit. Here's Why...

by Lauren D'Alessandro

A lot of people are taken with the idea of minimalism. Our society is one that over-consumes, so it's natural to respond to this imbalance by cutting things out of our lives. For a while, I was a fan of minimalism. I liked the idea of being able to pick up and go on a moment's notice, or having a clean space that doesn't need to be up-kept. I started to pair down my possessions. I sold many things on Ebay and gave less valuable stuff to Goodwill. At first, it felt great. Truthfully, I was a bit of a hoarder before. I had way too much stuff, and I don't regret getting rid of it.

After a while, I began to realize that having less wasn't de-stressing me in the way that I thought it would. Trying to control my possessions left me stressed out. I was constantly preoccupied with my stuff, and I wasn't living with the freedom I though minimalism would give me. Eventually, I found a healthy balance between having too much and being obsessed with getting rid of stuff. It seems that the best things in life come to us when we find balance in the middle of two extremes.

Physical possessions might be temporary, but that doesn't mean they are worthless. They have value when they are held in the proper regard. Here are a few of the reasons why they are important:

Our possessions express who we are and provide a record of our lives.

By being overly sentimental, we hold on to a lot of junk. But by cutting out sentiment, we lose a lot of what gives life it's meaning. The things we save provide a way to reminisce about the past and to keep a record of our lives so that we can share them with posterity. By oversimplifying, we rob ourselves and our children of the past.

God is not a minimalist.

God is a loving father who lavishes, and a room full of treasures is evidence of our Father's generosity. This is should remain in balance — being spoiled is not necessary, but neither is being skimpy. Our material possessions express that God meets our needs and grants our desires.

To be clear, people who own more are not more blessed. You can feel just as lavished upon with a closet full of clothes as you can with two beautiful outfits that God has provided you with. It's not something we need to measure or compare — rather, it's an attitude of the heart. If you are going through a time of lack, that doesn't necessarily mean you're "missing it". These times come to all of us and are meant to refine our character and teach us reliance on God. But we need to know that the character of God is generous and abundant — not minimal or lacking.

Organization enriches your life; trying to control everything brings stress.

The pursuit of having less stuff is not satisfying because it is never complete. Your focus becomes controlling your possessions, which is almost more preoccupying than having too many in the first place.

Order and organization are good things, but organization is meant to allow you to enjoy your environment and focus on the important things in life, not to be a constant preoccupation. Accept the fact that life is never "complete", live in the moment, and be okay with your possessions and their constant evolution. Freedom, peace, and creativity will be found when your mind is free from trying to control everything.



6 Habits to Help You Stay Inspired for Your Creative Job

by Lauren D'Alessandro

When I started my marketing job, I was excited for an opportunity to do something that I love to do. But I found myself facing creative blockages more often than I thought I would. It was one thing when creativity was purely for fun, but being creative on-demand was more challenging than I ever imagined.

Fortunately, I've learned some habits that have helped me to be creative when I need to be and balance that creativity with my other job activities. Hopefully these tricks will help you to become more effective in your creative position!

1. Create separate time and space for tasking vs creative activities.

Rather than allow myself to switch tasks too often, I set aside specific timeslots for uninterrupted brainstorming. If you have the option, sometimes it can be helpful to move to a conference room or some other spot to help your brain recognize that you are shifting focus.

Another trick I've learned is to separate my brainstorming time from the time I actually spend turning that idea into reality. Once I'm in my creative flow, I don't want to break it. I use that time to generate as many ideas as I can, and I write down all of the details. I'll revisit the list at a later time and put in the work to make those ideas happen. Doing this allows me to get the maximum output from a burst of creativity without wasting time on tasks that could just as easily be performed later.

2. Make sure your overall lifestyle is suited to performing well at your job.

Getting regular exercise in my free time helps me stay focused at work. It helps if the exercise is intense – since I'm sedentary most of my day, I really need a strong adrenal boost to maintain a good energy level. In addition to working out, I try to take a brisk 20-30 minute walk during my break. I also occasionally do stretches or standing yoga poses in the bathroom stall to keep my blood flowing.

Eating right is also key. I used to be able to get away with less nutritional meals, but now I quickly feel the drop in my energy level if I haven't been eating properly. Also, choosing the right snacks can be the difference between facing a severe afternoon blood sugar drop or going strong all the way until the end of the day. I like to snack on things like





think outside of the box.

As an added bonus, the conversations I have during these walk-arounds usually unearth some creative ideas that my coworkers have. Don't be afraid to ask your co-workers for ideas – often you'll find they've been hiding some great ones. Just make sure you give them the credit when their ideas work!

4. Learn to “birth” ideas rather than force them out.

It's important that you are setting up the right conditions for creativity. When that lightning strikes, document that idea (more on this in the next bullet point), but keep in mind that this idea might not be ready to share right away. Keep returning to it and allow it to develop further. One day you'll realize that it is ready to go, and you're ready to present it to the world.

Now that I've started this process of nurturing my ideas, I have a running list of every idea that has come to me. I scan my list regularly, developing the ideas that aren't quite ready yet and moving forward with the ones that are. I also have a file called “DRAFTS” that contains a bunch of half-written blog posts. Sometimes I'll be inspired to write part of a post or to create an outline, and I'll return to it later and flesh it out.

5. Keep an idea notebook.

You never really know when inspiration will strike. That's why an idea notebook is so useful. Keep it at your desk so you can document things easily. Sometimes I'll have an idea while working on another task, so I'll jot it down for later.

6. Create an inspiration file.

Sites like Pinterest and Behance are a great source of ideas, but having an actual real-life file is the ultimate inspiration. I work for a printer after all, so why wouldn't I want to look at actual printed items?

Whenever I find a cool print project, I put it in my file. Often, our graphics designer or my boss will give me something interesting, and I'll add those to my file as well. Looking through these projects is a great way to get out of a creative rut.

raw veggies with hummus (broccoli is especially good for your adrenal levels), hard boiled eggs, and nuts. Proteins and dark greens are a good choice when you need energy.

3. A simple change of scenery can go a long way.

If you're sitting at the same desk staring at the same thing every day, your creativity is going to suffer. It's easy for your thinking to fall into a pattern. Breaking up that pattern is the best way to help your mind move in a new direction.

Getting away from your desk and moving around can really help. When I'm feeling stuck, I'll pick up my camera and walk through our various departments looking for creative projects to photograph. It helps wake me back up, and the scenery change helps me regain my ability to

4 Classy Ways to Show Off a Curvy Figure

by Lauren D'Alessandro



Fitted Top With a Full Skirt

This feminine silhouette is a great way to show off a tiny waist, and it works whether you are an hourglass or you are top-heavy and looking for a way to bring balance to your look. I love a full skirt that sits at the natural waist because it creates the illusion of a very tiny waist.



Fitted Skirt With a Blousy Top

This is a great office look — the looseness of the top can help offset the fitted skirt. If you are more top heavy, this look might throw your body off balance a bit. If you find this to be the case, try a dark color on top and lighter color on the bottom to bring things back into proportion.

The classic “problem” of a curvy figure is that clothes that look cute on your petite friends can wind up looking a bit trashy on you. The situation can seem a bit lose-lose — when you wear baggy clothes, you look way heavier than you actually are, but if your clothes are too tight you find yourself on the receiving end of some leering or judgmental stares.

It can feel like frumpy and trashy are your only two options, but there is a way to dress beautifully and still look like a class act. Finding the perfect balance of figure flattering and classy can be a real challenge, but when you achieve it the results are incredible. Here are some of my go-to outfits to show off my figure in a ladylike way.



Fitted All the Way

One of my favorite looks, this will always be the most impactful way to show off your figure. Remember, fitted is a world away from tight! Choose thicker materials and opt for high-quality items that have lining (and make sure you are wearing the proper undergarments).



Anything With Peplum

Peplum is a super classy touch, and it's a great way to add some extra style to an otherwise tailored look. You can find peplum tops of both the casual and formal variety, and they are a great way to look both on-trend and classic! Here I'm wearing a black peplum jacket.

The Ultimate Guide to Creating Curls in Fine Hair

by Lauren D'Alessandro

My all-time biggest beauty predicament has been figuring out how to style my thin, fine hair. Hair dressers often correct me, “You don’t have thin hair — just fine hair. You have a normal amount of hair on your head but it’s fine and it falls flat.”

Either way, getting my hair to look the way I want it to isn’t easy. In high school the messy bun look was in, but my hair wouldn’t cooperate. My “messy bun” was more of a “small, stringy bun”. I’ve always liked my appearance, but I had a hard time accepting that my hair wasn’t naturally voluminous and wavy.

As I’ve gotten older, I’ve learned to appreciate my hair. It’s soft to the touch and it dries quickly. (In third grade, my friend Jennifer used to stand behind me in line with her hand on my head and marvel at the softness of my hair.) It doesn’t take long to style since there isn’t tons of it, and it never gets unruly or too big.

I get a lot of questions about my curly hair and how I get it to look that way. My everyday look consists of a tapered barrel curling iron, hairspray, and volumizing powder. Keep reading to learn more about how to achieve this look.

Use a tapered barrel.

The loose waves look requires that your hair be flatter on top with a tighter curl toward the bottom. A tapered barrel is perfect for achieving this. The base of the curl will be tight and have great hold but the top will be looser, giving you a better effect.

My tapered barrel is 1” at the base and 0.5” at the tip – I’ve found this is the ideal size to give me curls that hold without making them too tight. You may have to experiment a bit to find the size that is perfect for your hair, but you can always go to a store like Sephora and ask for assistance in testing out the irons.

Section your hair before curling, using small pieces rather than large ones.

I do three sections on each side of my head, even though I could probably do two. The extra separation means more fullness. I’ve found that for looser curls, it works best to do roughly the same number of sections, but brush it out at the end. If I make my sections too big, my hair might just straighten out.

Avoid big barreled curling irons.

A 1-inch barrel is the largest that I ever use to curl my hair. Any bigger and my curls fall out. Try out a few different sizes to see what works best with your hair type.

Use wands instead of the clamp.

First of all, it's super easy to lose bits of your fine hair on that clamp. Second, rolling your hair from bottom to top isn't going to create loose flowing curls. Switching to a wand was a game changer for me. Curling my hair was faster, and my curls have a much better shape to them.

Blow dry your hair first for volume.

I often allow my hair to air dry when I curl it to cut down on time. It works well enough, but I get the absolute fluffiest and most voluminous curls when I blow dry it first.

Don't overdo it with products.

The only product I use when I curl my hair is hairspray to set the curls and some volumizing powder to the roots (and while I don't use it, I also recommend a heat protectant spray). I discovered that when I'm curling my hair, less product = less weight and maximum volume.



Riverton Garden Tour

Riverton Garden Tour 2018 was one of the highlights of Spring for me. This tour, hosted by the Porch Club of Riverton, was a gorgeous tour of nine different gardens in Riverton, NJ. I took hundreds of pictures, and editing down my selection was a challenge. The first stop on the tour, which I'm sharing here, was easily my favorite.



This gorgeous front porch caught my eye right away. I loved the soothing color palette, which featured mint green, steel grey, and pops of blue, red, and orange with a generous sprinkling of gold metallic elements. This home inspired me to start incorporating mint into my living room decor.







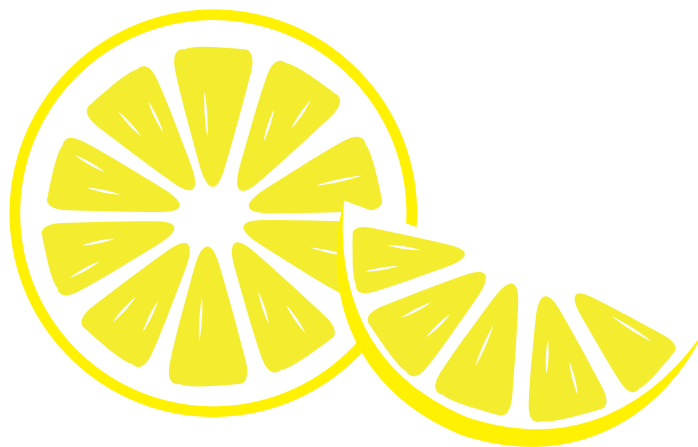
Isn't this backyard quite the stunner? The stand-alone back deck is impeccably decorated. The color scheme ties in with the front porch without being an exact replica of the same style. I wanted to cozy up on this little couch and hide out in the backyard all day. I would've gotten kicked out, eventually. But it would've been worth it, I think.





Pink Lemonade Sangria

This delicious sweet and sour sangria is the perfect pink drink for a girl's night in. I typically stir up a batch of this as a crowd pleaser when I'm having female friends over. Be forewarned: I like my drinks strong! This version packs quite a punch, so if you don't like your drink quite so strong, switch the measurements to 1 oz of lemoncello and 1/3 cup lemon juice.



Ingredients

- 1/2 Cup Sweet White Wine
- 1/3 Cup Limoncello
- 1 oz Lemon Juice
- 1 oz Grenadine
- 1 lemon (to garnish)

Directions

Shake ingredients in a cocktail shaker and pour over a glass with ice. If you don't have a cocktail shaker, grab two glasses, make your drink in one of them, and then pour from one glass to the other a few times until thoroughly mixed, then pour over the glass with ice. This recipe makes 1 cocktail.



6 Tips for Successful Yard Sale Shopping

by Lauren D'Alessandro

The only thing that gets me more excited than a trip to the thrift store? A Saturday morning yard sale! The deals that I get at yard sales are usually much better than my thrift store deals — which is saying a lot. I've gotten a tall faux plant for \$5, multiple free chairs, and a hand painted floral tray for \$15.

As an experienced yard sale shopper, I've learned a few tricks for getting the best deals (and steals). Here are my best tips for successful yard sale shopping.

1. Find yard sales postings online.

I still see the old fashioned poster board signs hanging on telephone poles all the time. But another way to learn about yard sales is to find them listed online at places like Facebook Marketplace or Craig's List.

2. Look for community yard sales.

On a typical day, yard saling would require a lot of listings from online and a car. But if you hit up a community yard sale, everything is conveniently close together. You just need to walk from one sale to the next!

3. Cluttered Yard Sale = Better Deals

A friend and I were yard saling together when we came across a yard full of boxes with junk piled in them. My friend wanted to go elsewhere, but I insisted that this was an exciting find. When people haven't taken the time to sort their goods, that usually means they are just trying to get rid of "junk" as fast as possible. The more you have to sift through everything, the more likely you are to find overlooked treasures at a fraction of the cost.

4. Don't forget to haggle the price.

Yard sales are the number one place to for haggling, and there are a few ways to increase your chances of talking down the price. First, if you're buying a lot of items at one sale, the seller is more likely to give you a better deal since you're buying up a lot of items from them. Also, your chances of haggling successfully are higher at the end of the day (usually 2 or 3pm) when everything is being packed up for Goodwill.

5. Bring reusable shopping bags.

People usually provide plastic shopping bags, but having a few of your own bags in tow can't hurt, plus it's a bit better for the environment!

6. Bring a wagon.

I've never personally done this, but I saw someone else doing it at a community yard sale and I thought it was one of the best ideas I'd seen. When you're buying bigger items, reusable shopping bags don't always do the trick! Sometimes you need a little something extra to help you transport your findings.



4 Compelling Reasons to Shop Secondhand

by Lauren D'Alessandro

Anyone who knows me knows about my obsession with thrift store shopping. I can be found in a thrift store at least twice a week hunting down the latest fashion bargain.

My mantra to find the best pieces is “shop often, buy seldom,” so I don’t always leave the store having made a purchase. This is how I can justify spending so much time in these stores — I only

buy things that I absolutely love, but in order to find them I really need to invest time in looking for them.

Thrift store shopping is more than just a fun hobby — shopping secondhand is actually a very responsible decision. Here are four reasons why I think everyone should consider secondhand shopping.



1. It's Affordably Sustainable

Fast-fashion poses many ethical problems, but finding brands that are ethical and sustainable requires research as well as a hefty price tag. I like to think of thrifting as the “reset” button for brands that aren't sustainable. When you buy used, you aren't directly contributing to the production of new clothing. You are taking what's already in existence and giving it a new life. And you're doing it at a fraction of the cost of most ethical brands.

2. It Saves You Money

I already touched on this a bit, but thrifting can help you to build an extensive wardrobe at a fraction of the cost of new clothing. Whether you search the bargain bins at Goodwill for the lowest possible prices or you opt for the organized luxury of an upscale thrift store, you're paying less for what you buy.

3. It's a Creative Outlet

Unlike regular shopping, thrifting exposes you to both current trends and vintage clothing. This allows you to be exceptionally creative with your style choices. Instead of wearing the same trends that everyone else is wearing, you can mix contemporary brands with vintage pieces for a look that's all your own.

4. You Enjoy the Thrill of the Hunt

Fellow thrifters agree there's nothing like the thrill of finding that perfect piece at an inexpensive price. Some people brag about how much they spent on designer clothes, but thrifters brag about the great deal they got on the same brand. Thrifting can require more patience than shopping new (a reminder that my mantra is, “shop often buy seldom”), but the payoff — lower price tags and the thrill of the hunt — is totally worth the effort.

Waiting for The One: 4 Things You Should Look For In a Relationship

by Lauren D'Alessandro

Recently, my fiancée surprised me with flowers. It was a simple gesture, but it carried a lot of weight for me. As I cut my roses and placed them in a vase, I thought about all the times when I was single that I picked up flowers for myself.

It is so important to learn how to love yourself before you're in a relationship, and I definitely had plenty of time to learn that.

A long time ago, I wrote a blog post about "waiting for the one." This post garnered a fair amount of internet attention for me – I received a lot of emails about it, including an invitation to audition for a reality dating show (which I declined).

When I was younger, I had a lot of optimism about my future relationship, and I encouraged other people to dream big when it came to the relationship that God had for them. Now actually being in a relationship, I feel that I have a slightly different perspective than I had before.

I will never stop believing that God will do big

things in my life. But truth be told, some of my dreams got a little too big.

Perhaps this is a side-effect of my bipolar disorder – one of the symptoms is a heightened sense of self-worth and having grand ideas. Or perhaps this was simply just girlish dreaming. Either way, God's choice for me was a lot different than what I had envisioned for myself.

I am far from disappointed with my fiancée – in fact, he's *more than* everything that I dreamed about. He's caring, he's kind, he's thoughtful, he makes me a priority, he's supportive, and he loves me even though I've opened up to him about everything in my life – including the embarrassing stuff.

With more years of experience and an actual relationship in my life, I feel that now I have a better idea of what's valuable in a relationship.

Here are four things that I have found are important in my relationship:



1. You need someone that you can be completely honest with.

As I mentioned before, I share everything with my fiancée. Sometimes that can be difficult, but I've found that sharing the difficult things and finding acceptance in my places of brokenness brings powerful healing to my life. If you can't be completely honest with someone because they're going to judge you for what you've been through, what's the point of having the relationship?

2. You need someone who loves you at your worst.

My fiancée has seen what I am like when I'm experiencing a manic bipolar episode, which is about as bad as it gets for me. He still loves me and wants to be with me, and his perspective of who I am hasn't been affected by seeing me at my worst. Get yourself a partner whose perspective of you doesn't change after they see your worst side. True love means seeing someone for who God has created them to be – at all times.

3. You need someone who believes in your God-given dreams.

My fiancée not only believes that I can succeed at my career and in my side-gig of writing blog posts, but he also offers me support. I read posts out loud to him, and he gives me feedback. He talks through difficult topics with me so I can process some of the things that are hard to write about. He fully believes that I can succeed at whatever I put my mind to. Having that kind of support in my life has been a huge blessing.

4. You need someone who is also your best friend.

No one can make me laugh more than my fiancée can. I love spending my days with him and there's no one else with whom I would rather pass my time. Romance is wonderful, but the feeling of romance comes and goes. Friendship is a solid foundation that will carry you through the roller coaster of emotions that a marriage will bring into your life.



DIY Magical Boho Butterfly Garland

by Lauren D'Alessandro





This simple and beautiful bohemian decor project is sure to add a bit of magic to any room! I went through a phase where I was really into butterflies and glitter, and I decided to create a simple DIY project that involved both. This project turned out great, and I was in love with how this garland looked with my decor.

SUPPLIES

- Faux butterflies (I used 18 total)
- Fishing wire
- Acrylic paint
- Paintbrushes
- Foam Paintbrushes
- Glitter
- Tacky glue (not pictured)
- Hot glue
- String
- Faux branch

STEP ONE:

Using a foam brush and your acrylic paint, start by painting each butterfly your desired color. You can paint them all the same color or mix and match them like I did. Let dry.

STEP TWO:

Pour glitter into a shallow bowl or dish. Using your tacky glue and a skinny paintbrush, paint the edge of each butterfly wing with a thin layer of glue. Dip into the glitter and shake excess. Let dry.

STEP THREE:

Cut strips of fishing wire to your desired length and heat up the hot glue gun. Attach the back of the butterfly to the fishing wire using hot glue. Hold in place until dry. Continue to attach butterflies along the length of the fishing wire (I placed mine about 12 inches apart from each other). I made three strands of butterflies, but you can make as many as you like depending on the size of your branch.

STEP FOUR:

Once your strings of butterflies are complete, tie each strand along the length of the branch. Knot tightly and use hot glue to secure if necessary. As a final touch, tie a length of string to either end of your branch for hanging.



4 Qualities of an Extroverted Introvert

by Lauren D'Alessandro

As a big fan of personality quizzes, I've spent a significant amount of time pondering whether or not I'm introverted or extroverted. There's something so validating about taking a quiz and receiving a resulting reading that explains you and your behavior. I think it stems from our desire as humans to feel understood (and to understand ourselves).

Yes, I adore taking personality tests, but the introvert vs extrovert question really stumps me.

Extroversion and introversion are certainly not black and white qualities. Perhaps some people can clearly identify as one or the other, but I can't really choose which one I identify with more. In the end, I usually tell people that I'm an ambivert, because I think I have qualities of both types.

I have found that being somewhere in the middle, I have a few distinct qualities of my own. Here are some characteristics that I often share with other ambiverts.

1. I can be particular about who I spend time with.

As I discovered recently, I hated living alone. If I have a significant other or close friend that I particularly enjoy, I'll almost always choose to hang out with them rather than by myself. But on the other hand, I'm particular. I prefer to have people to spend time with, but only if they are people I have a strong connection to. If I don't click with anyone around me, I'll choose my alone time over small talk with people that don't share my interests.

2. I prefer one-on-one relationships to group hangouts.

I'm extremely relational and I enjoy having lots of friends, but I usually prefer one-on-one, meaningful conversation over hanging out in a large group. I enjoy meeting new people, but sometimes I'm too shy to initiate conversation unless I know we have a common interest that I can ask questions about.

3. I need an equal balance of alone time and social time.

If I spend too much time alone, I start to feel depressed and bored. But after a long weekend of socializing, I feel drained, and I need to recuperate alone. I tend to plan my weekends so that I have one social day and one day to myself. This serves both sides of my personality and keeps me feeling well-balanced!

4. I can work well independently or as part of a group.

I love working alone on my own projects, but I also adore collaboration, and I love the way that groups of people can work together to achieve a bigger purpose. I enjoy the synergy of working as part of a group, and yet in my career I have been particularly successful at working independently.

5. I often need time to "warm up" in social situations.

I typically come off as shy, but once you get to know me I'm actually very warm and outgoing. I just prefer to get to know people first before I really start to engage in conversation. Which leads me to my next point...

6. I prefer deep conversation to small talk.

I enjoy learning about people, so I like hearing what they are passionate about or what's important to them as opposed to making small talk about the weather or a tv show that we both watch. I engage in small talk when I can sense that it's on a path to a deeper, more meaningful conversation.

7. I like to engage, but I also spend a lot of time in my own head.

I love having meaningful conversation with people, but sometimes I find that during a conversation my mind can end up on a totally different path. Often, something we're talking about will spark an exciting or intriguing idea, and I'll get wrapped up in that idea and find that I've suddenly slipped back into my more introverted mode.

8. My personality can depend on the situation, and that surprises some people.

The thing that most often surprises people about me is that I can be super quiet in one situation and super talkative in another. In high school, I received votes for both "Quietest" and "Loudest" in the yearbook (and I won for Quietest). My level of bubbiness often depends on who I'm around, how comfortable I feel in a situation, and how interested I am in what's going on around me. I know many other ambiverts who are the same way. This "personality change" can confuse people who have seen us in both our reserved and our more outgoing states.

My Myers-Briggs Type

As I wrote this article, I decided to take the Myers-Briggs test to see what I'm currently testing as. My result was INFJ, with 51% Introversion and 49% Extroversion, thus confirming that I'm pretty much split down the middle.

On Bipolar and Finding My Own Silver Lining

by Lauren D'Alessandro



Last year, I missed my own birthday.

I actually went out to dinner with two close friends for my 31st birthday. But I wasn't really there. The reason was because I was experiencing my second manic-psychotic episode during that outing. The chemicals in my brain were roaring in imbalance. I might as well have been on drugs, because I had become an entirely different person.

As I mentioned, this was my second episode. My first had occurred just about 9 months prior. After the first occurrence, my doctors had written off my symptoms as being caused by dehydration. I had been sick for about a week and half straight prior to having that breakdown, so I thought it was just a one-time fluke. It was this second birthday episode that got me diagnosed with bipolar.

I was in a lot of pain afterward, both mentally and emotionally. Life felt so unfair. Here I was with an incredibly difficult diagnosis. The fact that some people seemed to place the blame for these episodes on my shoulders was salt in an already gaping wound. Despite the fact that I did have some amazing friends who came through for me in a big way, it was difficult to take my focus off of the things I had lost. The silence of the people I had expected to stand by me was absolutely deafening.

I was left with an intense sense of loss. Besides losing friendships, I had lost, among other things, my sense of safety, my sense of security in my own body, and my sense of peace. My mind was reeling as it adjusted to the new medication. My heart was wracked with guilt wondering whether this was truly, as the doctors told me, not my fault.

It was during this time that God started to form something new and special in my life, though I didn't know

it yet. The month prior to my birthday episode, I had gone on a trip to New York City. I thought that I had reserved two nights at an Airbnb, but it turned out that I had only reserved one. So I was stuck in the city that day without a place to put my bags and without a plan. I remembered suddenly that I knew someone who lived nearby

– someone that I had known a few years ago. After some deliberation, I decided to reach out to see if he could meet up. He responded to my invitation, and we ended up spending an exciting afternoon exploring the wax figures at Madame Tussaud's.

We continued to talk on the phone occasionally after spending that day together. And then, my second episode happened. Unlike the majority of the other people who had been in my life, this person made the decision to stick around. This decision really deeply moved me. I realized how caring this person was, and slowly I started to wonder if we could be more than just friends.

The months that followed with both beautiful and difficult. I was coming to terms with my diagnosis, healing from the trauma of it all, and learning to forgive and move on. At the same time, I was feeling more supported and loved than I'd ever felt by someone I was really learning to care for. It felt like normalcy in the midst of all the chaos — like a light at the end of a very dark tunnel.

One of the first things I can remember sharing with my current therapist is that I needed God to show me in a fresh way that he was in control. When my episodes first happened, everything felt random and senseless. I knew that what I needed from God was a reminder of his providence.

God came through on this need in two big ways. The first was the way that he provided me with a job that allowed me to move back to New Jersey to be closer to my family (I needed the emotional support), and the second was the beautiful way

that he brought me a relationship with someone who has seen me at my worst and yet still believes in the person that I truly am.

For me, one of the best details of this story is that if my first episode hadn't

lost me the friendships that it had, I probably never would have reached out that day in New York City. So in the end, it was one of the worst things in my life that brought me one of the best things. This relationship will always serve as a reminder to me that God really does work all things together for my good.

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Thoughts on the Value of Gratitude

by Lauren D'Alessandro



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require that we shift focus.
Whatever we focus on gets
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Gratitude. I must admit that this is something that hasn't always come easily to me. In the past, I was somewhat of a blind optimist, excited for everything in my life. More recently, some of the struggles in my life have gotten to me, and I went through a time where I really had to look harder in order to feel a sense of gratitude for anything that I had.

When I got diagnosed with bipolar I felt trapped and frustrated. My medicine was making my thought processes a lot slower than I was accustomed to, and in some ways this made me feel trapped inside my own head. I knew I would have to adjust to this "new normal", and the permanence of this adjustment was daunting. It's terrifying when something that you're used to and that you take for granted – such as your mind – fails you in a way that you never anticipated.

During this time, the idea of gratitude felt completely foreign to me. It's true that I still had a lot to be grateful for, but it didn't feel that way at first. I was so focused on the things that I had lost that it was hard to remind myself of the good things that were still in my life.

At the time my mind was fixed on the friends I had lost, the way that certain people had treated me, how confused I was about my diagnosis, and the fact that I hated my medication. In retrospect, I don't really blame myself for being frustrated

about those things – they were all terrible things to experience and I don't wish them on anyone. I had to mourn them, but I also had to get to a place where I could recognize what I had to be grateful for.

One of the best things that came into my life this year is my boyfriend. God brought him into my life at a time when I was feeling very abandoned, and this relationship really helped me to remember that I was still worthy of love. I'm also incredibly thankful for my job. I have a great marketing position that allows for remote work, which is an incredible blessing during a time where many people are on furlough or filing for unemployment. What's more is that I have great friends who DID stand by me through everything, and I'm so thankful for them.

Gratitude can sometimes require that we shift focus. Whatever we focus on gets magnified, so if you're struggling with gratitude it's important to spend time meditating on the things you have to be grateful for.

Practicing gratitude does not mean that we will not have struggles, and it does not invalidate the trials that we go through. But what it has the power to do is to keep us reminded of the fact that no matter what struggle we are experiencing, there is always something else in our lives that is worth living for.

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