The Need to Belong

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Stand out, you lose.

Fit in, and you win.

Imagine, you're at the mall shopping with your friends.

You find a top you really like, something you really want to buy.

And then, your friends say,

"Oh, don't buy THAT!" … "Buy this one instead!" "You'll definitely look better in this one!"

What do you do?

Do you stick to what YOU want to buy and wear?

Or do you change your decision to fit in with your friends?

For those of you who chose to purposely adjust to the majority: hi, you're just like the "old" me.

Six years ago from today, I had just returned from the city of Hong Kong.

As an international returnee, at first I felt completely outcast from the society around me.

I was lost in a community I didn't belong to.

I developed the habit of adjusting to others. I always played safe.

Whether it was deciding where to eat for lunch, or picking an answer for a class quiz,

I would always see myself blending in with the group.

Was I shy? No.

Was I careless? Never.

I was hesitant and unconfident, afraid to fail, afraid to lose.

I thought that if I was honest, if I was the different one, I'd be rejected.

Everything I said, everything I did, was determined by how I thought others would react.

Would they approve of it?

Am I making the right choice?

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What would they think of my decision?

I was constantly stuck in a cycle of paranoia,

forced by the need to be accepted by not only one, but many.

I had only seen myself from the outside, overly self-conscious of the perspective of others.

Was this the kind of person I truly aimed to become?

In the midst of trying to fit into the illusion of the new society,

I was simultaneously giving away the chance to rediscover who I truly wanted to be.

I realized, that this was all just a way of escape, a way of avoidance, restraining myself from the "reality" I imagined.

Not only was it a waste of time, but it also cut my precious opportunities and chances in life.

In my third year of junior high school, I plucked up the courage to make a stand

To do what I wanted to do, even if it risked alienating me from my group of friends

As I'm sure most of you know, belonging to a sports club in a Japanese school is a strict and demanding experience. And while the self-sacrifices you make for the group can be positive and character building, they can also be stifling.

Preventing you from pursuing individual goals and activities …. in favor of the group

I had decided to take part in a week-long international academic competition held in Malaysia. The prospect of pursuing a new area of study, making new friends, and exploring new cultures was intoxicating. But breaking this news to my club mates - of six weeks away from our daily practice - was not so easy. And yet, I took the step to explain my decision and follow my own path. Even if it risked alienation from my peers

And what did I learn from this?

I learned that my friends could understand and respect my decisions

I learned that the fear was nothing compared to the lifelong memories and friends I made during the experience. That any short term negative

consequences were drowned out by the vast ocean of positive memories I have from my week in Kuala Lumpur.

And I stand here now with less fear and more confidence over my future.

Willing to take more risks.

Willing to take a stand.

Willing to be me.

Imagine being able to do what you want, and not what you think you should do.

Imagine not having to adjust to others' opinions.

Imagine feeling confident about your own choices.

Accommodate less to normality, listen more to yourself.

Fit in, you lose.

Stand out, and you win.