

Introduction: My name is Helena. I graduated from Emory class of 2019. And I studied economics and environmental science.

Question 1: Can you tell us a little bit about your journey (and where your headspace was at) from your Emory graduation to your current role?

Response: My journey from Emory graduation to where I am now was pretty tumultuous and really crazy. I think that when you graduate from college, a huge chapter of your life is ending and you're experiencing a lot of shifts. So I was in this place of a lot of questioning and also wanting to delve deeper into more meaningful questions in life. Like I wanted to understand what it meant to have life purpose. I wanted to explore if there were any absolute truth in this world. I wanted to understand what it meant to be happy. And this filtered into every aspect of my life. So I was thinking about my job, I was thinking about my relationships, and what my next steps were. And this brought a lot of confusion because I think that I was really deeply influenced by what others around me were doing and also what people had told me was something that was good to do. I ended up not really listening to anyone. And then I just started traveling because for as long as I can remember, I have wanted to travel around the world. So I started traveling in November of 2019. And I was planning on backpacking throughout all of Southeast Asia. And then obviously the pandemic hit in March and really switched out my plans. And since March, I've been in Thailand, and I moved to the south of Thailand from the north a couple months ago. And on this island in the south of Thailand, I've been really exploring movement arts as well as vocal arts and vocal expression. So that's been really cool.

Juggling different skill sets and also all of my different interests, I think has been like a lifelong journey because I think it's easy for people to compartmentalize, and it's in our nature to want to compartmentalize others because it helps us understand them. But it also goes against human nature to be compartmentalized. Everyone is many things, you aren't just one thing. So I've always been really hungry for exploring and for doing different things. So, teaching and also doing freelance work online, it feeds my intellectual and academic nature, whereas dance and movement arts sort of feeds my need to express myself and be creative. I don't feel that it's difficult because I feel that balance exists within me, so of course it's going to be expressed in what I'm doing. I imagine it like yin and yang energy, like you need both kinds to exist and to be in this world, and so I use both of them in my life. They were catalyzed by my participation in this artistic residency on the island of Ko Pha-ngan. So it's a three week artistic residency led by two facilitators who had a contemporary dance background. And so this space really allowed me to flourish and be encouraged by other artists. For me, it was like specifically exploring contact improvisation, vocal sounding—and when I say that, I mean really expressing whatever sounds come to you in the moment and expressing how you're feeling, whether that's like screaming or sighing or sounding like an animal trying to sound like an insect, or whether it's like singing, because I also started singing a lot more and creating songs in this space. So it was an extremely loosely structured residency, but it was perfect for me because I was just launching into the world of creative expression.

Question 2: What were things that were unplanned/unexpected but meaningful to your growth?

Response: First, I had planned to go to Montana and do an environmental science internship immediately after graduation and then I ended up staying in Atlanta to work on nurturing my relationships and my friendships and also working on exploring deeper philosophical matters with my more intellectually-minded friends, which was good for personal growth. And normally, I never put personal growth before professional or academic growth, so this was a huge step for me. So in July of 2020, I spent a month at a meditation retreat center in the north of Thailand doing a Vipassana, which is a silent meditation retreat where you meditate for 16 hours a day and you don't talk to other people, you don't listen to music, you don't eat in the afternoon, you don't dance, you don't sing, you don't write. And this was also a life changing event in terms of my perception of the world. All of these experiences really culminated in my realization that life is an experience, which is something that is singularly unique to every single person and sometimes is better to not put into words because then you preserve the essence of the experience. And this is what made me realize, really, that I need to be expressing myself creatively. And that I need to be honing art and working on art because art is something that is probably the purest form of people still doing something in and of itself, at least when they start working on art. And also, art is just such a pure expression of life.

Question 3: What does creativity/creative exploration/living a creative life mean to you?

Response: Creativity and art is a state of mind more than a product or something that is tangible. Creativity can come out in so many forms and in so many different ways. It's literally everything from drag queens who dress up like 1960s aliens to people who write anime fanfiction. All of it is creativity. And all of it is so beautiful because it's someone saying, *Hey, I really want to do this. And this is something I'm passionate about. And I'm just gonna put a little piece of me into what has inspired me.* And so, for me, creativity seeps into everything I do. And I love for it to seep into everything I do. So the most overt and most obvious things you can point to in my life that are creative are when I dance, whether it's solo or when I'm dancing in contact improvisation with others. When I sing, like whether I'm creating covers with my voice or if I'm writing songs, these are obvious artistic practices. But also for me, teaching is something that's really creative. I like creating my own lesson plans. And I love doing that. I love creating games and exploring new ways of learning. And I have also had experiences volunteering on farms in Southeast Asia and I've had a lot of creative freedom in how I have been creating these sorts of... and like cultivating, literally cultivating these little patches of Earth. So thinking of how to nurture these plants, how to create the most beautiful setup, what makes the plant most happy, I feel that it's also like a connection that I can make with Mother Nature and also with the spirit of who I am, and I guess what I would want if I was a plant. So there's amazing creativity to be explored everywhere, like it's not just in one or two things.

Question 4: What advice do you have for your younger self?

Response: Would be to explore more and to really embrace failure and embrace mistakes. Because I think for me, something that was really holding me back from being more creative and reaching out to the amazing artistic communities that Emory has was like fear of rejection, or fear of not being good

enough. Because there are so many amazing artists at Emory. And we have this preconceived notion of what art is. But art is also about failure. It's about trying things out and being like, *Is this gonna work?* Even if it doesn't work, it doesn't make it bad, it's just something new. So, embracing failure and embracing discomfort and also, even if you're low-confidence or insecure, embracing that in your artistic process.

Something that one of the facilitators at the artistic residency told me that really touched me was that there was this girl who was really, really insecure about dancing and she was like, *I don't want to dance, I'm just gonna sit out with everyone, I feel nervous. I don't know what this block is.* And he was like, *You should dance that block, like just embrace your feeling of feeling insecure and feeling sad and feeling unsure and let that come out in movement, whatever movement that is. Even if it's just covering your eyes or if it's shaking your hand around because you don't know what to do, that's still art, and it's still a performance.* I was like, *Yeah, it's all an expression. And that's what makes it beautiful, even if it's not beautiful.*