

**Introduction:** Hey everyone, I'm Toyin Thompson. I graduated Emory in 2016 with a BA in philosophy. And right now I'm a medical student at Emory School of Medicine.

**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:** So as far as my trajectory towards where I am now, I can honestly say I've wanted to be a physician since I was in high school. I was very confident in knowing what I wanted to do to the point where I kind of rushed myself. Like in high school, I took enough AP classes to basically graduate college in three years. I was taking a ton of classes every semester and I was just really focused on reaching my one goal. But then, you know, as everyone else, after I graduated, I was like, *Do I really want to do this? This is actually a really big decision.* Because you know, when you're 18, everything seems very possible. You're like, *I can do this all the time.* But once you turn 21, 22, you're really thinking seriously about the future. So then, I ended up working for a nonprofit for about a year and a half. And while working at the nonprofit, I realized that I was still really stressed out about the things that we were doing. And then sometimes I didn't feel like I was doing enough or helping enough people and the work I was doing wasn't meaningful. And then I was like, *If I'm going to work a job where I have to spend, you know, so much of my day invested in doing this, I might as well just commit to medicine, like my original plan was.* And that's kind of what ended up happening.

So I was working for this nonprofit, it was with underserved communities. I was working with young girls in the Atlanta area and creating programs for them in both science and math. And it was a lot of fun. It was amazing. It was great to meet the girls and their families. And to really just encourage them to pursue degrees and careers in both math and science. But I remember there was one particular event that we were hosting that was sponsored by a really big company. And the event wasn't great. It was kind of half-heartedly thrown together and it made me kind of upset because I'd seen this event thrown for other communities and other girls, and they always had really amazing products and stuff and staff and time and food. And my girls weren't getting any of that. So I just remember feeling kind of like *okayyy...* And then we did a photo op with this major corporation that was sponsoring it. Of course, you have all the little Black, Brown, and Hispanic little girls sitting around being happy, holding signs "thank you company." And I'm just like, *This doesn't sit right with me.* Of course, it's a nonprofit so we need sponsors and everything. But it wasn't really about the girls, it was about the sponsor. That kind of left a really bitter taste in my mouth. If I really want to help underserved communities, I kind of want to do it on my own terms with my own hands.

During my gap year in between college and medicine, I was also on the board for The Hudgens Center for Art and Learning. So the Hudgens is a museum and it also has a ton of classes where you can take drawing and painting classes and really improve your skills. There's also pottery classes and it's like one of the best ones in all the southeast. It's a center located in Gwinnett County in the city of Duluth. And it was really amazing working there and spending my time there because then I got to finally be on the leadership end of art and everything versus being on the producing, making art side. It was really cool seeing all the leaders from our community being so interested in art and how we can make it bigger and everything and how just literally anyone from all ages was there. We have like little baby toddlers come in sometimes, 90-year-olds come in as well, and they could all engage in art and find something meaningful.

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

**Response:** Something that ended up being really stressful, but actually being a really great thing was that I actually applied to medical school after I graduated Emory in 2016. And I had my whole document down, my personal statement done, I had enough cash to send the application, and sure enough, I clicked send, sent my app in, and then my gut sank. I was like, *Uh-uh, something is wrong. I don't like this.* I was like literally nitpicking everything, like whether I could say “and” or “in addition to” and just literally all the small details. I was just spiraling inside of my application and thinking, *Oh my God, is it perfect? Is it good enough?* I ended up actually going for a walk three days later. I'm just on this walk, I just can't stop thinking about the application. And I get home and I'm like, *You know what, actually, nevermind.* And I totally just withdrew my application before it even went forward or sent anything. I did not even just apply that year, even though I had paid for it and I had everything set up. And I just kind of sat down. I was like, *Oh my god, I just withdrew my application for medical school. What am I going to do now?* I consider myself someone who's fortunate enough to have a family that can support me and a place that I can always go home to. So “stressful” was in the sense that my plans weren't being pushed forward but I also had this amazing support system that I could rely on until I was better able to kind of get it together and apply. And I know I talk a lot about mental health and how that's important in our community and everything, but that year was so great for me. It was my first year that I hadn't thought about medicine in years. I just ended up working and doing that nonprofit job and working for the Hudgens and just making more art. I made more comics, wrote some stories. And it was good for my mental health completely because it just gave me some time to think, *Is this really what I want to do?* But I totally remember that my application was so painful. I'd been working all those years towards that one goal and I was like, *I don't think I'm ready yet.* And I'm so grateful that I did it because the class that I ended up joining in med school is like the most fun class. They're amazing, the greatest people. It was fate. It was God that allowed me to just be like, *Actually, I'm going to just wait.* So that's something that was stressful, but really helped me out, I think, in the end.

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

**Response:** Living a creative life, to me, means just surrounding yourself with things that you find beautiful and that you enjoy. It means finding time to create and surround yourself with things that you've made or friends have made and just enjoying them. Being creative means going to hang out with your friends and telling a really, really entertaining story that everyone laughs at, that always makes you feel good. Living a creative life means just dancing in your bedroom when you feel like it and outside. It's just expressing yourself as authentically as you can, that's what being creative means to me.

My medical school class knows me as “The Art Girl” basically. If they have a problem or they have a question about art, they send it to me because they know I love art and something I tell everyone that I love and that I do. But what happened in COVID was that we weren't meeting people organically. So a lot of the professors, surgeons, and attendings I was working with didn't know I did art. So I'm like, *Oh yeah, by the way, my whole personal statement is about how much I love art and how much I love doing it.* They're like, *What, I didn't know you painted.* and I show them stuff and they say, *Oh my*

*God, that's so cool!* I think living creatively is something that you really just do for yourself. Honestly, just keep close to your heart. Because it's hard to bring it up in professional settings, which is totally understandable. Your life doesn't have to always be art.

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

**Response:** Here's something that would have totally helped past Toyin a lot: *You do not have to be perfect. You suffered a lot because you're trying to be perfect all the time.* So I'll just start with this story. I always remember this: I was working in my physics lab and one of my classmates comes in. And I'm wearing my cute little dress, I have my little heels on, I have my makeup on. And I'm slowly trying to do this really complicated science project because I'm just trying to look put together all the time and I don't tell anyone whenever I get anything below an A-. So they came in and I was just having a little spat or whatever and he goes, *Sorry, we can't all be "Little Miss Perfect."* And I'm just like, *Oh my God, do you think I'm perfect?* Like, I didn't even take it as an insult, I was like, *Oh my God, I'm doing this successfully.* When I took my MCAT, I scored in the 90th percentile and I was riding that high. I was like, *I can do anything. No one can stop me. I'm on this trajectory, I have my goals.* And then I told you about the gap year I took. And then after that, I just stopped striving to be perfect, you know. I was just kind of happy being who I am. And I kind of realized this because, kind of depressingly, of the 2016 election. When Donald Trump won the election, I kind of just cemented in my heart that no matter what I do, I'll probably never be enough. Because I'm thinking, I'm sure a lot of us people of color—and especially black people, especially black women—hear that people only respect you if you're smart, if you have something to contribute to the conversation, if you're qualified...this, this, this and this. But what really turns out is that really doesn't matter. Trying to achieve someone else's standard of what's intelligent or beautiful or what's good isn't going to land you anywhere, because you're going to just assume what they believe. What they believe about you is more of a reflection of who they are versus who you are. So seeing Donald Trump, you know, all the chaos and drama that was around him and seeing him still score the election just cemented that like, *No matter what I do, I'll probably never be enough. So I might as well just live for myself and live in a way that's meaningful to me and makes me happy versus trying to make this imaginary white person, white man thing, accept me for who I am.* And it's actually turned out a lot better. Like I have a lot more friends now that like me for who I am. And I know that no matter what I do or what mistakes I make or whatever happens, people are still always going to love me, you know.

I just want to say right now, if you're a student who's in college: Oh my God. You're doing amazing. Just have so much compassion for yourself. Right now, we're still in COVID, we're going to be in it for a while. I just want everyone to know that every day you're going to class, you're waking up, you're wearing your mask, you got your vaccine, you're doing everything that you're supposed to be doing. And that's really all that you can control. And just have compassion for yourself because this is really hard for everyone. And I can only just hope that Emory as an institution also has compassion for you guys and allows you guys to take breaks when you need it and allows you guys to say, *I just need some time to myself right now because a lot is going on.* And a lot will continue to go on. Just make sure that you're making yourself a priority and you're taking care of yourself. I'm not gonna say it gets easier because that's a lie, but I will say that you get stronger. So that's my word of advice to my students out there.