

Peggy Mativo

“The Year of the Dream”

It was 5 am in Kenya when I called my parents. I told them I wanted to come home.

“Is everything ok?” my mother asked. I said it was.

Then I said the unthinkable. I told them that I

wanted to come home and start a non-profit in

Kenya. But that was only half the story. The other

half was that Harvard was not going too well. I

wanted a break.

I had been toying with the idea of a year off since my

days as a sophomore. I know some people make this

decision easily. After I shared this with my

roommate, it took her a less than week to decide that she would take junior year off. I tend to be the more cautious one... It took me a whole year to admit to myself, or anyone else, that I wanted - actually that I needed - a break.

It took every ounce of courage in my body to tell my parents what I had decided. I honestly felt like I was committing a crime. No one in my family had ever taken a year off, and while I was home, my family would have to contend with an unending volley of questions from well-meaning friends and curious neighbors about whether I had really dropped out of Harvard. As the first person in my family to go to

such a prestigious institution, I would not be setting a good precedent.

My parents were worried that I was dropping out... and not to join the likes of Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Robert Frost or even... Matt Damon. I was “dropping out” to start a non-profit. My parents said no... that I shouldn’t do it. I should simply graduate like everyone else, get a job and settle down. They said it wasn’t worth the risk. With the stigma attached to failed non-profits, my new ideas could mark me permanently as a failure.

I faced a choice here. In my heart of hearts, I knew I was tired of Harvard. I hated my concentration. MCB

**just was not right for me. I sat in those classes,
feeling lost...afraid, stupid, and wishing all the time
that I were invisible. My soul suffocated in shame
each time I looked at my midterms grades. In this
sea of people who looked like they knew where they
were going, I felt alone. Lonely. And when I got to
the point where I was tired of being miserable, I
made my choice: I took the year off.**

**I knew I was risking a lot: losing friendships, failing
publicly and never regaining my family's trust So,
before I left, I cleaned so many bathrooms with
Dorm Crew and saved money so I could afford my
time away.**

Then I started chasing my dreams. I wanted to inspire thousands of young Kenyans to make a difference as volunteer teaching assistants in our public schools. I had doodled and drawn this dream out, countless times: that they would go into crowded classrooms, and ensure grading was on time, give individual feedback, tutor and mentor. Now that I was out of Harvard, I could finally build it into a reality.

The year off wasn't easy. I pulled more all nighters and chased as many deadlines as I do here... but I was satisfied. I was working on something I really cared about.

One of my favorite authors, Paulo Coelho, says:

“Making a decision is only the beginning of things.

When you make a decision, you are really diving in a strong current that will bring you to places you never dreamed of.”

One year later, so much of my life has changed. I’m a full-time student who runs a growing non-profit organization. We have volunteers in classrooms as we speak inspiring the kids that they reach. And through their tutoring work, we’ve seen academic scores rise by more than 10% in some our schools. PACE has received a string of awards and recognition for our non-profit work.

But even without all the accolades, I would still be grateful for the year. I joke with my advisor that it made me a better student and a better writer, but really it made me a better friend. I cherish old friendships, and when I get to the Lowell dining hall these days, I realize that I deeply miss the class of 2013. But now I have the opportunity to reach out to form new friendships- and for that I am grateful.

So if you're thinking about taking that year off, you probably should. Reach out and talk to someone.

There are lots of resources and lots of people, like me, who would love to help you think about it. And there are super-seniors here who want to share their experiences. Find them and talk with them.

This, after all, is the least risky time to take that leap of faith. So why not go ahead and do it?

So, is it all really worth it? Whenever I look back and ask myself this question, the answer is always yes.

Life gives us all these clues to help us find the right path for ourselves. And sometimes that path means giving yourself the space to get off the path you're currently on. And taking the courageous steps to walk the road less travelled. I invite you to consider walking that road.