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7-LETTER WORDS

When I started thinking about this speech a week or so ago, I noticed that, weirdly enough, there were quite a few 7-letter words that wield a lot of influence in my life and, I'll venture to say, wield influence in many of yours as well.

For starters, we all go to college at Harvard. We go to Harvard, where each and every day weekday we carry out a frenzied routine, determinedly trying to maintain control, keeping the anxiety in check, often throwing any sense of balance out the window, and just generally doing everything we can to ensure that the 7-letter word that eventually labels us will be "success" and not "failure." Some of us, myself not included, are lucky enough to already know what the purpose of all this striving is, and the rest of us are still searching for answers, motivated, perhaps, by the desire to equip ourselves to fight for justice or motivated simply by the comfort that a 7-digit salary would ensure. But

those are the weekday 7-letter words. The weekend ones are alcohol and sexxxxx with 5 Xs.

The entire reason why I started noticing these 7-letter words, though, is because I realized that I wanted to give my speech on one particular 7-letter word that has had a hold on me for almost as long as I can remember. This word is “perfect.”

In high school, I was determined not only to be a perfect student but also to get as close as I could get to being a perfect person. I needed those 100's on my tests, but I also needed to be that Asian-looking girl who was so well rounded that she could pull it off without stereotypically giving up everything except academics. So that's what I did. I played French horn in the band, took piano lessons on the weekend, and ran varsity cross-country and track every season since the spring of seventh grade. But that wasn't enough either. I also had perfect standards that my character traits needed to meet. I tried to be unfailingly optimistic. I was proud (and still am!), so I tried to avoid showing weakness, expressing negative

emotions, or asking others for help. I treasured **honesty** and never cheated on a test. Basically, I tried be the nicest fucking person anyone had ever met.

But then I strayed from the perfect path and did something that a perfect person, at least by my definition, would never have done. I deferred my acceptance to Harvard and took a **gap year**. Next to my name in the post-high school plans edition of my high school newspaper, there was a very not perfect entry for me:

Jane Wang Williams – **organic farming** on a **gap year** and then Harvard. I took a gap year because what had gone hand in hand with all of this “perfect” was a hell of a lot of anxiety – anxiety that physically manifested itself in the knotted stomach and racing heart that I had to look forward to every single time I had to do something academic – and I was exhausted and utterly **deluded** with school. I didn’t understand why I had to put myself through this on a daily basis.

“Perfect” had led me to another 7-letter word – **unhappy**. So I started reflecting on why – why was it so all-important to me to be perfect? The answers that I came up with – that I didn’t want to be the source of any extra problems in an

already tense household, that I just needed to keep on being perfect because I always had been – these answers didn't seem nearly good enough to justify so much unhappiness. They weren't good enough.

I wish I could say that I have all the answers to tell you how to stop trying to be perfect and to be happier instead, but I'm still a work in progress. The one thing I can say for sure, though, is that it has helped for me to replace "perfect" with "reflect." That's how I realized that I've spent so much of my time doing things out of a feeling of obligation toward others that I've almost completely lost touch with what I myself actually like to do, what actually makes me happy. So I decided to join the crew team this year – because I apparently like masochism.

While many of us seem to be barreling down the exact paths that lead to mid-life crises and regrets, we can't bring ourselves to slow down and reflect on whether we're doing things that make us happy - because the thought of the answer being "No" is even scarier. My advice, though, is to take the risk. Take the risk of reflecting on whether there is some 7-letter word that is making you unhappy,

and if there is, reflect on why and how and what changes you can make. Hell, reflect all over the place – just don't reflect for hours on end, day after day after day. You will get a reputation with your friends if you do that, and they will make fun of you. I speak from experience. Maybe just reflect on **Tuesday**. You might drop a letter grade from one of your classes in the process, but in the end, I doubt that that really compares to dropping the 2 letters u & n off the front of that 7-letter word that ends in happy.