

[I'm Taking a Break!](#)

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COMMENTARY

I'm Taking a Break!

My year-off between high school and college is going to be a real education

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Harvard sprawled before us. the 400-year-old ivy-covered walls revealed, the dew on the impeccably manicured lawn shimmering bright. The chilly December air crystallized the pungent caffeinated scent swirling through the air. The members of the 2001 Harvard Model United Nations group huddled together for body warmth waiting for our tour guides. We clumped together under the dubious likeness of John Harvard, cursing both the cold weather and the late arrival of our tour guides. Finally, the fleet of apologetic second-year Harvard students swarmed the yard, and our tour commenced. As chance would have it, I managed to find myself next to my tour guide and struck up a conversation. I learned that she had gone to Spain to learn the cello before attending the school. She gushed about her "incredible experience, " as she described the "best thing I have ever done." The thinking cogs in my brain churned. What would I do if I took a year off? Easy enough I'd postpone my start of studies at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism and would instead study Bharata Natyam dance and learn my mother tongue, Tamil, in Chennai, India. Perhaps, I could.

The idea of a gap year is discordant to most high school students. Throughout our education, college sprawls before us, a misty, enchanted utopia awaiting our arrival. As time throttles forward, the mist clears. Senior year, utopia seems so close: frat boys, furry mascots, fight songs, intense study sessions, eccentric professors, endless pages of reading, formals. "Let's celebrate because this day of the week ends in Y" parties. So, why stop? Why wait another year to enter Cinderella's collegiate castle?

Simply because the world is wider than we think. As children, an empirical procedure for life is laid out for us. Birth, school, stress, college, stress, grad school, stress, job, stress, marriage, stress, kids, debt, death, stress. This linear life path keeps us from arriving at certain enlightening truths. For example, "Hey, maybe there's a life path that doesn't include a 15-meal-a-week college dining hall plan " or "Hmmm ... maybe I'll try to find an alcove elsewhere in the world, despite the myriad activities that Insert-Name-Here University has to offer."

And for me, there is one one of family, brash colloquialisms and classical Indian dance. My path moves me to India for a year.

The reasons are many. My uncles, aunts and cousins have always lived in the city of Chennai (formally known as Madras). It is the capital of Tamil Nadu, a southern state of India that follows the coast. Chennai is a city heated in both temperature and temperament. The days can reach a broiling, stagnant 110 degrees with no wind to alleviate the heaviness. Sheets of humidity hang in the air; one must part them to walk forward in the Chennai air.

So, my Indian relatives were far away from "the Florida family " my parents, brother and I in both spirit and distance. A few frail letters, staticky phone calls and an interrupted chain of pictures have been our quartet's connecting threads across the Atlantic, the Alps and the Sahara. From my comfortable white leather couch in Fort Lauderdale, they were my two-dimensional picture-perfect relatives.

The few times I visited India, the faraway-sounding voice on the other end of the line grew firm. I tried to absorb my uncles' signature expressions, memorize the texture of my aunts' voices. The inert image arose from the photo paper, breathing, laughing and gaining palpable form.

Their personalities molded as they escaped the need to speak loud, broken English over the phone. In Chennai, my relatives sparkle, electrifying the room with cracks. Their humor is distinctly Tamil. It is one of the oldest languages in the world and owns a rich and varied history and cadence as a result. As with any old language, Tamil's catch phrases are remnants of its culture past. They mark the historical inside jokes of the Tamil people. This is the year that I'll finally get the joke.

Family and heritage aside, the principal reason for my gap year is founded in childhood fantasy. Punctuated by aerobic leaps and graceful turns, Bharata Natyam owes its growth and fame to Chennai's numerous dance schools. It has been a style of dance that has captured my fancy ever since I was four years old, when I saw my first Bharata Natyam performance. Thirteen years of instruction later and the mercurial expression and nimble mid-air turn of a dancer's torso still amazes me. I devolve; back to my four-year-old self, eyes locked in childish wonder, mouth open in curiosity. The novelty has yet to wear off.

And the best dance teachers in the world are in their last years before retirement. Legends wait in India. There is the renowned Kallanidi Aunty, a kindly woman, calm and friendly, with a knack for eliciting the subtlest emotions from the youngest of faces. Down the street, there is a compact man who refuses to compliment anything but the divine in his classroom. Lakshman Sir, as he is called, wears austere white that matches his clean, no-nonsense style. Across the city teaches a kindred spirit. A tightlipped perfectionist of straight posture and strict disposition, Uma Aunty analyzes a dancer's body from her detached location upon a thatch mat on the hard, concrete floor. One sweats and bleeds to hear the phrase, "not bad " from her accusatory mouth. Once heard, the words convey one important attribute: legitimacy.

And it all spirals down to that one value. How can we as individuals maintain our validity in a world so used to processing and eliminating the human spirit? We can by purging the need to fit the mold. Life is more than a rote process of a core curriculum, a desk job, two kids, a white picket fence and a car insurance policy. Instead, it is the sum of our interests and passions, whatever they may be authoring a novel, boating along the coast, or taking a few months off to spend time with our families. By taking the time to explore other options, we ensure our education.

So, this is my year to break the norm. This is my year to flout the ordinary routine of lecture halls, sorority rushes and course credits. It is my time to sprinkle a little fairy dust on myself, and to open Fantasia's portal with my own key. School can wait on life.