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As a general rule, if your personal life philosophy is sewn into a small decorative pillow, it was most likely created by someone else. If it was created by someone else, then by nature, it’s not personal. I believe that life philosophies are developed from life experiences, and my personal philosophy was created at the end of the first decade of my life.

My sister was 22 when she was killed in a carjacking – a random act of violence. I was 10. Don’t feel badly for me and my family, as we have never felt badly for ourselves. Today, I write this as a 20 year old, who wonders every day who I would have been had this tragedy not occurred at such a formative age. I have come to accept that for better or worse, I am a direct product of this tragedy, and so my thoughts and musings on the world.

As a 10 year old, I became the unofficial observer of my packed house full of grieving supporters. I sat and watched people stream in and out of my front door, and I was still watching when the streams ran thinner and thinner and eventually, dried up completely.

It’s natural for people to return to their normal lives, but for my family, our life would never again be normal. While everyone easily resumed their daily tasks, for me, getting out of bed in the morning was a challenge, going back to school was a nightmare, and pretending to be a normal child in class was a daily effort.

Each member of my family grieved in distinct ways, and I tried to be the representative who showed the world that we were “survivors.” You see, there was (and still is) nothing I hated more than that look of sympathy and complete pity from others. I spent most of my day smiling just to ward off that very look, but most of the time, I was just exhausted.

One day, I overheard my mother on the phone with her sister. She said, “You know, I only have X amount of energy and I can only do so many things with it before I’m totally and completely depleted.” That was it! It was just a mathematical equation and nothing more than a matter of simple subtraction. We were each given only a fixed amount of emotional energy and could take on only a fixed amount strain directly proportional to our personal energy level before we ran out.

I was so busy being “back-to-normal” child for my classmates, “perfect-student-see-I’m-doing-just-fine” child for my teachers, “look-I-can-laugh-again” child for my friends, and “perfectly-well-behaved-so-I-don’t-burden-you-any-more” child for my parents. I wasn’t even doing a good job at attempting to simultaneously fill all of these hyphenated roles because I was so depleted, leaving no time in between to “just-be-a-child” for myself.

I quickly realized that to truly take care of other people, I needed to take care of myself first. I had to get my life in balance before I could have balanced relationships. A part of this balance came from learning what merits expending this energy. I've faced and overcome one of the worst things that can possibly happen to someone. It tends to put things in perspective pretty quickly and pretty permanently.

Becoming upset over something small expends a large amount of the "X amount" of limited energy that you have. If something can't be changed, it is nothing more than a complete waste of energy to be irritated. Take for instance a traffic jam. I have two options: I can either sit in my car, fuming at my misfortune, my bad timing, how this will affect the rest of my day, and curse about the situation to the person in the passenger's seat. Or, I can turn up my music, and enjoy the company of the person in my passenger's seat. Either way, I'm not going anywhere.

Energy was replenished and tranquility restored from realizing that I have no control over the external situation, but I do have control over the internal one. I'm wasting gas either way, but I don't have to waste energy. See, I often hear people talking about "choosing their battles" and they might be on to something. However, I don't think that choosing battles necessarily involves two people. I have learned to choose the battles within my daily life, between myself and my environment. And much more often than not, I am the winner.

I like to think that if Melissa were alive, she'd look at me from the passenger's seat, smile, and say, "Jess, turn down the music. The traffic is moving again."