

Game of Challenge



My days teaching English at a Korean academy were filled with rowdy screaming kids, navigating school politics, and avoiding unnecessary confrontations with Carol, my Korean supervisor. My evenings were spent correcting homework and making dinner, then trying to unwind before going to bed too late. My Saturdays were spent on grocery shopping that took forever and involved numerous stops along with housecleaning, laundry, and prepping food for the week. My Sundays were all about catching up with my family and friends online and by the time that was done, it was usually around five in the evening and all I wanted to do was drink a bottle of wine, eat an overpriced frozen pizza, and watch TV.

It was exactly like shooting a movie on location, except that I was irritable all the time, feeling frustrated and under pressure and hating how this felt, but having no idea what to do about it. I tried hanging out with my colleagues Brian and Shannon, but the party on Friday night that lasted until the early morning hours resulted in a hangover that kept me in bed for the entire weekend, leaving my chores undone, my family and friends neglected, and me angry at myself for the wasted time.

When owner and dragon lady Lynn said something about why her big fishee big teeth no big smilee, I knew I had to do something pronto. Maybe a spa day at that upscale place I passed on the way to work would do the trick, I thought.

Not wanting to waste one of my three precious sick days per year on something trivial, it felt like divine intervention when my supervisor Carol notified us later that day that the school would be closed this Friday for some roofing repair work that required the building to be empty. Perfect! I stopped at the spa on the way home and booked myself in for a day, scheduling a manicure and pedicure, a renewing facial with head massage, a body scrub and moisturizing seaweed wrap, and a two-hour full body massage.

I walked into the spa area on Friday morning, finding it very bright, very white, and very clinical, but totally thrilled to be offered real brewed coffee upon exiting the changing room wearing a fluffy white robe. The spa ladies were all pleasant and smiley, with extremely limited English, but their expertise was apparent, as all the treatments I received were top notch. Everything was done at a leisurely pace that was calming and the massage was one of the best I'd ever had. I left feeling exactly as one should after a spa day - refreshed, renewed, relaxed and glowing.

That was Friday. By Monday I was back in the saddle, feeling irritable and tense again, and ready to pinch someone's head off for looking at me the wrong way. What is going on? I wondered. I'm never like this. I'm always happy. I'm never bitchy with people around me. I'm always in a good mood.

Why the fuck am I so strung out?

I was distracted all day trying to come up with answers and by the time I went to bed that night I'd worked myself into a tizzy. Although I'd slept well, as soon as I opened my eyes the next morning, I was annoyed by how hot it was in my apartment. Laying there in my sweaty sheets, I realized I'd been too busy whipping myself into a frenzy and had forgotten to turn down the heat last night before going to bed, and that made me even more annoyed.

Every day that week something insignificant went wrong and set me off. The new science workbooks didn't arrive and the monthly schedule for science classes was out the window. I got distracted by something and stepping away from the stove, burned my favorite dinner. One of the tiny kids got a massive nosebleed out of nowhere that wouldn't stop, and it disrupted the whole class.

The water pressure in the bathroom fell off leaving me to shower in a trickle of tepid water. An entire class had made the same mistake on the same homework essay question and the corrections took over almost two hours instead of the usual forty minutes.

The place I bought my beer was out of the brand I preferred. And going to the convenience store for my now habitual weekend frozen pizza, I found that the money-grubbing proprietress had almost doubled the price. All these inconsequential mishaps were blown out of proportion and fueled my irritation like gasoline on a bonfire.

The unfortunate byproduct of this highly disturbing week was some quality daytime wine drinking on Sunday afternoon that rendered me unconscious well before my normal bedtime.

It was still dark outside when I woke up the next morning and looking at the clock, saw that it was four forty-five. Wide awake, I knew I wouldn't go back to sleep and wondered what the hell I would do for three hours before having to leave for work.

Suddenly remembering my pre-dawn walks in LA, it occurred to me that I'd not taken one since arriving here and the thought of that morning walk was so appealing, I forgot how irritable I was. I jumped out of bed and ten minutes later I was walking through the deserted streets of my neighborhood towards the river and the path running alongside it.

There wasn't a vehicle in sight on the six-lane highway and as soon as I crossed it, I could hear the sound of the river's shallow water running over rocks. It was very soothing to be in motion again and my mind drifted away on the sound of the flowing river.

My normal walk was an hour, so thirty minutes up the path I turned around to go back, going a bit beyond my starting point to end up in a pine tree park. I sat down on one of the benches, where the sound of the wind in the pine trees and the burbling water put me in a trance that lasted until the sun came up. Heaving a deep sigh, I was relieved to find that I felt great after walking and sitting in stillness surrounded by natural beauty.

I marveled at the absence of annoyance as I showered under the dribble, fought my way through the morning rush hour crowds, and heard the screaming stampede that signaled the start of the school day.

Later that morning Carol the supervisor called me to the Korean teachers' office, and I arrived to find her having a heated argument with a Korean co-worker over some bullshit school policy. Each wanted me to agree with her point of view and when I wouldn't take sides, they turned their anger toward me saying my refusal would look bad to Lynn. I wasn't even upset by their petty political ploy, although I did kinda want to pinch their heads off for being so childish... Happy at feeling happy again, I must have been smiling when I went up to the tiny kitchen for lunch.

Lynn was eating her lunch and seeing me, she said ‘You big smilee now like big fishee big teeth!’ The return of my smile got me a hug from Lynn and a large serving of the Kimchee pancakes that the cook knew were my favorite thing in her repertoire. Jabbering in Korean to each other and saying my name, they both beamed as I scarfed down the spicy pancakes, and I was not the least bit irritated to be spoken about and watched while eating. And in my last class that day, surprising my rowdy twelve-year-olds with an impromptu game of Science Challenge, I didn’t get pissy with them when they got wound up and out of hand.

On the way home I stopped in the pine tree park and leaning against one of the towering pines, I silently thanked the trees and the river. As I climbed the stairs to my apartment, I laughed at my impulse to offer thanks to inanimate objects as though they could hear me. Whipping through homework corrections, the beer I didn’t usually buy wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be, and my dinner of leftover Kimchee pancakes that the cook had wrapped up and placed on my desk when she left for the day, was fabulous. I spent the rest of the evening engrossed in a book and feeling very relaxed, I retired earlier than usual, deciding to try another early morning walk.

When the alarm went off at five, I almost rolled over to go back to sleep but forced myself to get out of bed. Nearing the river, I was surprised to find myself feeling excited. Why the hell am I excited to be up at five o'clock in the morning when I could be getting two more hours of sleep? I wondered. As soon as I started walking, I got it. The excitement was about seeing if this early morning walk accompanied by the sound of the flowing water and then sitting in the pine tree park watching the sun come up would positively affect my day as it had yesterday. And it did. I was again compelled to stop and thank the pine trees and the river on my way home, but today I didn't have the urge to laugh at myself for expressing my gratitude to nature.

I've always turned challenging things into some kind of a game played against myself, (probably some peculiar only-child thing) and that evening after dinner I thought of turning the early morning walk into a new game to see if I could do it every morning for the rest of the week.

Knowing I needed seven solid hours of sleep, getting up at five meant going to bed at ten, which was gonna be tough. Getting all my evening shit done with some time left to chill before going to bed at ten was hard enough but hauling my ass out of bed when my alarm went off at five was definitely a drag.

As I knew it would, turning it into a game was the way to go, making me the winner every day when I motivated to get up, do the walk, and sit in the park afterwards. Even more gratifying than winning the game every morning, was how easy it was to detach from any drama going on around me and maintain my usual happy attitude.

That week I blew off Wednesday sushi with Brian and Shannon, my fellow American teachers knowing there was no way I'd get to bed by ten, and they were cool with rescheduling for Friday night. Camped out at our regular sushi place with our drinks in hand, we were recapping the week when Shannon asked why I'd had to cancel Wednesday night.

Explaining the challenge game, it was clear from their expressions they thought that was crazy stupid. Brian definitely had some anger issues, and we all liked our weeknight happy hour, but they both spent the weekends doing some serious partying at home with the giant scotch bottle, and from what I'd seen working in the film industry, that meant unhappiness on some level. Without going anywhere near that steaming pile, I just said that doing it made me feel like I'd accomplished something that felt good, improved my attitude, and left me indifferent to all the high drama going on at work.

Brian nodded, saying ‘Yeah well, obviously it works for you, but there’s no fucking way I’m getting up in the dark to walk next to that smelly river.’

‘I know.’ I replied, ‘It’s a bitch getting out of bed that early!’

Shannon added ‘I could never go to bed that early, my favorite show is on at 10:30’

Not looking for any converts, I said ‘Hey I totally get it - it’s just something I thought I’d try’ and we moved on to our first course of Tekka Maki and Wakame salad with another round of drinks.

It was almost midnight when I went to bed that night and waking up almost exactly seven hours later on Saturday morning, I felt like doing the walk even though the sun was already up. Saturdays were a marathon of getting everything done so that I could chillax on Sundays and not have to bother with any real cooking or chores during the week.

The day started at nine, with a taxi to the Korean version of a Walmart where it took at least an hour to do my weekly shopping. Lugging the heavy bags out of the store, down the block and up a flight of stairs to a pedway crossing the busy street to get to the taxi stand was a haul.

Back at home, after stowing the stuff, I went on foot to the supermarket. This journey involved walking to the pine tree park and crossing the river using huge cement cubes placed a foot apart that served as a bridge. Reaching the other side, I walked another six blocks to the supermarket that sold the beer I liked. Stocking up for the week, I couldn't possibly walk back with all those one-liter bottles and would take another taxi home.

If my wine supply was low, it meant yet another, lengthier taxi ride to a department store that had a European wine cellar featuring wines from France and Italy. I always got dirty looks from the cashiers when ringing up my bottles of wine and wished I could ask them what their fucking problem was in Korean.

Finally finished with the shopping, I would put in a load of laundry and clean the apartment so that when the wash cycle ended, I could hang up the clean clothes to dry.

The last task was prepping my food for the week. Totally over the food served at lunch, I would sautee chicken breasts and slice up red peppers and cucumbers to put in lunch bags for each day of the week along with a small tub of plain yogurt. I would also make a veggie frittata and a pot of some kind of soup to heat and eat for weekday dinners.

Washing and prepping the ingredients, once the frittata was cooked and the soup was simmering, I would clean up the kitchen and correct homework.

By then it was usually around six, and I was ready to kick back and watch something American on TV that was dripping in Korean subtitles. Needless to say, my Saturdays were exhausting.

So waking up that morning and wanting to take the walk, I didn't hesitate knowing how much it had improved my workdays. The sun was already up, other morning walkers were out on the river path, and I had to blow off the pine tree park that was filled with families and screaming children, but just being out in the sunshine doing something that felt great was enough to make my day way better.

The chores all seemed to go faster than usual, and I even smiled at the attitudy cashier ringing up my large wine sale at the department store, so I decided to play the game for another week.

Wednesday sushi nights were an important mid-week social event that definitely helped get us through the week, but when I got home too late after the next one and missed my quality morning time the next day, I spent the day feeling like something was seriously missing. Given our radically different weekend agendas, Wednesday night was the only social time I got with Shannon and Brian apart from our brief morning hangouts with a smoke and a nasty cup of instant coffee before the school day started.

Unwilling to sacrifice sushi night on the altar of rigidity, I asked them what they thought about it during our morning hangout the following Monday. They both gave me their god-you're-such-an-idiot look, and said we'd just go earlier and leave sooner. Non-problem solved.

With the success of the first two week's challenge game, another week was added and then another. After a month of playing this new game, I easily woke up at five. My walk and pine tree silence left me energized and ready for whatever the day brought. What had begun as a chore became a habit in the space of a month! The best part was, I woke up looking forward to this quality morning time and missed it when it didn't happen, so staying motivated was easy. And that's how I unwittingly got into my morning meditation practice.