

On Being a Donkey

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Once upon a time, in a small town, perched on the Himalayan foothills, lived a young donkey named Atif. Atif had a simple and contented life: when he was tired he slept; when he was hot he waded into the stream; and when he was hungry he ate the sweet grass that grew in patches on the hillside. Atif spent most days carrying bricks, fruit and vegetables, and jugs of milk up and down Main Street with his family.

Life was happy for Atif until one day, he decided to wander past the familiar milk stands, and fruit and vegetable carts on Main Street and go onto Camel Back Road. Lined with sweets shops, restaurants, and hotels, Camel Back Road was new territory for Atif. And as he rounded the corner, what he saw amazed him: a small pony wearing a bright red saddle and a harness decorated with bells.

Atif stood in silence as he watched the pony trot around the ring carrying one child after the next. When children went away, Atif went up to the pony and said, "How did you get to wear that bright red saddle and those bells? How did you learn to trot? I would love to do that."

The pony shook its head and responded, "But how could you? Look at your shabby mane. And you are boxy and slow instead of lean and fast; you could never learn to trot. Who would ever want to ride you?"

So Atif walked back home, thinking about what the Pony had said. Was it true? He felt that if he grew a beautiful mane and learned to trot just like the pony than he would be truly happy. The next day, while carrying a load of milk bottles to the market, all he could think about was how to become a pony. As a result, he did not even stop for a mouthful of grass, and at the end of the day Atif ignored his friends when they asked him if he wanted to go wade in the stream.

Atif's parents looked on in bewilderment, as they had never seen this behavior from him before. When Atif returned to the stables, they asked, "What is wrong son? You look so upset?"

Atif responded, "I want to trot. I want to wear a red saddle and a harness with bells. I don't want to have a short mane and stubby legs. I just want to be a pony."

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I am going to stop here for a moment to ask you a question. You have probably heard it before. And some of you have even heard it while sitting on this ridge. What do you want to be when you grow up? Or more simply: What do you want to be?

In the third grade I wanted to be a fireman, so did every other boy in my class. And on the first day of school, we all made drawings of ourselves as future fireman. Our teacher hung our pictures up as a reminder of why we were in school.

Well, I am not a fireman, but I am me. And I am here today because I want to tell you that being yourself is the most important thing to be. Atif lost his happiness because he lost sight of who he was. He was not a pony; he was a strong, sturdy, and dependable donkey. But because of his desire to be somebody else, all of that was no longer good enough.

Eventually Atif started ignoring his family and friends. He tried desperately to play with the ponies, but he was never allowed into the ring. As a result, he just wandered around by himself, dreaming of another life. Until one day, Atif stumbled upon an old sage, meditating beneath a Banyan Tree.

As Atif approached, the sage looked up and asked him, "What is wrong?"

Atif replied, "I want nothing more than to trot, to wear a red saddle and bells, and to give children rides in the ring. I want to be a pony."

"You really think that will solve all of your problems?" asked the sage.

"Yes," said Atif. "There is nothing I want more."

So the sage transformed Atif into a pony, and Atif trotted away towards Camel Back Road. For the first time in his life, Atif carried the children around the ring. He thought he was the happiest that he had ever been.

At the end of the day, Atif went up to the other ponies and asked if they wanted to go eat the sweet grass and wade in the stream. The ponies fell down laughing, and the oldest one said, "We do not do eat wild grass. We do not wade in the stream. That is for donkeys."

Atif was confused, but he shrugged it off and just went home. As Atif neared his house, he became excited to show his parents who he had become. When they saw him though, Atif was shocked by their reaction.

His mother gave him a sad look and said, "I feel like I do not even know who you are. That is fine that you carried children around the ring, but do you really need to be somebody else to be happy?"

It took awhile for Atif to fall asleep that night because of all that had happened. When he finally did, Atif dreamt of being in the ring with the ponies. Around and around he went, his donkey friends and family watching him.

"Look at me," he neighed. "I am a pony."

And at this, his donkey friends and family disappeared. This sign of his future terrified him. In his sleep, Atif yelled out, "I don't want to be a pony."

And when he woke up, what did Atif want to be? He wanted to be himself. From then on he was, and that is the most important thing to be.

So ends the story of Atif the donkey.

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Goals are important, don't get me wrong. But to find goals that matter, they need to be goals that you achieve. And to find success in achieving your goals you must have confidence in who you are. You cannot do that by being somebody else. Only by being yourself can you be truly happy.

Well, I am going to tell you a little secret. The story that I just told you was not really about a donkey named Atif, it was about me. Just as Atif wanted to be a pony, there was a time in my life when I wanted to be someone else: a professional athlete, a famous actor, and sometimes just other kids in my school. I thought that my only way of being happy was to transform myself because I did not like who I was. I thought I was clumsy, I thought I was stupid, and I wished that I was just someone else.

When did this all start? Well, flash back to the last millennium when I was in the first grade. During silent reading all other kids read chapter books, and I was still stuck on Dick and Jane because I could barely read. Here is a sample:

"Fun With Dick and Jane"

Look, look, look. Oh, oh, oh. Look. See it go. Jane said, "Look. I see a big yellow car. I want to go away in it. I want to go away, away."

Dick said, "Look up, Sally. You can see something. It is red and yellow. It can go up, up, up. It can go away."

Sally said, "I want to go up. I want to go up in it. I want to go up, up, up. I want to go up and away.

Much like Sally, I desperately wanted to escape. So, for a while I gave up on reading and started drawing during that time. Once, I remember a girl ask if she could draw during silent reading too. The teacher said, "No." And when the girl complained that it was unfair because I could draw, the teacher responded, "He is different."

I hated being different. Some days I hated it so much that when I came home from school, I would bang my head against the wall, shouting, "I hate myself. I hate myself. I hate myself." And, a few times I even vomited, maybe hoping that I would get rid of the part of me that made me worse than everyone else. What did I want to be? Definitely not me.

By the third grade, I did learn how to read. My parents sent me to a school for kids with learning disabilities, and I was able to get the instruction that I needed. But was I happy— no. I had gotten into a cycle of thinking that I was not good enough, and no matter what I did, I just needed to be someone else.

In middle school and high school what I wanted was to be popular. I had dreams of being an absolute beast like Martin or being a hip musician like Ian. I wanted to be not just liked by people, but revered.

When I graduated high school, I decided that I would finally make that transformation by becoming someone else. Like the sage turning Atif into a pony, I turned myself into a meat stick football player. However, I did not need magic or a wise man to do it. I changed the way that I dressed, wearing a cutoff t-shirt, baggy jeans and a baseball hat. I acted dumber, and I used homophobic, racist, and sexist language. I even selected friends

based on who was popular, instead of actually who I enjoyed being around, and I did my best to copy everything that they did.

The worst thing that I copied was drinking massive amounts of alcohol. One night, I got so drunk that I started a fight with my roommate. He broke my nose, ran out of our room, and called the campus police. I was sent to the hospital. I was banned from my dorm, and the next day I was moved into temporary housing.

The following day was lonely. I had no one to talk to about my problems because all of my friendships were based on popularity. When I tried to engage one of the cool guys that I hung out with, he could not give me the support that I needed, but he did offer to beat up my roommate for me.

The next weekend, I went home for a break. When I pulled into the driveway, my parents came out to greet me, and my mother ran to the car and gave me a hug. As she pulled away, she looked at me with tears in her eyes and said, "I don't know who you are anymore."

While that was not comforting, that was what I needed to hear. For the rest of the weekend, I sat with my parents, and we talked. We talked about my first few months at school, about my grades, about my friends, and we talked about who I wanted to be. And it was then that I realized that.... I want to be me.

Here at Pasquaney, we have the opportunity to live in a community that celebrates the individual and being your best self. But you have got to buy in to who you are. Set goals here and achieve them. Excel at what you do, and do it as yourself because only that will make you happy.