

Leaning In for 2026

Comparison is the Thief of Joy.



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“Why don’t you try harder to speak up when you step into a room?”

That question came in winter 2009 when I was 20. For a split second, it was like my mind actually shattered, every thought, response, & defense crumbling around me, before they swooped like a vortex & came together again.

“It’s not that I’m worried about sounding stupid . . . or having a stupid question,” I said. “I always have this fear that I have nothing to contribute, that I don’t have anything meaningful to add to the conversation, so I wait around until I do.”

I’d never admitted that to anyone, hardly even myself—it was a thought that was pushed away quickly when it tried to insert itself—but it was true. I didn’t want to waste anyone’s time, so I would wait until I was confident that what I had to say carried meaning, that what I’d observed would amply push the conversation forward, & if I didn’t feel that way about it, well, then it wasn’t worth mentioning. The problem was, I could wait through an entire class period before I thought I had something to contribute. I could sit listening, taking notes, & earning high marks for months without ever saying a word.

Now, I’ve “proven” that I can wait in silence for years.

I've carried this fear around with me that I am a little soft—my writing too passive, too welcoming of asides & shifts in the conversation, not intelligent or thoughtful enough; my speech too inarticulate, rambling, stuttering; my mind a quiet, un-honed space that hardly warrants a second look. I've wondered if I'm too malleable, too open to others' ideas, adventures, & writing styles. If I'd only "posed" as a teacher & an academic & never had the chops (mentally, physically, or intellectually) to pull it off.

I just assumed that other people were better, smarter, stronger, tougher, **& most certainly, sharper**—with sharper tongues, sharper minds, & sharper, more refined, far less refutable arguments/ideas.

The groundbreaking part of receiving that question wasn't the question or my response; it was their reaction to my response. When their eyes lit up & eyebrows rose, I had to stop & ask myself if I was missing something—and if I were, what could it be?

For the rest of that year & throughout the rest of my undergraduate career, I pushed myself to share thoughts, ask questions, & move conversations in unexpected directions with my students, classmates, & fellow writers. What I found served me well, & I carried it with me into my MFA program, where I studied poetry, fiction, gender studies, & dramatics, **& without that push to speak up, I question whether I would have made it through, what I would have taken from the program, or if I would have applied at all.**

I graduated with my MFA in 2015, & for the next five years, I thrived, & I thrived **hard**.

I say that with so much gratitude—From 2015 to 2020, I served dozens of writers, poets, entrepreneurs, small businesses, & literary presses/publishers per year, writing articles, essays, email copy, & social

media content; writing, reviewing, & editing educational resources; publishing poetry, personal essays, film critiques, & *so many* well-received long-form book reviews; developmental & line-editing fiction, poetry, & nonfiction books; & helping writers edit, design, publish, & market their books.

I was a prolific, published poet; an avid & well-received book reviewer, & I loved the role I played as an editor-of-all-trades among writers, literary magazines, & small presses. I was at the top of my game. Not to mention all of the writing groups I was a part of, the readings & open mics I was invited to attend, the book clubs I participated in, & even the offers I had to join a major arts organization to either transform one of their art classes into a visual art/poetry workshop or launch a whole new creative writing class (I basically would have had free reign), & to teach poetry studies/writing to individuals at a local prison (yes, *seriously*).

But in 2020, when the pandemic hit, I, like so many people, wondered where the world & life would go from here, & me being me, I wondered what I could do to make it “better.” I questioned what in my life I could control to temper the uncontrollable.

Going through old photos (thanks, Google Photos/Memories), my husband & I joked about living closer to his Tetka (Aunt) & how much more fun the kids would have if they had her in their lives more regularly. (Yep, Tetka, if you ever translate & read this, it all started with a photo of you & Cadence, holding hands, looking back over your shoulders & smiling as you stepped into Samobor Castle at the top of Tepec Hill.) But then, as the joke went on, it didn’t feel like such a joke anymore; & as the pros & cons began to roll, *just for fun*, the pros significantly outweighed the cons.

The biggest con, honestly, was that I wasn’t convinced it was the right choice for me.

It took so much of my life for me to feel like I fit in *anywhere* & to have *any* semblance of confidence, I worried about how that would translate (no pun intended). I worried how it would impact my writing & my clients. I worried about how often I'd see my loved ones in the States. More than anything, I feared my ability to learn the language, navigate the bureaucracy, & simply be a functional adult in another language in another country so far into my life (I was 32 then, just months away from having our third baby).

I knew that my kids would be young enough to acclimate & that effectively, eventually, it would be the only life they knew, a constant. But for me, it would be new, it would be starting over, & I wasn't convinced I had the mental capacity to pull it off. I worried, selfishly, that my children would flourish & find their way, & that my husband, back on his home soil, would find his footing & way in the world, & the four of them would leave me in the dust, floundering, unable to make sense of myself, unable to contribute anything meaningful outside of the classrooms, writing groups, publishing offices, book clubs, & open mic nights I'd left behind.

& honestly? So far?

It's been exactly how I feared it would be.

Most of the time when I enter a room, I'm taken back to that twenty-year-old girl who entered a room, struggled to make eye contact, & smiled awkwardly at someone when she accidentally caught their eye. Who sat quietly—in a corner as often as possible, to avoid impeding traffic flow of the people who are *actually* interacting, who are *actually* meant to be there—& answered quickly, with a flutter of hands, eyes darting, speaking as fast as possible to get out of the way again, *shocked* that someone had something to say to her, specifically.

I'm surrounded by Croatian when I leave my home, & I do my best to listen to it, to identify the words & phrases I've learned, & to target the

concept of the conversation, at least, in the hopes of learning more of the language & to kind of follow along, bobbing my head & smiling encouragingly to those who glance my way so I don't just appear as a human-sized potato taking up space on someone's couch.

I'm otherwise flummoxed by it & deeply ashamed that it's such a pain point for me, & I don't want to waste people's time by trying to speak—I live in a country that does not prioritize English-speaking, & I do not expect anyone to do so, especially for me. I'd rather remain quiet, figure things out alone, & not waste anyone's time, or make them feel like I expect *them* to speak English for *me*, when *really*, it should be *me* learning Croatian for *them*.

It's the way of the world, I respect the *h-e-double-hockeysticks* out of it, & I only wish that my darn brain would wrap itself around the concept of language learning a little better so I could actually *put that respect into forking practice*. To refer back to an earlier point, I wish my mind were sharper.

It's infuriating. I'm impatient. & clearly, so mentally, intellectually, *soft*.

Recently, I've wanted to take my Substack and travel writing more seriously, so one night, I stayed up until 2 AM so I could attend a writing workshop led by copywriter & humorous memoirist Laura Belgray. Toward the end of the workshop, while she was accepting questions, a fellow writer asked her how she navigated conversations around *marketing* her book once she'd landed an agent, & her response stopped me in my tracks like that question 16 years ago (*I'm old*).

Belgray said, "Everyone wants another *Atomic Habits*, but I **need** *Atomic Habits* to **read** *Atomic Habits*; I can't get through it at all. So I knew it wasn't going to be that, & I had to honor that, fight for that, & wait for

people to come in who were willing to see it & fight for it in the same way.”

It had brought up memories for her of, while agent-hunting, how she’d had a conversation with someone who basically barraged her & her story, saying she was not as good of a writer as Author A, not as exciting or unique as Author B, not as funny as Author C, & certainly *never* going to be made into a movie like Author D. & you know what, she wasn’t going to be Author J (James Clear), author of *Atomic Habits*, either. But that did not make her memoir any less of a book; it did not make it any less good; it just hadn’t found its people yet. When it did, it flourished.

And this hit me hard, but not just as a writer. Since this past summer, I’ve been pushing myself to write more, to read more, to dive into the deeper & more personal stuff where I never tend to go (in a way, *hence this post*), & I’ve *definitely* had my doubts—I’ll never be able to “verb” an animal like Robert Hass or turn a phrase quite like Brigit Pegeen Kelly or Diane Seuss, write fiction like Stephen King or Celeste Ng, or be funny like Laura Belgray or Tiffany Jenkins or Jessica Pan.

But also? Internationally-speaking?

I’m not Kacie Rose—a popular social media influencer & former Broadway dancer who moved to Italy within the same timeframe that I moved to Croatia, who has since *learned the darn language*, started offering travel tours to those visiting Italy, wrote & published & book-toured *You Deserve Good Gelato*, married the love of her life, & is working on renovating their *gorgeous* estate. (Seriously, can I be Kacie when I re-grow up? I would *love* that, & my family deserves the best.)

I’m not Cheryl Strayed—a woman who went through a messy breakup & turned it into an incredible, harrowing, & funny backpacking adventure that later became *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. I don’t

have a messy breakup (thankfully), but I also don't have it in me (at least right now) to go soul-searching on a 1,100-mile solo trek.

I'm not Ocean Ramsey—the woman, the myth, the legend, the shark whisperer; diving & doing all of the things that my *Lit Shark* heart aspires to, not shying away from a single species of shark, writing books, & creating Netflix documentaries about these misunderstood beauties. I also want to be Ocean Ramsey when I re-grow up; *Lit Shark* deserves that.

I'm not Taryn Delanie or the *Unlikely Countrywoman*—Taryn is a force, a delight, a part-time chaos goblin (her words), a brilliant advocate, & now the owner of an incredible, sprawling historic manor in upstate New York, with views that make my tree-loving, field-loving, chicken-loving, bird-loving, sea-view-loving heart happy. I don't have the grace, humor, or New York life to be her, but I imagine how much fun it would be to have my own *Unlikely Countrywoman* moment, home-renovation-by-the-sea-style someday.

I say all of that, not to knock myself down (I do plenty of that already) but to remind myself that each of us must follow our own path, & some journeys will be much lovelier, sparkling, successful, & fast/slow-paced than others.

Some expat stories will be much happier & more fulfilling than others. More immersive. More successful. Quirkier, weirder, more ambitious & random, fast-paced.

Heck, some expat Substacks will be much better than others—with better writing, more interesting stories, & more helpful, resourceful, insider tips than others.

If I take a moment to think back to that retrospective question I had about my MFA program—whether I would have made it through, what I would have taken from the program, or if I would have applied at all—if it hadn't been for me putting in the work & putting myself out there when I wasn't sure I had something to contribute . . .

Clearly, I've "applied"—I got on the plane & moved to Croatia. Check box: checked.

But this past November, that flight landed five years ago. What do I have to show for it? What am I taking from this move (the program)? From this life?

Most importantly: Will I make it through?

I mean, I have to. I am SO pleased, so happy, so joyous, so grateful, so in love with the fact that I was right about my family settling in & thriving here. Picking up the language *immediately*, making friends, finding things they want to do, doing well in school & extracurriculars & work, & just creating a life for themselves in another country. I couldn't be happier with how they're doing; I'm so proud of them.

I just wish they could be proud of me.

I can accept the fact that I'll never be *exactly* like Kacie or Cheryl or Ocean or Taryn. They have their journeys, & I have mine. I'm sure there are just as many things about their lives that I wouldn't want as the shining, ambitious things they've shared online & in their books; & I'm certain they would say the same about me.

But I *do* believe that my kids, my husband, & *even I* deserve more from the mother, wife, intellectual, & woman that I proved I could be—never mind that it was in another country.

I think for now, I need to own those things I loved about myself—those things that made me feel proud, & made me feel like me—in a quieter

way & make room for what must be done to let me step into the room. I can't ever step into the room & make noise if I can't speak the language. I can't ever volunteer or advocate if I don't deeply know the history & how to navigate the bureaucracy (without my husband in tow). I have to re-learn those things that make me a functional adult, & once I have, at least enough to get by, maybe there will be space for the poetry, the writing, & the art parts of me, too. The teacher & the book lover. The banned books advocate. The crazy cat lady, who's turning into a crazy plant lady.

I always come back to this, but words are at the foundation of it all. Thought, opinion, communication, education, art, expression—it's images, words, & history. The puzzle pieces that'll let me listen, let me learn, eventually let me speak, & then, let me express.

So: why haven't I tried harder to speak up when I enter a room in Croatia?

I'm not afraid "to sound stupid," mispronounce or wrongly conjugate a word, or "sound like a child." I'm afraid of being misunderstood, of accidentally saying something offensive, or of saying something incredibly menial, a sign that I haven't done enough research or thought things through well enough.

But if I ever want to be anything like the person I was in 2015-2020, I **have to lean in.**

It's hard to say how I feel about Croatia, because I've hardly lived outside of four walls the entire time. But I have to believe there are libraries, classrooms, art museums, writing groups, book clubs, animal rescues, & volunteer centers who would welcome me, if I could just get myself to a place where they can understand what I'm saying. What I love & believe in. What I can contribute.

I'll never totally be McKenzie Lynn Tozan the Midwestern writer again; I know that. I'll likely never have such a grip on the Croatian language

that I could compete with what I could do in English from 2015 to 2020. People here will likely never know how studious, careful, smart, & sometimes funny & quirky I was. But maybe coming close to her, shadows overlapping, still having some of the same interests while exploring new ones, new spaces, new books & stories—maybe that will be enough. Maybe that'll be something to be proud of. A different language in softness.



Cattails on the Coast

So, why did I write this? What does this mean for *Mediterranean & Me*?

To be honest, I thought about taking *Mediterranean & Me* down & starting over with something else in 2026. It all goes back to that “I

have little to nothing to contribute” mentality. I feel like I have nothing to write about, so then I don’t write; I don’t post; I let this Substack wallow & then wonder if it’s pointless.

But when I really push myself to think about it, I don’t think it’s pointless at all. In fact, it might even be important, especially with the number of people moving from one country to another with current political developments. It’s important for people to remember that not every journey will be as well-known as Cheryl Strayed’s, & not every move will be as immediately successful as Kacie Rose’s, as lovely as Taryn Delanie’s, or as impactful as Ocean Ramsey’s.

My journey has been quiet, slow, & largely alone, in my mind. Occasionally, it’s loud, exciting, & unpredictable. Nerve-wracking. Unsteady on my feet. Inspiring when I step into the sea. & maybe that’s okay. Maybe it’s okay for someone to need time to settle, to find themselves again, to find peace.

I want 2026 to be a combination of really leaning in, both mentally & socially. I want to lean into the quiet parts & find rest, find peace in the solitude. Find my footing that keeps feeling like it’s slipping. & I want to lean into other possibilities—of connection, of friendship, of photo-worthy moments.

A journey can take as long as you need it to—as long as you’re always going somewhere. I think I’ve been quiet & standing still for long enough. It’s time to take a few paces & jump off the dock.

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