

How Woodstock Ruined Me

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In 2007-08 I attended Woodstock for my senior year of high school. My mother, Deirdre Straughan '81, had been campaigning for me to leave Italy and attend school at Woodstock my entire life.

After graduating I moved to Texas, Australia and NYC, and only returned to Italy to visit. Because my year at Woodstock School represented the end of my life as I knew it, I ended up shutting it out for a long time. I kept in touch with classmates, but I've only now started to seriously think back on the experience and all that it meant.

I made the decision to apply to Woodstock after having truly reached my limit with the Italian school system. Throughout my youth, I found school to be as painful as birthing several breech babies at once. From bad grades to vicious arguments with teachers who seemed to really dislike me, for a long time I felt as if I was destined to fail at everything forever.

During high school I was an avid photographer, to the point where I wouldn't leave the house without my SLR. I had a group of artsy friends with whom I'd arrange photoshoots on weekends; we'd scout out cool locations such as an abandoned 1960s amusement park or a green open field for a picnic-themed shoot. I was befriended by several event planners in the area, and I ended up shooting their fashion shows and parties in exchange for rides to and from the venues and free drinks. Before I even knew what networking and creating a portfolio meant, I had successfully built a reputation for myself around town as someone with a useful skill who was easy to work with. But none of this seemed relevant to the people whose opinion mattered the most, i.e., those who were grading me. Yes, I volunteered to take

every single class photo one year. Yes, I talked my homeroom nun into letting us watch *Born Into Brothels* in English with subtitles during class. Yes, I coordinated a field trip to the local hospital's coma ward with the doctor who came to our school to raise awareness about organ donation. But did any of this initiative-taking and enthusiasm earn me any brownie points? No.

I was on the verge of flunking out of school for the second time in a row, when I decided I was willing to risk losing it all for the sake of getting out. I applied to Woodstock, was accepted (surely being an alumni kid helped), purged my Italian Club Girl outfits by giving them away to friends (an inconceivable gesture that represented the end of one life and the beginning of a new one), packed my SLR, and off I went.

The first thing I learned was how quickly strangers will bond over a shared physically and emotionally stressful situation. After I met up with the rest of the exchange students in London we flew together to New Delhi and spent a couple of days there in profound culture shock, then made the long trek to the foothills of the Himalayas. You really cannot remain strangers for long when, as a group, you are experiencing severe jet lag and "Delhi Belly" followed by altitude sickness and everything else that first hits you when you get to India.

We made it to the school and realized the adventure had barely begun. We came to terms with the fact that "we white folk" were by far the minority in this community, something I found incredibly fascinating and understated. I had never even heard of countries like Bhutan, and I was soon to be exposed to Tibetans, Nepalis, Koreans, Japanese and many varieties of Indians.

Ironically enough I was the only Italian, and I quickly eased into my usual role as the perpetual outsider: not quite American enough for the exchange students, definitely not at all Asian, but somehow a little in between all worlds. The only difference this time was that it did not seem to matter. Once again we were all bonding over the same unique experience, despite our different backgrounds.

I think the fact that I finally got the chance to let go of who I thought I was supposed to

be culturally enabled me to truly embrace who I am. I was immediately encouraged to be myself and explore the things I was interested in. Obviously there was a curriculum and standardized testing, but all of a sudden I was being invited left and right to explore other stuff just for the sake of it.

For the first time in my academic career, I enrolled in drama, art, politics and government classes, as well as classes that involved reading books and then discussing what I thought about them (rather than being told what I should think about them).

I took the ball and ran with it, ecstatic about the fact that I had found a place where I could join an a capella group if I wanted to. Why not? Never picked up a guitar before? No better time than the present. Oh, you like to paint? Well there's a blank wall in the Indian Music Classroom that has your name on it.

All of this freedom resulted in my self esteem skyrocketing, to the point where I began to believe that I was truly capable of achieving anything. I remember one time, towards the end of the school year, it was my friend Elisa's birthday and I decided to stand up on stage in front of the entire school and sing "With A Little Help From My Friends" to her. I sang the first two verses solo, without any form of musical accompaniment, before some friends joined in. I do not think back to this because I believe my performance was particularly spectacular, but because I haven't had the courage to do something like that before or since. This incident perfectly illustrates the level of confidence I had towards the end of my year there, and boy, was the real world a rude awakening.

Woodstock ruined me because, in real life, many people do not want you to get up on stage and sing for them. For reasons that I have yet to understand, the ability to take on any challenge or task (or at least the confidence to give it a try) is often frowned upon. I left Woodstock a full grown tiger only to find that employers expect me to be a hesitant cub, to slow down, act more modest, and to take all of those qualities that make me a supposedly sought-after independent self starter down a notch.

As it turns out, talking about how you grew up in another country and went to school in India

sounds more threatening than cool to most people, and the enthusiasm with which you were taught to voice your ideas at Woodstock, tends to come off as overbearing and bragging.

Woodstock ruined me because it taught me not to sweat the small stuff. After living in a third world country and growing accustomed to cold showers in the winter, why would I ever want to complain about the line at Starbucks or keep up with the Kardashians? I've now learned this makes me incredibly pretentious.

Woodstock ruined me because it gave me the gift of a worldwide network of people to stay with when I travel, which makes me that girl who says "I was staying with a friend in Helsinki" at parties, and everyone

hates that girl.

Woodstock ruined me because it taught me how to chase off a pack of rabid monkeys, and how to get my nose pierced in a bazaar back alley for two bucks. I have yet to find a way to put these skills to good use here in America.

Woodstock ruined me because it condemned me to only fitting in with a much smaller and harder to find community of people: the people who get it.

And last but not least, Woodstock ruined me because it instilled in me a ridiculous sense of ambition that is becoming harder and harder to keep up with. With a portfolio of alumni ranging from multimillionaires to

high-ranking government officials, I'm terrified at the prospect of being the only one at the high school reunion who isn't saving the world.

I've once again come to a crossroads. I think the first thing I have to do is wallow in my comfort zone for a little while in order to get my confidence back up. So I booked a ticket to Japan (I have a friend from Woodstock there who will show me around), and I started a blog so I have a place to spread my pretentious wings and write my overly ambitious heart out.

I may also take advantage of the fact that I have the apartment to myself during the day and belt Joe Cocker songs in solitude. Maybe that will cheer me up, we'll see.