

## ESSAYS

# 5 Lessons My 20s Taught Me

*Reflections from surviving one of life's most turbulent decades*

*-By Dominic Anthony*



Your twenties ain't no bitch. As crass and as lewd as that sounds, the decade is... trifling—to say the least. As someone who recently survived it, I'd like to share with you what I clawed out of the wreckage—the beautiful, fun, often hostile, wreckage. Let's begin.

### 1. **You won't take the advice.**

It won't be because you don't want to. In fact, you are desperately trying to figure out a way to be better, get over the situationship, or make more money. But as my mother says, *some lessons just have to be bought*. This didn't click for me until I was having brunch with a friend in her forties. I was staring down at the classic Atlanta cuisine—chicken and waffles—lamenting to her how I felt I should be over the breakup by now.

“Girl, I’ve done everything—exercising, dating, traveling—but the hurt... it still punches me in the chest during a work meeting. I have listened to everyone’s advice and done all the self-care Ulta has to offer. I just don’t know what to do!”

She took my hand, and I thought, “shit, this is about to be one of those *let me hold your hand while I say this* moment”. I figured she was going to tell me I was defective and needed to *grow up* and *move on*. But instead, she looks at me, and in the most gentle voice goes, “Your brain has never been here before. You can get all the advice in the world, but your body just does not know what to do. You have to experience this. You have to live this”.

Instantly, my mind went to a thousand other times where I desperately wanted to take the advice, stick to the plan, and move on. However, my body and brain simply could not. I had to experience whatever the trial was firsthand. I had to make the mistake so that my body and mind could draw on this experience later. And it was in that moment that I realized that there are some situations where experience really is the only thing that matters. My mother was right—surprise, surprise.

## **2. There are no right or wrong choices.**

We paralyze ourselves out of fear that we will make the “wrong” choice. Then we spend years terrified and stuck in the job, relationship, or apartment. The moralizing of each choice is like a cement block weighing us down as we try to swim. Inevitably, we end up sinking—watching the surface get farther and farther away. I have come to realize that there are very—and I mean very—few choices that are worthy of this kind of moral quandary. Most choices are simply that: choices. They do have consequences, and those are what you have to contend with. All of that anxious energy should go into making sure you have the tools to deal with those repercussions, not the choice itself. Make the choice. You will survive what comes next. If you’re not careful, you will look up at twenty-nine still in that relationship that makes you anxious, the job that makes you depressed, and the city that feels suffocating. If the outcome of that choice is hard, you have the privilege of making another choice, and on and on in perpetuity as long as you’re alive. And that is a beautiful thing.

## **3. You are always telling yourself a story, so make it a good one.**

I know—the affirmations feel corny, and the self-deprecations feel rooted in data and realism. But what if I told you that self-loathing is just as delusional as an inflated ego? We live in a world of spectrums, not binaries. You can neither be perfect nor worthless. That feeling will alternate depending on what your internal world is using as data to write its narrative. So feed it good things. Take a break from Instagram and that fitness page you follow to “motivate” yourself; when in reality you’re trying to shame your body and appetite

into submission. Unsubscribe from that couple's YouTube channel that makes you feel like yours is boring and devoid of passion. And for God's sake, change your music streaming platform so you can rewrite your algorithm and stop letting it feed you the saddest songs known to man.

Speak the affirmation out loud, listen to the motivational morning speakers, and claim positive things over your life, especially when you don't feel it to be true. Which brings me to my next lesson.

#### 4. **The feeling follows the action, always.**

You will spend days in bed crying over *that boy*. There will be times when *she* has you so anxious that you can not eat. *They* will ghost you, and it will make you question everything. The job will lay you off, and the friends will leave. There will be death. Sometimes these will compound, and all you will want to do is draw the blinds, cuddle up with that emotional support dog—who now has separation anxiety and is on the same antidepressant medications as you—and feel like shit.

These times are important. You must feel them in all their dark, raggedy fullness. And then there must come a time when you have to feel something different—something better. We are often taught that *time heals all wounds*, and like most clichés, that is a bunch of bullshit. Your brain can only make new pathways when presented with different experiences. You have to go outside and touch grass. You have to go to the bar and risk crying into some too-sweet cocktail with your friends. You have to go to the stand-up open mic. Your brain likes safety, regardless of how uncomfortable it is. If your brain knows what sadness feels like, it will remain there because it understands what that is and *how* it feels. It will continue to stay in the loop unless you give it an out. You can not wait to feel better. You have to do better, and the feeling will follow.

Of course, there are caveats, and mental health is nuanced and deeply personal. So, make that therapy appointment and talk to your doctors, because these are actions too. Whenever you're ready to feel different, you have to do *different*.

#### 5. **“You are your best thing”. - Toni Morrison, Beloved**

There will be no bigger regret than the times you did not choose yourself. Those tiny moments where you feel self-betrayal gnawing at the bottom of your sternum will fester into resentment and self-loathing. We are conditioned to believe we need completing. That you are, by default, empty and need to be filled with things and people. But the truth is, you are already complete. Each person, experience, and place allows you to meet yourself more deeply. You are the universe—literal stardust—come alive to be able to experience itself through your senses.

So often, we lose that plot and choose the development and experiences of others over our own. Yes, there is nuance. Being in community and operating from love requires sacrifice. But only you know where that line is. See where things feel in your body. Remember the time you betrayed yourself—did you feel it in your chest, arms, or legs? Does this create that tingle in the exact same spot? Or does this feel different—in uncomfortable but fulfilling ways? Meet yourself with as much, if not more, curiosity as you meet those you date. Because you are your greatest tool. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. *You are your best thing.*

As I stand on the precipice of a new decade, I look back, and perhaps the greatest lesson I have learned is this: I don't know anything. I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing—so take those five lessons with a grain of salt. Life is extraordinarily individual, and my lessons might not be the ones you need to buy. But if they are, I hope that you allow them to hold you tight as I plan to for the next decade— and God willing, beyond.

-Dominic Anthony

Dominic Anthony (He/They) is a Black, queer poet with roots in Missouri and Arkansas. They learned the power of words through their grandmother who said, “you have to be able to name a demon to cast them out”. Here, in the Black southern tradition of prayer and conjure, their poetry is rooted.

You can read their work in publications such as MayDay Magazine, Bible Belt Queers, Flava: Juneteenth Zine, and Beyond Queer Words: Queer Anthology. He is the Editor in Charge of AfroPoetist