

“Speed. I am...speed.” Lightning McQueen’s iconic opening line in the movie *Cars* is a perfect representation of my obsession with velocity, the invincible connection that’s controlled how I’ve lived my life. Even as a child, these affirming words muttered by an animated Disney character inspired my young mind and convinced me that first place was the only place. Lightning McQueen’s picture still sits above my bedframe, reminding me every time I get out of bed to keep moving and keep moving fast.

Just like he won races, I had to win every hundred-yard dash during my elementary Field Day competitions. As I mastered AP Calculus, I rushed to complete the homework while the teacher still taught the lesson. I had to learn the quickest, work the quickest, run the quickest...I mean, life revolved around speed. My room is even decorated with posters of Mustangs, Corvettes, and other muscle cars that represent the pinnacle of engineering, cars that hold speed, cars that break records. Sitting in front of the TV for hours watching stock car competitions helped construct this mindset that to be the best, you had to be the fastest.

Every event from childhood built this vivifying fascination towards speed. I’d attend NASCAR races where these magnificent cars competed for the lead at 200 miles per hour, or airshows where fighter jets would tease breaking the sound barrier close to Mach 1. Witnessing these extraordinary vehicles scream by at dangerous speeds was nothing less than elating, so I couldn’t help but question the engineering behind it. “How is that possible?” became the prominent curiosity in these moments. How is it possible that an aircraft can travel faster than a force of nature, or that one engine can produce and distribute enough power to push a car past limits once seen ridiculously unachievable? Pursuing this answer brought me to discover mechanical engineering, a field dedicated to employing the principles and factors of speed to create speed itself. Now I spend my free time building model engines and working on real ones, in the hopes of preparing myself to one day be part of a team that creates the very beasts of vehicles that enthralled me as a child.

It is my belief that the duality of speed mirrors that of life. At incredible speeds, one recognizes the encapsulating thrill associated with travelling fast, as your gut crawls beneath your feet to hide from the uncertainty of what this speed may result in. This very same exhilarating feeling, however, slyly distracts the mind from the chaotic possibilities and risks that can ensue such unstable control. Thus, speed, while electrifying, is dangerous. It is this danger that I seem to have erroneously underestimated, evident now that my high school years come to an end. Wanting to race through

elementary and middle school as fast as possible is a ubiquitous mindset in children everywhere, and I was no exception. Eager to finally terminate the endless routine of waking up for school, I can remember sitting in bed wishing years of my life away, all so I could wake up as a college student, an adult. As that time draws nearer, I realize I am terrified at the thought of leaving my childhood behind. Though my obsession with speed inspired my desire to be the fastest at everything, I recognize now that I've blindly gone too fast through life itself. I was quick enough to have discovered this at a younger age than most, so I've tried to relax myself and experience life slower. Enjoying your years is far more important than speeding through them, because living life only to reach the next objective neglects the ability to actually experience these moments we won't get back.

Lightning McQueen didn't win his big race, by the way. He came in *second* place in order to provide help to a fellow racecar who needed it. Disney and Pixar valued that connection more than a heart-pounding race-to-the-finish victory. So though I still pride myself on my speed and my fascination with creating it, I've learned that maybe pacing yourself is actually the fastest way to enjoy the ride.