

How SpongeBob Changed My Life

By Jaymes Outlaw | Edited by Youba Bathily

THE BIKINI BOTTOM EFFECT

I came for the jokes. I stayed because a sponge, a starfish and an exhausted cashier were making a suspicious amount of sense.

CULTURE · PERSONAL ESSAY

Bro is a sponge. Why is he making sense?

Saying SpongeBob changed my life sounds like the beginning of a joke. Honestly, fair. The man lives in a pineapple, wears a tie to cook burgers and has a laugh that could get a noise complaint underwater. This is not the person you expect to teach you anything except how to annoy your neighbor with incredible consistency.

But the older I get, the less the show feels like random nonsense. The nonsense is absolutely still there. It has not clocked out. Underneath it, though, are feelings that are pretty familiar: trying too hard, embarrassing yourself, wanting somebody to like you, feeling left behind, and needing your friends even when they are being a lot.

That is what I mean by changed my life. A cartoon did not secretly raise me or solve every problem. It gave me a way to recognize things without turning every feeling into a whole dramatic presentation. Sometimes the explanation is just: I get it now. Unfortunately, I understand Squidward.



Taking the assignment seriously. Possibly more seriously than the assignment requires. Official Season 1 episode artwork. © Nickelodeon / Paramount.

LESSON ONE

Caring is not actually embarrassing.

SpongeBob cares about his job like the Krusty Krab is paying him in ownership shares. He is excited to show up. He wants to do well. He takes a burger seriously. Meanwhile, acting like you do not care has somehow become an entire personality option.

I understand the appeal. If you pretend something never mattered, failing at it feels less public. You can say you were barely trying. Very convenient. Also a pretty good way to spend your time doing things halfway and then wondering why nothing feels satisfying.

Watching SpongeBob makes me think there is something brave about enthusiasm. He does not wait for everyone to agree that his interests are cool. He just has them. I do not need his energy at seven in the morning. Nobody needs a full SpongeBob before breakfast. But I do want the part where liking something does not require an apology.

There is a limit, obviously. Caring about your work does not mean your boss owns your entire personality. Mr. Krabs is not the blueprint. The useful lesson is to take pride in what you make, without measuring your whole worth by how much you can produce.



SpongeBob at his desk in official artwork for "Procrastination / I'm With Stupid." The essay is open. That counts as a start. © Nickelodeon / Paramount.

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LESSON TWO

Understanding Squidward was a personal development.

At first, Squidward is the guy ruining everybody's fun. Then you start paying attention. He wants quiet. He wants his interests to matter. He would prefer to complete one ordinary task without the neighborhood becoming a situation. Suddenly his facial expression starts looking less like a joke and more like a valid response.

That does not make every rude thing he does okay. Being tired is an explanation, not a permission slip. Still, the show leaves room for a person to be difficult and worth understanding at the same time. You can recognize someone's frustration without endorsing the way they take it out on everybody else.

I like that SpongeBob and Squidward do not have to represent two completely separate kinds of people. Some days you are excited about everything. Other days one more unnecessary sound feels personal. You can have both days and still be yourself. Growing up should not mean deleting all your SpongeBob just because your Squidward finally showed up.



Squidward enjoying a quiet moment in official Season 1 artwork. A reasonable request, historically difficult to maintain. © Nickelodeon / Paramount.

LESSON THREE

A real friend does more than stand in the background.

The friendship in this show is not polished. People get jealous. They misunderstand each other. Patrick can turn a simple conversation into a technical problem. Nobody in Bikini Bottom is giving a flawless seminar on communication, which is part of why it feels recognizable.

"Pizza Delivery" is a good example of why the relationships work. SpongeBob and Squidward are a terrible travel combination and a surprisingly good story combination. The comedy comes from how differently they approach the same mess. The part that sticks with me is the possibility of care underneath all that irritation.

You do not need a friend who agrees with every decision you make. Sometimes you need someone who notices when you are taking something too hard, or when somebody is treating you badly. Someone can roast you and still be on your side. Those are compatible services. The difference is whether the joke leaves you feeling included or smaller.

That is also why the show's awkward moments matter. Being close to people does not remove the need to apologize, listen or respect a boundary. Friendship is not a lifetime subscription to acting however you want.



SpongeBob and Squidward on the road in "Pizza Delivery." Two coworkers, one delivery, several preventable complications. © Nickelodeon / Paramount.

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LESSON FOUR

Being bad at something is not your final form.

SpongeBob can be incredibly good at one thing and struggle with another. That is a surprisingly useful idea when it feels like one bad result has become your entire identity. You miss a question and your brain starts writing a documentary called *The Downfall*. Bro. It was one question.

The show exaggerates failure until it is ridiculous, but the feeling underneath it is not ridiculous at all. Wanting to get something right, getting nervous, comparing yourself to somebody else, and trying again are ordinary parts of being a person. A result can tell you that your approach needs work. It cannot tell you everything about who you are.

The part I take seriously is that trying again should include learning something. Repeating the exact same mistake with increased confidence is not character development. Ask for help. Practice differently. Take a break when you need one. You are allowed to be a beginner without turning it into a permanent announcement about your intelligence.



SpongeBob and Patrick in official "Big Pink Loser / Bubble Buddy" artwork. Learning with a friend can be a very hands-on process. © Nickelodeon / Paramount.

THE PART THAT STAYS

You can grow up without becoming allergic to joy.

One reason I think people keep connecting with SpongeBob is that the same show can mean different things at different times. You can enjoy a ridiculous face one day and recognize an uncomfortable feeling in the exact same character later. That does not require pretending every joke was a secret life lesson. Some of it is just funny. That is allowed to matter too.

Comfort does not always have to look impressive. A familiar cartoon can be a small place to land after a difficult day. It does not fix what happened, but it can interrupt the idea that the whole day has to stay bad. There is value in something that lets you breathe and laugh without asking you to explain yourself first.

So yes, SpongeBob changed how I look at things. Care about what you do. Let people be complicated. Be a decent friend. Do not turn one failure into your whole biography. Keep something in your life that you like simply because you like it.

I am not moving into a pineapple. The housing situation is already confusing enough. But I am keeping the lesson: you can take life seriously without acting like enjoying it is embarrassing. A yellow rectangle got that part right.



Patrick guards his box in official artwork for "The Secret Box / Band Geeks." Some mysteries are apparently above our clearance level. © Nickelodeon / Paramount.