More lists~ But smaller and more condensed, because you’re right, we are whittling down to the core of everything now, and hammering things down to what’s most important, the basis of where everything is.

1. *“…but do you know that this past week was probably the first, maybe second time in our entire friendship that we’ve gone a day without speaking? It’s not that we have different mindsets all the time, Mandy, a lot of the time we are very very similar. But the difference here, for me, is that you were someone I wasn’t prepared to go to speaking to only every few days, or just in the evening. It doesn’t mean that I think we are less close, or that you can’t have your space but just that being able to talk to you that much was something very special to me, something I cherished more than just talking you know. It’s not something I have with anyone else or something I want to do with anyone else, it was something just between us and I thought it went both ways, I didn’t think it was something I would lose.”*Here’s the thing with this, though; there’s an implication here that you’ve lost something; and maybe that’s true, maybe there is one aspect of this friendship that is changing, but what’s *not* changing is the core of our friendship, what makes it the most meaningful. It circles around back to the same point that I’ve talked about: I can’t be the same person that I was, that I’ve been for the past several years.   
     
   What makes our friendship special, what makes it important to me, isn’t the constantly talking part, it’s what we talk *about*, it’s how we are with each other, that’s what’s special to me, what I cherish and love and devote myself to, because what I share with you *isn’t* what I share with other people. It’s the quality, not the quantity to me. How I talk to you and what I say to you *isn’t* like what I say to other people, it’s specific to you, and you alone. Even when we take little breaks in talking, I still only ever have talked to you about certain things, or done certain things, or whatever the case may be. My friendship with you is entirely its own because of several reasons – our anime nights, for me, that’s something only shared between the two of us, I don’t do that with other people. The weenie / goober thing, as silly as it is, that’s another thing just between us. There are about a dozen and one other things that are specific *only* to our friendship, and for me personally, that’s what makes it special, not just the concept of talking consistently. And I know that it’s something important to you, I’m not at all trying to dismiss or discount your feelings in any way, I swear. I in no way am trying to imply that it’s easy for either of us, or that it’s unimportant to me, because it isn’t, it’s hard, I know it’s hard for you because it’s hard for me too, it’s not easy on either of us. Shifting one way was easy, shifting back is not.
2. *“…almost every time space or distance was involved, it ended up in a break off, in me getting left behind for someone else. And so it’s something I worry about, no matter how hard I try not to, that in that space, someone will replace me, that someone new will come along and they will be the one that you can talk to again.”*First of all, I don’t “replace” people. I’ve never liked that phrase, but I think as well I’ve said sometime before that I don’t put people on levels. You are you. You are Sam Knowles, my best friend and artist extraordinaire. There is no one else like you, Sam, and I wouldn’t want there to be. You can’t be replaced, because there is no other Sam Knowles that is also my best friend that is also artist extraordinaire that is also exactly like you, and even if there was, there is *still* no replacing you, ever. There is no replacing what is irreplaceable.   
     
   We are both going to have other friends, but it doesn’t lessen how special our best friendship is. We are both going to have people that we are close with and that we love and cherish, along with each other, because that’s just the way that life is, and I want us to be able to talk about those other friends with each other. And that will never change what you and I have with each other. But what I’m saying also, is that right now, when I am trying desperately to learn how to be myself again, to learn how to live without my beautiful, beloved, agonizingly missed mother, I don’t want you to feel alone, or feel like I’ve abandoned you. I want you to be patient with me, but I also don’t want you to suspend your own life for me and forget that you are also so, so important, and you are also needing to be taken care of. I want you to keep doing what is best for *you* while I’m doing what’s best for *me.* I want you to find yourself again while I’m finding myself
3. *“…but the time away while we were arguing and things were uncertain, I realized that I had lost some of myself too, in the past years and years of friendships where I defined myself by those friendships, where I made them out to be the most important thing to me.  
     
   And I guess that is still what scares me, because it still is one of the most important things to me. Your friendship is so so important to me, and I don’t want to change that, I don’t want to lose that. I don’t want to think of a future where you might be there, or you might not, or you might be there on weekends, you know? And I don’t know how to change that, but I also want to be able to give you your space, to find some solution, to make it work, so I guess, this is me asking for your help in this situation, if you can give it, when you can manage it, because this is so incredibly hard for me.”*I won’t be much help here, I’m afraid, because I *don’t* know what the future is going to be. And again, please don’t think this is me saying that I am breaking off the friendship, or that it’s not super important to me, because it is, because it’s *so* important to me, and *because* it’s important to me is why I am trying to make things right again. I’m still here, and I’m still fighting.   
     
   I can’t make promises right now, Sam. I want to so badly, but I can’t, except for the fact that I am doing my absolute best to do what I can to work through this, to make things right, to put us where we’re supposed to be. That hasn’t changed, and neither has the fact that I find what we have to be special and something to be cherished. And there is the fact that, in the entire time I’ve known you, I haven’t had a regular 9-5 job where I get yelled at if I use my phone during work, like I used to, neither one of us has. I spent 99% of my time at home since I graduated from college, taking care of Mom, so I *had* that time and energy to do what I wanted with, and I chose to put it into our friendship, because that was what was and is important to me.  
     
   But my life is a complete mess right now. I *have* to figure out myself first before I can take care of others. If we look at a timeline:  
   * 1. *2005 – Mom gets cancer for the first time. I’m 15years old.*
     2. *2007 – Mom gets cancer the second time, this time Stage IV, the final stage. I’m 17 years old and graduating from high school.*
     3. *2012 - I graduate college. By this time, Mom has had hundreds of chemotherapy sessions that make her lose her hair, her lunch, and her sanity. She’s also had about four or five surgeries, including skull surgery, and two seizures.*
     4. *2013 – We learn the cancer has metastasized to her bones. Matthew and Anne move back home.*
     5. *Early 2014 – We learn the cancer has metastasized to her brain.*
     6. *Sept. 2014 – Mom begins to have trouble breathing. She works through it.*
     7. *October 2014 – Mom has more lung trouble. I still have no job.*
     8. *November 2014 – Mom’s breathing issues acclimate. She has headaches. Rarely gets out of bed, spends most of her time lying down.*
     9. *December 2014 – Mom goes on oxygen and hates every second of it. She spends about a week in the hospital, comes home Christmas Eve, and goes back the day after Christmas. She didn’t even remember celebrating Christmas with us because she was so out of it, but she remembered the rings I got for us, and wore hers around her neck. She can’t climb stairs, so we put the bed in the living room and I sleep down there with her. I am woken up every single hour, every single night, to help her to the bathroom with her walker, for almost two weeks.*
     10. *January 2015 – Mom spends two more weeks in the hospital, and then a third, at a different hospital.*
     11. *Early February 2015 – Mom is sent home finally from the hospital with hospice. We know it’s the end, that this is it. That after ten years of fighting, everything is beginning to fall apart.*
     12. *Mid February 2015 – Gabriel stays at Aunt Traci’s. Anne, Matthew, and I spend every hour of every day taking care of Mom. We help her in and out of bed, every hour. We begin to help her in and out of bed several times an hour, and she is too heavy and too completely out of it to even stand straight. Matthew takes off two weeks of work because Anne and I can’t lift Mom on our own. We get almost no sleep at all for two weeks, and we are frustrated, exhausted, in pain, and Mom is no longer lucid enough to recognize us, to speak, to do anything but quietly moan because it hurts. No amount of medicine keeps her asleep, no amount of medicine keeps her from feeling pain. She is always awake, always in pain, always out of it. She is no longer Mom.*
     13. *Mid February 2015 – Mom dies, at close to 2AM. I am the only one awake, because somehow, somehow I knew. I wasn’t even sleeping on the floor like I have been for the past two weeks, I am In a chair dozing beside her and I wake up, suddenly, abruptly, unexpectedly. I reach out, and take her wrist, feel the weak pulse, and know she’s still breathing, so I sit back. A moment later, everything stills, and Mom is quiet, and I know. I wake up Matthew and Anne, we make our three calls: Aunt Traci, the bishop of our church, and Nana. It begins a tree, as we notify the people we need to: hospice, the rest of family, and Mom’s two best friends, who immediately drop everything and drive over in a foot of snow to keep us company while we wait for the funeral home to come and get Mom.*
     14. *Late February 2015 – We have the funeral. I learn my (younger) cousin is getting married in May.*
     15. *Early March 2015 – We are pressured to figure out what we want to do with the house.*
     16. *Early March 2015 – We learn we have to sell the house ASAP. We have to clean the entire house, get everything out.*
     17. *Early March 2015 – I need to find a place to move, to live. I spend hours and days and weeks looking up apartments across the country while simultaneously trying to clean the house and figure out where all of my stuff is. We have to go through Mom’s stuff as well, and people are putting so much pressure on us to clean, we spend hours and hours and hours doing nothing but cleaning and packing, cleaning and packing.*
     18. *Mid March 2015 – I find an apartment, finally.*
     19. *Late March 2015 – I move to Pittsburgh. Things don’t quite go as planned, and I have to make two trips. I’m terrified of living on my own, I never have before, but I don’t have a choice. I have to go to church, meet new people, learn to be on my own, and it’s absolutely terrifying. I don’t know how to do any of that.*
     20. *Early April 2015 – I drive back home for Easter the week after moving in. I have to go back to the house I already left and clean up my room again.*
     21. *Mid April 2015 – The house is still being cleaned. I’m being scolded by Aunt Traci and Uncle Jon, who are understandably frustrated, as they’re the ones paying for the mortgage on a house no one lives in anymore. I start looking for a job, put out dozens of applications, send my resume everywhere, but no luck.*
     22. *Late April 2015 – The house is finally sold, the house I lived in for 14 years, the house I grew up in, the house where Gabriel was born, where I was happy, where I was loved, where I felt safe and protected and cared for. It’s gone, and it’s never coming back. I still haven’t adjusted to it yet.*
     23. *Early May 2015 – Still no job. I’m starting to run lower and lower on my money, and it’s getting a little desperate.*
     24. *Early May 2015 – I have to drive back to Virginia for Christina’s wedding, and learn that my car has all sorts of things I need to fix. Insurance, registration, inspections, license. I’m worried about how well it’ll drive, whether it’ll even make it. The car was Mom’s first ever car she bought on her own, that she saved up for, and it’s all I can afford right now.*

I don’t tell you all of this to make you feel sorry for me, but to help the understanding process along, because you said it’s hard for you to understand because you’ve never experienced it, and that’s okay, it is. I don’t expect anyone to fully understand what I’m going through, but this is what my life has been like for ten years, and for the first time in ten years, I have started to put myself first. I haven’t had a lot of time to grieve at all, I haven’t had a lot of time to spend on myself, and I’ve forgotten how to do that. Sometimes it takes me hours upon hours just to drag myself out of bed because all I want to do is sleep. I sometimes dream of Mom, and that makes it worse, not better, because I wake up and she’s not there like she used to, I’m *so used* to waking up to Mom being alive, and that is one of the hardest things, because there is a split second when I wake when I don’t remember, and then I do, and then the grieve sinks all over again, and it’s so painful and so devastating; it’s like losing her all over again. That’s why mornings have been the hardest for me, why it’s been so hard to even do anything as simple as picking up the phone.

I’m not used to that. I’m screwing up, making mistakes, going all over the place. I don’t know if what I’m doing is even right, if what I am saying makes sense. But I know, at the very least, that where I am physically – here in Pittsburgh – that’s where I’m supposed to be, that at least is something I know to be certain. And that’s about all that I know for certain, except the constant presence of you and our friendship, because that’s never been a question for me, I know that you’re always there for me, that you love me and cherish me as much as I love and cherish you.

I know it’s hard, believe me I do, it’s never once been easy for me, either, it has never *once* felt easy that things are changing, but they are, and it’s something that I need, so I guess what I’m saying here is that this is a transition for me. I think all that I can do right now is to keep moving forward the best that I can, and what I think the both of us need is just patience with each other while life readjusts, and I know that probably doesn’t feel like much, but it’s what I realize I need for the first time in a long time, is just patience, because even though it feels like forever since Mom died, it’s barely been over two months. You’ve talked before about how blessed I am, but Sam you also are so loved, and so blessed. If I didn’t think that this friendship and you were worth it, I wouldn’t have written any of these letters, and the same goes for you, because I know how much it means to the both of us, how important it is for us to figure out where to go from here. The fact that I will always love and support you, as usual, has never changed and never will change, that is ingrained forever in my mind and in my heart.