

# The Academic Road to Success



Discovering the Student, Discovering the Self

English 100 Publication

Missouri Western State University

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# Introduction

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The essays that appear in this publication were selected by the English 100 Committee from submissions from English 100 students from the Fall 2010 semester. The criteria used to evaluate and select these essays included content, originality, a sense of discovery and insight on the part of the student writer, control of form, language and sentence construction and representation of the various types of assignments students are engaged in while in this course. ENG 100, Introduction to College Writing, is a developmental composition course designed for students who show signs of needing additional work on their college-level writing before starting the regular general education composition classes. In this course, students learn about and refine their writing process with a strong focus on the act of revision, engage in critical reading, thinking and writing and write both personal and text-based essays. ENG 100 prepares students for the rigors of college-level writing and introduces them to college expectations.

It is our hope that these student essays reflect the struggle and the joy, the hard work and the rewards that these students have experienced both in their lives and in the classroom. Furthermore, these essays reflect the diversity of our English 100 students and the uniqueness of this course. Our students are entering college straight out of high school and are returning to the classroom after years of work and family, come from urban and rural areas, and represent different races and cultures. And this work is truly their work -- the committee has not made any revisions or corrections to the essays. And as you read, we hope that you will discover the same things that the students have discovered: during their first semester in college they are discovering themselves, realizing that they are part of many communities and defining themselves as individuals, students, scholars and citizens.



Missouri Western State University

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## On My Way

Amber Anaya

When reading, “How I Learned to Read and Write”, by Frederick Douglass, I realized that while Douglass came to see literacy as freedom, as so do I, but at the same time I also see literacy as a quality that deems respect. To be literate is to be respected as well as free. Nobody is going to look up to someone who has not the knowledge needed to lead. That is what I want. I want to be held in high regard for the knowledge and abilities I have acquired and will continue to acquire throughout my lifetime.

I, as Gloria Naylor would put it, was, “...a very shy and very repressed adolescent...”(227), and because of that, like Naylor, I was looked down upon, especially in school. Even now as an adult I remain a bit quiet and at times a bit awkward. And so even now at times my ways are described as stupid or dumb. Someone actually told me to my face that they think that I am stupid. That tore me up inside, and, considering the fact that I am my own worst critic anyway, for a moment there, I actually believed her. I felt enslaved to the word that pierced me so, almost like Douglass when at one moment lost in his own head he states, “...the thought of being a slave for life began to weigh heavily upon my heart”(139), because I thought that I would never be free of this feeling. This title - that no one would ever respect me or take me seriously because of it. The more I thought about it the more angry I became. I am not dumb. I am far from stupid. In fact, those words should be stricken from my vocabulary all together.

Ignorance wouldn't get you up out of bed at the but crack of dawn to make it to class on time. Though I may not have it all figured out I am smart enough to know where I need to be and when. I know, that as not only a woman, but also a minority in college, like Jordan, “...that in order to compensate for what I had missed in earlier years, that I would have to work harder, and study longer, than anybody else”(212), though in my case in the present tense, it still stands.

Making it to college at all is something I consider to be a great privilege. If there was a timeline made out for you to look at you'd probably notice the huge gap between the time I dropped out of high school in 2002 to the here and now 2010. Although, during that time I had always read books and wrote in the journals I keep, I knew deep down that it would never be enough. It didn't matter that when I was in school I made good grades and even some how managed to skip my eighth grade year to go on to the ninth. It didn't matter that I carried a book bag with me wherever I went to make sure I would always have something on hand to keep my mind working. It didn't matter that I had put on an art show or created music and modeled. Because it would never be enough. Not only by societies standards, but my own as well.

I was constantly trapped inside myself as the candle that burns at both ends like, Gail Godwin, in, “The Watcher at the Gates” when she quotes, Schiller, “...you reject too soon and discriminate too severely”(222) - it was the same. Every time I would get the courage to get up and do something about my situation, something would happen and I would back down. Telling myself I'm not good enough and that I'll never make anything of my self. It seemed my watcher would never take a break.

Thankfully there had finally came the time I was able to evade my watcher. The many trials life had handed me throughout the years had brought me to my wits end. I felt as Douglass when he came to find his knowledge a burden instead of a blessing when he states, “It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out”(140). I knew that I was smart but it wasn't going to do me any good to keep “sitting” on that knowledge. I had to do something, so I did.

In 2008 I signed up for this program at Johnson County Community College, called, Project Finish, and proceeded to get my GED. The program was very sufficient to say the least. We met at the Oak Park library every Tuesday and Thursday of each week. I worked very hard and diligently to ensure my passing of “The Test”. As a matter of residence I ended up taking the test at Maple Wood Community College and passed.

It gave me the greatest feeling I'd had in a very long while the day I received my diploma in the mail. I carried the certificate around with me everywhere just so I could look at it from time to time to remind myself that I was capable of achieving any goals I set for myself.

Not long after I had passed the test I began asking myself that one very important question, "what next?" Constantly I asked myself what my next move was going to be. Of course you would assume I would choose collage but of course my watcher had yet again sunk it's teeth in; I'd gotten it into my head that despite my GED no college would possibly accept me. So I started looking for jobs. I was adamant in my quest for employment but got no where. I got so tired of being turned down that I gave up. I had fallen into a depression and hid myself from the world; fallen pray at the gates once again. "You are ashamed or afraid of the momentary passing madness which is found in all real creators"(222) to put it as Schiller would as quoted in Godwins essay. Sure I had still kept up with my reading and writing but it still wasn't enough. A GED wasn't enough.

It wasn't until I came across a very inspirational quote written by Martin Luther King Jr. in a 2009 calendar that I realized what I was going to do next. MLK states that, "You do not have to see the entire staircase, just take the first step." By getting my GED I had already taken the first step. I knew where I wanted my staircase to lead and it was high time to get up and take that next step.

I started researching different schools at the same time contemplating exactly what it was I wanted to learn. I knew I loved to write, create art and music so I decided to study Film and Theatre. By definition, Theatre is a collaborative art form so why not major in something that involves all of my interests. When I heard that MWSU is one of the best film schools in the country it was pretty much settled. While touring the school I remember feeling extreme excitement. I couldn't wait to start. And after registering for all my classes all there was left to do was wait.

When classes finally began I remember feeling so nervous but at the same time ecstatic. It was really happening and my mind was as will always be ready to take in as much information as it possibly can. My first few assignments had me

leaping with joy inside. One assignment in particular seemed to put the icing on the cake. It was when I read the words written by Maya Angelou in "Sister Flowers" when Mrs. Flowers proceeds to lead her in her life lessons stating that she, "...must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy"(95). There had been so much time lost but I had never stopped learning. I never want to stop learning.

This is where I'm supposed to be. This is what I'm supposed to be doing. I am confident that I will prosper here because I am no longer afraid to speak up and out. I am no longer afraid because like Jordan, "I became familiar with the process of thinking. I learned to thinking things out and reach conclusions and defend what I had said"(213) the only difference being this present time. I am learning and growing stronger by the minute. The self-respect I have gained just by taking this one step has already begun to shape me in the most wonderful of ways. Confidence is finally on my side because I'm on my way to becoming that well rounded, highly respected, successful young woman I know I am capable of being.



## They Are Teaching US!

Kenny Ang

Back in 2008, I was hired to be a piano teacher at a newly established music school in the northern part of Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia. It was my first experience teaching, so I had mixed emotions: excitement, fascination, anxiety. Most of the students about to start learning piano were children under ten. Knowing that, I started to prepare myself by reading up on various methods appropriate for teaching children.

I was making the fifteen minute drive from my home to the music school on a sunny afternoon. I was not teaching that day; I just came to look around and check out my teaching room. The road was unusually clear, no traffic jams at all. After I reached there, I parked my silver car right in front of a glass door, which was the front door of the music school. I stepped into that four story building. As I walked down the hallway, I smelled the cream colored paint on the walls, while noticing that some furniture were still not in their proper place.

After a while, the owner of the music school escorted me to my assigned room, which was located at the corner of the second floor, next to the stairs. At the wooden door of the room, there was a plaque with a word "Obedience" posted on. At first sight, I didn't know what that word stood for; it didn't make any sense to me because it had nothing to do with music. After taking a look on the doors of the other rooms, I realized that all the rooms in this music school were not named with A, B, or C, but with characteristic features such as creativity, obedience, and determination. It reminded me of the motto of this music school: Better music, better character.

I turned on the white-colored light in my room. It was not a very big room, but it was indeed a nice place to work in. There was a black Yamaha upright piano on the left side of the room, and I started to try the instrument by playing a classical piano piece. After a couple of

minutes of playing, I was certain that the piano was in a very good shape: it had a very good touch, which ensured me that it was recently tuned and regulated.

Then, after a couple of weeks of extensive pedagogical training, I began to teach there. I only taught private, one-on-one, piano lessons. In my first month of teaching, I was nervous when I talked to my students, as I was afraid that they couldn't understand what I explained. But as the time went by, I started to get better in conveying my musical knowledge to my students.

There is a vivid memory that occurred during the course of my teaching career. Once, I taught a five year old child, whose name was Jerry. He was taking once-a-week lessons with me. He had a thin and short body, which was not uncommon for children at his age. The insufficiency of his height made his feet unable to reach the floor, so he had to put his feet on a small stool to prevent his feet from hanging in the air.

He was an active, talkative, and quite naughty boy. To be honest, I didn't enjoy working with him, because I found it difficult to communicate and he couldn't stay focused during the lessons. His hands were restless and he liked to move a lot. If he got bored, he started to bang the piano, which really made me furious. Another time, he put his hand into his mouth, sucked it, and right after that, he played the piano with his grimy hand.

There was also an occasion, when he wore a watch which had a laser light in it. And guess what, in the midst of the piano piece, he stopped playing and started to flash the laser to some particular spots in the room - like Buzz Lightyear in the Toy Story movies. So instead of using his hands to play piano well, he used his hands to do other unproductive acts.

His other unique attribute was he liked to elicit smiles, no matter what was happening during the lessons. And on one occasion, he didn't bring his piano book to lesson for four consecutive weeks. I was so angry that time that I told him furiously, "Don't you know that I am not here for the money? I am here to teach you and share my musical experiences. So if you don't want to study with me anymore, you can

quit this lesson now." Unfortunately, he did not quite understand what I said, and again, he smiled innocently, which made me depressed.

One of the problems, it turned out, was he had never practiced at home because he didn't have a piano. He only had an electronic keyboard, which was really a major problem. For me, the essential aspect of learning piano as well as any other subject is to practice diligently. An only-once-a-week practice during the lesson time would not result in any satisfying development at all. That was why I never ceased to encourage my students to have their own piano at home, so that they could practice by themselves.

There were many consequences that derived from his not having his own piano condition. One of the serious problems was his hands did not have enough strength to press the piano key, because he used to play on a keyboard at home, which had softer touch compared to that of piano. When he played a piece, you could easily hear that some notes were missing, and it was obviously disturbing. Imagine the Jingle Bell song, which is supposed to be, "Jing - le Bell, Jing - le Bell, Jing - le all the way". But because there were some missing notes, it became, "Jing - ... Bell, Jing - le ..., Jing - le all ... way."

Hence, for the sake of his improvement, I kept asking him to urge his father to buy him a piano. "Jerry, you should ask your father to buy you a piano. How can you develop your playing skills, if you don't have any piano to practice on? You can find a used piano with cheaper price, rather than looking for a new, expensive one," I told to him persuasively. Then, the five year old boy nodded his head, told me that he understood what I said.

However, about four months later, I realized that his head nodding was just his regular robotic action. Jerry had not asked his father to buy him a piano. I was really mad; I was on fire. So I asked him seriously, "Why don't you buy a piano? Have you begged your father? Do you realize that I have gradually lost my enthusiasm to teach you, because you never practice with piano at home?" Then I continued my "lecture" for a couple of minutes. But not as usual, he didn't respond to my question directly.

He made an expression that I had never seen before; he was sad, I thought. Finally, he answered me, also with an intonation that I had never recognized before, "Don't you know that I have already strived to get a piano for a long time? My father works very hard to earn money. He must travel to Surabaya to work, in order to make a living for my family. I've asked him to buy a piano, but my father admitted that he does not have enough money for it."

My teaching room was completely silent. I was stunned. That was supposed to be an answer of a seventeen year old teenager, or even older person who was mature enough to understand such an issue. I felt guilty because I had misunderstood Jerry. I had never imagined that Jerry had such a deep understanding about his father's hard work. That day, my five year old student had taught me something. Yes, I was learning from my student.

Before this occurrence, I used to have very high expectations of all of my little students, that I had almost always expected them to do what intermediate pianist should be able to do. I demanded them not only to be able to play a new piece within a week, but also to play it musically with rhythmic accuracy and a good sense of timing. These outrageous expectations drew some bad effects to me and also to my students. I often felt disappointed, frustrated, and ever willing to give up, because I thought I couldn't teach my students to play well. On the other hand, my students were afraid of me and afraid to go to lessons. At some point they lost their interest to play piano because of my unreasonable demands.

But since that particular event happened, I started to change my way in teaching. I tried to be considerate of my students' conditions. As Jerry, who was considerate of his father's economic situation, I attempted to be considerate of Jerry's condition of having no piano. Sometimes, I let him practiced in my room for couple of minutes before the lesson started, I tried to be patient when he made a mistake over and over again, and I lowered my expectation for him.

Outside my teaching room, I also started to observe children closely. I tried to take my time to sit down, relax, and watch them carefully

because they were teaching me something that I might not get from my school teachers. The kids taught me something beyond the textbook.

Sometimes, it is still hard for me to admit that youngsters could teach me so many important lessons; but it is true. Maybe I am smarter than them in the matter of intelligence, but when it comes to emotion, honesty, and sincerity, they can be superior to me.

Indeed, they taught me a lot...



## Away from the Noise

Mario Asti

Many people had traumatic experiences at the home they were raised in. Perhaps a sibling or parent had a drug or alcohol problem. Maybe the person themselves had a substance abuse issue, behavior that causes confusion, divorce, and even violence. These are common reasons so many of us seek a safe haven. My reason for seeking refuge is not so dramatic. Simply stated, I grew up in a home with three older sisters and an angry mother. My grandmother's kitchen became my favorite place to be, a space of simple order and serenity.

At the turn of the century from the late 1800's to the early 1900's, there occurred a large migration from Europe. The migration was largely from Italy, full of economically displaced people, all seeking the opportunities which America offered. With war looming on the horizon, the well known industrialist, John D. Rockefeller Sr., decided to create the Colorado Foundry and Iron Corporation to produce steel. Steel, being one of the most essential materials of the time, and Colorado, having all the raw materials needed to produce it in a relatively small region. Rockefeller built the large foundry complex in Pueblo, Colorado. Jobs created by the combination of work in the foundry and the mining of raw materials attracted tens of thousands of immigrant workers to Colorado, which included my paternal and maternal grandparents. My grandparents established their homes just blocks from the looming foundry and my father later built our house just two blocks from his parents' home.

The neighborhoods surrounding the foundry were fashioned over a period of half a century beginning around 1900 to the post WW II era of the late 1940's. My grandmother's house was one of the earlier built houses in the neighborhood. Slatted board siding painted gray, the house stood two floors high with three brick chimneys on the roof jutting in the air against the contrast of the wooden shingles, blackened with age. The front porch was about

eight feet deep and spanned the front of the house surrounded by heavy wooden railing in between pillars supporting the heavy porch roof. A bench swing hung on one side facing down the length of the porch while a freestanding iron famed swing sat on the opposite end facing back. Entering through the front doors of her house revealed the fact, like most people of their day, my father's parents purchased most of their furnishings through Sears and Roebuck's catalog. A couch, chair and large wooden Philco radio completed her living room. The extended space next to the living room housed an oak dining table with chairs and a freestanding walnut dish cabinet, both providing adequate resources for family dinners. Iron frame beds with goose down mattresses and oak dressers occupied her bedrooms. In the rear of the house, she equipped her sewing room with a treadle Singer sewing machine. In an adjacent room, she had a Maytag washing machine complete with roller ringers and two galvanized wash tubs. Methodical cleanliness was evident in the brightness of the walls from regular cleaning and the polish in the wood of the doorways, floors and furniture. The scent of the fresh air with a wisp of bleach emulated from the hand washed linens that had been hung outside to dry. Moving towards the back of the house though, one was captured like the bee being attracted to a field of fresh clover. The soft aroma of slowly brewed coffee and freshly baked pan bread drew the soul into the kitchen.

My grandmother kept her kitchen simple in order to move around with ease. Against the back wall was a freestanding double sink with extensions on both sides and enamel coated steel base with two doors on the front. On the wall perpendicular to the sink was a freestanding dish cabinet also constructed of enamel coated steel. The cabinet was designed with upper dish storage mounted on a base with a countertop with lower storage for pots and pans. Next to the cabinet, underneath the window looking out on her garden, was a small dining table with a vinyl top and chromed steel frame and legs. This table was used for most meals and as a work surface for preparing food. On the opposite wall from the table was her walk-in pantry. The pantry had a door, when opened, exposed a medium small

room with shelves built all the way up to the tall ceiling full of supplies, and three large built-in storage bins for flour, sugar, potatoes, and onions. Next to the pantry with a perfectly flat black gun metal cooking surface and an oven door coated with white enamel containing black specs, was the crown jewel, the deluxe coal stove which provided the energy to warm the house and prepare sustenance. My grandmother's kitchen was the heart of her home, a perfect place for her son and young grandson to get away from the turmoil created by a somewhat insane mother and three daughters.

I remember, at about age six, sitting on the piano bench of our spinet in the living room facing away from the piano. My feet were dangling and I was just looking around at the living room, ignoring the noise in the background emulating from my three sisters and mother having a somewhat escalated discussion over the proper scheduling for the use of curlers and the bathtub. My mother was screaming as she always did. She was neither an alcoholic nor drug addict. My mother's behavior could not be excused due to substance abuse. She was just furious and mean, most likely because she wanted her own life and children got in the way. My father was sitting in his chair; the aroma of his cigar mixing with the fumes of hair spray coming from the bathroom, when, all of a sudden, he put down his newspaper looked at me and said "Let's go." We walked out the front door without a word, turned at the sidewalk, and headed to my grandmother's house.

Leaving our house under tension had become normal. Approaching her house, we saw my grandmother sitting on the hanging swing with a cup of coffee in her hand. She rose and greeted us in Italian when we reached the porch. She was wearing a black cotton dress with a pattern of small red flowers covered by a white apron with a handkerchief matching her dress, wrapped and tied on her head. Standing, my grandmother exhibited the five foot two frame of an elderly Italian woman. Her face was wrinkled like a prune from age and her hands were worn from decades of hand scrubbing clothes, walls, dishes and floors to maintain a household. Though her physical beauty had faded with age, her eyes were clear, blue, and vibrant. The

beauty and gentleness manifested in the hand-colored portrait of her youth hanging in her living room, completely remained in her eyes. My father held the front door open for her as she led us through the house directly into her kitchen. The tension of the stress from the earlier turmoil quickly dissipated. The surrounding walls with their yellow wallpaper dotted with patterns of small white flowers, the faint odor of burning coal from the stove, and the leftover smell of a freshly baked loaf of pan bread hanging in the air created a brightness and warmth that was relaxing to the soul.

My grandmother wanted to make a fresh pot of coffee, so my father told me to go out to the coal shed and get a bucket of coal. I went over to the coal bucket by the stove and picked it up, but I hesitated waiting for my father to join me. "Go on" he said motioning me with his hand, so I started moving. I was about to experience my first chore in my grandmother's kitchen. I had retrieved coal before, but this was the first time alone. I went into the shed and began loading the bucket. When the coal was at the top, I attempted to pick it up, but couldn't. I took chunks of coal out until I could lift it to carry, which only left the bucket about half full. I carried the coal back and through the kitchen, then set it down by the stove. I was sure they would be disappointed with my effort, instead, my grandmother praised and thanked me bending over and kissing my forehead. I walked over to my dad, he pulled me next to him with a half grin on his face and a chuckle he patted me on the shoulder. I was black all the way up my arms to my chin from the dust, so my grandmother pulled out her step stool and had me stand up to the sink to wash myself. While I was gone, she had started the coffee and set the table with some cured ham, olives, cheese and the pan of bread she had baked earlier. When the coffee was ready, she went to the cabinet and pulled out three cups and set one in front of each of us. I asked if I was going to get some and she said "Of course, you work, you have lunch and coffee." She came up with the coffee pot in one hand and a bottle of milk in the other, filling my cup a third of the way with coffee and the rest of the way with milk. From that day on, I drank coffee at my grandmother's house. My father

and her conversed softly in Italian while we ate. When we were finished, my father and I sat quietly with our own thoughts while my grandmother whispered her daily prayers with her rosary. My mother called interrupting our peace, so we had to leave. My grandmother bent down as she always did and kissed me on the cheek, then reached up and kissed my father on the cheek and we left. Quiet had ensued at our house except for the muffled sobbing of my sisters lying on their beds. My mother had gone after them with a wire hanger, because they hadn't fixed their hair right.

My oldest sister, Sue, was married by the time I was eight, so just my two sisters, Julie and Lynn, were at home. The tensions in the house were increased due to the girls introducing a boyfriend factor, so getting away was a regular occurrence. One summer morning, I got on my bike and rode to my grandmother's. Entering the house, I found her in the kitchen. The reassuring smells of bread and coffee were in the air, but today, the kitchen table was in the middle of the floor. As I walked into the kitchen, she greeted me with a kiss and handed me an apron. "Good" she said "Someone to help me." While she was fixing me a cup of coffee, I noticed she had strung a rope line caddy-corner across the kitchen just head high. While sipping on my coffee and putting on my apron, she pulled a large bread board from the pantry. There was a clean white linen cloth on the table that she placed the board on. Next, she produced a two-inch diameter wood pole about six feet long, which I knew was a rolling pin. Her early morning had been spent preparing the pasta dough for noodles. She tossed a little flour on the board and we went to work. With one of us on either end of the rolling pin, we started at one side of the board and worked until the dough was stretched like a thin skin all the way across. My grandmother then took a small knife and cut thin strips to hang on the line she had strung so they could dry a little. She proceeded to fill a large pot with water, some seasonings and one whole chicken. She stoked her stove and set the pot to simmer. We cleaned the work area and moved the table back against the wall. I replenished her inside wood and coal supply for the stove while she set the table with food. We

sat and ate and conversed quietly about nothing. Afterwards, I sat and relaxed in the silence of the whispers of her prayers with her forefinger and thumb moving over the beads of her rosary. The peace once again washed over me.

By the time I was twelve, all my sisters were married and gone. I now visited my grandmother to avoid my mother. At this point, my grandmother is slowing down. She is eighty three years old and I'm at her house everyday to do chores for her. I come in one day after all the chores are done to the smell of my grandmother's coffee. She doesn't bake or cook much anymore, but her life has centered to her kitchen. We finish our coffee not saying much when she gets up and walks to the pantry. She produces a bottle of wine and sets it on the table. She shuffles to the cupboard and brings back two glasses. My glass is filled about a quarter of the way with wine and the rest with water and her glass is filled about halfway with just wine. She sits down, we salute each other and she began softly speaking about her life. Just hearing the softness of her voice was reassuring that there were truly safe places. After awhile, she began whispering her prayers with her rosary. Against the background of the aroma of the coal and the creaking of the metal of the stove expanding and contracting, the peace of her kitchen again descended on my soul.

Having wine together was my grandmother's and my secret. Shortly afterwards, she declined in health and came to live with us. My grandmother attempted to bring the serenity of her kitchen to our house, but my mother wouldn't allow her to. My mother was mean to her and kept her from participating in the house other than to live there. My grandmother didn't last long; she passed away just after my thirteenth birthday. Looking back, I know I will never find a place so peaceful as my grandmother's kitchen. Three quarters of a century of time separated my grandmother and me and, though I don't know what she was like before I was born, I do know the person who interacted with my early life. She embodied the full capacity of softness and warmth of which humanity is so capable. My grandmother's presence was the main factor that brought a sense of peace to her kitchen.



## The Opportunity

Mario Asti

A pause occurs when a person looks back to the ideas that influence the process required to achieve the dreams that he or she aspires to. We are taught that hard work and discipline are the keys to succeeding in any endeavor. The premise we are not taught is the measure of success. Pulling my horn out after the job and reconnecting with the recordings of the masters, the truth dawned on me that my destiny with my discipline was not primarily monetary or social, but the idea of reaching inside and finding my own voice.

My musical journey started at seven years old when, after watching my sisters practice and play their instruments, I decided that the trumpet would set me apart. My mother, having had her own ideas, decided I got a saxophone. She won. When I first opened the case, I encountered a muskiness that resembled nothing other than a version of my drunken uncle Larry's bad breath mixed with rotten eggs, stored in a sealed cardboard box, and then suddenly opened in a poorly ventilated room. Despite the odor, I was so excited to have my own musical identity that the visions of melodically cruising on "Hello Dolly" in a Louis Armstrong fashion, with trumpet in hand, quickly faded away.

The very first person to expose me to the understanding of my talent as a musician was Rocky Dinero. Rocky was this wiry fellow whom my parents knew long before I did. Rocky took the job that no one else wanted in the school system, because he loved music. He traveled to all the elementary schools in the district during the week and taught music, giving all of us in the less fortunate neighborhoods a chance to elevate ourselves.

The first lesson was the most difficult, breathe. Breathing seemed pretty easy; after all I had been breathing on my own for seven years. Rocky was very good at proving to us we didn't know how to breathe. "I want you to take a big

breath and make your tummy like a melon," he would tell us. That was easy as I would do that with my friends all the time. "Now hold your breath, make your tummy hard, purse your lips and begin to push it out slowly, like someone is pushing on your tummy with a board." That was hard. After getting the hang of breathing, we put our instruments in our mouths. Rocky sat up straight and seemed to brace himself against something he knew was coming. Something he could never quite prepare for. Something like jumping off that twenty foot cliff at the swimming hole. Hitting the water stings, however, the time between jumps allows the memory of the impact to fade.

He had us take a big breath. Our eyes wide with anticipation, he cued us to play. From the end where the clarinet player was, came the sound of a parakeet whose leg had been trapped in the spring steel door of the cage the owner just returned him to. The vision that the bird was wildly flapping his wings to reach the wooden bar in the middle of the cage, which was unattainable, all the while screeching in pain, came to mind. There were two trombones. Combined they emulated the scream of a wild bore being stomped on by a raging elephant trumpeting loudly while pursued by an unidentifiable model of aircraft. Next to me was the trumpet player who wasn't creating a bad sound, just something like a boat horn under water. For some reason something in his mouth was fluttering uncontrollably. The one final musical expression on top of everything, was the blood curdling scream of a half dozen geese, unable to fly, being chased by a person with a flamethrower just close enough for them to feel the heat. That was me. After what seemed to be a minute, but was probably only twenty seconds, Rocky ended the carnage. We looked at each other, smiles on our faces ear to ear, including Rocky. I was as excited and thrilled as if I had just opened a Christmas present that was anticipated all year, which turned out to be better than expected. I had made a sound.

Rocky took me through those early years, "Mary Had a Little Lamb," "When the Saints Go Marchin' In" and so on. When Jr. High School days started, Rocky turned me over to my first great mentor, Steve Comi. Mom took me down

to Steve's music store for my first lesson. We walked in and as I looked around, I got a little scared. The shelves were all the way up the walls, filled with sheet music and method books. Standing in that room, with what seemed like every bit of musical knowledge in the world surrounding me, I began thinking. "Do I have to learn all of this?" "Am I good enough to be here?" "This is definitely going to take longer than a week." Steve came from the back of the store to greet us. He was average height. His jet black hair with wisps of gray in the front was combed back. He sported medium side burns and one of those pencil thin mustaches peppered with gray that most Italian men of the day had. Wearing a smock stained with the remnants of glues and lacquers from repairing instruments, he was wiping his hands with a plain rag. "Come on back," he said "Let's get started." We went towards the back of the building through a dark hall to an inside room with two metal folding chairs and a music stand. He told me to get set up, he'd be right back. Steve came back with a thick and a thin book. The thicker contained what seemed to be an endless amount of scale and musical exercises. The other was a book of jazz studies. "It's okay," he said "You'll get through it," with a big grin on his face. I wasn't quite sure whether he had the "I eat medium size kids like you for lunch," grin or the "Your ok kid, I've got your back," grin. Turned to be the latter, but I knew I wasn't in Kansas anymore.

I began at this point on my life journey of disciplined practice. "Wood shedding your axe," Steve taught me. "Axe," being your instrument and "wood shedding," basically meaning practice until your lip falls off. Steve introduced me to great players and had me listen to their abilities to weave intricate patterns in music. "Pick up on these ideas and you'll be first call" he told me. "First call" is the person who is at the top of all the local musicians call lists for work. A musician being at the top of call lists created a social status among other musicians as well as influential people in the community. "First call" gave a musician the first right of refusal for the best paying jobs. For several years I worked with Steve. He had me playing well enough to be at the top of my game through high school. After I graduated high school, I moved to

a town in western Colorado named Grand Junction. There I went to the local college, Mesa State.

I began studying privately with Paul Schnieder. Paul was the head of the jazz department and a saxophone player like me. He had been recruited by the college to run the jazz department even though his previous position was at a Jr. High school, which was evident. Paul was the first call saxophone player in town and even though I was his student, my abilities with jazz and blues surpassed his. Gary Smith was the busiest working musician in town. I knew if I could get a job with him, I could end up being at the top of his list. I found a trailer to live in rather than an apartment. Considering the hours I chose to practice, I didn't want to bother any one. I drove an old beater car which kept my hands greasy at least once a week, but I didn't have a car payment to worry about. Under these circumstances I could spend more time practicing because I just needed enough work outside of music to survive. And practice I did. I pulled the albums of the master players out every day. "Miles Davis," "John Coltrane," "Dexter Gordon," setting the needle down at the beginning of a musical phrase, listening, and copying on my horn. Picking up the needle and going back to the same spot over and over, until all my albums had grooves worn in only certain spots where the best "Licks " were. Grooves that were like trails through the prairie, trails leading to understanding the thinking process of the great players.

Then the call came, out of the blue. Paul had to cancel and could I make a job that night. Of course I accepted. Adrenaline was flowing, I was ready. I knew that after that night I was going to be on top of the call list for Gary. I packed up my car that afternoon and hit the road. The job was about a two hour drive. We were playing in the bar at the Hotel Jerome in Aspen, CO., a high end ski town. This meant the money would be excellent. I arrived at the hotel early but just in time to meet Gary. We loaded equipment in and set up. Everyone in the group sat down and discussed what songs we might use. We began playing. The job went great. I knew I was playing really well. Every time we finished a song, Gary would just smile and give

me a thumb up. We finished the night all feeling good about our performance. We all finished packing equipment when Gary approached me. He handed me my pay for the night and told me how exceptionally well I had played. I shook his hand and thanked him. "I look forward to more work if you have any coming up." I said. He looked at me and said, "Mario, you play much better than any sax player I use, especially Paul. But I have to use Paul as my regular sax player because of his political ties to the college." For a moment I was stunned. I could feel every ounce of moisture in my sinuses welling up behind my eyes. A lump formed in my throat like a boiled egg was stuck there that wouldn't go down when I swallowed. Here was Gary, a man whom had openly discussed the virtues of discipline and practice as being the foremost qualities of a great player; saying those qualities were of no value in the scheme of working and being accepted as a musician. "Sure I understand" I said, shook his hand again and walked away.

I loaded my beat up car, just one of the obvious sacrifices I had made to play better, and drove home. Driving down the highway, the anger welled up in me. I couldn't believe what Gary had said. I was the working musician, I needed the money. I deserved the right to make the money. I had put in the work everyone had so reverently talked about. Where was the respect for the person who sacrificed time and possession to play well? Obviously times had changed from what Steve had taught me. The band leader was now pursuing political favor; the pursuit of excellence was gone. I arrived home about 3:30 a.m.

Opening the door to my trailer, I peered in for a second. I hadn't left a light on and it was a moonless night. The inside was a black hole with faint streaks of light filtering in from the distant street light. Looking much like the emptiness I had felt at that moment. I turned on the light in the living room and sat down, tired, just staring. I decided to practice. I pulled out my horn and pulled out an album, "Miles Davis" Kind of Blue. I just needed to get better. I cruised through the music with "Cannonball" and "Coltrane." For a couple of hours I played along with and in between the masters. Playing hard, sometimes furiously, trying to burn off the

anger. Finally I was playing All Blues over the top of “Miles” trumpet solo, when all of a sudden I heard my own voice, a glimpse of my own soul coming through the horn. I put my horn down. I was exhausted. The album finished and I sat in silence. As I gazed out the window, my eyes catching the sunrise, the truth of my search suddenly dawned on me. The real motivation of the discipline and hard work, the practice and “wood shedding,” was not to make money, not to be revered as a great player, but to reach inside myself and discover my own voice on the horn.

I went on after that night and got many calls for work from many different musicians. Gary would call once in a while for me to substitute. I traveled the country, working with many different musicians. A few times since that night musical groups or band leaders had given me similar reasons for using someone else. That never bothered me again though, knowing what I had realized about myself. I began forming my own groups, booking work on my own and continue to practice daily.

Looking back, I realize that I am and have been a well respected musician by my peers and audiences. I carry that moment with me to this day though, which has led me back to school. I continue to study and find new and better ways to approach music with my horn. I love to study and gain more skill. To search inside myself and reach into my soul is the best way to dance with the “Muse.” The true reward of the work is neither the money nor the recognition, but the idea that when I take my horn out of my mouth I can say, “Today I made a sound.”



## Simply Sunday

Elizabeth Barbosa

Between the lawn chair tucked under my arm and one hand gripping the cooler handle, I managed to walk down the grassy slope, and graciously say hello to everyone within ear shot. The sun was in full force that day and a soft breeze moved across the tall trees, causing the various shades of green to highlight and flow down into the luscious thick lawn. Sunday picnics at Bartlett Park were always a favorite family tradition of mine. We all made time to share each other’s company, and there were a lot of us. Our family continues to be one of the largest in town. Often by late afternoon half the park became our family’s social playground. Everyone scattered; yet remained connected as we visited and enjoyed spending the day together. Unfortunately, our family get togethers have become more infrequent through the decades and I reflect often on how much I cherish and miss those simple Sunday memories.

I lost my balance and fell to my side laughing uncontrollably. My favorite cousin and I seemed to always find mischief. Rita and I had just spent the last half hour devouring sweet, juicy, ripe watermelon. Then, intermediately like a jetted water sprinkler we spit those slippery black seeds at the back of Michael John’s and David’s heads. They are a pair of pesky cousins that we thoroughly enjoyed tormenting. I couldn’t tell at the time, but the benefits of two missing front teeth were a sure catapult for added spitting distance. Still laughing hard we sprinted from our grandma’s patchwork blanket. In fact, mom had caught the boys as they attempted to catch us, but little did she know that the mischief had started with us. As I ran, I gripped those wet watermelon rhines with a tightly closed fist. Pit stopping to disturb the flies and sweat bees that hovered over the dirty green trash barrels as we shouted two points. We shot to the swings and dusted up the dirt scrambling to get situated in those blue seated swings. Back and forth we mechanically pumped our legs, as we quickly

rose higher and higher. I let out a scream when I suddenly slowed and then stopped mid air; shockingly I felt a force slowly pull me back. Then like a stone in a sling shot, I flew forward. I bet I could have gone full circle around that tall swing set. Looking down I saw my older cousin Johnny smiling as he ran out from under my moving seat. I felt I could fly through that big blue sky as I swayed widely to and fro. Gripping the swings long chains I leaned back and looked up. I delighted in making a parade with the assorted shapes of fluffy white clouds, imagining them to be all sorts of animals prancing across the open sky, in other words just simple and pleasing enough. Back in those days we managed to bond without the interruptions of cell phones, handheld games, or laptops. Just the flash cameras and big boxy camcorders that captured the moments of various conversations, gathered groups of relatives, and some goofy smiles while the day lazily drifted by.

Commotion stirred up at the food area as all the kids gravitated towards a bare spot under the big oak tree. Rita and I raced across the park; kicking the fuzzy dandelion heads, and in turn they dusted the green lawn, as we abruptly stopped to join the antsy group. With our eyes wide open and attentive we waited anxiously, anticipating the treasure of real money coins and candy treats to come. All we knew during those days were the homemade piñatas crafted with newspaper, plaster of paris, and water, thus totally different than today's fancy piñatas. I wish I could recall what figures they were supposed to be, but indeed the excitement was just the same. Everyone got a turn as the uneven line formed from shortest to tallest and confidently we all attempted to crack that container of goodies. With a plastic bat and a bandana blindfold we guided one another with our oohs and aahs. With a beer in one hand, Uncle Jesse controlled the rope with the other, tugging up and down and laughing quietly at our disfigured batting attempts. When the turns got closest to the taller kids small pieces of newspaper and treats would scatter causing us all to lunge and descend like vultures. As a result, our dirty hands became full and we stretched our shirt into makeshift baskets.

Some of us traded our treats, but most delighted in their finds. I suppose that was the adult's form of cheap entertainment, but nowadays I have to admit how hilarious it can be. Thinking back I smile gratefully because my aunts and uncles took the time to give my cousins and me those simple Sunday memories.

The chipped wooden green picnic tables sported such an array of delicious food, and yet the choices seemed endless. My favorites always remained the same through the years Aunt Dixie's homemade macaroni and cheese, Aunt Bernie's handmade stuffed banana peppers, and without a doubt Grandma Barbosa's re-fried beans, rice, and pork chili. Along with her always popular freshly made tortillas. I could eat them with a slab of butter or sometimes I spread them with peanut butter and a lot of sprinkled sugar. Either way, I could never eat just one. Black cherry Shasta was my favorite to fish out of the cooler of cold slushy ice. That collection of coolers always sat closest to the men in their metal folding lawn chairs. The horseshoe games lasted most of the day, mainly because of the high number of interruptions caused by us kids when we accidentally darted across the throwing path, although the cold PBR and debating conversations had its definite contribution as well.

By the second or third time around the scrumptious tables of food, the containers would thin out. For instance, popular dishes would be scraped close to empty and crumbs would lie sparse. That is when I started scavenging for a long straight stick and mom's not so well hidden bag of marshmallows. Dad would eventually stop conversing with the men and start stoking the grills coals, causing the half dead charcoals to flame up with life. As we quickly loaded those sticks we shoved them into the flame and within minutes we pulled back a fiery black and white treat. In fact, I liked mine really black, okay burnt. I pursed my lips and blew the small flame that remained, as I tried to balance the crisp melting goo. Half the time I made it to my wide open mouth while hitting my cheeks and chin on the way. The other half sadly ended up a pile of gooey ash in the dirt. Unfortunately, I believe most children these days would balk at

the sight of a toasted marshmallow and not even care to attempt those ugly sweet treats. Ah, the sweet sticky simplicity of childhood.

Plans for an upcoming reunion are in the making. I periodically log on and check my Face book page, with a technology that I have succumbed to just to stay in touch. A new comment from a relative is shared; while some complain of timing, others comment on the importance of those far and few between reunions. A couple of years ago we all gathered at the American Legion hall, it was a hot July holiday weekend. The newest collection of homemade movies began to project on the wall as we crowded our chairs on to the dance floor, while some stood elbow to elbow. Cousins' Laurie and Martina worked long hours gathering old pictures and various home movie clips; they created a timeless treat for everyone. The family film lasted around forty minutes as the music back dropped and the scenes faded one to another. Bursts of laughter, deep sighs of admiration, and harmless pokes at each other criss crossed the room. When the lights came back on not a dry eye was left among us middle aged and older folks, and with watery eyed smiles we shared our hugs. That is when I became sadly aware that Sundays at Bartlett Park were gone and holiday get togethers were far and few between.

As our family dispersed that day, hugging one another and saying our long goodbyes I could only hope these gatherings will continue throughout the years. The generations of our family patch worked together with loving memories, cherished visits, and home movies. A simply priceless investment for the preservation of family.



## The Art of Writing

Sarah Chellew

“Writing is a form of personal freedom. It frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us. In the end, writers will write not to be outlaw heroes of some underculture but mainly to save themselves, to survive as individuals.”

- Don DeLillo

Before I could read, I loved to listen to stories. Once I was able to read, I became obsessed with the way the words looked in the pages of the books that I had read. Throughout the years I have learned tricks to overcome obstacles such as my “watcher”. It wasn't until college that I discovered the true value of placing what I am trying to express through words into the correct picture frame. My addiction to writing is equal to a drug addict's addiction to heroine. It is what frees me from the chains of reality. It also allows me to express myself on an entirely different level. My obsession with writing based on my experiences and interests in learning have built me up to the writer I am today.

I was born on June 5, 1991 but I was reborn at the age of five when I learned how to read. After reading the essay “One Writer's Beginnings,” I couldn't agree more with Eudora Welty's statement. She said that, “Learning stamps you with its moments. Childhood's learning is made up of moments. It isn't steady. It's a pulse.” (185). I was stamped with the memory of reading my first book. I cannot recall the title of the book nor the author but I remember the first word that I recognized and read out loud. I was sitting on my mother's lap on the huge comfy leather sofa located in the corner of our living room. My mother was going to read the book to me but for some reason the word “mouse” that was printed on the shiny page struck out at me and I had the sudden urge to say the word out loud. After I recited the word a few times, I had no trouble reading the rest of

the book. That day marked my love of reading.

I was then reborn for the third time at the age of ten when I discovered the art of writing. I loved the way that words looked and seemed to flow inside the pages of books. I decided to start my own journal and create my own words. I couldn't help but compare my own experiences with Welty's experiences. She explains her own adventure, "My love for the alphabet, which endures, grew out of reciting it but, before that, out of seeing the letters on the page. In my own story books, before I could read them for myself, I fell in love with various winding, enchanted-looking initials drawn by Walter Crane at the heads of fairy tales. When the day came, years later, for me to see the Book of Kells, all the wizardry of letter, initial, and word swept over me a thousand times over, and the illumination, the gold, seemed a part of the word's beauty and holiness that had been there from the start" (182.) Welty and I both fell in love with the way that words looked before we were able to read them. Throughout the years I have worked with words. I have developed my own style of figurative language which has helped me accomplish my own creativity in my current style of writing.

On August 12, 2008 I wrote an entry inside my journal. After reading Gail Godwin's essay, "The Watcher at the Gates" I was freaked out by the close similarities between the author and I. Reading her essay was a dose of Déjà vu. We both overcame the same imaginary issue known as writers block. The weird factor about this subject is that we both turned writers block into a demon and named it the "Watcher". Godwin portrays the definition of the demon by stating, "Watchers are notorious pencil sharpeners, ribbon changers, plant waterers, home repairers and abhorers of messy rooms or messy pages. They are compulsive looker-uppers. They are superstitious scaredy-cats. They cultivate self-important eccentricities they think are suitable for "writers." And they'd rather die (and kill your inspiration with them) than risk making a fool of themselves" (223). Both of our watchers tortured our self consciousness in almost the same way; they both lock the words that you want to say up in a huge bulletproof cage. Miraculously

Godwin and I defeated our watcher by confronting it and drawing a picture of it. Even though I have lost the drawing, I still have the essay that I wrote in 2008.

"I write because I love the smell of a wood pencil or the smell of ink gliding across a blank piece of paper. The letters of my words have to be perfect. I guess that makes me a little OCD. When I am angry or depressed writing becomes my source of therapy. I love a full page of words it's an accomplished goal for me. I hate misspelled words, scribbles, errors and my Watcher which is the demon that blocks my thinking. In every piece that I write the things that I hate are always unavoidable which underlines the imperfect part of being human. I love the sound of my writing object scratching words onto a blank page. I guess writing becomes an obsession when I write down random words in my head or when I wake up in the morning and find one of my journals tucked under my arm. Writing is my favorite hobby, I guess it's a little nerdy but it's what makes me, me!"

The stupidity of writers block drowned out my will to write papers in school. I was afraid to share things that I had written which resulted in the horrible grades that I received on late papers. Godwin defeated his Watcher the day that he decided to have a conversation with it. "On a very bad day I once wrote my Watcher a letter. "Dear Watcher," I wrote, "What is it you're so afraid I'll do? Then I held his pen for him, and he replied instantly with a candor that has kept me from truly despising him. "Fail," he wrote back" (224). I overcame my Watcher in almost the same way that Godwin defeated his. After I drew the picture of him, I expressed my true hatred for him through words which resulted to the understanding that he was there because he was protecting my fear of embarrassment. I learned from that day on that fear should not overpower will. I used the energy produced from embarrassment and fed it to its antonym. I am now a proud writer and my watcher is just a shadow of guidance.

Through the many years that I have been writing papers for school, I have always written for what I thought the teacher would want. It wasn't until college that I really opened up the

door and allowed myself to write papers for my own enjoyment. In my English 100 class the first paper that I turned in was completely horrible. One thing that I learned was to write my papers for myself. If you don't enjoy your paper then how do you expect anyone else to enjoy it? Sometimes saying what you truly want to say becomes the heartbeat of your paper and everything else that supports it such as experiences becomes the pulse.

In the essay, "Learning to Write," Russell Baker underestimates his teacher. Baker states that, "Mr. Fleagle was notorious among City students for dullness and inability to inspire. He was said to be stuffy, dull, and hopelessly out of date. To me he looked to be sixty or seventy and prim to a fault. He wore primly severe eyeglasses, his wavy hair was primly cut and primly against the collar buttons of his primly starched white shirts. He had a primly pointed jaw, a primly straight nose, and a prim manner of speaking that was so correct, so gentlemanly, that he seemed a comic antique" (219.) Reading this quote made me laugh because in a way it describes my first English professor. When I walked into class on my first day I figured my professor would want boring essays. So I wrote an essay that I knew high school teachers would like in attempt to receive a good grade from him. Little did I know that this professor would actually tell me the truth about my paper in front of the whole class! At the time I was embarrassed but looking back on it now I'm thankful. If it wasn't for my professor's honesty, I would still be writing high school level papers today. What sparked my interest in this essay was a small but powerful statement that Baker made. He wrote, "Suddenly I wanted to write about that, about the warmth and good feeling of it, but I wanted to put it down simply for my own joy, not for Mr. Fleagle" (220). It attracted my interest because after I trashed my first paper and restarted it I decided to write for myself by choosing a topic that was meaningful to me. After I received an A on my final draft of my first paper, nothing held me back from writing exactly what I wanted to say. I also came to the realization that my professor might look "out of date" on the outside but was in fact a creative person on the inside. He even made us laugh

quite a few times in class, even the day that he randomly crouched down and stood up in an awkward position in the middle of the classroom. His explanation for his random move was, "my girdle just fell off and I had to pull it back up!" our entire class roared with laughter. It will always remain a highlight of my college experience.

I was reborn at the age of five when I learned how to read and then reborn again at the age of ten when I discovered the art of writing. Even though I was reborn two times, I really didn't start living until I entered college and learned the true value of placing what I am trying to express through words into the correct picture frame. The pulse of this paper is love of words, victory over my watcher and my version of "Mr. Fleagle." The heartbeat of this paper is the uncontrollable addiction I have with writing. My obsession with writing based on my experiences and interests in learning have built me up to the writer I am today.



## My Skeletal Statue

Sarah Chellew

Have you ever dreamed of making a solid stone statue of yourself that would live through a million years? A monument of you so greatly defined in detail that a stranger would know your entire life story after staring at it for a few minutes? If I could build a statue of myself, I would be wearing a necklace around my neck, a vase under my left arm and I would have a notebook waving above my head in my right hand. I would add these three objects to my statue because they would explain how I was raised, how I built my life and how I prove to be immortal. The necklace, vase and notebook are skeletal preservatives of me.

My mom gave me the necklace the day after my Great Grandmother's death. It was a gift from my Grandmother which she bought a week before she died. It is made out of white gold that glistens in the sunlight like glitter. In addition, a heart shaped pendant with four diamonds on each side of the object hangs loosely on the center of the chain. The skill in making this elegant piece of jewelry illustrates my Grandmother's loving way of raising me. She explained to me that the recipe of becoming a successful person was relying on the way you presented yourself in contrast to relying on beauty. Even though jewelry is not a person, it falls into the same equation. It does not sell by the way it looks behind a glass case; it sells by the way it presents itself on a person. This special necklace is not just a symbol of my Great Grandmother's love; it is a symbol of how I was raised as well. The necklace around the neck of my statue is important because it represents me on the behalf of how I was raised.

Standing on the outside and looking in you might think that my life is somewhat simple. In reality it's very complicated because I expect nothing less than perfection. You can compare my life to how I built my clay vase last year in high school. For example, my vase is made out of tiny little spiral circles that I linked together to

form a tall structure that would eventually hold flowers. I went in before and after school to work on my project which took about a month and a half to complete. After the vase was built I had to pour four different types of glaze on it to make it the perfect color. My next step was firing the glaze which took about a week to do. I had to repeat this process four times before I was satisfied with result. When it was finally finished I received an A on the project but as a consequence I was three projects behind the rest of the class. I can compare my clay vase to my life because I am always three steps behind everyone else. The vase under my left arm in my statue is significant because it represents how my life is built based on the expectations of how I want to live my life.

The simple black and white notebook that I write in everyday is a story of my life from the age of ten until the day of my death. I bought it when I was ten years old after watching the movie Harriet the Spy but it wasn't until after I read The Diary of Anne Frank that I decided to turn it into a journal. In a million years I will still be alive. My soul will live through the veins of my thoughts which are engraved in the bones of my journal. When that day comes, people will see the world, as we know it today, through my words. In a way I will communicate with the future through mental telepathy which will allow me to be immortal by living through the thoughts of others. My journal will be the bridge that connects me to immortality and the present to the future. It is also the heart of my statue.

If I built a statue of myself it will still be standing strong in the year of 100,002,010. It will be a monument of me so greatly defined in detail that any stranger would know my entire life story after observing it for a few minutes. The necklace will shine proudly around my neck representing how I was raised, my vase will be tucked under my left arm symbolizing how I built my life and the notebook will wave above my head in my right hand clearly proving how I will always be immortal. These three objects are the bones that identify who I am. In other words, they will always be skeletal preservatives of me.



## The Road to Leadership

Jaime Collado

The past six years of my life has been a molding process. I have taught my body to do things I once thought never possible. I have trained my mind to work hard and respond fast. From a boy to a man, I grew up one day at a time. Enlightened and taught by a man of many traits, Michael Monroe has taught me perseverance, strength, courtesy and the desire to teach martial arts.

Two and a half years into my Tae Kwon Do training, the school was on the verge of closing when the head instructor was forced to move to Oklahoma. Our highest ranked instructor, currently running our south school location, had a choice to make. This was to let the North school go under or step up his role, and not give up. The man who stepped up when nearly a hundred students needed him most, was certified instructor and 3<sup>rd</sup> degree black belt Michael Monroe. I was a red belt at the time, about 6 months before my 1<sup>st</sup> degree black belt, and naive to how much of a roll this man was to play in my life. Working fulltime for the power and light company, Mr. Monroe heads straight from the office to his new school, ATA. Thirteen hour days, at least five days a week for the past 3 years, he has inspired me to never give up and to all ways persevere.

I have all ways favored sparring, with my long legs, speed and flexibility I usually have the upper hand. All of my talent goes out the window when Mr. Monroe and I spar. Now a 4<sup>th</sup> degree black belt, his kicks are so strong that my arms aren't strong enough to hold the block up as he kicks right through them. With countless nights of teaching and training I become stronger. Standing 6' 4", 250 pounds, taking his side kick to the ribs feels the equivalent to a horses back kick, both in which I have felt. The bitter sweet taste of blood mixed with a plastic mouth guard is a taste in which I will always

remember. He has taught me how to fight much larger opponents by using their momentum and size against them, redirecting and moving around those long and powerful legs. I will always remember the time I stopped a man from killing himself. It was a Friday night, December 2007, exactly one week before I achieved my 1<sup>st</sup> degree black belt. I was at a bar downtown when I stepped outside to use my cell phone. Snowflakes the size of quarters fell as I did not have a jacket on. I took exactly two steps when I looked up and observed a man no less than 250 pounds screaming obscenities into his phone. At that moment, time seemed to slow down as all my senses peeked. The man throws his cell phone onto the cement sidewalk and reaches into his pocket and pulls out a single razor blade and goes for his wrist. I don't know whether it was me, or some higher power working through me, but without thought, I lunged at the man. I caught his hand about an inch into his incision. While holding onto his hand, I use the leverage of his weight to put him onto his back. Straddling him, and holding pressure on his wound, all the while he is resisting, I take my shirt off and tie off the wound. As I am holding this man, I hear sirens behind me, and finally, time comes back to normal. I was later told, had I not held pressure with my shirt as I did, this man would not be here today. At our belt promotion the following Friday, in front of nearly 150 people, Mr. Monroe proudly stands behind me as he speaks of my run in with the man. It took everything for me to hold back the tears as he ties my black belt for the first time. I was solidified with that knot, and Mr. Monroe had given me the strength.

I have trained with and participated in many seminars and tournaments put on by high ranked masters, where courtesy and respect is a must. Mr. Monroe has taught me to bow first, and wait for them to extend their hand for a handshake. The bow is the equivalent of a handshake in Korea, and shows disrespect to offer your hand. I have been shown to break eye contact when bowing, a common courtesy. I have been taught to show respect and to earn respect, which have opened so many doors for me, ethically and professionally. My actions and behaviors are a mirror image portrayed by

Michael Monroe. Because of my courteous professionalism, I have been offered to own and operate a school in Leavenworth, Ks. My dreams are becoming a reality, and I have been given the tools necessary to excel. My courtesy to myself and others is a trait in which I respect and show.

One of the most admirable traits of Michael Monroe is his teaching intuition, his ability to better his peers and most importantly the desire to make you better. He has taught me to all ways move forward and never settle for anything short of the best. He has shown me how to be a leader and has passed his vision of helping people onto me. To see someone improve them self, and know that I aided them in this process, is the best feeling in the world. Through countless hours training, the right mixture of blood and sweat, Michael Monroe has taught me how to persevere, how to be strong, how to be courteous, and has given me the ability and desire to teach martial arts. From a boy to a man, the last six years of my life have molded me into who I am today, and I am learning more and more every day.



## Early Education

Stephanie Crist

To learn to read and write at an early age is extremely beneficial to a child. To grow to love books and writing can benefit your life abundantly. When a child is not read to or not taught that reading and writing are important, it gets put on the back burner. In *One Writers Beginnings* by Eudora Welty we see that she was a child of readers. Welty's parents initiated her love of books and writing. She grew to love books and reading, and this gave her a strong advantage in life. Unlike Welty, my life of reading and writing wasn't so grand. I wasn't taught that reading was important or writing for that matter. My Mother was a single parent and never really had time for me or reading. So I grew up being unsure about my reading and writing abilities. Reading and writing is a part of our everyday lives. To do it affectively can impact you tremendously. But to not know, can be crippling. Welty was taught at a young age to read and write. I was not, and now that I am older I am realizing my struggles stem from the lack of attention given to books by my Mother.

Having parents that are readers, is something I think every kid wants. To sit on your bed all snuggled in your blankets, listening to the soothing voice of your Mother reading is very comforting feeling. The feeling of safe, knowing that while she reads your mind is taking it all in, absorbing information that will profit you sufficiently. Welty's Mother would read to her, she says, "she'd read to me in the big bedroom in the mornings, when we're in her rocker together..." (182). Welty felt safe there with her Mother reading to her. She would enjoy listening to her Mother read as she churned butter, and came to expect it as well. Welty explained, "...the churning sobbed along with any story. It was my ambition to have her read to me while I churned; once she granted my wish..." (182). In contrast to Welty's parents, my mother worked often. It seemed like the only

reading she ever did was of bills and child support letters. My Mother's knowledge of reading and writing wasn't the best. I believe she relied on my school to teach me the necessities of reading and writing. I feel as if she would of read to me, we both would have been more efficient in reading. So being educated at home is excessively important in a young child's life. When parents don't want to make the effort neither will the child.

Having the means to afford literature in your home is a crucial part of early education. If you don't have books, how are you to learn the significance of reading and writing? To afford good books is one thing; to disregard buying books is another story. Welty explains, "Neither of my parents had come from homes that could afford to buy many books, but though I must have been...a strain on his salary...my Father was all the while carefully selecting and ordering away for what he and Mother thought we children should grow up with." (182 & 183) Welty's parents cared about their child's development. They wanted the absolute best for her. They gave her start to a satisfying life. In regards to not affording books like Welty's Grandparents, mine were the very same. My Grandparents could not afford books for their fifteen children. So in a sense you could say that they all suffered from lack of book smarts. If one thing is passed down more than once, it will be passed on again. My Mother and her brothers and sisters were not read to as children. So why would it be decisive to read to me at a young age? It seems the importance of books was not acknowledged in my family life for generations. Being a single Mother and working the overnight shift there was never any time to read a book. My Mother struggled to put food on the table. I was lucky to get anything when I did. Not being introduced to books early can give a child of an adult who wasn't read to a huge disadvantage. Having the money to buy books so that your child's mind can explore is awesome. Not having money to buy books is just one of those things that are out of your control as a child. It would be up to me at that point to explore or not.

Parents, in every sense, build and modify us. They praise in joy for A's & B's, but ground

you for D's & F's. But the ones that are grounded, is it their entire fault? Bringing a good education into a child's life is one of the greatest gifts you can give them. Parents who work together can shape their children's lives forever. The sad truth though is not everyone is brought up this way. Increasing knowledge into the small brain has time and time again been proven affective. Leaving out this early knowledge now can be harder for the big brain to comprehend. Welty indicates, "I live in gratitude to my parents for initiating me – as early as I begged for it...into knowledge of the word, into reading and spelling...They taught it to me at home in time for me to begin to read before starting to school." (185) Bringing it to her early, gave her a head start. In gratitude she thanks them for making her life extra special. My Mother did the very best she could for me. We didn't have the reading and writing materials needed, but she instilled what she could for me.

Every home life is different. Children grow and learn through their teachings. They blossom through experiences, the good and bad. Being brought up in a world of pages and words can take you to imaginable places. Welty recites, "...the Book of Kells, all the wizardry of letter, initial, and word swept over me a thousand times over, and the illumination, the gold, seemed a part of the word's beauty and holiness that had been there from the start." (185) the passion of a book and feeling the words is indescribable. Being able to put the words together and understand them, to me is amazing.

In a nutshell being exposed to reading and writing at a young age is priceless. When the means are not available though, it can be strenuous. Parents want the very best for their children. Some just can't, won't, or don't care. It is a sad part of knowledge and learning we and they are missing out on.



## My Two Chocolate Ghosts

Bobbi Dickerson

It was supposed to be a productive day. I had plans to get my house in order. Plans that would make my house and family run smoother. After all, I was a stay at home mom and that was my job. I was to be super mom, super wife and super woman all in one. Today was the day, that all these great roles were going to be accomplished or at least I thought.

My day started off pretty routinely. It was a beautiful sunny morning. There was a peacefulness, the kind of peace that drapes throughout the house early in the morning. I knew it would not last long once the kids woke up, so I enjoyed this time usually with a cup of coffee and my husband. We always took this time together because we have hardly ever gotten any time to ourselves. We have always had a child somewhere between us. It was always just this way.

When my husband left for work, I knew I would not have much time before our two girls woke up. It was better for me to get as much done in the house while they were sleeping because they required so much of my time. Don't get me wrong, I am not complaining or anything; being a mom is a big responsibility and my girls make it challenging and interesting.

My girls are good girls, but they do have an ornery streak. The apple did not fall very far from the tree. Let me tell you, their dad can be just as ornery. They definitely did not get it from me. I love them but they can be a handful. The girls are exactly two years and twenty days apart. Mikayla, age four, is a vibrant, bubbly, strong-willed child and she loves to talk. Brooklynn or Roo for short, age two is a quiet, but thoughtful, funny child.

These two had figured out at very young age, if they teamed up and worked against me, they could get a whole lot more past me. One of their many pranks happened while Grandpa and I were talking during a visit. Mikayla snuck

into the kitchen, found the scissors and cut Roo's curly hair. Mikayla was lucky Grandpa was there to save her that day. Poor Roo looked like a little cancer patient for months with patches of hair missing. Another time, they dared each other to climb higher and higher in our backyard tree until they got stuck and had to be rescued by the fire department.

The girls woke up and uneventfully we did our regular routine which consisted of breakfast, playtime, snuggling and reading a book or two. Before I knew it they were dressed and in the backyard playing. This day was awesome. Everything was working out great, and it was just as I had planned. I put a roast in the crock pot with new potatoes. This was one of our favorite family dinners. I started cleaning. I cleaned the house from one end to the other. I washed everything there was to wash. I mopped what needed mopped. I dusted what needed dusted. The only breaks I had were to check on the kids, to get them a drink, or to feed them lunch. I worked up a sweat in the house that day.

By the late afternoon, Mikayla and Roo were watching cartoons in their underwear. I could not keep clothes on those kids. It was a fight I had long given up. I decided just to go with it. I thought if they were still naked by the time they started kindergarten, peer pressure would surely make them get dressed since I could not.

I needed to get the laundry which was down in the basement, so I made an announcement to the girls and proceeded downstairs. It only took a few minutes to change out the washer and dryer. As I came up the stairs with a bucket of laundry, I heard laughter and joy. I thought to myself, "What could possibly be that funny?" It was at that moment that my head popped above the railing and I saw what was supposed to be my couch. I was so shocked all I could say was "Oh My God!" Apparently, when you yell those words and children do not realize you are standing right behind them, it startles them and makes them jump three feet in the air.

As they turned and looked at me with fear, they realized they were so busted. Their little faces and bodies were completely covered

in Hershey's Chocolate Syrup because they had taken two full supersized bottles, emptied them onto my brand new baby blue couch and proceeded to use it as a slide. So now, what once was a beautiful blue couch is now a brown sticky mess. As I tried to wrap my head around what I was seeing, I contemplated how was I ever going to clean this up? I looked at those two girls in disbelief and I growled, "You get back to your rooms and don't you dare come out!" As I said this, the door bell rang and it was my best friend. I think God knew I needed help and sent someone. Either that or He knew the kids needed to be saved. She saw what kind of mess I was in. She helped me get the kids situated in the back room and then she went home and left me to the cleaning. I think she was even overwhelmed at my dilemma.

Without thinking I just started pulling cushion covers off the couch. What else could I do, but just throw the covers in my washing machine and pray they did not shrink. I took towels and Pine Sol water, and started scrubbing the rest of the couch. I cleaned and I cleaned. I cleaned for hours on that couch. It was never the same after that, but I did manage to get it back to at least being presentable. Thank God the covers did not shrink.

Just as I was about finished, a big white cloud came bounding down the hall. In this white cloud were Mikayla and Roo looking like they had been tarred and feathered. Apparently, the Hershey Syrup just wasn't enough. They had gotten into a supersize bottle of baby powder they had found in my bathroom, and hit the sides to make a storm cloud. The result of hitting a baby powder container enough times is powder shooting up and out and covering you and everything else in the room. That is what my children had been doing the entire time I had been cleaning the couch. Now they looked like little chocolate ghosts.

It was at that moment when it happened. I emotionally broke! I lay on the floor laughing and crying all at the same time. I felt so powerless to stop what was happening when earlier it had all been under my control. Not only did I feel powerless, but that I was made to feel powerless by a four year old and two year

old. I was older and smarter; how could this be? They had beaten me, and I had surrendered. This also made the kids realize they had pushed mom just a little too far. As I lay in the floor laughing and crying, two very sticky girls that smelled like chocolate and baby powder curled up next to me and said, "We are sorry Mommy. We didn't mean to make you cry." My response to them was "It is ok. Mommy just needs to cry now." I did. I needed to grieve over the loss of my day, my new couch and most importantly the loss of control. I don't know how long we lay in the floor, but now I too was covered in chocolate and baby powder. It was a long time before I was able to pull it together that day, but looking back, I learned sometimes life requires us to surrender because surrendering invokes freedom. By freedom I mean, that day I realized for me to fulfill all the roles I needed to, it did not require a check list, I just simply needed to live and love come what may. Yes, they had made a horrific mess, but couches could be replaced. My girls could not. I was finally free to be the good wife and mother, but more so a great role model for my girls. They had also learned if they wanted Hershey's chocolate syrup they would need to go to Grandma's house, because over my dead body will it be at my house ever again.

I put my two sticky kids in the bath. Getting all that syrup out of their hair was no easy task. I must have refilled the bath water at least three times. After their bath and dinner, it was bedtime. There is nothing sweeter than a sleeping child.

It wasn't long before my husband came home. He was always so kind to ask about my day, even though most of the time my answer never changed. Today he was in for a treat. There was still plenty of evidence of the day because frankly, I was too exhausted to do any more cleaning. When he walked in, he saw a small glimpse. He could taste baby powder in the air and see footprints in our hallway. He got the full scope of my day when he got back to our bedroom, turned the corner and glanced into the bathroom. He responded with, "Holy Hell! It looks like a powder bomb went off in there! What happened?" I began explaining the day's events and he wanted to know if I had taken

pictures. I could not believe after all I had been through that he wanted pictures, but he thought they would make great ammunition for blackmail someday. That is the lesson though: when life happens have your camera ready.



## Nonreader to Scholar...My Path

Bobbi Dickerson

Throughout the course of my life, my educational experience has been like a roller coaster, nothing definitive but still having boundaries especially when it came to reading. As a small child I was eager to learn to read, write and communicate through words. Teachers played a vital role in my journey towards literacy. Some teachers were excellent educators and I have even made lasting friendships into adulthood with a few. These teachers taught me to push for higher standards when I was a beginning reader; when it could have been easier for me to give up. Some teachers never challenged me, made me want to quit and not ever read again. Some teachers were inspirations, some hindered me but they all helped shape me into a perfectionist state of mind. The journey was not easy traveling the road from nonreader to scholar, but I credit all the teachers who directed my path in becoming one.

Perfectionists are people who strain compulsively and unremittingly towards impossible goals, and who measure their own self worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishments toward these goals. I am not sure if perfectionists are born or created. Barbara Charline Jordan, in "Becoming Educated," wrote about the pressures of being the first African American woman who was accepted into Boston University as a law student. Jordan stated, "I felt that in order to compensate for what I had missed in earlier years, I would have to work harder, and study longer, than anybody else (Jordan 212)." Being a perfectionist, I can relate to Jordan, because it feels as though I will never be as smart as the next guy due to the teachers who never challenged me during my high school years. Or maybe it is as Gail Godwin describes as she struggles with her critical thoughts and feelings as she tries to overcome her writers block in her essay "The Watcher at the Gates," "It's amazing the lengths a Watcher will go to keep you from

pursuing the flow of your imagination (Godwin 223).” Maybe it is both, I am not sure when my Watcher posted his guard, but somehow he crept in. Perfectionism made his home and I have spent my life trying to overcome and keep him at bay. Sometimes I have succeeded, other times I have failed. Sometimes he has helped me succeed. Other times he has been my worst enemy and prevented me from staying on my path towards becoming a reader.

I remember being a small child, even before I could put letters together. My favorite toy in the world was a chalkboard; my favorite song was the ABC’s. I would write a mix match of letters on it, usually ABC and say to my sisters, “What does that say?” I was hoping that I had spelled something, but to no avail I had not.

Starting Kindergarten to me was a big deal. That is where I was going to finally learn how to read and put that chalkboard to use. My kindergarten teacher was Mrs. Lovelace. She was every bit of what her name represents. Everything she did was laced with love. She taught me how to write my ABC’s correctly. She not only taught me to write them correctly, but she also taught me what each sound was. I would practice them daily on my dotted lined paper until I could write them perfectly. Now I could go and write them proudly on my chalkboard with ease. That made me excited. That was my first recollection of my Watcher’s initial appearance where he pushed me to accomplish my desired goal of learning to spell.

From Kindergarten to first grade, things changed drastically. My belief that all teachers were kind and loving was shattered when my first grade teacher was Mrs. Beers. She smelled of cigarettes and spit. I was unable to read rhythmically as she wanted me to. I tried, but I was just learning. I would occasionally stumble over my words. One day as I stumbled she stopped the entire class, pulled me over to her desk and wrote a note. While handing me the note, she scolded me saying, “You will give this to your mother tonight or you will have swats first thing tomorrow morning.” I was horrified. First, that she would do this in front of the class, and second, that I would get swats for reading. At least, that was my interpretation. I took the

note home to my mother, she signed it and my mother brought the note back herself the next day. The powerful lesson I learned that year was the power of the teacher’s pen and its hold over my life. I believe that day had an effect that I feel even today. My Watcher still reminds me to fear the “almighty” teacher’s red pen.

My second grade teacher, Mrs. Snodgrass, loved me unconditionally. It was during reading class when I discovered this. I was reading the story when she noticed I could not say the word puppet. Unlike, Mrs. Beers, Mrs. Snodgrass kept me after class, and lovingly worked with me for what must have been an half an hour before I could say the word correctly. It seemed like an impossible goal, one that I would never attain, but with her love and determination she helped me with the pronunciation of my words forming me into a better reader.

I remember listening to Mrs. Snodgrass read stories. Listening to her read was like watching a movie unfold. I always wanted to be able to read a story like that. I can remember listening and being in awe of her talent. It was in her class that I read my first book, *Little House on the Prairie, On the Banks of Plum Creek* by Laura Ingalls Wilder. This book came to life for me. It was not just how the story unfolded, but I could relate it back to the way Mrs. Snodgrass would read out loud. Reading became an adventure that year similar to Richard Rodriguez in “The Lonely, Good Company of Books” when his teacher had commented to Rodriguez that he had nothing to fear and she had asked him, “Didn’t I realize that reading would open up whole new worlds? A book could open doors for me (Rodriguez 232).” Reading would have been my door if I had more teachers like Mrs. Lovelace and Mrs. Snodgrass that were able to inspire me and direct my path, but too many times that was not the case.

My home life played a major role in my literacy. I was the youngest of four children. My dad had a high school education and my mother dropped out at the age of thirteen. She always stressed the importance of education. It was never an option for us not to have one. I think the lack of her having a diploma made it all the more important for us to have one. We

were often told we could be anything we wanted to be as long as we worked hard and were willing to put forth the effort. However, sometimes the messages my parents sent were quite confusing to us. They told us to stand up for what we believed in, be educated and be able to defend it. Unless, we differed in opinion from our father, then we were just stupid. This gives a very mixed signal to a little girl that had just been told she could be anything she wanted to be. It is just how Gloria Naylor describes the mixed messages she receives in "The Love of Books." She wrote,

We do not have to say to our children, "You are nothing." We don't have to stand up in an auditorium, on a parade ground, and blatantly shout out to them, "You have nothing to give." We have done this much more effectively, through silence, through what they do not see, through what is not there when we parade before them what we declare is worthy. It is a very effective message. It was the one that I received. And I received it from well-meaning people, who thought I was bright, I had a future, I had promise (Naylor 229).

I too got a very effective message. My watcher told me that I was stupid and if I was going to amount to anything I had to be perfect at everything. If I was not, then why try.

According to these standards and my previous experiences, reading was a bust. I was smart enough though that I learned how to play the game of Jr. High and High School and no teacher ever challenged me at the game. I accomplished going through my entire school career only reading that one Little House on the Prairie Book and still graduated at the top of my class. I did not have a teacher like Russell Baker who wrote about his experience in "Learning to Write." It was his English teacher, Mr. Fleagle, who challenged him and gave him options and choices of essay topics. Baker wrote,

I took the list home and dawdled until the night before the essay

was due. Sprawled on the sofa, I finally faced up to the grim task, took the list out of my notebook, and scanned it. The topic on which my eye stopped was "The Art of Eating Spaghetti" (Baker 220).

I can remember my English teacher assigning books like Romeo and Juliet and Moby-Dick. Fiction books like that still make me cringe. I would skim it, take the test and ace it. It was not hard. The negative aspects of my watcher had taken his hold. Although, my Watcher would not let me fail, my spirit was broken. I would have done anything for a teacher like Mr. Fleagle. I would have loved to write essays. I would have been a writing fool. I think what amazes me more than anything is my parents never asked, "Why don't you have homework?" Or "Why don't you ever read?" They never went to the school and talked to my teachers and said, "Why doesn't she have homework or read?" I know if my child today was never challenged and kept coming home consistently without homework or a book, I would be calling the teacher and asking questions.

The saddest part of my high school experience was my senior year. I worked thirteen years, kindergarten to senior year, to graduate and then not one teacher approached me about going to college. I graduated at the top of my class. I was never told about taking my SAT's. Again, my watcher reinforced the fact, that I was stupid and that I was not "perfect" or good enough to go to college.

It was not until four years after high school, I was grieving the death of my grandmother that the ground work for reading became a significant factor in my life. My grandma had always been a refuge to me. She was a mother figure. I felt that God had taken the one person who had truly loved me unconditionally away. I was very angry and one night as I lay in bed, I prayed that He help me to trust again. That night in a dream, my grandma came to me and said, "God may have taken my spirit, cancer may have taken my body, but you will always have my love." She then gave me a hug and she was gone. I woke up from that dream not angry anymore. I do not

know if it was my grandma or not, but I do know God knew what I needed to hear.

Five years later, as I was studying to become a minister, I was reading the Bible 1Corinthians 13:8 "Love never fails." In other translations it says, "love never dies." Right then it happened. I traveled back five years earlier to the dream of my grandma; that is what she was telling me. I had made the connection that love never dies. This gave me a burning desire to know more about this God that was love and only wanted good things for me. The more I read and discovered, the more I wanted to share and teach others. I had a heart for teenagers and wanted to share God's love with them. Reading and studying the Bible lead me to a two year mission trip in southern Louisiana in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. While there, my family and I helped to rebuild the affected area by building homes, porches and painting houses. It is as Dave Eggers describes in his book *Zeitoun* regarding one family's survival of Hurricane Katrina. Edgar writes,

He must trust, and he must have faith. And so he builds because what is building, and rebuilding and rebuilding again, but an act of faith? There is no faith like the faith of a builder of homes in Coastal Louisiana. And there is no better way to prove to god and neighbor that you were there, that you are there, that you are human, than to build (Eggers 324).

It is exactly that. To build a home for a Katrina victim meant rebuilding their faith where it was once broken. My job was simply to try and restore some kind of peace where there was none. We did this by trying to bring some normalcy back into the community. We had weekly youth gatherings to remind Katrina victims that God still loved them despite their circumstances. We held fun activities where kids could come hang out and be without the pressures that life brought since Katrina's visit. I fell in love with the people; it is something I still miss even today. I lived the impossible dream. It was something everyone told me I couldn't do. "People just don't pack up their children and

move across the country to help strangers, Bobbi." They said. It was an impossible goal. Maybe for some it would be. For my Watcher, it had become a challenge. Being told it was impossible made him want to stand his ground and prove them wrong. He had a mission and he was determined.

It was my experience with the people of New Orleans and their lack of medical care that brought me to MWSU to seek my degree in nursing. It has always been something that I toyed with. I was told that most doctors and nurses left after the storm, the average wait to receive medical care is one to two months. After my mission trip ended, my mission then became to seek a nursing degree.

I always knew my grandma's love had power in my life, but I never knew until this essay what impact reading the Bible had. Love never dies. I would say it has not. This essay should be proof to anyone that it is not in the amount of words used. It is in the impact with which the words are used that makes all the difference. As far as a perfectionist being born or created, I don't know if I figured that out. I think if anything, I would have to say my perfectionism is probably a little of both. I do think I will always feel as Jordan felt, that I will always be playing catch up in some form or fashion, but as Godwin struggles with her Watcher I like mine posted right where he is at. I do know if it were not for the teachers shaping me into a scholar through my educational experiences, the good and the bad, that I would not be in college today. However, I will leave you with this; Naylor wrote, in her essay "The Love of Books," about her plans for the rest of her life and how she plans to communicate not just in written words but through the stage. She wrote,

I will always have stories to tell. They may not be good stories; they may not be bad stories. But I would like to believe that I will always tell honest stories and that to the lives that come to me I will somehow do them justice (Naylor 231).

My hope is through my path of education here at MWSU and in seeking a nursing degree

that I too will have stories to share and tell. Stories that will touch lives and those lives, through me, will be forever changed for the better. It's hard to believe that the path can be traced back to a little song and simple chalkboard. ABCDEFG...



## Against the Odds on Longer School Days

Bobbi Dickerson

I can remember when I was a high school student looking at the clock and counting it down, thinking to myself how much longer until this class is over. Sometimes I would not even hear what was being taught or be able to concentrate on my work. Since 2008, President Obama and Education Secretary Duncan have supported longer school days giving students more time in the classroom. Education reformers agree that more time in school is essential. Although, I will agree secondary education needs to be reformed, educators and parents need to look at what is working for teachers and students. Gambling with the future of students is unacceptable. Parents and Educators need to seriously take into account the effectiveness of the longer school days and shorter school weeks and the impact it will have on the student's academics.

One program that has received much national attention is the Expanded learning Time Initiative, otherwise known as ELT in Massachusetts. This program added 300 hours to the school year in 22 schools that participated. Each school took a full year to plan how to best use the extra time. The cost was \$1,300 per child and was paid through state resources.

Edwards Middle School in Boston was set to close due to low math test scores. In the Christian Science Monitor, Amanda Paulson reported,

The school used ELT funds to add four hours a week of math instruction – including less-traditional methods. Now, it's outperforming the state average in math and cut its language-arts achievement gap by 80 percent (Paulson 3).

This example shows how the extended day helped improve the school, but I believe the extended day added more than just an hour or two of teaching and studying. It also

exemplifies how they used their time effectually even if that meant using less traditional methods.

The late Senator Edward Kennedy introduced a bill called the TIME Act in hoping for a national program. I believe a bill for this kind of reform would need to be tested in far more reaching areas than just one state before implementing it for an entire nation. According to Paulson's article, Frederick Hess, the director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington says, "Replicating the Massachusetts model nationally could cost \$50 billion a year (Paulson 3)." If Hess' statistics are correct then I believe before we implement a new program we need to look how much we are willing to gamble with our children's futures.

Miami Dade County Public School district in Florida, which consists of 39 schools, also implemented the ELT program. The school system found very little improvement to show for its investment. After one year, the district compared the 39 schools that had participated with another 39 schools that had similar demographics. They found the Miami Dade Public Schools tests scores were higher only in writing and then only by a small margin.

Many accounts that came from the Florida School district regarding the ELT program were negative. According to the article,

Longer School Day and Year Trials Yield Different Results" by Don Parker-Burgard reported that, "Student and teachers alike reported exhaustion from the extra hour per day, and many students stopped attending school altogether once summer vacation began at the district's other schools (Parker-Burgard 10).

There were other details of high achieving students feeling like they were being punished for something they had not done. It is not conducive to learning when students are anxiety prone for being unjustly punished and needing a break. This is something I do not want for our nation's student body.

Fifty Billion dollars a year is a lot of money to spend when states are looking to cut budgets wherever they can, which makes school districts have to do the same. This year alone we have had record number of budget cuts and school districts across the nation have been trying to find a way to make the ends meet. The first school to attempt a four day week and longer school days in Missouri is the Lathrop School District. My children attend Lathrop. It has been a big adjustment this year on the community. The School Board's reason for making this decision is to save one percent of this year's budget which is a mere \$120,000. School starts at 7:50 a.m. and ends at 3:48 p.m. Tuesday through Friday which added 78 minutes per day. Similar to the ELT program, Lathrop added an estimated 300 minutes per week. Across the State of Missouri, school districts are watching for what happens in the Lathrop District because if the longer days and shorter weeks work for them, other schools will be switching for budget reasons also.

With any change or reform comes adjustment. Unlike ELT, setting up the four day school week for Lathrop did not include parental input with the exception of a survey and the final decision when a community board meeting was held. It took the entire Performing Arts Center, which holds approximately 200 people, at the Lathrop Middle School to hold the crowd and mass media.

I have heard positive comments from parents regarding the longer school day and shorter week. Parents like having Mondays off so they can make appointments for their children so the students do not have to miss any school. Parents also like the consistency of the school calendar. They never have to guess whether it is an early out day or wonder if school is in session. In an interview, Kristy Hinshaw, mother of three, said, "Four day school week gets two thumbs up at our house (Hinshaw)." I would say based on these criteria, I would agree with Kristy if that is all we had to base it on.

Talking to parents you would get one aspect, interviewing teachers you would get another side. All teachers consistently said with the four day school week and longer school day, there is less time to plan for tutoring and after

school activities; but having a more traditional school schedule versus a block schedule is a definite advantage. An elementary teacher commented how the longer days allow for more organized MULE times, which consist of enrichment lessons and scheduled academics, compared to prior years. Michelle O'Connor, a Middle School English Teacher reported in an interview,

The biggest part to me is the calendar. No holidays, no early outs, no parent teacher conferences – I get to see my students everyday of the four-day week. I can't say that about previous years, so to me that's the biggest pro (O'Connor).

After hearing the comments from the teachers, even though they were positive, it makes me wonder if the difference is not just being able to use time more wisely because they do not have to schedule around holidays or early outs. I do not see how adding a mere eight minutes to each class can make that much of a difference, but I can understand how the education process could be disrupted by the calendar. Maybe one answer is in making the calendar balance better for both teachers and students.

The district consists of three schools: one at the elementary level, middle school level and high school level. Reports from the middle school at the end of first quarter show more A's and less F's from the students and also reported less discipline problems than previous years. During an interview Chris Fine, Lathrop Middle School Principal said, "We were in position for the perfect storm. Our students are excited about being in middle school. They want to go to school because it's a new experience for them (Fine)." Fine and I also discussed how reports are now starting to emerge how, across the United States, middle school age children are quicker to adjust and usually excel when placed in a shorter school week and longer school day situation. Maybe the success of the students has to do with the attitudes with which they approach their education. Everyone does what is important to them.

Reports coming from both Elementary level and Middle School level show Lathrop

students excelling from parental and educator view points. However, the opinions were not as favorable from the parents at the high school level regarding the four day school week. In an interview Tammy Paxton, mother of two, commented regarding the high school, "Communication is lacking, homework is too much on these kids and educators don't seem to care about the pressures they are putting on them (Paxton)." Frustrations regarding the high school seem to be higher than any other level of education. I believe it is from parents and students not feeling as if they are being heard. The spot light is on the high school to perform. Students are supposed to be being prepped for college but most underclassmen are not passing basic algebra classes. Every district in Missouri is waiting to see how well Lathrop's academic reports are this year versus previous years. I believe that pressure to perform well is passed on to the students and it is showing in the student's expressed anxiety.

One continual theme from the student body is the overwhelming load of homework that high school students are receiving on a daily basis. Despite having seminar, which is daily time, 30 minutes, set aside to work on homework or get help in a subject; students are still struggling to accomplish all that is being assigned. Sophomore, Amelia Gustin reported in an email,

I get worn out by seminar and I tend to get off track because I'm just exhausted from doing school work. Then I get home and end up stressed because time is an issue and homework is loaded (Gustin).

Some students are using seminar for a much needed break in their day. Other students commented on how the overwhelming homework load was making it impossible to be involved in afterschool activities and hold a job. Students were going to have to make a choice between being involved or earning money to put away for college. Time constraints would not allow for both. The smallest but yet most powerful voice are the voices of the students and ones most likely not to be heard. Students are crying out for some reprieve or mercy.

Educators need to pay attention to the needs of the students. Homework is essential in every class, but is all homework relative? I believe that is the question every educator needs to be asking before assigning their next assignment because not every crossword puzzle or word search is necessary.

According to the world, America falls short and we need to step up education. Our answer to the problem is longer days and when budget problems persist shorter weeks and even longer days still. We have a country full of under paid teachers who use personal time to grade papers, record grades and plan lessons. In the article "Stuck In School" written by Gregg Sacon, he wrote, "According to a recent Health Magazine poll, "high school teacher" is the most stressful job in America (Sacon 2)." Maybe it is the most stressful because teachers are told they get three day weekends but then they have to use the Mondays for professional development, tutoring, planning extra lessons and grading the extra homework. There was a time when teachers used to get home before rush hour and had summers off to restore their skills and refresh their minds. Now these benefits are fading away. Try convincing the basketball coach, who is driving home at 9 p.m. after practice to grade papers and plan lessons, that longer school days are better for her student's education. I bet she might disagree.

The longer school day along with the shorter school week definitely has its conveniences for those families who enjoy Mondays off, but sacrificing our children's education for a few accommodations is not worth it. While some issues could be handled regarding unnecessary homework, I still believe students should have a platform to voice their concerns and an advocate who offers support, direction and helps them communicate their needs. In the mean time, the school administrators need to properly support teachers with the appropriate staff so personal time can genuinely be used accordingly, but then how much money will we truly be saving. Change is hard work and it takes a community working together to bring it about. With education not being a priority on the national agenda, Congress continues to squander funding

and school districts continue to suffer. The stakes are high for this generation considering they will have the most technology. Hopefully we, as parent and educators, will be able to provide the resources for an equivalent education. America is in a race, the horse has left the starting gate, the clock is ticking, but my bet is not on the longer school days or shorter school weeks.



## Unfocused Focus

Penny Elifrits

I wonder how many of my former classmates look at our yearbook and think, "What the hell was I thinking?" I remember halls full of aqua net hair, Madonna-Laufer inspired outfits, mullets and Concert T's worn expertly with Levi 501's because they accentuated the retreating view the best. I spent more time getting ready in one morning than I did on my homework the whole year. The ritual of getting ready to go anywhere would make Queen Liz herself cuss a blue streak. My dad, who has never been accused of being patient, would threaten to leave without me all the time. I am sure the only reason he didn't is because he knew he would have to endure at least a day of my tortured, going to die on the spot, teenage drama show antics. I was so good at that, my mom recently told me I should have given lessons.

I flashed back on all this after reading an essay for college. It was Leonid Fridman's, "America Needs Its Nerds." He stated a case of how it was more important to be good at anything, but being smart. His definition of geek, which is also from the "Webster's New World Dictionary," is "a street performer who shocks the public by biting heads off of live chickens." (Fridman 209) After reading this I thought it sounded more like a description of me, not a geek. I have never bitten the head off a chicken, but I would have given my granny boots to have seen Ozzy do it. He also refers to the fact that it is more acceptable to be athletic and irresponsible, than it is to be academic or have an innocent hobby. This is sadly true. If you couldn't handle your liquor and made a fool of yourself over the weekend it was the main topic of the school hallways, not what was assigned reading in literature class on Friday. I was guilty of this myself; I probably couldn't have told you what was even assigned. "Our fault lies not so much with our politics as within ourselves, our values and our image of a good life. America's

culture has not adapted to the demands of our times, to the economic realities that demand a highly educated workforce and innovative intelligent leadership." (Fridman 210) This statement speaks monuments as to why intelligence, knowledge and the dedication of hard work is more important than who your friends are and what they are wearing.

My fifteen year old son came home one night from school and he was talking to me about who everyone thought their king and queen candidates would be for homecoming his senior year. He didn't mention himself and I immediately thought of this essay. I wanted to see if he could relate to what the author was saying and maybe compare it to his life right now. He is an A student and very mature for his age. Amazingly he didn't get the importance of Fridman's essay, which proves to me the author's theory. I questioned him about what he thought of the essay and he said he didn't understand why I had him read it. I am wondering if there shouldn't be some kind of social skills class in grade school. If they can figure out algebra in the early development of their brains, then they could understand sociology and the basics of human kindness and compassion for one another. I have noticed some of my friends' daughters, who are just starting kindergarten, acting like they own the world and everyone owes them. I know a lot of this stems from discipline and teaching them the right way, so this tells me their parents still buy into this theory. There are millions of dollars spent each year on acceleration sports camps, team uniforms, football cleats and basketball shoes, however, when the child asks its family to sign up for a trivia bowl or go to a brain bowl, very few show up. I have actually told my son, "I don't have the money to go to "Borders" book store," when we had just gotten out of a crazy movie that cost me a total of sixty dollars. I know we need the fun of being free of thinking and letting our proverbial hair down, I just wonder if maybe we should take a minute or two to think about what we want for our children in the future. If we want them to truly be the best they can be and have a better life then perhaps education should be the first on our lists and sports, video games and movies should be

second. It would be unrealistic to say all of these things need to go, I am not saying that at all. We all need a break. Like Fridman says, "Do we really expect to stay afloat largely by importing our scientists and intellectuals from abroad?" (Fridman 210) I am saying, we should refocus our attention, support our children and help them to be exportable.

My best friend in high school was what we considered the nerd. She was never flashy or into what we called fashion. She was more interested in acing a test than perfecting the application of seven different eye shadow colors applied in rainbow fashion or getting her mascara to look like Lita Ford's. I thought at the time it was extremely lame of her, to be honest. However, my teen ego would never have let me realize that she was the one I should have been modeling myself after and looking up to. Fridman states, "Nerds are ostracized while athletes are idolized." (Fridman 210) It happens that my friend was also good at sports; it seemed she excelled at whatever she decided to do. I think it came down to her determination to succeed and wanting to do her best no matter what she was doing or what others said. I would like to thank her; not only did she help me with my homework and keep me on track academically, she kept track of me at parties and listened to me every time I got my heart broke. I have recognized what a fabulously important person she was in my life. In a way she is helping me now; over the years, I have thought about my friend and wished I would have been more like her. I am glad she was the nerd or I wouldn't have graduated high school at the level I did. I wasn't stupid; I was just so involved in myself and the social aspects of high school to realize the importance of an education. I now realize that she was more than just a friend, she was my hero. She was not a nerd; she was a grounded, smart, beautiful, funny, intelligent teenager.

Looking back, if I had spent more time studying and less time worrying about what others were doing, I think I would have been more focused and had a lot less issues in my adult life. "How long can America remain a world-class power if we constantly emphasize social skills and physical prowess over academic achievement and intellectual ability?" (Fridman

210) This is a good point. I am sure that poise and good social skills help when dealing with the powers of foreign lands. I seriously doubt, however, they would take someone serious that couldn't point out their current location on a map or what country they were in. I spent my whole high school career on dates, at parties and worried about being popular and accepted. If I had just been myself, what would have happened? Would I have disappeared from earth; would I have been shunned; would I have been an outcast? Who cares! I can only think of a few people in my high school that have become successful. They would be the ones that knew to focus on what was important: education, a career and the realization that there was a life to be lived after high school. They could dedicate themselves to something and follow through. I still have trouble with focus and planning, my ability to get sidetracked is staggering. I can go to Walmart for groceries and come out with a gallon of milk and toilet tissue; go to pick my son up from school and go to my shop instead, walk in the door and wonder, "What am I doing here?" Only then do I remember where I was going and what I was doing. I know some of this is genetic, but most is from the lack of discipline in my younger years. You never hear of someone waking up smart. It is a lifetime achievement. I have life experience and knowledge of how people react and behave. I will soon have the knowledge of text books, the ability to be on time and hopefully learn some important organization skills. This is my starting point. I want to be a nerd!



## My First Love

Aja Fields

At some point in time everyone will come in contact with a person who will forever make an impact on their life. That impact can be good, or it can be bad. It can even be a little of both since people say a little good comes from even the worst situations. I guess that's true because the person that impacted my life didn't do this in the way you might think. This person hurt me physically, mentally, and emotionally but at the same time I wouldn't be who I am today had I never met him.

His name was Christian, Christian Ryan Leonard and we met in January almost two years ago. He had light caramel colored skin, beautiful dark brown eyes, and long girly eye lashes. He wasn't very tall, maybe about five foot six so it was never hard for me to reach up and wrap my arms around his neck for a hug or reach his lips for a kiss. He dressed funky most of the time, and his outfits consisted of jeans with a rainbow belt, small t-shirts with different characters such as Pokémon, cookie monster, and Elmo. He wore "skate shoes" with yellow and red laces, loved rock music and had a talent and a passion for skateboarding. Christian was like no one I had ever met and that's what attracted me to him. He was like a breath of fresh air and I was curious, but you know what they say. "Curiosity killed the cat". My curiosity wouldn't kill me but it would come pretty damn close.

The first time I saw Christian was on Facebook. I was good friends with his cousin Morgan and was on her page looking at pictures. There was one of the two of them and he was making the strangest face and pointing his finger at her while she smirked and looked straight at the camera. For some reason I found this to be hilarious and I sat at me computer laughing and wondering who he was and why he was making such an outrageous face. That's where my curiosity came into play. I thought he was pretty cute too and decided to ask Morgan about him. About a week later I saw her and asked about him. She said "Oh girl that's my cousin

Christian, you want his number"? This is how everything started and Christian and I ended up having our first conversation later on that night. It seemed like all we did is laugh and joke around with each other, and we found that we had a lot in common like music, food, and cartoons. He had a great sense of humor too because when he asked me to send a picture of myself to his phone I sent a picture of Edna from the movie "The Incredibles" and said "I hope you aren't too disappointed" he found it pretty funny and declared a "pic war". That conversation was one of the best we would ever have besides the conversation when he asked me to his girlfriend. That came a week later and of course I said yes. After that we hung out for the first time and it was amazing. People told us we might be moving too fast but we were too happy to care. Christian had everything I wanted in a guy and then some. I could tell him anything and he never judged me. He was my best friend and even though we had just met, I was in love with him. The best part about it was that he claimed to have those same feelings for me, so what could be better?

The first few months of our relationship were amazing, Christian and I were together almost every day and when we weren't together we were texting or talking. I felt like the luckiest girl in the world but all too soon my world would be turned upside down and I would have to upright it, or allow it to come crashing down on me.

About four months after we had been together I found out I wasn't the only one he was involved with. He had another girlfriend the entire time and I had no clue about her until she called my cellphone demanding to know "who the hell I was". I was extremely sad and hurt. It hurt even more when I saw her. Her name was Melanie. She was short, and heavyset with a bad attitude, a smart mouth, and was really (for lack of better words) ghetto. As if that wasn't enough I learned

That she was only fifteen. There went my self-esteem. I felt ugly, like maybe I wasn't good enough for Christian. After a heated argument with Melanie and then with Christian, I ended the relationship. It was hard at first, and I cried every day for a month and walked around

miserable. I eventually came out of it though, and somewhat began to move on. He never called to apologize for what he had done and I didn't hear from him again until November, seven months later.

Looking back at the situation I realize that there were red flags from Christian, I just chose to ignore them. I pushed them back to the back of my mind and told myself it didn't mean anything when he walked into a different room to answer his cellphone, or when he suddenly became too "busy" and "tired" to answer my calls or take the time to return them. I accepted his excuses to make myself feel better and I never should have done that. I simply should have seen Christian for who and what he was, accepted that he wasn't the one for me, and moved on with my life, but at the time I wasn't ready to let go.

He contacted me through Facebook and we agreed to meet at the park around the corner from his house so we could talk about what happened. I was a little nervous at first because I hadn't seen him in a while and even though I had a new boyfriend I still wasn't quite over Christian. He surprised me by actually showing up because I was expecting to be stood up. We sat under a shelter and talked about what happened. I was still angry and hurt so it was hard for me to make eye contact with him, but I had a question that needed to be answered. I wanted to know why he cheated and when I asked, he replied "honestly I've always had a problem with cheating, but usually I end up telling on myself before it goes too far, but with you it was different. I didn't want you to go". Ignoring my emotions, I told him I thought he was selfish for not telling me the truth. He agreed, admitting that he was wrong and gave me what I wanted, an apology. We agreed to be friends and made plans to watch a movie at his house on Tuesday of the next week. Why not? I had a boyfriend who I was really into and Christian wasn't ready to be in another relationship at that time since him and Melanie had broken up. The fact that he had cheated on me was enough to keep me from wanting to go that route with him again so I didn't see any harm in the friendship or us hanging out. My mother on the other hand saw it differently.

I remember coming home later that day and telling her that Christian wanted to be friends. Her words were "I understand you still want him in your life, and it's good that he apologized, but Aja some people just don't deserve a second chance". "I'm not going to tell you that you can't talk to him but personally I look like after what he did, he doesn't deserve even your friendship". I told her she fusses too much but now I wished I would've listened, mother knows best.

Tuesday came around and I headed to Christian's house. When I pulled into the driveway he was standing on the porch barefoot wearing pajama pants and a white tank top. I remember chuckling to myself and thinking "what a freak, some things will never change". As I got out of the car he greeted me and we walked into the house chatting casually like old times. He popped in "Transformers" and we sat on the bed and watched. About fifteen minutes into the movie he turned toward me and said "can I just kiss you already"? I replied hastily with a sharp "no, and if you try anything, I'll kick you in the balls". He laughed and said "okay, okay I promise I won't", I believed him. We turned back to the movie and five minutes later he was grabbing my ankle and complimenting me on my hairless legs. "your skin looks so smooth", and after smelling my hair, "you smell amazing". I kicked him then but only in the leg and threatened to leave if he didn't stop. I wish I would've just left right then and there because I think I could've saved myself from his bad intentions.

Anyone who knows me well knows that I am extremely ticklish. Christian knew this too, and when he began to tickle me, I laughed until I cried and flipped and flopped all over the bed like a fish out of water. I moved so wildly that I ended up falling back on the bed and bumping my head against the wall. Christian had me right where he wanted me, on his bed and on my back. I was still laughing even though he had stopped tickling me and when I looked at him he had this look on his face, like he wanted something from me. I abruptly stopped laughing and tried to sit up while saying "alright, that's enough". Instead of moving to the side Christian leaned towards my face and tried to kiss me. I

got mad, turned my head and tried to wiggle away, but he caught me both of my wrists and flattened his body on top of mine, pinning me to the bed. "Christian stop it dammit, I have a boyfriend". "Come on Aja you know you want to, you've been with me before". I said no and asked him again to stop. My voice was beginning to elevate but for some reason I didn't feel the need to scream. Sometimes I wonder why I didn't scream but honestly, I don't think anyone would've heard me since there was no one in the house except us, so what difference would it have made?

At some point I realized Christian wasn't going to stop and began to panic. I got even more panicky when he reached down and pulled my black basketball shorts down along with my underwear. My mind was racing and I squirmed trying to move away from him but his weight was keeping me pinned to the bed. I cried and kept asking him to leave me alone. It seemed like he had done this to someone before me because he moved quickly and with a purpose. He pulled his pants down with one hand and that's when I felt the pain. Sharp pains that hurt enough to make me nauseous while I tried to clamp my legs shut. He was too strong and for ten minutes, I went to hell. I stopped fighting him at some point because the harder I fought the worse the pain got. When it was over he kissed me on the cheek, the way a guy in love would kiss his wife or girlfriend. This act of affection only confused me and made my skin crawl. He moved off me and when I sat up I saw blood on the bottom of his shirt and more on the sheets. Splotches of crimson, and when I moved I could feel it trickle onto the sheets. Christian didn't look at me as I looked around for my clothes and I wonder what he was thinking about at that moment. It didn't matter to me then, I just wanted to get out of that house.

I felt dizzy and dumb as I walked across the hall into the bathroom. I stuffed toilet paper in my underwear to keep from soiling them and I could hardly think straight. I felt sick and dirty, like everyone was watching and laughing at me. I came back into his room, got my phone, and keys and left. He still didn't move. I had to be at work at three that day so that's where I headed. I was in pain and I could feel the bleeding getting

worse but I wasn't sure of what had happened let alone what to do about it. My parents were in New York at the time so they couldn't do anything for me. I wasn't even sure how to describe what had happened. Was it rape? I said no, he refused to stop but at the same time, I kept remembering the kiss he gave me I was confused and needed to talk to someone so I text my friend Caroleena and told her what had happened. Her words were "Aja, he raped you." She was telling me what I already knew but didn't want to accept.

I sat in my car in the parking lot of my job wishing hell on Christian at first but eventually went into the building. I managed to get through the first few hours of my shift but eventually confided in my supervisor Christine who I had been working with for two years and had grown very close to. She then told my administrator there was an emergency with me and that she was taking me to the hospital. Before we went she stopped and picked up Caroleena. Christine drove me to Truman Lakewood and after filling out paperwork on the incident they took me back to the room and examined me. That only thing that made it bearable was Caroleena sitting by my bed and holding my hand. I had bruising and some tearing according to the report and was given medication to prevent two common STD's and pregnancy. They also gave me a list of places that provided free counseling and support groups. God knows I needed them because I was screwed up in the head and walking around like a zombie. It seemed like I would have nothing but dark miserable days ahead and truth be told, I just wanted to lie down and die.

After being released, I went home and stayed in bed for three days. I didn't eat, shower, or brush my teeth. My mother knew what had happened but didn't know how to deal with it so she left me alone. At some point Christian called me acting like nothing had ever happened and acting like the psycho that he is. He talked like we were the best of friends "guess what I did today yo", blah,blah,blah. I finally cut him off and said flatly "why did you do it". There was nothing but silence at first, graveyard silence. His reply was "I thought you wanted to". I laughed with an edge of bitterness to it, I think it scared him. "I cried, and tried to push you off,

and you thought I wanted to". "Well what are you gonna do about it", he asked, like he was annoyed with me. I said I didn't know and hung up on him. We didn't speak again after that.

*"Cuz it turns out the nature of rape has changed/we can now meet them in circles we frequent for companionship/we see them at the coffeehouse/wit someone else we know/we could even have em over for dinner & get raped in our own houses/by invitation/a friend" ..... - Ntozake Shange*

There was a time when I felt like that happened to me was my fault, like maybe I did something to Christian to trigger his actions. I know better now, it wasn't me it was him. Christian is the one with the problem not me. There were people that thought they knew what happened that day, and a lot of people accused me of being a "bitter ex-girlfriend". I know better than that too. It was hard for me to ignore the things people said about me and about my situation at first, but I eventually grew immune to it. No one was going to tell me what happened that day unless they were in his house and in his room at that time. I remember being at Longveiv Community College for summer classes and sitting at a table of students I didn't know. One of the girls asked me what my name was and when I told her she said, "oh you're the girl Christian raped". I didn't even know who she was but she knew me and my personal business. After that situation, the things people say no longer can cut me. Not the way her words did and because of that I've learned to forgive people for their ignorance and pity them instead of being angry with them.

It has almost been a year since Christian raped me. I never called the police on him or attempted to press charges. I didn't have the strength to go through the legal aspects of what he did instead I prayed, went to counseling, and pushed forward. Through the anger, confusion, pain and sadness I made myself move forward. It wasn't easy. I had nightmares, thoughts of suicide, and seriously crazy mood swings but I still came out of it as an overall better person. I'm a lot smarter and wiser than I ever was before I met him. Christian taught me not to be so naïve and so trusting. He taught me that people aren't

always who they claim to be and that the last person you would ever expect to hurt you could easily flip and script and be the first to try and tear you down. Because of Christian, I have the toughest skin you can imagine, and I can see bullshit coming at me from a mile away. It might sound strange but he also showed me what it was like to really fall in love. I had dated guys before but I never knew how it felt to fall in love until I met him. I was in love with Christian because of whom I thought he was but in the end, he let me see his true colors and I realized then that he had never really loved me. Christian is a person I would love to forget but never will, because of the impact he had on my life. Even though he put me through one of the worst situations I could ever go through, I still thank God for putting him in my life and opening my eyes and forcing me to start seeing people for who they really are instead of whom I want them to be.

*"Cuz it turns out the nature of rape has changed/we can now meet them in circles we frequent for companionship/we see them at the coffeehouse/wit someone else we know/we could even have em over for dinner & get raped in our own houses/by invitation/a friend" ..... - Ntozake Shange*



## One way or the Other

Shelby Frazier

In the story's "Sanctuary of School" by Lynda Barry and "In Praise of the F Word" by Mary Sherry education is the main topic. "In Praise of the F Word" Sherry argues that it is the right thing to fail a student that does not make the proper grades to graduate. To support this the essay tells a story about the author's son who was threatened to be failed, because the teacher was not going to pass a student who did not earn the grades needed. In "Sanctuary of School" a young 7 year old girl uses her school as her get away and sanctuary. The essay talks about how this one teacher changed the live of a young child because of how much she cared. Lynda Barry and Marry Sherry both agree that teachers need to not only teach but they need to care enough about their students to get them to graduation day. I agree that by caring for them, teachers need to get them the help they need in order to get the passing grades students need to graduate. "Sanctuary of School" by Lynda Barry is about a young 7 year old girl who sneaks out of her house due to a horrible home life and finds safety at her school, just as I found safety with Mrs. Brandt my 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at Pickett Elementary. Barry states, "It was winter and my parents had been fighting all night." (191) She sneaks out to the only place she feels safe, her school. She walks all the way to her school in the dark and cold night. She arrives as it starts to become day. The first person she sees is her Janitor Mr. Gunderson and Barry says, "I was incredibly happy to see him." (192) She spends the morning with Mr. Gunderson helping him with his morning work. As the day begins she runs into many of the teachers and secretaries who all wave and smile. Finally she sees her teacher Mrs. Claire LeSane. "Walking towards us in a red coat and calling my name in a very happy and surprised way, and suddenly my throat got tight and my eyes stung and I ran toward her crying." (192) Mrs. Claire LeSane took her to room 2 and a loud her to sit and paint until class began. Drawing was one thing she

loved, "At the back table in Room 2, I learned to build myself a life preserver that I could carry into my home." (193) Budgets in schools are being, cut, so teachers are not being hired, because they cannot pay them. Because of this students are suffering, "We are told in a thousand ways that not only are public schools not important, but that the children who attend them, the children who need them most, are not important either." (193) Meaning that teachers are not caring about their students, which is making students not feel at home when there at school. More teachers in my opinion should care about their students so they feel comfortable going to school. At Pickett Elementary I was able to find my safety in my 4<sup>th</sup> grade class. My teachers name was Mrs. Brandt; she was a loving, caring, and thoughtful teacher. Mrs. Brandt was not only there for me in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, but she was there for me the whole time I was attending Pickett Elementary. Mrs. Brandt was a teacher that I could always go to no matter what. I was always able to go to her with homework help, problems, and just to talk about anything that I had on my mind. All students should be able to have a teacher like I did. Both Barry and I were able to find sanctuary with one special teacher that we had, and neither of us will ever forget the memories we made.

"In Praise of the F Word" by Marry Sherry she argues it is the right thing to fail a student, who does not deserve to graduate, this being the same situation my brother encountered in kindergarten. Sherry states, "Tens of thousands of 18-year-olds will graduate this year and be handed meaningless diplomas. These diplomas won't look any different from those awarded their luckier classmates. Their validity will be questioned only when their employers discover that these graduates are semiliterate." (215) Sherry tells a story about her son who did not pay attention in his English class. When his parents asked, "Why don't you move him to the front row?" the teacher responded "'I don't move seniors' she said. 'I flunk them.'" (216) Sherry was in shock as she thought about her son's academic life. When Sherry got home she looked at her son and all she said was "She's going to flunk you." (216) After that the son started making English

important to himself. Sherry goes on to talk about her adult education students who felt like they should not have been passed through high school. One of the students stated, "I don't know how I ever got a high school diploma." (216) Sherry has come to find that, "Most kids don't put school first on their list unless they perceive something is at stake." (Sherry 216) Many consequences will happen if students do not pass. Such as not being able to get a job, or not being able to get into a good college. Students do not realize these consequences until later on in life. I have never had something like this happen to me, but my brother has. When he was in kindergarten he had a teacher who we all thought was going to do a great job. My brother would come home with good grades and he seemed like everything was fine. Until my mom started asking my brother simple questions that a kindergartener should know such as his ABC's and counting to 10. At this point my mom realized that something was not right. She started asking his teacher questions and he would always tell her the same thing that he was doing fine. My mom had finally had to go to the principal and explain the situation. The teacher was fired and due to the lack of learning my brother was not able to move on with his class like he thought he was. He had to completely repeat kindergarten due to the lack of teaching he had received. He also was enrolled in the classes that give you the extra help. If it was not for my mom making that decision for holding him back he would not be where he is now. Just like in my brother's story if he would have just been sent on to the 1<sup>st</sup> grade he would not have known hardly anything that he would have needed to. Which would lead him to graduating without the proper knowledge you need to have a job, or go onto college. My brother and Sherry both know the effects of a student who does not get the proper education or just does not pay attention.

"In Praise of the F Word" and "Sanctuary of School" are both fantastic essays on education. I agree with Shelly about failing the students who do not deserve to pass. I think that if more teachers would fail students and tell them they are going to fail if they don't get it together than more students would feel the need to work

harder. I also agree with Barry teachers need to be more loving and caring. If students would have someone to trust at school than they would want to be at school. I know that by having Mrs. Brandt at my school it made me excited to be at school every day. Schools need to make sure they have teachers who have the guts to fail a student but also have a caring heart to take care of them. The education system needs to improve before many children just drop out and don't come back. Many kids are leaving because of the rudeness of teachers, and some are just getting them useless diplomas. I believe that more teachers should be hired to fill the positions that need to be filled, so budgets need to be increased to help with the education system.



## A Day with Amelia

Theresa Gossett

Telling everyone at work that I needed this day off to spend with Amelia Earhart was simple. They laughed and asked if I was crazy or in a time warp and didn't realize that she was no longer alive. I reminded them that the choice to believe and have faith in what happened to Amelia Earhart was up to them. Thanks to Amelia Earhart my belief and faith grew stronger that day.

The city of Atchison goes all out to celebrate the birthday of Amelia Earhart. The city reminds us of her childhood spent in Atchison, Kansas and the accomplishments of being a woman aviator that lead up to her mysterious disappearance. On Saturday, a high attendance day, the celebration begins with authors reading their books about the aviator, a symposium at Benedictine College, birthday cake on Main Street, and tours through her childhood home on the hill. All of these events are nice and fun for tourists; however, I was present for only one reason.

My morning started with a most awful site that not only puzzled me but humored me! In front of my sleepy and still dreamy eyes I saw a pair of flight goggles staring at me! Someone said, "Come on, it is time to go."

"Go where?" I asked in disbelief.

"Come along and don't be so silly. You know where we are going. You took the day off to go with me, so come on!" was the only reply.

Waking more fully, the whole image began to take shape. In addition to the antique flight goggles, a brown leather bomber jacket in the middle of July confused me until I remembered who I was about to spend my day with.

Standing before me, tall and slender, the young woman appeared bossy and demanding. I had to finally ask, "Are you Amelia Earhart?" "Who else?" she replied.

Driving Ms. Earhart (she later let me call her Amelia) to Atchison to begin our adventure

was my duty. At the public library, we listened to authors tell their stories about what happened to Amelia Earhart. One author's account of Amelia Earhart's disappearance was that she lost control of her plane and crashed into the ocean. Amelia just rolled her eyes (I could see she wasn't sold on this version). Unable to control myself, I asked if this wasn't the truth. She just smiled and told me to believe what I liked because nothing would bring her back. Reflecting on what she just revealed made me appreciate Amelia (as I was now to call her).

Another author told the most amazing story of how Amelia Earhart was a spy and was shot down by Japan; however the United States saved her and gave her a new identity as a housewife in New Jersey. I just had to watch Amelia's response to this version of her life: her cheeks turned red with rage, and then confusion set in when she wasn't sure if he called her incompetent or chicken for running away from her family. Finally, I got to see her in action while she stood up and proclaimed the author an idiot filled with stupid ideas and demanded that we leave. I can assure you that the audience not only watched in amazement (after all they did just see Amelia Earhart)... they gave her a standing ovation!

Heading to Main Street after our abrupt departure from the library, we became more aware of our surroundings. We heard children screaming as they chased each other in the afternoon sun and carnival rides roaring in the background as the hint of cotton candy filled the air. Suddenly, when the aroma of cake made our tummies rumble, Amelia informed me that she likes to eat two pieces of cake, one white and one chocolate, just to make sure both are delicious.

When our sweet tooth was finally given its desired fill of birthday cake, we headed to the symposium where we listened to Amelia's sister, Muriel, reflect on her childhood. Later, Amelia asked why they wouldn't let her go up and speak to Muriel. "She is very old and might not recognize you and if she does it might upset her," I replied. Out of frustration or sadness, Amelia began to cry. Holding Amelia until the tears subsided made me realize how exhausting this day was on her.

When I asked if Amelia wanted to see her

childhood home before we left, suddenly for the first time that day I saw joy in her eyes. We went to the small, white house that is surrounded by huge historical home overlooking the Missouri River which was where Amelia spent her childhood with her grandparents. The tour guide was so thrilled to see Amelia she couldn't stop welcoming her home. Seeing all of the changes to her childhood home made Amelia very nostalgic. Amelia smiled and asked so many questions that I think she tired the tour guide who, insisted we view the rest of the home alone. It wasn't until we went upstairs and saw all of her toys and pictures that Amelia began to change. Asking if she was okay, I received a response I will never forget. With her big brown eyes staring at me she said, "Thank you for spending the day with just me! I love you so much Mommy!" Grabbing my little Amelia Earhart and hugging her all the way to our car filled my heart with the kind of emotions that words can't express.

My children have all brought me joy and embarrassment, but I wouldn't trade any of the moments I've shared with them. This day meant so much to Chandler because she felt special that I had taken the day off to spend with her and share her love for Amelia Earhart. To me that day was special because I learned more about my daughter and her strengths and beliefs. Even though she was only eight years old, she taught me to stand up and be heard. My faith and belief in Amelia Earhart will always be that she gave me a day with my daughter that can never be taken away and I thank her for that.

P.S. I love you too, Chandler (a.k.a. Amelia Earhart).



## Treasures of a Lifetime

Theresa Gossett

Close your eyes and escape with me to a place that holds my favorite memory. Beware: this is an adventure in which you must use your imagination or you will miss the specialness. Look out for the witches, ladybugs, strong odors, storms, pirates, tea parties, and a magical horse. Come along now, we must begin.

On my birthday my family and I always go to my parents' home in Kansas. They live in a small white ranch home with black shutters and cement steps that my father wrote each of his children's names into when he poured the wet concrete. He said he wrote each of our names so we would never forget this was and will always be our home. Amazing how something so simple that meant nothing to you as a child becomes extremely significant to you as an adult. Suddenly, the most wonderful aroma of chocolate cake floats on the breeze as I inhale anxiously anticipating the joy this will bring to my senses. This starts to remind me of how much I love my childhood home and the security it always brings me. These securities remind me that my favorite place is here awaiting my return. I decided to share this wonderful place with my children that day.

Standing with the sun warming my skin, I came to the realization that it doesn't feel so sticky outside thanks to the breeze blowing. The sweet smell of alfalfa enters into my world and it takes me back to a time so long ago. Reminding myself of all the fun I had here playing games, reading books, throwing tea parties (for no real people, only stuffed animals or imaginary friends, were invited), and how many times my horse would come under the green branches and hide with me while begging for an apple. I am easily pulled out by the sound of laughter and three small voices begging for my attention. "Tell us why the ladybug table is here," screams Carrigan. "No, tell us about the chipped pink tea set with the purple flowers Mom," begs Chandler. "I want to know where the pirates

are,” said Gage. Looking down at them, I explained that under this big, green beautiful weeping willow tree in the middle of my parents pasture, anything is possible.

Their grandpa had made this wonderful wooden table and painted it white with ladybugs all over it. Out of love, he kept it, and brought it out that day when I told him I was taking them to the willow tree. Later, I shared with them the story of my tea set and told them all about the wonderful tea parties I threw for my imaginary friends until the wickedly mean witch would show up and ruin them. I chose to leave out the part of who the wickedly mean witch was that day, however as any younger sibling would know already sisters never can leave you alone when you are entertaining! While we sat on the not- so- lush grass and let the ladybugs tickle our tanned legs, I told them the story of Treasure Island and all about the colorful pirates. Gage stood up and picked up a stick, but to him it was that same wooden sword I had used so long ago. We all fought the coldhearted cutthroat pirates that day. I told them about the way the branches swayed when a storm would come in and we stood and danced around in the branches. Then the breeze blew in the most pungent smell of wild flowers and honeysuckle. Suddenly I remembered how much my horse, Chestnut, would love the smells (especially alfalfa) and how I would pretend she was magical and could run so fast that we would fly someday.

When I finally opened my eyes, I saw three sets of amazingly dreamy brown eyes staring back at me. The owners of these eyes started making up their own stories to remember. However, for me, all I had was the magic of childhood and the joy that my children could not only see, but share my special place. They had discovered my treasures from so long ago under my willow tree.



## The Black Hole

April Hiemer

I see the big green road sign with gleaming white letters coming up, menacingly notifying me that the exit to hell looms just a little farther up the road. I slow the car down and turn on the left blinker, my heart heavy, stomach clenched and my dreadful attitude submerges from some deep, forgotten place inside of me. Driving slowly as the road curves to the right, memories start to flood into every part of me. Wondering why I feel like tormenting myself, I pull onto the raggedy brick road. The sound of the tires rotating grows louder, more consuming. The inexplicable sound impresses on me exactly where I am. It looks so sweet and innocent to someone passing through, but the looks conceal a vicious life defining place. And with each brick street and its devastating dwellings, come even more sickening memories to remind me of the inescapable hell of life in Troy, Kansas.

The town remains so old and historic; it almost has a charming 1950's look to it, with its brick roads and deserted, long forgotten businesses. In looking up historical information, I found a perfect description noted in 1860 by Richard Francis Burton, "Passing through a few wretched shanties called Troy..." while on his way to California. An unsuspecting person would enter into it unknowingly; that is why I dubbed it the 'Black Hole.' With a population 1,054 and total area of 0.7 square miles, it resides one of those places that a person would hear the old cliché, 'Don't blink or you'll miss it!' Troy, the county seat of Doniphan County contains the Tall Oak Indian Monument, made by Peter Toth, in front of the court house. The only place to eat existed once as a gas station. With the pumps still in front, they now have a grill and a fryer inside. Half of the people in town own the town and surrounding farm land. The other half of the people live off welfare and rent from and work for the former half.

The first memory comes when I pass John's Market; as I push open the door and step onto the faded tile floor I get dirty looks from the

heinous old ladies working the registers. The smell of stale cardboard, rotting produce and not so fresh butchered meat floods my nostrils. I used to go there at the beginning of the month to buy something for lunch. That close to food stamp day we did not have much to eat. I would usually get a can of plain Spagettios, or Campbell's vegetable beef soup and a string cheese stick. The next day mom would go to St. Joe and spend all of the food stamps on "groceries." "Groceries" consisted of too many boxes of Little Debbie snack cakes, several boxes of Hamburger Helper, a whole case of canned mixed vegetables, and not enough hamburger to get us through the month. I both loved and hated groceries.

I dreadfully make my way up the three blocks to Uncle Jim's house to see mom. The looming three storied house, always blue, contains many memories for me. As a child I lived there with my mom. My aunt, who hated me, would serve me bologna and mayonnaise sandwiches on white bread every day for lunch, her idea of trying to break me of "pickiness." I didn't eat. In my high school years, she also spread vicious rumors about me and forbade my cousin to hang out with me. Since the divorce the house now claims home to whoever might stray into its walls, somewhat like a boarding house. I fail to think of a pleasant time here, almost as if the non-living structure sucks the joy out of me. This confines only one small corner of hell; it expands west from this side of town.

Right in the center of town stands the proud and prestigious court house. Brick road and crumbling remains of abandoned buildings set up the surroundings. It looks like a ghost town. I can still feel my heart beat speed up as I approach the court house. I can see the low wall around the court yard, known as "The Wall." Over the years people have carved names, initials, one-liners, and short quotes into the white stone. Nearly every night, but mostly on the weekends, it would be inhabited by the popular kids, the football players, the burnouts, and the people that graduated years ago and think of themselves as 'cool'. They spend their time drinking, smoking, picking fights, looking for sex, and picking on me. I could not walk, drive, or ride by there without some comment or

object flying in my direction. I got pulled over once for driving too fast down Main Street. No explanation was needed Speedy, the sheriff, already knew why. I did not receive a ticket, but he neglected to dole out consequences to them either.

Right across the street, but a world away in my mind, sat the library. I spent a lot of time there. I read just about anything so that I didn't have to face the reality of my shitty life. I remember my first and only fight in the empty lot next door to the library. I vividly remember Jamie Wykert, a short fat girl with a speech impediment and an "I can whup anybody's ass" attitude, asking me "Tho, what are we gonna do about thith?" Immediately pulling chunks of my hair out, and chocking me. I blacked out from being so scared, and at some point I snapped out of it long enough to punch her in the face, once. I came to again with my head slamming on the concrete and Jamie sitting on top of me. I don't know how, but I got out from underneath her and it all ended. Strangely, she started inviting me to parties after that.

On the next block, right about in the middle, across from the town's only Baptist church, threateningly sits the house I grew up in. I cannot believe how normal it looks on the outside. It probably looks normal on the inside too. My experience distorts the view. It's a basic, small white house with light blue trim. I open the front door to a screened in porch full of boxes of junk. The next door I come to opens to an empty front room. To the right, stairs lead down to the bedrooms. To the left, a room we used for our living room. And there sat mom, playing super Nintendo or PlayStation. Past that empty room waited the kitchen. Our dining table pushed against the right wall, next to the stove, always piled with stinking, rotten, dirty dishes, and mice. The adjoining wall housed the sink and counter space, again with the dense, disgusting, dishes. To the left stood the refrigerator, nearly always empty, and a doorway to the bathroom beyond that, but we won't go there. Let's back track to those stairs. A wooden, narrow, unsafe for children, stairway that led to a "finished" basement contained two bedrooms. Mom claimed the room straight ahead, where she kept the light on half the night

reading romance novels. My sister, Megan, and I shared the room to the right. We shared a bed despite our age difference of eight years. Sometime in my teenage years Megan started sleeping on a loveseat in our room. We didn't have many furnishings or clothes, cable or movies. We did have a door in the back of our room. Because mom always grounded me for some random bull shit, I would sneak out of that door at night and party with my friends. Naïvely, I thought of that door as the gateway out of hell.

I walked, every day to school. The walk ended in a huge uphill that reminds me of the Mamba rollercoaster at Worlds of Fun. The middle school and high school loomed at the top of the monstrous hill, right next to each other at the other end of town. They mirrored the town in cruelty and I believe that it might have all started right there, in school. With every step I took the anxiety stirred in me more and more. I remember the first day of middle school. We had recently moved from Texas and had not completely settled in yet. Mom would not buy me new school clothes and refused to wash any laundry for me, so I wore a pair of black sweat pants with holes in the knees and blue canvas shoes with holes in the toes. Not such a good impression to a bunch of junior high kids. I had a bad attitude from the start. Any one that talked to me I snapped at, pretty much sealing my fate as a loser forever. When high school started I started drinking alcohol to have people to hang out with. Girls would follow me in the bathroom and threaten to kick my ass at least once a week. Nothing shocked me anymore from the rumors that spread about me. I could describe the stories as almost intriguing. That continued until junior year when I started shoplifting. Finally I had clothes to fit in and people started talking to me and inviting me to parties, which led to more trouble. I eventually got in caught for drinking and shoplifting.

Part of me did finally escape from the black hole. At first when I left I just took hell with me. I eventually discovered that I would need to develop into a different person and leave my former self back in Troy. I go back every once in a while, dreadfully, to visit mom. When I go, every corner of town holds a memory for me,

most of them unpleasant, and I feel gratitude that my children do not have to grow up in a small town. But my views have changed, slightly. The town does not seem to have the same kind of power over me that it once did. How can hatred, fear, and peace all exist inside of me at the same time? Maybe the peace came with maturity and age, or maybe from a higher power with a purpose. I've heard time and time again that everything happens for a reason, still searching for mine, but in the meantime, grateful to know that I don't ever have to go back to the hell I endured in Troy, the lowest place I can think of.



## Lessons of Childhood

April Hiemer

With the sun setting I am called to come in for the evening. After a long day of playing outside, I enjoyed a bubble bath. I cherished this time with Mommy. After bath I quickly gobbled a snack, and went off to bed. Snuggling down in the blankets, I waited in anticipation for a story. Mommy would smile at me when she sat on the bed. As she read each page, I could see the characters, streets, and dwellings unfold in my bedroom. "Get to bed," screamed my mother over the cover of her book! The daydream was over. Having a neglected life full of chaos drove me to find some way to escape and express myself. I needed a way to find a better life with acceptance and acknowledgement. I found that in the way I would eagerly flip through the pages of a book, by trying to draw beauty in the mundane, and in writing my life stories, disguising the tragedy and sorrow in the form of poetry.

I don't remember a time when my mom read a book to me. Although I learned the importance of books from my mom, it was not in the positive way that most kids learn. Mom often ignored me because of a good book that she just couldn't put down right now. Or she would have a headache and needed to go to bed, and read. She read every moment spent at home, much like Eudora Welty describes her mother in her essay "One Writers Beginnings." Welty says, "My mother... sank as a hedonist into novels" (183). My mother, like Welty's, lived life only for the pleasure of reading. My sister and I would get in trouble for singing at the dinner table because we were interrupting her book. Reading romance novels at the dinner table remains my strongest memory of her. With three failed marriages and nothing to show for it, she gave up on men and real life. She was entranced by the magic in the pages of her novels where guys cared more about women's feelings than their own image. Where every action and word was exactly right and it always ended the same:

happily ever after. Society leads us to believe this is how life should unfold. It's drilled into our heads from childhood with fairy tales of the prince defeating the dragon and saving the princess. There's not a book that says in real life the dragon, a negative consumption of the essence of life, isn't easily slain. He hides and comes out often and when least expected. We don't have the knowledge to permanently get rid of it. Happy times, like a princess, are nearly impossible to find, and when experienced should be savored. The dragon will try to steal every ounce of joy, and can easily win because we don't know how to keep life in a positive focus. Due to my experiences, I became just like my mom with books. I learned the disappointment of life quickly and I would engross myself in a book about something better, or sometimes worse. I had the same yearning for a loving family as Matilda. I experienced having best friends with The Baby Sitters Club, found the clues with Nancy Drew and loved to make my own conclusions. In Wait Till Helen Comes I learned that others had it worse than I did. Devouring the mystery in every book of the Fear Street Saga written by R.L. Stine, I eventually lost myself in the craziness of Stephen King. I fell into the main character's lives and lived in the pages. I felt dissatisfied when I turned the last page, and I would quickly grab another book to fill the emptiness of my life.

I could get lost in the beauty of a picture just as easily as a book. I remember that at the age of three I could paint and color inside of the lines. I always felt superior with some sort of expressive utensil in my hand. I had the compulsion to fill the vastly blank paper that sat in front of me looking so sad I could almost see the tears rolling off the page. According to Welty, "Children, like animals, use all their senses to discover the word. Then artists come along and discover it the same way, all over again" (185). She is talking about the beauty and wonder that we see in everything when we are children. Some people, artists, get the ability to see the world with this same childlike conviction. They experience the joy of sharing their view with the world. I had a passion for drawing, for trying to express the sublime world I saw in my head. However, no matter how hard

I tried, I couldn't get my pictures to come out the way I wanted them to. My art never looked as beautiful on paper as it did in my mind. Though I did have one teacher that never gave up on me. She continued to push me into new techniques and mediums trying to find something that fit. I discovered drawing people from pictures and had a knack for it. The subject didn't move and the lights and shadows were always the same. I saw the picture for what it was and didn't have a problem replicating it on paper. I feel that it is because of my persistent teacher that I actually won a gold medal at an art show for my pencil drawing of my boyfriend at the time. I had such pride in that picture; I had captured and displayed it for what it was and how I saw it. My chest swelled with accomplishment at receiving such a noteworthy honor.

Although I now view drawing pictures as an early form of sharing stories, I don't have many early memories of writing. At times I would journal my thoughts and feelings because they were too hard to actually verbalize. Writing helped to get out the ugliness that swirled in my head without creating more problems for myself. I seemed to lack the natural filter that most people had between their brain and mouth. Any thought that came into my mind was out of my mouth before a thought was even shaped. My thoughts came alive and flowed so logically from the pen onto the paper. I never fathomed that I might have a talent for writing until my sophomore year in high school. When I started my writing class I was introduced to poetry. I really enjoyed the poems and essays that we read in class. My favorites were Edgar Allen Poe and anything about lost love. I began to write my own poems. Actually my whole circle of friends did too and we would bring them to school for each other to read. My friends would always say how good mine sounded, and I enjoyed that. But another girl in our group wrote beautifully as well, and I felt competitive towards her. We both kept it going long after the others quit. At the end of the year, totally unsuspected, my English teacher came to me in the hall way and told me that I had talent and if I needed recommendations for college she would give them to me. Russell Baker describes a time like this in his essay "Learning to Write." He says, "I

did my best to avoid showing pleasure, but what I was feeling was pure ecstasy... I had discovered a calling. It was the happiest moment of my entire school career" (221). He is referring to how he feels after writing an essay that his teacher felt was the very essence of an essay. His teacher read it aloud to the class and they also enjoyed it. I can relate to the way Baker felt, accomplished, amazed at his abilities, and astonished that he was worthy of such praise. I had never even been considered an average student before, but I excelled in this class by only being expected to do something as natural as breathing for me.

As I grew older I slowly stopped making time to read. I gave up on drawing the day I graduated, and the grocery list was the extent of my writing. In her essay, "The Love of Books," Gloria Naylor paraphrases Toni Morrison in *Sula*, "An artist without an art form is a dangerous thing" (228). Her point is that people have to have a way of releasing, and creative people can go crazy if they don't find an outlet for their feelings. Because I refused my outlets, I was becoming insane. My mind constantly raced like a dog chasing its tail. With no way for my thoughts and feelings to come out, my life spun out of control and I eventually broke down and sought help. The wonderful people, who helped me with love and acceptance, led me straight back to the escape and expression of the most important lessons of my childhood: reading, writing, and drawing.



## Finding Myself

April Hiemer

Doubt and confidence desperately waged a war inside of me like a drowning man fights for air. My chest swelled with pride as I walked to the expanse of brick buildings that evoked heavy anxiety throughout my body. I was more intimidated than I had ever been, wondering to myself why I was doing this and knowing at the same time. My stomach felt like it would fall out of my butt as my feet instinctively carried me through the front door. I couldn't stop grinning like a fool! I had waited patiently for twelve years, not actually allowing myself to believe that this day could ever be possible. Today was my day to show I could do it. Though it took divorce, new relationships, and fighting through feelings of inadequacy I, with God's favor, was fulfilling a lifelong dream of returning to school to become a teacher.

For many years I didn't even know it was possible to have a life of my own choosing and I believe the first crooked step in my beautiful journey was divorce. Before I took that step that I had sworn to myself I would never do, I felt so ugly inside, twisted and confused. It was as though everyone around me was watching every move I made and I was a caged animal, a rare species that no one had seen before. My life was stolen and I didn't know any way to live other than for everyone else. I was so scared of what "they" thought and how "they" felt, I wasn't aware that I even had valid thoughts or feelings of my own. I should just be and do whatever "they" expected and everything would work out. Naturally I bought into it and played the puppet on a string. I assumed there must be something wrong with me to feel as unsatisfied as I did. This way of life didn't bring me any peace. I definitely did not feel joy, and I hid, especially from God.

Fortunately God sought me out and gave me an extraordinary friend. She was like a beacon of light in an angry sea of chest caving,

gut clenching anxiety. Mary Jo was in her fifties, about 5'10' with tastefully dyed blonde hair that was always styled. She wore stylish, well fitting clothes and had a pair of black framed glasses on her perfectly made up face. She had the warmest and most comforting smile and was remarkably funny. I just couldn't figure out how she had the ability of laughing through life. Although, she had been through two divorces and was working on number three, she was a deeply spiritual woman. It was not in the religious 'Better than Thou' kind of way, but in a very accepting, loving way. The woman was confident in her place with God, and she taught me so much about accepting myself and who I was and what I wanted to do with my time. The first time I met her I immediately felt a pull towards her, like the mother I always wanted and more than that, a true friend.

One weekend we went to a women's mini retreat and some of my true feelings came out. We were in a picturesque, charmingly decorated cabin, (except for the slightly tacky deer head poking out above the fireplace). There was a breath taking view of the lake nestled in a thick blanket of snow with the sunshine glistening off of it like thousands of tiny diamonds. I was sitting cross legged in a big cushy chair with the warm, crackling fire in the big stone fireplace to my right, sipping hot chocolate. I uncomfortably listened to the two women sitting on the couch across from me, "man bashing." I felt they were missing the point of why we were there and I tried to change the topic. I didn't want to spoil the beautiful scenery around me, the freedom of the day. I could have that kind of drama at home! Somehow we began talking about dreams. I was apprehensive with doubt in my chest of whether what I said would be acceptable or not. I nervously tucked my hair behind my ears, then un-tucked it several times until I pulled it all over to one side in front of my right shoulder. Then I flipped it back to pull it up into a ponytail, twisted it into a bun and dropped it as it was suddenly my turn to share. I took a deep breath and quietly asked God to give me the right words to say. With the heat rising in my now red face, and my eyes on the ground so I would not have to see the reaction in their eyes, I spat out that I had always wanted to be a

teacher. I was not feeling very courageous and wondered if I would get any approval.

Not only did they not laugh at me or stare at me in that rare caged animal way, they actually understood. They all had their own similar stories to share. Their acceptance led me to feel for once in my life worthy of something different, better even. Then Mary Jo began to plant seeds in my thoughts while sharing the story of how after her first divorce she quit her job and went back to school. She knew how to get all of the funding needed, and offered to help me if that's what I wanted. Mary Jo always said, "There's nothing better than giving back," and boy did she! That incredible woman went from being a single mother of three on welfare, to being a nurse, eventually moving all the way up to head of the health department in Platte County. Selflessly, she even went to Jefferson City to testify about how welfare can actually help people who are trying to make a difference in their lives. I was excited and encouraged as her testimony began to open possibilities in my head. Being supportive and really making me feel like maybe it could happen for someone like me was definitely her specialty.

It took some time for me to get the courage up and follow through once I had made the decision. I did eventually make the first baby step and called Ellen from the non-traditional student center. Within a couple of weeks I was sitting at a desk in a class called Considering College. I sat rigid with my notebook. With my pen in hand I was ready to jot down everything I could. I wanted to be able to comprehend what exactly I was thinking later on when I could breathe. There were two other people in the classroom with me but they already knew so much about it and had a game plan. They were both planning to start attending in January, and when I heard that I felt way out of my league. There was no way I would be able to get everything done in time for that. So I set my sights on the summer semester. I started filling out the paper work, slowly, pacing myself in case I wanted to back out! It took me several months but I was grateful because I knew I did not want this to be like several other impulse decisions. I regretted them once I was in a situation, not having thought it through. One

especially difficult thing for me to deal with was the suggestion that I would probably need to, (GULP), quit my job! That was a stab in the gut! My mother, sitting in filthy, rodent and insect infested house, playing Nintendo, behaving as if her children didn't even exist, flashed before my eyes. It was almost too hard. Kind of like when I try to swallow a bite of food that I didn't chew enough and it gets stuck between my throat and chest. The only thing I can do is drink until it goes down, despite the pain. By this time God had provided me with so many people that really loved and cared about me that working through that issue was a lot easier than I thought. It took lots of praying and reassurance time and time again, "You are not your mom," and "What you do is not who you are." I can still feel my throat swell with the thickness that means tears are on the way to think of the love that I experience today.

As I sit in a small room that has more people than places to sit, I am wondering why God chose this point in my life. It is as if the pain of remaining the same was finally greater than the fear of change. He had a plan for me that I could only fulfill after experiencing the things I did in life. I am now a college student and face new challenges. Because of coming out on the better end of such difficult struggles I somehow have the strength and courage to have faith and believe that no matter what, God provides for me. I plan to make the best of this experience and look forward to sharing my passion with the children I will someday, in a now foreseeable future, be teaching.



## Hunting for a Unicorn

Kim Hurley

“Mmmph!”

God, that hurt. I’m so scared, and I can’t scream, talk, whisper or even swallow. “Mmmph.” Well, I’m glad my heart is still beating but it’s slow. *Oh God, am I going to die?* I can’t even lift my arm, I’m melting into this chair. Are we all going to die? The five of us sit here, motionless, hoping not to be found dead by my friend’s parents. I’ll never do this again-if I survive.

One would think that the lesson would have been as clear as icicles on a sunny winter day. For me, the lesson was merely never to take PCP again, which I never did. As for drugs, it took me twenty-six years before I got the lesson. Drugs were the amazing discovery of this generation. It was the coolest form of fun ever created, and I never suspected drugs to be bad.

I was a teen from the seventy’s. We wore ratty bell-bottomed pants, furry accessories and said things like “groovy,” “flower power,” “sock-it-to-me-baby,” and “sex-drugs-rock ‘n roll.” Everybody owned lava lamps, peace signs and psychedelic everything. My high-school sweetheart introduced me to pot. He was Senior Class president, a straight-A student, played Bach with his guitar, and was a star gymnast. I knew I was safe in his care. I was a cheerleader, a junior, and completely in awe of how amazing he was. We eventually lost out virginity together, which finalized our perfect relationship. Of course life continued, but the relationship didn’t. I had already invested two years experimenting in my own pharmaceutical intership; mushrooms, mescaline, hashish, cocaine, speed, and LSD to name a few.

I eventually had two daughters, so I tried to “clean up my act” throughout my twenties. I intermittently had points of little or no drug use. My children had no idea about drugs; however, many times they saw me struggle with alcohol. Little did I know that I was addicted. I simply thought I loved it and at times believed it was

the only consistently good thing in my life. I, like most people, misunderstood and thought addicts had to have sores on them, use needles, and live under bridges. My consumption progresses and u continued to become more and more dysfunctional, yet craved more and more of whatever I happened to be using at the time.

I developed a spiritual void and was numb of emotions. I later learned my problem was not just about the drugs. People seek food, other people, money, jobs, power, gambling, shopping, self-mutilation, staving, stealing all in the name of feeling good, to fill a void, but it can only be filled be finding one’s own spirituality. Spirituality is also misunderstood. It means having to do with the spirit, not joining a group of people and like sheep following other’s rituals. Presently my spirit is sometimes filled when surrounded by magnificent mountains, or sitting by a violent river, as I feel the mist and listen to the tricking and the roaring simultaneously.

But as I walked in that black period, during my late thirty’s, my sisters and my mother informed me not to come around anymore. My brother-in-law told me I was the black sheep of the family, and I did not belong there. Without my girls I felt I was dragging an anchor hooked my heart. They had moved in with my mother, as she fought cancer. They were finishing out high school without me. I missed proms, graduations and boy problems. Dreaming of picking out prom dresses, and primping hair and make-up all lost because of using.

Without even trying, I triplicated my bad situation. I have found the most amazing man. He drank whiskey, and drove circles around my house professing his love for me. He has a passion for drugs as much as me, and I was sure I had found my “soul-mate.” We got married as soon as we could and I thought his little “jealous streak” was cute. We moved to Florida, where he threatened to kill me because a neighbor told us both hello. I fled and made my way back to the mid-west. He moved back as well, and I moved right bank in to his arms.

It took about a year and a half before he hurt me for the fist time. He knocked my jaw out of socket. I’ll never forget that night, it was the

night Lady Diana died. There is no way to explain brain-washing. I basically believed everything he said. Sometimes I received custom floral arrangements, or diamond rings; yet often was verbally abused and threatened with death. By this point, my addiction had grown to a pitiful level. I couldn't stay clean for over two hours. I couldn't escape his hold. He controlled the money, our belongings and worst of all, me. It was imperative to do as told, like wearing what he wanted, and that included my hair and make-up. He told me when to go to bed at night and when to get up. By living with no success to phones and living two states away from my family, I was all alone. Daily I tried to get trashed quickly and get as wasted as possible. The abuse started slowly, but got to the place where a couple of injuries were healing as I would receive another. Purple and green eye-shadow were worn often to make my good eye match the other.

Due to my addiction, I'd gotten myself into a relationship that I wasn't sure I could survive, let alone escape from. I could only drive for an hour or so before needing to use. It wasn't easy to figure out a way to even finance a way back home. His aggression grew, and so did my consumption. The injuries ranged from a chipped pubic bone, broken tail-bone, rape, to being abandoned in a snow filled field on a bitter January night. I endured being dragged by my hair, thrown into concrete driveways, slaps, punches, being hit by a truck and being tossed off a bridge. I really just wanted to get rest from the insanities that has become my hell. To be honest, I tried to take my own life a couple of times; it was too much to bear.

Finally one day, the opportunity came. While waiting for him to step into the house before me, I bolted through the yard, alley and straight into a stranger's house. I handed them a tiny phone number so small I couldn't read it. My family phone numbers were taped behind the mirror in my compact. We contacted the police and they whisked me away to a safe place, as my husband drove in circles around the block trying to find me. When my father got the call, he drove twelve hours to rescue me from that nightmarish place.

I had no idea what was in store for me

ahead, nor any idea what freedom meant anymore. I left that town with the clothes on my back. I craved using all the way back to St. Joseph. I was taken to the women's shelter and was told things would be okay. There was a bigger problem in front of me. Rules, rules stating all sorts of things in order to live in that protected environment. The only rule that mattered to me was the one reading, "No drugs or alcohol will be tolerated on the premises." We had called treatment centers in the surrounding area, and there were no openings. What was I going to do? My insides were shaking, and I was as anxious as having hives, yet not being able to scratch them.

The treatment center called back and said I could sleep on the waterproof bed, if I was interested. I was interested! How on earth was I honestly going to stop using for eternity? I knelt down and prayed the most important, powerful prayer of my life, "*God help me.*"

That was "the beginning of the end." Or more accurately said, "it was the beginning of a new beginning." I've had the great fortune of living two lives in one life time. Never can I allow myself to forget the hells I barely survived. I now know it's not about feeling good all of the time, but learning how to feel and be okay. Now, with respect for the pain I've gone through, it helps me to live in gratitude every single day. To those harmed due to me past, I have done my best to repair the damage. By volunteering work for suffering addicts daily, and by helping strangers with empathy, I know their pain. I am blessed with a life not that I could have never imagined to be a mother, grandmother, a sister, an aunt, a friend, a mentor, and now a student. As long as my mind is open, new ideas can enter, and by staying clean one day at a time, I have learned to do many other things the same way. By faithfully showing up for class, and doing my very best, and leaving with new information to go home with and apply them as life lessons.

I needed that horrific time in my life to shape me into who I am today. No matter what hells transpired, I couldn't see past the fantasy of my dreams; it wasn't reality, it was chasing a rainbow, hunting a unicorn and almost dies trying. My eye was on the prize, yet it was a carrot never to be reached my whole life was a

whirring past me, and I had no idea. I need to experience that void. Not my spirit is full, life is full, and I deserve respect. With over eleven years clean, I am much more complete and gratefully live in the here and now. I have so much to learn, so much to do, and give. Every minute of like now is precious.



## Miss Ava

Kim Hurley

I can't really say, but I'm guessing she was extra vulnerable or sensitive the day she had her tubes put in her ears. She was only nine months old when it happened, but something big definitely happened. A complete change occurred, and it only took seconds. I saw it as it happened. We were laying together on the floor on a blanket. When she awoke from her nap, she looked into my eyes, yet deeper. She was peering into and touching my soul. I was taken aback, because it was nothing I expected or imagined, yet I had experienced something.

My whole life has been preparing me for this magical relationship. Her birth had to wait, so I could be open to all she has to offer. Our best-friendship goes unsaid. It is accepted and understood, just like the air we breathe. To discuss it is almost insulting. To see us together, people envy our connection. Our spirits together are like butterflies in a field, playful, carefree and being what we're meant to be.

Had she not been born, I'm sure everything would carry on and I would have a typical lifestyle, but Miss Ava raised the bar; she stepped it up a notch. Her high energy demands attention but not in the obnoxious way. When she bounds into a room, it's like a spotlight is drawn to her, and the people around her respond as supporting actors in a play.

By all appearances, she's a delicate, fragile, little girl. Indeed she is petite in stature, however size in an inappropriate means of measurement.

She's quite sensitive about her size and at the age of three, very angrily announced, "I'm not yitto, I'm small!" At first glance you notice this pretty little girl with butterscotch tresses in loose spirals. Her skin is creamy caramel protected by wisps of blond hair on her lean arms and legs.

Her dove gray eyes have the lightest shade of sea foam-green mixed in. The innocence behind her eyes shape then wide and round. The long thick black lashes line her lids like someone abusing mascara. Her bushy little-girl eyebrows are soft and she takes pride in that fact. Rich luscious lips

which add to her doll-like beauty, will obviously be to her positive as she matures, but at this point they wrap around her lollipop stick and bury deeply into ice cream with the natural passion of a seven-year-old. Her feminine nose flares when angry or irritated and is sprinkled with seven perfect freckles. A few days ago, she threw her messy hair out of her face as she interviewed me. Do you have any idea how beautiful the world is by looking through a hot pink clipboard? Everything is either more intense or bland. Yeah Ava, that's really cool. Everything changes perspective when I spend my life around Miss Ava. It's not pretend; it's a fresh look at what is all around.

My first challenge in her interview of me was when she had me make up the questions to be asked. What is one of my favorite memories? When I got to see all three of my grandchildren be born. What do I like to do when spending time with Ava? Anything and everything as long as a certain cute girl ends up in my lap. As the interview carried on, she rested her miniature chin into the palm of her hands. Her candy-apple-red fingernails rested on her cheek-bones. A ray of light leaked through the shades "just so" and gave me a glimpse I had never noticed before. I discovered orange flecks sprinkled on her iris, like little gray doughnuts. Her eyes widened with excitement, and they sparkled when she sensed we again made a connection. She lost interest rather quickly, but really enjoyed questions that had to do with the two of us. We needed to take a break and go bake our famous chocolate cake with cream cheese frosting and a crumpled up cookies-n-cream candy bar on top. Perfect ending to a perfect interview.

There is always an adventure to pursue with Miss Ava. Activities and projects that require immediate and full attention might be wildflowers that need picked, or a pile of leaves that have to be jumped into. Its snowball fights and icicles to use as magnifying glasses. It's eating mouthfuls of fruit so huge that we have to laugh as the juice is drooling. We play queen as we make up stories and paint polka dots on one another's toes. Our connection and energy increases with every adventure and experience we share.

How can I not admire her? Who else do you know has a favorite color called Sparkly Rainbow? She can wear her lime-green chucks with anything and is confident, because she doesn't care what others think. Her fantasy place is in cotton candy clouds while living in a snow cone house. I even respect her honesty. She admits to her imperfection/addiction. She said, "it's hard to totally give up my thumb, because it's always so close."

I am the other half of this wonderful relationship. What I do know is I have a sense of obligation. Part of my purpose is to ensure she learns life lessons, giant ones and clever little antidotes to life's daily challenges. I also need to encourage her to continue to love and embrace who she really is and never let anyone try to steal that away from her. She sits before me with her eyes and mind wide open. As she listens carefully to the things I tell her, I can't help but watch her sparkly hot pink earrings. I am so blessed to have her in my life. We are a never ending pair. Our spirits can dance together, long after our bodies are gone.



## No Stopping Us Now

Neva Kidwell

As a student, and as a writer at Missouri Western State University, my parents are dependent of me to succeed in college. Thousands of dollars was spent on me to continue my education all of my past 13 years of life. The literacy I gained from those years is now coming in handy in my new college career. Being that I am the first in my family to go to college, I have a huge weight on my mind that I have to show them that all their money paid off. I want to graduate college to show my parents that I have succeeded. Before I can do this I have to overcome my watcher at my mind's gates. My watcher is the voice that tells me to put down my pencil and to come back to my work when I'm ready to be perfect. My watcher tells me that my ideas are a disgrace and he keeps me from doing brilliant writing. In Gail Godwin's essay "The Watcher at the Gates" she states "Watchers, each of whom was as individual as his host, and all of whom seemed passionately dedicated to one goal: rejecting too soon and discriminating too severely" (Godwin 222). Godwin and I both have a watcher that tries to hold us back from succeeding. As we go along in our writing and joined together with other writers, we understood how to overcome these watchers. Before we could overcome, we first had to identify and get to know these creatures living inside our heads.

I first came into contact with my watcher when I was in third grade. For our Language Arts class we had to write fictional stories and turn them in for a grade. Coming up with the right story was hard at times but at that age I wasn't too worried about being perfect. As I got older in high school, I had to write down my idea and then taking that to a deeper level of thinking. This was a struggle when I had my watcher in my ear whispering sweet nothings to me. As Godwin and I both found out, "watchers are notorious pencil sharpeners,

ribbon changers, plant waterers, home repairers and abhorers of messy rooms or messy pages" (223). I realized just what my watcher was when he was so constant in making me give up. I became too nice and could not write down that argumentative thesis that my paper desperately needed. To succeed in college I had to know what my watcher is, and now that I know I can get to know him better to overcome his beatings.

My watcher is a sneaky one. He always shows up when I'm most vulnerable. I started to take track of all the times he came about. Most times he spoke up when I was doing grade altering papers that needed the powerful thought that my watcher was taking away from me. Just as Godwin "I decided to get to know him better. I discussed him with other writers..." (222). Like me, other writers had the same problem when it came to writing. My watcher was making me do everything perfect and made me get dates, names, and spelling all up to tip top shape before I could take one step further. I wrote all his tactics down so that I could understand his motivation. With each distraction he threw at me, I got to know him more and more. Once I got to know him, I learned just how he distracted me from succeeding in college.

Watchers like to distract you in numerous ways. Some writers begin to write and then are rudely stopped in their tracks by their watcher. Writers start to think that their writing isn't good enough and they become afraid to pick up their pencils and fight back with their watcher. We forget to realize that our work is amazing because our watcher is too busy snaking his way into us. For Godwin her watcher "adores stopping in the middle of a morning's work to drive down to the library to check on the name of a flower or a World War II battle or a line of metaphysical poetry" (223). My watcher loves to make me feel lazy. "You can finish this paper later when you get some rest. Relax Neva, you got time" my watcher would softly whisper to me. Of course I really didn't have the time to relax. My thoughts were already strong and pushing themselves out of my brain onto my paper like horses out of the starting gates. My watcher is always there trying to get me to waste time, but in order for

me to succeed in college I have to barge my way through these distractions and outsmart my watcher.

Writers are always trying to figure out how exactly they can get rid of their watcher. There no real way of making him stop completely but there is a way of ignoring him. I've learned that listening to music helps him stay out of my mind. When he starts to whisper, I turn the tunes louder. I also have a journal that I brainstorm in so that whenever I want to expand my ideas, I can always flip through it for inspiration. Godwin on the other hand looks "for situations when he's likely to be off-guard. Write too fast for him in an unexpected place, at an unexpected time" (223). Now that I know how to outsmart my watcher when he flies into my mind, I don't let him stop me at my gate. I've broken the chains of the gate and I can succeed in college because I've stopped my watcher in his place, and not mine.

Throughout all my years of elementary and high school I gained the literacy I needed in college. I'm proud to be the first of my family to step foot into a college to continue my education. College isn't all about the social life. You actually have to graduate at some point. Knowing that people are watching my every step, my every grade, my every midterm is a scary thought. To succeed in college and make my parents proud of my accomplishments, I have to overcome my watcher at my mind's gates. Anytime that he tries to show up now, I put him in his place. Godwin and I both have learned to "keep your watcher in shape and he'll have less time to keep you from shaping" (223-224). Now that I know how to control my watcher at my mind's gate, I have no problem succeeding college.



## I Can Read and I Can Write

Katie Kriebs

Every child in America faces having to read and write. In the essay "One Writer's Beginnings" by Eudora Welty, she explains why reading and writing has importance in her life. Both her parents value books and raised her on this belief. Since her parents made reading fun and spent the time to feed her knowledge for reading, it became the center of her home. Welty wrote, "I learned from an early age of two or three that any room in our house was there to read in, or to be read to." (182) Welty would have her mom read to her every chance she got. Welty parent understood the value and importance of books and where determined to pass that love to Welty. In my experience, reading and writing was also the center of my home. My parents also valued books. Reading was not a choice in my home reading was expected to take place everyday. My parents made it fun by taking me to the library to pick out my own books. It is my personal belief that if you're taught from a young age to appreciate books you will enjoy the written word more later on in life. Both Welty and I grew up in homes where reading and writing were used as personal escapes and personal achievements. For us reading and writing was an enjoyable past time like watching TV is viewed in today's society. I love and value books because I was conditioned to enjoy reading from an early age.

Why do some parents value books in their homes and others don't? The answer is simple those parents also had parents who valued reading and writing. Their love of books has been passed down through the generations. In Welty's essay she said, "my father's favorite book was" Sanford and Merton, by Tomas day written in 1780" (184). She described the book as torn, over read, but still full of great importance to her father. Welty then writes, "I had a feeling even in my heedless childhood that this was the only book my father as a little boy had of his own. (184)

This would not be the case for Welty, because she recalls, "I was presented, from as early as I can remember, with books of my own." (Welty184). Welty writes about her family not really being financially able to buy books of their own. Welty's parents, however, would not give up and somehow managed to save enough to buy her books. Even though her father only had one book as a child his family taught him the importance of what was inside of the cover. He passes this understanding to his daughter. When I was growing up my Mother treasured her complete set of encyclopedias, which neatly sat on the book case. My mother would use them often. Every time she opened the hard burgundy cover, the aged pages moved freely. My mother still owns her prized books even though they're aged; they're still valued and important. The books are still sitting neatly on her book shelf. Welty's father as well as my Mother both grew up without the opportunity to read many different books. However, their parents emphasized the importance of reading whether that was in the form of one book or many. One could also argue that books meant more to them, because they didn't have many.

Somebody reading a book and loving it might not be so excited to write their own story. Growing up I had the worst case of writer's block, and still today I suffer from writer's block. Writing has never been my forte, grammar and spelling gets me every time. My mother would quiz me over new words. Over and over we would rehearse, but nothing good ever came out of it. However, it was the complete opposite when it came to reading. When I was a child my Mother would come into my room and read stories to me. This was our special time together and we would read and dream together. She would read stories about far away lands and fire breathing dragons, as I laid there listening to my mother's calm voice. I would imagine living in a far away land and the adventures that were to follow. At the small age I became hooked on books. Welty felt the same way as I did about books. Welty said, "I lived in gratitude to my parents for initiating me- as early as I begged for it, without keeping me waiting -into knowledge of the word, into reading and spelling, by way of the alphabet."(185). She explains reading was

fed to her as it was fed to me. She understands now, as an adult, how much her parents contributed to her love of reading and writing. However, Welty and I differ because she enjoys writing and is quite talented at it. I do understand the power that comes from writing. Writing well can change lives. I know because I love reading, I just don't love to write my own stories. Welty contributes her love of writing from her love of reading. She continues her story by saying, "Love for the alphabet, which endures, grew out of reciting it but, before that, out of seeing the letters on the page" (Welty185). Thanks to Welty and my parents we both enjoy books. Her parent introduced her to the letters hidden in the words on the page. So reading and writing became a natural thing in her home, as well as mine.

In every home you have a heart. This is the place where your house becomes a home. For some families it is the living room or kitchen. But for Welty it was her library. "In the mission-style bookcase with its three diamond-latticed glass doors, with my father's Morris chair and the glass-shaded lamp on its table beside it, were books I could soon begin on-and I did, reading them all alike and as they came, straight down their rows, top shelf to bottom."(183) This was the room Welty most cherished it was the center of her family. Welty stated, "There was a full set of Mark Twain and a short set of Ring Lardner in our bookcase, and those were the volumes that in time united us all, parents and children."(183) Welty's point is her library and Mark Twain became her comfort and her escape from every day stress. It was how Welty and her parents bonded and spent time together. My parents and I would read together at our dining room table. It was a massive dark oak table with eight matching chairs. The table was always decorative with a fancy table cloth and place settings. The middle of the table was filled with a decorative center piece. Our bookshelves sat across the room and were filled with a variety of books. However, the bottom shelf was reserved for children's books. We would sit after dinner and my father, who, on occasion, switched with my mother, would read out loud to my favorite books. This was an important time for me. It let me know I was valued and that my books were

valuable. After all why else would my parents be reading my books? This made my want to read more, I so wanted to be like my parents. Reading was the center of both Welty's home and mine. She enjoyed her library and I enjoyed my dining room. Our parents enjoyed reading and it became the center of our special rooms. These rooms changed our lives and shaped our character. These rooms became our special memories full of reading. Her parents were the main contributors to her love of reading. Welty wrote "learning stamps you with it moments. Childhood learning is made up of moments. Childhood is made up of moments. It isn't steady. It's a pulse. (186) Welty moments were filled with loving parents laughing and reading together it is how they connected as a family. It is how my family connected. With the add benefit of learning to read and loving it.

Reading is important as well as writing. Reading allows you to escape the stress of everyday life. It also acts as entrainment for families helping them to become closer. Writing gives you away to express yourself, to send a message. Getting your thoughts down on paper is also a good way to relieve stress. Writing stories can be fun to do by you, or as a way to bring your family together. In the essay "One Writer's Beginnings" by Welty, she emphasizes the importance of reading and writing. She explains why reading and writing was important to her. She writes about her parents love for books and why they are valued in her family. Welty used reading and writing to connected to her family. Welty writes about Brickell; she described him as a literary critic. Welty did not know the moon sat in the West. He told her in regards to being an author, "Always be sure you get your moon in the right part of the sky" (Welty186). Welty became an accomplished author and maintain to remember her moon sets in the West. In my family books were also highly valued and cherished. My family also spent our free time reading together. This instilled in me a comfort and love for reading. Like Welty, I to have to give "gratitude" (Welty183) to my parents for giving me the opportunity to learn though reading and writing. Babies who are nurtured from birth grow to be big and strong. The same thing happens to children who are

read to from an early age. If you nurtured a child with knowledge they will learn to value and understand the written word. With an understanding of words children can begin to make a connection with the author and with themselves. It is my hope that all parents will grant their children with the gift of reading and writing.



## The Memory of Reading and Writing

Cai Hong Li

I was born in a small village— so small that it never appears on the city map. In this small village, few people knew how to read and write, and only a few families had books. I never got a chance to know who they were, what kind of books they had, and if I could touch them. In addition, my father is a good man and hard worker, yet he did not know how to read and write. One day, Father asked, “Rainbow, how do you write wood?” I answered with a question, “Which wood do you want?” Father replied, “It is wood’s wood.” He was trying to explain what word he wanted, but he could not. I giggled at Father at the time, but I saw the importance of reading and writing. I did not have any reading or writing experience before kindergarten. My reading experience was similar to the essay, “The Love of Books” by Gloria Naylor and my writing experience was about the same as Russell Baker’s essay “Learning to Write.” Regardless of these lacks of reading and writing environments, I learned that reading and writing were things I loved to do, they allowed me to open my eyes learning new things, and built a strong foundation for my future life.

I did not know what reading was like before school started. My parents never read to me, and I did not have any books. My experience with books was similar to the essay “The Love of Books” by Gloria Naylor. According to Naylor, she and her family loved books. Yet she describes, “[her mother grew up in Mississippi in 1930) She was not allowed to use the public libraries; and purchasing books was out of the question for her” (226). Naylor points out that it was difficult for her mother and other black people to have access to books then. My parents were poor at that time. They did not have money to buy me a book even if they wanted to. Furthermore, we did not have a library in the village. In fact, I did not hear the word “Library” until my third grade. I imagined

what a library looked like, dreamed that one day I would step into a library and check out a book. Yet I knew this was the same as the moon in the water, looked nice and real, but when I reached for it; it would disappear. However, I was a very fortunate person. When I was twenty six years old, for the very first time, I stepped into a library, paid fifty yuan, and checked out a book. I was so excited by then.

My reading experience is about the same as Naylor’s writing experience. In Naylor’s essay, she describes why writing is important to her, and she states, “Why do I write? The truth, the unvarnished truth, is that I haven’t a clue” (225). According to Naylor, when she was young, she did not know why she wrote, but the writing had the significant impact on her that it saved her life. The same as Naylor’s writing experience, I did not have any idea why I read. However, my reading experience may not have the same significance as Naylor’s, but I believed that it was a part of the foundation of my life. It gave wings to my mind and I wandered into the colorful world.

There was not a lot of money given to school each year, because the village was poor. One example was we did not have any tables and chairs in the kindergarten classroom. All we had in the classroom was a few pieces of chalk, a black board, a platform, and a big window on one of the walls that faced the sun. Each day, the sun illuminated the whole classroom in bright sun, and nothing could hide from the dark. Dust rose from the dirt floor; tiny shiny dots and thin transparent fibers floated in the air under the sun-ray. Despite the poor condition of the school, I loved to read and learn new things every day.

The most fun thing for me to do in the school was to sit and read a black and white picture book. We had a half hour of free reading every morning. Every child was supposed to read or write in this time, but they did not. I loved morning free reading time. I used to sit on my stool with the book on my lap, and I would flip through it while other kids were shouting, throwing paper balls over my head. Though I did not know how to read by then, I just loved to see those pictures in the book.

This was the first book I owned in my life. It was given to me by my kindergarten teacher when we first met. It was a soft, paper covered book with some Chinese characters written on it in black ink. To me, they were alive and were almost flying in my eyes. Drawings of landscapes, animals, and people filled the whole book. Under each of these pictures danced a couple lines of phonetic symbols and their corresponding characters. The most interesting part of the book to me was the people in the pictures.

All the people were dressed strangely and beautifully in this book. Men wore long dresses like women did, and some had the strangest hats I had ever seen in my life. For instance, one of the hats had two little fan like things stuck out in opposite directions behind the head. On the other hand, women looked pretty and gentle like butterflies gracefully flying by. Their dresses were full of flower and plant patterns that were classical and rare. I was fascinated and my imagination took off like a wild horse fast as the wind flying in the book. For the first time, I went beyond my own cocoon to see what was on the other side.

My reading habit was influenced by the lack of reading environment and by the black and white picture book. My curiosity grew strongly and healthily; I longed for school in order to get a book to read, because books and reading were a luxury at the time. In addition, this kindergarten textbook played a very important positive role in my reading. It not only evoked and satisfied my curiosity, it also shaped my point of view about reading books. I read for pleasure and I traveled without my feet, but with my mind instead.

However, I did not really know how to read until the third grade. At this point, all phonetic symbols were gone, along with fewer colored pictures and more plain old Chinese characters. In addition, in contrast with kindergarten, I had more text books to read, and each text book was about three times thicker. Moreover, in this grade, my classmates and I started to write short essays.

Nonetheless, my writing experience is much like that of Russell Baker in his essay "Learning to Write". According to

Baker his teacher believed the essence was important in writing. He points out by quoting what his teacher had said in the class. Right after Mr. Fleagle (Baker's teacher) finished reading Lady Macbeth, students were laughing, the author states, "[Mr. Fleagle said] 'There is nothing funny, boys, about giving suck to a babe. It is the— the very essence of motherhood, don't you see'" (219). Baker believes that writing could be in many forms, but the principle is the essence of writing. He proves his point with the essay that he had written about eating spaghetti. This is true to me too from my own writing experience.

One example of this is one of the most influential writing experiences for me during the third grade. For that whole week, I had been worrying about the essay that I had turned in. My nerves got weaker and weaker while my eyes were fixed on our teacher. Yet when he looked back at me, I just could not maintain eye contact with him, and my hands and legs did not know where to put themselves. I sort of felt like a little thief who stole a chicken from him.

Our teacher was giving back our essays. He started in the front row and I sat in the first desk of the middle row. I watched our teacher finish the front row, then start the middle row in the back, and slowly but steadily walk toward to me. My heart jumped suddenly as he approached to my desk. I lowered my head, accepted my essay from his hand, and closed my eyes.

Unrestrainedly, the picture of our teacher talking about our essays on the platform flashed through my brain. I quickly asked myself, "Did I follow the instructions?" My brain responded immediately, "Not exactly, at least the part that your teacher said about 'interesting,' and your essay was pretty boring." Carefully, I recalled my lesson from last week about the writing assignment, "This writing has to be an informal essay which is about two hundred words, and should create an interesting theme..." I certainly did not follow the rules very well. For example, I wrote about three hundred words, and I did not think that my essay was interesting.

I thought this because I chose to

write about “Spit” as I did not know what to write. I sat there like a piece of rotten wood without any spark. Finally, I squeezed out the title of my essay “It Is Not Good to Spit Whenever or Wherever You Please” from the corner of my brain. This was an obvious and common topic to me and I believed the people who were around me knew it too, so it was not interesting at all. I figured, even though our teacher was in his best mood; he probably would give me a “C.” I had handed over my essay in an uneasy way. During the rest of that week, I could not predict whether my brain was happy or not as the weather station could not predict the weather. In that week, I was as uncomfortable as an ant crawling on a burning hot pot.

As I held the paper that our teacher had just given back, I was nervous. I touched my essay that our teacher had commented on, yet I did not dare to look at it at first. I looked around to see if anybody else did the same thing as me. Some of them seemed to be disappointed, but my friends looked happy. Based on expressions on my friends’ faces, I felt a little confidence. At last, I urged myself to take a peek.

Hurray... what do you know? I got ninety eight out of a hundred. I almost jumped up from my seat; I really had a hard time forcing myself to calm down. After that class, my teacher told me to go to his office. He suggested that I enroll in a state-wide competition as a reward. My own writing experience proved Baker’s point about writing. He believes it did not matter, if we wrote about boring topics or interesting topics, odd events or common events, the most important thing was the essence of writing. Again, Baker points this out by quoting what his teacher had said at the last, “When Mr. Fleagle [Baker’s teacher] finished [Baker’s essay ‘The Art of Eating Spaghetti’] he put the final seal on my happiness by saying, ‘Now that, boys, is an essay, don’t you see. It’s — it’s of the very essence of the essay, don’t you see. Congratulations, Mr. Baker’” (221). Baker believes if we get down what is the essence of the essay, then we know how to write.

Reading and writing were important to me. They allowed me to imagine, to dream, to go beyond my own world, and to learn new things

that I had never heard of. Without reading and writing, I would not be in America, and certainly I would not get a chance to go to college and make my life better than before. Also, they help me to say what I want to say and allow me to write what I want to write. Moreover, without them, the material civilization would not be as rich as now; spiritual values will not be as significant as today; the knowledge will not be as advanced as today. How could I live without literacy?



## Inmate 08111982

Megan Newby

I'm probably in the sky, flying with the fishes,  
Or maybe in the ocean, swimming with the  
pigeons,  
See my world is different  
-Lil Wayne-

I remember the days that I rushed home from school to the smell of chocolate chip cookies baking in the oven. Holidays where my father was at the head of the table ready to slice the ceremonial bird that mom had slaved over all day. Playing Barbies with my sisters and mud fights with my brother. Those were the best days... for the Brady Bunch maybe. This was not my life, not by a long shot.

Latch key kid, broken home, statistic. These words seemed to stick out when I was a kid. Back in those days, my mother worked two jobs for as long as I can remember. She knew that raising me was not going to be easy or cheap and did everything that she could to make sure that I was taken care of. I was her number one priority in this world. There was not anything that came before me, there still isn't. My mother still to this day, puts herself last on her own list. This is proof that some things never change.

When I was younger, I never thought of all the struggles that my mother endured as a single parent. When I thought of holidays, my mind was normally filled with the usual kid stuff, food and depending on the holiday, presents were on my mind too. For my mother it was different. She was thinking about money and work. That is why holidays were always a stressful time in my house. My mother always prayed that she would be off for the holiday. When she did have to work on the holidays she worried that I would think less of her for not being at home with me, and where I would spend the holiday. Mom always made sure that I was not alone on the holidays that she had to work. I do not think that she knew how much

that really meant to me. Thanks, Mom I love you.

I was fourteen-years-old when my father knocked on my door for the first time. I opened the door to find a short man with fading red hair, and a pack of Winston cigarettes in his shirt pocket. He was a stranger to me at the time, still is for the most part. He asked if my mother was home, she was working that day. My mother came home shortly after to find him on the couch waiting for her. I could tell from the look on her face when she walked in the door. This was not a reunion she welcomed. She looked as if she was staring into a past that she had worked so hard to hide from the rest of the world, including me. It was not until years later with my own children that I understood the mix of emotions my mother felt that day. The feelings of terror wash over your body, almost as if you are drowning while the world stands by watching. You are helpless in the worst way. At this point, all a girl can do is pray; pray this is a wicked dream that goes away the minute that her feet hit the floor in the morning.

The first real conversation that I had with my father I was high. It was the kind of high that would have made Snoop Dogg proud. I didn't care what he thought. Who was he to judge me? He was not there the countless times that I was hospitalized as a child, my mother was. I was angry with him. He had no clue. That same day he told me that I had three siblings. He spoke of them as if they were a peace offering. For the lifetime of unforgiving abandonment, that he so easily dumped on me as a child, his child. I learned that only two of them were alive. Samantha passed away when she was just a baby. He said that she had died from sudden infant death syndrome or S.I.D.S.

Over the next few years, I would spend time with my new family. Comfort was not something that came easy for me. Quality time was a struggle for my new siblings and me. We resented each other for different reasons. I felt that I had been denied a father. They felt that I was lucky because I did not have the same front row seat to the alcoholic father that they had. These painful feelings still have yet to be discussed. My father tries in his own way to apologize for the past. "I have made stupid mistakes. When I was young, I was caught up on

things that I now know are not what was or is important". Sometimes I believe him and other times I do not.

Shortly before my not so sweet sixteenth birthday, my father went to jail. He told me that it was a misunderstanding. "Everything will be fine, you will see." He was right about the seeing part. I saw what it did to my new family the day of his sentencing. My father went in front of a local judge, who did not hesitate or stutter as the words life sentence rolled off his tongue. I can only imagine the shock of the courtroom when this happened. I was a minor at the time so my presence was practically forbidden. I do not know my father well enough to say whether he is guilty or not. His mother swears that all of his "youthful antics are catching up with him, that is why he is really serving time." She might be right, she might just be crazy...I do not have that answer either. What I do know is this; my father is serving a life sentence in a maximum-security prison. He is a level five inmate; he is not there for unpaid parking tickets. My father has the philosophy "I would rather be judged by twelve, than carried by six" I must say I do agree with that statement.

Following my father's incarceration, I became more of a statistic than ever before. I knew that statistically my chances of being locked up in jail or prison had increased because of him. That did not seem to matter though. I was hanging with the wrong crowd, skipping school, and sneaking out at night when my mother was at work. Mary Jane was my new best friend.

I smoked every time I had the chance. Looking back now I know that was the wrong thing to do. At the time, I did not care. I think had I done things differently I would not be the person I am today.

Prison visitation is a process. You have more rules to follow in that one building than you do in the courthouse. The guard's will not think twice about telling you all of the rules. You go through countless metal detectors, are patted down, I have even saw them bring out a drug dog. There are reasons for most of the rules for a prison visit. There are even some that sound stupid that you probably would not think about like open toed shoes. That one is for inmates that

have foot fetishes. The list goes on for what seems like forever. Regardless of how many rules you have to follow for your own protection and the privilege of a visit, that alone will not justify the feeling you have when you walk through those doors. It is almost as if you leave your own freedoms at the door the minute you walk in. One of the first times that I visited him in prison, I remember wondering to myself, how many of these men are rapists, murderers, or worse? I pushed that thought as far as I could the minute that I saw my dad coming. I knew that if I did not I would not be able to stay. We were in a big open room filled with people that had only done god knows what. The smell was not much better either. I can only describe it as a mixture of fear, despair, and broken dreams, with a hint of cheap bleach. I could not visit my father very often after the first time. It was too emotionally draining for the both of us. Moreover, it scared the crap out of me.

The last time that I saw my father was to tell him that I was pregnant with my oldest daughter. Prison had changed him. He looked older than the last time that I saw him. His hair was now mostly all grey with just a hint of red that was there before. He quit smoking shortly before my visit. The prison was now a smoke free facility. I am sure that is what encouraged him to quit. He was excited about the news of my daughter. He kept telling me "It kills me that I am not gonna be around to see her" "One of these days I will get out of this place and things will be different, just wait you'll see." This past July was the fourth time that my father had been eligible for parole in thirteen years. He is still currently incarcerated in prison. That was one of the last times that I actually saw him.

He calls on a regular basis to check up on me. That is all the contact that he and I really have, I am ok with it being that way. Am I a bad daughter because I do not visit him? In my opinion, no I am not. See what I learned from my father is simple. We cannot change the past; all we can do is move forward. That is what I am trying to do, move forward. My dad taught me all the things not to do as a parent. It is because of those things that there is a void between us. My mom taught me all the things that a parent is suppose to do. That is why she and I are so close.

No one is perfect and that is ok, as long as you are willing to admit you made a mistake in the first place.

In a world filled with uncertainty, there is a mob of children that go to bed at night without food, love, or a sense of security. It is because of this that I try so hard with my children, so they do not ever experience these feelings. Life is hard enough for kids these days, why add to it? I am not flawless, nor am I perfect. My girls teach me new things every day. I know that this is only possible because, I am here every day. My girls will never know what it feels like to visit me in prison. They will never know what it is like to grow up without me. They know that I am always here for them no matter what, that I am just a phone call away. That is the way childhood is suppose to be. Theirs will be full of love and support. Not collect calls and prison visits.



## My Table

Matthew Robertson

In almost everybody's life there is an item that is treasured. Virtually everybody has some kind of possession that they hold close to their heart. But not many people have something that holds them. Throughout my life I have obtained many objects and possessions that I could hold in my hand. They all have a special place in my heart. As important as things might be, the thing that means the most to me is my table. You may think that every table is the same, but this is not just some hunk of wood with four legs. This table embraces me with arms of comfort and relief. It is a landmark in my house. It's not just a table. It is the table. It is my table. There have been numerous good times and laughs shared around this treasure. On this table rests my memories and experiences that bring me peace every time I sit down on it. Every time my butt hits the comfy cushion of one of the chairs, it's like nothing can go wrong in the world.

I don't remember exactly when the table was introduced into my house and into my life. It has been with me as far back as I can recall. In my mind, it is something that was always there. This table, with its elongated octagon shape, first started out as my family's dining room table that held my family suppers. One of the table's features that I find favorable for holding meals is how it stands a little lower than waist high. Its medium brown wood top and dark dull metal legs made it a good place to sit down with the people you love. This table turned dinnertime into family time. At the table, I learned how to hide my green beans under my potato skin. It is where my mom made my brother and I eat creamed corn for the first and only time. I laughed so hard that I spit food across the table, because my brother said he found the cob in his creamed corn. It is where my mom served me Eggo Waffles every day before getting on the bus for school. The way she cut my stack of four waffles into small bite size squares made it a

good way to start the day. It is where I learned that eighth grade was too old to have your mom cut your waffles for you. This table was always there to bring my family together at least once a day. There were no distractions. We talked to each other and enjoyed the time we had together. These times were some of the most carefree, and peaceful times of my life. Everything was how it should be. The memories of bonding and laughing with my family around the table are ones that I wish I could experience again.

As the years went by the table started to age. It started to become a little wobbly and banged up. My mom thought it was time to upgrade our dining room table. We got a new black wooden table that sat high off the ground. Being perched on one of those chairs with my feet dangling from them, made me miss how down to earth the old table made me feel. This table didn't make me feel the same connection with my family. It did not provide a comfortable environment us to spend time spend time together. The new table made it unfortunately easy for us to break the tradition of eating together as a family. Since the old table was replaced we are more likely to eat in front of the television or in the kitchen. Our new table did not bring us closer together.

Even though the old table was replaced as the official dining room table, it became even more special to me. The old table was moved into the family room, the place I spend most of my time. This is where it became my table. Some people feel that they have a special bond with their car because they spend their time fixing it up and making sure it runs. They put their sweat and blood into their car. This is exactly how I felt about this table. Every time one of the cushioned backings of a chair fell off its metal frame, I was there to screw it back on extra tight and give it new life. I don't consider myself a handy man that spends all day in the garage fixing things and working on his ride. I barely ever washed my car. With my table it was different. I can't remember how many times I had to run upstairs to get the electric drill to fix one of the chairs. It's safe to say that my handy work has gone into every single chair.

Every Saturday or Sunday morning after

one of my brother's parties, I would walk down the stairs to find the basement in disarray, including my table. I would find myself throwing away all the half-empty beer cans that remained on it from the night before. I would then scrub the surface of the table that was sticky from spilt Keystone Light that had dried overnight. The rest of the basement I left for my brother to clean. The table, on the other hand, was my responsibility. Every time I cleaned the table it gave me a sense of pride because I felt I was taking care of it.

I feel because of my maintenance on the table, it repaid me with the ability to play the games of paper football and poker with my friends. The smooth wooden surface was optimal for sliding paper footballs and play cards across it. At my table I won \$125 in a poker tournament, beating out my brother and his friends. I was down to only five chips and somehow I came back and won the whole thing. It felt good to win at my table. I felt like I was defending my turf. It was like the table had my back and it wanted me to win. During my table's reign in the downstairs family room there were frequent sports games being played there. My friends and I would always have to move the table over by the patio door in order to widen the playing field in the basement. We could not move the table without one of its legs popping off. I feel it was the table's way of saying it didn't want us to have fun without it.

Some of the best times I had at my table were in solitude, drawing and doing other types of art. It was my quiet time where I am free to do what I love to do. Every artist needs a place to work. This table is the only place I feel is suitable for me to work. Just being able to slide my hand across the smooth surface table makes me grateful to have such a thing. I would spend hours on end with paper, colored pencils, and other art supplies scattered across the table. Some of my best artwork has been done at my table. It is like the table and I are partners. It seems like my best ideas come to me when I'm at my table. I look forward to all the great works of art my table and I create in the future. It will always be my workspace. Every time I sit down to work I can feel the table's security and warmth surrounding me.

It seems with every ring left by a frosty beverage and slight rip on a chair there is a memory that lifts my spirits every time I think about it. These are memories that I want to relive in the future. I know that my table will not physically be in my life forever. There will come a day where I can no longer sit at my place of comfort. When that day come I will do my very best to carry on the impact the table had on my life. The table has always been the place where I find peace and comfort. I want to do the same for the family I hope to have. The table will be gone, but everything I learned from it will remain. I want to give to my future family the same sense of peace and comfort. I will share meals and talk with my family. Any time my family needs me, I will be there to build them back up, clean them off, and give them new life. I will have fun with the family I have and give them the best of my ability. Hopefully my best work will not be shown through my art but through the family I love. By carrying on my table's legacy it will always be a part of my family, part of my life, and part of me.



## Not Made of Glass

Shawn Shadwick

I have had people in my life who respect me as a young man that never quit, never backs down, someone who sticks to his guns, and who stands his ground. These are things a man is made of, and can be proud of. Unfortunately for me this wasn't always the case. I was a runt of a child, and this made me the perfect target for bullies. Running through backyards after school fleeing from bullies, I would hit a moment in time that would change me for life. I was a thin, pale, sickly little boy who would catch a cold if the wind would blow just right, and had allergies to boot. I grew up in a humble house, in a rundown old neighborhood. We were a poor broken family. My mother and father had slipped up. My mother was a waitress at a local ma and pa restaurant. My father was in and out of jail and just drifted around the states. It was hard telling when I would see him. So my mother did what she could for me, my brother and my sister. The hardest obstacle for my mother was well me! I was always sick so I got the bare minimum care to get me up and running. Not from neglect but the lack of ability, she worked a lot to support her children. I remember being woke up by my brother for school while my mom brushed my little sister hair, looking for my older sisters skirt, and cooking our breakfast. She would drop us off at school go to the restaurant just to return in time to say our prayers before bed. I still don't know how she did all that, working as a waitress and as a mother to four children one of them a sickly little boy.

Due to my pathetic appearance, I was targeted by bullies. For about two years this bullying lasted. Two years of running through back yards, dodging snarling mutts and screaming elderly men pissed off about their grass being trampled, just to avoid these bullies. Through all my efforts to get away they caught me a lot actually. They

would beat me up, departed me, throw rocks at me, and I would even have my face shoved in the nearest pile of dog crap! See there wasn't much a 40 pound, 4 and a half foot third grader can do to a group of 4, 80 pound, 5 foot fifth graders. So I devised an escape plan. Instead of running the gauntlet for five blocks I would go under it, through the storm drains. I would have done anything to avoid the verbal and physical assault that prowled the way to my house looking for me. I could hear their taunts from through the slats in the storm drains. They would yell and scream things about my pathetic appearance, my mother's job as a waitress, and any cheap shot they could think of about my dad not being around.

One day after worming my way out of a crap sandwich, I took flight to the storm drains. Their remarks of me being gutter trash followed me into the damp, dim tunnel. Running for so long through the muck and moist air I had to rest. Under a storm drain, I sat down with beams of light shining through the slats in the grate. The sweet spring air pushed its way through, and then I heard what I swore was splashing from where I had just come from. My heart sank, I was sure it was them. They had followed me down here. I leapt up and climbed the small ladder to the surface, and to my horror I had come up right in front of the four of them. The splashing had tricked me, fooled me into believing they were down there. They yelled as they ran towards me, my heart practically bursting out of my chest I tried to run. I was out of breath from struggling up the ladder. Being out of breath and fatigued from my climb had made me an easy catch. One of them brought me hard to the gravel by jumping on my back. The he punched me in the back of the head and side of the face and soon the other three joined in with a barrage of punches and kicks. When I stopped moving, they stopped to laugh and make fun of me for crying. Those tears burned my scraped face as they scoured down my bloody and bruised cheeks looking up hearing their laughter, insults, and mockery; something rose up inside of me. This swelling, burning feeling shot through my thin frame. With teeth and tiny fist clinched, I lunged

at them, swinging my fists as hard as I could. I landed the first punch in the throat of the one who had tackled me. As he gasped for air with tears and panic in his eyes, I swung and hit him for a second time in the nose. I turned and kicked another in the middle of his pants, as I went to throw a punch. One of the boys then tried to tackle me. Rolling around in the gravel kicking up dust, ending the tussle by grabbing his ears and slamming his head into the ground, out of nowhere I felt two large hands under my arms jerking me off the bully, I instinctively turned and swung furiously. Though the tears and dust in my eyes, I saw my dad. With amazement in his eyes, and my reflection in his glasses he said softly hoisting me up with one arm. "Let's get you cleaned up." I glared over his shoulder at the bullies with tears in their eyes as they cried; I gave a small toothless smirk.

My dad had this smirk, look of pride and disbelief. My dad did not saying a word the whole drive home with his cocky smirk on face. When we got home he sat me on the kitchen counter. With a damp kitchen towel he started to wipe away the tears away, he tells how he was coming by the house to see the family. Then he saw some boys fighting and thought it had to be my older brother. To his shock I was one the youngest of his boys! He told me how afraid he was when he ran over, then how amazed, relieved and proud he was when he saw his son was the top dog in the dog pile. The he hugged me and said me to "Go clean up. We are going to go see your momma." That prideful walk to the bath tub was one of the best moments of my life.

Eighteen years later I still look back at that moment when I was afraid. I have come to realize through the years I have seen how a sickly, frail little boy faced down so many things like angry old men, snarling dogs, and the dark creepy sewers. Seeing what I did back then leading up to the confrontation with my bullies, I was brave in the face of fear just too finally facing my bullies outnumbered four to one. At the same time, it showed me it is amazing what a man can do when he knows he's not made of glass.



## Education Outside of Schools

Katelyn Smith

Positive education shouldn't only happen in schools. Parents all over the world fail to teach their children useful skills in life, or just teach them the wrong ones. Some parents often unknowingly teach their children bad habits either because of their own backgrounds or just because they don't care enough about their children to learn the appropriate and logical ways of life. The *Glass Castle* written by Jeannette Walls and "America Needs Its Nerds" written by Leonoid Fridman both describe these types of parents. Parents should be more concerned and aware of what they're teaching their children on a regular basis through their actions and what they model for them. In the essay "America Needs Its Nerds," Fridman argues that students who like to study should not hold their heads in shame. He believes that our society, including parents, idolizes athletes and look down on people who pursue knowledge. The "nerds" become social outcasts when in all reality the intelligent ones stand capable of keeping this country together (Fridman 209-211). I fully support and agree with this argument. I think people that earn good grades should take pride in themselves and earn their parents' praise because in most cases they will turn out to be the people worthy of it. Parents should enforce good grades and good study habits on their children before encouraging sports. My parents never forced me to play sports, but unbearable describes the pressure behind my decision. If I would have chosen to not play sports, I knew I would disappoint my family. On the other hand, if I brought home a less than honorable report card no repercussions took place. This taught me that an education did not matter which in turn caused me to act careless with my grades. I never developed good study habits so I struggled with homework and taking tests. Because of this, I waited until age twenty-three until I decided to attend college. I agree with

Fridman when he notes that America can't remain a world-class power much longer when typical defines parents who look at their children with shame for studying rather than playing sports (210). There is a significantly lower amount of children that grow up capable of supporting themselves based on their athletic ability compared to children that grow up and earn a degree to start a career for themselves. "If we are to succeed as a society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we had better shed our anti-intellectualism and imbue in our children the vision that a good life is impossible without stretching one's mind and pursuing knowledge to the full extent of one's abilities" (Fridman 211). Financial security usually lies in a college

diploma. Parents teaching their children that sports rank higher than grades and an education could ultimately reduce their children's chances of success.

All parents should demonstrate responsibility for their children. In the memoir *The Glass Castle* written by Jeannette Walls, two parents who had no ability to take care of themselves struggled daily to raise their four children. Both parents stayed too self-absorbed and busy making excuses about their own lives that the children had no chance of being a priority. The children's lives meant little to their parents, let alone the values and education the parents failed to teach them along the way (Walls 1-288). I can relate to Walls' experience when her mother hadn't done any of her work for her job as a teacher and refused to go to school that day because of it (207). My mother had done this many times throughout my childhood, and even though the Walls' children did not follow in their mother's footsteps, I did. During my high school years, I found myself putting my homework off until the last minute, and then it became too late to have it done on time. Because of this, I would not attend school the next day. My mother allowed me to miss school as often as I wanted, and she would even call the school for me to let them know I would not attend on those days. Honoring attendance remains crucial in order to move forward in many aspects of life, especially for school and holding a job. Without guidance and

demonstration of responsibility success as an adult becomes much more challenging for children to accomplish.

Parents should never expose their children to alcohol abuse. Rex Walls, the father in *The*

*Glass Castle*, resorted to drinking alcohol daily and in many cases became violent as a result. Rex made up stories in order to give his family reasons about why he needed to go to the bar every night. When referring to her father, Walls states, "He came home in such a drunken fury that Mom usually hid while we kids tried to calm him down. He broke windows and smashed dishes and furniture until he'd spend all his anger; then he'd look around at the mess and at us kids standing there" (112). During my early teenage years, my mother picked up the habit of drinking. Instead of going to a bar every night like Rex, she drank at home. Fortunately she never became physically violent, but she liked to argue a lot when she drank. By the time I turned fifteen, I also picked up the habit of drinking from watching my mother do it. If she did it, why couldn't I? It didn't take long for me to start making bad decisions due to my drinking. My grades fell, I stopped attending extra-curricular activities, and I even got my first MIP (Minor-in-Possession) after an encounter with the police. I disagree strongly with both Rex and my mother's decisions to drink while children witnessed their actions. Some people learn from the mistakes of alcoholic parents and never start drinking, but just as many follow in their parents footsteps and also become alcoholics.

All parents need to understand that at all times their actions result in teaching their children lifelong habits, whether good or bad. Parents need to make a conscience effort to set a good example for their children. Studies show that the way of learning began with modeling. When a role model does something, a child follows suit. A child will do what they see and hear, which exemplifies why the adult figure needs to take their role seriously and not only teach positive habits, but demonstrate them as well.



## My Struggles of Life-Long Acceptance

Junior Sanford

As an obese person in a society of super models and rock hard bodies, it's been a daily struggle of acceptance and one of humiliation at times. I've never felt like I belonged. From my childhood to today, I've had to endure society exposing me to what they considered acceptable. Whether it was my GI Joe actions figures, sports players or actors, society has unintentionally placed a stigma on accepting obese people.

As a child, I knew I was different from the other kids because of my weight. Not knowing why or how I got the way I was, I just knew I was bigger than the others. I never let it keep me from having fun and being a kid, like some kids I know. I wasn't scared to play pick-up football and baseball games with my buddies. I never shied away from terrorizing the neighborhood on my bike either. There wasn't much that I didn't do because of my weight.

Year round, I was involved in the community sports programs. I started when I was about 6. My summers were spent playing baseball and my falls were for soccer. I even tried basketball once just for fun. The one vivid memory I have from playing sports is I was always the slowest kid on the team. My weight issues obviously had something to do with it. During baseball season one year, I was told that if my legs would go as fast as my arms, I would be faster. It would be like having a car where the front and back wheels went around at two different speeds. My mom would sign me up year after year for any and every sport I wanted to play. In her opinion, it was a good way for me to develop team work skills and it didn't allow my weight to become a life-long crutch. She knew I wasn't the fastest or the best player on the teams, but she signed me up anyways. She told me to do my best at whatever sport I played because that's all the coaches wanted from me. There were games that I never got to play in or hardly got to play in because of my weight and ability. Even with all of the obstacles I faced as a child because of my weight, I never let it keep me

from enjoying myself and having fun.

Being a teenager was a very challenging and fun time period of my life. Not only did I have to deal with the regular hormonal issues and body changes that come at that stage of life. I also had to deal with additional body changes due to the excess weight I had been carrying for years. They weren't very flattering changes either. There was no overcoming my new body composition, it was what it was.

Football was one sport that I found enjoyment in. If it wasn't for football, my teenage years would have been unbearable. This was the one sport that my weight was helpful in. I was still the slowest on the team, but I was also the hardest to move. Being "short and stocky" as some people would say, made me the perfect practice dummy. One of my teammates actually referred to me as "the human shot put". Even though I was a great practice dummy, I hardly got any playing time in the games. The only time I got to play was when my team was up or down by 20 or more points. Needless to say, I didn't have a very stellar high school football career. Maybe with the right workout routine and some direction from the coaches, I would have been able to improve my skills as an athlete. This is really when I started to notice the way my weight had an impact on my life. I'm assuming the coaches thought that I was a lost cause because of my weight issues, I'm not sure. I do know this, the kids that got all the direction from the coaches and playing time were those that were fit and athletically gifted. It pains me to look back and realize what I could have been with the right guidance and a little hard work.

In my early twenties is when my weight really started to balloon out of control. With no organized sports programs and being able to eat and drink whatever I wanted too, year after year I was buying larger clothes. I went from 3X shirts to 4X, then 5X and finally 6X. At this point, I was around 425 pounds, I guess. When you're that big the thought of stepping on a scale isn't very appealing. I would compare it to getting your teeth pulled without anesthesia. My pant size was an astonishing 68 inches. The average man has a 40 inch waist. I was nearly double that. To put in perspective, I was as round as I was tall. Not everyone can say that about themselves.

Being that big, life truly sucked. I wasn't able to do the simplest things like use a seat belt, fit into booths at restaurants or sit in normal sized chairs. There are three major incidents that really stick out as moments of clarity on just how big I really was.

The first was: I was invited to a buddy's house for dinner. We all sat down to eat, out of nowhere there was a snapping sound, similar to someone breaking a stick into two. Next thing I know, the wooden arm of the chair I was sitting in, was on the floor. We all laughed about it, but deep down I was truly embarrassed. This was the first time we had been invited to their house for dinner; I was hoping it wouldn't be the last.

The second one is similar to the first, except this time it was at a movie theater. My nephew and I went to see the "Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King." It was a holiday, so we got there early to get good seats and we did. Our seats were in the front row of the second tier, probably the best seats in the place. As I was wiggling my way into the seat, the bottom fell out from underneath me. My hips and legs were so big; they had pushed the arms of the chair wider than they were designed to be. The worst part was I didn't even fall down when it happened. The girth of my hips had wedged me into place. Needless to say we had to go find the manager, get our money back and go to a different theater with arm rests that adjust up and down.

The third and I would say the most humiliating moment was about 5 years ago when I started a new job as a CAD technician. I had to ask my supervisor to order me a larger office chair. Here I was, first week on the job and I already needed a new chair. The one they originally gave me was a top of the line ergonomically designed chair. It was designed for a normal sized person though. Certain parts of the chair were made out of hard plastic, which left bruises on the back side of my thighs. Even at the widest settings, it still wasn't big enough. The chair they ordered me was huge. I knew I needed to change, I just didn't know how.

As time went on, I was trying to find my place in society that didn't want me. Society made it loud and clear about not accepting me. Everywhere I went I was stared at like I

belonged in a traveling freak show, with the bearded lady and the lizard man. I could hear the Ring Master making the announcement, in my head. "Come one, come all to see the quarter ton man, I promise folks he won't eat you".

Sitting in the confines of my personal sanctuary, I was stuck doing my nightly routine of watching TV. As I flipped through the channels, I came across a new reality TV show. It was called "The Biggest Loser". Little did I know the impact it was going to have on my life. It was a TV show about extremely overweight people, just like me. This was the first time as an adult I felt accepted by society. Here I was glued to the TV watching a weight loss show with millions of Americans on a weekly basis. Season one aired over a 14 week time period and left me asking myself one thing, could I lose weight like they did? I had my doubts because I had more weight to lose than anyone on the show did. I saw how happy they were after losing their weight, I wanted and needed that. Was this going to be my ticket to social acceptance? Six months later season two aired, the contestants were bigger and closer to my size. Once again, I was glued to the TV watching the contestants lose weight. Week after week they were winning back their lives they had lost or never had. Before I realized it something had come over me, my emotions had gotten the best of me. There I was tears streaming down my face like I was at a funeral service. I was at a funeral, a funeral for my unhealthy lifestyle. It was time to change; now I needed to find the resources to do so.

The next day, I woke up with a yearning to change. I found a fitness center in the building next door to where I worked. After checking it out and talking with one of the fitness trainers, I knew this was it. The Yards Athletic Club was going to be where my life was going to change in ways I never could have dreamed of.

November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2005 is when I started my lifestyle change. Before I could get started I needed to know one thing, my weight. There I was standing in front of the scale trying to prepare myself for what I was going to see. I took a deep breath and stepped onto the scale and closed my eyes for what felt like an eternity. A few seconds went by and I finally opened my eyes to see what years of neglect would look like.

The scale delivered a blow that I had been preparing for my entire life. Like a prize fighter preparing for the biggest fight of this life, I was ready for it. In big red numbers the scale screamed 451. I wasn't shocked, I was embarrassed, embarrassed that I had let myself get to the point. Those numbers 4-5-1 were burned into the deepest parts of my soul. At the same time, 4-5-1 ignited a fire inside of me that still burns to this day.

Pound by pound I was getting my life back, a life that I never knew I was missing. After a few months of healthy habits, I started to notice huge changes. I no longer needed to use the elevator at work. I bounded my way to the second floor using the stairs, like a large cat climbing a tree. My special ordered office chair was turning into an over-sized lounge chair with wheels. For the first time since buying my car I was able to use the seat belt. I no longer had to stare at the seat belt light that constantly reminded me of my old self. It was the little things of life I had been missing out on, that most people take for granted. Overcoming the little obstacles was bringing me closer to my goal of social acceptance.

It's been almost 5 years since I decided to change my lifestyle. I've had moments of weakness and triumphs of mass proportion. I've lost over 160 pounds and plan to lose more. I no longer get stared at in public like I use to. Whether society has accepted me or not, I don't care anymore. I've accepted who I am and that's what really matters.



## What it means to be a Writer

Carlie Valencia

I have always loved reading and writing. When I was younger I would marvel over the formation of sentences along with the emotion and clarity they carried. My letters formed words, words turned into sentences, those sentences would carry my thoughts, my feelings, and my story. In our Introduction to College Writing book I read the essay One Writers Beginning by Eudora Welty. I too have a love for books, so this essay appealed to me. Welty had also learned the alphabet from her parents just like I had. She says, "I live in gratitude to my parents for initiating me-as early as I begged for it, without keeping me waiting-into knowledge of the word, into reading and spelling, by way of the alphabet. They taught it to me at home in time for me to begin to read before starting to school" (Welty). Welty and I are very similar. My mother taught me how to read, write, and spell my name. She encouraged me to see the beauty in what letters and sentences could become. From that day on my life had changed and I'll never forget it. After I learned to read and write, I knew that I would always enjoy the power of words.

After learning to read and write, I fell in love with books. I enjoyed reading and letting myself be opened up to someone else's thoughts and feelings. In the second paragraph Welty states, "It had been startling and disappointing to me to find out that story books had been written by people, that books were not natural wonders, coming up of themselves like grass" (Welty). I am not disappointed that books are written by people, I think that is what makes them unique; each book has its own voice because of the person. Books to me are natural wonders because they came out of a person's mind and imagination, like the grass has come up out of the earth. The author goes on to say, "Yet regardless of where they came from, I cannot remember a time when I was not in love with them-the books themselves, cover and binding and the paper they were printed on, with their

smell and their weight and with their possession in my arms, captured and carried off to myself" (Welty). I feel like she is reading my mind. I love getting a new book and smelling the freshly made pages no one else's fingers have touched except for mine. That this book would stay with me not just physically but also in my mind, to be played over and over each time I read it. The words on the pages come together like when I write. They inspire me to soar outside of my brain and bring in new motivation or imagination.

Imagination and audience awareness to me are the keys to great writing. To be so descriptive, to show an image to an audience, is what makes a great story. My task one paper is one of my favorite papers that I have written. This paper set a whole new standard to my writing that I plan to uphold. At the end of my first paragraph I wrote, "What I remember most is how the color of the blazing flames practically blended in with the sky." I put this in my paper because I wanted to paint a picture to my audience, describing that the fire was so high I did not know the difference between a sunset and a flame. I wanted the reader to use their imagination to picture flames soaring up as if they were trying to take over the sky or burn the clouds down. A few other great descriptive sentences from my task one paper are, "Fire, it is so beautiful even when it is just an accident. The smell of smoke still sends a spark of remembrance through my body. The warmth of flame close to my face makes me feel awkward because of my memories of the fire. The flames that engulfed my house could practically touch the sky, twirling little streams of dark smoke that looked out of place next to a beautiful sunset. The smell of the smoke lurked throughout the neighborhood and crept into nearby houses...On this birthday, when my house burned down; I opened my eyes and saw the world like I'd never seen it before. I saw it on fire." In these sentences, I still want my audience to picture what is happening, but I also want them to feel the emotion of the event. I wanted them to picture their world, or mine, and see it crashing down. It was like watching a flame being put on a piece of paper; it disappears right before your eyes leaving ashes behind. To see your world in a

whole new way changes everything from perspective, to thoughts, and to feelings. I am always looking for ways to improve my writing skills so I like to go back and reread my work often. I get a new experience each time I read my work; I hope this is the same for my readers. Even as I was writing task one, I noticed that my use of description was increasing and improving in quality. This pattern follows along through my next task as well.

Another continuous pattern that follows through all of my tasks is my improvement in grammar. Even though I have always loved writing, I still seemed to make grammatical errors. Throughout high school I tried very hard to make my paper's perfect but it never seemed to be enough. Now in college, I try harder, knowing that it is the commitment and effort that will make the change. My first task paper had quite a few mistakes. A lot more than I thought it would have. Even though I had gotten an A on that paper, the mistakes made me disappointed in myself. I made a goal to reduce my number of mistakes by reading my papers multiple times and have the people around me give me advice or edit them. Having this goal and being in this mindset worked. My task two paper had only one mistake. I had forgotten to capitalize one letter the first 'j' in "Jack Johnson". A careless mistake none the less, but from a little hard work I had reduced my mistakes to merely one! I was so excited and proud of myself; Acing another paper, but this time with only one mistake. I was curious to see if I could work hard enough to have no mistakes on my next task. The next task was task three, the hardest of them all, and I was nervous. I knew that this time I would have to work even harder than on the first two, and I did. I had reached most of my goal. When I got my third task paper back I was astonished. Not a single grammatical error. At this point I felt a new sense of achievement and I felt my confidence boost. Even with this new confidence, I had done one thing wrong on that task three paper. I did not make it long enough and I wish that I would have. I know that there was amazing work done and that I had put more effort into it than the other two, but I was short a page. I began thinking of another goal-to be as

detailed as I can and make sure all of my papers after are long enough.

I named this task 'What it Means to be a Writer' because my experiences with reading and writing are what I believe gave me my voice. A voice is something that no one can copy. I will write in my own style inspired by anything I take interest in. My errors, my description, reading books, and my sentence structure all contributed to the way that I write. I love to see words whether they are on a computer screen or in a book. I believe that Welty had the same experience with letters and words as I had. She writes, "My love for the alphabet, which endures, grew out of reciting it but, before that, out of seeing the letters on the page" (Welty). Words are forever and they help you connect to other people. Words form sentences that express knowledge, experience, emotions, and imagination. I believe that words to me are like paintings to an artist. They can create something unique or simplistic, informal or beautiful. The range of what words can create is amazing. I will continue to improve my writing, and set out on my journey to discover what I think it means to be a writer.



## Pieces of my Life

Logan Yates

I stand here, staring at the wall of glossy prints; multiple shapes and sizes. Each one is like a cliffhanger to an episode of my life. Ranging from the hot summers in July 1991, to the cool evening fall in September 2010. The handy thing about these shiny photographs, is that they can capture an emotion, an event, or anything really with just a quick click followed by a bright and almost blinding flash; ready or not. Looking at the dual photo frame, on the left, my favorite Aunt, Tracey, my Grandma, and my Ma. Looking to the other photo in the frame, my Aunt, my Papa, and my Ma, once again. It takes me back to February 2nd, 1996. I was only five years old; It was Ma and Tracey's birthday. I cannot quite recall the restaurant we went to, because we always went out for dinners. In the photo, I remember how my Ma and Tracey used to always wear red lipstick, brighter than a firetruck, yet as dark as a deep red rose. I remember how my grandma always brought me my own special cupcake, yellow cake, with frosting as white as the first snow fall. I never cared for icing. I see my Papa smiling from ear to ear, I can almost hear his laughter from here, I still remember. Memories fade, unfortunately, but a photograph is forever; Some may argue that, but my photos tell a story of my life, they tell a story of that event, that moment captured, yet never forgotten (because of that photo.)

Its July 7, 1996. I feel the hot sun on my skin, the heat from the leather seats on the back of my slender legs, and the warm wind playing in my hair. Its my fifth birthday. Ma and I were on our way to Canyon Cafe in Plaza Frontanac for lunch. Ma snaps a quick photo of the two of us before heading into the restaurant. She let me dress myself today in whatever I pleased. So whats more exciting than dressing like royalty to a five year old; I wore a Barbie hot pink princess dress, and whats a princess without her crown and jewels, I had them on as well. My crown of

lovely purples, navy blue gems and of course of Mother of Pear pearls. Ma has on a blue gray blouse, with her chocolate colored hair pinned back and out of her vision. Quickly we smile and a memory has been made to last forever.

Its now spring break 2002. On our way from the seven day cruise to a warm and welcoming home dinner at The Lemp Mansion. The aroma of freshly fried chicken, slowly roasted roast beef, the spice and sweetness of the freshly baked apples, the warmth of just out of the oven dinner rolls, the clanging of plates and silver wear ready to be set, the well polished and groomed waiter, the bittersweet chilled ice tea, and the love of my family. i sat down to the table beside my grandma, which i missed terribly. We sat behind a lovely mirror with a copper extravagant frame, the table and all of the houses furnishings were the originals of the home since the early nineteen hundreds. The wall paper was of great detail, the moss green background with an ivory decor hiding the moss; the crimson stripes with a hint of ivory laced down the crimson. My Grandma and I lean into each other and smile. Such a simple photo, of my grandma and myself, yet such memories are evoked, such senses are remembered.

May 10, 2004. Tears have fallen and mixed with the warm oceans salty tears, emotions of happiness and love surrounds us as my aunt Tami just got married. The sacred and first kiss of the two has already been taken from one another, as it is the first kiss of being Man and Woman; the ceremony is over and all that is left are the delicate petals that have fallen from the flower girl's hand woven, sandy brown basket and from the bouquet of flowers that not only the bride possessed, but the maids of honor as well. My aunt Tracey and I are the last to remain on the beach, feelings flooding us like a hurricane floods many homes to people. Little do we know my Ma is wondering with her eyes from the fourth floor of our beach house. We stand facing a breath taking sunset that steals away the beauty from the ocean. Its not a moment of sadness, not just the feeling of content, but feelings of happiness, warmth and joy fill our hearts, our backs to the world. The wind brings in a salty breeze as the ocean brings a chill up our spine. Ma, rather than keeping this

moment to remember herself, she took a photo of this known and seen bond between my aunt Tracey and I.

Its amazing how something so simple can evoke such feelings, sadness, happiness, excitement, anger and even rage. My photographs are most sacred to me; without them, I fear one day I might not remember, because my worst fear is forgetting. There are things in life that are forgotten by the mind, but photos help us remember. People forget things for reasons and then there are things people never want to forget. I say, its not worth trying to forget, because things happen for a reason; I say that remembering those things, yes can be very hurtful, but it is the good things that you should always remember and out weigh the bad memories. Photographs are forever, they take you back to a moment in time, a place, a special time in ones life, to the darkest memories, and to the ones left to be forgotten.