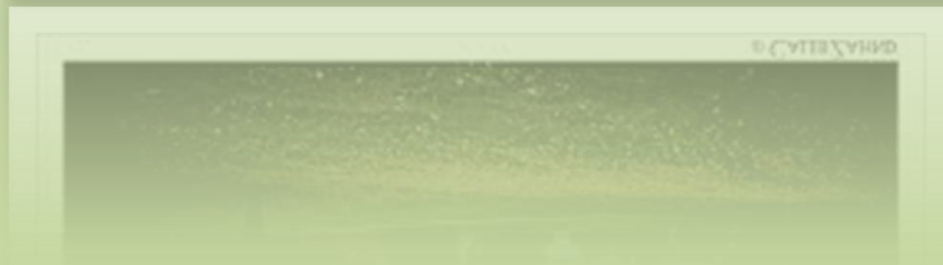


# DISCOVERING THE STUDENT, DISCOVERING THE SELF

ENGLISH 100 STUDENT ESSAYS

MISSOURI WESTERN STATE UNIVERSITY



## Introduction

### Dawn Terrick

The essays that appear in this publication were selected by the English 100 Committee from submissions from English 100 students from the Spring and Fall 2015 semesters. 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.

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“There have been great societies that did not use the wheel,  
but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.”  
Ursula Le Guin



## Calming the Inner Critic and Getting to Work<sup>1</sup>

By: Joanna Abreu

“It is not what you say out of your mouth that determines your life, it’s what you whisper to yourself that has the most power.” – Robert T. Kiyosaki

For me, writing has never been easy. However, I love reading, and it is weird because people should have a kind of connection between both, but it has been different for me. I feel like is really hard to organize my ideas when I have to write. Sometimes it is impossible not feel me stuck when I am writing. I sit down, and I think for minutes, and just stare at all the blank spaces and notes I have, and feel like I have nothing to write about. This does not happen all the time to me. Sometimes is easy express myself with no problem in a paper, but other cases it is really hard. Reading some articles, I have seen that I am not the only person who has problems writing. In “Calming the Inner Cretic and Getting to Work” Allegra Goodman is trying to tell us that when it comes to writing, we are going to have voices in our head, and these voices are going to make us doubt instantly ourselves. She tries to accomplish a point of view of her own writing. She wants people to know what she thinks about writing and its complications while writing. In the article, she does reference some factors that could affect us when we are writing. Much like Goodman says, I think that I should learn to work with my inner critic. Everyone has one. It is that voice in my head that says you are not good enough, and makes me question my ability. I have to love what I write, and I have to keep in mind that I am not writing to say what other people think of it. I am writing to help open their eyes and ears.

Self-confidence is the single most essential ingredient an author needs to succeed, because good writing is never quick or easy. To write well requires energy, discipline and hard work. I remember myself in my last year of high school, when our professor told us about our last project before graduate. It has to be a huge project. We had to choose an interesting topic, investigate about it, and everything had to be written by ourselves; when I listened it, I almost got crazy because I was so scared about it, and I was not confidence in myself. The only thoughts I had were kind of “Am I smart enough to do this?” It was horrible at the beginning, but with time I proved myself that I was complete able to do a great job. In “Calming the Inner Critic and Getting to Work”, she explains that, “Treat writing as a sacred act. Just as the inner critic loves to dwell on the past, she delights in worrying about the future. “Who would want to read this?” she demands” (2). She is describing an internal conversation that happens when people write; many time we have that voice in our head, it just makes us think we cannot do what we have to do. So we could say that our enemy is in our head. In this point, I agree with Goodman. Actually, she

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<sup>1</sup> Work Cited in this Essay: Goodman, Allegra. “Calming the Inner Critic and Getting to Work.” New York Times. The New York Times, March 12, 2001

describes exactly what happen to me when I am writing. The Inner Critic is the voice that creates an idea in your head, it makes you feel that the assignment is something that you are not capable of completing. In many cases, it creates performance anxiety that shuts down our ability of being productive. I have been looking for solutions to this problem. Listening classic music really works for me, also writing all my ideas down in a paper helps me a lot to organize my ideas. Somehow, if you can free yourself of self-doubts, and worries about how critical your committee is going to be, you will have more energy available to work on the assignments.

Moreover, other factors could affect when you are writing, professors and classmates could be one. Many people see professors as someone who is there just to bother you, what I think is not true. However, I think that it is uncomfortable having someone next to you, and watching everything you are doing when you are writing. I have always hated it. However they do not have to be next to you to make you get distracted, sometimes when you are stuck in a paper, people just come to your mind, and it makes you feel so insecure about what you are doing. She says:

On bad days, however, only unwelcome visitors appear: The specter of the third-grade teacher who despaired of your penmanship. The ghost of the first person who told you that spelling counts. The voice of reason pointing out that what you are about to attempt has already been done – and done far better than you might even hope. (1)

In other words, when we are not comfortable doing something, people who we do not want to appear come to our mind. When we remember them, our confidence can get really low because maybe we just remember them telling us bad things about what we do or because we just remember them bothering and making us feel afraid to fail. I not agree when Goodman talks about this point because for me a watcher is not my enemy. When I was a junior in high school, I had struggles with math and my professor was looking what I was doing all the time, at the begging it really bothered me, but then I realized that he just wanted to help me. To be honest, having him helping me was the best thing that could happened to me. We can see our watchers in different ways, for some people watchers are enemies, for others, they are helpful. It is true, many times we are afraid to show our work to someone who really knows about what we are doing, and more when we are not sure about what we did, but not because they know a lot they will be a bad person for us. For me, watchers have always been helpful. They will always help us to fix our mistakes. Our watcher could be a person, or it could be our mind. Watchers will affect you as much as you let them; actually if you learn to work with them, a watcher will indispensable to you to write a paper, or to do an assignment.

Writers take risks. If we do not take risks we could end up boring the readers. Sometimes people just write easy things, it is the worst mistake that we can do. We have to be interested about what we are writing, when we write we have to take risks. Just because you write something easy does not mean that it will be good. In “Calming the Inner Critic and Getting to Work” the author says, “Ultimately every writer must choose between safety and invention; between life as a literary couch potato and imaginative exercise. You must decide which you like better, the perfectionist within or the flawed pages at hand” (3). In this quote, the author is trying to say that we have to choose between being one more, and being a real writer. The only way to improve as a writer is taking risks, because it does not matter if everyone love what you are writing, or not. Because you are not writing what people think about something, you have to write about how you think, feel, and see everything; it is why not everyone will love your job, but you have to take the risk. In this point I agree whit the author, because sometimes when I am writing I delete many things, just because I feel like people is not going to like what I am saying.

When I was about to graduate of high school, I did not know what to write about in my last project. I had one topic in mind but I was afraid because it was really complex and maybe many people were not going to like that topic, but I decided to talk about it anyways. I was the best decision I took because I did what I really wanted to do, and I proved myself that I can do whatever I want, no matter how complex it could be. I think that sometimes no matter how many people enjoy what you write, and tell you that they enjoy them, not everyone will. You cannot please everyone, you won't please everyone. Taking risks means writing about something with honesty, digging deeper into subjects we may fear. I believe most readers will appreciate this honesty and even fall in love with it, but we need to accept that some of them will despise it, dread it or even feel uncomfortable. We have to take our own writing choices, we have to desire to create something new and original on the page, pitted against the awareness that any break with writing conventions and norms carries with it a certain level of risk. Risk can be terrifying, especially for a person who is learning, but it is an excellent way to improve.

Becoming a good writer is not easy it takes hard work. Every writer can get better, and no writer is perfect. I think I have improved a lot as a writer since I came here, but it has been a hard work for me. Try to write every day, or multiple times a day if possible. The more you write, the better you'll get. I think that we should find solution to the problems that we have when we are writing, and it is what I have been trying to learn. Writing is a skill, and like any other skill, people have to practice it to get better. Write stuff for yourself, write just to write, and have a blast doing it. It gets easier after a while if you practice a lot. We have to eliminate distractions, it is best done in quiet. Writing does not work well if we are not concentrated, forget people, and forget what people could say about what you are writing. Be Honest. Tell people the stuff they all think but nobody ever says. Some people will be angry at you, but most people will be grateful. Be friend of your inner critic, we have to believe in our skills do write. Many times it plays again us, but if we learn to work with it, it will be an important key to our success. We have to be honest when we write, your writing tells the reader many things about you, whether it is a personal paper or not. Your writing has to show what you think, how you think, and what you find important. It can indicate your level of education, political leanings, and opinions. It shows a whole world of information about you. There are many solution to the problems that we have when we are writing, it is not an easy work, trust me, I know it; but with practice and hard work we will improve on it.



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## Welcome to My Nightmare

By: Chris Bennett

“The real hero is the man who fights even if he is scared.” – George S. Patterson Jr.

Some would say that our past experiences have molded us into who we are today, like an artist, using their hands to shape and mold a block of clay into an exquisite master piece. Our experiences add to our ever growing personalities, actions and our perspective of the world around us. Some experiences are no more than simple, short interactions with others; while some are so horrific they are instantaneously seared into our thoughts like cattle being branded at a ranch. Being a medic in the Army deployed to Iraq is like knocking on the devils door, he may not answer at first, but eventually he will and it won't be pretty. He answered that door on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006 with a punch so quick and brutal, he was able to rip out my once un-calloused, still beating heart and force fed it to me like Hannibal Lecter, dining on the delightful taste of human flesh. The cataclysmic effects of that day inflicted struggle, collapse in my mental stability but yet ultimately, with all the bad that was endured, I went through a metamorphosis that made me who I am today.

The sun was just rising in Taji, Iraq, and like every other day in Taji, the smell of burning trash and spent ammunition filled our noses and slowly chopped away at our souls. Our patrol base was located on the premises of an old meat processing plant. A scene of buildings you would expect to see from old World War II footage; standing but torn inside out by war, not unlike the souls of men. As usual, my crew was preparing for another long patrol. Oblivious to everyone, however, was that this day would be the last for four of our brothers.

As if we had a streak of bad luck, it always seemed we would get struck by an improvised explosive device (IED) while on patrol. Our crew alone had been hit seven times thus far, but none of us were ever seriously injured. It was serendipity that our bad luck turned out so well. Well, that is, until my friend said to me “I don't have a good feeling about this one, Doc”.

We had been patrolling for nearly five hours when our Platoon Leader decided to, in the words of Robert Frost, “take the road less traveled” which has made all the difference. As we rounded a corner it happened. Like a jet going supersonic and breaking the sound barrier.....BOOM! It was the sound we all knew too well, a sound that shakes men to their bones. For us medics, that sound is analogous to a light switch; a sound changing a rifleman into a lifesaver.

I immediately jumped from our truck. Grabbing my aid bag along the way. With the plethora of medical and surgical supplies at my disposal, I felt as if I were prepared for anything. As the events unfolded that day, however, I would soon learn that I was dead wrong. I waited until the smoke from the explosion had cleared before making my way to what was left of the truck. As the smoke cleared, before my eyes only the frame and cab of the vehicle remained. I



rushed up to what was left of the truck and I gazed at the remains of one of the crew members. A medic has a tough job as any Soldier does. It weighs heavy on the heart, the mind, and the soul to see so much death. Doubly traumatic, however, is when a medic cannot identify one of his own men. This was the case with the first casualty as he had been burned beyond recognition; like a piece of meat forgotten on the grill at a barbeque. I moved on to the driver's side but the driver wasn't there. I thought that maybe he had dismounted to pull security or to find safety, but he was nowhere to be found. I then made my way to the next casualty. As I pulled him from the wreckage, I noticed the absence of blood and that he was still breathing, and so I moved on to the third casualty. I first attempted to remove the twisted pieces of metal that encompassed him like a tomb, but this became laborious and ultimately impossible. I decided to grab him by his vest and pulled him out. As I pulled, both of his arms came with me. The metal had bilaterally amputated his arms, and I vaguely remember gasping at the sight. In the end, it took two other men to help me get him out of the truck. Immediately, I initiated treatment to stop the hemorrhage of bright red blood that was flowing like white water rapids. I was able to get the bleeding under control and stabilized both casualties.

The Medevac helicopters were five minutes away when we were notified that they had to return to base to refuel. When I heard this I felt my heart sink as I knew I would have to watch two friends die. I did everything that I could for them, but wasn't, nor am I God and was unable to save them. Forty-eight hours later, we found the driver of the truck. His body had been thrown three hundred meters from the blast. I pulled him from the ditch and began to weep as I held his lifeless body. I swayed back and forth, undulating as a pendulum on a clock that had run out of time. I loved him like a brother and I wished that it had been me that died instead. As I spoke these words to him, my thoughts were of his little girls back home. I had no family at the time and, if I could, would have traded places with him. As if I was attempting to will into reality, it took three men to get me to release his body. I swore that if I found the person that killed my friends that I would exact revenge sevenfold.

We redeployed to Fort Hood, Texas about a month later and I never felt right about being back without them. I felt as if I had to go back and finish what we had started; to go back and find the person responsible for their deaths. A week later is when my downward spiral, soon to be called "my nightmare", began. The families of my deceased friends blamed me for their deaths, claiming that I didn't do all that I could. It was difficult to hear this from friends; from people I would socialize with on weekends prior to deploying. It was not long before my mind started to believe that their cruel words were true: I was the reason their loved ones didn't make it home. I turned to alcohol in an attempt to numb the stinging pain and guilt. I became an annoying drunk and the person that everyone avoided. I became misanthropic and hated life. A month of this behavior and I had reached my breaking point; I decided that I couldn't deal with the stress, the emotional torment, and the nightmares. That night I believed that this world would be better off without me, and this is when I began to have suicidal ideations. I soon became committed to the idea and chambered a round into the barrel of my handgun. I pressed it to my temple, flipped the selector switch from safe to fire. As I pulled the hammer down, the clicking sound it made resonated threw my head, like a person that kicking a soda can while walking through a tunnel. I put my finger on the trigger and was about to squeeze, when a voice in my head told me that I was better than this. Realizing that I need help, I sought anyone that would listen. I became a regular at inpatient care but was no closer to resolution than when I had walked in the first time. Nothing alleviating the pain I felt, I slipped back into a deep depression. Slipped, that is, until news of my unborn daughter arrived. This is when my outlook on life took

a turn for the better.

Experiences shape us and at such a young age, I feel that my experiences have allowed me to become a stronger person. I am now cognizant of when to ask for help, and know that alcohol doesn't solve problems, it only masks them, like a child dressing up at Halloween to become someone, or something else. I now have a beautiful daughter in my life and I cherish every day that I have with her. Were it not for her, I don't think that I would be here today to write this paper; sharing my experiences. I would have been just another statistic that you might hear on the evening news about another veteran taking their own life. I have always said and believed and still do, that every situation we go through in life is what defines us as a person. However, it's up to us how we let these situations affect the course of our lives. You can either learn from these situations or let them make you a stronger person, or, you can act like a whipped puppy and cower with your tail between your legs, all the while life is passing you by.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Statement from the author: "Due to the extreme nature of this essay, I feel as though I should make a statement about suicide. There is nothing in this world worth killing yourself over. I ask that if anyone you know is battling with suicidal ideations, please seek help. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem."



## **You Do Have a Choice**

By: Chris Bennett

“May your choices reflect your hopes, and not your fears.” – Nelson Mandela

Some people would venture to argue that in today's culture that choices are not made based upon free thought or free will. Instead those people that believe this are forced to pioneer down a path riddled with crime, broken homes and an absence of education and skills suitable to ascertain a career. Many people that walk this path in life end up in our penal system, not once, but more often than not, on a continuous cancerous cycle. A great example of this, would be that of *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Faces*. This book was written by Wes Moore. He gives an intricate view into the lives of two different people with the same name, but with two completely different outcomes due to the choices they made. They both had run-ins with the police, except one learned from this while the other one would eventually return to the penal system, where he would spend the rest of his life. This can be attributed to the lack of rehabilitation and second chances once released from incarceration.

Jails and prisons were originally meant to be places, for those that were incarcerated, a structure designed to rehabilitate those who committed crimes. However, over time these places have become nothing more than a breeding ground for animosity, brutality, and the lack of personal accountability for one's own actions. Instead of being given the resources and tools to better their chances of not returning through what seems to be nothing more than revolving doors at a prison, the inmates are left to ruminate on the thoughts that no cares and that the reason they are incarcerated is everyone else's fault, rather than their own. Irvin Weathersby Jr., who at one time taught for a reentry program, in nothing short of a biased article, published by *The Atlantic* in February of 2015, entitled "A Second Chance," reports statistics and data on one demographic, that demographic being of young, black, formerly incarcerated Americans. His argument is clear and true in that the incarcerated should be given the means to better themselves to have a decent chance of not returning back to the path that led them there in the first place. However, Irvin states that "Formerly incarcerated men must learn to embrace methods of self-improvement, and we as Americans must learn to empathize and restore their citizenship." Most would agree that everyone needs to embrace methods to better improve themselves. What most would not agree with is the fact that we as Americans should empathize with people that have committed crimes. We shouldn't empathize, but rather give most of these men a second chance, judge them not by their past, but judge them by their current actions. One of the most simple, yet most powerful, things that we have control over in our life is our ability to decide what contributions we may bring to this world and what type of mark we decide to leave. Just because people may have made poor choices early on in life, does not mean they haven't a possibility of a future, and shouldn't be offered an opportunity to achieve more. Wes Moore, author and decorated Army veteran stated, in a simplistic, yet extremely powerful excerpt, from his

book *The Other Wes Moore: One name, Two Fates*, "The choices that we make about the lives that we live determine the kinds of legacies we leave" (175) clearly showed that he understood the importance of how we live our lives and the effect we have on others in this world.

We as the human race tend to get lost in our own blithest behavior and not take into account Sir Isaac Newton's Third Law of Motion, published in the *Principia Mathematica Philosophiae Naturalis* in 1686, which states that "for every action in nature, there is an equal and opposite reaction." This law is not only applicable to nature, but to actions of people as well. A prime example of choices and how they have an effect on others is when Wes was involved in the robbery that left an off duty police officer dead:

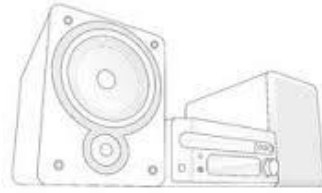
"One of the people being held at gun point was Sergeant Bruce Prothero, a thirty-five year-old, thirteen-year veteran of the Baltimore County police department. Earlier that day, he'd left his wife and five children, ranging in age from two to six, to work his second job as a security guard at the jeweler's...Sergeant Prothero scampered behind the Delta 88 and began to lift his head, a black gloved hand reached out the window holding a handgun and let off three shots, striking Prothero at point-blank range." (147-148)

Those three shots ended up killing Sergeant Prothero. However, those three shots also affected other people who were not there, who knew nothing of the actions that were taking place. Like a pebble thrown into a pond, the ripples move further and further away from where the pebble has now become part of the pond. Metaphorically, the pebble would be that of the three shots fired that turned a wife into a widow, and left five children without a father, these resulting actions being the ripples. These choices will forever have an impact on not only Sergeant Prothero's family, but also that of Wes. Had Wes chose to remain at Job Corps, he never would have found himself in that situation. Like I have said, one little choice can and will affect the rest of your life. Sadly, Wes's impact that he will leave on this earth is that of anger and sadness. He was unable to break a cycle, and instead fell into the same cancerous void that many never get out of. By making the right, harder choices, Wes ultimately set a cycle that was also set for him. His father was never around, now Wes will no longer be around for his children.

Poverty, drugs, no education, missing fathers, lack of positive role models, and these can all be factors that place hurdles in one's life and make it seem as though there is no escape. I escaped poverty, drugs, a drug addicted and alcoholic father, a mentally abusive step-father, and drive-byes. My motivation was to not be like my father, to finish high school, and to obtain a college degree and when I had a child, to not walk out of their life regardless of the situation. My plans didn't quite follow through the way that I had thought they would. I realized that if I didn't make a choice to get out of the area I was living, make a choice to escape my step-father that I would fall into a cycle that my father fell victim to. So, instead of taking the easy way out and letting whatever happens happen, I took hold of my future and made a choice to join the Army. See, no matter what, every person has a choice to change.

The question is why can't people take a path towards a brighter future for themselves and their families? Fear of uncertainty, not being man enough, or is it just fear of failure? No one on this planet has ever gotten every little thing they have ever done right without failing. We are human, we make mistakes, but it's how we let these things affect us that determines whether or not we overcome and drive on, or retreat back to what it was we used to know. Wes Moore had something to say about failing: "Failing doesn't make us a failure, but not trying to do better, to be better, does make us fools." (185) Those that give up after failing once, those that don't try to do better, to be better, they truly are the definition of cowardly fools. Only cowards *choose* to not

strive to do better. Cowards *choose* not to be better. Choices, we all have them, we all make them, and they all have everlasting implications for those around us. *Choose* to be better, *choose* to work harder, and *choose* to break any cycle that inhibits your ability to pursue what you want from life. Legacy, strive to leave one behind that has a positive impact, and remember that you, and only you, are responsible for your actions, and that those actions affect more than just you, but affect everyone around you.



## Literacy in Hi-Fi<sup>3</sup>

By: Chris Bennett

“Through literacy, you can begin to see the universe. Through music, you can reach anybody. Between the two, there is you – unstoppable.” – Grace Slick

Some would venture to say that education is a product of literacy abilities. That the amount of education that we possess, our desire to possess, is singlehandedly attributed to how much and what we read. In a powerful quote regarding reading, by the late, great, Carl Sagan once said “One glance at a book and you hear the voice of another person, perhaps someone dead for 1,000 years. To read is to voyage through time.” However, how does one ascertain a passion, love, or desire to read when they are not shown by their parents what the benefits can be? What if the very thought of reading scares them due to the erroneous feelings of isolation? In the narrative essay entitled “The Lonely, Good Company of Books”<sup>4</sup>, excerpted from the autobiography, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, Rodriguez, who at one point held jobs from that of a teacher to a journalist, who is arguably one of the more contentious writers of his time, based upon his views of affirmative action and bilingual education, recounts overcoming these impediments and finding his passion for reading. Like that of Rodriguez, I was not shown the benefits of reading by my parents. However, unlike Rodriguez, I never acquired a desire to read books. Although our journeys in literacy are similar, they differ in the way that we obtained knowledge and differ in the aspect that he learned through books, and I through the polar opposite, music.

Growing up, Richard Rodriguez was faced with many hurdles in his journey in literacy and his eventual hunger and aspiration for reading. One of these hurdles was that of his parents’ unattractive thoughts of reading. Recounting memories of his parents’, Rodriguez tells us that for them, “...reading was something done out of necessity and as quickly as possible. Never did I see them read an entire book. Nor did I see them read for pleasure” (293). Like Rodriguez, I never saw my mother read for pleasure. The only thing that I can recollect that she would read, other than mail that was addressed to her, was the daily newspaper. Conversely, the only section that she would read was the classifieds, for at the time she was searching for a new job before she got diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and was no longer able to work. I feel as though this had a negative impact on my personal excursion in literacy. Had Rodriguez and myself been

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<sup>3</sup> Work cited: Rodriguez, Richard “The Lonely, Good Company of Books.” *Introduction to College Writing: English 100*. 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. ED: Missouri Western State University. Boston. McGraw-Hill Learning Solutions, Pages 293-297. 2010. 21 Apr. 2015

raised in a home that taught the importance of reading, our trip may not have been as rough as it was.

Rodriguez's path, with the help of the older nun, enabled him to establish his passion. Reading list after list of top books, reading any type of book that he could get his hands on. Rodriguez went on to become a teacher and later on, a writer. He received his M.A. from Columbia University in 1966. While his path took him on a course to education, my path has just recently been discovered. Unlike that of Rodriguez, I took a slight detour on my path. My path took me to places and experiences that I would not even wish upon my enemies. However, after nearly fourteen years, my path has once again veered toward education, and possibly the path towards a degree in either education or journalism. I have yet to decide on which one but being that I have only recently started college I have a little bit of time to decide on which one. I have always known that education is important and without it you are not only hurting yourself but you are also hurting your children by not being the positive role model that all parents should strive to be. This is where my path and Rodriguez's meet again. We both feel that education is important.

Unlike myself, Rodriguez had more to battle than just his parents' joyless approach to reading. Rodriguez had to overcome his erroneous feeling that reading was nothing more than a labored chore, not unlike that of a child having to do the dishes or take the trash out the night before trash was collected. To this he also had to combat his inner mental state of isolation and loneliness in regards to the way he felt when he would read. Rodriguez tells of his time of being placed in a remedial reading class and that with the help of an older nun, he was able to learn that there was nothing to fear in regards to reading and his feelings of loneliness and isolation. Rodriguez recounts "...I was thinking of another consequence of literacy...Books were going to make me 'educated'. That confidence enabled me, several months later, to overcome my fear of the silence" (295). I never had the issues that he did in regards to remedial reading. Unfortunately, I never had someone to show me the possible jubilation that comes with reading. The only positive memories that I can remember, in regards to reading, are of my early childhood when my mother would read to me at night before bed. By the time that I turned seven years old, they all but abruptly ceased. My mother never suggested for me to pick up a book and read, she however, would make me look up a word in the dictionary, if I were to ever ask her how to spell a word.

To the average person, reading books is how most procure a more academically thought-provoking vocabulary and superior comprehension skills. Conversely, I achieved my intellectually eloquent grasp of the English language through a different approach to reading. I did not sit around my dwellings reading books, venturing off to faraway places in my imagination that I had never seen or experienced. I did, however, sit around my room with a pair of black, Sony headphones that were attached to my portable CD player. While I was listening to my favorite band, whichever one that may have been at the time, I would read the lyrics from the CD insert. If I didn't know what a word meant, I would go to my dictionary to find the meaning of the word. I would do this until I was able to decipher, like that of a cryptologist finally unlocking a code that could change the world, what the meaning of the song was. From the time that I started to do this, which was around the time that I entered the fourth grade, to this very day, I still continue with these habits. Rodriguez recounts a sign that hung above the nun's desk in his fourth grade classroom that read, "Open the Doors of Your Mind with Books" (293). With this quote, the orthodox that learned through reading books would most likely agree. To the unorthodox, who learned through music, like I did, the following quote is from that of not only a

brilliant actor, but also that of a musician, Johnny Depp. Johnny Depp explains that “Music touches us emotionally, where words alone can't.”

To say that music is not a key to open up one's mind would not only be ignorant, but also unreservedly naïve. See, music and books share something in common that most people fail to realize. Books tell, through complex dialogue, vivid descriptions, and many of pages a story. Now stop and compare a song to a book. Does a song not tell a story from beginning to end? Are there not emotions that are felt depending upon the type of song, just like there are emotions felt when reading a book, too, depending upon the style of the book? Can they not both enable a person to learn? The only real differences between the story in a book and the story told through music is the way we input them into our mind. With books, our minds are grouping shapes and lines into letters, and then to that of words for us to soak up, whereas music is sent through the air in the form of frequencies to our ears, then sent to our brain for processing, and yes, just like that with books, we soak it up.

Books and music can both have the same effects in one's endless quest through literacy and education. Regardless of whether or not I ever found a desire to read, as Rodriguez did, which I have not, makes no difference. However, what is important is that I found a way to educate myself. My way is to use a different sense than Rodriguez. Whether it's our similarities in regards to our parents, or how we are different in terms of our literacy passion, one thing that I feel we both hold close is that without literacy, we can have no education; without education, we will have no future.





## **The Past is the Past**

By: Taylor Elliott

“Even the darkest night will end, and the sun will rise.” – Victor Hugo

Depression changes people: sometimes in a way that can end in death, sometimes in a way that creates new life. A person can let depression defeat them, or they can use their experiences in life to learn how to make their life better. I always felt nothing good could ever come from my depression. I felt like giving up, I was ready to give in to death. But I never wanted any of that. I learned from my emotions and I bettered myself because of it. Before all the depression, before my life started to become complicated, I was young, and I was happy. Most summer days were spent with friends. I would run down the grass covered brick sidewalk to my friend's house; we'd keep ourselves entertained with the simplest activities. A good amount of our time was spent riding bicycles, or getting grass stained knees from playing some kind of sport, mostly football. The only thing we were worried about was having fun. But those fun summers would soon come to an end. As time passed, I became more reclusive. My feelings towards life started changing: It was less happiness and more...emptiness. Time that would have been spent with friends now became time spent alone. I began to feel empty, like I was in a dark cave, surrounded by nothing but the overwhelming darkness and the feeling of being all alone. There was no guide to lead me out of my despair. I had no torch to light the walls and show the way out. There was no definitive path for me to take. I was ready to crawl up and sit in the darkness. I would need to find the light on my own. But without the motivation, I would just sit there, alone in the darkness of depression. There was no light at the end of my tunnel. My life did not get better. My life would become despairing and desolate. I couldn't cope with these overwhelming emotions I was dealing with. With no person I could relate my emotions 2 with, my social life would cease. I would restrain myself to my room. I was unsure what to do during my day to day existence. Life became miserable, my life began to spiral out of my control.

I longed for the end of my tortuous tunnel of darkness. There was no hope for a future where every day was filled with feelings of melancholy and anguish. I prepared to steal my life from the mediocrity of existing in constant depression. I would fail on three different occasions. Strangulation; I placed a plastic bag over my head, and anticipated my last breath. I thought I would be able endure the agony of the moment to end a future life of misery, but the overwhelming feeling of suffocating convinced my young mind otherwise. I couldn't complete the task. The next few days were spent deliberating a second attempt.

The Overdose; I did my best to locate enough pills, red ones, blue ones, capsules, tablets, anything I could find. I thought that would be enough do the deed. I poured myself a handful of the assorted prescription medications. I was too inexperienced to know what any of the medications did, I simply thought that if I had taken enough, then surely my body would not be

able to handle the amount of drugs I ingested. Regrettably to my young self, I awoke the next day.

The Incision; I was home alone, not just alone in company but alone in life. I felt that I was being tied down by life. I wanted free. It was time for me to end the suffering once and for all. I was ready to cut myself free, free to live in peace with no worries. I searched the kitchen for something I thought would do the job. I found a small 5 inch knife in the silverware drawer. I grasped it in my right hand. I recall the shimmering blade and the worn wooden handle. I dropped to my knees and sat alone on the cold kitchen floor. I felt a warm feeling of serenity engulf my thoughts. "It's time" I whispered softly to myself. With surgeon like precision I aligned the edge with the blue vein on my inner forearm. I could feel the cold steel of the knife, its edge razor-sharp. I paused for a moment, a million thoughts raced through my head, but there was one I recall most vividly, release. I lightly closed my eyes as a smile culminated on my face. Without a thought in my mind, I sharply sliced down. I had no clue how my future would play out after the cut was made. Should I cut again? Do I wait for the red life force to drip out of me? These were questions that didn't actually cross my mind beforehand, but they were now at the forefront of my attention. I gazed down and realized the severity of the laceration I inflicted on myself. It didn't hurt but I was young and I was startled by the amount of blood dripping from my arm. I could see a steady pulse of blood leaking from the vein I had cut. I did my best to stop the bleeding, and as I applied pressure to the wound, I realized that I would not be able to leave this life behind on my own.

Realizing that I was stuck in a life of misery, I spent years of my life alone, stored in my bedroom brooding over life. But as I got older I came to realize that my life needed to change. I couldn't remain this depressed young boy; I would have to find a way out of my slump. I would need to go out and achieve in life. I felt it was time to get a college education. I knew I would be able to meet new people and become educated as well. Just going to college though wouldn't get me new friends. I needed to force myself interact with people. After being alone for so long I knew that I didn't want to go back to the solitude of my room. I wanted a different, better life. My depression may have made my life worse when I was younger, but from the despair of my youth I learned that I would need to do go out and experience life if I wanted to be happy again. I wasn't going to let depression defeat me. I learned that my past does not need to affect my future. I forced changes in my life and I'm better because of it. Now, the past is just the past. Today I'm focusing on college to get my bachelors in computer science. I'm meeting new people and making friends. I learned that I never wanted to go back to that life of despair.



## **Zombies Never More**

Bobbie Griffin

“The trouble is you think you have time.” - Buddha

The furniture in a room that surrounds us everyday usually fades and becomes nothing more than another object. After going to my mother’s place of employment at a funeral home for thirteen years, I have experienced the normality of mundane “objects” fading. These “objects” being the deceased lying in their final resting place in a casket at a funeral home the family have carefully chosen to handle their loved ones with the best of care. Many would say being around a deceased body is bizarre and creepy, but it’s not to me. After so long, I grew use to seeing the same scene of the deceased and started reasoning with myself. A body is a shell that holds the spirit til that person’s time has passed. I learned this life lesson and others to do with the grieving process by going to the funeral home and being exposed to its surroundings at a young age. I didn’t know then that being at the funeral home would help me prepare for the acceptance of death and my overwhelming fear of zombies , but I would be grateful for that later when my uncle passed away.

My parents were always hard workers, ever since I can recall they work long hours and hard labor jobs. At the age of eight, my mother already held four jobs while my father held one at a Western Reception Diagnostic Center, a local prison in town. Three out of the four jobs my mother held was being a housekeeper for families who were too busy to maintain a sanitary living space for themselves because of their own hectic schedules. The other job was working at a funeral home as the housekeeper at night. The only drawback was for my brother and I who saw our mother for less than three hours a night before she went to work at the funeral home. As for our father, my brother, Brandon, and I were lucky enough to see him for five hours.

I was happy to see my father, but I still craved the bond only a mother and daughter could have, and three hours didn’t feel like enough to make it. At one point, I grew jealous seeing my brother and father develop a bond that only they could have. It was painful to see the two of them happy and having so much in common while me and my father barely even acknowledged one another. At only the age of eight, I felt neglected, misunderstood and alone. So when my mother asked if I wanted to go to the funeral home with her one day, I couldn’t say yes fast enough. I wanted to make that bond similar to what my brother and father had, and didn’t care what it took or where it was at. I didn’t know what I was getting myself into when I agreed to go with her to work. But going set me up to learn about one of life's hardest lessons. Death.

The first time I saw a dead body was the third or fourth time I accompanied my mother to work. A majority of the time I went I would lock myself in the office room out back next to the embalming room and refuse to come out until my mother’s job was done and she was ready to leave. I had a crippling fear of zombies at the time, and me seeing a body was not something I

wanted to do because of it. That was until one night my mother asked me happily if I wanted to see one. At first I thought it was a joke, but seeing that my mother wasn't moving from the oversized brown door with warning and hazard signs proved otherwise. Seeing the embalming room door reminded me of the setting of a horror movie with zombie, the atmosphere changing drastically while my fear riddled eyes refused to move away from the bright yellow biohazard signs. I was waiting for the moment when an unhuman like noise erupted from behind the door along with the thumps of the monsters trying desperately to free themselves from behind the door to feast on my innards. But after standing there for what felt like hours but was a few moments, that never happened.

Slowly, as if prying the words from my mouth, I said yes, letting my curiosity get the better of me. And when she opened the door, I regretted the decision immediately. An unprepped body lay on the cold metallic table, a white cloth draped partially over an old man in his sixties. I felt my gut knot up seeing his face that was nowhere close to looking peaceful. His mouth was agape, as if wanting to scream in pain and dread of his own demise, his wide, lifeless, glossed over eyes staring up towards the old water stained ceiling. His thin skin was sickly pale to the point it looked translucent and the blue veins were sticking out visibly on his wrinkled face, his dry chapped lips a bluish purple due to the lack of oxygen flowing through. I couldn't sleep that night after seeing the sight. But after seeing that body they faded into the background and I stopped worrying about them. While I was at the funeral home, I learned after sometime how people react to the loss of a loved one, and in doing so it helped me learn how to deal with the grieving process and how to cope with the loss of loved ones.

Being at a funeral home, you're exposed to countless services with grieving families whose family member lies peacefully inside a casket. The colored lights above meant to add a certain lifelike quality to the person resting inside, all prepped for the viewing. I spent countless hours reading pamphlets of the grieving process while waiting for my mother to get done cleaning, all saying that it's normal to go through the "Five Stages of Grief": Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. I wondered if I found people's grieving strange because I just didn't know the person personally like the family did. Well, three years ago in December, my family went through a loss of their own, my uncle.

My Uncle was never healthy. Having a pacemaker, an enlarged heart, and bad eating habits was hard enough, but living in a trailer house that was infested with mold made no sense to any of us. It was a setup for disaster. My father never understood why his brother didn't try harder to improve his health. I personally believed my Uncle did this because he knew it was pointless to try seeing as how the doctors told him he had less than nine months to live after his last trip to the ER because of faulty wires in his pacemaker. Inevitably, his poor health got the better of him, and he passed away.

He was sent to the funeral home my mother cleaned for and was readied for his viewing and cremation the very next day. I went with my father to see his deceased brother that day, my nerves on end already seeing my father's disposition having turned from anger to sadness in a matter of minutes. I knew my father would have wanted my brother or mother to be with him at the time, but my brother had been deployed to an air force base in Alaska two years prior while my mother was working. It was awkward for me. When we got to the funeral home and into the room my Uncle was in, I found myself just standing and staring at a body under a white sheet. I had no tears. No gut clenching saddeness. Nothing. It was as if I was looking at one of the many bodies I had seen before and not even giving it a second thought. My father on the other hand, was in tears.

It's suggested that when going through a loss that you read up on what emotions and reactions that are expected out of you and the others around you, and reading the pamphlets offered at a funeral home does exactly that. Having read the pamphlets countless times when going to the funeral home, I knew the process and what my father was going through with the loss of his older brother. I was apprehensive to consult my father, feeling that he and I weren't that close to begin with because we didn't have that bond him and my brother had. But I knew it didn't matter, he needed someone to reassure him that everything was going to be fine. taking my father's hand slowly to gain his attention, I quietly apologized for the loss of his older brother, my Uncle. With the help of the pamphlets and family, my father was able to get over the loss of his brother.

If it wasn't for going to the funeral home countless times and reading the pamphlets, I would still be that child that was afraid zombies and the aspect of death. I would need support going through the grieving process while being oblivious to others sadness to do with their own loss. No. Instead, I don't flinch when seeing the deceased, and don't worry about death or zombies. I help others, such as my father, when they lose someone close to them and respect their own ways of coping with the loss. I now know that death is a part of life whether I like it or not, and I can't change it. Nobody can change it. For that, there are zombies never more.



## Words Stick<sup>5</sup>

By: Nikki Groom

“When a person tells you that you hurt them, you don’t get to decide that you didn’t.” –  
Louis C.K.

My mother used to tell me to remember this quote, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” She said if I remember this it will happen. In my experience, I’ve realized, the correct way of saying that quote is, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will scar forever.” In *The Other Wes Moore*, by Wes Moore<sup>6</sup>, there were two boys with the same name and similar back stories. Even though their childhood was pretty much the same their future came out different because one of the Weses chose to go down the right path and not continue down the wrong path. Wes 1 started out being bad, he was skipping school, tagging walls, and getting in trouble with the law. He eventually found his way to military school. Wes 1’s family sacrificed basically everything they had to get him into that school. At first all he did was try to run away, but when they let him talk to his mom he started straightening up and acting like he should. Because of military school, the positive influences in it, and realizing that he should only let the good things stick with him, he became a successful young man. Wes 2, on the other hand, started out down the wrong path and remained going down the wrong path. He did try to get out of his bad life but he deemed hard work to be too hard and because he didn’t have any positive influences, he gave up and went back to drugs. He eventually got arrested and put in jail for life because of a jewelry store robbery where an off duty cop got killed. Maybe if he had realized what words should stick he would have ended up with a different life. If someone consistently calls you fat, soon you will start to believe it. If someone always says you’re not going anywhere in life, you probably won’t. If you put yourself around people who always get into trouble, you will to. If you hang around people who do drugs, you will to. In *The Other Wes Moore* by Wes Moore and in my life, I’ve noticed words stick, no matter what anyone says to you, but so do actions. If teachers, parents, family and friends came to realize that their words can effect what choices we make, there might be a lot more successful people in this world.

Although we as humans have free will and can do whatever we would like in our lives, some things people say to us are what shapes our future, whether it’s advice, criticism, respectful or disrespectful. For example, Wes 1 was playing with his sister Nikki, when he suddenly punched her in the face. Wes 1’s mother Joy was furious, she started screaming at him and yelled at him to go upstairs. After Wes 1’s dad calmed down his mom, he came upstairs to talk to Wes 1. He wanted to explain what he did wrong and why Wes’s mom was so angry. Wes 1’s dad said to Wes after entering the room, “Main Man, you just can’t hit people, and particularly women.

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<sup>5</sup> Work cited: Moore, Wes. *The Other Wes Moore*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011. Print.

You must defend them, not fight them. Do you understand” (Moore 11)? Wes 1's dad explained to him that it's not okay to hit a woman. Therefore, Wes had been taught a lesson never to hit women. Wes never did hit a woman after that night. His father had shaped part of his future just by simply telling him at a young age that it is wrong to hit women, and that women are to be protected not beat. When Wes 1 got sent to military school he wouldn't cooperate. He kept running away and trying to escape to a train station. One night his sergeant, Austin, gave him a fake map to the train station. Wes tried to follow it but got caught and brought to the colonel's office. “Look at me, Moore,” he firmly commanded. I lifted my eyes Colonel Bratt continued. “I am going to let you talk on the phone for five minutes, and that is it for the rest of plebe system. Call who you need to, but you had better be snapped out of this when that phone hangs up” (Moore 94). Colonel Bratt made a decision to let Wes 1 call his mom because of his rebelling. When Wes called his mom he definitely didn't get the answer he wanted. When he was on the phone with his mom he begged her to let him come home, but she stopped him mid-sentence to say, “Wes, you are not going anywhere until you give this place a try. I am so proud of you, and your father is proud of you, and we just want you to give this a shot. Too many people have sacrificed in order for you to be there” (Moore 95). The last thing Joy said to Wes before she hung up was, “I love you, and I am proud of you. And, Wes, It's time to stop running” (Moore 96). After that phone call Wes started to behave more. He began the process of changing himself for the better, because of what his mother had said to him. On the other hand, Wes 2 ended up with the wrong words sticking. Wes 2 ended up going down the wrong path as a child because of what his brother had taught him. Tony told him, “If someone disrespects you, you send a message so fierce that they won't have the chance to do it again” (Moore 33). Those particular words stayed with Wes 2 so much that he heard them run through his head every time something violent happened. For instance, when Wes 2 and his friend Woody went to play some football, Wes 2 ended up getting punched. Wes 2 ended up retaliating by running home and grabbing a knife, and running through his head were the words, “*Send a message*” (Moore 34). Another example, when he walked a girl out of his house her cousin Ray was outside, he ended up punching Wes 2 in the face. Again he retaliated by getting a weapon but his time it was a gun. Wes 2 ended up shooting Ray, and the only thing running through his head at the time was “*Send a message*” (Moore 104). Those few words made such a big difference in his life. If he wouldn't have taken them so close to heart, he might not have ended up in prison.

Sometimes the things that stick with us help us realize what's right even if you want it to be wrong. My mother always used to tell me, “Life goes on.” I always hated hearing it as a kid. Though the older I got, and the more mature I became, I realized she was right. Life does go on no matter if you want it to stop or not. I took this quote to heart so much I started using it myself in a modified version. So to this day I use the saying, “Life's in session.” I ended up finally fully realizing this quote after a particular hard time for me that I did eventually make it out of. When I met my biological father I thought he would be completely different than what he was. At first he seemed rather normal to me. He had a house, a car, a pet, and what seemed like a nice life. I ended up moving up to Idaho to live with him for a while. At that moment things were going great, we got along perfectly. However after about 4 months, I started noticing him acting differently though. He would come home and be up all night and all the next day. Then he would sleep for what seemed like forever. I had never been around really bad drugs before in my life so I really didn't know what to look for. It was my boyfriend who told me he thought my dad was on meth. I didn't believe him at first, but then I started to pay attention a bit more too how he was acting. He kept coming up with a lot of money just randomly. That's when I asked my

dad if he did meth. He of course said no but I had no idea how to react to what he told me for an explanation. My dad told me that when I got taken from him as a kid and was told he would never get us back because of what my mother did, he lost it. He did get into drugs but eventually got out of them. He unfortunately didn't get out of the drug world though. My dad was a drug dealer. He sold oxycontin and oxycodone to druggies. One night I asked my dad if I could go out with some friends. He in his sleepy, groggy state and said yes. At 2 am I was a block from my house at the park playing night soccer. My dad called me freaking out, asking me what I was doing out at 2 am. I tried to explain to him that he said it was fine and I was literally just down the road. That's when I knew he had lied about not being on drugs. That's also when I decided to go back to Missouri and get on with my life, because I didn't want to be a part of that world no matter how good the money was. The last thing I said to my dad before I drove off to head back home was, "I love you dad, but I can't live with someone like you. I don't want to be a part of this, and I understand that you just can't get off of them but dad, life's in session, and I'm not messing mine up for you." I remember that word by word because it was the hardest decision I ever had to make. Saying goodbye to your father forever should not be something a 17 year old girl should ever have to do. Words will always be one thing that effects decisions and outcomes in our lives. Whether it's a memory of something someone said to you that or something someone said in that moment. Words are always going to affect people.

Even though words stick we can choose to listen to them or we can choose to just brush them off. Wes 1 was arrested and the cops ended up letting him go. Before they let him leave though they told him, "You kids are way too young to be in this situation. But you know what, I see kids like you here every day. If you don't get smart, I am certain I will see you again. That's the sad part" (Moore 83). "I hope you really listened to what I told you" (Moore 84), but Wes 1 at the time did not listen and was back out tagging on the streets a few weeks later. Wes 1's teachers even took it far enough to tell his friend to stay away from Wes 1. Justin and Wes's teacher said to Justin, "Justin, you are a good kid, you need to stay away from Wes or you will end up going nowhere just like he will" (Moore 117). Justin of course didn't listen to the teacher and was amazed that someone would be so quick to judge a 12 year old kid. Wes 2, on the other hand, did listen to what his friend had told him about Job Corps. Levy, Wes 2's friend told Wes, "Listen, there are definitely some options, but I am telling you, it won't be easy. It will take work, and it will take commitment. Even when the days are tough, you have got to push through. Feel me" (Moore 139)? By brushing off the things that was said about Wes 1, he pushed through the negativity and became successful in life. Wes 2 did listen to what his friends said but since he had no positive influences in his life to tell him anything good about what he was doing, he ended up back on the wrong path.

Words can hurt a lot sometimes but you can choose to let them just fall off your shoulder. For the longest time I was told by everyone except my parents that I would end up just like my sister if I didn't change my ways. I would be pregnant as a teen and would just abandon my kids just like she did. I would be homeless with nowhere to go and no one willing to take me in. I would refuse to get a job, and say that working isn't for me, and I would have no future to look forward to. It hurt to hear this stuff because they were judging me based off my sister's actions. I was nothing like her, heck I don't even like my sister. I strived to be everything opposite of her my entire life. So the fact that people judged me solely off of her past decisions hurt, but I chose not to listen to those people. I chose my own path and let their words just fall off. I chose to get a job, go to college, and make a better life for my kids, not abandon them. We choose which words stick the most with us. Whether they are good or bad, we let them stick with us.



Sometimes the things people say to us sticks like glue but actions can speak just as loud as words. Wes 2 wasn't always around for his kids, and that probably had something to do with the fact that Wes 2's dad was never around either. "Wes's nonexistent relationship with his father probably contributed to his seeming indifference about becoming a father himself" (Moore 101). "He saw Wes standing over him. Still squinting, he looked his son in the eyes. [Who are you]" (Moore 102)? The fact that Wes 2's dad was never around and didn't even know who he was, was probably a major contributor to why he didn't take care of his kids like he should have. Wes didn't even care about the mothers of his kids in the way he should, because his father didn't care about his mother. All Wes 2 knew was that his father abandoned his mother and left him with his mom. So that's what he did to his kids because that's all he knew. Mottos are a way of showing people how to live their life as long as you live your life like it as well. Wes 1 lived his life by these mottos, by watching everyone else live up to these mottos with their actions and following in their footsteps, he became a better person because of it. "Our standard motto, [No excuses, no exceptions,] and our honor code, [A cadet will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor tolerate those that do,] were not simply words we had to memorize but words to live by" (Moore 115). Wes 1 believed in these words, he believed that they would help him though life by making the right choices, and they did. Everyone around him followed these codes, so he learned that following these codes can help him through life. Everyone else demonstrated the proper way to be and he watched and listened and because he followed these codes, he grew up to be a successful man.

Sometimes all you need to make it, is that one person who always says you got this. My friend Lee that I've always considered to be my sister has been there for me since I was a teenager. She's the only one who believed me when I told her that I didn't want to miss school. She's the only one who believed me when I said my medication kept me up all night and made me sleep all day. I was on 900 milligrams of lithium in the morning and 900 milligrams at night. It kept me up all day and all night, but even though I missed so much school she still told me she knew I would make it to where I wanted to be. Lee was always there for me when I needed it. Always telling me I could go where I wanted no matter what was going on in my life. To this day she tells me she always knew I would eventually get on my way to where I was going in life. When she told me, "You'll get to where you need to be," she didn't always mean in school or life, sometimes she meant emotionally. When I was 15 years old I went through I really hard depression. I barely ate, slept, or even talked to anyone for months. Lee was the only one who was able to reach out to me to figure out what had happened in my life to make this sudden change in my life. I was sitting on my porch one day and she walked up with a bag of Taco Johns, which was my favorite fast food at the time, and asked me if she could sit down. After she sat down we started talking about how I was doing and what was going on. It took me about 2 hours before I told her what was really going on. I explained to her that the reason I was so depressed was because back in November on the 28<sup>th</sup> my best friend killed herself in front of me and that I blamed myself for not being able to stop her. She paused for a while trying to think of how to reply to that. Then she said, "I know it hurts now and it's going to for a while, but you will get to where you need to be soon I promise." At the time it really didn't mean much to me because I was hurting, but eventually when the pain started to subside it became very helpful. Every time I slipped back into crying I always thought, I'll get to where I need to be soon. It helped a lot more than I thought any words could help. To this day I think of this quote when I am having trouble with school, life and emotions. Her words have stuck with me and her actions of being there for me have helped me be there for other people when they needed it the most.

Words will always stick with us no matter what we say and do. Words will stick, but we

can choose to let them stick. We can choose to let the bad stick or the good. Not everyone in life will have something good to say to you, sometimes it will be bad, and sometimes it will hurt, but don't let the bad stick unless it needs to. Let the good stick because if you let the good stick and you put yourself around people who act right, you will eventually pick up on the good they say and the good they do. In *The Other Wes Moore*, by Wes Moore, Wes 1 listened to the people telling him good things. He shut out the bad and moved forward with his life. Wes 2, on the other hand, didn't listen to the people saying he needed to get his life together. He just stuck with the bad and ended up in prison because of it. Don't let other people decide your life, you are in charge of who you are around and the words you listen to. You are in charge of you!



## Second Languages<sup>7</sup>

By: Nikki Groom

“To have another language is to possess a second soul.” - Charlemagne

Reading to me is a fantasy, an alternate reality I can escape to, when I just can't handle my life at the current moment. Reading is more than just words on a piece of paper, it's my alone time to be with me and my book. Writing, on the other hand, is my way to express myself. Writing is more to me than reading is, although I love them both equally. To me writing is a language, it's the language that comes to me more than any other. English is my second language compared to writing. Like Eudora Welty in “One Writers Beginnings,” I too was surrounded by books as a child. Welty, as a young girl had always loved books. Her mother and father as kids were not around books like they should have been, but they loved to read as much as their daughter. Welty's mom and dad wanted their kid to have books, so they started buying books for the future as well as the present. In Welty's home, some of the books she grew up around were dictionaries, encyclopedias, fiction books like Charles Dickens, Mark Twain books, and fairy tale books. She learned to read by being read to and wanting to read herself. Also like Gloria Naylor in, “The Love of Books,” I loved to write and used writing as a way through my emotions. In, “The Love of Books,” Naylor talks about how she started writing when her mother bought her a white notebook, because she didn't know how to communicate with her daughter. When Naylor's mom gave her the notebook, she told Naylor to write down everything she couldn't say to her out loud. Naylor's writings started out as just mere emotions being written down on a piece of paper, but eventually they turned into poems then into short stories. She didn't realize she had the chance to become a writer until she was 27 years old. She didn't think she would ever have a chance because she was black and there were no published books by black people that she had ever seen. She eventually ended up publishing her first novel, and continued to write. Reading and writing helped me grow into the person I am today. In “The Love of Books,” by Gloria Naylor, and in, “One Writers Beginnings,” by Eudora Welty, they talk about how reading and writing gave them something magical in their lives and helped them emotionally and mentally. Reading and writing have helped me in very similar ways as Welty and Naylor.

Kids need to be able to discover their reading preferences without a parent pushing it, because sometimes if you push a kid to read something they don't like, they end up getting set back. As a kid I always had books around me, my mom had a little library by our staircase. I was able to read whenever I wanted, with a variety of books to choose from. Like Welty, in “One Writer's Beginnings,” my mother used to read to me as well. Welty's mom read to her in

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<sup>7</sup> Welty, Eudora. “One Writer's Beginnings.” Introduction to College Writing. Dawn Terrick. Boston: Mc Graw Hill, 2010. 298-303.

Naylor, Gloria. “The Love of Books.” Introduction to College Writing. Dawn Terrick. Boston: Mc Graw Hill, 2010. 225-230

basically every room they had. In the dining room, kitchen, living room by the coal fireplace, and in the bedroom in the old rocking chair. Welty actually made it her mission one time to get her mother to read to her while she churned butter. When her mother finally granted her this wish, the book was done before the butter was finished being churned. When my mother would read to me I would always ask her if I could read. I couldn't read well when we first started, but after a few years my mom ended up moving from small books that were about 25 pages, to larger books about 150 pages in length. It became harder but I still wanted to read. When I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade I was able to read much larger books. I read the first Harry Potter book, "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone." When I told my mom about the book though, she forebode me to read the rest of them. She told me that I would not be allowed to read anything with magic or supernatural things in it, because it was unchristian like. Back then my mom and dad where what people called bible thumpers. I didn't get to finish reading the Harry Potter Series till middle school, when the school had a private library. I just kept the books in my locker and hid them from my parents. I didn't want to read because I was afraid that book would be taken from me as well, and it ended up setting me back in reading to the point where I started stuttering while I read and not being able to pronounce words. My parents refused to let me read the books I loved and because of it, it set me back in reading by quite a bit. "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 from themselves" (Welty 298). I had a very similar thought when I was a kid and found out that books weren't this amazing magical thing that just happened to show up in this world. The fact that I had always loved books to the point where I considered them magic, helped me realize that it's not the cover that makes the book, it's the author. Someday I hope to write a book as amazing as some of the books I've read. Welty's parents did encourage her to read what she wanted, unlike my parents did. Even though my parents told me I couldn't read the books I wanted to read, I still managed to be a very good reader and writer

Emotions can be something that's really hard to deal with sometimes; sometimes people never learn the proper way to let them out. For the longest time I didn't know how to properly release my emotions, so I became a very angry person. Welty never really wrote much until she started writing her books, but she enjoyed writing when she started it. To me it seems like Welty used an emotional stabilizer with her books. When she was sad, happy, tired, bored, angry, or just in the mood to read, she would read. "Yet regardless of where they came from, I cannot remember a time when I was not in love with them-with 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. Still illiterate, I was ready for them, committed to all the reading I could give them (Welty 298-299). She loved books so much she always wanted to read and was committed to reading as much as she could, just like I am. When I was 13 years old I had a friend kill herself in the same room as me and it really messed me up. I didn't know what to do anymore, I stayed home and was extremely depressed. I became angry shortly after it all happened and started to rebel against everyone, I didn't go to school, I really hurt the ones that cared about me and loved me on purpose. I was pushing myself away from everyone who ever was there for me in fear that they would leave me as well. My mother had no idea what to do at first, then my mom's friend told her to buy me a journal. So my mother bought me my first real journal. I was never a diary writer so my mom called it a daily log journal. When she gave me the journal she asked me to write everything I need to say down that I couldn't find the words to say. My first journal was filled in 3 days. I wrote until I no longer had the urge to aggressively write anymore, then I just started writing when I needed it. When I

cannot find the words I need to say, I go write them down. Most of the time every time I try to talk about something serious, if I don't write about it first, it comes out completely wrong. Welty didn't use writing as an emotional stabilizer, but she did use reading as one instead. Writing doesn't always help everyone, but for me it helped me release every built in emotion I ever had. Writing will always be my way to say things I could never actually say out loud.

Sometimes learning one's talents comes in the most peculiar way. Naylor discovered her talent for writing in basically the exact way I did. Her mother gave her journal to write in, to help her learn how to talk about what was bugging her. She wrote down everything she couldn't find the words to say, but could find the words to write. First it started out as just rambling, then it went to poetry, and then she ended up writing short stories, which ultimately lead to her writing her first novel. One thing that Naylor's mother said to her sounded a lot like what my mom said to me when she bought me my first journal. "You know, Gloria, I'll bet there are a lot of things going on in the world you don't understand and I'm sure there are even things going on in here in our home that might be troubling you, but since you can't seem to talk to your father and me about these things, why don't you write them down in here" (Naylor 228). Naylor learned to communicate through writing, just like I did. When my mother gave me my first journal she basically said the exact same thing to me. When I first started writing it was literally just to realize my bottled up emotions. When I first wrote poetry it was to beat my sister at it because of something she had said to me. One day my sister showed me some of her poetry, I had never read poetry before. I loved it so much that I told my sister I wanted to try to write poetry as well. My sister told me that I would never be good enough to write a poem. That right there is what set my determination to beat my sister at writing poetry. After a while of writing I began to love it so instead of trying to outdo my sister, I just wrote poetry for myself. One year I decided to write a poem for my mom's Mother's Day gift, when I read it to her she asked me how long I had been writing poetry. I told her a few years, she then asked if I would read her my other poems I had wrote. After I got done reading her my poetry, she asked me why I hadn't tried to get it published yet, I told her that my poetry was my poetry and I wanted to keep it that way. The way I discovered my talent for writing poetry was indeed a very peculiar way, but I don't think I would have ever discovered it fully without that drive to outdo my sister. Naylor didn't find her talent for poetry by trying to beat her sister, but it was still a unique way of discovering her talent. She just started writing, she had no idea she had that talent, and all of a sudden she's a great writer on her way to writing a novel.

Even though reading and writing have two completely different meanings to me they still shaped me into the person I am today. Without reading there is no writing. In "The Love of Books," by Gloria Naylor, she wouldn't have been able to be who she is today without reading or writing. Just like Eudora Welty, author of "One Writers Beginnings," never would have learned to write without reading. They never would have become the successful writers they are today without reading and writing. Without reading I wouldn't have an out to depend on when I needed it, and without writing I would never have learned to properly release my emotions. Without reading and writing I wouldn't be writing this paper, because I wouldn't be in college. I wouldn't have the motivation to make a better life for my kids, I probably wouldn't even have my kids. I'd probably be just like my sister, living on the streets because I wouldn't have that push to do better. The stories I read have always helped me get through my life. Just like writing has always helped me push through my emotions and keep moving forward, and even though I've had my setbacks I got right back up and kept going, because life's in session and it doesn't slow down for anyone.



## Sanctuary at Bridgewater

By: Nikki Groom

“At the blueness of skies and in the warmth of summer,  
we remember them.” –Sylvan Kamens and Jack Reimer

I have a place that holds a lot of important memories that involves my brother John and I. It's a beautiful, quiet place surrounded by trees and pathways. There's a lot of animals that you hear and see. It's a place that's very important to me and its name is Bridgewater. Bridgewater is important to me because it holds the memories of the things my brother and I did before he died and it makes me feel closer to him. Also because it's my place to escape reality.

At Bridgewater, John and I loved walking down the pathways in the forest and looking at the animals and listening to the way all the sounds fit together. We heard crickets, bees birds chirping, leaves moving in the wind, squirrels climbing up and down trees. There were animals walking over leaves and sticks, we even noticed a faint sound of water flowing over rocks. When we listened to the sounds not only did it relax us, but we also noticed that it created a beautiful symphony. All the sounds just tied together and made the most magical music we had ever heard.

John and I had a lot of adventures at Bridgewater together that brought us even closer than before. The one thing during that day that both of us never wanted to forget was the group of fallen trees we found. At first we just decided to climb up and sit down on them, then we started to get a little restless. I was sitting there thinking if we could climb and jump from upright trees with no problem, then why can't we with fallen down trees? So once again John and I decided to do something incredibly dangerously stupid that somehow always managed to work out in our favor. We jumped from tree to tree and after awhile that got to be boring so we upped the stakes a bit and decided to play tree tag, which is very similar to regular tag but in tree tag you have to stay in or on trees. I'm honestly surprised that neither one of us got hurt. The fallen trees we found turned out to be a great place that we went just to sit down and talk, but little did we know that the fallen trees we loved so much and thought to be the best place in the world was about to become second best. One time when we were up at Bridgewater we decided to take a little adventure and diverge from the path and into the woods. We tromped through the woods getting caught in thorns and fallen branches. We were laughing and talking having a great time. Then he shushed me, so I asked him, “What, did you hear something?” He looked at me and asked if I heard that noise. I took a second to listen and realized that what he had heard was moving water. We both got so excited! We had no idea there was a body of water out here, so we followed the sound of the water. We thought it was a pond but what we discovered was far from a pond. We found a river, it was the 102 river. We were so excited we both loved rivers! We only had one problem, the only way to get down to the river was a very steep and muddy hill.

So we decided one of us should stay up until the other got down in case one of us ended up hurt. We did rock-paper-scissors in order to see who went down first, and of course I lost. So I started my way down the slippery, muddy cliff like hill. When I got to the bottom, John came down next. He made it down with ease just like I did. We loved climbing, so stuff like this was easy for us. When we got down we saw that there was a rock bed we could stand on that allowed us to be on the river without being in water. The view was amazing. We could see up the river to where it cut off in a different direction, the hills around the river where it turned were immaculate. We could see down the river as well but it was nothing like the view up river. We decided it would be fun to have a rock skipping contest. John always beat me, but I was always close behind. We skipped rocks and talked for what seemed like hours. We even went swimming and we would continue to come to the river for the rest of the times we came back. The sunset was just starting to happen and the sun was just over the top of those hills, the sky was a canvas of color. It had pink, orange, red, yellow, and purple and it painted its way across the sky and created uneven shadows across the land. In that moment I knew that this place this awe-inspiring river and rock bed would always be our own place for each other. This was now and forever our place.

Bridgewater became the most important place in the world to me on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014, the day my brother drowned in the Skidmore river. I never realized how important a place could be and how many memories one place could hold until the day I could never make new memories with my brother there again. For the longest time after my brother died, all I did when I was alone, was drive to Bridgewater. Most of the time people thought I was with someone or out running errands, but I wasn't. I was out at Bridgewater trying desperately to understand why it had to be my brother. I couldn't even bring myself to get out of my car for the first week after he had died, but on the second week I decided to get out and go to the river. At first it felt wrong walking down this path without my brother. I felt like I was betraying him somehow. But as I got deeper into the pathway and closer to our spot I started to feel like someone was walking right beside me. I felt a hand grab my hand and I looked to where he would usually walk and I saw him there, not physically saw him but I knew he was here with me, walking down that pathway to our spot. I knew then in that moment that he wanted this to remain our spot, forever. When I got to the river I started to skip rocks. Then the memories started flowing back so fast and hard I got light headed and weak, I ended up falling down. I was so razed but I had no emotions; I was so verklempt. I sat there for what seemed like minutes but was actually hours just staring at the water, and when I finally looked up I noticed that the sunset was just starting and it looked exactly like the first time we discovered the river. That's when my body finally registered what was really happening and my eyes started to rain, and I don't mean a nice pleasant rain, I mean like a heavy down pour with a flash flood warning. After about 10 minutes I felt like someone was trying to wrap their arms around me and stand me up, so I stood up and stared at the sunset. I started thinking about how much more special Bridgewater is to me now that my brother is gone, and how much more meaning it has, because of the memories I got to share with my brother in this heavenly place.

Now that my brother is gone, I use Bridgewater as a sanctuary, a place to think, escape my life sucking job and my obnoxious family I call reality. When I'm stressed and need to get away, I go to the quite serenity of the river John and I found together. When I go to the river it helps me feel closer to my brother and sometimes I feel like he's there standing right next to me. Feeling closer to John helps me remember to appreciate every second I have of my life because the one person I thought I'd never lose was taken from me, and it made me realize that living life

desultory is not good enough. Sometimes when I need to think I will go to the fallen trees we found and climb to the tallest one and just sit up there for hours thinking about my life or whatever is going on with me in that moment. I think about my family and my friends, I think about all the things that went wrong in my life and how I managed to get back up and be where I am today, I think about what's stressing me out and how I can fix it. Like the time I went to Bridgewater when the doctors told me they thought I might have a brain tumor. I was so scared and nervous I couldn't handle life at that particular moment. So I went to Bridgewater to calm myself down and think about what I could do. I thought about what I was going to do with my life, but mostly I thought about the memories I shared with John at Bridgewater, and how different things might be if we hadn't found this special place to share together. Every time I go to Bridgewater it reminds me that no matter what has happened to someone there will always be a place where you feel them around you.

When I first started going back I thought it would be a little weird, but surprisingly everything basically seemed the same. The fishy smell of the river didn't change, the mossy smell of the rivers rocks didn't change, the wildflowers and pollen still smelled amazing, the smells still all harmonized together. The sounds were the same too, the river flowing over the rocks, the wind blowing through the trees, sticks getting stepped on by animals, it all sounded the same and for some reason it shocked me that they weren't different. I'm not entirely sure why I expected things to be so different but they weren't that different at all. I still do some of the things me and John used to do together. I still went to the river and skipped rocks, climbed trees, swam, walk the paths, and I still mushroom hunted. Sometimes I will go walking around looking for random junk like John and I used to do. One time when I was walking through the woods I found a toilet, and my first reaction wasn't your typical reaction. The highly logical reaction would be "Why would someone put a toilet out here?" But that wasn't my first reaction, my first thought was, "That's pretty funny, someone actually just randomly decided that the best place to dump your old used toilet was in the middle of no where," and all I could do was laugh. I had no idea why it was so funny I just thought it was extremely comical that someone would actually dump a toilet out here. Going to Bridgewater makes me feel a lot of emotions, sometimes it gives me a happy feeling, other times I get sad because I want John here with me. Sometimes all I feel is relaxed, and sometimes I get anxious because I'm worrying to much and have to slow down and breath to stop myself from having a anxiety attack where no one can help me. I'm never sure which emotion is going to pop up but either way to me it's a sign that he still lives within me.

We didn't realize it back then, but that was our spot, the place where we told all our secrets and confided in each other. The place where we could be ourselves with no one to judge us. Every time we needed to talk about something that was relatively deep, Bridgewater was the place we went. Like the time I needed to talk about how my ex husband had been treating me. I needed a safe place to tell my brother just how bad he had physically hurt me, and Bridgewater was that place. The place to confide in John, the place to let all my emotional baggage out.

There's a lot of people who have to deal with death in troubling ways. They never had that one person or that special place that made it all a little easier, which in some cases could lead to them becoming reckless and destructive. I'm lucky I had Bridgewater to help me through it all because without that place I would probably be one of those reckless and destructive people. Spending time at Bridgewater after my brother died helped me though his death. It helped me remember that even though he's gone I can hold him and his memories in my heart. All the memories I have with John, and all the memories I made when he was gone has made



Bridgewater so special and meaningful to me. Without Bridgewater I would be a completely different person. I wouldn't have learned how to deal with my brother's death, and I wouldn't be where I am today as a person. That is why Bridgewater means so much to me.



## Writing Voices

By: Daisha Hampton

“Writing is the painting of the voice.” - Voltaire

Writing for me is a very difficult process, because I have these nagging voices in the back of mind telling me that everything I’m writing is wrong. I spend many nights writing and then find myself rewriting the entire thing, because something was wrong. I always have to think about the reader and what they want, I never just write for myself. When I was younger I enjoyed writing about my family and feelings. I didn’t have people judging me, I was able to write what I wanted when I wanted. When I got older writing became a hassle, I had to write about things I wasn’t interested in and I felt I had to alter my opinions to satisfy readers. The voices inside of my head never let me forget that I had to write to satisfy others and not just myself. These voices are a problem for me, because I have no confidence in my own thoughts and opinions. I recently read two articles that really described me as writer perfectly. One article was Allegra Goodman’s “Calming the Inner Critic and Getting to Work.” In this article the author spoke about her experiences and struggles as a writer. The author speaks of these critics that hinder her writing. She talks about how her critics makes her think about who would read her work, or who would publish it. The author gives examples in her writing of what she does to ignore her critics. The other article is “The Watcher at the Gates” by Gail Godwin. In this article the author speaks of the watcher. The watcher helps writers but hinder them as well. Godwin talks about how the watcher makes you go back and revise your paper to make it better. Godwin also talks about how the watcher can be needed, but sometimes a pain to deal with. Some watchers need a bribe, some are cooperative and actually help revise your writing. Much like both authors, my experience with writing has been rough, because I can be my own worst enemy.

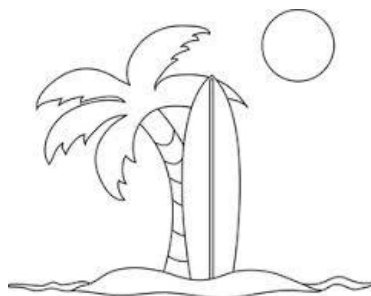
Many times I find myself deleting a lot of my work, because I feel my opinion and thoughts won’t be favored by my teachers and peers. In the article “Calming the Inner Critic and Getting to Work” Goodman says, “Just as the inner critic loves to dwell on the past, she delights in worrying about the future. ‘who would want to read this?’ she demands. ‘Nobody is going to publish a book like that!’ Such nagging can incapacitate unpublished writers (2). When writing people tend to think too far in the future. They began to worry about others liking their work. Their confidence is now in shambles, because they are so worried about the future and others opinions of their work. I find myself doing that a lot, I’ll write a paper and think to myself my professor isn’t going to like this, peer review is going to brutal. I never truly took the time to admire what I had written. I never truly appreciated the rawness of my creativity. In the Watcher at the gates, Godwin says, “I was writing a novel, and my heroine was in the middle of a dream, and then I lost faith in my own invention and rushed to ‘an authority’ to check whether she could

have such a dream” (290). In other words, the author finds herself checking another source, and second guessing herself, because she has lost faith in her own work. When I write I always find myself asking for someone’s opinion, and I continue to do that until my paper is finished. When I read over my paper I began to hear the drastic changes I made to fit the opinion of others.

A lot of things causes the writing process to become longer, and dreaded even more. If it isn’t procrastination its self-doubt. In “The Watcher at the Gates” Godwin says, “Other Watchers have informed their writers that: ‘Whenever you get a really good sentence you should stop in the middle of it and go on tomorrow. Otherwise you might run dry’” (291). Watchers give you excuses not to go on. They make you believe that continuing on won’t benefit you or your writing. The watcher causes you to procrastinate and makes the process longer. There have been many times when I would tell myself I needed to clean my entire room before doing my work. I would convince myself that the smallest things would prevent me from writing a good paper. In reality I was the only thing holding me back from writing a good paper. In “Calming the Inner Critic and Getting to Work” Goodman says, “Love your material. Nothing frightens the inner critic more than the writer who loves her work” (2). When you love your work and are confident in what you’re writing the inner critic is scared and can’t really critique your writing, because you will just ignore them. When I am writing something I am passionate about, and I’m in love with my paper I stop thinking about other people’s opinions. I just focus on my writing the voices in the back of my mind get really quiet and just let me write. my creative juices really began to flow. If I don’t love my work it just makes me not want to do it, and that’s when I began to procrastinate, and doubt everything I’m writing.

The voices for me can sometimes be helpful if you learn to work with them. In “The Watcher at the Gates” Godwin says, “Get to know your watcher, He’s yours. Do a drawing of him (or her), Pin it to the wall of your study and turn it gently to the wall when necessary. Let your watcher feel needed” (292). By working with your watcher you began to get comfortable with who you are as a person. You began to realize that you are in control of what you are writing, your watcher is just there to help you not take control. The watcher becomes a good thing when you become comfortable enough to put him or her in their place. I can relate When I’m writing I began to ignore the voices until I finish, and then I allow my voices to change any mistakes I made while keeping my ideas original. In “Calming the Inner Critic and Getting to Work” Goodman says, “Recognize that deep down you love your inner critic. How sad, how sordid. How cheap. Secretly writers do love the censor within” (3). The inner critic censors you in ways that benefit you and your papers so you secretly love it. It gives you a much needed critique at times. I sometimes loves having something in my mind that goes over my work and points out things that should be fixed, but I know that in order to work with the voices I have to be confident in my work.

According to Allegra Goodman and Gail Godwin, the more confident you become in your writing the less the voices have to critique. You can’t allow your inner critic to take complete control of the paper. You have to let it be comfortable enough as a writer to work with your inner critic. Even though your inner critic may suggest procrastination you should always try to push through. Never give your inner critic the upper hand because in reality you control your inner critic. In order to be comfortable with your writing you must always be confident and never let your negative thoughts get in the way of your creativity. Make best friends with your inner critic, because together you two can create a really great paper.



## **Gem in a Pawn Shop**

By: Zakary Ingraham

“Sometimes you just have to ride the wave you’re given.” - Anonymous

Foam and fiberglass were perfectly shaped, the bottom was deep blue in color with yellow lightning bolts kissing the rails. It was a triple fin surfboard, with an adjustable fin in the middle. I had only seen professional surfers with boards like this, and I knew this board was special the moment I saw it underneath the Christmas tree. Simple and pure, and just the right height and thickness, for a kid my size. Catching waves was easy compared to the old hand me down boards my mom’s boyfriend gave me. When I caught a big set wave, with my feet stuck to the waxy surface of the deck, it was like my board and I were dancing along the surface of the water. I never felt I would fall off, and a trust was formed that couldn’t be broken. During really big swells this surfboard was also a safety net; it kept me safe and afloat while I surfed the dangerous large breakers. As I look back, now I realize that this bond between boy, surfboard and Pacific Ocean instilled in me the passion for surfing, the ability to cope with life’s challenges, and a deep love and respect for the Mother Nature.

As my feet moved to contain the speed of the surfboard beneath me, I grew in total awe of the way it easily handled the waves, and responded to the slightest change in balance, or shift of weight. Turning and keeping momentum was effortless, as if I was an agile porpoise, not a clumsy 12 year old boy. This feeling I have inside of me is of sheer jubilation, this is the best I have ever surfed before, and I owe it all to my new “stick”. The way this board made me feel kept me excited inside, and my desire to keep surfing turned into an all-out commitment towards perfecting my new craft.

It really wasn’t new, my mom bought this board from a pawn shop in Kailua, and I had been begging profusely for her to buy it for me since the day I spied it for sale in the front window. Even though there were a few minor dings that needed resin to fill them, and sandpaper to smooth off the burrs, this board was far from second hand quality. It looked almost new and I guessed the previous owner most likely outgrew its small size and had to sell it to get a bigger one. I, of course, was happy to fix and nurse my new best friend back into premium surfing condition. Repairing the small nicks and scratches further cemented my true love for my board almost as if we were kin to each other. I grew to trust this board, as I rode waves bigger than twenty feet tall, and because it kept me afloat it was my lifeline to safety. This board has influenced my relationship with the ocean waves in a positive way as my riding got better; and every day I felt as if today I surfed my very best.

Sometimes I would sit with the local “grommets” on the beach, watching the waves, and inspecting the currents, before we jumped in to the frothy shore break. “Grommets” are what we called young surfers, usually sunburnt with sun bleached hair as well. As we sat, we were

becoming more familiar with the patterns of the rips and undertows that tourists usually overlooked. We looked for rocks underneath the surface that weren't plainly visible at first glance. We knew what areas to avoid, and what parts of the beach were dangerous. I used to poke a stick in the sand at the tidal line, and in ten minutes if the tide was coming up the stick would now be partially underwater, vice versa, and the tide would be going out. I would sit on my board in the lineup, and use this knowledge to catch the best waves of the set. Just by watching the ocean you could learn how to sense changing conditions. In a way, by being observant of Mother Nature, you were giving, and earning respect.

My board was able to let me adjust to each wave as it changed in front of me, and I would burst around a crumbling section to get to the open face, and keep my speed going for the next move. I learned that each wave was unique, and being flexible in surfing allowed me to get the best out of each wave. Being a pre-teenager, I was learning a lot about making the right choices and how they affected me when I surfed. Life is similar to surfing in this aspect. Life is always changing, and from early lessons learned as grommets, Surfers know how to adjust to life and "go with the flow."

Randy was my mom's boyfriend, and he gave me one of his old surfboards, but it was way too big, and for me, it was like riding a piece of driftwood. Very hard to turn and heavy also. My new board was light and quick, and made for a smaller person like me. It wasn't embarrassing to carry around, and sometimes I even got compliments on the art work, and shape of it. This board was shaped by a professional surfboard maker, for a young pro rider, and it made me feel like I was a pro too. At this age looking cool was important, and this piece of art helped me feel accepted by my peers. They even gave me tips on how to pull new moves, and said that this board was radical enough to pull them off. I was being shown by locals how to do these maneuvers, and this board helped me get accepted, and feel like I belonged to a tight knit group that I hadn't belonged to before. Kind of like you were a V.I.P, and only certain cool people could be a part of your society. This board helped me feel like I was finally a part of something that people couldn't even buy for themselves.

I had owned and ridden many surfboards in my life, but this particular board was unique for me. The experiences with this board at my side helped me learn how to be safe while in the Pacific Ocean, by giving respect and in turn, gaining respect back. Other surfers understood this, and accepted me as an equal, because they knew I was a genuine surfer at heart. This board also helped me in times of critical life choices, by teaching me to be flexible in mind and body. But the most important lesson I took from this relationship, was as humans on this planet, we need to better respect and take care of our Planet Earth, so future generations can enjoy it also.



## **The House of My Mind**

By: Taegyeong Lee

“My grandmother knew what life was about: no one left her house with an empty belly, without getting a hug, without hearing her say I love you.” – Anonymous

Sometimes, people overlook how time has molded themselves into who they are today. With time flying fast, how our memories of life have affected each of us seems unrecognizable. However, each one carries deep hidden memories that unconsciously consist of their current self. These memories present a place to rest, hide, and chuckle at. Such a place is my grandma’s house to me. Passing through my teenage days, my bright, balanced, and boisterous fragments of memory stay at my grandma’s house. It is a two storied dark brown brick house with the tiny front yard of untrimmed leafy evergreen trees and the huge backyard dotted with grass and with mysterious bluish-green bushes and gorgeous plants on the left side. The spacious living room with four wooden rooms including two bedrooms surrounding it was packed with my grandma and relatives chattering and giggling, there was no way for its warmth to dry up. Our gathering was consistent almost every day until bedtime. With the full moon seen in the night sky, each of my relatives begun to leave and go back to their own room. Though the living room showed its emptiness, it was soon filled up right after the next day starts. Although my grandma has now passed away and most of my relatives who once lived in the house left for a job and/or school, so only one aunt and her husband live there now, this place would be my little universe where a sense of love, happiness, and yearning exist. I want to treasure our old memories we had in this house because I know how lovely it is to bring the memories out on the spot, having stories to tell of how we had blossomed whenever we were together. My grandma’s house is where I can bring back my memories with my grandma who taught me kind words, two aunts, and the beauty of nature the backyard has.

The house is where I can think about my grandma who taught me the importance of kind words. It was the place where a string of cool air sneaked in through four sliding doors and time-worn squeaky wooden floorboards were ornamented with old-fashioned shiny navy plaid pattern on it. Putting my left toes slowly with the right one rightly following on the floorboard, I danced the hornpipe when nobody’s there imagining how funny it would be if I performed this in front of my sweet grandma who always had praised me. At times, I mimicked an ice figure skating player with long slender legs, who I had admired, with my toes fidgeting; wiggling just like something was burning on the floor I stand on. Every now and then, my two aunts jerked the door open, caught me, and giggled to make fun of me, saying, “Look at her ass”, which made me burst into tears. Or at times, when I didn’t notice my grandma on the white cotton cushy sofa, who kept

watching me playing seriously, cheered, clapped, and said, “I should have noticed how talented you are at rhythmic gymnastics. I’m proud of you, dear.” Well, that was not rhythmic gymnastics exactly though, no matter what, whenever she praised me, I felt just as I fly above fluffy clouds. I tried to remain in the warmth the words she had just given me had all day long. She used kind words. She seemed to know how to make people smile, how to treat people, and how to get people to come to her without request. She was like an aged fairy, but she had her own beauty. She wore a torn baggy sleeveless, but looked fancy without costumes. She had a gray streaked curly permed hair, but it showed traces of decades through which she had gained her wisdom. Her mouth was like a fountain where clear spring water comes out; where the water’s magic words are produced. I was sure her beauty emanates from every word that she said. I remember one afternoon when noise which was supposed to fill four spacious rooms inside was totally gone except my younger sister working on her assignments after school. As the strong rays of the sun became less furious, my back turned against leafy evergreen trees in the front yard, which came into the edge of living room, and had me under their shadows. I faced my grandma who was enjoying her rest on a rocking armchair, so I didn’t say any words which would have disturbed her, to respect her silence that was unusual in that house. But she suddenly broke that silence with some words. She said, “Sweetheart, what is beauty?” I was put on the spot to define what beauty was, which made my palms get wet by its strangeness. Actually, the answer was obvious to me, I thought, beauty was the way Sailormoon dresses up, a main character of one of the popular Japanese animations. But I know, no matter what beauty is, that was not what she wants from me. She said, “The way you say is you. You are made of the words you say. Beauty comes from words you think, choose, and say. How beautiful are you?” Looking back on that day again, I can say she was right. The power of words can heal people, but they can also kill people. Since words are not visible like an object, they can go anywhere and at any time. They spread quickly and strongly. I am the one who controls these words within myself. She told the truth. Words can even choose whether the one speaking is going to be beautiful or awful depending on the words they choose. My grandma, who passed away two and a half years ago, no longer exists in this world. The one who gave me words of wisdom went far away to where I can’t reach her. Whenever I visit the house, the rocking chair she used to rest on seems to still keep her soul, reminding me of her chattering, laughing, and chuckling clearly, and then my memories soon blossom as if I go back to moments of when I was talking with her. Although her body is apart from her house, my memories with her are going to be with the house always.

Also, my grandma’s house is where I can bring back my memories with my two aunts. My two married aunts, Suk and Sun, my grandma’s two daughters were almost as authoritative as my grandma at the household because they had lived in the house as long as my grandma had lived there. Suk, her first born daughter, was 5.6 feet tall, had a dark brown short curly hair with jugged cheek bones, which she regarded as her complex. She wore wooden glasses at that time. She was a typical Korean first born daughter: self-aware, responsible, chatty, and sometimes self-centered unlike Sun. Sun was a third born child, who imitated Suk’s dark brown curly hair out of jealousy, so they looked like twins or almost identical if I looked at their hairs only. But Sun wore metal framed rectangular shaped glasses and that was the point where I could recognize who is who when they sit. Sun was shorter than her sister because of her physical disability, which stopped her growing height during adolescence, so she was around 5 feet. Nonetheless, she was a positive and energetic person who chats endlessly, especially when they were together. An old Korean proverb says: “Women gathering has plates broken.” That proverb fits them exactly. If words were visible like objects, the house would be filled with the words

they said, so silence was one of the things I couldn't have dreamed of in that house. However, thanks to my aunts, the house always brimmed with liveliness and I love that liveliness so much, though sometimes that made small things bigger. I remember one early morning, I saw Sun bringing up a topic related to Suk's second son on the spot. Suk's second son once lived in the house and left due to his school to another city. They, at first, started to talk about the shape of his new bike that broke down one day after he had bought it and it lasted for an hour and a half and then changed the topic slightly to its color that they were satisfied with and this topic even longer lasted up to for two hours and other bike related topics such as Sun's opinion about why people should stop riding a bike, appropriate names for his broken bike like Buzz or Mayfly were topics that followed and lasted for three hours. Eventually it ended up with his housing contract problems at his place, which made two aunts out of blue decide to visit his house late that night and come back after three days. Although their two husbands grumbled at their loudness and un-predictableness, well, as they always said, that was how my two aunts had spent their days go by. However, to the present, Sun left the house for a new job in Busan and her husband for his master degree in Seoul, so only Sun takes care of the house, every now and then, we gather during holidays and taste how our memories we had were in this house. Those memories sometimes taste spicy, but mostly savory.

Along with memories about my grandma and two aunts, the house also keeps my memories about the backyard that showed me the beauty of nature. Since my family were city dwellers and did not have enough yard space to cultivate plants like the ones for country residents, we only had ornamental trees and plants grow on the narrow front yard with pinkish-brown bricks surrounded it. In fact, the trees and plants existed only for our pleasure in our front yard, so it was always neatly trimmed and not allowed to be as it is. However, the backyard in my grandma's house was, I'd say, the unknown world I had never been to. It was like a small arboretum where I first saw mysterious dark green bushes, leafy trees twisted with ivy, sweet potato runners, three persimmon trees laden with fruits, white magnolias, camellias, and mimosas, none of which the rest of the family houses had. The size of the backyard was larger than the house. With the right side of the backyard sparsely dotted with grass, the left side was hard to walk all the way because my feet easily sunk deep into sticky and uneven soil, but it was fun to play in as if my feet are underneath thick layers of snow. The soil was as downy and fluffy as a mattress that I jumped on when my grandma was busy working on mopping the floorboards. Having getting tired of jumping, I would look up into the sky. Since I was so short, around 4.6 feet tall, if I looked up that way, leaves that hung down from branches of each tree blocked my vision, so I could observe how each leaf's blade and vein were in contrast with one another in terms of its color when the sunlight penetrated them. While a leaf's veins kept its green color, leaf's blades lost theirs as if they were on X-ray. Soon my eyes turned its gaze upon spaces between leaves to see how a ray of sunlight is twinkling like yellow stars. Afterward, I had my eyes move backwards to see how largely I can capture the whole view of the tree. And then I felt choked at its indescribably beautiful scenery, at its fresh greenery, at its natural grandeur. Those feelings were definitely what I can't feel in my home, my village, or my city. Even today, whenever I visit to my grandma's house, I step on soil, touch leaves, observe its greenery, and try to keep those feelings until I get back to my home.

Now I cannot see my grandma smiling on a rocking chair who reeled off a story of wisdom, or two aunts making the house vibrant although the backyard is still left unchanged. However, my memories in this house come out whenever I need spaces to rest, hide, and chuckle at like my home. I close my eyes and imagine the way grandma smiled at me, reminding the



lesson she gave me. I also laugh at how my aunts had their days go by. And then my memory arrives at soft soil where I stepped on with sunlight shining between leaves. My grandma's house is becoming the house of my mind.



## Reading and Writing that Makes Me Free<sup>8</sup>

By: Taegyeong Lee

“Freedom is not worth having if it does not involve the freedom of making mistakes.” -  
Gandhi

Do easy access to books, parents who crave success for their children's education, and a highly intensive school system naturally make kids interested in reading and writing? It probably can help them, but not necessarily. I was born in South Korea, where one's educational level explains one's profile. The higher the level is, the more successful they become in terms of social status, annual salary, and respect by people. For a more successful life, a top tiered and prestigious university must be also included on their profile. Therefore, it is not surprising that Korean students willingly plunder their youth in *hagwons*, local private educational institutes, where they spend their time studying until 11 pm or even later after school, and also that their parents spend over 20% to 50% of their monthly income on their children's private education. And that is probably because of the inefficient Korean public education that does not focus on reading or writing but on heavy memorization that makes this phenomenon worse. Under such a public education environment, it is natural that parents force their children to read books for their bright future with high scores and not for the pleasure of reading. My reading environment in my early days was similar to the essays, “The Lonely, Good Company of Books” by Richard Rodriguez and “One Writer's Beginnings” by Eudora Welty and my writing experience was similar to the essay, “Learning to Write” by Russell Baker. I also found differences from the essay, “One Writer's Beginnings” by Eudora Welty regarding my reading environment. Even though South Korean education system does not focus on reading or writing, but on rote learning, and though parents make their children read books to get high scores, after I entered college, the reading sessions in humanities program gave me a different view of the world and also the courage to express my opinion through writing.

Since my parents had a fervor for educating me before I entered school, I could easily access text based resources at home; however, I was not that inspired to keep reading. My experience in reading was similar to the essay, “One Writer's beginnings” by Eudora Welty. In her essay, she states, “My father was all the while carefully selecting and ordering away for what

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<sup>8</sup> Works Cited: Baker Russell. “Learning to Write.” *Introduction to College Writing*. 6<sup>th</sup> edition.

Boston: The McGraw-Hill Companies. Inc, 2010. 267-269. Print.

Welty Eudora. “One Writer's Beginnings.” *Introduction to College Writing*. 6<sup>th</sup> edition.

Boston: The McGraw-Hill Companies. Inc. 2010. 298-303. Print.

Richard Rodriguez. “The Lonely, Good Company of Books.” *Introduction to College Writing*. 6<sup>th</sup> edition. Boston: The McGraw-Hill Companies. Inc. 2010. 293-297. Print.

he and Mother thought we children should grow up with” (299). Welty explains that her parents took care of what books she should read since their parents knew how important good books are, and how they impact their children. Likewise, my parents were always emphasizing why I should read books especially before I entered school. They knew how much rich reading experiences would impact my studying in the future, so they spent time in search of educational, informative, preferable books that other parents recommend and bought a series of newly released books. These books were written for children from autobiographies of historical figures to thin novels that teach lessons. Welty describes her rich reading environment in her essay. She was exposed in her early days to many book sources such as books in the family bookcase, encyclopedias, and dictionaries as the following quote shows. She says, “Besides the bookcase in the living room, which was always called “the library,” there were the encyclopedia tables and dictionary stand under windows in our dining room” (299). Likewise, I was surrounded by newly released, colored, illustrated books in three 6 feet wide and 10 feet long dark brown wooden bookcases in my room. There was a bigger one in another bedroom, packed with older, worn out books that were rarely read by me and my younger sister. In the bookcase, there were also Korean encyclopedias, dictionaries for foreign languages such as Japanese, Indonesian, and Arabic, and books my parents used to read when they were younger. In Welty’s essay, she says, “I learned from the age of two or three that any room in our house, at any time of day, was there to read in, or to be read to” (298). Unlike Welty, despite my easy access to books, the books at home were rarely read and my parents did not read books to me. Since my father was a busy businessman working from the early morning to late at night, even I could seldom look at his face. When he they had some time, my parents would liberate themselves from the house and stay outdoors; otherwise, they indulged themselves in immediate pleasure that media presents to them. However, they couldn’t stand the long silent journey that books lead them. In the essay, “The Lonely, Good Company of Books” by Richard Rodriguez, I found that his parents had a similarity with my parents. He states, “For both my parents, however, reading was something done out of necessity and as quickly as possible. Never did I see either of them read an entire book. Nor did I see them read for pleasure” (293). My parents, likewise, read books at times, but reading was something done out of necessity. They read an electricity bill, a manual of operating instruction, letters from our relatives, wedding invitations, brochures for cultural events, but those were all for their reading. They made me read by saying, “Turn off the TV. Go and read.” while they were watching TV in another room. So, reading was kind of my homework rather than something I genuinely enjoyed, but sometimes I did it to please them, to show that I was listening to them. So, even though I had a bunch of books, few inspired me to enjoy reading.

Because the Korean public school does not focus on reading and writing, but on heavy memorization for the *suneung*, the Korean version of SAT, I did not read books and write essays until I entered college. Though I had some writing experiences in elementary school because they asked students to keep a diary and journal on a weekly basis, after I entered middle school, school curriculum went toward the *suneung* that consists of multiple questions. This style of testing requires students to memorize answers rather than considering why the answers are right or why the others wrong. Naturally, the way teachers taught the students was mostly one way teaching. It was not asking the students to read, explore, criticize, and conclude the answer on the basis of reading and writing. This way of teaching lacked the need for reading and chance of writing from students, so all the students had to do was just taking notes on what teachers say and memorizing answers for exams. Anyhow, I got high scores on all types of exams and enjoyed being praised by parents and teachers, but I never thought I became educated. In

Rodriguez's essay, he says, "It soon was apparent to me that reading was the classroom's central activity" (292). But when it comes to me, it was opposite. Whereas Rodriguez explains that reading is achieved in class, my school days consisted of continuously making sure I knew the lessons teachers taught by memorizing and reading was an option for bookworms. Rodriguez continues in his essay, "... remedial reading classes were arranged for me with a very old nun ... One day the nun concluded a session by asking me why I was so reluctant to read by myself" (294). In school Rodriguez attended, reading sessions for those who cannot keep up with reading class were prepared with a teacher who willingly wonders why her student has such a problem. Unlike Rodriguez's school, my school, even if there were students left behind in reading, did not care to know how its students were doing in class. Also, I didn't have teachers who wonder why reading was not a concern to me. Naturally, reading was becoming nothing but something done out of necessity such as reading to find answers for higher scores, or instant reading for reading competitions in school. I'd even say that reading rather frightened me at times because reading was only for exams and the exams usually got me freaked out.

However, after entering college, the reading sessions for the humanities program I attended inspired me to keep reading and writing. The program was liberal classes for college students who want to study an introduction to philosophy, art, history, and literature for 12 hours a week for three and a half months, through which additional reading sessions are required to attend. In the sessions, we read "Desire and its Interpretation" by Jacques Lacan, "Différance" by Jacques Derrida, "An Introduction to Existentialism" by Jean Paul Sartre and the like. Though I was obsessed with the reading session for French philosophy in particular, a transcendental lesson I realized over the sessions converged on one thing. No matter what the subjects were, this lesson showed up in all of them: if there is a problem and it is left alone, the problem festers, and if the problem goes to extremes, changes are naturally followed by a radical method such as a revolution. And I began to apply this lesson to the current Korean public education problems in terms of its inefficiency. And I expected its future this way: if its inefficiency in public education comes to extremes, better ideas would show up by progressive students or their parents because few of them consistently want to invest their time and money in the inefficient system public education provides. From the program, furthermore, having studied French philosophy, reading "An Introduction to Existentialism" massively influenced to the way I think, say, and act. This book focuses on one's rights, individuality, differences, and the corresponding weight of responsibilities, saying that individuals get to make their own choices because they have freedom. His words helped me look at a matter objectively. From this, I could eventually look objectively at the Korean public education and could criticize the system out of my old perspective that all things taught in public education had gone to the right path all the way. Also, I tried to get out of its collectivism that reinforces uniformity of opinions in school, which made me refuse to be different from the others. Furthermore, I tried to get out of my arrogance that was made by achieving meaningless high scores, and thus feeling a sense of superiority over the others. In Rodriguez's essay, he poses questions to himself like this. He says, "Didn't I realize that reading would open up whole new worlds? A book could open doors for me" (294). Rodriguez realized the power of reading can usher in a new world. Likewise, I would have not gotten the knowledge I have now unless I had read. Reading gave me a different view to look at the world, a chance to think differently, and the courage to criticize what I had thought it was right. Eventually, I became educated by reading.

Along with building up knowledge by reading, writing became a means to express my thoughts. When I was in middle and high school, I was never given a chance to do any type of

writings since the suneung reduced the importance of writing to the bottom due to its multiple choice method. At the final year of my high school, my very first essay was a college application essay that took two weeks, which consists of my award winning school career, school activities I had participated in, and high GPA with a bit of highfaluting words for a self-description section to demonstrate how competent I was among applicants, of course, with the guidelines of a formal composition. If there was something to be written, I wrote it out of necessity. However, after the reading sessions, I felt that I wanted to write since my opinions that I made through the reading sessions needed to be expressed. And I thought writing would allow me to achieve more than oral words since writing gives me time to contemplate as much as I need and thus reduces probable errors. In the essay, "Learning to Write" by Russell Baker, he says, "I wanted to put it down simply for my own joy, not for Mr. Fleagle . . . To write it as I wanted, however, would violate all the rules of formal composition" (268). Baker explains that though he violated formal composition he should have followed for his grade, he did not care. He just wrote words from the bottom of his heart for his joy. Likewise, I started to write what I want to write. I did not need to worry about my writing. I did not care what my writing was supposed to be in accordance with appropriate paragraph structure such as one that starts with an introduction and ends with a conclusion. I did not care for someone who would probably judge my writing style or words or someone who probably could read my essay by accident. Rather, I wrote for myself. I wrote to become more educated, mature, and wise. And I continued to write from that moment until now to express my thoughts, opinions, and ultimately, myself.

The true meaning of education seems profound when an individual feels hunger for it or when the environment is supportive enough for the individual to achieve that meaning. I think I belonged to the former. Even though I had easy access to a bunch of books at home, even though I had parents who are passionate for educating me, and even though I was in a Korean school that is highly competitive, I was not inspired to read and write. However, now that I have different views to look at the word and the courage to keep writing, all of which were achieved by the reading sessions that inspired me to do so, I feel free to accept and express words through reading and writing.



## Love Hate Relationship with Reading

By: Joraya Maag

“Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.” – Joseph Addison

At a young age reading was very important and highly influenced within my life. My mother loved to read and that was the most common activity we did together, long nights of reading bedtime stories and early mornings of reading stronger novels of her likings. During my young years reading was enjoyable. The different tone and words rumbling off of my mother’s tongue and the imagery that she created with the description of characters was the reason that I would look forward to sitting down in her lap and listen to her read. Nowadays I’m not able to say that I can agree that reading is enjoyable. Many kids go to school to learn and become smart and tend to enjoy school. I, on the other hand, had a very rough experience with school. My early years weren’t bad at all. I enjoyed everything about school and it was very common for me to be at the top of my class each year. Middle school is when it all turned around for me. I no longer liked school and it was all because of a few words I heard often from my teachers. I was constantly being told that I wasn’t good enough and my reading was going to hold me back. In the essay “The lonely, Good Company of Books” by Richard Rodriguez he shares the struggles that he had with reading and the different things that he went through to become a better reader. He eventually makes reading an enjoyable opportunity. When it came to tough books Rodriguez shares with us his struggles. From his experience, which tells us that reading difficult books for a sense of self-achievement is not the best way to read, he criticizes the education system because of its little help in students’ reading. In my own experience, reading has been both similar and different. Much like Rodriguez says about reading I have had to self-motivate and dedicate myself to become a successful reader and highly educated adult.

At a young age reading was taken very seriously within my family and our home. My mother was always taking me to the public library to pick out new books for bedtime while she shuffled through novels to try to find one she hadn’t already read. When the search was over we would find a cozy spot and she would start to read one of the many books she selected. My mother was very intelligent and when it came to reading books she was able to make the book come alive. As she read I could always picture myself in the book and when she read dialogue her voice would change bringing each individual character to life and past the surface of the pages. My mother loved to read for pleasure and entertainment. Unlike Rodriguez states, “Never did I see either of them read an entire book. Nor did I see them read for pleasure” (293). He describes how he knew his parents could read but never caught them reading for fun. He shares that they were able to read and write in two different languages including English and Spanish but they only read or wrote because they had to. Many different things that they read may have been in a different language so it was easy for them to read it since they knew Spanish. They would have to read when they needed to cook or put something together to live day by day.

This is different from the experience I had with my single parent. My mother read what she had to throughout the day but no matter how tired she ended up being at the end of the day I was always able to count on her to read me a story before bed. My mother proved to me that she had the self-motivation to read and learn more beyond what she was learning from the world. She always told me that reading was a way of learning something I don't know or will never experience in my own life. My mother was different from Rodriguez's parents because as he said he had never seen them complete a whole book my mother had this dedication side of her that forced her to complete at least two book a week not counting my bed time books. As I grew up I started to pick up the love for books. Many days I would come home from 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade with a new book that I wanted to read to my mother so she could see how much I had learned growing up sitting in her lap. This was a very important time for our mother-daughter relationship to grow stronger. The more I read to her the more dedication and self-motivation I built to continue to read more books and make my mother happy. Those days quickly came to an end.

Although at a young age I had a love for books it's easy to say that middle school and high school change that for me. Class was getting harder and harder and the stories we had to read were doing the same and becoming more difficult as time went on. I was reading the passage but the words, ideas, and story line was not sticking in my head. I had a hard time summarizing what I had just read and when it came to question and answer time I would close my eyes and pray that I wouldn't be called on. Rodriguez writes, "I privately wondered: What was the connection between reading and learning? Did one learn something only by reading it?" (294). The author writes this asking himself how and why reading is so important. He question if reading was the only way he could learn. He wonders if he will only be smart if he can read and pull apart what he is reading with a full understanding. He knew that he was struggling with reading and it was having him worried. If reading was the only way someone could learn he feared that he wasn't going to learn or be intelligent was he went through school. He wrote, "Books were going to make me 'educated.' That confidence enabled me, several months later, to overcome my fear of the silence" (295). He wrote this because not only was he able to step out of his fear but he also received the help to furthering his understanding of reading which provided him with the motivation to really get into books. He feared that he wouldn't be educated and may upset his parents. He now understood the real importance of reading. Being a good reader with a large vocabulary and a different outlook on life that's influenced by the things you read is what's important and creates an academic successful student and adult. Unlike Rodriguez, I didn't have this empowering experience. When my teachers saw that I was struggling with the readings that were assigned they simply pulled me over to side and made it clear that they could see that I was having a hard time and suggested that I read more at home. I wasn't for sure what else they wanted me to do because what they suggested I was already doing. Often times I tried to go back to when I was young and have my mother read to me just to see if I was able to understand the passage if it was coming from someone else. But it turned out that I still struggled. Our reading level testings were around the corner and my teachers were making it very clear that if I didn't do well on it I may have to restart the reading section in my grade. I didn't receive help from my teachers like Rodriguez did and that was a big problem for my mother and me. In her eyes, she was sending me to school to learn and if I didn't know something she expected the school and my teachers to teach it to me. The sad thing about it was that my teachers didn't focus on the students that needed a little help, instead they focused on the ones that knew what they were doing and were flying through lessons and passing test with bright colors. I often heard that I wasn't good enough and I would possibly never be able to further my education if I wasn't able

to read at such expected high level. It took all that I had to push myself and prove all of the teachers that doubted me that even though I struggled I would further my education and be something in life. But the school year was coming to an end and I thought I was running out of time. As my hour glass was running out of sand I had to find the motivation to flip it over and start new. I knew I wasn't going to be able to do anything if I wasn't fully dedicated to work hard towards my goal.

Due to my bad experiences and struggles with reading, college was making its way up my list of fears. It felt as if my life was on the line, I would either make it or break it. Summer was approaching and I had completed registration for college. I had no idea how I would get through college if I wasn't smart enough to get through easier reading classes. Considering what my teachers had said I wasn't one hundred percent sure if I would survive. When I had heard the same thing over and over about myself from my teachers I began to believe it. That's when I decided to be different from what my teachers thought I would be but it was going to take a large amount of motivation from myself to accomplish the goal I was reaching for. I ended up teaching myself more over the summer so that I wouldn't die my first semester of college classes.

Rodriguez writes, "What did I see in my books? I had the idea that they were crucial for my academic success, though I couldn't have said exactly how or why" (295). The author wrote this because his mother had asked him a question on what he saw in the books that he was reading and why he thought they were so important. He wasn't able to give a full answer because he didn't know it. He knew that reading was a way of making him smarter and opening doors for his future. He learned that reading gave him a wide range of knowledge that he would be able to apply to his life. Having his scheme and different ideas he will be able to get through life and go for what he wants. He was educated that without being able to read he wouldn't make it anywhere in life. I had this same problem. I wasn't and still not able to tell you why reading is so important other than it's needed to be successful in life. Without reading you aren't able to live a life because no matter what every day everywhere something is constantly being read.

Throughout the summer I built a high motivation level to read and start understanding what I was reading. I also have dedication to get through what I was reading and actually comprehend it and learn from it. I had a hard time at first but as time has went on it is becoming easier and my goal is getting closer to reach. Now that I am in college and I spent a long summer trying to improve my way of reading, I would say that I'm very proud of the change I have made. Although I still dislike reading I am able to bear with it and get the job done. So far the challenge that I thought college would give me hasn't been as tough as I thought. My only fear is that one day I will be handed a reading too difficult to comprehend and my hard work will be shoved in my face by someone stating that I'm not smart enough to understand.

At the end of the day it takes motivation and dedication to get the things done in life that we need to accomplish. Rodriguez and I can relate to one another because although we had a rough time with reading we both now know that self-motivation and dedication is what will make us successful. My mother tells and shows me every day how proud she is that I am slowly becoming more involved with books. To this day she will ask me if I have any reading that she can read to me so that we can continue our close bond. Many years ago you could place a book in front of me and it would stay closed. Now that I know of the power reading has on one's future life there is a greater chance that I will open that book and take a journey through the pages. Reading with motivation and dedication is the key to being a highly educated adult with great successes in life.





## Literacy Autobiography<sup>9</sup>

By: Jorden Miller

“There is no friend as loyal as a book.” – Ernest Hemingway

At six years old I can remember wondering why I had to read every day when mom and dad never did and my sister only read for school. It took my grandmother passing away to get me to read. She always read to me when she babysat me and I craved that after she died. When you are young and you cannot make sense of the world around you books tend to be the only escape you have. I never really liked to read before that and even after that. I struggled with reading for a long time because I was so shy and quiet. I did not see why I had to read in class at home. I was put in a special reading group even though I knew I was a very smart kid. I understood what I was reading but not why. I had no one else at home to remind me how amazing reading was after my grandma passed away. My mom glanced over the weekly newspaper and my dad barely even read the instructions to his latest tool or building projects. My sister, who is four years older than me, read her assignments for school but I very rarely saw her read for fun. My third grade teacher Mrs. Hall introduced me to a new world of reading. She gave me book after book to read and she took our class to the public library for the first time where I eventually got a library card. After that year I began to read more and more. Like Richard Rodriguez very often speaks about in “The Lonely, Good Company of Books” a specific person sparked my love of reading. He never wanted to read for fun because his parents did not. When he had a teacher help him he started to enjoy the reading but not always understand. He could read for fun. I no longer just read out of necessity for school and intelligence, but I read in order to become the person I want to be. Reading changed me as a person. I learned that reading did not have to be a chore. Reading can be an enjoyable worthwhile experience.

Like Rodriguez, when I was very young I never saw anyone read for fun but only out of necessity. I began to see reading as a necessary evil to pass my classes in school. For both of us reading was just something you had to do. However, unlike Rodriguez my problem was not that I did not understand the reading just that I did not like it. I can remember this being the case for nearly all of my life. When I was four and had just started preschool both my parents were working so no one made me try to learn to read at home as fiercely as they should. Instead it became a need to basis unless my grandparents were babysitting me. Then my grandma would read to me and make me try to read. It was only with her that I felt like it was good to read. My parents gave me a very different feel. My parents approach to reading was much like what

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<sup>9</sup> Works Cited: Rodriguez, Richard. “The Lonely, Good Company of Books.” Introduction To College Writing 6” edition. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2010, 293–297. Print.

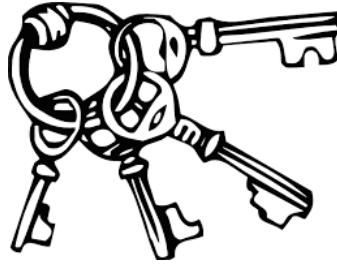
Rodriguez states in his opening paragraph. He recounts that, "For both my parents, however, reading was something done out of necessity and as quickly as possible" (293). When he didn't see his parents read for fun he didn't know that he could read for fun. If it was a necessary chore then why should he care about it? I had a very similar approach to reading when I was in my own home as well. If mom, dad, and Hailea didn't do it I wouldn't either. My parents are still very cavalier about reading but my sister and I both have changed. We both really like to read and go out of our way to find something to read. Seeing my Mom, who I idolize, not care about reading really changed how much I cared about reading too. If such an intelligent woman did not need to read I did not need to read either. Not to be smart at least. It was not until I got older and had different teachers that really cared in school that I would even come close to changing my attitude about reading forever.

These feelings about reading however did change. When I went to school I had a teacher who showed me the magical world of reading, just like what Rodriguez found when he had to work with the nun. Having someone care so much about if I read or not made a huge difference to me. It only took one person to change me so much for the better. My third grade teacher Mrs. Hall had small group and solo reading time every single day. She was always so lively when she read and looked like she was a different person. I wanted to be like that too. That's where I learned reading could be enjoyable. She then gave me books to read and even helped me get a library card so I could get even more books. She worked with me so much to make sure that I understood the value of reading and how it could help me. I think that Rodriguez also has a very similar experience. When Rodriguez works with the nun after school he learns about what books can do for him and that reading can be enjoyable. Reading was more than just looking at words on a page. Rodriguez tells us that the nun said, "In an uneventful voice she replied that I had nothing to fear. Didn't I realize that reading would open up whole new worlds? A book could open doors for me. It could introduce me to people and show me places I never imagined existed" (294). She was showing him that books could serve a higher purpose than just educating you. Books could take you on an adventure and help you make new friends. I, just like Rodriguez, had learned from an educator that reading could be used to get out of the world you were already in and get into another. If you wanted to see a new place you could just read about it and be transported there. If you wanted to meet new kinds of people you could read and meet all the new characters. When I read about the magic treehouse I went on all the adventures with the kids too. This new love I found for reading had carried over to high school and now college.

This change in my attitude on reading definitely stuck with me as I got older. As I got into high school and even now in college I can find books that change my life. I see reading a far more enjoyable way to pass the time than I used to. Now I make time to read every day for fun not just for my assignments. In high school I actually read the assigned readings that I wanted to. I started to enjoy even those required readings. I could relate to more characters and I wanted to pretend like I was in the stories. When we would be assigned readings for my high school English class, which became rare at the end, I would always start reading them as soon as possible. I loved to read the great classic novels and jump into lives that Jane Austin or Nathaniel Hawthorne had created. I think I favored them because I was always very head strong. I did not accept that things had to be a certain way. I wanted to challenge everything. These authors also seemed to do that too. Even the characters were different to me. I was so surprised to find that I could relate to these characters. I even enjoyed Charles Dickens more than anyone else in the class. That was also something I think I shared with Rodriguez, ; Rodriguez recounts the time that he read all of Dickens' works and how he felt like he was inside the story just to be shut out

when it ended. He states that, "I loved the feeling I got- after the first hundred pages- of being at home in a fictional world where I knew the names of the characters and cared what was going to happen to them" (296). Rodriguez feels a personal connection to the characters of the stories almost like they are his friends. He felt like he has escaped to a whole new world with all new people. He got to go on all the different adventures that they went on. I feel the same way when I read too. When I read Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice" I almost became a new person. Elizabeth Bennet was so confident in herself and knew exactly what she wanted. I started to think about what I wanted and became more confident in myself. I was more independent after reading this. I fell in love with all the characters and wanted to find my Mr. Darcy. I become emotionally invested in the characters so when they hurt I hurt and when they win I win. I think that is a unique trait that a lot of avid readers have. However, the difference here between so Rodriguez and I is that while we both enjoy what we read he still struggled to understand while that was not my issue. I understood and now I completely enjoyed reading too.

It was after all this that I no longer just read out of necessity for school and intelligence, but I read in order to become the person I want to be. Reading changed me as a person. I learned that reading did not have to be a chore. Reading can be an enjoyable worthwhile experience. I learned and grew from the beginning. I used to think reading was only a chore that had to be carried out in order to finish all my schooling. It was just something that I had to do. With no one telling me reading was fun I never knew what all I learn from reading. It was not until I had my third grade teacher that could spark my interest in reading. She made me want to discover all new worlds and all new people. After I learned all the new things I could get from reading I actually enjoyed it. Reading became my favorite way to pass time and escape all the troubles in my life. Reading can be a means of escape when your world seems like it is falling down around you. You can use reading go places you want to see and meet the kind of people you want to meet.



## Young Hands Hold the Key<sup>10</sup>

By: Tayler Neely

“A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies. The man who never reads lives only one.” – George R.R. Martin

We all find a passion at some point in our lives, something that drives and educates us, fuels our souls, and could quite possibly take part in shaping our future. I found my passion in the form of books, calling to me and peaking my interest from the moment I was old enough to clutch their delicate pages in my small, eager hands. While reading offers us a chance to open our minds, to imagine and empathize, books also educate us with a multitude of facts and are building blocks for an advanced vocabulary. In the autobiography “One Writer’s Beginnings” Eudora Welty expresses her love for books and credits early exposure of reading to becoming literate, which ultimately allowed her to become a well-rounded, effective writer. Young minds are yearning for information to help them grow and become more educated. Although the opportunity of learning lasts a lifetime, I believe the importance of reading and being read to, should be instilled and encouraged in children starting as early as comprehension.

The literacy of parents plays a major role in a child’s curiosity and thirst for knowledge. Similar to myself, Eudora Welty also grew up watching her parents read. We were both heavily influenced by our parents to pick up a book and give it a chance. At one point in her autobiography, Welty shows appreciation and gives thanks when she states, “I live in gratitude to my parents for initiating me – as early as I begged for it, without keeping me waiting ... into reading and spelling” (301). Not one time did my parents discourage or try to redirect me when I was found with a book in my hands. Reading was treated with respect from my family. Holidays were always filled with giddy anticipation of my new books. My parents handed down their love for reading on to me, before I could be exposed to a world where reading is no longer applauded by most, and for that I am eternally indebted to them.

The reading opportunities children are exposed to also contribute to the fascination and enthusiasm they feel. When I was a child, I knew of many places where I could obtain a book. School, family, and friends all offered a variety of books and when I was old enough to walk downtown to the library, I received a card of my own, which allowed me to check out whichever writings I craved for or however many books I desired. Having convenient access to an assortment of reading material within a household is generally uncommon, but not for Eudora Welty. She writes in “One Writer’s Beginnings” of the abundance of reading materials located

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<sup>10</sup> Works Cited: Welty, Eudora. “One Writer’s Beginnings.” *Introduction To College Writing*. Ed. Missouri Western State University. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2010. 298 – 303. Print.

inside their bookcase, which they had dubbed “the library”, and tells of the encyclopedia tables and dictionary stand (Welty 299). Despite her age, Welty expresses that she had a hunger to read all the books when she stated, “Still illiterate, I was ready for them, committed to all the reading I could give them” (299). Having access to a monumental amount of books fueled Welty’s desire to read and educate herself with their words. Imagine if every child had an opportunity as magnificent as Welty’s. I can only dream of such a wonderful world.

Finding a love for the basics that are accompanied with literature is an essential. As a small child, before I had the capability to read, I fell in love with the illustrations inside a book. I would gaze at the pictures on the inside pages and they could tell a story on their own. Even though my mother had read to me my storybooks a hundred times over, I could examine the drawings, discover something new I had never noticed and the book would come alive with a new version of the tale. Eudora Welty also found a love for the artistic side of her storybook, taking a special liking to the initials found in her book of fairy tales. She shares with us in her autobiography that, “When the day came, years later, ... all the wizardry of letter, initial, and word swept over me a thousand times over, and the illumination, the gold, seemed part of the word’s beauty and holiness that had been there from the start” (Welty 302). Her words share my thoughts on the beauty and significance of the small details and remind me that even as an adult, I can still stop and appreciate them.

All in all, I am a firm believer of early exposure to reading. As has been mentioned, young children are waiting to leap head first into the world of education. They have an itch to obtain as much knowledge as possible and an open, curious mind willing to absorb it. Welty describes childhood learning when she writes the beautiful statement, “Learning stamps you with its moments. Childhood’s learning is made up of moments. It isn’t steady. It’s a pulse” (302). However, without the parent setting the fire within their child, I do not believe that many children would pick up a book. We unfortunately reside in a world where a majority of society has deemed reading unnecessary, irrelevant, and unproductive.

We need to take it upon ourselves to introduce our children to books while they are still young, before they are exposed to the opinions of those who dislike reading. I await the day when my youngest child begins to gain an appreciation for the artwork and illustrations, like her brother and sister did before her. If I as a parent can introduce my children to the wondrous world of reading and assist them while they build their love and knowledge for books, then that would be an incredible achievement. Supplying them with encouragement, stimulation, and reassurance, the tools that are needed to succeed, and by having a constant source of new reading material, I hope they can find the love I carry within myself for literature.



## **Doing More in the Face of Danger**

By: Dani Nickels

**“A true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves those he has left behind.” – GK Chesterton**

There is no escaping danger no matter how hard you try. It is always something you will have to face. Danger appears in your home, in school and even your job. Some jobs are more dangerous than others, but none the less danger is truly unescapable. This is something Justin Newman, a 35 year old male from Versailles, Missouri, knows all too well. Justin was a private in the United States Army, and spent fourteen months in Mosul, Iraq doing security detail in 2005. He faced many challenges and dangerous situations but returned home safe in 2006. When Justin was deployed he had to leave the side of his wife and his one month old daughter, luckily there were many things to help him with the reality he had to face both physically and emotionally. From my interview with Justin I learned that he faced some difficult tasks while on security detail, mainly due to language and culture barriers. Justin gave up time with his family, his safety, his comfort, and came out on top with a great message for humanity.

Not only did he leave his mom, sister, nephews and nieces; Justin also had to leave his new family behind. When we talked about his family Justin reminded me “I was fairly newly married and I had a new born daughter.” Justin left home when his daughter was only one month old and returned when she was close to fifteen months old. Sadly time didn’t stop or slow down, but before Justin knew it, his new born baby was a year old. Justin missed her first birthday, actually Justin missed a lot of things. Thank goodness for skype and old fashion letters so Justin could still see what was happening back at home. Sometimes seeing it makes you feel close, but yet you are so far away. Being so far away from home and from your loved ones can be hard as Justin shares “I had a quilt my grandmother made that was always very comforting it felt like home.” Also “We had Xbox, CD player, television, music, computers, not the best internet access but we did have it, and even satellite T.V” the things that made his time away from home not quite so lonely. Along with those comforts Justin also received care packages with pictures and updates on his beautiful family. Many people think soldiers overseas may not have luxuries we have here at home but Justin and many other soldiers do.

When people think of Iraq they think the worst, but that’s not always the case. Yes it was dangerous, danger is all around but it’s not like a war movie we watch on T.V. That is one of the very common misconceptions of the situation. Justin explains “We weren’t crammed in a foxhole worried that at any time we would be mutilated by an enemy we couldn’t handle” and he is right, that is one big misconception. We often picture the enemy as something our soldiers can’t handle. I catch myself thinking of war movies or gruesome war tales anytime combat is mentioned, it’s just what we do. We never stop and asked about the real picture Justin explained to me “The reality of what going on wasn’t that severe where I was” and that was an interesting

fact for me to wrap my brain around. When we hear the words Iraq and war we all freak out and picture the worst possible outcome we can think of, but that's just a reaction to the image created by the media.

The media showed the worst parts of what was happening, it didn't show the average day in Iraq because what kind of story is that. When war with Afghanistan started I was very young and anytime I heard anything about the war it was a negative horrible thing; bombs blowing up, hundreds of people dying, soldiers being killed and it was never calm. So for me and many others we have this horrible image in our mind that war is scary and serious; but reality is it isn't always scary and serious like we think. Justin also explained to me that the hardest part of his job was having "language and cultural differences" with the civilians he was trying to protect. His job was to keep them safe and it was hard to do when the people he was protecting did not understand what he was saying or doing. Contrary to many beliefs Justin was not a violent murderer, he did not join the army to kill, but to help people no matter where they lived.

One of the most common misconceptions about military personal is that they murder people and they are so violent. When I asked Justin to give me his feelings about this common misconception he states, "We are not killers. We do what we do because we genuinely want to make the world a better place and to help people and unfortunately sometimes bad people have to get hurt in the defense of good people." That is what Justin wants people to understand most about the military. Do people in the military sometimes have to be violent and do bad things? Yes they do. Does this mean they wanted to kill people and do the things they did? No, they did those things so Americans could be free. Military personal are not violet murders, they are heroes who defeat the bad guys. Doing what's best for their country is not something they regret.

Everyone has regrets and wishes for redoes and do overs, but in life there is no such thing. You have to learn from your mistakes and try our best to not repeat them. You may not be able to redo something but you can give advice to someone in the same position you were in to try and save them the regret. You can pass on your wisdom, not just to a specific person but to everyone. Create a new moto to live by so that regrets don't come in numbers. That is just what Justin did. He looked back on his time in the army and decided that there were things he could do differently and he emphasized "Do more, try a little harder, go a little farther out of your way, run a little farther, and help a little longer. As long as you do more and everyone does more, more will get done." This is how to keep from having regrets. This is how you make a difference. You cannot always be one hundred percent perfect but there is always something more you can do, so do it. Make the world a better place, help yourself, and conquer your dreams, all by simply doing more and encouraging others around you to do more also. Justin missed out on many important events here at home because of his desire to do more for America, and the world.

Justin missed the important mile stones of his daughters first year of life, left his safe country, to go fight in a war, and come home with an amazing inspiring tale, "Do more" in everything you do you can always do more. Justin was really passionate about this in the interview and I truly believe he applies it to his daily life. There is always more to be done, there is always more for you to do. We need to do more of whatever it is, whatever is needing done. Justin looked danger in the eyes and beat it no matter how big or small it may have been Justin beat it. He looked at danger and wasn't afraid that's why he returned home safely to a family who loved him and missed him. He came home to his daughter, wife, mother, sister, nephews, nieces, and his friends. Justin, in all reality came home a hero, not solely because of his actions in the face of the danger, but because of what he was willing to risk to make his world a better

place. Reality is Justin Newman, the 35 year old father, the uncle, the brother, the son, the husband, the soldier is a hero.





## Still Waters Run Deep

By: Dani Nickels

“Peace is a journey of a thousand miles, and it must be taken one step at a time.” –  
Lyndon B. Johnson

Living in Missouri has its challenges. There is the weather; you never know what is going to happen. It can be eight below zero one day, and one hundred and three the next. Living in a small town in mid Missouri, has its own problems. You are at least a nice car ride away from any shopping malls, Movie Theater and even a grocery store. Living in Versailles, Missouri there really isn't much to do, although we do have a Wal-Mart. Lucky for me growing up we had a small farm with woods and pastures, and a shaded pond. That is the place I remember feeling the most comfortable, and felt the happiest, home by the pond. The pond is in many memories of my child hood, the good ones, the bad ones, and the ugly ones. From the catch of my first fish, to a high school breakups, and even the loss of a very special family member, the family pond is where I found my happiness and my peace.

The day I caught my first fish was one of the happiest days of my life, as well as my dad's life. My dad loved to fish, since I was only six years old I could care less about fishing, until my dad got me a Barbie fishing pole. It was a pink pole with a blue reel and a pink, green, and blue tackle box. I was so excited to be going fishing with dad now that I had the coolest pole. We fished for several hours, and I caught everything but a fish. I cast my pole into a tree, the brush, and into the lily pads, not no fish. Dad wanted to call it a day but I begged him to let me cast one more time. Right as the bobber hit the water it disappears, I finally had a fish on the end of line and I was going to make my dad proud. I pulled back my pole to set the hook in the fish's mouth so he couldn't get away. I reeled as fast as I could reel. My dad's eyes were bright as he was coaching me through it, and telling me how good I was doing. I finally got that tinny little crappy out of the water and on the dry grassy bank. It was so small I couldn't keep it, and that's ok. I didn't care about the fact I caught a fish. I was more focused on how happy my dad was. To hear him say he was proud of me, made me the happiest girl in the world at that moment. That was the moment I really connected with the pond. Looking back now I realize that was the day I fell in love with that pond and how it made me feel so happy.

As my love for the pond grew so did my love for Wylder. Sadly my love for his wasn't as strong as my love for the pond; Maybe if it had been Wylder and I could have lasted. My first love other then the pond and it left me broken and breathless. My heart was so broken by boy I had no idea how life would go on, how everything could and would okay, I had no clue how I would get over it. When Wylder dropped me off at home I went straight to the pond bank. I sat there for hours crying, writing in my journal, and throwing rocks into the muddy water. Throwing a rock and watching the ripples start small and get bigger, and bigger until they

disappeared, and just like that, I finally stopped crying and realized that everything was going to be okay. That even if I feel the ripples in my life right now, soon the ripples will disappear, and life will be still, peaceful, and happy once again. Although the water broke for the rock, but it didn't stay broken, it regained its stillness and went back to the way it was before. That's how I needed to be. My feelings I had my time to be sad, now I need to get it together and be okay. Just like the water I need to return to the person I am. I need to return to the way I am. I sat there a few more hours, just quiet, feeling the darkness around me, and hearing the frogs croaking, and the crickets chirping. I laid there looking at the stars and the moon reflecting on the water. The calming sensation of happiness filled my heart once again, and I was okay.

As I was sitting in the paddle boat in the center of the pond staring at the abundant life before me I became Irritate with it. The trees are living, the grass is green and lush, the grasshoppers are energetic and hopping all over, and the beautiful bright orange colored butterfly is fluttering from flower to flower. I see all this amazing life around me, and I'm annoyed. I'm enraged at the trees, the grass, the grasshoppers, and even the butterfly I'm furious that even after my world if flipped upside down and overtaken by death, they are still living. I'm livid that everything around me is living and happy and unchanged by my granny's death. I'm so angry that her death hasn't effected anything that it's like she didn't matter, as if she didn't exist at all. There as I sit dressed in black, makeup streaming down my face, it accrued to me that I should be pleased the pond didn't change. When I needed the pond the most it was constant. It was the same that day as it was the day I caught my first fish. It was peaceful, and beautiful, and constant, it was full of life. Life has a beginning and an ending. I have to make peace with the fact that my granny is gone, and that is just a part of life. As I paddle to the bank, so I'm not late to her memorial survives, I take another look at all this beautiful, peaceful, lively place, and I smile. Granny would have loved this pond place as much as I do.

From the catch of my first fish, to high school breakups, to the loss of a very special family member, the family pond is where I found my happiness and my peace. It didn't matter what mood I was in when I went to the pond, I never left feeling empty, scared, confused. I left with happiness and peace of mind. The pond was still, and full of peace and understanding. It was the best place to be when I was growing up. The feeling I felt while I was there were too diverse and complex for most people to understand. Lucky for me we lived on a farm with a pond. After all, Still waters run deep.



## **Public Schools: Future Potential or Educational Submission**

By: Alexis Pickett

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” –  
Nelson Mandela

In the essay, “School vs. Education” by Russell Baker, the author believes that schools are limiting the true potential of students through repetitive arbitrary testing designed to gauge teacher to student accountability. Baker states, “During formal education, the child learns that life is for testing,” and that “success comes from telling testers what they want to hear” (225). In addition, Baker claims that schools are quick to alienate students into two categories: smart or dumb. Teacher accountability is critical but today’s emphasis is on standardized education and is neither specialized, nor individualized, nor influential. The current learning ideology entails bodies in seats, memorization, repetition, and 500 page textbooks. Society views educational purpose as the catalyst in developing literate voting citizens, future problem solvers, and leaders for the workforce of tomorrow. Public schools were first established with the goal to create a dynamic opportunity for equality, however industrialization transferred schools to a place to prepare the future workforce for new jobs in factories and Commercial Farming. Through the progression of technology, careers have moved from industrial to ideal driven, yet programs of study in public schools have remained fundamentally unchanged.

Students with learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, or who come from underprivileged homes and surrounding communities that don’t support them are less likely to rise above arbitrary barriers. State involvement has not been a positive influence and decisions on what or how teachers should teach are left to politicians, lawyers, and corporations; those who have little-to-no involvement or experience with the fundamentals of teaching, nor the knowledge of what challenges teachers and students face daily. Baker incites us to reconsider the role of administrative accountability by saying, “If the teacher expects little of the child, the child learns that he is dumb and soon quits bothering to tell the testers what they want to hear” (225). Teachers are now being evaluated based on the test scores of their students and assessment averages are salary driven. Specialized care in public schools is marginal and communities build schools in a one-size-fits-all capacity because it is better for economic growth. Because teacher salaries are based on evaluations, more teachers have become political in their attempt to secure the best performing students to increase testing averages. The emphasis is now on time sensitive initiatives towards the investment of test taking and not towards an overall understanding or the application of inspiration to the relevant subjects.

Our current system is outdated, counterproductive, and contradicting. We want students to be creative, but we teach to a packet. We want them to be self-reliant, but we force them into educational submission. We want our students to think critically, but we make them memorize.

So what then is the purpose of education? How is it that students who do not perform academically still somehow manage to pass into the next grade? Baker refutes our current practices by saying, “From this the child learns that while everyone talks a lot about the virtue of being smart, there is little incentive to stop being dumb” (225). The main difference between the industrial era and today is in the advancement and accessibility of technology. Learning is no longer confined to a classroom because nowadays children have smartphones that supply an endless amount of knowledge at their fingertips. Look at the number of degree programs that offer learning at one’s own pace and at one’s own schedule. We need to recognize what higher education already has and revolutionize our existing broken system.

Consider what impact and gains can be achieved through changes aimed at fixing the broken connection between schools and our communities. Fundamentally, we can change the building blocks of our society by redesigning a contemporary workforce to support our advancements in technology and harness individual potential and creativity. A remodel of our education system can have a positive influence on poverty and the equity of incarceration. Learning does not have to be confined to a class room. Instead, let’s rethink the module and create a learning environment that is flexible and offers hands-on experience. Our children cannot visualize a future that doesn’t exist unless we facilitate hope, ambition, and dreams. Give students the knowledge, skills, and disposition to succeed and be accountable for what really matters. Instead of mandatory rubrics, measure the gain and growth of a child from one year to the next. Instead of teaching to the test, students should be taught to learn.



## First Steps to Literacy

By: Alexis Pickett

“Literacy is one of the greatest gifts a person could receive.” – Jen Selinsky

Every moment in our lives is a new outlook, a beginning and an end, a convergence of the threads as well as a divergence. Education begins from the moment we are born. Instinct offers the yearning to suckle, but we quickly discover differences in taste. Our bodies develop alongside our sensory perceptions, and we begin to cultivate personalities; our preferences emerge. In the essay, “One Writer’s Beginnings” by Eudora Welty, the author believes that the desire for learning exists in the underbelly of our upbringing attained during significant periods in our lives that silhouette our directional paths. Welty says “Learning stamps with you its moments. Childhood’s learning is made up of moments. It isn’t steady. It’s a pulse” (302). My life began likewise. There have been a number of moments that contributed to my core literacy development. My incessant need to know “why” outlasted my toddler years. Although my mother tried to conceal her annoyance, my continuous need for answers to explain the world around us worked her patience. Eventually, seemingly proud of herself, she suggested that I look up the answers myself. And in doing so, advocated my literacy independence that was in retrospect, comparable to a babe’s first steps.

My mother was overweight as a child and voiced concern that she didn’t want us to know what that felt like. She said other children had a tendency to be mean and lacked compassion. That was the reason she gave for insisting we go outside to burn off our energy; however, she perhaps fancied being alone without the burden of her children from time to time. Whatever her reason, I didn’t object. Coincidentally, I favored sensory experiences of nature. Welty makes reference to her own influences during her early childhood by saying, “Children, like animals, use all their senses to discover the world,” (302). My preschool years were not dissimilar. I had full range of our large backyard and the creek that ran behind it. Sometimes my learning involved long afternoon expeditions of the ecosystem around the creek. Other times it required a hands on approach, like looking underneath rocks or digging trenches for my toy boats. I loved it all: from the rollie pollies that would crawl up out of the bricks in our flower garden, to the sweet aroma of the peonies that flowered outside our windows. My grandfather, who encouraged my literacy connection at an early age, gifted me with the complete set of 1977’s Britannica *The Young Children’s Encyclopedia*. At last, I was able to: identify the names of plants, understand that tadpoles grow into frogs, and why squirrels hide their nuts. I spent hours thumbing through pictures until I successfully studied all sixteen volumes.

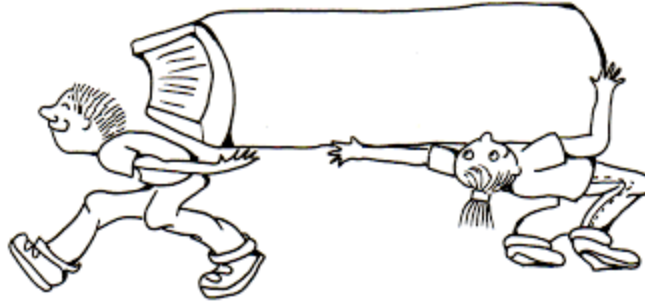
Spelling has always been challenging to me. Perhaps it was because of an articulation disorder which required me to miss class on occasion in lieu of speech therapy, or maybe it was because I felt that the importance of spelling a word was less significant than the actual usage. Nevertheless, I spent a great amount of time looking up various words in the dictionary. It was

during one of those times that I had stumbled across the word “sign language”. I was fascinated to learn that there was a method of communication that required the use of hands and that this language had been developed specifically for the hearing impaired. I had taught myself to sign symbols for the different letters in the alphabet and had practiced them until I could run through it with ease. Welty explains this connection in more depth when she says, “In my sensory education, I include my physical awareness of the *word*. Of a certain word, that is; the connection it has with what it stands for” (302). To my dismay, this wasn’t a talent that my home room teacher saw as beneficial and I was instructed instead to stay on task. At the time, more emphasis was placed on winning the annual spelling bee than actually having an interest outside the scope of our lesson plans. Ironically, my speech therapist felt differently and bought me a book about Helen Keller. She would ask me to read aloud during our sessions and was encouraging. Through her, I was able to expand my literacy development to include an understanding of the usage of words and their influences on society.

During my elementary years, there existed a strong incentive to be average. Our current 1-2-3-4 academic grading system either identified students as proficient (4), meets standards (3), partially proficient (2), or not at all (1). We were on-the-right-track if we came home with a three on our grade card and felt secure in our mediocracy. Our school district adapted the typical numeric to letter grading system during my fifth grade year. This was a pivotal time for me because it was in that moment that I understood what it felt like to be labeled. At first I was confused and wondered what I had done differently than my classmates. Welty’s words resonate within the monotonous method in which learning was depicted during her childhood when she says, “You learned the alphabet as you learned to count to ten, as you learn ‘Now I lay me’ and the Lord’s Prayer and your father’s and mother’s name and address and telephone number, all in case you were lost” (301). I didn’t wait to open my grade card until I got home. I stood staring at my grades in disbelief. How could my teacher have given me anything less than a B? It was at that moment that I decided to take my literacy more serious. I was able to recognize that my grades would impact my ability to be successful and I immersed myself into my studies. By the end of the year, I had improved my grades and have maintained high educational standards since.

I was fortunate enough to spend a great amount of my free time at my grandparents’ home, which always smelled like old books. My grandfather loved books so much that he began to purchase books from garage sales or estate auctions, regardless of the subject matter, if he felt that he could resale them for a profit. To my grandmother’s dismay, books began to over-flow into their normal living areas restricting their use of common household amenities, such as their kitchen table. She was not completely immune to their charm, having developed a fetish for murder mystery paperbacks. She kept a pile of her favorites next to the toilet and it was amusing that she often used a piece of toilet paper as a bookmark. In a back bedroom, specifically reserved to accommodate their grandchildren for over-night visits, existed a collection of beautifully illustrated children’s stories. Welty’s description of her own encounter with books is similar to my own when she says, “In my own story books, before I could read them for myself, I fell in love with various winding, enchanting-looking initials drawn by Walter Crane at the heads of fairy tales” (301). I spent hours, lost in the illustration of books, that in their own right retold endless stories depending on what my imagination could depict. I loved the ornate qualities exemplified in the first letter of my favorite stories and appreciated its presentation. The illustrations themselves had captured the essence of the author’s intentions in pictures that brought the story alive.

Much of my relationship with reading lies in my ability to bring to life my own imaginings. Moments in my own sensory discoveries adjoined with the familiarities of life that can be located within the context of books makes it easy for me to connect to the characters. My own existence fades as the persona of the characters are brought to life and for the moments in which I am alone with the words, I am reborn. Welty describes, “I located myself in these pages and could go straight to the stories and pictures I loved” (301). Likewise, reading ignites my senses. It’s less about what the author says that I connect with, but rather a gratitude for the language that so beautifully captures the moments that serve to entice emotions within myself. Ironically, it was through literacy that I uncovered a process of expressive release that healed me during an influential period of time when I was looking for a creative outlet.



## **Reading and Writing: A Whole New World.**

By: Carlos Pozo

“The more you read, the more things you know. The more things you learn; the more places you’ll go.” – Dr. Seuss

You sit in a room alone with your blankets wrapped around you, prepared to sleep but not quite ready for it. By simply opening a page you are suddenly transported to an entirely new world. You are now a knight in full plate armor, a sword at your side and a shield on your back. A mighty dragon stands before you, staring you down prepared to torch you at a moment's notice with its flaming breath. You charge forward, shield in hand guarding you. The dragon roars angrily while pelting you with fire, your shield heats quickly but you bear the heat. You must kill this dragon. The safety of your home depends upon it. The dragon gives you a brief respite as it breathes again, but before it can attack a second time you lunge forward plunging your blade deep into its chest. As you pierce its heart the dragon roars in agony falling limp. You wipe your blade clean while panting heavily. Your conquest laid before you, the town thanks you as their hero. You decide now is a good place to stop before closing the pages of the book and sighing happily. You saved a town and defeated a mighty foe, all before you slept. Books and reading have an amazing ability to immerse the reader and transport them to an entirely new world. However that's not all they're good for. They can teach you many lessons, some unintended, and many that you won't learn anywhere else. I am positive that Eudora Welty, writer of “One Writer's Beginnings,” would agree with me about the magic of books. In her essay she tells the tale of her family providing her with books throughout her whole life, and how the tales whisked her away to faraway lands and taught her all manner of lessons through her life. At an early age my mother inspired a love and passion for reading by showing me the treasure of wonder and adventure that books can be, the way it can transport you to new worlds and allow your creativity to truly take the wheel.

As early as I can remember, my mother read to me. She started with fairy tales. Stories of knights in shining armor saving damsels in distress, and going on adventures to save their king and countrymen from all manner of beasts and horrors. My favorite was Aladdin because of the moral that a poor thief could win a royal princess simply by being himself. It gave me an idea that someone could do anything as long as they dedicated themselves enough. I would read the covers and the names of the authors and wonder what kind of lives they lived. I was saddened to discover that like my experience was similar to Welty as she 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 298). What Welty means by this is that she believed that story books are magical objects occurring naturally in the world and it was surprising and a bit saddening to know that it's written by normal everyday people instead of



being brought to the earth as if by some form of the magic within the pages itself. The magic that is contained within story books is very powerful. After my mother would read them to me, I would spend countless hours asleep, dreaming of the worlds I just heard about, imagining the heroes contained within and what the world must look like. Rich and lush kingdoms beset by the tyranny of an evil king only to have a noble knight rise from nothing to defeat him. Sometimes even a poor thief courting a rich princess using nothing but his charms and personality. The stories themselves instilled a genuine curiosity within me. What other worlds laid out there bound between pages of books? Their covers holding magic and treasure the likes of which some people may never see. I never wanted to stop reading about these magical places and their heroes within. That desire to continue discovering new worlds instilled by my mother's reading to me as a child is a fire that has been burning at me since it was first ignited. A hunger for reading that would never be satiated grew within me in those early years.

As I grew older my mother continued buying books for me. However, her motivation changed. As I grew older the books she purchased began to change in order to provide other kinds of learning. This is similar to Welty as she states,

Neither of my parents had come from homes that could afford to buy many books, but though it must have been something of a strain on his salary, as the youngest officer in a young insurance company, my father was all the while carefully selecting and ordering away for what he and mother thought we children should grow up with, They bought first for the future (Welty 299).

When Welty says this, what she meant is that even though her parents never really had a lot of money to be purchasing books, they would make sacrifices and purchase books that would improve her future. My mother did the same as she went from fairy tales of faraway lands to books geared towards me learning. She would scour garage sales and used book stores for any book she felt I could learn from, from textbooks about biology to history texts detailing violent wars and historical assassinations. I could not be anymore thankful for her choices. What started as a spark for reading had grown into a small flame seeking any and all forms of knowledge. I would read about the building blocks of life and learn that my human form was nothing more than the grouping of several microscopic cells. I learned the ways that our country and even world had changed as the years went by. My hunger for reading grew into a voracious need to consume any and all forms of knowledge I could get my hands on. I benefited from this in so many ways, and my vocabulary grew more extensive, improving what I could read and comprehend. I learned that I had a fascination with all the different ways humans have evolved in acts of violence and earned a fascination with questioning their motives. I don't think I could have ever been given a better gift than a desire for knowledge it really helped mold me into the knowledge seeking intellectual individual I am today.

As I grew closer to adulthood my mother stopped buying me books. I could now procure my own collections and which fostered my own love of writing. My many years of reading had improved not only my ability to read and understand others' writings but also to create some of my own. A love of imagery and writing blossomed within the garden of my soul similar to Welty as she stated, "My love for the alphabet, which endures, grew out of reciting it but, before that, out of seeing the letters on the page" (Welty 301). She means to say that she grew appreciation and love for the English language as a whole because she read the letters within the words of her books. My love of reading also evolved, taking a new form. The small fire seeking knowledge turned into a roaring flame of appreciation of word. No longer did stories of historical fiction satisfy me. I wanted to express myself and pour my soul into bare pages. I wanted people

to read my words and know exactly how I felt in the moment, to connect and resonate with me and my experiences. I began listening and following several poets and people skilled in the magic of words, Gibson, Wakefield, Kay. I didn't stop at poets either, even people who had been widely quoted and had touched my soul, Wilde, Twain, Dickinson, Angelou. Anyone whose words could resonate and inspire me were considered as I poured my heart and soul on pages and thoughts. I've written short stories and poems that while they may never see the light of day, are the musings of my very being. I owe every story, poem, or even scene I've written all to my original spark and love of reading. All to the treasures and magics contained within their pages their beautiful imagery allowing me to learn how to paint a vivid and complex color picture in someone's mind with simple words of black and grey.

I find myself now in college and among coworkers who don't enjoy or want to read I am saddened that not everyone learned the power that reading is. My experiences are similar to Welty who stated, "I believe I'm the only child I know of who grew up with this treasure in the house" (Welty 301). Meaning that she believes that she was the only child given the treasures that books are. I myself believe that I was the last child on this earth to be imparted with the magical treasure that books and a love of reading are. Many of my friends, coworkers, neighbors have all confessed to me that they hate reading. They see it as a chore, forced to be done, and quickly lest it take too long. To those that inform me I apologize that they were never blessed with the fires for reading and language that I was. That the gifts of books and the stories and treasures contained within were never given to them. I often sit and wonder how much better or more enriched their lives might have been had they received these most beloved treasures that common mortals refer to as simple books.



## Raised With Books

By: Chris Rannabargar

“Books help us understand who we are and how we are to behave. They show us what community and friendship mean; they show us how to live and die.” – Anne Lammott

Reading is better when it's introduced early in life and is molded in the right environment. When kids don't see their parents read or don't get stories read to them from an early age, it can really affect kid's outlook on books for their entire life. In the essay “One Writer's Beginnings” by Eudora Welty, Welty was always around books just like me. Her parents raised her and taught her that reading was good and they both loved it. Because her parents raised her with books, she grew to love them and eventually became a writer. Welty was raised around books and so was I. Just like Welty, in her essay “One Writer's Beginnings,” had her mom to read to her and the family had a large collection of books to read, I had my great grandfather and my father to thank for my love of books to this day.

Welty and I both learned how to read from an early age. My first memory of reading goes back to my father. He loved to read when he got the chance. When he had time he would. One day my father gave me a wonderful gift. He gave me his collection of *The Great Brain* books. It was from these books that drove me to read more. To this day I still have those books. Whenever I think of when he gave me those books, I can smell the slight old book smell, and remember the yellowing pages and the great adventures that awaited me. Welty also from an early age was raised around books. “I learned from the age of two or three that any room in our house, at any time of day, was there to read in, or to be read to” (Welty 298). When she was young she had access to books anytime of the day, she could read anywhere and could be read to anywhere in the house. Her mother would read to her and really get into the story as would Welty. She said, “She was an expressive reader. When she was reading *Puss in Boots*, for instance, it was impossible not to know she distrusted all cats.” Welty had her mother to read to her at all times, even at times that it seemed strange. Both our parents were into reading; this is how both of us got so involved in reading books and enjoying them.

Both Welty's father and my great grandfather loved to read. Welty's father didn't read to her but he did like to read himself. He loved to read just as much as his wife but he wasn't as hedonistic. Since the family didn't make enough money to go on vacations, her father went on them in a different way. He went through books. The was one book in particular that Welty remembers, it was called *Sanford and Merton in Words of One Syllable* by Mary Godolphin because it was a book her father had since he was a child. She describes in particular the details about the book; the missing front cover, the back being held on by just strips of pasted paper, the stained and the tattered look of the pages. Our families were in ways very similar. My great grandfather had a large collection of all types of books. He had a study full of fiction and nonfiction books. He enjoyed both types of books but he liked fiction books a little more than the nonfiction. His favorite book was *The Skeleton Coast* by Clive Cussler. Whenever I would come

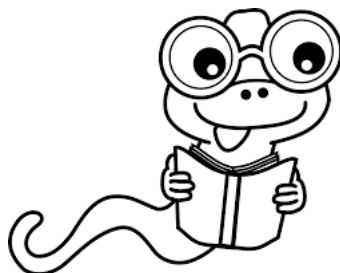
over for the weekend I would be in that study reading. I would also find myself lost in the stories and explorations of Cussler. My great grandfather didn't have an old book like Welty's father had but he had a really old typewriter, so both men cherished the old and cherished reading.

My father and Welty's family weren't at all rich. Welty's family wasn't rich so when gifts were given they were books. Her parents bought books for their children to read or for them to be read to. A Welty said they bought for the future. Welty usually only got books for her birthday or Christmas so it was a really rare occasion. The first set of books she got on her sixth or seventh birthday was a ten volume set of *Our Wonder World*. She enjoyed all of the stories. She also mentioned that she would ask other kids if they had read the books she had read. I got books every once in a while but I remember one set of books that my father gave me for my thirteenth birthday. He had the books and they had been passed down to him from his father before him. Now the books had come to me. I hope that someday I can pass them down to my kid if I ever decide to have one. The collection of novels was called *The Adventures of the Great Brain* by John Fitzgerald. The books were written by the younger brother of the Great Brain. I enjoyed these books very much. I remember one book in particular it was called *The Great Brain and the Magic Water Closet*. In the story, Tom Fitzgerald's father buys a new toilet and gets it installed in the backyard. I also remember Tom Fitzgerald (The Great Brain) charging people to see the "magical water closet." He had a line of kids lined up by their house just to see it. I really loved that book. I would also, like Welty, ask people if they had read those books and they would just give me a look. Welty and I both had books we enjoyed as youngsters. Later we grew into other books as we got older.

In ways I can also compare myself to Welty's mom. I really enjoy books and I get into them. I would say books are almost "hedonistic" for me, just like Welty's mom. Welty said, "My mother read secondarily for information; she sank as a hedonist into novels." I enjoyed reading authors like Tom Clancy, Rick Riordan and Sherrilyn Senyon. I really get into the stories and when a book is really good I can feel myself being sucked into the book. I feel as if I am right alongside the main character. I can picture myself as a demigod or a spy getting rid of terrorists.

Welty's father got into traveling books and that's how he saw the world. Her mother was described as a hedonist because of how much she got into books. My father liked to read. My great grandfather would play music and read by the fireplace. Or he would be typing on his typewriter coming up with stories that he would fancy going off into. Welty's and my family can be compared very closely and they can be considered similar. Welty and I can also be compared in a certain way. Both of us love reading and we both enjoy it very much.

I deeply believe that reading and being around reading from an early age can really affect how kids feel about books. I started reading from an early age and my dad introduced me into reading. He would read and I wanted to do what my dad was doing. My dad rarely did it but he did read to me. He gave me books for one of my birthdays. He didn't force me to read so also, I really think that helps kids. If you try to force kids to do things and they really don't want to that makes them grow to hate it or dislike it. Welty's parents didn't force her to read and she grew to love it as well. Her mother read to her and she loved it, she craved it. From reading she grew into other things like writing and she liked that as well. The point is not introducing books to your kids early on or reading to them can lead them to not like reading or straight up hate it. From my dad getting me into reading early on and Welty's parents doing the same it got both of us to love and enjoy reading. Welty's "One Writer's Beginnings" really helps show how reading or being read to can not only help you learn but it can really affect your outlook on books and reading.



## **We Are All Nerds<sup>11</sup>**

By: Ryanna Rempel

“Be nice to nerds, because chances are you will end up working for one.” – Bill Gates

“Don’t ever be ashamed of loving the strange things that make your weird little heart happy.” This quote tells us to embrace our inner uncanny selves, but so many people are ashamed to really embrace their inner nerd, including the author who stated that quote. Today, nerds are looked down upon, cast aside, and bullied. They don’t get the full social experience as other students, and they are often judged and tortured. In the essay “America Needs Its Nerds” by Leonid Fridman, a doctoral student in mathematics at Harvard University, he argues against the negative views of people who are “intellectually curious and academically serious” and reveals a fundamental problem in contemporary America. Nerds are thrown in trashcans, lockers, and are embarrassed every day. Sadly, some commit suicide feeling like they have no better option. They don’t get the chance to make friends, they have different interests than what other people have, but they are still human beings. They have the power to change the world. I agree with Fridman that our world needs nerds, and I agree they are abused in society, but we all need to embrace our inner nerd, because in some way or another, we are all nerds.

Instead of embracing our inner nerds, some people with advanced intellect are made fun of and misunderstood. Fridman discusses this issue in his article. He argues that, “in the U.S. elementary and high schools. Children who prefer to read books rather than get wasted at parties with their classmates, become social outcasts” (Fridman 257). According to the author, people with above average intellect are bullied, harassed, and punished for their advanced thinking. They are cast out of society, and have a difficult time talking and advancing their social skills like everyone else. The nerds are shunned from society and all social events. I have witnessed this many times before. One of my friends was at a party and enjoying college life. She texted a picture to one of her ‘nerdy’ friends. This guy is one of the sweetest guys I know, but he has different interests, that often cause him to be uninformed about the social events around campus. He sent a picture back to her with him working on doing his homework. It’s sad how he isn’t included in most of the stuff around campus, but this also happens on television all the time. Almost every movie or show has a classic stereotype of a nerd or geek, that one person to bring entertainment to the whole class and strung out for public humiliation. Nerds and geeks are made fun of, and that’s a sad fact that needs to change.

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<sup>11</sup> Work Cited: Leonid Fridman in, “Voices of the New Generation; America Needs Its Nerds” pp. 257-258 New York: New York Times Company, 1990

Simon Pegg,, Quotable Quotes < <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/556142-being-a-geek-is-all-about-being-honest-about-what>>

Not only are nerds publically tortured every day, but many also work extremely hard to earn good grades despite being made fun of. According to Fridman nerds are cast out because, “intelligence and refusal to conform to society’s anti-intellectual values, many are deprived of a chance to learn adequate social skills and acquire good communications tools” (257). Nerds are criticized for their ways of thinking, acumen, and manner of speaking. In my opinion, nerds are pushed out of society and not given an opportunity to socialize with other people. They tend to focus more on their studies and getting good grades, so other students feel inferior of the nerds. The nerds get good grades, and ease through their classes, while some students fail and struggle. In that way the other students feel upset and take it out on the nerds. Also, occasionally jocks are just handed that easy ‘A’ instead of working for the grade. I see this happen all the time, and it personally happened to me just a few short weeks ago. I have a class I am flying by with a perfect score. It’s a very challenging class, and I work extremely hard for my grade. There is another guy, though, who struggles in that class, or really just doesn’t put any effort into it. He asked what grade I had in the class, and I simply said “A.” He got really upset and cursed me out. I didn’t do anything. I just said my grade. He was the one who asked and vocalized his F in a very loud tone across the building. Because I was doing well in that class, and this guy wasn’t, he got mad at me instead of the other way around. In their own way, nerds are above everyone else, which causes them to be pushed away, and shunned from society.

Nerds are just nerds in academics, but we are all nerds in our own ways. As Fridman states, “Until the words ‘nerd’ and ‘geek’ become terms of approbation and not derision, we do not stand a chance” (258). The world won’t change until these simple words become a badge of honor instead of disgrace. Actually, we all can be nerds sometimes. We all have one or more things that we understand, and others do not. Some of us are smart about sandwiches, and we know exactly what it takes to make an amazing sandwich, and can talk on and on about how awesome sandwiches are. Some people are nerdy about theater, art, cinema, sports, pizza, electronics, television, wood carving, welding, cars, and so much more. Why do people try to hide who they are? I think it’s because people are scared to be rejected. They don’t want to be made into the typical stereotype that is projected on society. People are so scared they will unleash their dark side if they let their inner “nerdiness” shine. We are all strange, and we need to embrace our inner nerds. We should all be proud of the things that makes our weird little hearts happy.

We not only have to embrace our inner nerds, but we have to embrace other people as well. Everyone is unique and gifted in their own way. We all are nerds and some of us strive harder for good grades than others, but in the end, we are all nerds, we are all geeks, and we are all perfect. We have to put down our judgmental thoughts, and embrace our inner geeks! As the author Simon Pegg states, “Being a geek is all about being honest about what you enjoy and not being afraid to demonstrate that affection it means never having to play it cool about how much you like something. It’s basically a license to proudly emote on a somewhat childish level supposed adult. Being a geek is extremely liberating.”



## **Called upon the Lake**

By: Ryanna Rempel

“Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished.” – Lao Tzu

Nelson Mandela once said, “There’s nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find ways in which you yourself have changed.” That is exactly how I feel every time I return to Table Rock Lake. I walk into the familiar cabin in the beginning of August, and the cool crisp breeze of the lake hits my skin seeming to say “Welcome Home.” The glass-like water shines in the folds of the hills, covered in rich shades of green trees. Boats fly across the water, untouchable and flawless. The seagulls dance elegantly in the sky watching the fish jump out of the water, playing a fun game of cat and mouse. The sunset’s glow in a fire of neon colors weaves into the sky. The sun finally sets and the stars shine, like fireflies performing in the midnight sky. This place is where God touches earth; this is where I feel His presence in every breath, breeze, and sound. Every day I sit outside at the cabin and think about how much this place has impacted my life. I am just breathless at God’s glorious creation. Table Rock is not just a lake; it’s a place where I formed meaningful connections, gained confidence, and grew spiritually.

The lake echoes of laughter and shrills of excitements as family and friends play and talk endlessly into the night. This reigns true for me in so many levels. Every year my family and I schedule our annual vacation, where we spend countless hours preparing our boat, making reservations, and packing for our week long relaxation. We stay in the same resort my dad stayed at when he was a young boy. That place reminds him so much of his childhood and the memories he had created. He wants to create those same memories with his kids. He talks about how his dad taught him how to water ski and sitting under the starry night, roasting marshmallows, over an open fire. My family and I grow in our bond as we stay in this compact cabin with very little privacy. We also test each other’s patience, especially with three kids in one room. I tend to learn stuff about my siblings I never knew, like how my brother is a restless sleeper, and my sister likes to talk when she wakes up. We build memories and share laughter throughout the whole week. We grow closer and love each other in a whole new way, growing us closer as a family.

Table Rock Lake isn’t just a place that families bond, but it also has been a confidence builder, the fear of pain and failure is something I face every day while on vacation. I have to believe in myself even if I feel that the task is impossible. My family and I have a boat that we love to take out on the water. We all do some kind of recreational activity; whether it’s wakeboarding, water skiing, tubing, knee boarding, rope swinging, or cliff jumping. My mom is amazing on the wakeboard, my brother and sister are crazy on the knee board, and my dad can

do it all. Personally, I like to wakeboard. This sport requires a lot of muscle, balance, and endurance. When I finally can get the basics down I am going twenty-five to thirty miles per hour on the back of a boat, hanging on by a simple, thin rope. The fear strikes me and pushes me past my comfort zone. I watch videos online, and see all the cool tricks like jumping the wake or flipping my board around. I often wonder if I am capable of doing these tricks, and I find myself working weeks and months, trying to master a simple trick. Even though sometimes it comes at a painful cost when I hit the water face first, but I don't give up, and I eventually stick the landing. It's a confidence booster and I walk away knowing I conquered that simple jump. I can use the skills and patience that I learned and apply them to life. One of my skills that I've applied using these skills is becoming a state champion in Martial Arts and earning my third degree black belt. I remind myself every day that I am stronger than I think, and that I can do anything I set my mind to.

Table Rock isn't just a place I vacation, but a place I attend church camp, and I personally get to feel God working in my life. I travel to this camp with 300 teenagers and I get to spend a honeymoon with God. I get to hear everything without the roar of distractions like cellphones and media. I see His majestic creation He paints every day for me. I get to see God in a whole new light, a rare, and beautiful light. He speaks to me in ways I could never imagine, challenging and deepening my faith. This is where God grabbed a hold of me. God placed the pastor at the camp to ask a simple question, "Would you pick up your cross and walk with Christ carrying your sins that He so selflessly paid for you?" As the pastor spoke these words tears welled, thinking of the suffering Christ went through for me; bloody, beaten, stabbed and tortured. I soon found myself on my knees at the alter as wet, hot tears flowed down my cheeks. Pleading my heart out to the One who makes the moon reflect the sun. Rebuilding my faith and love in Christ, giving my whole heart to Him. From that moment on, my spiritual relationship with Jesus has been deepening every day. God calls me to go out beyond Table Rock to the broken world, He pushes me to go deeper than the lake, deeper into the broken world.

Table Rock is more than a pretty lake; it's changed a big part in who I am. This lake has a very special place in my life. I draw closer to family and God, and I also deepen my confidence in my ability to be strong. It helps me grow mentally, spiritually, morally, and physically. The Lake is somewhere I look forward to going to every year, and someday hope to live there. For me, Table Rock Lake is more than a lake; it's a therapist for the soul.





## **Forever Changed by Rylee**

By: Ryanna Rempel

“Though she be but little, she is fierce.” - Shakespeare

As we sat in a pew, we couldn't help but giggle as we watched this joyful little three year old run around the church. We never would have imagined that she would impact our lives so much. Rylee's previous name was Liberty, but everyone called her Libby. She was from a small town just thirty minutes from where we lived, but she and her grandmother, who was also her guardian, attended the same church as my family and me. When her grandmother's health rapidly declined, she couldn't raise Rylee alone, so everyone in the church took part in raising the church's little sweetheart. Because of this, Rylee had to be passed around to different community members and so she had no sense of stranger danger. Those who didn't know how to care for her drugged the juice in her sippy cup, didn't feed her regularly, and physically and mentally abused her. Watching Rylee and her grandmother and the situation at hand, we felt a calling and love for Rylee. We wanted to help her and give her a loving home. Our household was quiet and calm, and my whole family was very active in our church. My brother was eight at the time, so having a three year old around would be a huge adjustment, but Rylee's presence changed my life and my identity forever: she made me more responsible, more compassionate, and more joyful.

On a Sunday in May, we watched Rylee get pulled out of the sanctuary by her grandmother. Suddenly, her grandmother's hand collided against Rylee's small body and she whimpered in pain. As the scene took place in front me, a tear ran down my cheek. My heart shattered because I could do nothing to help her. While getting in the car, my parents exchanged a serious look. They decided that they needed to talk when they arrived home. When we arrived, I walked into my parents' room as the tears flowed down my cheeks. I wondered if there was anything we could do to help this sweet little girl. As the days went by, our hearts and minds overflowed with prayers while we tried to figure out if we could properly help her. Our family talked with our pastor and his wife and explained the details of all that was going on and where we felt God was leading us.

The next day the pastor's wife sat down with Rylee's grandmother and explained how we had come forward and were willing to care for Rylee. We were kept in the dark until the next Sunday when we finally sat face-to-face with the grandmother. She asked us questions about our family, trying to figure out who these odd people were. She finally looked straight into my dad's eyes and asked, “Do you really want her?” My dad sat back, taking a moment to ponder just how deep that simple question was. His response was simple, but made an impact with everyone that sat at that table. “Yes, we really do. We feel God calling us to open our home and hearts to

her.” Relief flooded her eyes and she nodded before saying, “Okay, I’ll get the paper work drawn up and you will be her guardians.” At that moment, a surge of panic and confidence rushed through my veins. This was our new reality. The grandmother handed us a Wal-Mart sack that was half full of clothing. They had a stench of stale smoke embedded into every seam. That was all Rylee owned during the first three years of her life, a half full Wal-Mart sack.

We got the old, broken car seat out of the grandmother’s car and drove home with Rylee. My mom soon had to go to work, leaving my Dad, brother, and I to somehow survive the day. We hadn’t had a young child in our care for a very long time; my brother was eight at the time, so to have a little toddler running through our house was a big adjustment. She was a ball of energy, she ran all the time, and sometimes she would suddenly vanish. We would look and when we found her she would be crouched down around the faint glow of a small night light, softly whispering, “I wish, I wish.” She stole our hearts in those small moments. When she got thirsty, we didn’t have sippy cups, so we got a big, chunky sports water bottle, thinking that would get us by. We gave her the bottle, but she dropped it and it broke. Dad and I looked at each other as fear filled our eyes. What had we got ourselves into?

Although it was scary to take her at first, Rylee changed my life in so many ways. She deepened my compassion for others and filled me with joy. As I spent time with Rylee, I began to have eyes to see broken people, hearts, and circumstances. My heart breaks for them every day. The compassion for others brought on by Rylee has helped me figure out my true passions in life. It’s fueled me to work on mission’s trips and outreaches. I’ve traveled to Puerto Rico on a mission’s trip and helped fix a house in the “slums.” The compassion for others also helped me see how much I want to work in ministry. I plan to work at a teen camp in the country until I feel called to go wherever God calls me next. I personally see what broken people go through and I want to do everything I can to help them. God has fueled a fire in me.

Rylee is always filled with contagious, joyous bubbles. She is positive and so outgoing. She makes everything so much brighter. When we are walking on a gravel road, she will watch the rocks. Some rocks are smaller than the others and she just giggles and freaks out over the little “baby rocks.” She has so much sunshine in her soul. It makes me smile and laugh about the perspective she brings. Whenever I am at the store and have her with me she just can’t help but talk and laugh with everyone we pass. I find myself doing that more and more even when I don’t have her with me, to just show kindness and love to everyone. The abundance of her joy is contagious. I find myself much happier than when I normally am. She makes my whole day, every day. I laugh and smile a lot more with her in my life since we adopted her and I see the humor in situations more than the negative.

Now Rylee is six years old, living in the house, a part of my family, and I call her my little sister. She is so much a part of me. She goes just about everywhere with me, like my mini me. She has changed the way I think, act, and love. She makes me smile in the dark times until tears of laughter roll down my cheeks. She is my cheerleader and biggest supporter. Through thick and thin, I will always be there for her and she has impacted my life greatly. Now I sit on a pew in church and watch this bubbly, excited little girl run around and think to myself how lucky I am to have her.



## **My Greatest Loss**

By: Amber Richardson

“You were my home, Mother. I had no home but you.” – Janet Fitch

Because of what I lost on March 2, 2007, my little sister and I were seemingly in a state of perpetual shock. I can recall nearly every event from the day my mother passed away, and everything preceding said loss, for better or for worse. The loss of my mother led up to me dropping out of high school in my junior year, after a steady decline in grades. The family dynamic I had always known came to a halt, causing my little sister and I to be apart temporarily. Realizing that it is impossible to know how long someone will be on this planet changed the way I value everyone in my life. My sister, Aunt, and I were not able to brace ourselves for the impact, the hard-hitting reality that my mother lost her fight with cancer, irregardless of the fact she was now home on Hospice care. Our denial, coupled with the fact that Mother had already been "cured" of her, now metastasized breast cancer, gave us false hope. The day my mother passed away, my life changed forever.

I remember staring at the eggshell colored wall of the small room I shared with my sister, Emilee, from the time I was twelve and she was six, after we moved from Kansas City to Grain Valley; we were both now a substantially more mature age at 17 and 11, respectively. My Sister was sitting on her black, disheveled futon, sucking her thumb-a coping mechanism which had not manifested itself for a few years, as she was eleven years old. My tall, thin Father was on the phone in the kitchen, smoking and making arrangements to have my mother's once full of life and stout, now illness-wracked, body removed from our small, pastel yellow duplex. My aunt Kathy was calling around to churches, trying not to break down into a bumbling mess, her voice shakier with each response she gave on her cell phone. My aunt Linda, Mother's sister-in-law, was cleaning up the entirety of the house, floating from room to room, asking if any of us would like food or coffee when she finished. My uncles, all of whom were always protective of their little sister, sat around my mother's Hospice bed, their heads lowered in an almost endless, silent prayer. None of us could believe she was now gone, and I was in shock, simply going through the motions of helping with funeral arrangements. It was as though I had been cursed, the magic of my mother's presence faded.

The difficulties that took place during my mother's illness were especially difficult. For nearly the entirety of the two years she fought her illness, my aunt Kathy and I were her caregivers. Eventually, after her treatments, she was declared in remission, but a couple of months later, it had metastasized all over her body. I had been involved heavily in foreign languages in my high school career, as I've always desired traveling abroad to teach English. I

had taken three years of Japanese, and had a chance to travel to Japan with my school's foreign exchange program. Unfortunately, I had to capitulate and was not able to travel, resulting in my giving up academic pursuits, which I came to greatly regret.

After my mother's passing, my father threw himself into work, presumably to not have to deal with his feelings. He would generally leave my sister and I home all day with no way to contact him, and he was drinking pretty regularly again. I asked my Aunt to adopt my sister and told her I would testify on her behalf. Eventually, Kathy got to adopt Emilee, and after a while I moved in with them. It was of great comfort knowing we had some semblance of a family once more, and I think my mother would have been happy with this outcome.

My mother was absolutely always the most enchanting person to me when I was a child; for starters, she loved singing Stevie Nicks while wearing her black peasant top and twirling around, the piquant scent of her perfume enveloping everything in our small home before she would take my hands, making me dance with her. She was a short, stout woman-you would never expect her to move around the way she did, nor would you expect her fiercely protective nature. When she smiled, her whole face would light up from within, as though her soul was a burning candle shining all throughout her physical being, and her eyes would also give off an illuminating quality-the blue, green, and yellow combination of them possessing you like two rare gems. She taught me how to cook nearly everything she did: perfectly golden-brown fried chicken, perfectly al Dente pasta, steamed broccoli that falls apart at the slightest touch...so much amazing food. She also taught me how to sew, how to read, how to care for Emilee when she was born, and to seek all of the knowledge I possibly could. She celebrated my successes, taught me how to learn from my failures, and comforted me through each and every difficulty in my life.

My mother was my rock and supported me no matter what. She was my best friend when I was growing up. My alcoholic father was always working, leaving my mother home alone with my little sister and myself, which meant we all spent a lot of time together, and that my mother was the one we went to with all of life's troubles. On the morning of March 2, 2007, my rock was no longer on this earth, She would no longer wake me for school in the morning with the sing-song tone of her morning greeting, she would no longer have made bacon, eggs, and toast to fuel the family in the morning.

I recall loading into the truck with my father to go pick out a coffin, flowers, and a funeral home-none of which I remember, I just know I walked and spoke, and have no idea what I said, how I looked, or any other seemingly trite detail. All I knew was that it felt like the only people that came to the realization of things were Emilee, Kathy, and myself. I remember the day of the funeral, which was three days after Mom's passing, and a day after visitation, as we were sitting in St. John Lalande, a large, stone church, it finally hit me that my mother was dead. And I cried in the middle of Father Fitzpatrick's somber reading, because the conclusion to the chaos that was a result of having a very ill family member that needs your undivided attention, the hope that everyone who truly loved my mother held steadfast, and the result of all of her fighting and committing to somehow faithfully get out of bed and go through the pain of chemotherapy and radiation for every single treatment, was for nothing. The culmination of these events occurred three days prior, when she took her final breath.

The day my mother passed away, twenty two days before my eighteenth birthday, my life changed forever. She would not be there to see my little sister go on to junior high school, nor to see me graduate high school. She would never achieve her own dream of academic success in computers, something she had longed for. She would never plan another birthday party with a

brightly-decorated home, a golden pineapple upside-down cake, and a plethora of gifts. She would never be able to cry at the sight of either my sister or I getting married, she would never get to rub her stubby nose against any of her grandchildren's noses. For a long time, I was angry at the universe. Why should we be robbed of the best thing in our lives, and why should she be robbed of her chance to make a better life for herself? I still cannot make sense of these events, but I feel as though she's with me, almost living vicariously through me.

In many ways, my loss of stability has helped me grow and mature as a person. I now value every single family member I have and enjoy seeing them at every opportunity that presents itself. I value education much more than I did when my mother was sick, I value being able to go outside and have the warm sun wash over me, like my mother used to enjoy so much. It has been the most difficult way to grow up, but my life has honestly changed forever.

I often think of my mother and how much she loved the changing seasons. She would likely think that the Missouri Western State University campus is beautiful in autumn. She would probably ask how my classes were going and if I need anything. She would tell all of the family activities she would like to do over the holidays, starting with decorating the house for them all simultaneously all the way through New Year's dinner. I carry her with me in memory, in all that I hope to do and accomplish.



## **That Old House**

By: Martin Roper

“There is no place like home, except your grandparent’s house.” - Anonymous

The large white house, on the corner of Ruby Street, is where my grandparents lived. I spent a great deal of my childhood growing up in that house and I was practically raised there. That house symbolized the values in honesty and kindness towards others that my grandparents had taught me. It also brought the family together and was centered on faith.

To ordinary eyes, my grandparent’s house looked like just another conventional house. To me, the house was far from being just another normal house. It was a California, bungalow style home built in the 1930’s. It is located in Argentine, Kansas, just South of Downtown Kansas City, Missouri. Growing up, anytime I heard the words, “Let’s go to grandma’s house” from my mother, I would get excited. Going to my grandparent’s meant time spent with them and I couldn’t seem to get enough. Pulling into the driveway, the house looked like a mansion to me. It sat on top of a hill overlooking the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad tracks. It had a three car garage that was full of my grandpa’s tools and lawn equipment. It was a two story house white vinyl siding and black shutters on every window. The roof line was simple and had a stainless steel chimney out the top of it. As you walk through the front door, you enter into a great size living room. The living room is where we sat and talked as a family and read books allowed for story time. The kitchen was right around the corner from the living room so it was pretty easy to tell when dinner was being prepared or cookies were in the oven. The smells of my grandparent’s house are a big part of the memories that tie into the house. Beef and noodles was my grandma’s signature dish. We knew what was cooking in the kitchen by the sound of the pressure cooker singing on the stovetop, the unforgettable smell of beef broth and black pepper, and the buttery green beans for the side dish. The house being so big made hide and go seek, with my siblings, extremely fun.

As I grew up and matured a little, I started realizing that spending time at grandma and grandpa’s house had more meaning than just games and good food. It became clear to me that they were my second parents. In the house on Ruby Street, they loved me, took care of me, taught me right from wrong, and bought me my first bb gun. That bb gun was a huge deal to me. My grandparents gave it to me to teach me responsibility. I was being very responsible with it until I accidentally shot one of their windows on the house out. They approached me and asked if I knew anything about it. I answered with a sadden voice and confessed to the crime. They then told me they were proud of me for telling the truth and being honest and because of that, they weren’t upset about the window anymore. Every time I look at that window, I realize I’m fortunate that they taught me the values in honesty, responsibility, kindness, and hard work. Being one of five boys in the family, my grandpa put us to work. We had planted a huge garden in the backyard, roughly 30ft-50ft, with a variety of fruits and vegetables. We planted, corn,

cabbage, lettuce, squash, carrots, cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes, watermelon, and cantaloupe. Learning from my grandpa how to manage and take care of a garden, and making sure it stays healthy, was fun and beneficial. Seeing something grow and actually become something, from the work of your own two hands, is a great feeling. It makes you feel good about yourself when learning new skills, especially when they help you in the future down the road. Later in life, I got a job working at an apple orchard. My job duties were to maintain the orchard and make sure it stays healthy and nurtured. I thank my grandfather for the knowledge and work ethic he passed on to me while working with him at the old house.

My family was rarely all together at one time. The only place that seemed to bring them all together was my grandparent's house. Whether it was birthday parties or holiday dinners, everyone knew to go to grandma and grandpa's house. Occasions like these always called for games and quality family time. Our two favorite games to play as a family were Skip-bo and Dominos. We would have such a great time, and it was so special because of the family's love and excitement that filled the room. I remember playing dominos at the dining room table one night, it got so loud from all the family yelling back and forth at each other over who had the double blank. No one was angry or upset; we just didn't know where it had gone. After a few minutes of creative discussion, we found the double domino on the floor where someone had knocked it off the table. After games were through at my grandparent's house, we all gathered around the dinner table to eat some supper. In their house we always said a prayer in thanksgiving for the meal that was provided. This is one of my favorite memories. As a family, we all bow our heads and thank God for the meal He has set before us. What I love that for those few moments, we all center our attention on God and forgot about everything else. As a family we gave thanks and we were all united in prayer. Different sides of my family had their own views on religion but when we were at the house sitting at the dining room table, we all were one in God. My grandparent's house is full of memories of bringing the family together and growing closer to each other.

Now that my grandparents have passed away, the memories that were made in that house are locked away in the back of my brain and I will remember them forever. I strive to live a healthy, honest, respectable life and I see that in reality through my accomplishments. I was awarded The Christian Character award my senior year of high school. I received the award in both basketball and track and field. I work for a construction company and I have been given two raises in the year and a half I've worked there. I just received a third raise recently and a promotion. I am always hearing positive feedback from my co-workers and bosses. I wouldn't have accomplished nearly as much if it wasn't for my grandparents in their old house. I wish they were here today to enjoy my accomplishments that they are such a huge part of. I would give anything to tell them thank you and spend just one more day with them in that old house.

I really can't imagine a more special place in my life than my grandparent's old house. I learned so much growing up with them and they are truly great role models. They are the ones that lived kind, honest, and respectful lives and I'm thankful that they took the time to influence those qualities onto me. That old house was much more than a fun place to visit; it was the place where I grew up and was shaped into the young man that I am today.



## **A Life with Alcoholism**

By: Julie Schield

“Alcoholism isn’t a spectator sport, eventually the entire family gets to play.” – Jim Brosnan

Alcohol for some may be an addiction, a disease, but for others it is a lifestyle choice. Alcohol is something that can take control of a person. According to the NCADD “17.36 million people, one in every 12 Americans suffer from alcohol abuse dependence.” Alcohol can alter who a person is; it can change their perception greatly influencing their decisions. I conducted an interview on a man who would like to remain confidential, but for the essay, I will call him Pete. I wanted to understand how and why addiction has changed his lifestyle. When Pete was 17 years old, he started drinking alcohol. First, it started as a social thing just doing it for fun, and soon it was out of control. For Pete alcohol addiction is a lifestyle choice. Pete still drinks today, but his addiction is not nearly as severe as it once was. Pete didn’t know it until late in life, but his life was headed in the wrong direction. During Pete’s alcoholism he had various struggles; he went through stages of his addiction with his family, sports, and almost losing his life. This made Pete understand and learn what he really wanted out of life. During the interview, I learned the powers of addiction, and how easily it can destroy lives without that intention.

At 25 years old, Pete was involved in an accident that could have taken his life. Pete stated, “When I am drinking I do not know my limits.” Pete and a friend were drinking excessive amounts of alcohol after being awake over 24hrs. That afternoon Pete decided to jump in his truck and head home. Pete does not have a good recollection of that night. Pete woke up in jail. His family told him he was in the hospital 3 or 4 hours before he was arrested for DWI. Pete flipped his truck over a 20ft. bridge; he suffered a bruised ribcage, glass in his face, and throughout the rest of his body. Pete said, “I believe my guardian angel was watching over me.” Pete in other words was saying this accident should have and very well could have taken his life. This accident was a decision made by alcohol not a decision that he would normally make. Pete let his alcoholism take control of his actions by allowing him to jump in the car and go home under the influence. This accident opened Pete’s eyes, and helped him realize the path he was headed was the wrong direction. This has taught me to never underestimate alcohol, can what it can make a person do.

Alcohol caused a separation between Pete and his family. He did not even notice he was addicted to alcohol until he was 23 or 24 years old. Pete stated, “I did not know I had a problem with alcohol until my family told me every time they see me I am drinking.” His family noticed his addiction before he did. Pete would attend birthday parties for his younger nieces and nephews while being intoxicated. Pete would forget about birthday parties, or just decide not to go because he wanted to go to a bigger or better party with alcohol. This caused a distance between him and his family. Pete’s family lacked communication with him knowing the addiction that had control of the person he was. The addiction caused a disconnect with his



family, only talking by phone once in a while. Pete wanted to be an uncle that will see his nieces and nephews grow to be adults, and understood if he wants a real relationship with his family, he must take the steps to get there. Pete now attends family functions without the need for alcohol, and enjoys family functions sober. For this experience, I have learned it only takes one time of drinking and driving to take a person's life. When a person goes out drinking plans need to be made in advance to prevent a possible tragedy.

Pete allowed alcohol to come in between him and a sport he loved since he was young. Pete played football throughout his childhood, and continued to play in high school. Pete had a love for the game; he even received a scholarship to play football. During the interview, Pete mentioned, "I played sports at one time and gave it up for the love of beer." I couldn't believe it. I heard this man could have pursued a future but couldn't because of an addiction. Pete described to me how much he loved football and he was so deep in his addiction that he didn't have the same drive as he once did. Pete was very competitive in the sport, and he had a passion for the game. Pete was no longer involved in practices; he would not communicate with his teammates the same way he used to. Pete lost the opportunity to receive a scholarship for college, because his addiction prevented him from growing up. This has made a huge impact on who Pete wanted to become. Pete wanted a degree and he never had the opportunity to go for it because money was a problem; His way around the cost was the scholarship that he let slip through the cracks. This has showed me that life is full of regrets and mistakes. This has taught me not to let an opportunity pass by; it will be decision the person will have to live with the rest of their life.

After serving time in jail, losing his license, and almost his life, and possibly the relationship with his family, Pete decided he was not going to let alcohol control his life. This is not the person he is determined to be. Pete said something I believe is very enlightening to anyone else suffering from an addiction Pete stated, "Running from yourself is why a person abuses alcohol." In my own words, Pete was saying that through life people make decision that may not be the right one, so they run away from decision rather than facing it. Pete has had many circumstances throughout his life that he let take control of the person he wanted to become. Pete seems to me like a young man that has a drive to become successful, and this is his main drive in life. Since the accident, Pete has declined on his alcohol intake. Now when Pete decides to go anywhere and plans to drink, he always has a designated driver to prevent any harm from himself or to others. Pete will not use alcohol in excess if he has to work the next day. Pete started taking control of the alcohol, instead of letting the alcohol take control of him. I have never personally been addicted to anything, and I find it scary to have the possibility of spending my life or even part of it because of an addiction. This has opened my eyes and showed me the effects of alcohol addiction. Knowing what Pete has been through during his addiction has really made me question whether I will even drink anymore.



## **Caffeination Conversion**

By: Michael Sherman

“Ah, coffee. The sweet balm by which we shall accomplish today’s tasks.” – Holly Black

There has not been a single event in my life that has changed who I am more drastically than switching from Diet Coke to coffee. I have not always been a coffee drinker and, while I do now partake in other drinks, it has worked in many ways to change who I am for the better. Coffee has attributed greatly to my lifestyle changing, from one of inactivity and slothfulness to a life that is healthy and active. The most noticeable differences by far were those to my personality and mental faculties. Motivated by these changes, coffee helped to attain my goals as my own determination was found for the first time. Coffee now helps with many of my problems of fatigue and lack of focus.

Before I continue about how much coffee has done, I must give you a perspective of what I was like drinking Diet Coke. I was a terribly obese with no motivation doing as little as I could get away with. At the time, Diet Coke was all that I would drink, tables being covered in cans was the daily decor. I knew that lifestyle was not sustainable, but I did not have the mental clarity that I have now. Easily hundreds of times I had dismissed the worries of my friends and family. Having a conversation walking into the bathroom only to emerge having forgotten it had taken place was an all too common occurrence. My diet consisted of pizza or breaded chicken swimming in ranch dressing, not having even tasted many vegetables or even fruits in years. When I started the transition, it was the worst being able to pry my eyes open for only 4-5 hours a day before falling back into a coma. Waking to a clear mind for the first time after having a cup of coffee in the morning and staying awake the rest of the day, I realized I was somehow different than when I was drinking Diet Coke. It happened so fast, mostly because I was not awake for most of it, but it was at this time I found coffee and life began renewed.

Once it was all said and done, I had accepted coffee into my life. I lost about 35lbs in 2 weeks just from drinking coffee rather than Diet Coke. The fact that I never have liked coffee before now seems hilarious, as I found out soon after that coffee paired much better with healthier food. So instead of pizza and chicken I would go for a bagel with honey. Skipping meals to work or to exercise for the first time in my life. The pain from being so heavy no longer hindering me as I continued to lose weight. I started cooking healthy full meals like Pasta dishes with very light sauces, vegetables and mushrooms. Step by step, I went on to become mostly vegetarian, something that no one thought would be possible for me as I was stubborn beyond words. The transition from my old diet was difficult, but it opened a path to improve myself. Time passed and I continued my life style, I ended 190 pounds lighter than my former self. With a new sense of confidence I opened my eyes for the first time to a new world.

There was never a time in my life previously that my eyes were truly open. without the

fog over my mind, I found making reasonable conversation possible. I felt different as soon as I started to drink coffee, communication was an area I always lacked, but now I could talk to anyone having the Interest now to do so. Waking up in the morning was now a happy event. to this day, I love to have a few cups of coffee while making conversation with my father and girlfriend. I found a new sense of purpose that I previously lacked, fueled by coffee I started my own small business selling books on amazon.com. Providing customer service was something I had previously failed at doing, but now it was an easy daily routine. And the nervousness of the few meetings I had to go to was more out of anticipation than fear or doubt. I was asked one time to meet at a bar by an amazon.com regional executive but I insisted that we meet at a coffee shop instead, confident I would have the advantage in any negotiations we would have.

I made the biggest changes in my life over the last three years, opening what I would call the coffee chapter in my life. My state of mind was the most prominent metamorphosis, where as my clarity of mind when drinking Diet Coke was nonexistent. Loosing so much weight and changing my everyday life allowed me to do much more with my life. The motivation that drove me to start my own business and helped me to strive for a better life. I am now an avid coffee drinker and I do not promise the same results to everyone, but I will not be drinking another soft drink in my life if at all possible.



## What Hurts the Most

By: Jennifer Siler

“What hurts the most was being so close, having so much to say, and watching you walk away.” – Rascal Flatts

Words and actions cut deeper than some people think. The things people say and do to you can and will stick with you for a long time. It is hard to forget that they have already hurt you. Pain seems to never leave no matter how hard you try to hide it. Have you ever lost trust and value in someone because of what they have said or what they have done? Have you ever had someone choose someone else over you when you should have been their first choice? Have you ever been ignored? My dad caused me this pain. My dad hurt me with his actions and with his words. My dad left me when I was born. He was always in and out of jail for doing stupid things. He was never there for me, he was only there when it was convenient for him. My dad never provided me with the father daughter bond that I had always wanted. People you should be able to trust can leave you with the least to show for it: he hurt me by losing more of my trust and value in him, he chose others over me, and he ignored me.

Words never leave a person's conscience, all the hurt that they ever feel will either build up inside and eventually break them apart or they will start harming themselves or others. The pain never leaves. Every time they see that person all they can think about is the hurtful things that person has said to them before. The hurt that someone might feel would be like hanging off a steep cliff with over a hundred feet drop holding onto a rope for dear life. Fear in their eyes, palms are sweaty, teeth are clinched together all because they want to hold on for so long they want to keep going. However, after a while they get tired of holding on and they let go and all the fear, hurt and anxiety that they may feel just disappears. A few years ago my dad and I would communicate on the phone because he lived out in California. We started arguing about how he has never been there for me, how he has never done anything right for me, and all sorts of things-like being the father that I always wanted or bonding with me, just things like that. Unfortunately, things took a turn for the worse and things were said that should not have been said. My dad knew about the situation, but he was not there when it occurred. My dad told me that I deserved to be molested when I was eight years old and told me that I put myself in that situation. He said this because I told him that my sister was communicating with her dad again after seven years. That is when he said, “See, you put yourself in that situation for that to happen to you.” That being said, I quit talking to my dad for a while because those are words that I will never forget, no matter how many times he may apologize for it. I will never look at him the same. Words hurt, and knowing that he thought that about me made me realize I had no value to him and that I could not trust him after that.

My dad lost any type of influence he had on me because of saying those harsh things. I could not see any value to a relationship between us and I felt like I could not trust him because he hurt me in a way that I would have never expected him to. My dad would pop in and out of my life here and there, but I felt as if he was never there. I felt this way because he would never be around unless things was not going good with him and my mom. He always seemed to be around for her. Yes, I understand that he loves her, but he should love me too.

He always seemed to choose her first. My dad not loving me like a dad should made me feel as if I was being ignored. What I needed did not matter to him. As long as he was happy and getting what he wanted everything was okay. I never got the attention that I wanted from him. I wanted to go out to dinner, go to the movies, and go take pictures together. I wanted hugs from him because to me that meant that I was important, but instead, I did not get anything. I never mattered to him, I was invisible. When I did get attention from him, it was to tell me to do something for my mom around the house. I never just got the love from my dad and the bond that I wanted with him. I knew I was not important to him and I did not matter to him. I was ignored by the person I wanted the most attention from.

Being emotionally and verbally hurt the way I was made me realize to never expect someone to stay in someone's life, because they can all leave. Crying in a dark room with no one around and the door shut made me realize that even the people that someone may expect to never hurt them, can hurt them the most. Never depend on someone to stick around because once they are gone people realize that there is no going back. My dad hurt me and I will never forget that. He hurt me before anyone else could.



## Evolution of Literature to Me<sup>12</sup>

By: Shelby Swartz

“That is part of the beauty of literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you’re not lonely or isolated from anyone. You belong.” – Scott Fitzgerald

Throughout our lives we will learn more and more about literature and what it means to us. My perception of reading and writing has constantly changed as time has passed. I can connect much of my story to that of Richard Rodriguez, an author and journalist for PBS, in “The Lonely, Good Company of Books,” an excerpt from his book, *Hunger for Memory*. My parents were much like Rodriguez’s parents; they knew how to read but rarely did except for out of necessity, such as bills. Therefore, before I knew how to read and write, I saw literature as a mystery that would only be solved when I became a grown up. As I got older and read more I thought of reading and writing as a boring subject that I would not need in my future after I was done with school. When I got out of high school I wrote my family while I was away at war. Writing was no longer a chore, but a form of communication, a way to take my mind off the present temporarily and think of back home. Now that I am a college student, literature has taken yet another step in a new direction. Similar to Rodriguez, literature was once a great burden and has evolved through my life to become an educational tool.

A connection I can make to Rodriguez is how his parents only read for needs and not for pleasure. He explains that his parent’s reading was “... done out of necessity...” (293), much like my parents. They were the same way when I was a child learning to read. I never saw them read books except for my mom reading stories to me on rare occasions. This made me more curious about reading. I wondered why some people read books just for fun and some people avoid reading like it’s some disease. These were some questions I had before I knew how to read. My father never read, because he was always ashamed of his education and always pointed out that he wishes he graduated from a better school and got a better education. The only things my mother read was the different envelopes that the mailman delivered, junk mail, bills, or shopping magazines. I remember her always reading magazines such as *LTD.* and *Fingerhut*. I would look at them after she was done, at all of the pictures and make my own stories about the toys. I remember making wish lists of what I would want from the magazines. This was not enough for me though, I wanted to read big books like my brother and sister. I couldn’t wait to be like them and be grown up and I couldn’t wait to learn read by myself.

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<sup>12</sup> Works Cited: Rodriguez, Richard. “The Lonely, Good Company of Books.” *Introduction to College Writing*. Sixth Edition. Ed. Missouri Western State University. Boston: The McGraw-Hill Companies. 293-297. Print.

My first memory of books was when I was too young to read and my mother would read Dr. Seuss books to me. These books intrigued me because of the odd environments and odd characters within the stories. I loved all of them, the goofy cat that wore a tall, red and white hat in *The Cat in the Hat*; all of the little fish that helped me learn numbers in *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*; and my favorite, the little bears that bounced on their dad in *Hop On Pop*. Just like Rodriguez says in “The Lonely, Good company of Books,” that books, “...could introduce me to people and show me places I never imagined existed” (294). This is when I realized books could take you to new and unique places. I loved to listen to my mom read the rhymes that Dr. Seuss had written such a long time ago. This was my first encounter with words that rhymed. They were so fun to hear, I couldn’t wait to be able to read them on my own. I loved to get pulled into this goofy, cartoonish land that Seuss created.

My love for books soon faded as I learned to read because I was forced to read at school about things that weren’t so interesting to me. I dreaded having to read the boring text books given to me at school about history and science. I had the same feeling as Rodriguez did at first about reading, that it “... was at best, only a chore” (293). I also had a boring teacher in elementary school that made class as dull as a dishwasher. I remember her now talking in front of class with her low monotone boring voice. When she started talking I could not focus and my mind would be in another place. Therefore, I did not read in my own time because the amount I read in class was enough for me. Little did I know, this was just a phase and I would eventually need reading and writing more than I imagined, to keep my mind right, and to keep in touch with family halfway across the world.

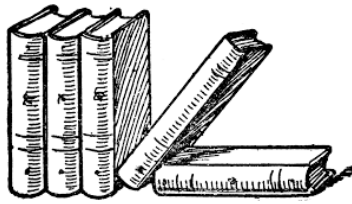
After graduating high school I learned again that reading and writing did not have to be a chore and could be a way for my mind to be back home even when I was away. In the Army I wrote to my family back home while I was deployed to Afghanistan. I wrote about the strange things I would see on a daily basis, or about how different these people that live there and their culture were. It was also good to know what was going on back at home so I did not feel so out of the loop. I read books when most of my battle buddies had already fallen asleep, in the big dark tents where all the bunk beds were in perfect lines, with a rifle hanging on the corner of each. I could hear many snores and the occasional laugh from somebody still awake watching sitcoms on their laptops. Each bed was somebody’s personal little space. I read about things that interested me, such as *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. I would think like I was Katniss Everdeen in the battle for life. It let me get my mind off of the stresses that war brought me. It was great to live in the stories of those books instead of thinking about what could go wrong on our next mission.

Now that I no longer have to stress about the war, I use literature in college to learn as much as possible. Reading is now a powerful learning tool that I will use to succeed in my college career. The more I read, the more I learn about any particular subject. I also become better at writing and expressing my thoughts onto paper because I read many other professional authors and make improvements to my writing style. Rodriguez says it perfect when he says, “Books were going to make me ‘educated’” (294). Books are what are going to make me successful in my education. I never realized reading would be so important in my life. It is just as Rodriguez describes, “...crucial to my academic success...” (295). The more I read and comprehend in college the more successful I will become. I now see how knowledge is power and will help anybody succeed. It is no longer boring to read and write because I can see how reading can make you smarter and that motivates me to succeed.

I can relate to how Rodriguez feels while reading books. He describes the feeling, "...of being at home in a fictional world where I knew the names of the characters and cared about was going to happen to them" (296). I get the same feelings as I read books. I get pulled into this new world the book creates. I get this feeling from both fiction and nonfiction books. While reading the book *American Sniper* by Chris Kyle, I began to see the world through his eyes. His battle buddies and squad members became mine and I cared for all of them as if I were by their side in the battlegrounds of Iraq. On top of buildings looking down the scope of a sniper rifle, with evil, ruthless terrorists, that want nothing more than to kill innocent people, in my crosshair. It is amazing how books can grab you from your real life and completely pull you in. It is more real than watching a movie at an IMAX theater because in your mind, the story has such great detail that cannot be remade by special effects and professional actors. Writers can create a world for you to get away from the stresses of life and take a break mentally. I love the feeling you get from reading books. Rodriguez describes this feeling perfectly.

My knowledge and view of literature has evolved greatly over the course of my short, twenty-three year life, just as it did for Rodriguez. What was once a boring chore to us is now a powerful tool I will use to succeed in school, everyday life, and beyond. I have used literature to get away from the real world and to stay connected to family that was far away. I will continue this journey and use this powerful knowledge to succeed in school and future careers. Literacy has brightened my world and will light the path to my future.





## Found My Freedom in Education<sup>13</sup>

By: Sofia Aguilera Tovar

“Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom.” – George Washington Carver

Imagine having to fight for knowledge because someone else has control over education. If people have determination, there is no barrier that can stop them. This is proven in the life of Frederick Douglass and mine. In the passage, “How I Learned to Read and Write” found in the *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, Douglass explains most of the obstacles that he had to go through when he was searching for his freedom, and he overcame them by learning how to read and write. For Douglass, not to be a slave was his goal. My goal was to be capable of being out of a regime that didn’t allow personal/educational growth; my goal was to be able to get an education without being forced to think in one specific way. Even though we differ in terms of environment—I was not a victim of slavery—we are similar in terms of reaching for our goals; we both had the desire to be out of an oppressive regime through education.

Douglass was born a slave; he had a master and a mistress. When he was young, his mistress was teaching him how to read and spell words; she was a “...pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman,” like Douglass describes her (271). His master Mr. Auld, forbade her to teach Douglass how to read and write. His master explained by saying:

‘If you teach that nigger [talking about Douglass] how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontent and unhappy.’  
(270)

This gave Douglass a reason to fight for his freedom; he didn’t know how to be out of that oppression and that regime, but the words of his master stood in his mind for the rest of his life. He now knew that being educated would make him of no value to his master and it would give him the freedom that he always wanted. His master’s wife stopped teaching the little slave how to read, yet that didn’t mean that he was going to stop learning. Instead, he started learning in a different way. Douglass used to exchange bread with little kids of the neighborhood to give him reading lessons because he had more food than other kids that lived in those streets, and that gave him a solution to his problem. Even though his master didn’t allow him to learn, he kept finding ways to accomplish his goal of being a free man. Another difference was that he didn’t have the resources to pay for an education, and in that time it was a lot harder than it is now to

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<sup>13</sup> Work Cited: Douglass, Frederick. “How I Learned to Read and Write.” Introduction to College Writing. Sixth Editor. Boston : McGraw-Hill, 2010. 270-76. Print.

look for information. Also he couldn't ask anyone about the meaning of words because he would be exposed. With the few books that he had, his desire to learn was not satisfied. He gives an example by saying, "The dictionary afforded me little or no help [he was looking for a word he had been hearing a lot]. I found it was 'the act of abolishing'; but then I did not know what was to be abolished" (274). He didn't have an easy way to access information and that made it even harder.

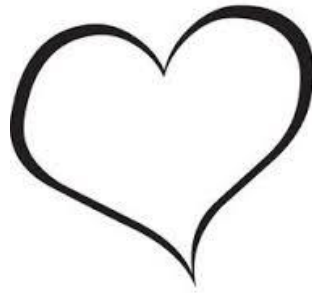
The obstacles were different, but our goals were the same. Unlike the author, I was not a slave, I did not have a master or a mistress, and I was not a little kid by the time I realized that learning could change my life. I was born in a beautiful family, a family that always encouraged me to go beyond my limits, to go beyond anyone's expectations of my life, and to look for better opportunities. I was born in a political regime that rejects different points of view, a regime that wants to create a religion instead of a political party, a regime that stands up against the knowledge of their citizens. I was born in that regime, and it's been there for the last eighteen years. They put in jail anyone that contradicts them, and they would kill their college students if they protest against new measures. They don't want people that think, and they do this through different mechanisms. For example, in the case of Douglass, his master didn't allow his mistress to teach him how to read. In mine, the government changed the information of the books by which kids learn. They are giving them an opportunity to learn, but not to grow. The knowledge that they are receiving is going to disable them from improving in their lives; it's already putting a limit to their lives. I didn't know that all of this was happening until I turned twelve years old. My family provided me with many different types of books, and they reinforced me to have a different opinion. They started taking me with them on every trip they could. I would see how life could be better not only for me, but for others. I learned about different cultures and how other people lived, and that is when I decided that I needed to learn a different language. It would give me the opportunity to travel and have an open mind to the world that I would like to live in. Like the author, we both had a reason to fight for our freedom; we did it by learning, it took us to places where we wouldn't be oppressed by that type of regime.

We both had the courage to fight for a better life, even when we were fighting against the odds. For him it was to learn how to read and write. In the case of Douglass he understood that learning how to read and write would give him an opportunity; education gave him "the path from slavery to freedom" (270). Douglass was aware of what he needed to do to succeed. Unlike other slaves Douglass had the determination to change his destiny.

We both had the courage to fight for a better life, even when we were fighting against the odds. For me it was to learn a different language. Learning English made me capable of being in a college with a scholarship, giving me the opportunity to learn and to be, someday, a capable professional that would be able to help her country. It also gave me the opportunity to give all my energy and focus to learning in a healthy environment. Instead of being in Venezuela studying in a university that would take all of my energies living in constant fear that someone would hurt me or kill me. English has given me the opportunity to enjoy my tennis in a healthier environment and helped me to accomplish some of my biggest desires in life.

I believe that people get tougher when life puts them in these similar situations. There will always be a regime or someone that wants to oppress and keep the rest of the people ignorant to gain power over them. But that doesn't mean that there isn't a way out. There is always a way out of an oppressive regime and there will always be opportunities in the world for those who make the right decisions; for those who fight harder, and for those that have the control of their destiny in their lives. Like Douglass said "How I Learned to Read and Write":

“Once you learn to read, you will forever be free” (273). It is not only reading, but it is understanding that it will make us critical thinkers, which is something that we need to treasure. At some point this skill will lead us to accomplish our biggest goals and desires.



## **Life as a Unique**

By: Josie Widner

“Embrace those things that make you unique.” – Janelle Monae

The closet seems like a vestige from a darker time. Many young LGBT people never experienced the repression, but there is an older generation of men who closed the door decades ago and now find themselves tentatively stepping out into a terrifying world. They often feel alone. Macon Allen even though a young man, was once one of those alone men that didn't know how to come out. He is from Gallatin, Missouri and is 18 years old. Gallatin is a small town North of Cameron. It is a really religious community. He knew that he was gay at the age of 12, but didn't have the courage to come out until the age of 17. Being gay for some people is easy and for others it is very hard. If you have ever been to the town of Gallatin you would know that it is an anti-gay area. Macon had a lot of guts coming out the way he did. I don't think people truly know what homosexuals go through and why they are the way they are. Macon has changed many people's views on homosexuals, including mine.

At the beginning of every person's coming out process is a period where that person begins to question his or her heterosexual identity. With that being said, Macon questioned his sexuality for many years. He ended up coming out his junior year of high school. "I didn't know how anybody would react to me coming out. I did it over social media because I knew that it would spread a lot faster that way. I did it after talking to someone after they came out. They talked about all the support that they got after they did. I did it really late one night. I think it was like 10:30. It was a scary feeling and I was terrified to go to school the next day. The reactions were more supportive than I thought they would be." I don't think that he expected the support that he got. He thought since it was Gallatin that everyone would judge him on his sexuality. The Gallatin community is filled with very religious people and they would most of the time judge someone that would sin, but not Macon. The person that supported him the most was his best friend Stephanie. She was the first person to ever find out about his sexuality. Macon didn't think that coming out was as bad as it could have been. I think that he feels so much stronger now that he finally came out to everyone after all those years. I know him personally and he is a very strong person now. He is probably one of the strongest people that I know.

Some people that are gay go through major denial because they don't think they are gay and don't want to be. They don't want to like the same sex as they are. They want to be normal and not unique. Just like most people, Macon went through a denial stage after he knew he was gay. "I wasn't sure about the feelings I was having, so I thought the next best thing was to deny that they were even there at all. I didn't think that what I was feeling was normal, so I didn't

want people to see me as a freak." It is also known that some people go through a depression when they are going through a denial stage. Macon told me that he went through depression. "I did go to the dark edge of suicide a couple of times. I was so ashamed of who I was and what I was becoming and I actually considered it for awhile. Thankfully, I never attempted." It is sad that people have to worry about coming out because they have to think about what everyone else will think. They even think about suicide because they are afraid of who they are becoming. Most people that are or are going to come out gay think that it is majorly wrong to think that way. They wonder why they are the ones chosen to be gay out of all the people in the world. Macon told me that it is life changing, but it is worth it in the end. Even though he went through denial, he got through it. It was way better for him after he came out, than before, when it was all a secret. The thought that he is gay and it is all a secret is what led him to depression. He didn't want to think of himself as gay. He didn't want to be the way he was. I don't think he would change who he was for a second at this moment in time though.

When Macon finally accepted the fact that he was gay, that is when he finally came out. He finally just said "that's who you are, just deal with it." Now that he has come out, he said, "I have no regrets, and I wouldn't change anything that has happened. I am a lot happier now that it is out and not a secret. I don't have to hide who I am anymore. I use to have to put a new face on every time I went out so people would suspect more than they already did." Some people think that being gay is contagious or something. So then they avoid the people or don't go near them because their parents tell them not to. Parents think that they can get their kid to not be gay with therapy. Macon should be very thankful for having his mom in his life. I know his mom personally and she loves him I think even more now because he is being his true self, rather than being someone he is not. She has treated him no different than before she knew he was even gay. I asked him what his mom thought about him coming out and how it happened. His response was, "Well I told her I was gay when I was 15? I think? It was so long ago! But I told her when we were on our way home from my grandparents. I told her that I liked a guy instead of a girl and she cried. She told me that I was making a hard decision because she knew my life would be more difficult because of it. This was way before she really knew what it meant for me to be gay. It took her awhile, but eventually she got used to the idea that I wasn't going to change and it was just the way that I am." After he came out gay, he felt changed in so many ways. He didn't have to hide his sexuality. He could go out and do whatever he wanted with a guy if he wanted. "I felt like 1,000 pounds was lift off of my back. I felt like I could actually breathe for the first time in many years. I didn't need to hide from people anymore. I could be me, the real me." I felt like his personality changed so much after he came out. I could see a huge change in his happiness. He is one of my best friends and I could see that change.

When most people hear the word gay they think of homosexual automatically. The actual definition for the word gay is lighthearted and carefree. I would describe Macon that way for sure. He is so sweet and I don't think anybody could not like him. He has so much advice to give for anybody that is thinking about coming out gay. He says, "We never truly know ourselves. When the time comes for you it will. It is okay to take time. Don't listen to people when they tell you it is time to come out. You just want to be 100% before you actually do it. You don't want to think that it was a mistake to do it after it is already done." After he came out gay, he thought that he gained so many friends, rather than lost. It is a major decision that needs to be thought about before you do it. When people come out gay they are still worried and still kind of unsure. I think it is a discrimination thing. "I can't really think of any blatantly negative comments after I came out. Before I came out, people would call me a fag, queer, and things like that. It stopped

once I came out for some reason and anyone who disagreed with me being gay simply didn't say anything." Gays have been discriminated just like many other people. They are regular people to. This interview has turned my views around because I honestly thought they chose to be gay. I never thought that they were just born that way until now.

“My aim is to put down what I see and what I feel in the best and simplest way I can tell it.”  
Ernest Hemingway



### About the Authors In the words of the students' English 100 instructors

**Joanna Abreu:** Joanna is one of the most studious, hardworking students I have met in my time teaching at Missouri Western. Her perspective on readings and issues we discussed in class was unique and insightful, and her ability to grasp difficult subject matter and write about it in poetic always delighted me. Her writing is wise and empathetic, revealing so much about her character.

**Sofia Aguilera:** From the moment I met Sofia, I knew that she would be a powerful force in the classroom, and she proved that early intuition correct. Eight A.M. would always find Sofia hurrying in, a big smile on her face, homework in hand, ready to learn, after having attended tennis practice already. She invited serious conversations about writing with her classmates, leading her writing group, and often the class, in the challenging work of drafting and revising. She put in countless hours revising and editing her own work, determined to tackle difficult topics in ways that would truly make a difference in others' lives, and to perfect her facility with language. In her essay, “Found my Freedom in Education,” Sofia tells the gripping story of her journey, not only to the United States, but “out of a regime that didn’t allow personal/educational growth.” The energy and positivity and gratitude with which Sofia tackles every educational experience is truly humbling.

**Chris Bennett:** If you know Chris at all, you know he has an opinion. He has opinions about what is happening in the world. He has opinions about the books and articles he is asked to read for class. He has opinions about his writing and the writing of his classmates. He has opinions about his own and his classmates' lives. More than opinions, though, Chris has compassion, heart, and an ability to connect with others and make them understand in no uncertain terms how much he cares. In “Welcome to My Nightmare,” Chris allows us a peek into his life as an Army medic, to witness a gruesome and horrifying event alongside his younger self, and then to watch his “metamorphosis” into the motivated person he is today. In “You Do Have a Choice,” Chris takes to task those who feel life’s circumstances leave them out of options, an essay inspired by an intense desire to motivate his classmates, and in “Literacy in Hi-Fi,” Chris challenges the notion that literacy, without which, “we can have no education,” and hence, “no future,” is achieved only through the reading of books. In each instance, Chris reaches out to his reader, connecting his opinions to other writers, to his own experiences, and in some cases, speaking directly to a reader who might be in trouble. I have no doubt that this same sense of compassion and passion for a better tomorrow will follow Chris into his chosen field of law enforcement.

**Taylor Elliott:** Not every student writer, or even professional writer, is willing to open the doors to the most painful rooms in their past and let you in, let you traverse the feelings, thoughts, and

decisions that most hold under lock and key. Taylor, however, is willing. At first, he was understandably reluctant to share his story, but eventually he made the courageous decision to submit his essay, “The Past is the Past,” in hopes that it might be a beacon for others. Taylor shares in this very honest piece the struggle with depression that might have ended his life, a struggle from which he ultimately decided to “create new life.” Taylor’s work focuses on a very real issue, one that affects more people than we care to admit, and in sharing his story, he is an advocate for those who suffer the stigma associated with depression in our society and are reluctant to get help because of it.

**Bobbie Griffin:** At the beginning of the semester, Bobbie was very quiet, and reserved. But as the semester progressed, so did Bobbie's willingness to share her interpretations of the readings. She always had a way of paralleling the lives of the characters in the readings to her own life experiences. She became one of the most talkative and intuitive students in class, albeit with a continued timid demeanor and quiet voice. But by the end of the semester, it was her writer's voice that spoke the loudest.

**Nikki Groom:** Nikki is the student that all teachers hope to have; she is intellectually curious, sensitive, intelligent and dedicated to her education. But more than that she is a talented writer. When she stepped into my classroom, she already had an innate ability to write well. Although most students would be satisfied with this, Nikki was not. She wrote, revised and then revised some more. And with each step, her writing became more powerful, more expressive, more astute. And this work ethic and insight carried over into the classroom. She was always engaged with the readings, her writing and the ideas of her classmates. She truly had a positive impact on the class. Consequently, Nikki has three essays in this publication and her essay, “Sanctuary at Bridgewater,” is one of the award winners. In this poignant essay, Nikki explains how she learned to cope with her brother’s death. The details she uses to describe both the place and the memories she and her brother shared in that place are striking, moving and insightful. It is clear to every reader that Bridgewater is their “now and forever” place. In bringing to life Bridgewater, she is also able to keep alive the memory of her brother. And that is the mark of a great writer.

**Daisha Hampton:** Though a quiet student, when Daisha spoke up, the whole class listened intently. She came to class with a love of writing already and it showed in her attention to detail in each task paper, where I was often in awe of her ability to say something so profound in subtle ways.

**Zakary Ingraham:** Zak is a remarkable student who works tirelessly to revise and improve all of his essays for class. He writes with an enchanting style which leaves his readers with many vivid images and ideas to ponder. He was especially generous with his time during writing circles and peer reviews when he helped classmates improve their compositions. Zak’s class contributions during discussions revealed a close reading of text material and he was able to integrate the texts into his writing in an effective way.

**Taegyeong Lee:** In her essay “Reading and Writing Makes Me Free,” Taegyeong Lee gives a glimpse into the competitive South Korean educational system as she reveals that until she was inspired to enjoy reading and writing for herself, she did not feel she was educated. She says,



“Reading gave me a different view to look at the world, a chance to think differently, and the courage to criticize what I had thought was right.” In “The House of My Mind,” Taegyeong Lee gives the reader a tour through her grandmother’s house through vibrant pictures. Her grandmother and her two aunts come alive on the page as Lee deftly captures their personalities through description and dialogue. Both of these creative, thoughtful essays are well worth the reader’s time.

**Joraya Maag:** J is one of the strongest close readers I have had in English 100, and her ability to understand and critique texts was invaluable during classroom discussions. As a writer, she always has something to say and it was a pleasure watching her wrestle with big ideas and not shy away from being true to herself. Her confidence and leadership skills helped make her classmates trust her and look to her for guidance.

**Jorden Miller:** Jorden’s strength in writing is narrative and emotional impact. She definitely knows how to make a reader feel like they are part of her story. It was lovely to see her confidence as a writer grow over the course of the semester, and the way she tackled difficult subjects was motivating to her classmates.

**Taylor Neely:** Taylor was committed to producing impressive essays because of her work ethic and her ability to rethink and revise. She was a good influence on the other students, who admired her work and writing ability, as well as listening to her in-class comments. Taylor took her assignments seriously and completed them thoroughly, time and again. She was a joy to have in class and promises to do well in other composition courses.

**Dani Nickels:** Dani is a dedicated student and an excellent role model for her peers. I could always count on her to lead class discussions, which illustrated both her reading comprehension and strong leadership skills. She combined her exceptional natural writing ability with a willingness and eagerness to fulfill the expectations required of the course. She was always willing to help her peers in a way that was practical yet non-condescending. She was constantly challenging herself to become a better writer, which was evident with the multiple drafts I saw throughout the semester.

**Alexis Pickett:** Alexis Pickett came to my class much like some other non-traditional students; that is to say she wanted a sort of “tune-up” before getting into ENG 104 & 108. As a result, and like many other students who re-enter college, or are mature and attend college for the first time, Alexis opened her mind and let go of popular pre-conceived notions of what makes for a successful academic writer. And she thrived. She emerged as an extremely strong and gifted writer who will continue to do well as a student here at MWSU. Her hard work and determination have proven to be yet another example of why many professors and instructors at this university value non-traditional students. Her writing style is intelligent, clear, focused, and meticulous. I wish all my students had the commitment to writing that Ms. Pickett clearly possesses. As a former one myself, I say... Yay, non-trads!"

**Carlos Pozo:** From the very first day of class, I knew Carlos was going to be an asset to the classroom as a critical thinker and as a curious learner. He was very helpful to other classmates

in peer reviews and it was exciting to watch him grow as a writer from his first essay to this final paper. As a writer, Carlos is honest and sincere and willing to take risks with language.

**Chris Rannabargar:** As Chris writes about in his essay, “Raised with Books,” he has always had a love for reading and relishes the “slight old book smell and remembers the yellowing pages and the great adventures that awaited” him in each book. It is this inquisitiveness and imagination that propelled him to success in my classroom despite the obstacles he faced outside of the classroom. Chris’s first semester was a very difficult one and he faced challenges that young people should not. However, he remained dedicated to his education and continually surprised me as he always submitted his work on time, came to class prepared and was willing to participate in every discussion. We could also count on Chris to add levity to the conversations! A true student is one who places learning and education above all else, even when it is difficult, and Chris is a true student.

**Ryanna Rempel:** On at least three occasions, Ryanna Rempel made me cry. Once, her description of her little sister’s adoption was so gut-wrenching that I walked into the other room to read it aloud to my husband as he was painting our bedroom. When I finished, he stopped mid-brush and just stood there for a second before finally saying, “Wow...a student wrote that?” Wow is right. Ryanna is a gifted writer, and her incredible talent is matched only by her formidable work ethic. In short, she’s a dream student. Often, her faith inspires her paper topics, and that personal connection promotes beautifully emotive writing. In this publication, she has an impressive THREE essays, but before you start reading, you might want to grab a box of tissues.

**Amber Richardson:** Amber is the sort of student who sneaks up on you. She sits quietly in a non-conspicuous corner of the room, and when she speaks, she is so quiet that you almost can’t hear her. However, when you pick up her writing, you can’t help but be transfixed by the powerful voice she shares through the written word. In her essay, “My Greatest Loss,” Amber recounts a tale of pain, loss, hardship, and ultimate triumph in beautiful language that made me stop and re-read, and re-read again. She brings her late mother to life for the reader through vivid recollections ranging from “the piquant scent of her perfume” to her “illness wracked body” and even the lost possibility of her tears at her daughters’ weddings. In the classroom, Amber has evolved into a powerful voice as well, offering exceptional advice to peers and fostering their growth as writers as she plans to do with future students of her own one day, students who will be lucky to study under this talented, kind, caring writer and educator.

**Martin Roper:** Martin’s essay, “That Old House,” beautifully captures the aromas, sights and feelings of his grandparents’ house. More important, the essay captures Martin’s true persona, a young man who values family, faith, responsibility and respect for hard work. Martin is a young man of his convictions and I always looked forward to him sharing his opinions as well as his analysis of our assigned readings. Martin was a careful and critical reader whose insights into such topics as the importance of role models as well as literacy helped to shape and enliven the course. Over the course of the semester, I witnessed Martin grow as a reader and writer and I was always impressed with what he had to share. He was a great addition to our classroom.

**Michael Sherman:** I will never forget an early meeting I had with Michael's Student Assistant for Writer's Workshop. She told me that his essay was about coffee, a vast departure from the topics students usually choose for their first Task Paper. "It's really good," she told me, but I wondered if she was a little hesitant that I would accept, let alone appreciate, such a piece. However, after reading "Caffeination Conversion," I couldn't help but be truly inspired. In this essay, Michael recounts his journey from a life of "inactivity and slothfulness to a life that is healthy and active," in what he calls "the coffee chapter" of his life. It is a delightful essay that reminds us of the power our seemingly small choices have in making big changes.

**Julie Schield:** When Julie started English 100, she brought with her a complicated relationship with reading and writing. Over the course of the semester, she pushed through difficulties with the assignments, constantly seeking for a deeper understanding of writing and improving her craft. Through the process, she not only learned about English, but more importantly - she learned about herself.

**Jennifer Siler:** When Jennifer Siler walked into my Eng100 classroom last fall, I felt like doing a happy dance from the front podium. The first words out of her mouth were, "Do you remember me?" Of course I did. Jennifer, like so many other students, had started college the previous year but had withdrawn from her courses because circumstances were tough. When her name disappeared from my roster last year, I desperately hoped that she'd eventually find her way back to the classroom. Thankfully, she did. Unlike so many of us, Jennifer is strong enough and smart enough to fight for success. In fact, she used her struggles to guide her writing, and the difficulties she'd faced in the past became the catalyst for her excellent publication paper. For this accomplishment, and all of her inevitable future accomplishments, Jennifer should stand up and proudly do her own happy dance.

**Shelby Swartz:** I first met Shelby as a freshman in my high school classroom, and again as a senior before I ever encountered him as a college student. He was, back then, and still is today, bright, polite, mature, and hard working. In the past semester, though, I've had the privilege of watching him develop into a mature adult who is willing to tackle serious issues in his writing, and to share his experiences, often painful, with others so that he and they might learn from them. In his essay, "Evolution of Literature to Me," Shelby shares the evolving role literacy has played in his life, from "a chore" to an escape from war, and eventually the tool that "will light the path" to his future. It is truly an insightful, thought-provoking read.

**Josie Widner:** When Josie entered my classroom, she was quiet yet conscientious. Intent on doing well, she always had questions and was always willing to revise, revise, revise. When we began Task Two, our Interview Paper, Josie had questions and concerns. But when I read her draft for the first time I thought, "Wow!" In her interview and essay, "Life as a Unique," she interviews her friend Macon, a courageous young man who came out of the closet at the age of 17. Josie chronicles Macon's journey and through the stories of support from his best friend and mother, she leaves her reader with a sense of hope that all people, regardless of their sexual identity, can be accepted and loved. I think because this story was so close to Josie, it was her most powerful essay as she proves that "Macon has changed many people's views on homosexuals, including mine." With this paper, Josie understands the power of language and storytelling. And that lesson is one that every writer should both learn and model - and Josie has accomplished both.



