

**inkslinger  
2007-2008**



# inkslinger

## 2007-2008

The *Inkslinger* is an annual publication of the New England College Writing Department. The essays in this edition have been selected by an editorial committee comprised of Writing Department faculty members. The essays selected for publication were chosen to best represent the excellence and diversity found within the first year writing program at New England College. Submissions for next year's edition will be accepted through January, 2009, with an electronic publication date anticipated for spring semester 2009. \*

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# Big Brother

*Matthew Anderson*

Self acceptance is an issue that countless amounts of people of all ages, backgrounds and ways of life struggle with. Who or what is to blame for the conflict of self acceptance? Is it our elders? Is it from our peers? Do the ever-growing influential media effect the youth and even adults today into thinking what's right and what is not? The reasons are different for each individual depending on their circumstances. For myself, I had a hard time accepting myself from not being like my older brother, who was very hard to live up to.

Ever since we were children my older brother, Mark, was doing things that kids his age weren't. Be it from either reading a difficult novel in the third grade or being an ace on his baseball team. He had a natural talent of many skills, there was no doubting it. So it always bothered me when I remembered him playing first base in little league while I would go out and be stuck with outfield, where the poor players were placed. If a kid could hit the ball that far then his parents were probably feeding him 'roids.

When I reached Middle school, entering sixth grade, my brother Mark, being three years older was just leaving to go to High school. I remember each year on the first day the teachers would ask if people were siblings to former students. Mark had left a legacy in that school. He had made a mock-umentary of the seagull problem we had. The film was a joke on the movie *The Birds*, he spliced in clips of the campus and the movie and narrated it himself. I admit that it was a really impressive film made by an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student, it turned out so good that the eleven o'clock news came to the school that year to interviewed him and show clips from the film. I remember the hopeful teachers asking me, "Oh, you're Mark's little brother! Are you going to make a sequel to the *MBMS Birds*, that would be great!?"

"Yeah, maybe..." I would reply, trying to get off the subject quickly, as I was sick of hearing it.

It was as if they expected me to be just like my brother. During those years, I guess I let the teachers down because I never made that sequel the school wanted. The middle school years were very difficult for me, my parents and teachers all expected me to do exceptionally well like my brother. Unfortunately, I felt like I was the Yin and Mark was the

Yang. The fact that I knew my brother blew through all the work I did and even took the more difficult classes offered without breaking a sweat affected me in a negative way. It made my poor work seem even more discouraging.

Entering High School wasn't much easier to cope with. Mark was a senior when I entered as a freshman. By this time, I knew my brother was a great academic achiever, but in the High School years I also realized he was the king of the social scene at Mira Costa. During this period of time Mark became this puzzling figure I idolized. I relate to Kristen E. Hughes' trouble of who she thinks her boyfriend was when she said "He was a dark knight with a beautiful cold smile, would-be rower, and a chain-smoker at the age of sixteen. I never knew exactly who he was" (Hughes 53).

Being just another head in the crowd, I could always overhear people talking about my brother. There was an occasion where I was standing in line with my friends to get lunch and in front of us were two typical "California Barbies" from one of my classes talking about my brother. I toned out what my friends were saying and I remember listening to the girls instead, "You're going to Mark's party this Friday right?" Out of the corner of my eye I watched the blonde girl tilt her head in a questioning motion while at the same time putting her hand on one of her exposed tan hips. I never understood why some girls do that, but does anyone?

"Well, uh, I heard about it, but which Mark is it?" Immediately I thought to myself, defending my brother's reputation, *how could you not know which Mark? He's only the most popular person on campus!* Luckily, Blondie felt the same way I did,

"Mark *Anderson*, obviously." She said, stressing the last name.

"Anyways, you're coming cuz' its going to be crazy!"

That Friday night's party was a lot of fun. I even recall seeing Blondie and her friend sitting on one of our couches. My parent's were out of town like always and it was the place to be. The rest of the freshmen year was a blast. Weekends were fun and I was hanging out with everyone who was part of the "in" crowd. However, unlike Mark I couldn't keep my grades and social status in good shape, it was one or the other.

At the end of the freshmen year, I realized I barely passed any of my classes. My old friends weren't my good friends anymore and my girlfriend was feeling that I wasn't being myself anymore. Was I really different? At the time I'd have liked to think I wasn't, but I was. I was trying too hard to be someone I wasn't. Depression overcame me during the

beginning of that summer. I didn't go hang out with the "in" crowd nor did I hang out with my old friends.

One night, while I was alone, Mark came home unexpectedly early and sat down next to me on our deck. My brother isn't one to normally care about other people's feelings or to inquire for information to cheer someone up, it's just who he is. He did shock me though when he asked me what was wrong. Being honest with him I told him I don't know what to do. On one hand I wanted to go wild and have fun, because that's what you're subtly taught to do in High School and College. Then I told him that on the other hand I wanted to just do what I felt like. If I just want to spend time by myself or just doing pointless stuff with just a few different friends, then why is that looked down upon? Is there a reason people can't look at someone like that and say "Oh I wish I was like that.?" The answer still escapes me to this day.

"Matt, just be yourself. It sounds cliché, but it's the truth." He said.

"I want to be like you though, it's just confusing to me, you're like a superhuman or something. You're the Van Wilder of our school, but you still take AP classes and stuff" I admitted.

"That's good for now, but it's not going to matter in the future. I'm far from perfect Matt. Dude, I like have double the amount of personal problems you do. Believe me, sometimes I look up to you and wonder how you do it..."

"Why?"

"You can get along with anyone...be it my friends or the random people around campus. It seems to me when you just act yourself you do fine in any situation. I have to actually put in effort into my image, it sucks dude."

We sat in silence for a while, both of us just thinking. I remember not feeling awkward though. Eventually a car pulled up and Mark told me his ride was waiting, I told him "C'ya later" and he left. Not much immediately changed when he left, I still sat there in silence, thinking. What he said really struck home; it made sense to me what he said. From that point on I decided that I'm going to just go with the flow and accept who I am. The attitude will take me where it takes me, but I know that I won't be feeling like I'm someone who I'm not. Nancy Mairs' once said "First, the matter of semantics. I am a cripple" (Mairs 409). She accepts who she is, she doesn't sugar coat it. This is much like what I did to myself. There was a song I would listen to a lot that would remind me to be myself; it was

called *Smash*, by the Offspring. The lyrics speak for themselves and it's probably the only song I will admit that I truly relate to. Especially the first three verses:

*Head over heels I've fit in before,  
now, I don't want to do it no more.  
I've held it all in with blood on my face,  
built it up man so bad you can taste.*

*I don't slag no one,  
I don't even judge.  
Don't give a shit cause I'm not gonna budge.  
I just want to be who I want to be,  
Guess that's hard for others to see.*

*I'm not a trendy asshole.  
I do what I want,  
I do what I feel like.  
I'm not a trendy asshole.  
I don't give a fuck if it's good enough for you.  
Cause I'm alive.*

Three years passed and I graduated from High School. I made some poor decisions in High School while learning to be myself, but I did manage to save my junior and senior year grades. However it was too late to take the SAT's and prep for a good four year so I took a year off of school and worked. It was truly then that I realized what I had worried about so much in High School didn't matter at all. No one's social status mattered in the big picture.

At the end of the summer of 2007, I decided that I wanted to go back to school and get a degree. Nearly everyone told me that it was too late to apply to colleges and get financial aid, it seemed as if no one wanted to help. It was then that I spoke again to my brother. I called him and asked him for some advice. For the first time in three years we talked about that night, the one that he told me to just be myself. I immediately knew what he was talking about; the only person I could rely on was myself. So I scrambled and gave a last ditch effort to apply to a rolling admissions college in New Hampshire, I got accepted and I'm in the process of getting my Criminal Justice degree.

Self acceptance was the most difficult thing for me to understand growing up. Thankfully, I had a brother who unknowingly put me to the test. I've learned that every day you're tested and everyday you hope you make the right decisions to stay true to yourself.

Slipping up is only human, but you must get back on track when you do or you risk turning into something you're not.

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# The Slaying of a Public Servant

*Christopher Buker*

All of us have witnessed or been involved in experiences which have shaped, or had an affect on, the way in which we view the world. These events are ones which usually stick with us for the rest of our lives, and are events which are constantly reflected upon throughout our daily routines. For me, this event is the murder of a Manchester N.H. police officer. On the night of October 16, 2006, at approximately 2:45 a.m. Officer Briggs and Officer Breckinridge were on bicycle patrol. Officer Briggs was scheduled to be off duty at 3:00a.m., but decided to respond with his partner to a domestic disturbance call in which gun shots were fired. What Officer Briggs did not know, was that he would not return home that morning to his wife and two sons. Instead, he would be gunned down by a man he was all too much familiar with, Michael Addison. Not only would this tragic event have a detrimental impact on the family of Officer Briggs, but it would forever instill a new sense of fear in the eyes of our nation's police officers.

In 2004, Officer Briggs was honored for rescuing nineteen people from a burning apartment building in downtown Manchester, just blocks away from where his life was cut short. Ironically, one of those nineteen people whose life was spared, was Michael Addison (Asmar 2).

As a criminal justice major and a future police officer, this event has had a great impact on the way in which I see the world. As I reflect upon watching days and days of news coverage on the event, there are three vivid scenes which have stuck with me since that tragic October morning, when I woke up and learned there had been an attack on one of New Hampshire's public servants.

The first scene which I remember from the murder of Officer Briggs is the picture of the crime scene on WMUR News 9. The crime scene was roped off with yellow police caution tape, and at the scene was Officer Briggs' patrol bike. It was a very dark night and there were many police officers walking back and forth around the scene with their pen and paper out. This scene sent chills up my spine and made me want to call every police officer in the world to thank them for the risk they take every time they put on their uniform and go to work. People all too often overlook the sacrifice that police officers make in an effort to ensure our public safety.

Michael Briggs had a great impact on the people around him. He connected with the community in which he served and had a positive effect on the city of Manchester. This influential impact can be seen in Michael Cohen's, "You Can Shave the Beast, but Will the Fur Grow Back?". This piece describes the effect that the diversity in a community can have on an individual's way of life. It goes on to explain how socialization and the interaction between citizens can result in the ignition of the learning process. In this case however, it was the people of the city who had an impact on the author, as opposed to one individual having an impact on the whole city.

When Michael Cohen referred to New York City as a "melting pot" (39), it created an image in my head of a large amount of people, all gathering together, and who have come from many different backgrounds. This was the same image which I saw when hundreds and hundreds of people gathered together to pay tribute to the life and career of Officer Briggs. Merchants Auto.com Stadium was packed, and there was not an empty seat in the place. Perhaps Michael Addison was a victim of being "...sucked into the vacuum of hate at an early age" (39). Maybe it was his upbringing and background which made him authorized to take the life of another human being, a man who dedicated his career to helping others and assuring their safety. No one will ever know the true reason why Michael Addison pulled the trigger on that early Monday morning in October of 2006, and left an eight and eleven year old fatherless, and a loving wife, a widow.

Another scene which I can clearly remember is that of the Massachusetts State Police and the New Hampshire State Police, walking into a court room with Michael Addison in handcuffs. This scene made me have a large amount of faith in our criminal justice system as a whole. It made me feel a lot better about the situation, knowing that the beast who took Officer Briggs' life was now in custody. It made me feel a sense of peace and comfort, seeing Michael Addison dressed in an orange jumpsuit. I am sure that this scene had a similar affect on the family of Officer Briggs. Although nothing in this world will bring Michael back to them, seeing the man who took their loved one's life in police custody, brought peace and comfort to the situation.

In Alice Walker's, "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self", she says in reference to the electric chair, "All night I have nightmares about the electric chair, and about all the people reputedly "fried" in it" (620). What Alice Walker failed to mention was that those people who are "fried" in the electric chair, are criminals such as Michael

Addison, who have taken it upon themselves to “play God” and take the life of another human being. Attorney General Kelley Ayotte is seeking nothing less than capital punishment for the slaying of Officer Briggs and this gives me a sense of great pride in our justice system.

The third scene which I remember from this horrific tragedy is that of the funeral of Officer Briggs. I can still to this day, almost a year later, see the flag draped casket of the slain officer, and the hundreds of police officers marching down the streets of Manchester in tribute and honor. From this scene I can remember seeing the widow and two sons of Officer Briggs, as they were drowning themselves in tears of sorrow and loss. I also remember the Fisher Cats stadium being packed that day, with fellow police officers, friends, family members, and members of the general public who came out in support of Officer Briggs and the Manchester Police Department. The field of law enforcement is an extremely strong brotherhood. When an event such as Officer Briggs’ murder takes place, the law enforcement community gathers together whether they knew the fallen officer or not, in an effort to show their support and share their grief with the family.

Officer Briggs realized the negative effect that people in society can have on one another. This is what he dedicated his career to and ultimately gave his life for. Just as expressed in James Baldwin’s “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American”, Officer Briggs valued the individual opinions and ideas of the people in his community, and was dedicated to resolving the conflicts which arose as a result of these opposing opinions.

I have been interested in the field of law enforcement since about the fourth grade. Since then I have involved myself in preparatory steps which have helped to prepare me for this occupation. I am a police explorer with the town of Hillsboro, N.H., I have attended all three years of the New Hampshire Police Cadet Training Academy, I have taken part in a year-long internship with the Hillsboro, N.H. Police Department, I have completed a Crime Scene Investigation Academy at Bentley College, and I have been hired as a Security Officer at Concord Hospital. In Lee Abbott’s, “The True Story of Why I Do What I Do”, a great sense of passion is expressed in reference to Mr. Abbott’s career choice as a writer. I can relate to this passion. I take great pride in the field of law enforcement and nobody could ever convince me to change my career path. Lee Abbott was exposed to this when he faced rejection from his father. Although his father did not agree with him becoming a writer, he continued on with his career goals because he knew that writing was what he wanted to

dedicate his professional career to. Officer Briggs lost his life because some dirt bag did not approve of his career path.

The murder of Officer Briggs has had a great impact on the way in which I view the field of law enforcement and the world. Before this tragic event, I had always thought about the danger and risk which is associated with police work, but I had no reason to fear it. I had only heard stories of officers getting injured while on the job, and had no visual image to associate the story with. This all changed after October 16, 2006. I saw live news coverage of a crime scene which was the home of an attack on a police officer. This event created a great deal of anger in my heart, and made me really consider my career choice. This image brought to life those stories which I had heard over the years. A public servant's life was cut short while he was responding to a call for service. I have realized that this event has only strengthened my will to become a police officer. I am willing to dedicate my career and risking my life, in an effort to protect the general public and actively participate in tracking down "dirt bags" like Michael Addison.

On February 23, 2007, Michael Addison was indicted on capital murder charges for the shooting of Officer Briggs (Vincent 14). During the five minute court hearing, Addison pleaded not-guilty. September 2, 2008 has been set as the court date on which Michael Addison will be tried for the capital murder of Officer Briggs.

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## Writing for Fun

### *Taylor Deming*

One night, late in the sixth grade, I had a fantastic dream about a girl and a group of her classmates traveling across a desert. They came upon a giant cliff and there was no choice but to climb. There was only one problem: no climbing gear. The dream continued on, and whatever happened next is now a blur to me.

It bothered me for a while, because I couldn't figure out what that dream meant. I had never been to a desert. I didn't know any of the people who I saw in my dream. Everything about that dream was a mystery to me. Why my brain would show me such odd images? None of it made any sense.

When I think about what Lee K. Abbott wrote in his essay "The True Story of Why I Do What I Do" I realize his story relates to me. He wrote "All stories are true stories, especially the artful lies we invent to satisfy the wishful thinker in us, for they present to us, in disguise often and at a great distance, the way we are or would want to be" (87). Of course! The girl must have been *me*, and the adventure she was taking was something my subconscious was telling me I wanted to do. I wasn't sure yet why I was crossing a desert, but I was going to take the story and run with it.

The next day, sometime after school, I began writing the dream down. I added a few more students, developed the plot and setting, and worked on some dialogue. I started my novel that very day, and I haven't stopped writing it since. It's something that has consumed my entire being. If I hadn't begun writing my novel that day, I don't know where I'd be right now. There were so many secrets I wanted to reveal, so many possibilities to pursue. The options were endless. That's how I got hooked on writing.

Up until that day I began writing, I never knew how freeing writing can feel. That book has changed my life in more ways than I can imagine. Annie Dillard, author of "The Writing Life" sums up my feelings by saying, "Putting a book together is interesting and exhilarating. It is sufficiently difficult and complex that it engages all your intelligence. It is life at its most free" (11).

Before I began writing, I was a lonely outcast. I had trouble fitting in with my classmates, and I had no way to connect with them. Since I began writing, I was more confident in myself and I didn't have trouble talking to people. My grades began to improve, and I was finally becoming a person I was proud of.

My parents noticed the change in me immediately. I don't know if they understood it, though, because I hardly knew how to explain how great it felt. That feeling is something almost impossible to put into words, and I knew they'd accept it, but maybe not understand it. The first thing they saw was that I was spending hours sitting down at my computer and typing non-stop. Time, of course, meant nothing to me when I was writing. I would spend all night at the computer if I needed to, as long as I finished the chapter or the scene that I was working on. I wouldn't stop to eat, I wouldn't stop to think, and I wouldn't stop to reread what I'd written (which was a big problem).

My novel has gone through four drafts already, and I'm still working on it. I keep adding things that I forget to tell the reader, I change some paragraphs so they flow better with the chapter, and I invent new characters to add variety to the plot. The draft I'm working on now is nothing like what I had intended it to be when I was thirteen. The stuff that I saw in my dream has changed into something new.

Another point Abbott makes in his essay, is the point that we write using everything that we have learned in the past. After quoting Willa Cather, he writes, "then by the time I was a sophomore in high school...the material I had acquired I'd got from him..." (88). This is true for me as well; even though I am writing a fantasy novel, I use my own real life experiences and try to incorporate them into the story. Abbott uses his father and their relationship; I try to use everything I've been through and my relationships with everyone in some way. Though they may not know it, but my friends have influenced my writing in more ways than I can count. I create characters after them and I use their lives as fuel for my own writing.

Now that my novel is in its final draft, I guess it's soon going to be time to let go. I don't know what future is in store for my book, but I'm sure there's going to be someone out there who wants to read it. I'm just happy that it has ended up where it is, and I'm proud

of all the hard work I put into it. It has been a long and difficult road that I've had to walk to bring my writing to where it is, and I think there is still room for improvement. But that's the thing that keeps me going: knowing that nothing ever stays the same and knowing that my writing does change, even when I don't realize it.

I guess writing is like planting a seed. It's like I was given a seed to plant, but I was left with no idea what it would grow into. I planted it and waited patiently, watching it grow. Instead of getting a plant, I got a book. With every year it grows bigger and stronger, becoming something I never imagined it could. There is no greater feeling than accomplishing something so important; if there is, I haven't experienced it yet.

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## Go Big, Not Home

*Leanne DeRosa*

“**H**OLY.....! What was that?!” yelled Danielle.

We all looked at each other and declared that we wouldn't go check. The sliding glass door on the opposite side of the room had made a slapping noise, as if someone was throwing water balloons at it. The three of us looked at each other expecting the other to get up and see what just happened.

“I'm not going. Kollin, you go...” I said timidly.

“Oh no I'm perfectly fine thanks. You guys check,” Kollin said as if he knew what was going on. Danielle got up to check. She slowly pulled open the curtain with both hands and gave out a loud shriek. She ran to the bathroom, leaving the curtains open just enough for me to snap my head over and see a man standing with a mask and blood splattered up against the window.

“What the hell is that?!” I screamed and jumped under the covers of the bed. Kollin was on the floor cracking up as if he had planned this awful prank. The man in the mask jumped into the window again, Kollin still rolling on the floor laughing as if he had just seen a stand up comedian. Tommy - Kollin's best friend - walked inside and took off his mask. Somehow he had made it look like there was blood splattered on the window. Kollin was just the ploy to keep us distracted.

“You can come out of the bathroom now Danielle!” yelled Tommy. As Danielle walked out of the bathroom her pants were soaked on the inside seam. She was so afraid and apparently couldn't run to the bathroom fast enough. We all sat there and laughed until our stomachs hurt. Tommy apologized for scaring us and Kollin apologized for helping.

Although I had known them both my whole life there was always this relationship between the four of us that was indescribable. Tommy always had those Abercrombie jeans and a t-shirt on as if he was trying to impress someone by wearing expensive clothing. Kollin, on the other hand, was opposite. He'd wear whatever he found in his closet and didn't care; he'd find a new friend if he had to. Kollin was one of those people with an “I don't care” attitude. If you had an opinion you were too afraid to share, or you were scared about something going on he'd tell you, “Go big or go home kid.” He was tall, dark and handsome the stereotypical hunk, if you will. Always ready to kick some ass for his friends

and always willing to listen to the friend in need. He liked to be outside, play paintball, ride dirt bikes, all of his bonfires consisted of serious amounts of fireworks and the only reason there were ever groups of cars at the fire department were to visit him on his off hours. He had guts, enough for everyone. After all, go big or go home.

It was Thursday, August 2<sup>nd</sup> at one of the classic “Thursday Night Bonfire Club” bonfires. There was no other location for the bonfires besides the lake because there was just something about it. You couldn’t put your finger on it but it made the good time seem like it could go on forever, like you were only there because life couldn’t get any better than it was. The next day Kollin, Tommy and A.J. –their other best friend- were all leaving for a vacation to North Carolina. They spent a few days fishing, playing volleyball and jet skiing. I can’t even express to you how perfect life was over the weekend when they left. Everyone was having a great time ending our summers in Connecticut, getting ready to go onto college, take the next step to do what we wanted. That Wednesday the news hit.

I had just gotten to work, put on my apron and was about to go out to my first customers. My phone rang a few times but I was running around because it was a busy day at work. I was done with my first shift at about noon and it was time to go on break. I checked my phone, “6 missed calls.” Six missed calls from five different people, “what is going on...” is only thing that is running through my head. I checked my voicemails. All of them just told me to call this person back or call that person back, no specifics on what they wanted. At that moment my friend Megan called.

“HEYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY” I yelled.

“Leanne, Leanne did you hear? Leanne did you hear what happened?!” she was yelling frantically into the phone as if someone had died.

*Why is it that when you love you lose?*

Kollin Francis DeNegre died, on Tuesday August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007. He was 18 years old, the oldest son to Janice and Mark DeNegre and an older brother to Ronelle DeNegre. Kollin was a volunteer firefighter and loved everyone. How did this happen? Why did this happen?

When I heard that Kollin had died I felt like Lee K. Abbott did when his father hauled him off to the garage, as if I had “discover[ed] how hard the world is, when what you’ve cleaved to is cleaved from you with a broadaxe” (Abbott 89). I know that I was in his

life for a reason and that there was a “truth grander” (Abbott 89) than the two of us. It is a truth that I know is grander than knowing that we die and do not rise. Right at that moment I knew this. It hit me like ton of bricks to your back. I had this intense rise of heat in my body and all of a sudden it felt like the winter had begun in August. Making a thought seemed incomprehensible and making a sentence seemed unimaginable.

The next days were spent at Kollin’s house and Tommy’s house - with bonfires of course - remembering him. Since I was four-years-old I’ve known Kollin. It was like someone from my family had passed away. There aren’t even words to describe how I felt because I couldn’t feel. No matter how many times people told me that he was “in a better place” or “he was watching over me” it didn’t matter because he wasn’t there.

The world at this very moment was a box. No way in from the outside and no way out from the inside. I had to feel this on my own although there were 700 people who felt the same way. That’s how many people there were at the wake that day, 700. 700 black ties and 700 black dresses. There was a line out the door and down the street. I hugged Mr. DeNegre as if the tightness of the hug depicted how fast our hearts were beating at that very moment. There was no way I was going to college. *College? For what purpose? To expand on what?* My brain couldn’t function; never mind function on studying. Without him, what did I do? I’ve been best friends with him since age 10.

For the next two weeks I abuse God. I ask him why? I swear at him as if he is right in front of me. I ask him why such a thing to such a person? Is it fair? Is it fair to God? Like Alice Walker in “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is Self”, I “rant and rave” and “hate and despise” (Walker 621). Though I have no physical scars as Walker depicts in her writing, an emotional scar makes it all inconceivable. She could move on and live with her beauty inside, but in these pivotal weeks, I felt no beauty inside. Nor did I feel shame, or angst or dismay. I felt nothing. I do not pray for happiness in my own life, I pray for happiness in heaven for Koll.

I have now decided to let New England College know I am not going. I am not subjecting this disease like feeling inside me to the rest of the world. I should really tell someone, is what I’m thinking. I e-mailed someone who had not been involved with this at all. Not a friend, not a family member but a teacher. I have known this teacher for 5 years and he has helped me through everything. I told him about not going to school and not subjecting my loneliness to others. I didn’t want to deal with the issue at hand and I was

running away from fear. He said to me, “You need to enter college with a clear head. What are you going to do back here in Burlington? Nothing! It is a town of 8,000 people, none of whom are going to push you to do anything better unless you push yourself. In 10 years from now when you aren’t a teacher, you will regret this. The thought of Kollin dying is hard and it will get easier as time passes but it will only get easier if you don’t let it take over you. Do yourself a favor and make this obstacle have a purpose. Remember who he is, remember who you are and remember why you’re accomplishing the great things you’re going to accomplish in life.”

I could not have made this clear to myself without his help. “I do not think that I could have made this reconciliation here” (Baldwin 105). I could not have made the choice by myself. I needed my teacher’s guidance. In fact, he was more than a teacher, he was a mentor, a bright man full of intelligence and grace. Only there for help, never for harm. That was all I needed to get me going back onto the right track.

These events alone shaped my view of the world. Remember who you have and remember what you have. Remember who you had, and remember what they gave you. If it was courage then take it and do great things with it. Bob Marley, a famous reggae artist sang, “In this great future you can’t forget your past, so dry your tears....” You make your own expectations but never forget where the opportunities you were given came from.

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## Dark Tunnel, Open Sky

*Shana Elburn*

I never had a permanently disfiguring accident in my childhood as Alice Walker did, but I know what it's like to feel ugly. Of course, I'm pretty sure all teenage girls go through a period in their life at some time, usually in middle school, where they feel awkward and hideous. I know I did. In fact, I thought I was done with that stage by the time I reached high school. It is true that I never lost the use of either of my eyes, although the transformation I undertook was on the same level as that of Alice Walker. On a fateful summer morning after my freshman year, that dreaded first clump of hair fell out in the shower. But, let's start at the beginning.

The worst time in my life began with constant fatigue, headaches and joint pain, beginning in March. I trumped it up to sleep deprivation and didn't mention anything to my parents until, after sleeping more and more each day, I didn't feel better. In fact, I felt worse. I felt as though I had the flu and just could not get better. In April, my parents decided to take me to the doctor. I thought I had a stupid virus, at the very worst a bad case of mono. The doctor was puzzled as much as we were, and sent me to Bay State Hospital to have tests done. After a couple of agonizing weeks spent waiting for test results, the verdict was delivered: I had cancer- leukemia, to be exact.

It would be a vast understatement to say that I was terrified. I have no idea what my parents thought at that point in time, or at all throughout this experience. My illness is something we avoid talking about to this day. Of everything that cancer did to me, I despise it the most for driving this vast, impassable fissure between my parents and I.

After much discussion and silent staring contests between my parents and the doctors I had been given, it was decided for me that chemotherapy would be my "best chance." I think it is important to mention here that I had much more pronounced symptoms than many people do, and we had succeeded, at least, in one fight against this beast (that's what it was, a beast taking over my body, my life): we caught it early. The majority of the crippling fear I experienced was not of death. I had seen pictures of cancer patients. We watched Lance Armstrong pedal his way across France with no hair. I was fifteen years old; I didn't want to lose my hair! I didn't want to be different from anyone. In high school, to be different in any way is social suicide, even if you have no control over the

things that make you different. I had images of “CANCER FREAK” tattooed on my forehead. I walked around for months acting like it was. Like Alice Walker, I stopped looking up.

Once my hair had completely abandoned my head, just in time for the “back to school” shopping season, I begged my parents for a wig. They told me that I didn’t need one, that I should be proud to be fighting the monster inside of me, and “we don’t have the money for one, anyway.” They told me that the kids at school would understand, and if I wanted to, the school would allow me to wear hats and scarves. My parents tried to make it seem like a privilege that I could wear a hat to school when others could not. To me, it was just another thing to make me different from everyone else. To be even more different was the last thing I wanted.

“I HATE YOU!” I screamed, “I hope this *kills* me. Then you’ll feel sorry.”

That was the first, and only time throughout my illness that I had ever seen my father cry. I never wanted to see it again. I had siphoned the hatred I felt for myself, my body, my cancer, onto my parents, onto the world. “I was sucked into the vacuum of hate” (Cohen 39). Hatred was taking over me, much like cancer was.

The lowest point of those two years was not the nausea and vomiting caused by chemotherapy. No way. It was not the anxiety of blood tests. The lowest point was the self-loathing I felt when I looked into the mirror and saw bare skin stretching across my head, my once bright eyes were sunken and my body had lost any of its natural shape. I was a walking scarecrow. Vanity was my biggest enemy, not cancer.

I stopped talking to people. People always want to describe cancer patients as happy little bald people, grateful to still be alive. Not me. I hid completely within myself. Citing tiredness, I would crawl into my bed after school and cry for hours. I was in a desperately lonely place. I didn’t look anyone in the eye for months and months. The relationships between the few friends I had remaining, the ones who hadn’t been scared off by my skeletal appearance, were rocky at best. We could no longer relate to each other. I didn’t care about MTV or shopping. I didn’t care about anything. A giant chasm had erupted between us, and there was no way across.

After more grueling rounds of chemotherapy, radiation, and constant pain, I was feeling a bit better. I was now about to begin my Junior year. I took the test. Did I pass or fail? We waited anxiously by the phone. We waited for two days, but it felt like a month, a

year, the wait was spanned across an infinite timeline and we would never know. Finally, the phone rang. It was the doctor.

“Shana, I have some good news...”

His sentence was interrupted by my scream. I was liberated, I was free. I could be normal again. I finally knew what James Baldwin meant when he said, “It is as though he suddenly came out of a dark tunnel and found himself beneath the open sky” (106). I stopped hiding beneath my head scarves. My head was no longer completely bald. I was a fuzzy peach. I began to resemble a human being. I vowed to hate less and love more. I started to look people in the eye once more. My old friends were gone forever, but I made new ones. The world wasn’t perfect, but in the months after my illness was finally beaten, it sure seemed like it was. Life went back to normal.

However, I still did not feel beautiful until four months ago. I still avoided the mirror at all costs. In the years since my hair began to grow back, I refused to cut it. I denied anyone of even a trim. It was my hair! Mine, not theirs. They didn’t know what it was like to feel the scratch of a wool hat against bare skin. My hair eventually turned into a nest of tangles and knots. A friend convinced me that it would be best for everyone if I at least got a trim, for graduation, which to all teenagers is the apex of achievements.

I sat in the hair dresser’s chair, the stylist knew not to cut off more than an inch. But once she started cutting, I felt this sudden urge to cut more and more off. I told her to “Give me anything, I don’t care. Make me pretty.” And she did.

Twenty minutes later my hair was chin length and amazing. I looked into the mirror. The girl looking back at me didn’t even look like that Shana I was used to seeing. By then, I had gained most of the weight back, and I looked like an actual human being. “She is beautiful, whole, and free. And she is also me” (Walker 623). That girl in the mirror was me. And she was happy, healthy, and above all, pretty.

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# The Non-Super Heroes

*Trevor Greene*

**B**atman isn't a superhero; he just has cool gadgets. While he may only have cool gadgets and not super powers, he is still a hero. For many years, people have been talking about heroes and telling stories of their bravery. From Superman, to Spiderman, to Wonder Woman, little kids have been fascinated by the super abilities of these super humans. However what we have yet to teach little kids is that some of the greatest heroes of our lifetime aren't in comic books and movies, but on the streets of our cities, and in our backyards. People like police officers, fire fighters, and teachers – all of these people are the real heroes. These are the people who protect us every day and shape the children who are the future of this world.

Throughout history there have been many people who have done whatever they could to protect and help people; and they have done it without super powers. From Harriet Tubman who helped slaves through the Underground Railroad to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who was one of the largest leaders in the civil rights movement to the fire fighters and police officers of the 9-11 attacks there have been many people who have committed selfless acts to help others, and for that they have been labeled as heroes. These people weren't trying to gain fame or money; they were simply doing what came to them naturally, and that was to help those who needed it.

For many years now heroes have been thought of as superhuman, strong, and masculine. Even the ancient Greeks told stories of Hercules, the son of the god Zeus, who had super strength and was very masculine. Although this may have been the image that society has portrayed to us, it isn't a true portrayal of all heroes.

In 1941 a relative of mine on my father's side, Dr. William Moulton Marston, a Harvard professor of psychology, decided that there needed to be a representation of women in the world of heroes. It was at this time that Marston created Wonder Woman. The idea of this new superhero was to portray a superhero that was feminine, yet still strong. Wonder Woman was equipped with a magic lasso that could tell when the criminal was lying, similar to the polygraph that Marston had invented years before. She also had metal wristband which she used to deflect bullets. Wonder Woman's form of transportation was an invisible jet; what does that have to do with being heroic...nothing, but let's face it, an

invisible jet is cool. The whole idea of Wonder Woman was that she was a role model for girls; she was feminine yet she was still strong and powerful.

There can be many different kinds of heroes. The word hero means something different to everyone; to some a person has to have super powers, to others they just have to be brave, and still to others all they have to do is simply have the courage to do what it takes to keep their family fed and clothed. There are so many people, both in America and in other countries, which have the courage that most people don't have to work in horrible jobs with bad hours for minimum wage just so that they can give their family the things that they absolutely need such as food and clothing. While Barbara Ehrenreich may not have actually been so poor that she was forced into the situation she put herself in, I would still consider her a hero. In her book *Nickel and Dimed*, Ehrenreich was talking to her editor and they started talking about how people could live like that. After her editor said "Someone ought to do the old-fashioned kind of journalism – you know, go out there and try it for them" (1), she took the chance and tried living on minimum wage at different jobs.

In her work "I Will Be My Own Hero", Kristen Hughes wrote "I used to have a secret hope that inside me there was a Hero who would take over my life and who only suffered from lack of confidence. I always hoped that my Hero would take charge and make the decision to go adventuring, like Ulysses, across the world" (50). I think that this is true of a lot of people; they want to be a hero themselves, only they lack the confidence to act when the opportunity presents itself. This is what separates our everyday heroes from everyone else; they have the courage to act. Not only is this true for everyday heroes but superheroes as well. In every story about superheroes there is a part after the hero realizes that they have powers and they have to answer the question of whether or not they want to expose themselves to the risk that is associated with rescuing people.

In the essay "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American" by James Baldwin, he wrote "I left America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury or the color problem here" (104). This is a great example of how people can be heroes by doing what they want. Some people are looked at as heroes even though what they do helped themselves instead of others in need. Much like Baldwin who moved to Europe to pursue his dream of becoming a successful writer, there are many people who have the courage to take these chances with no guarantee for success because they believe so much that that is what they should be doing with their life.

Whether it is someone who has super powers such as Superman or Spiderman, or someone who has cool gadgets to help people like Batman, or even the more real person who has the courage to go to a food pantry so that their family can eat; heroes are an important part of our culture. Some people look at superhero stories as entertainment, some see them as hope; but what is important to remember is that the most important heroes are on the streets of our cities and in our own backyards.

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# Shattered By Light

*John Hanks*

*The eye is always caught by light,  
but shadows have more to say. ~ Gregory McGuire*

Superman isn't quite a hero; he has a cape and a dream, which are very important, but he is missing the one component all heroes need, tears. His cape hides him from the shadows and gives him flight, but most importantly it gives him strength. He hides behind the cape, not letting life in or allowing life out. She doesn't remind me of Superman; she has a cape, hers made from scrim material. I can see through her cape. They both have a cape, but she has more. They both have a dream. Superman's dream, to be with Lois Lane, is superficial; her dream is about bettering herself. She dreams to be free. Superman has two major components, the cape and the dream, but he never had tears, which is different than crying. Superman's fans cry for him, but no one *truly* cries for him. People cry for him because they see his pain; but no one gives him their tears. She has tears, giving her the third component of a hero. I feel her pain, and I give her my tears, so she doesn't have to cry.

\* \* \*

I study her face in the photograph: is she truly happy? Her smile seems faint; however, I see it. I look at her wilting eyes yearning to cry, to let pain out and life in. Her eyes are green, yet they seem black. The soft golden light turns her crimson cheeks to a pale ash. She looks happy on the outside, but her inner being strives for love, warmth, safety, the rations one needs to survive.

The warm morning sun slowly advances into the room, making what is dark visible to the naked eye. The sun reveals the underlying results, but she hides them. This particular morning we have a snow day; I stay in my pajamas until noon. I sneak over to her house; her father is not home. The hallway smells of stale beer. We play in the dark basement, slowly losing track of time, slowly losing track of reality. Her father comes home. She realizes it is time, time for the daily havoc. She pushes me to safety, hides me behind her scrim cape of disillusion.

I sit behind the scrim cape; my only view is the sliver between the floor and the cape. It is a sliver of reality. Her father's eyes are dead. "The bull's eyes remain expressionless despite the chaos and destruction around him..." (Hughes 50). He picks up a flashlight. I

notice the conical beam of a flashlight, picking up the dust particles looming in the air. I study the way the light strikes her skin, leaving a piercing mark of unadulterated hate on her angelic skin. The light fades the crimson from her cheeks to the pale ash, the same color I notice in the photograph.

The light looks inviting, but I know it hurts. I desire to catch the light for her. To absorb the light so she doesn't have to. I'm a moth drawn towards the bright light, but I have the common sense to avoid the danger. The light makes shadows. These shadows tell her story. I see the result of the intense light stealing the glow from her skin; it is drained of color, nothing but shadows left. She never cries, but tears wash her face.

I sit there and never intervene. I watch the light fall on one shoulder, leaving an impression. "I imagine the anguish..." (Walker 621) she must be feeling. I do not desire to see her eyes; the pain they are exerting on me, but I am forced to look. She is not crying, but tears wash her face. The light drains the blue from her shirt; the shirt turns the harsh grey of unpleasantness, like clouds before a thunderstorm. I sit there watching the light fall behind her back, again and again. Why do I not move? *Why do I not move?* "So why [don't] I intervene? Certainly not because I [am] held back..." (Ehrenreich 41). She is not crying, but tears wash her face. I am paralyzed; I watch the light fall on her arms. I do not move out of fear of getting hurt. *Now, I realize if I did move; the light would only strike harder.* I was not supposed to be there in the first place.

I do not move all night. I watch the world through the sliver of reality. I watch her sitting tall, not moving, not even after it happened. Her eyes look knotted, but she manages to put on the smile, the same smile I see in the photograph. Her eyes are full of pain. She cloaks herself from reality; she uses her scrim cape to cloak the light, but fails. Her cape gives her strength to stand. Her stance reminds me of an oak tree in the yard: the bark of the tree is twisted and the tree writhes in pain. The light sticks to her; now she is lit from behind the scrim. I study the impact of the light. When she realizes she is vulnerable, she hides behind her smile. The cape gives her strength just as it gives Superman his strength, strength to stand and face the world.

She never loses her dream in all of this. She never cries, but tears wash her face. Her dream is to get out, to break from this mold of light. She keeps a grip on her dream, never altering it. Heroes do not dream of a better future; they dream of living without the looming light in their life.

I cry instead of her. I give her my tears so she doesn't seem weak. She's brave for not crying a single tear. I bestow all the tears I have, so she can sit there and not give her father the satisfaction of crying. I relinquish the one component she needs to survive this light. I supply her with the last component of a hero, tears.

\* \* \*

It slips. The picture frame falls, the light catches the picture just right; all you see is her smile. The corner of the mahogany frame hits the ground first; it spins clockwise for a second or two. Glass slivers begin to fly everywhere, slivers of glass; but I realize these are slivers of her life. The glass sits on the floor, breathlessly. The slivers are too sharp to piece back together. They will be swept away one day; after all, heroes are never permanent fixtures. Nothing is forever; capes deteriorate, dreams wash away, tears dry up, people die, and heroes fade.

I watch the leaves fade to vibrant yellows, oranges, and reds. They look so beautiful. I notice the leaves begin to fall to the ground. They are dying. They look so graceful, but they are dying. She looked so graceful, when she was dying.

Her death is an example of shining sorrow. She's free, *but she's free*. She achieved her dream, but she fades. I never saw her cry; I only saw tears wash her face, cleaning the ash off. I cry for her, so she doesn't have to. I only cry in the shadows because "they have more to say" (McGuire).

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# She Changed My View of the World Forever

**Kim Hanrahan**

When I was younger, my little sister was diagnosed with a serious kidney disease. She was only eighteen months old and I was no more than four years old. I did not know what was happening. I did not know why my little baby sister had to be hospitalized all the time. It was terrifying. All of a sudden she was coming home swollen from her medications. Eventually when I was old enough to understand, my parents explained what was wrong. I would get jealous all the time because although I was old enough to understand what was wrong, I still did not understand why she got all of the attention. Everyone was always catering to all of her needs, and I was being left out. It made me mad at her, and I would say mean things to her all the time about how swollen she was. I would make fun of her and to make it worse I would not stick up for my little sister when other people would make fun of her. Seeing my sister be put through such moments in her life has made me a better person. It has taught me that who somebody is, is found on the inside, and judging someone by the way they look is not the right thing to do, and is can be very hurtful to people.

All through elementary school, my sister had to cope with other children asking her why she was different. Because of the muscle weakness that her medications caused they would ask her why she walked differently, why she could not participate in gym class and why she would always take trips down to the nurse's office. They would call her mean names and tease her about her swollen body. Sometimes it was almost as if she were in the situation where Alice Walker, in *Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self*, when she is embarrassed by the way she looks in front of her daughter. Walker thought to herself, "Will she be embarrassed?" I think. What will she say?" (Walker 623). My sister was always self-conscious as well about who was saying things about her. She never had confidence on how she looked.

I was the big sister. I was supposed to be the one who was there for her to stick up for her and help her out with the entire situation. I was more worried about myself though. I was immature and selfish. I did not want people to start looking at me different or teasing me just because I was her sister. "I was sucked into the vacuum of hate at an early age." (Cohen 39). Just because all the other kids my age would make fun of her, I would go along with them. I could be standing right in front of her when someone would make an offensive

comment about her, and I would just stand there. I felt that I would do mean things just to get back. It was not the right thing to do and I realized that later in life. After a while, I began to realize that although fitting in with the other kids in the grade school was important the other kids were wrong and they did not know my sister. They did not take the time to get to know her just because she looked different. I knew my sister and I started to realize that although she looked different, and could not do some of the things other children could do, she was just like everyone else on the inside. She also deserved to be treated the same. She showed me this by staying strong after all the comments people would make about her. She made me never want to judge anyone ever again.

As we got older, things only got worse. She was hospitalized every week for dialysis, and eventually she was going to need a kidney transplant. I began to get worried and did not know how to show my feelings. I would not talk about it and I never wanted to go visit her because seeing her hooked up to so many machines scared me.

Finally it was time for her kidney transplant, at age eleven my sister's kidneys failed. It was time for my father to give up his kidney to keep my sister alive. Two people very close to me were going to be going through surgery. The surgery ended up working out great and I went to go visit my sister and father in the hospital shortly after. She did not even look like herself. She was not my sister. I couldn't even recognize her. She was swelled up, and connected to so many tubes and machines. I was scared for my baby sister and although I was young back then, at that moment in the hospital room, I regretted never sticking up for her. She looked so innocent and helpless. I could not even imagine going through what she went through. My sister is beyond doubt a strong person, and I truly admire her for everything she has been through.

My sister is now fifteen years old. She is doing incredible, and has recovered really well. She is a sophomore in high school, and has been through so much. All of what she has been through has made her a strong person, and now both her and I realize that whenever anyone is being made fun of for the way they look, we will instantly stand up for them all the way.

When my sister was finally better and recovering from her illness, she was a changed person. She again, could easily relate to Walker in "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self." After everything she had been through it made her realize that it did not matter what people thought of her, and she put the pain behind her.

For the most part, the pain left then. (So what if my brothers grew up to buy even more powerful pellet guns for their sons and to carry real guns themselves. So what, if a young 'Morehouse Man' once nearly fell off the steps of Trevor Arnett Library because he thought my eyes were blue.). (Walker 623)

Her self confidence was gained back, and she realized that all along she was the same beautiful person, and so did I as well. She would stick up for anyone being made fun of because she truly understood what they were going through. She also would not let people bother her. I also changed too. After seeing my sister go through all that she has, has changed my view on the world completely. She has made me a more caring person, and at times I wish more than anything I could go back and tell all those mean kids back in elementary school that my little sister is truly a beautiful person. Knowing that I can not go back and change that only makes me want to stick up for anyone who is being made fun of more. Watching my sister go through all that pain and hatred just because of the way she looked has definitely changed my view on the way I look at people. I will never judge anyone before I meet them ever again. She has also made me a more confident person, by teaching me that when people judge you by the way you look on the outside, should not be listened to because they do not know who you are at all. One last thing that my sister has taught me is to not take life for granted and to take risks in life. You never know what can happen and you just have to live with what you are dealt with.

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## Autumn Leaves

*Myles Jeffers*

Its autumn at my college and the leaves are finally turning color. My whole life, I have absolutely loved this time of year. One particular day, I am walking home from class admiring the fallen leaves, and as I approach my favorite tree, whose leaves can be found on the flag of the country that I hail from, I stop and simply admire. Not just because the leaves of this tree are a symbol of my country, but instead because of how beautiful this tree has become as a result of the cooling weather. The dark blood red leaves, the bright red leaves, the yellow leaves, the brown leaves, the flawless leaves, the decrepit leaves, the spotted leaves, all the leaves falling and twirling all the way down from the sky to the ground, where they stay mixed together. They are all different colors, all different sizes, but still all of them are just leaves, fallen from the same tree. As I am daydreaming about leaves and the country they remind me of, another student, just like me, is walking home from his last class. He walks right over the leaves that I had looked at, and is thinking, like I often do, about the wonderful nap he is going to have when he gets back to his dorm. We both arrive at our dorm at similar times, and I decide to take that nap, that I desperately wanted, and proceed to do so. My fellow student doesn't get to have his nap. Instead, he arrives at his dorm to find that a tornado has attacked his room, spreading all of his belongings about while taking with it the valuables from the room. This tornado didn't only ruin his room and steal his valuable belongings; it also left a note on each of their beds. The words on the notes were more devastating than the mess left by the tornado and much more evil. "Get out of town Nigger" was written on the note. Think about that for a second. This is 2007, slavery has been abolished, segregation is a thing of the past, equal rights is no longer an issue, this occurred at a college that promotes diversity, and still, still a fellow student has now experienced events similar to the attacks against the Texas Western basketball team in 1966, over 40 years ago.

Is segregation merely a part of our history, or still part of America today? I like to think of racism and segregation as the common cold virus. There is no quick fix for curing a cold virus, just like there is no quick fix for curing racism and segregation. Eventually your body will overcome the virus, but how many people do you know who have only had one cold in their life. In addition to the hundreds of different cold causing viruses that exist,

viruses also mutate to find new ways to infect your body and defeat your immune system. I think we have overcome racism and segregation in the past, but the proverbial virus that is racism and segregation, has found new ways to infect society. Although there are no longer blatant acts of segregation like that which Rosa Parks battled, but the presence of segregation can still be felt in America, and will continue to be felt, until we face this problem head on.

Racism and Segregation can be found in today's society on a daily basis. The events of Hurricane Katrina have been under a lot of scrutiny for the alleged racism involved. Those in power, such as President Bush, claim that there was no racism involved in the events. I'll provide you with some examples, and you can be the judge. Not long ago the Associated Press published two photos depicting the events of Hurricane Katrina. They showed a picture of an African American man carrying items in a bag, and the caption informs us that he looted them from a grocery store. Right beside it, was a picture of a Caucasian couple that was also carrying a bag of goods, but the caption told us that they found them in a local grocery store. During a visit to the Astrodome in Houston, Barbara Bush, the mother of our president, was speaking of the conditions that the evacuees were living in, and was quoted saying, "What I'm hearing which is sort of scary is they all want to stay in Texas. Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this--this (she chuckles slightly) is working very well for them" (Editor and Publisher). Furthermore, it took the government five days to respond with aid to the people of New Orleans, while the recent fires that occurred in a rich, mainly white, suburb of San Diego had aid within a couple of hours. Is this because we have learned from the tragedy of Katrina, or is it instead because of the racial differences of the areas. Some of these instances have obvious racial inflections, but nothing has been done about any of these situations. These actions are not as blatant as keeping African-Americans in the back of the bus, or not allowing them to vote, but these instances are still racist and segregating. The only problem is that no one can prove these racist allegations, and that is why they go unpunished.

Racism sadly still exists on smaller and more personal scales as well. I spoke about the racist attacks that occurred recently at my college already, and was shocked when I found out that no body has been punished for these actions. These are not the only racist situations I have encountered thus far at NEC. My best friend at the college, whose word I would trust

over anybody's here, is very kind and is from Sweden. While walking down the path from the library one day, he was passing an African-American student and they brushed shoulders. My friend apologized, but instead of receiving a "no problem", the other person snorted back saying, "Whitebread." I am not including this so I can say, "See, look, black people are racist too," instead, it shows that there is still obvious friction between people based simply on skin color.

Friction between races may have societal and visceral roots; all you have to do is walk into Gilmore Dining Hall during lunch and look at the seating arrangements. Generally, it would look like this; the Asian students all sitting together in a big group, then the African American students at another big table, then all of the different cliques of white kids. The African American students for the most part are all sitting together, because their population is made up of mostly the basketball team, but the Asian students, involved in no sports, all sit together. No one is making anybody sit anywhere in Gilmore, but still, they are all separated into groups as if there were made to sit by race. Is this because a white person is naturally more comfortable around other white people, and an Asian person more comfortable around other Asian people? I think when we are put into situations such as this, we chose to sit by people of our similar race or color not because we are racist, but because we are simply more comfortable within that group. Everyone is guilty of such actions, like allying ourselves with similar people, as Amy Tan states in her book, *Joy Luck Club*, "in a crowd of Caucasians, two Chinese people are already like family" (Tan 198). This is not because Asians are racist against white people, or that she feels white people are racist, but instead because we viscerally are automatically more comfortable with like figures. This I feel aids in segregation, not as brutally as racism, but it makes us recognize that everybody, even without thinking it, has an affinity towards their own kind, and is perhaps scared of the unknown other race.

We have to embrace that we are all different, and accept these differences, as well as recognize our underlying fear of the other race. As Cornell West brilliantly states, "Let us hope and pray that the vast intelligence, imagination, humour, and courage of Americans will not fail us. Either we learn a new language of empathy and compassion, or the fire this time will consume us all" (West 631) I think there is vast wisdom in these words and that at the risk of sounding utopian; we need to focus on showing compassion towards our fellow man

if we ever are to beat racism. It doesn't matter if you believe in the theory of evolution or the theory of Adam and Eve, either way; no one can deny that we all come from the same place.

I spoke about the beauty that lies within a bunch of fall leaves. We marvel at the beautiful different colors mixed together and as we look upon them, we love and appreciate them all no matter their size, shape or color. As humans, we need to learn to appreciate the beauty of the different colors of the human race the same way we do with leaves. It should not matter what a person looks like to anyone, and until we can appreciate the differences within each other we will be faced with racism.

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# The Wonder of Words Not Spoken

*William Johnson*

My relationship to the written word is one of curiosity and consideration. I am more of a reader than a writer, but when I observe something that strikes me, from time to time I put it down in words. When I glimpse an interesting book or am curious about a new subject, I am compelled to read.

One of the first books I read myself was about the Titanic, the ill-fated liner that struck an iceberg. I was 9 at the time. I remember handwriting a dozen double sided pages on the Titanic in elementary school, vividly telling how all the wailing people were plunged into the ice cold water. I enjoyed the experience and the teacher thought it was descriptive. Not long after, I picked up a 1929 copy of the *Tower Treasure* from a used bookseller. The Hardy Boys book inspired me to read more mystery books. In Toni Morrison's "The Site of Memory" Morrison states "fiction by definition, is distinct from fact" (432). I found that non-fiction could be equally exciting as fiction. I was equally regaled by Winston Churchill's *Thoughts and Adventures*. The book goes from keen viewpoints, to history, to daring do all in one volume.

The act of writing something down on paper helps us make sense of the past. Lee. K. Abbot in "The True Story of Why I Do What I Do" states "we want, I hope, because there is no other way to do it, to write it down, to transform it, to set it straight" (90). A few days after September 11th, 2001, I decided to put my thoughts and experiences of the day on paper. I didn't think about it at the time, but what I was really doing was writing to make sense of what had happened.

September 11<sup>th</sup> was the last day of what had been an enjoyable vacation in Nova Scotia. My family and I had spent the previous two-weeks traveling around the province. Early that morning, we boarded the ferry Scotia Prince at Yarmouth. The weather was grey and cloudy as I waited eagerly for the takeoff. I stood on the railings of the boat, as fellow passengers exchanged banter with a tough but cheerful lucking guy undoing the ropes. The boat left port around 9:00 am. I wrote about the moment when I first heard the news. I was stepping down the stairs to the seating area by some big windows looking out to the grey ocean. I realized instantly that something was wrong; the room had an odd atmosphere to it. I wrote about the mixed reactions of the people in the room. Some people looked sad,

others were in complete denial, one woman even looked excited. My thoughts went back an Agatha Christie novel I had read. A bunch of strangers were together on a boat, all lacking information, desperately trying to grasp who did it and why. Ironically throughout the day, everyone seemed a little friendlier to each other, as if people were realizing how fragile and unpredictable life is.

Later that day, the seas calmed and the sun came out; the weather outside was beautiful. But as the skies darkened, I felt the atmosphere become more apprehensive. Way behind schedule, the ferry entered Portland, Maine. Everyone was ordered to stay one area, by the gift shop, away from all exit doors. Hundreds of people were crowded together in one room. Outside one could see the lights of the Coast Guard Regatta escorting us in. Everyone waited in that room for some time; the atmosphere tense, if almost eerie. There was no sound except the hum of the engine, and the occasional chiming in of the intercom. For a lot of people, that moment really drove the fact to them. Something terrible had happened that day, thousands of people died; the world had changed and not for the better. Finally we were let down to our cars. Men in black suits with automatic weapons came in; dogs sniffed each vehicle for explosives. Bus compartments were searched first. They looked grim. Writing this down gave me the impression that humanity is “all in the same boat”. A lot of people want the same out of life, health happiness.

Writing about my experiences on September 11<sup>th</sup> helped me realize what happened, and helped me make sense of the catastrophe. Writing forces one to make a more in-depth analysis of a situation. In James Baldwin’s “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American” Baldwin discusses Tolstoy’s ability to fathom hidden laws in society through his ability as a writer. James Baldwin says, “Tolstoy was able to fathom, and make us see, the hidden laws which really governed this society and made Anna’s (*Anna Karenina*) doom inevitable” (107). Writing forces us to examine a circumstance. In “The True Story of Why I Do What I Do” Lee Abbott states, “we want to know what is in the trunks and lockers we lug forward through time, what vital secrets they can be sprung to reveal” (90). The act of writing about my personal experiences from the time of the tragedy helped my get my thoughts out into the open, in a way it was soothing.

Reading is instructive. I realize the truth in the saying; when someone enters a library, how cannot one stand back in awe? Therein lies a mountain of written knowledge,

learning, and experiences for everyone to read. The written word can entertain us, help express ourselves, explore new things, and make sense of the past.

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## The Rush for Gold

*Jennifer Kruczynski*

“**H**ave you called 911?” I heard my 16 year-old self ask him hopefully. “No, I didn’t think I should.” I thought to myself, *well isn’t this an emergency?*

When I was four my family couldn’t have been more perfect. I had three sisters that I could share toys with and an older brother to make me laugh. Does life get any better? My short blond ponytail shook from side to side as I held my daddy’s hand in line at the fair. If I was good I’d get an ice cream, or cotton candy, but my younger sisters wouldn’t because they were too little.

Later that day I turned and let go of my mommy’s hand to grab a shiny penny off the ground. When I looked back up every one was gone. In that moment my short life shattered; only to be pieced back together when I was scooped up into my daddy’s arms.

At about eight I found out that my mother enjoyed indulging in a drink before bed. To my knowledge she’d drink some wine, “wine doesn’t have much alcohol in it, don’t worry.” She would soothe my fears, at that age mothers are infallible.

At age ten I would burst out the door when my daddy got home from work to jump up into his arms.

At thirteen that habit ceased as did any conversations that once existed between me and my hero. At about that age I realized that my family was just as different from a melting pot as Michael Cohen’s New York. My family was nothing more than “insoluble liquids layered on top of one another” (Cohen 39). My older brother and sister would act out their unhappiness through a series of juvenile delinquent worthy acts, in hopes of turning my mother’s attention away from herself for more than the two minutes it took her to punish them. My younger sisters were just as timid as I, too afraid to make a wrong move, to act upon any impulse.

Robert Frost once wrote, “Nothing gold can stay.” And nothing I once thought was perfect stayed that way. My father, my one time hero, was and still is to this day a social recluse. My mother, whom at one time was a stereotypical suburban house wife, by this point is no longer perfect, or infallible.

At about thirteen, maybe even a bit earlier, I began to notice things changing. At this point in my life everything that I thought I knew vanished. Like someone snapped their

finger and I was thrown hurtling through time and space into a new dimension. I saw a new family, like people I had never known. It would be a few years before I realized what was really wrong. So when I was told that my mother was sick I naturally started taking on more responsibility. I would cook dinner, often neglecting my homework or staying up late to do it. It wasn't long before I saw what was really going on. Wine bottles would pile up underneath my mother's bed and she would be hospitalized, often for days at a time because of migraines.

At fifteen or so the trouble peaked. I spent most of my nights at my friend Cassie's house to avoid going home. By this point my father was wrapped up in theatre and work and didn't have extra time to deal with my mother or the rest of my family. She wasn't sleeping well, so her doctor prescribed her Ambien, a sleep aide known for its problems with dependency, amongst 6 other medications to help her other, various, ailments. I noticed that this had become a problem the day that she almost drove the car off the road at least ten times with my younger sisters and me in the car, so we could visit her best friend. My only thought, *I wish I am older so I can drive*. I sat with my fingernails in the arm rest and my eyes as wide as a child's in a toy store that whole ride, with my hand hovering just above the steering wheel. I didn't allow my sisters in the car with her after that incident.

It would be a year before anyone other than me would speak of the problem. After my mother collapsing in my bedroom in drunken stupor, nearly endless fights, my hiding her prescriptions and my grades falling in school, I couldn't handle it anymore. That night she passed out on my bedroom floor, and I had to lead her back to her bedroom, only to have her almost push me down the stairs. That was the first night I put my thoughts on paper. "The withered rose loses its petals/As the tears fall from her face/What was once a beautiful thing now has lost its grace/Those blissful times of being so close/Have come to a crashing halt/All because of a simple fear/There lies her fault" (That is an excerpt from a poem I wrote during that time.) At first my poetry was gruesome, depressing and if read by anyone would be my one way ticket to counseling.

After that night I moved out. I moved in with my good friend Cassie. I learned much as James Baldwin did in "Discovery of what it means to be an American", that once I was taken away from the problem I could sort it out, handle it much easier.

About six months later I moved back in, much to my dismay. My mother was still addicted, my father still completely oblivious. My older sister and older brother both moved out, unable to deal with my mother and her habits.

A few months later I was sitting in my bedroom braiding my youngest sister, Amanda's hair. It was that night or rather early morning that I realized just how much she was like me. Her quiet but sweet personality, no matter how snobby she seemed to a lot of other people, her long brown hair and big brown eyes. We talked as sitcom sisters do, late into the morning.

At about four o'clock I heard my dad, across the hall in his bedroom, talking to my mom or rather at her. Mandi was curled in a ball on my bed lying beneath the covers and she perked her thirteen year old head up. (I was almost seventeen at this point) I shushed her and quietly crept out into the hall. I heard my dad's worried voice trying to wake my mother up. I could picture him in his pjs pacing back and forth beside her bed, his brow furrowed, lightly shaking her shoulder then moving back timidly as if she would awake and yell at him. My hand hesitated for a few seconds above the knob on their door, but I vanished back into my room, remembering how many times I had been scolded for intruding.

I shrugged my shoulders when Mandi looked at me for an answer. Before I had the chance to sink back onto my bed I heard a soft knock on my door. My dad looked old for his age in the bright fluorescent light; he looked thoroughly worn, bags under his eyes and his thick white streaked black hair askew. He nervously combed down his hair with the palm of his hand.

"I need you to come help me with your mother."

I shut my door tightly behind me and stepped quietly across the hall. He held the door open for me, and I stepped inside the dimly lit room. In my mind my mother was nothing but a corpse, and my father just wanted the confirmation. I took a deep quivering breath before stepping around the corner. I took another deep breath and looked at my mother. Her thin hair was gathered in a ponytail anything but neatly. And she lay much as I expected, lifeless. I took a deep breath and crouched by the bed. My heart skipped a beat as I saw her chest immobile. I looked at her for any sign of life. I shook my head tears welling in my eyes and looked to my dad. My breath caught in my throat as I heard the most horrible most beautiful sound that had ever met my ears. My mom sucked in one ragged breath as if she were a corpse coming back to life before lying lifeless again. "She's been like that for

about a half hour now.” “Have you called 911?” I asked him hopefully. “No, I didn’t think that I should.” I thought to myself, *well isn’t this an emergency?*

I called 911 and told the operator the problem. She told me to keep my mother’s chin tipped up and then asked if she could speak to my father. I gave the phone to my father and did as she instructed. I put my hand under my mother’s chin and held it up. Every few minutes she would open her mouth and draw in a breath. At one point her right eye opened only slightly and I think she tried to say something but that was all the hope I had to cling to. My father gave her CPR with the help of the operator for about twenty minutes until the EMTs arrived and I dashed out of the room. I broke through my door and flung myself onto my bed forgetting entirely about my younger sister. “What’s wrong?” she asked as only a younger sister could. “Mom took too many pills, but don’t worry she’s fine, just go back to sleep.” I choked back my tears for her.

That was the single most terrifying moment in my life thus far. It’s almost comical how those are the moments that shape us. Those are the moments that in retrospect test us. They reveal something about us that we never knew existed. That was the moment that I finally stopped caring about myself and thinking *how am I handling this situation?* I started thinking about my mom, my dad, my sisters, my brother.

For a long time I have been fighting against something, fighting to change, to be different from those around me in hopes of igniting some sort of change in them. Through a struggle for personal identity which is a hard fight, (Cohen 42) I know now that I can’t change them, they have to want that for themselves.

I write to write. It’s that simple. I think that all writers will agree with Lee K. Abbott’s assessment, “We write, beginner and professional alike, because, though half-frightened, we want to know what is in the trunks and lockers we lug forward through time, what vital secrets they can be sprung to reveal” (Abbott 90). I know as a writer without language I would find a way to express my self, my thoughts, my beliefs, otherwise I would be thrown into an institution and marked insane. Written word is the glue that holds this world together. It’s like that hand that swoops down out of nowhere to save you when you’re lost. Whatever the form, stories, poetry, instant messages, text messages, movies, music, etc. we, I, need the written word to simply function day-to-day.

Right now my sister is 26 weeks pregnant with what will hopefully be her second daughter and her water just broke. It’s weird how one’s perspective can change the instant a

life hangs in the balance. As that little one clings to life, I just hope she knows that although this world is big and scary to enter into alone, she should hold on. Like a child that loses sight of her family at a fair, she will never be alone for more than a second in this world. She is going to have to be the one to make the decision to fight; no one can do that for her. As I make my way to the hospital I remind myself of a day when I felt like I had no life to live: “Where are you/I need you /Hold my hand steady me/I’m losing my self/But I can’t I wont lose myself/Nothing will change us if we hold on/’Take my hand.”

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## Accepting the Inevitable

*Megan McGowen*

“You have to be fucking retarded to be on the food pantry,” a wealthy kid sitting across the lunch table exclaimed my sophomore year in High School. “How in the hell can you be a good parent if you can’t even provide for your own fucking children? You have to be stupid.” The words of this snobbish kid haunted my thoughts. The conversation had started after a heated debate in Economics followed me into our lunch room. As I began to rise out of my seat I began to exclaim, “Are you kidding me? Do you have any idea how it feels to live like that?” The young boy’s expression began to turn to rage “Shut the fuck up, you don’t even know any better than I do.” Without thinking I sat back down, and quieted down to insure my double life of living below poverty level is still just my little secret.

All throughout high school, I was afraid to be myself in fear that people would find out everyday that I was different. I was afraid of the judgments, afraid of the comments, and I was afraid of the constant shame which would come with people finding out I was “poor.” What if my friends found out? Would my high class peers think less of me? Most certainly. I didn’t attend a private school, but this public school was unlike any other. Although nobody wanted to admit it there were two types of people, well off and poor, and somehow I managed to look sort of well off. What almost everyone didn’t realize was my parents worked two, three jobs to insure we still had a house to live in the next day. Heat became a luxury. Food pantry called our name every three weeks, and the question everyday was if our gas would get us to our jobs so we could pay our bills. It was a constant cycle, which was never-ending. Pay the bill for the car, go to work, pay for the gas to get to work, and hopefully the next car payment. What about everything else? Can people live on minimum wage and actually make it? Yes. It’s called bankruptcy. Twice.

I spent nine months straight at Wal-Mart. I knew the place inside and out and I wasn’t even working there. It was the only way I could see my mother do the horrible hours her job imposed on her. She became one of them, she was a machine who only worked there to get money to pay the overdue bills. As Barbara Ehrenreich experienced “Underneath those vests, though, there are real-life charity cases, maybe even shelter dwellers” (Ehrenreich 175). My mom was a Wal-Mart greeter. “Welcome to Wal-Mart Sir, Have a nice day Ma’am.” She’d tell every customer as they hustled and bustled by her with a

scrunched up brow and a face of anger and rage. No one would ever reply back with a “Thank You” or a nod. The only acknowledgement which she would receive over the next nine months would be the physical pain the customers imposed on her. Customers would purposely push her out of the way, or run her foot over with a cart, without even an apology. My mother endured this pain, so I could have a home.

Being Courageous? Who defines this? Is it the superficial super hero, who flies high and saves a damsel in distress? I know not. A courageous person is someone who puts loved ones needs in front of their own. My parents did this everyday without being told that they were doing a good job. Ehrenreich experienced this as well. “I wish I could say that some supervisor or coworker told me even once that I was special in some enviable way” (Ehrenreich 8). My parents got up every morning without complaining, to make sure our family was operating on a “normal” status. I laugh at the word normal. What is a normal house hold anyway? Is Ozzy Osborn the ideal father shooting up drugs with his family or is Britney Spears the ideal mother driving her son in her lap, and being arrested constantly? My family loves each other and will do whatever it takes to try to make everyone happy. But in society when does that ever make the news?

What is courage? Do I have courage? I am the first generation to attend college. What should have been an exciting time in the family turned into a high school graduation party from hell. As I sat around being proud of my accomplishment, my grandparents and relatives contemplated if I truly should waste the money to attempt college. “Now Megan, do you really believe you can actually do well in college?” My grandmother says concernedly. “Cause sweetie you know you can’t afford it, and well, wouldn’t it just be better to live at home and work?”

As I sat in my seat I looked over to my aunt for a reassuring comment to help me out of this hole in which I was being thrown into. “She’s right Megan, you and your parents don’t really have the money for this little vacation you will be going on.” Could this truly be happening right now? Could my whole family doubt who I was as a person. “Megan we aren’t trying to discourage you but if you aren’t sure, then I think you may want to rethink this.” When had I shown any doubt about college? I hated them for question me. I despised my graduation party. How could anyone have the right to question if I should be going to college other than my parents?

As the summer months came to an end, my family and I realized that all the jobs in

which we endured over the past would not get us the credit to make my dream of going to college a reality. I knew the only way in which I might make this work was if I could go to the people whom looked down on the whole college experience. “Ah, Nana, Grandpa, I’m kind of in trouble.” I looked down pulling any courage I could possibly find to ask them. “I was wondering if I could have you co-sign for a loan, so I can umm, still go to college.” I had never asked anything from my grandparents and I had hoped that for once they would actually do something for me.

“Megan, we told you. We aren’t going to sign anything that we don’t feel is right for you. Sorry. End of discussion.” With those words my college experience had just disappeared within seconds.

That was my last straw, I knew now I wouldn’t be attending college in the fall. I suppose everyone was right. I told my parents that I would stay at home and possibly try to go to school next fall. “Are you being ridiculous, Megan?” My parents had anger for the first time in their life with me. “Do you want this?” My mom spun around and pointed at our house, pointing at everything she felt as though was something that I could do better than. “You’re going to college and you’ll be fine. You’re not doing this to prove people wrong. You are doing this to prove to yourself that you can do it. We’ll find a way.”

When I found out my widowed grandmother who lives in an elderly home offered to co-sign for me I felt horrible. The woman receives less than \$500 a month before paying any bills, and has one credit card. She was the one person besides my parents who had always been supportive. Without batting an eyelash she signed the paper work. The minute she was approved, it seemed as though the world had been lifted off my shoulders and I could actually attempt one of my dreams. Just because someone is poor, does it mean I should be lessened from my options? Courage is in the eyes of the beholder. My Parents and My Grandmother would have to be the most courageous people that I know, never given up on my brother and I. Will I become courageous?

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# Death Penalty

*Chris Parker*

The death penalty is an issue that has been and probably always will be discussed and debated over. Some believe the death penalty should be abolished while others believe the death penalty should remain as an option. I admit that there are times when the death penalty has been found to be ineffective. Even with that said the death penalty should be administered to those who commit atrocious crimes and are found guilty. It makes absolutely no sense to me that convicted murderers are allowed to live in relative comfort, after taking something so precious from an innocent person.

People have become so laissez-faire about this topic, that they are willing to give everyone a second chance. Why is it that some people want to give the man who raped and murdered ten women a second chance. Give them a chance for what I ask? An opportunity to turn their life around; to become a normal member of society? How in the world is that even possible? It might just be me, but I feel that anyone who has done such a thing, as to take someone's life should never see the light of day again. I think most crimes deserve to have a harsher punishment. I think punishments and sentences have been lightened over the years, and it's not fair to the families of the victims. We get too caught up with trying to preserve the rights of murderers rather than using common sense in dealing with them.

Opponents of capital punishment believe the death penalty is not beneficial. I ask, is it not beneficial to rid society of these monsters, so they can never hurt anyone ever again? The headlines are covered with people who have committed terrible crimes and sit on television pleading that they're insane and can't be put to death. The government and the judicial system has now become a joke to people just as jail houses have become jokes to people abiding in them. At one point in time, jail was somewhere a person feared to go. "It made the warriors reckless and abandoned, throwing normal caution and survival strategy to the wind" (George 291). Aside from the fact that they are behind bars, what kind of punishment is a place to sleep, three square meals a day, time to enjoy the outdoors, and sometimes even TV time? "Once you join the residents in forgetting about the functioning humans they once were, you can think of them as a band of wizened toddlers at a tea party" (Ehrenreich 103). Jail, to some people, is a refuge where they can escape from the harshness of life and reality, and in some cases, it is no prison at all.

Even in the states that still use the death penalty, the crime a person has to commit in order to receive the death penalty has dramatically changed over the past several years. I don't understand why it is so difficult to determine whether or not a mother who has drowned all of her children should receive the death penalty. I believe there should be no questions asked and no second thoughts about putting those kind of people to rest.

I support the idea of the death penalty, but I disagree with some of the procedures taken to actually make it happen. There have been so many times when a judge sentenced the death penalty and still, twenty years later the convicted murderer was sitting on death row. I support the death penalty and agree that we should keep it, but if it is not going to be carried out within a reasonable amount of time, then it seems that we are just wasting time and money, paying tax dollars to feed and house these individuals. I think if the death penalty was a true deterrent to crime, we would not have so many problems. I do not believe the death penalty is a deterrent to any crimes, but I do believe it is a reasonable punishment and sentence that more people should receive for the crimes they commit.

I know putting to death one serial rapist or murderer is not going to stop rapes and murders from happening, but at least there will be less of them out there than there was before. I believe the death penalty was originally created to be a deterrent to crime, and I believe it could get back to being that if people could see the government taking steps in that direction. Jail houses have all the luxuries of living at home and I believe that if the death penalty is abolished people will kill because they want to kill, rape because they want to rape, and steal because they want to steal knowing that nothing too terrible could possibly happen to them. Jail might not be their first pick of places to be, but it's certainly not their last when they know they're going to have food, clothing, and shelter. I think if the government actually made people stay in jail for the amount of time they were assigned in their sentence, a lot less crime would be happening. Now people are getting sentenced to 25 years and in less than ten years are paroled, and back on the streets again.

I'm not trying to question our entire judicial system, but only trying to prove that methods other than the death penalty don't work either. That is a lot of the reason why I support the death penalty. My point is that our country faces plenty of crime already. Why give the chance to someone who has already been caught and convicted, a chance to do it again. We as citizens of this country should not have to worry about these people harming another innocent individual again. Putting someone behind bars for committing a crime for

ten years and then releasing them back to society is not comforting to anyone.

I am not a promoter of killing by any means, but I believe that in order to better protect society we might have to go to an extreme. “To establish a new framework, we need to begin with a frank acknowledgment of the basic humanness and Americanness of each of us. And we must acknowledge that as a people—*E Pluribus Unum*—we are on a slippery slope toward economic strife, social turmoil, and cultural chaos” (West 628). I did not mention “an eye for an eye” for a reason. I’m not saying that because someone has killed, that they should automatically die. What I am saying, is that all things considered, this may be the best option. Our jails are completely full. We, as tax payers have to pay for these people to survive. And as past burdens of society, why should they remain burdens for the rest of their life?

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# Survival of the Fittest: At Play in America's Working Class

*Amanda Peterson*

Families in America every day are scraping for nickels and dimes just to get by. All of the earnings are put towards feeding the family, sending the kids to school, and paying for shelter. We have all heard it. Some of us have lived it. My father attained a Bachelor's degree in Science at Southern New Hampshire University, formerly known as New Hampshire College. He has been working at the same company for twenty plus years. This company has been going down and taking its faithful employees with it for quite some time now. Their employees do not leave at the small possibility of being kept long enough to earn some sort of pension or lump sum – anything.

I am a part of the many families that are nickel and diming it. It does not help that my once two-income family was reduced to one when my mother was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and declared legally disabled and unfit to work. This forced my father to take on a second job. My courageous father wakes up at seven in the morning to roof and to work on the side only to report, at three o'clock in the afternoon, to his second-shift job at the hell-hole he calls work. He remains there, doing overtime, into the wee hours of the morning. He is wearing himself down, running on four hours of sleep, and he is doing it all to try to support a family of four.

Barbara Ehrenreich investigates the question, "How does anyone live on the wages available to the unskilled?" and reports her findings in her book, *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich 1). The bulk of Ehrenreich's investigation is based on the low wages available to the unskilled, which is a little different from my family's case. My father went to college. He has a Bachelor's degree. His salary, however, is not enough to support a whole family, and to pay off the cumulative bills. In Ehrenreich's experiment she only needs to fend for herself. She has nobody else who is dependent on her, and yet she still has trouble finding housing she can afford, and a meal at dinnertime. I wonder, just as this investigative reporter does of her temporary co-workers, why not leave for "something better" (Ehrenreich 61)? In my father's case, there is the promise of a pension that keeps him there. Others are tied down by difficulties such as a lack of transportation and/or housing availability.

Ehrenreich concludes that it is not easy, and in fact impossible, to survive on the wages available to the unskilled. Just one job does not cut it. She is required to take two jobs, just to take care of herself. “In my own family, the low-wage way of life had never been many degrees of separation away” (Ehrenreich 2). My father is required to take two jobs, and would take more if he was physically and mentally capable, just to provide for his small family. He is always saying, “If I can just get two more roofs, and if I can just last this much longer...” Ehrenreich sounds just like my father when she says, “I can do this two-job thing” (Ehrenreich 45). The physical capability and mental capacity of an average worker is not enough to get by. We need to rise above the rest in order *to survive*.

We also need to rise above the stereotypes with which people so quickly classify each other. Cohen states that “New Yorkers are stereotypically known as a crass and rude group, void of compassion” (39). What is the most common perception of those who are dependent on financial aid? Failures!

It is because of this common identity that I hide my family’s circumstances. It is because of this common identity that I lied that day at work. I work as a lifeguard at a summer camp that I call a low-wage job for high-class snobs. Many of those who work there went to camp there as a kid, and are very well off. They work as camp counselors just to continue with their childhood, not for the money. That must be nice. I worked there for the money though. One day, during my lunch break, I received a voicemail from my father: “Hey Amanda, it’s Dad. I need your help. I made a major blunder in my checkbook, huge, and we’re a few hundred bucks off, and I have nowhere to get it. I was wondering if you could loan me three-hundred...” Listening to this message was like taking a blow to the stomach. I had never heard of my almighty father being in such a compromising position before, and I, his youngest daughter, was expected to pull him out of it.

I was confiding in my sister, who worked there with me, when a couple of my co-workers approached me from behind and asked who exactly was asking for all of this money from me. My sister blurted out that it was my friend who needed the money, afraid of what the rest of our wealthy colleagues would think of us if they knew it was our father. “Confronted by our “[co-workers] we [stuck] to the lie” while they called my friend a deadbeat (Walker 619). I did not want them to call my father a failure.

It is clear, however, through the examples portrayed in *Nickel and Dimed*, the movie *Waging a Living*, and my personal anecdotes, that many of those who are not making it are by

no means failures. There are many educated, hard-working people who still cannot make ends meet. They are “hustling backwards.” As they continue to work harder, for a better position, and better pay, they continue to get robbed of the benefits that once supported them (*Waging a Living*). My dad worries that, with a second job, he may be deprived of the financial aid originally provided for my and my sister’s schooling.

Not all of those who depend on financial aid are failures. My father is not a failure. He is a courageous and strong man. He arrives at work each day with the possibility of it being his last day. He gets up each day, only to face a new battle. Yet, as exhausted as I imagine him to be, he continues to fight. After all, “the only society [we] know is one in which nothing is fixed and in which the individual must fight for his identity” (Baldwin 107). My dad could be weak and he could leave us. His salary is more than he needs to support himself. But he chooses to continue to support his family. I am certain that he will continue to fight the odds until he is the father of a financially stable family.

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## Will I Ever Forget?

*Catherine Poirier*

Early Wednesday morning, the sun was shining and the grass was still wet from the morning dew. I was thirteen years old and experiencing the most painful sensation, I had ever felt. At 7:00am, the church bells were ringing. I knew it was time for me to get up and start my morning routine. Everyday I would head down stairs and Mom would have two eggs sunny side up, two pieces of buttered pan toast and a glass of milk waiting for me. My older siblings were already at school and my mother taught me at home. I thought it was just another day.

I finished getting ready and was heading downstairs. I walked through a short hallway and, as I turned the corner, I knew something was wrong. My parents' bedroom door was open and they never left their door open!

I walked in finding my mother lying there on the floor. "Mom," I said whimpering, as if she was going to respond.

"Catherine leave the room!" my father said in a very stern voice.

I stood there motionless, watching in horror as two of my brothers performed CPR on my mother. Stepping back out of the room I turned seeing six medical response people running up carrying a stretcher. Walking back in the room, in shock, with tears streaming down my face, I could not believe this was happening. All I could hear were my two brothers, they were shouting, at my mother trying to get any type of response, from her, anything at all.

The medical workers had come into the bedroom and shuffled their way around the bed trading spots with my brothers. The chief of police had arrived and picked me up by my elbows carrying me out of the room. (He knew this was nothing for any little girl to experience.) As he set me down, he turned me around to face him and said, "You have to go downstairs; maybe it would be best for you to take a walk". I stood there and watched as he headed back into the room closing the door behind him. My mother had fallen ill in the past, but I had never experienced this in such a way. I knew very well now that this may have been her calling. I knew my mother who was much too young, was probably dead. It is as Gian Neffenger said, in her essay "House of Cards" When referring to her Uncle Pete's creations made from a deck of cards, "Whatever the meaning hidden in that final moment of

splendor, one thing is sure: a sudden demise grants a certain timelessness”(47). I thought time with my mother was endless, I never thought I would have to grow up without her!

I headed down the long narrow stairwell in total dismay, having no idea what to do, say, think or feel. I walked into the kitchen finding my niece, Amy, sitting there in our old wooden rocking chair. (Amy is only three years younger than I am, and we were more like sisters) Amy had arrived early that day to hang out before school. “Come on Amy, let’s go for a walk.”

We left the house with no destination in mind. Neither one of us said much. We both had the same response of the infamous “what if?” However, at the same time neither one of us wanted to feel bad, or think the worst!

I got home a few minutes later and my brother Joseph was the only one still there. He sat at the kitchen table with his bright red face in his hands.

“Mom go to the hospital?”

“Yeah.”

“She okay?”

“I don’t know, Cate. Just pray, okay!”

At this time, my sister Suzanne came running into the house.

“Where’s Mom? I just heard she was rushed to the hospital! Where? Where is Mom?” She was stuttering. She had heard through the grapevine that our mother had gone to the hospital (this is what happens when you live in small town and everyone knows each other).

At this point, my brother’s eyes started to fill up with tears. “Yeah.”

“Is she okay?! She’s gonna make it, right?”

“I don’t know!”

“We have to go to the hospital! Joe we gotta go!”

The three of us decided that would be best. Joe and sue left for the hospital and I stayed waiting for Dad’s call with news about my mother.

I had no idea what to think; at that point, all I could think was pray to Saint Anthony. My mother had always told us, if you want something done, he will listen!

About an hour later, my Brother David showed up. When he walked in, I was sitting on the same old wooden rocking chair that Amy was sitting in earlier. David is Amy’s father; I was very close to them.

“Mom go to the hospital this morning?” He didn’t let me know that he had any clue what was going on.

“Yeah.”

“Was Amy here when it happened?”

“Yeah. We went for a walk before they took Mom to the hospital.” I had no idea that he was aware of what was going on.

“Did you hear?”

“No Dad hasn’t called yet to tell me how Mom’s doing, or what happened. Joe and Sue left to go see how she is.”

“Did you hear?” He asked again as if he had no idea of what I had just said. He looked me right in the face and, having no way of really breaking devastating news to a thirteen year old, blurted out “Cate, Mom died”!

“What?” I heard his words, but I couldn’t comprehend.

“Mom’s dead!”

A sudden passage of cold ran through my body. Lee Abbott wrote an essay called “The True Story of Why I do What I Do” (87). At one point he writes, “In Life, however-which, messy and improbable and ephemeral, is not good fiction-I had no idea what made this world spin round and round. The facts were clear to me not the flesh” (87). My brother just presented the hardest news I was ever going to hear. I knew my mother was not coming home! I was too shocked and too afraid to cry. I walked back upstairs, not knowing what I was thinking. I went and sat in the spot my mother had died briefly thinking, my mother was just laying here. I did not stay there long. I was in complete denial thinking it was a mean joke. I ran downstairs, David was still in the same spot, I ran right up to him hitting him as hard as I could in the chest, screaming, “THIS ISN’T FUNNY!” We both broke down and started sobbing, holding each other in our arms.

Eventually people started showing up at my house to share their sorrow. Soon my house was filling with flowers. I felt my body beginning to hollow. With sleepless nights and cries of pain, I no longer knew what to do. For several months, I prayed to God to take me. I wanted to die! I hurt so badly! I was thirteen and my mother was dead!

Michael Cohen, in his essay “You Can Shave the Beast, but Will the Fur Grow Back”? Writes about the realization at a young age that the world was very mean and cruel. “I was sucked into the vacuum of hate at an early age. When I was twelve years old, I got a

taste of caustic malice that would grow, like a cancer, steady and imperceptible, eventually decomposing my soul as I got older” (39). It has been eleven years now since the death of my mother. I have since felt abandoned.

The next year I was sent back to a Catholic school. There they had constantly reminded me that the only reason I was let in was that my mother had died! I felt so tormented and harassed by the people. Almost daily, I would go to the cemetery, sit at her headstone, and cry. I often asked myself-Why? I was always furiously angry. I did not want my Mom to have disappeared; I wanted so badly to have her back! I wanted so badly to understand why the rest of my life would be filled with confusion. It was so hard to teach myself the things a mother would normally teach a daughter.

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# Big Business, Little Pay Check, No Trust

*Dave Richardson*

**P**ublic enemy number one: The republican sitting on his leather couch next to a warm fire, enjoying the comforts of his lake house, indulged in his own pretentious attitude. It is this man who decides what you are paid. He is the person who believes one corporation's multi-million dollar revenue is more important than the inevitable plunge into poverty for the average American worker. He tells you no. No, your efforts are not worth more than \$5.85 per hour, no matter how much bullshit you deal with day in and day out. The current minimum wage is a joke lacking a punch line, lacking humor or comfort. Minimum wage has to be raised.

Currently, the United States is in the midst of raising its minimum wage. Since 1997 it has been untouched, but since then inflation has continued to grow like a cancerous tumor in the lungs of America. Inflation continues to cut off America's air supply and although endless efforts have to take place in order to subdue its affects, a raise in the minimum wage could be the chemotherapy that helps to alleviate the throbbing cancerous price tags on American needs. Not wants. Needs.

Barbara Ehrenreich published a narrative titled *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* about her experiences in the lower class work force. It's an experiment; mind you, not the real thing. However, millions of Americans exist this way and work the jobs she has experimented with and live in moderate to severe poverty. After working a number of trifling jobs that were vital for her survival, she managed to find work at a house wares department store, similar to a Home Depot. Although she never formally accepted the job offered to her, the employer assumed they had hired her and bestowed upon her a vague starting date and hours. She called to confirm when she was due to work and found out her first day was an eleven hour shift. Then she asked that her wage was definitely going to be \$10 an hour. This question was met with confusion as if nobody had told her so (Ehrenreich 148). You see the things one must go through, one must sacrifice, to rise out of the lowly wages they're forced to work? Ten dollars is an abysmal wage, yet to someone with empty pockets, it feels good to earn.

Today, kids are capable of making ten dollars an hour at certain jobs. Lowly teenagers with no work experience, no life experience, can acquire a ten dollar job. Still, the

minimum wage has yet to break six dollars. What is the roadblock? If some companies can manage to pay its employees a respectable wage, why do others have such a hard time? In order to keep employees happy, one might think to better the actual product or service (or both) its providing which may start a chain reaction to keeping its customers happy, which in turn would come back to higher pay for the employees! What a concept! Instead, most CEOs are happy as long as their own million dollar salaries keep rolling in.

The future holds no good news. The existing income trend shows the rich getting richer and the poor eating their dust. Contrary to what the current president thinks, there really is only so much money to go around. If the trend holds true, soon there will be no middle class, just the rich and the poor living in utter disharmony. And it all comes back to the republicans.

Republicans among the likes of Reagan and good ol' W have accomplished little for the working class. Tax cuts for the rich? What? This is the logic behind it: Offer the super rich tax cuts so they can have more money to invest into the economy. In other words, don't make the super rich pay the percentage they owe so that in the long run, the people eating ramen noodles for dinner might someday be able to afford a steak dinner once a month. What kind of roundabout God damn solution is that? Grant the rich money, and give billion dollar corporations tax cuts? Fuck the super rich, and fuck the republicans.

Cornel West wrote an essay called "Race Matters" discussing the issues like racism, sexism and class, but the ideals used throughout the piece can easily be related to other social issues. He states, "As of 1989, one percent of the population owned thirty-seven percent of the wealth and ten percent of the population owned eighty six percent of the wealth – leading to a profound cynicism and pessimism among the citizenry" (629). The last bit, "a profound cynicism and pessimism among the citizenry" is what I find most interesting. What does West mean by this? Just that the majority of Americans living without wealth or comfort now have a negative, distrustful, outlook on the government, the economy, and society in general. Could a minimum wage dwelling at five dollars and some change have anything to do with this?

In Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King quotes Abraham Lincoln saying "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free" (380). Not to take away from King's thoughtful insight for civil rights, but his same principle can be related today with something totally aside from race. In modern day society, status and salary are now

relative to this principle. Today's slaves are those of us working for \$5.85 an hour scrubbing toilet bowls or serving up double cheese burgers. Those of us considered free are people who live in complete comfort: the wealthy. Most people will go through their lives never knowing the bliss of money meaning nothing. When did money start running the world anyway?

So where are we heading as of now? How dim the future looks. We will inevitably destroy our own country unless something is done to bridge the gap between the upper and lower class. The American empire, (empire taking a negative and positive definition here) will implode and crumble unless the middle class becomes the majority and stays the majority. Something must be done; let us start with the minimum wage.

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## Gansu Mountain

### *Jieling Shang*

It was a beautiful day, May 1, 1988. All of the Chinese people were so excited to celebrate their Labor Day. In the meantime, a cute little girl finally appeared from her mom's womb as everyone was anticipating. She was very curious about this new place, so she cried loudly, and other people were smiling happily. Her arrival brought them happiness and fortune. After just a few seconds, she stopped crying in order to smile. From that moment, her life began. Time flew, and the little girl grew up to be smart, talented, and attractive. She attracted everyone's attention with her smiling face. Everyone loved her, and gave her what she wanted. No matter where she went, there was always applause and compliments. This reminds me of one essay called, "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self" written by Alice Walker. Before Walker became blind in one eye from an accident, she was a very pretty girl. Everyone would praise her by saying " 'oh, isn't she the cutest thing!'..."and got so much sense! They gratefully add...' " (Walker 619). Like Walker, the little girl played an angel in others' hearts. In this angel's mind, there was no pain, no poverty, and no sadness. She was simply living in her happy heaven until she became seventeen years old.

In order to enjoy the summer vacation, her family decided to go on a trip with other friends. They went to Gansu, located in central China. It is a small and poor city, but has abundant natural resources. Until that time, the little angel had no idea of "poor" and "painful" because she had never experienced these problems.

The second morning of the trip, she woke up very early and was determined to climb the mountain by herself. Then, she started her adventure. After half an hour, she felt a little thirsty, so she took a break. She felt chilly and weird since nobody was around. After one hour, she started to feel confused about the direction she was going. She kept going on, and then suddenly, with the sound "poo-tong," she fell down because of the slippery leaves. She was so panic stricken, especially when she saw herself bleeding heavily. She tried to walk and find help. At that time, she became totally lost. She ran everywhere she might find people. Fortunately, she saw a hut.

The road seemed much narrower than before. She barely got there and didn't see anybody. She looked around, and felt very scared. There were only a few huts, which were very disreputable looking. But she could still notice that some people were living there.

Suddenly, three women showed up and stared at her. The girl got scared because those three women looked horrible. They looked extremely skinny and unhealthy. Their clothes looked like trash and they had no shoes. They were talking about something while walking toward the little girl. The little girl could not understand what they were saying. She then noticed a little boy behind those women. The little boy looked even more terrible. He was about four years old, but looked younger since his body was very tiny. His bones were sticking out. He was staring at the little girl and trying to figure out why she was there.

The girl's legs were shaking and freezing. She tried to smile, but couldn't. Then she started to explain why she was there, and where she came from. Obviously, the three women couldn't understand what she was saying. One woman was trying to find something from her "pocket." Surprisingly, she opened her hands to reveal some food, which looked like it had been pulled from the trash. The girl shook her head quickly, and gave some bread to them. The three women were so excited, seeing the bread, and took it immediately. The little girl smiled, and stopped trembling. She tried to communicate with them, and finally one of them understood what she needed. This woman led the girl back down the mountain. As soon as they arrived, the woman left.

The girl cried hysterically when she saw her parents. It was the first time she felt she could never leave her parents, and she couldn't lose them. Everything seemed very beautiful and kind to her. When she tried to recollect her experience on the mountain, she cried more sadly. She couldn't believe people in our world could be so different. She felt regret, because she didn't realize how lucky she was. Just like Michael Cohen states in "You Can Shave the Beast, but Will the Fur Grow Back?" "This polarization and social indifference, I believe, stems from the ruthless, heart-hardening, cutthroat environment..." (Cohen 39). This truth was finally accepted by the girl later in her life. Different environments create different people or lifestyles. The environment forces people who live in the same place to become very similar. For the people who lived in Gansu Mountain, they had no chances to change their environment. The only thing they could do was adapt to the defined environment. They were very poor and isolated from others because their environment wasn't good enough to help them have a better life. They didn't have technologies or education, just a bunch of trees and rocks.

The former world in the girl's mind disappeared; the new one with happiness and bitterness was raised. Whenever she thought about her experience on that mountain, she felt

very sad. Also, she felt very lucky. She felt sad because she couldn't help the poor people in Gansu Mountain, and she believed so many people elsewhere might have the same situation or worse. She felt lucky because she lived in a good environment and had a very sweet family. In addition, as her world changed, the girl became more responsible and ambitious. In her world, not only she and her family, but also all people need help.

The girl became determined to help others as much as she could. As Lee K. Abbott writes in "The True Story of Why I Do What I Do," "it is, I think, because we all feel, less and more, the obligation we have to our fathers, to our mothers, to all the folks, linked by biology or not, who have raised us; an obligation, as essential to our moral natures as our hearts are to long life, to the places we were raised in and in the knowledge we learned there" (Abbott 90). As Abbott says, everyone has a responsibility to their family, society, and country. The girl strongly believes she has the obligation to help others and improve their environment. She used to receive love and concern from others. But now it is the time to share her love and happiness with others. Her experience taught her to be stronger and braver, because she needs a very strong mind to help others, which means she needs to suffer the bitterness of reality.

Now, this girl is in America, because she wants to be more knowledgeable to help others. She is me, still smiling all the time, and feeling thankful for everything. I feel thankful to my parents for bringing me into this world. I feel thankful to my family, such as my grandparents, for sharing their love and kindness with me. I feel thankful to my friends for staying and sharing with me. I feel thankful to all my teachers for teaching me knowledge. I feel thankful to all the people who help and care about me. Finally, I feel thankful to the Gansu people for showing me a different world.

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## A Newfound Strength

*Natasha Stoyak*

Sobbing. Terror. Voice cracking. “He’s gone, he just up and left. Everything is gone Natasha, everything.” My heart is sinking deeper and deeper into this bottomless pit of a stomach. Thump, thump. “Well, did he say when he’d be back? Is he going to come back around or?” “No.” Thump, thump, thump. “It’s probably just an argument, maybe you can work it out you know? He’s not that evil that he would do something like this to you is he?” “I don’t know Natasha,” Thump, thump, thump. “I’m on my way home mom. Hang on for me okay? I love you.” I played her words over and over in my head on my way home, “I’m fine Natasha, I’ll be completely fine.”

I am a person who likes and enjoys seeing the best in people. I believe that there is good in everyone, and even after the experiences I have had, I still believe that to be true. Although, ever since “that day,” a lot of realities have come to life for me. My step-dad had a cold heart. He had a heart that wouldn’t warm if tempted. I can remember him screaming and swearing at me at the top of his lungs one day, simply because I locked the dishwasher, and he still had to put a dish in it. I couldn’t understand why anyone would get so angry over the smallest thing. The reality that I have come to over the years is that there are people like that everywhere in life.

I hate my step-dad for the type of home that he created. It was a home burdened with fear. It was a home composed of discomfort. It was a home where one was never good enough. It was a home where each was secluded. It was a home with little respect. It was a home filled with constant tension. A home that was not truly home. A home, where your gut you something was not right.

You know that intuition you get when someone says they’re fine, yet really you know that there is no word further from fine that could describe the way that they are feeling? Yes...this was the feeling that consumed me. I cannot explain how many days I knew in my heart that he did not deserve her. She deserved someone kindhearted, someone who would be there for her when I wasn’t able to be, and someone who would recognize that inner beauty that I still see in my mother. As Michael Cohen suggests in his essay, “You Can Shave the Beast, But Will the Fur Grow Back” I have realized that I could “...let this grow, like a cancer, steady and imperceptible, eventually decomposing my soul as I got older.” Or I

could rise above this. I have chosen the latter. Some experiences, like this situation with my mother can leave us with scars that will always exist. But the truth I have learned is that we have the option to stand as the better person and excel.

“All stories are true stories, especially the artful lies we invent to satisfy the wishful thinker in us, for they present to us, in disguise often and at great distance, the way we are or would want to be” (Abbot 87). In “The True Story of Why I Do What I Do,” Lee K. Abbot discusses how we like to invent our lives as we wish they could be. We like to change people into who we wish they were. This is what I was doing. This fantasy world, which brings many of us to tragedy, is what I have been doing all of my life.

I used to wish that I could change these people. The desire lived in me that maybe somehow I could make them better. When I saw evil, I automatically believed there was some hidden good that needed to be brought out. I automatically believed that I was the one who should bring that out. I would hope that I could understand their point of view, and share some type of empathy for them. I wished I could make them kind, make them escape the pain they instill in people. I wanted to make them understand how it feels to be weak, and then maybe they wouldn't be so hurtful any longer. I now know, through many hard experiences, that people are who they are. The hardest realization for me about all of this, something that I often still struggle with, is that- in the simplest terms possible; some people are just not nice. Some will never be.

I am reminded of Michael Cohen's essay, “You Can Shave the Beast, But Will the Fur Grow Back?” in which this reality is clearly written. “Don't even think about it. You can't change a thing. Not a chance” (Cohen 42). I want to believe that there is good in all: I do believe that there is good in all. Yet, what I also still recognize is that we cannot change others. The lives of others, the ambitions of others, are all in all up to them. If we only attempt to change them we will in time ruin ourselves. Because it is not fair to us, to search for something in somebody that just is not there. This is a difficult idea to come to an understanding with, because as human beings we all have that want to help people, to change people. This idea of not attempting to change people is a new view for me, a view that takes a lot of weight off my shoulders. A view that is thriving deep in my bones now that I have lived all of this.

As I lie down in bed at night, these words still rein true, deep in my soul. Words of my mother that I carry with me. “You should always be with a man who loves you more

than him.” My mother has risen above the defeats of this man. She has become a strong woman in spite of the tolls that he placed on my family. She has seen beauty in her darkest hour. Because of this, I am learning to be happy with what is. To surround yourself with people who love and treat you the way you want to be treated. To develop the type of relationships that you know will last forever. Because those other people-why bother? Why bother with a race you know you will never win? As Michael Cohen says in his essay “You Can Shave the Beast, But Will the Fur Grow Back” “It’s a compelling force.” This force that causes us to feel the need to give in. We automatically feel it easiest to give into our weaknesses, like our defeated races. I want to always stay away from that evil force, because sometimes it is so much easier to throw up our hands, and give up. But I am continuing to learn that this “compelling force” is a force that we are all better off with out. It is a force that I am much better off with out.

“I am in the desert for the first time. I fall totally in love with it. I am so overwhelmed by its beauty; I confront it for the first time” (Walker 622). Much like Walker in her essay “Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self,” I have confronted my new beauty, and I have lost my worst enemy. I have gained a new and improved view of the world that in previous days I had not known existed. I am proud to be focused on me, on that desert. Forget about the snakes in the dust, I am flying with the eagles.

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# Self-Acceptance

*Amanda Whalen*

The world we live in today is full of negative and judgmental people who are not open to people with disabilities. In the words of Nancy Mairs, from the essay “On Being a Cripple,” “Society is no readier to accept crippledness than to accept death, war, sex, sweat, or wrinkles” (410). In many essays we have read this term, there have been issues with self-acceptance among other things. The media and people around us try to shape who we are, and when we step out of that ideal “cookie cutter” person, people tend to look down upon us. There is no such thing as normal. It’s amazing that people can be judgmental when in fact everyone has flaws. People dealing with disabilities are often ridiculed and this makes it harder for them to accept themselves. When people with disabilities finally accept themselves, they are stronger for all the ridicule they have endured.

I have a disability myself and it has taken me years to learn to cope and be accepting of myself. I am Dyslexic, which is a learning disability that affects the processing of spoken language, written language, and language comprehension. It affects my everyday life and it defines who I am. It is not just difficulty with reading, but dyslexics think completely differently from the average individual. Through functional MRIs we are able to see that dyslexics think with a completely different part of the brain than others do. The average person thinks with the frontal lobes of the brain, while the dyslexic thinks with the back of the brain. Therefore, everything we do is done and comprehended in a different manner (Moore). We look at the world through different eyes, often seeing things more abstract than the average person can comprehend. The common misconception about dyslexics is that we are stupid, but that in fact is not true, because dyslexics are known to have average to above average IQs (International Dyslexia Association 2007). Having this disability is very embarrassing and in my early years I felt shameful about it. It wasn’t until I took certain steps and journeys in my life that I discovered that my disability was not a flaw but a gift, because it made me who I am today. I am a young individual with far more experiences and life lessons learned than most adults.

Not all disabilities are visible to the outside, but they still affect the person in a similar manner. My disability is not visible, but I feel it has always affected the way I communicate with people because I have always felt somewhat less intelligent than others.

In the essay, “Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self,” by Alice Walker, the character’s flaw is on the outside, and this is something she has to deal with every day. Being in school is hard enough without the criticisms and ridicule of other children. Walker explains her pain by telling us experiences of being pushed and even attacked because of her disfigurement of the face. While going through school I also experienced many of these things because I was “different.” It’s crazy to think that even at age eight kids can be so brutal, but they are and they learn it all from their judgmental parents. When I was also eight years old, I was in a similar situation. My dyslexia was exposed to the students and I was treated differently than other students. When I wouldn’t finish my test or homework, the teacher would stick me into the hallway by myself and tell me to finish my work before I could join in the next activity. This made me feel like I was not worthy of participating. When I needed help I could not get it because I was sitting in the hall by myself. The other students began to realize this and thought of me as an outcast. Every day I would be afraid to go to school because the teacher would embarrass me in front of the class and I would always pay for it later. The students would constantly tease me and the teacher did nothing to stop it. I would always try to be strong and hold my own, but my personality doesn’t match those characteristics. I am a very sensitive person who takes everything that people say to me to heart. When it was time for recess, instead of being happy, I would be scared and usually hide from the other “popular” children. When I didn’t hide I would be harassed.

One vivid memory I have of this harassment is when I went to Catholic school, where everyone was dressed in uniform with fake cookie cutter smiles and the stereotype of innocent children. I was thrown into a circle full of people and they yelled at and pushed me from person to person; I could not escape and at the same time I just wanted to curl up in a ball and give up. Eventually I got away but not with the help of any teachers. This type of event hurt my self-esteem and has affected me since. I didn’t do anything to these other children, so at a young age I became very self-conscious. I didn’t understand why people didn’t like me and couldn’t accept me for who I was. I left that school in the middle of the year because we were having problems with my teacher, but I never let my parents know about the harassment because I was afraid the other children would get in trouble and hate me even more. While reading Alice Walker’s essay, “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self,” I felt a connection when she said, “After months of torture at the school, my parents decided to send me back to our old community, to my old school” (620). This is because I

have felt that same shameful feeling she felt, although she had done nothing wrong. Children with disabilities deal with these sorts of things every day and it damages their self-importance. A child is like a piece of clay waiting to be molded, the people around her impact the way she will shape her life. When the piece of clay is constantly being squashed, it is hard for her to grow and mold into a beautiful masterpiece. I know the teasing definitely damaged my self-worth and it didn't make me feel better about my disability. This is an important part of self-acceptance because it is hard to except yourself when others do not.

To accept yourself, you need to discover who you really are and not how other people look at you. I feel that finding inspiration in other people helps to complete self-discovery. You need to have a sense of humor and know its okay to laugh at times because no one is perfect. Nancy Mairs gives us a great example of laughing at yourself when she starts off her essay by telling us a story about the day she fell into the ladies room toilet after reaching for her cane and becoming off balance. "Saturday afternoon, the building deserted, I was free to laugh aloud as I wriggled back to my feet, my voice bouncing off the yellowish tiles from all directions" (409). Although her falling into the toilet is not something she is proud of by any means, you still need to laugh at yourself and realize that things happen and not everything is a tragedy. Almost every day there are times when I have to laugh at myself and say "damn that Dyslexia." Dyslexia affects my everyday life just like any other disability, and it is apparent to people even when I speak. Sometimes when speaking I say things out of order. For example, the other night I was watching a movie with friends; when a friend asked me what the movie was called I said, "Up a Creek without a River," knowing that the actual name of the movie was "Up a Creek Without a Paddle." My brain saw a river on the TV; therefore I was fixated on the river and had a dyslexic moment! Being eighteen and pretty secure about my dyslexia, I can laugh about little things like that with friends and still feel confident about myself.

To accept one's flaws is to succeed in life. There is no person who is perfect, although our society likes to put that idea in our minds. It has taken me many years and a very long journey to realize that my differences are my strengths. Who cares if certain things like reading and writing are harder for me? I can do many things that others cannot. A big part of finding yourself is accepting who you are and what you are capable of doing. I understand that writing and reading will always be challenging for me and I don't let it bother me anymore. If people don't like me for who I am, then I don't need to waste my

time getting to know them. I have come to these conclusions through many experiences of negativity and being constantly put down. Find the strength inside you and it will let your true self be free. Society is full of superficial garbage, be your own person, be unique. It has taken me years to realize but I have found strength in myself much like Kristen E. Hughes did in “I Will Be MY Own Hero,” when she finally realizes she doesn’t need approval from others, she only longs for it, “I am finding a new Hero in myself to follow”(54). I and many others have looked inside ourselves to become successful people when others have told us that it is impossible.

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