



MOON PREP'S  
*Favorite Essays*

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HARVARD EDITION  
2023

Ten Essays that landed students a spot  
at Harvard

# One.

I've always been a storyteller, but I've only been an alleged fish killer since age five. As a child, my head was so filled up with stories that I might have forgotten to feed Bubbles the class pet just one time too often. Once I pulverized an entire pencil, because I was daydreaming instead of taking it out of the sharpener.

More than anything else, I became an obsessive list-maker. I memorized and wrote down long lists of my stuffed animals, cities around the world, and my favorite historical time periods. I created itineraries and packing lists for my Build-A-Bears, then arranged them in rows on a pretend airplane. I drew family trees for a made-up family during the Industrial Revolution. I wrote lists until the spine of my notebook cracked under the weight of graphite.

For a long time, I thought this was something that I alone did, and that I did alone. Lying on the floor of my bedroom, I spun fantastical stories of mundane events. Each story opened and closed in my head, untold and unsung.

Now, stories connect me to the world, creating communities instead of pulling me away from them. Years later, though—to my amazement—I discovered other people who were interested in the same things I was. Wandering into fanfiction websites and online forums, I was welcomed into a vibrant community of writers—serious, silly, passionate people who wrote hundreds of thousands of words analyzing character dynamics and exploring endless plot threads. When I finally started posting my own thoughts, I didn't feel like I was taking a risk or venturing into new territory. I had been speaking these words to myself since I was five, preparing myself to finally shout them into the real world. And people responded.

Spurred on by this excitement, I started writing stories for other people to read. I had fallen in love with the community writing had given me, and with writing itself. I wanted to contribute my own small piece to a world much bigger than me. I shouted my stories up to the WiFi signals that caught and carried them, waiting to be found by someone else writing lists in her bedroom alone.

In high school, I also found joy in editing. I loved analyzing, polishing, and curating my classmates' short stories, poems, and artwork to make them shine for my school's literary magazine. I spent hours with other editors, passionately arguing the merits and weaknesses of dozens of writing pieces. Editing the school newspaper, meanwhile, became a way to spotlight members of the school community, from profiling new staff and faculty to polling the student body about the stigma surrounding menstruation. I've now had my poems published in a national literary journal and have joined the editorial staff of an international literary magazine for teens. I feel like I'm discovering my power, and with it my ability to create change. Last year, I founded SPEAK, a creative writing program for elementary school students. I wanted to assist younger writers so they could create their own communities. During SPEAK sessions, I taught a group of students how to draw a map of a fantasy wolf kingdom they had designed, helped a girl edit her classmate's poem about hula hoops, and listened to a third-grader talk faster and faster as we discussed the meaning of soup in *The Tale of Despereaux*.

I've now turned SPEAK into a self-sustaining club at my school, and I'm expanding the program onto an online platform. Writing changed my life, but it only happened when I started sharing my work, putting it out there, and starting conversations—not just responding. Alone, stories used to abstract me from the outside world. Now, stories connect me to the world, creating communities instead of pulling me away from them. For too many of us, our stories are born in our heads, and they die there. I'm going to change that, for myself and for as many people as I can bring with me.



# Two.

The first word I ever spoke was my name. I was intrigued that my entire identity could be attached to and compressed into such a simple sound. I would tell everyone I met that my name meant “one,” that it made me special because it sounded like “unique.” When I learned to write, I covered sheets of paper with the letters U, N, and A. Eventually, I realized that paper was not enough—I needed to cover the world with my name, my graffiti tag.

This came to a screeching halt in kindergarten. One day in music class, I scratched UNA into the piano’s wood. Everyone was surprised that I tagged my name and not someone else’s. I didn’t want someone else to suffer for my misdeeds. I wanted to take something, to make it mine.

Kindergarten was also the year my parents signed me up for piano lessons, and every aspect of them was torture. I had to learn to read an entirely new language, stretch my fingers to fit challenging intervals, use my arms with enough force to sound chords but not topple over, grope around blindly while keeping my eyes on the music, and the brain-splitting feat of doing this with each hand separately. Hardest was the very act of sitting down to practice. The physical challenges were more or less surmountable, but tackling them felt lonely and pointless.

I only fell in love with music when I found myself in a sweaty church on the Upper West Side—my first chamber music concert, the final event of a two-week camp the summer before sixth grade. I was nervous. My group, playing a Shostakovich prelude, was the youngest, so we went first. My legs shook uncontrollably before, during, and after I played. I nearly became sick afterward from shame and relief. I was so disappointed that I thought I could never face my new music friends again. From the front row, I plotted my escape route for when the concert finished. But I didn’t run. I watched the whole concert. I watched the big kids breathe in unison, occupying the same disconnected body. I fell in love with music through the way they belonged to each other, the way they saw each other without even looking. I stuck with that chamber camp. In the twenty chamber groups that have made up my last six years, I’ve performed in six-inch heels and nearly fallen off-stage during my bow. I’ve performed in sneakers and a sweatshirt, on pianos with half the keys broken and the other half wildly out of tune, in subway stations, nursing homes, international orchestras, Carnegie Hall, and on Zoom.

Chamber music doesn’t work when everyone aims to be a star; it works when everyone lets everyone else shine through. It’s more fun that way. A musical notation I rarely saw before playing chamber music is “*una corda*,” which says to put the soft pedal down and play on only “one string,” usually to highlight another player’s solo. I don’t need to be the loudest to breathe in unison with my friends, to create something beautiful. In that moment, I’m not just Una, I’m the pianist in the Dohnanyi sextet.

I started to love music only when I realized it doesn’t belong to me. I had to stop trying to make piano my own and take pleasure in sharing it. I learned that the rests in my part were as meaningful as the notes; that although my name means “one,” I’d rather not be the “only.” My favorite compliment I’ve received was that I made an audience member feel like they were sitting onstage next to me. This, to me, is the essence of chamber music. To pull your audience onto the stage, trusting your group isn’t enough—you have to fuse together, to forget you exist. For a few minutes, you have to surrender your name.



# Three.

June 2nd, 2019. The birth of the new me, or "Simar 2.0" as mom called me. However, I still felt like "Simar 1.0," perceiving nothing more than the odd new sensation of a liberating breeze fluttering through my hair.

At age seventeen, I got a haircut for the first time in my life.

As a Sikh, I inherited a tradition of unshorn, cloth-bound hair, and, for most of my life, I followed my community in wholeheartedly embracing our religion. Over time, however, I felt my hair weighing me down, both materially and metaphorically.

Sikhism teaches that God is one. I asked mom why then was God cleaved into different religions? If all paths were equal, I asked dad, then why not follow some other religion instead? My unease consistently dismissed by our Sikh community, I decided to follow the religion of God: no religion. My hair, though, remained; if I knew my heart, then cutting my hair served no purpose.

Nevertheless, that unshorn hair represented an unequivocal beacon for a now defunct identity. I visited my calculus teacher's office hours, only to be peppered by incessant questions about Sikhism. He pigeonholed me into being a spokesperson for something I no longer associated with. Flustered, I excused myself to the bathroom, examining this other me in the mirror.

Why this hair? This question kept coming back.

I ransacked my conscience, and it became painfully obvious. Fear. Fear of what my conservative grandparents might think. Fear of what my Sikh family friends might say. Fear of what my peers might ask. This hair had usurped my sense of self.

So off it came.

A few days after crossing my personal Rubicon, I flew to India to meet my grandparents.

Breezing through the airport, I perceived something remarkably different about my experience: the absence of the penetrating surveillance that had consistently accompanied me for seventeen years. It was uncanny; I felt as an anodyne presence.

Apprehensively entering my grandparents' New Delhi home some eighteen hours later, I found myself enveloped in hugs. Savoring the moment, I failed to probe why. I recognize now that, in spite of their intransigent religious views, they appreciated that I had made a decision about my identity based on belief, based on being true to my evolving sense of self. I think my grandparents found that admirable.

A few weeks later, dad confessed, "I regret that you did not cut your hair earlier."

I have no regrets.

My hair made me work harder than everyone else simply because I looked different. Sanctimonious people lecture us on having pride in our differences, rarely considering the difficulties which being different entails. For example, a fake Facebook page created by an unknown schoolmate with my birthday listed as September 11th, 2001. Dealing with attacks fueled by ignorance never becomes easier, but such aggressions bolster my courage to face what other people think. In standing up for myself, I become myself.

On some level, I know appearances should not matter. Yet, in many uncomfortable ways, they still do, and they give birth to many disparities. Through the simple act of cutting my hair, I left the confines of intolerance, but my experience opened my eyes to those whose struggles cannot be resolved so easily. This motivates me to never be a bystander, to always energetically take the side of the persecuted in the fight against the powerful.

Over my years of shadowing, I have seen a healthcare system where patients receive inferior care solely on the basis of perceived race. Exposure to this institutionalized injustice motivates me to volunteer with a free health clinic to provide glucose screenings to the underprivileged. We must lead with personal initiative first, starting on the individual level and building from there. Only then can we bring about systemic change to reform the institutions and practices that perpetuate prejudice within medicine and without.



# Four.

It's 8AM. Dew blankets the grass under my bare feet as my small hands grasp the metal of the backyard fence. I lift my heels, summoning enormous power in my tiny lungs as I blare out a daily wake-up call: "GIRLS!" Waiting with anticipation for those familiar faces to emerge from their homes, my mind bursts with ideas eager for exploration.

Years later, at the corner of our yards, gates magically appeared; an open invitation connecting the backyards of four mismatched homes. The birth of the "Four Corners" inevitably developed into lifelong friendships and became the North Star in the lives of absolute strangers who have become family. As parents bonded at the gates, discussing everything from diapers to first dates, the kids took advantage of overlooked bedtimes and late night movies. Today, I launch into adulthood with the imagination, leadership, and confidence born from adolescent adventures.

Behind corner #1 lived the Irish neighbors, where I embarked on a culinary exploration of corned beef and cabbage served during the annual St. Patty's celebrations. My taste buds awakened with the novelty of a peculiar dish that seemed to dismiss the health hazards of sodium chloride, an element that conjures up mental images of chemistry experiments. With U2 playing on the speaker, and parents enjoying a pint of Guinness, adolescents discussed inventions that could lead us to a pot of gold; from apps that would revolutionize the music industry, to building a keg cooler from a rubber trash can (and yes, we actually tried that). Endless playtime and conversations fueled the gene of curiosity which molded my creative thinking and imagination.

Behind corner #2, vibrant Italians cheered on the creation of zip lines and obstacle courses, which taught me a thing or two about Newton's Laws of Motion. Body aches from brutal stops provided lessons in physics that prompted modifications. This inventive spirit during backyard projects required testing, redesigning, and rebuilding. I wanted to conquer the yard and use every square inch of it. My swimming pool hosted "Olympic Games", where the makeshift springboard I built would have made Michael Phelps proud. I dove into projects, disregarding smashed fingers and small fires. Through persistence and sheer will, repeated failures became a source of progress for all to enjoy. These lessons served me well when diving into the Odyssey of the Mind Competitions.

Corners #3 and #4, where Cuban roots run deep, entertained countless activities opening a world of learning and exploration. 1AM backyard stargazing encouraged my curiosity; the night sky like a blank slate, ready to be lit up with discovery. Through the eye of the telescope, I traced stars that were millions of miles away, yet filled my tent like fairy lights. Questions merged in a combinatorial explosion that only led to more questions. Could a black hole really cause spaghettification? Do the whispered echoes of dead stars give a clue to how old our universe truly is? Years later, at the FPL Energy, Power, and Sustainability Lab, conversations about smart grids, electric vehicles, and a possible colonization of the moon would take me back to that backyard camping, propelling my desire for exploration.

In my little pocket of the world, I embrace the unexpected coincidence that struck 20 years ago, when four families collided at the same exact moment in space and time. My Four Corners family, with their steadfast presence and guidance, cultivated love, maturity, risk-taking, and teamwork. Through my adventures, I became a dreamer, an inventor, an innovator, and a leader. Now, fostering my love for learning, spirit of giving back, and drive for success, I seek new adventures. Just as I walked through the magical gates of my beloved Four Corners, I will now walk through transformational thresholds to continue on a journey that began as a girl, at a fence, with a heart full of hope and a head full of possibilities.



# Five.

There's a theory that even though each color has a specific wavelength that never changes, how people perceive a specific color may have subtle differences based on small differences in photoreceptors, and the color that one person might consider red might still be red in another's mind but could look different — a little duller, softer, cooler. Furthermore, how a person's brain processes the color may also be linked to that person's environment. Some studies have suggested that color sensitivity could be linked to one's native languages: for example, people who speak languages that have specific names for eleven colors are able to easily distinguish those eleven colors, but people who speak languages with fewer color specific words may have a harder time distinguishing them.

So it appears that even at the most elementary level of sight, the world is not an objective thing. Instead, what we know and what we remember can influence what and how we see. The color blue may just be the color blue to a three year old, perhaps her favorite color even, but an adult might connect it to so much more—the lake by his childhood home or the eye color of a loved one.

I first consciously became aware of the power that our experiences have to change perception when I went to turn on a light in my house after learning about photons in class. What had previously been a mundane light suddenly became a fascinating application of atomic structure, and I thought that I could almost perceive the electrons jumping up and down from energy level to energy level to produce the photons that I saw. I then realized that my world had steadily been changing throughout my years in school as I learned more and more. I now see oligopolies in the soda aisles of the supermarkets. I see the charges warring with each other in every strike of lightning, and the patterns of old American politics still swaying things today. Knowledge and making connections with that knowledge is the difference between seeing the seven oceans glittering in the sun and merely seeing the color blue. It's the difference between just seeing red and seeing the scarlet of roses blooming, the burgundy of blood pumping through veins, and crimson of anger so fierce that you could burst. Knowledge is color; it is depth, and it is seeing a whole new world without having to move an inch.

It is knowledge, too, that can bring people together. I love listening to people's stories and hearing about what they know and love, because if I learn about what they know, I can learn how they see the world; consequently, since behavior is often based upon perception, I can understand why a person behaves the way they do. On a road trip during the summer, my mom kept looking up at the streetlights lining the highways. When I asked why, she told me that whenever she saw lights by a highway she would wonder if her company had made them. She would guess how tall they were, how wide, and what style they were. She told me that ever since she started working for her company, lights no longer were just lights to her. They were a story of people who first had to measure the wind speed to figure out what dimension the lights had to be, and then of engineers, of money passing hands—possibly even under her own supervision as an accountant—and then of transportation, and of the people who had to install them. I might never perceive lights the exact way my mother does or see her “red” but by hearing her describe what she knows, I can understand her world and realize her role in ours.

Beauty and color are in the world, but it is seeking the unknown and making new connections that unlocks them from their greyscale cage.



# Six.

Gazing up at the starry sky, I see Cygnus, Hercules, and Pisces, remnants of past cultures. I listen to waves crash on the beach, the forces of nature at work. Isn't it odd how stars are flaming spheres and electrical impulses make beings sentient? The very existence of our world is a wonder; what are the odds that this particular planet developed all the necessary components, parts that all work in unison, to support life? How do they interact? How did they come to be? I thought back to how my previously simplistic mind-set evolved this past year.

At Balboa, juniors and seniors join one of five small learning communities, which are integrated into the curriculum. Near the end of sophomore year, I ranked my choices: Law Academy first—it seemed the most prestigious—and WALC, the Wilderness Arts and Literacy Collaborative, fourth. So when I was sorted into WALC, I felt disappointed at the inflexibility of my schedule and bitter toward my classes. However, since students are required to wait at least a semester before switching pathways, I stayed in WALC. My experiences that semester began shifting my ambition-oriented paradigm to an interest-oriented one. I didn't switch out.

Beyond its integrated classes, WALC takes its students on trips to natural areas not only to build community among its students, but also to explore complex natural processes and humanity's role in them. Piecing these lessons together, I create an image of our universe. I can visualize the carving of glacial valleys, the creation and gradation of mountains by uplift and weathering, and the transportation of nutrients to and from ecosystems by rivers and salmon. I see these forces on the surface of a tiny planet rotating on its axis and orbiting the sun, a gem in this vast universe. Through WALC, I have gained an intimate understanding of natural systems and an addiction to understanding the deep interconnections embedded in our cosmos.

Understanding a system's complex mechanics not only satisfies my curiosity, but also adds beauty to my world; my understanding of tectonic and gradational forces allows me to appreciate mountains and coastlines beyond aesthetics. By physically going to the place described in WALC's lessons, I have not only gained the tools to admire these systems, but have also learned to actually appreciate them. This creates a thirst to see more beauty in a world that's filled with poverty and violence, and a hunger for knowledge to satisfy that thirst. There are so many different systems to examine and dissect—science alone has universal, planetary, molecular, atomic, and subatomic scales to investigate. I hope to be able to find my interests by taking a variety of courses in college, and further humanity's understanding through research, so that all can derive a deeper appreciation for the complex systems that govern this universe.



# Seven.

Getting out of bed in the middle of a long, New Hampshire winter was never easy, but some mornings were especially difficult. On those particularly tough mornings, when the temperature could no longer be measured in the comfortable world of positive numbers, my dad would be up before the sun. He would turn on the gas fireplace in his bedroom, carry milk, cereal, bowls and spoons upstairs, and then wake up me and my siblings. We would wrap ourselves in blankets as we ate our breakfast by the fire. I would complain about having to wake up early, never considering that my dad had been up long before.

Every morning for years he woke me up, packed my lunch, and drove me to school. He helped me with homework, coached my soccer team and taught me how to ski. Even as I've gotten older and started to pour my own cereal, my dad hasn't stopped waking up early. He gets up long before my alarm clock even thinks about waking me, walks to his office (a desk, chair and laptop situated above our garage) and starts to work. He works nearly every day, only taking the occasional break to engage in such leisure activities as splitting wood and mowing the lawn. As I've grown older I've looked up to him more and more.

There have been times in the past four years when I've come home with seemingly unbearable amounts of homework and I've thought, "I could settle for a B on this essay" or "How important really are the laws of thermodynamics?" On those late nights, when I'm on the verge of trading my notebooks in for a tv remote, I think about my dad. I think about how hard he's worked to make my life easier, and I realize that mediocrity isn't a viable option. I go downstairs, pour myself a glass of ice water, turn on some music, and get back to my work.

Sometimes it's hard to imagine my dad being young, but twenty-nine years ago, my dad was entering his senior year at Gilford High School. He had won a soccer championship under head coach Dave Pinkham, and was on track for another title that year. He was doing lawn care with his brother to make some extra money, and dreading the speech he would have to make at graduation.

I am now entering my senior year at Gilford High School. I won a soccer championship under the same Dave Pinkham as a sophomore, and hopefully I'm heading toward another this year. I'm running Leggett Lawn Care (which, despite its two unofficial part-time employees, has not yet gone public) and denying the inevitability of the speech I have to make this June. I'm keeping up my grades and trying to emulate my dad by putting others first. I teach Sunday School at my church, support the freshmen and sophomores on my soccer team, and give up countless hours of sleep helping my classmates with calculus. It's now my turn to go out into the world and figure out what I want to do and who I want to become. I don't know exactly where I see myself in five years; I don't even know which state I'll be living in next fall. I do know though that if I'm half the man my father is, (which genetically I am) I'll have the strength and humility that I need to selflessly contribute to the world around me.



# Eight.

I have always envied the butterfly.

Its graceful poise as it glides through the air; the blissful flutter of its wings as it courageously embarks upon life's journeys. Its ambitious and adaptive nature — a change-maker and discoverer, a trendsetter in the animal world, a leader amongst other species. Charles Darwin said, "it is not the strongest of species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one most adaptable to change." I envy the butterfly's adaptive approach to change, making them the silent leaders of the animal kingdom.

It was at age nine, on a family trip to the Boston Museum of Science, that I was first drawn to the breathtaking butterfly. As I stepped into the butterfly's endless capsule of nature, the flamboyant and audacious nature of the butterfly was captivating — their vibrant colors flaunted proud and shame-free, central to their persona but not defining of their personality. Their extraordinary courage in self-expression brought a little boy great inspiration. As someone who has questioned and struggled with my identity and accepting my queerness throughout life, the butterfly exemplified what it meant to be bold, courageous, and proud to a young boy who was lacking in all of those.

I vividly recall one butterfly standing out among its comrades. Being an uncreative third-grader, I named my new friend Bloo due to his radiant cerulean shades descending from darkness to light as they progressed from the wing's base. I watched Bloo soar, using his wings to glide far above the dainty and fragile stereotypes placed on him by society. I admire the profound growth Bloo must have achieved to get here, at one point a timid and powerless inchworm evolved into a carefully-crafted canvas of power. Bloo exemplified the strength and pride that I needed to begin accepting my identity. Looking back on this brief encounter with Bloo, I recall how he taught an insecure child self-acceptance. From here, I began to internalize the butterfly's power. I began to molt into a new skin with fledgling wings.

As I progressed through life with these newly-discovered wings, I became increasingly drawn to observing butterflies in nature. They have proven much more than just precious gems found amongst clouds or prize trophies for kindergarteners to catch in their nets. The butterfly has shown itself as the hidden alpha of the animal kingdom — a leader and trendsetter amongst organisms both small and large, a fearless change-maker enabling them to outsurvive the rest for the past fifty-six million years.

With the wings and strength of the butterfly latched to my shoulders, I proudly embraced the challenge posed by this delicate yet powerful creature — to be a leader and a change-maker. Recognizing many social injustices in my community, I was inspired by the butterfly to become a voice of change. Driven by the butterfly's creativity, I developed a social justice discussion program to take place at my high school, and became a local leader and fighter against corrupt politics in the 2020 election cycle. Bloo reminds me that time moves quickly and I must never settle nor lose focus in the crusade for justice. I hope to use this fragile time to advocate for equality in medicine, combining my passion for science with advocacy to leave a lasting legacy.

Today, the lessons taught by the butterfly are never far from my mind, whether I'm sitting in my English classroom discussing Beowulf, dreading the prospect of my upcoming integral exam, or even studying Darwin in Biology.

All these years later, as I ponder my defining characteristics and core values, I recognize that it is my time to become the butterfly — to embody Darwin's words and face life with the courage to create change as I break free from my cocoon and enter the long-awaited adult world.



# Nine.

“With the blazing morning sun beaming through the window, I had an inclination to make a stand to sell Lebanese laymounada - a light lemonade flavored with a splash of rosewater. Throughout my childhood, anytime the temperature spiked over seventy degrees, there would be laymounada waiting for me at my Teta’s (grandmother in Lebanese Arabic) house.

At that moment, I scoured the cabinets and secured the glass pitcher only to realize we did not have lemons. To my disappointment, I realized my days of being an entrepreneur and generating revenue from my laymounada stand were over before they could even begin. I sat at the kitchen table, wallowing in disappointment. I wanted everyone to be able to taste my Teta’s laymounada. Suddenly, I had an idea that would either prove to be inventive or a total failure. I would sell lemonade without the lemons. Revolutionary, right?

I ripped off a rectangular sheet of paper towel and jotted down my business plan. I listed the key elements of the business plan: a drawing of a cup, a rose, and the price- “fifty scents”- to correlate with the rose-themed business. I sat outside of my childhood home located in a cul-de-sac of five houses and sold my neighbors a rose drink- a combination of filtered water, packets of sugar, and a dash of rosewater. Granted, I only made about \$10 from a combination of my parents and generous neighbors who did not drink the “lemonade”, but the experience allowed me to realize regardless of the obstacle, if you are passionate, you can persevere. Teta’s laymounada was my introduction to entrepreneurship.

The entrepreneurial skills gained from my laymounada stand allowed me to establish A&G Jewelry, co-founded with my sister when I was twelve. This business focused on representing our Lebanese heritage. Using supplies we found around our house and from our local craft store, we created a variety of pieces that featured traditional Middle Eastern coins, beads, and clay baked into the shape of Lebanon. My sister and I collaborated to create marketing tools to promote our new business. Before we knew it, A&G Jewelry had earned a spot at my church’s annual Lebanese festival. After tirelessly marketing and selling our jewelry for three days straight, we had made over \$900 in revenue, which we decided to donate to the church.

Entrepreneurship took a new form in high school when my sister and I founded our second partnership, The Model Brockton City Council. We saw a need to engage our peers in local government by designing a simulation of our city council. We had to collect signatures, present to many administrators, and market our new club. The initial goal to have more people try my lemonade resonated with me as I strived to have more people engage in their civic duties. Today, over twenty-five of my classmates frequently attend my meetings.

With my first business venture selling laymounada, I made \$10; with A&G Jewelry, \$900; with the Model Brockton City Council, the revenue amounted to \$0. Although there was not a financial gain, I attained experience as a negotiator, problem solver, creative thinker, and most importantly, I became persistent.

Twelve years have passed since that summer day with my “laymounada,” and I have yet to maintain a long-lasting business. My six-year-old self would have seen this lack of continuity as a colossal failure, but instead, it instilled an intense curiosity in me. Little did I know the experience would remain so vivid after all these years. It has continued to push me, compelling me to challenge myself both academically and entrepreneurially. As I grow older, my intrinsic drive to have a lemonade stand, regardless of whatever obstacles come my way, persists as a deep-seated love of business.

When life doesn’t give you lemons, still make lemonade (or laymounada, as my Teta would say).



# Ten.

Barreling through the hallowed, mahogany double doors, I was on a mission. I made a beeline for the back. Behold, a panoply of new prospects, each beckoning me to read them.

Every weekend, my father, my sister, and I make the pilgrimage to Book Mecca. The sensations one meets upon entering Barnes and Noble are unmatched. The aroma of coffee mingles with the crisp perfume of unopened books, and the tinny music drifts from the ceiling speakers, coalescing with the clanking of the Cafe equipment, which is intermittently overcome by the barista's peppy voice on the PA system announcing the latest limited-edition dessert. Where else can one enjoy a triple-layer cheesecake among bookstacks? As Virginia Woolf says, "one cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well."

My family, however, dines on knowledge. To us, Barnes and Noble is an all-you-can-eat buffet for the mind. After we snag our favorite corner table, I sit, like metal to a magnet, immovable for hours.

I may delve into an Agatha Christie novel and attempt to outwit Detective Poirot; though I never win, I find the sleuthing remarkably similar to analyzing confounders the culprits of unexpected results-in my clinical research. Alternatively, I may crack open an atlas to test my memory from the summer when I memorized the entire world map. Or, I might read *Animal Farm* to better understand the system that ravaged Ethiopia in the late 20th century and forced my grandfather to flee his own village.

Complimenting this mission to satisfy our voracious minds comes an equally important fulfillment: engaging with the coterie of miscellaneous characters we have befriended. After visiting the same Barnes and Noble for eleven years, we have forged friendships with several regulars, including a retired teacher couple, an octogenarian with a seven-year-old brother, and an eternally sunburned man named George who shelters feral cats at his pool company's office. After a dear Barnes and Noble-goer passed away, my heart was comforted when I read in her obituary that she, indeed, would be missed by "the old [bookstore] gang." United by their good humor and love for Barnes and Noble, this unlikely group teaches me that a community can form around anything, no matter how disparate the members are. They show me that, in Aristotle's words, "educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all."

While I have the luxury of Barnes and Noble, my father's reality growing up in rural Ethiopia bears a stark contrast and defines my legacy of education. He received a meager education in a laughable schoolhouse, using sunlight to study by day, and the moonlight by night. When he was nine, my grandfather opened a school so my father could continue beyond 4th grade, unlike many of his peers. My grandfather had no formal education, yet he knew the country's constitution by heart and exhorted nearby villages to educate their children.

My father's dedication to chauffeuring me to the bookstore and the library is an artifact of his father's same dedication. And I am the accumulation of this legacy. Behind me are all of the sacrifices and payoffs of my family's dedication to education, and before me is a lifetime of opportunity and fulfillment. Though I have never met my grandfather, I feel an incredibly palpable connection to him through our shared fervor to learn and teach. My father's and grandfather's stories remind me that education is not a commodity for many, but a privilege that I treat as such. I cherish all of my education's wonderful consequences: the obscure curiosities I have indulged in, the strong sense of identity I have developed, the discernment and morals I have bolstered, the respect I have gained for different viewpoints, and the ambition for excellence that I have inherited and extended. They are what fuel me, my college education, and my drive to pay it forward.

