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Writer's Evolution Essay

When I was eight years old, I began to keep a journal. I would come home every day after school, and write about my day. Although this practice prompted me to tell numerous authority figures that I “wanted to be a journalist” when I grew up, I realize now that what I was doing was not even really writing. My journals consisted mostly of lists: lists of my best friends, favorite foods, places I wanted to travel, etc. I wrote as if someone later on would be reading these lists, carefully taking note of my likes and dislikes. My spelling was impeccable, and pages were torn out where I had “messed up”. I would articulately name these seemingly random things, but never elaborate on them whatsoever. I figured the many future readers of my lists wouldn’t really care *why* I wrote the things I wrote. However, looking back through these entries, there is so much more I would like to know. Why was I so obsessed with chocolate milk for an entire year? Why did I decide that I hated cats after watching an episode of Law & Order with my mom? Everyone always says that keeping journals is a good way to keep in touch with your own emotions, but I never really inserted any emotion at all. Entering into college, this detached, factual way of writing was still a part of me – and I didn’t even realize it. It wasn’t until I made the conscious decision to begin writing for myself instead of anyone else that I felt as though my writing was truly successful. Going off the map and developing my voice as a writer in unexpected ways has proven to be the most beneficial part of my time in the Minor in Writing.

The first paper I remember writing at the University of Michigan was an analysis of a Salvador Dali painting called “La Persistencia de la Memoria”. I wrote it the night before it was due, similar to how I had written every academic paper throughout high school. My study of the artwork read more like a list of attributes rather than an in-depth exploration. I wrote:

There is no doubt associated with the element of death except for at what time it will occur, and the ants attacking the clock seem to portray a feeling of anxiety about the demise in the future. Furthermore, the images in the painting are all slightly rendered, as if the viewer is seeing the picture through a dreamlike state. The fact that the creature in the middle of the foreground is completely unidentifiable further shows the uncertainty Dali has when it comes to time and reality.

It is now clear that I had little interest in the subject and, therefore, did not take the time to elaborate on any of my surface claims. I wrote what I needed to write in order to get a good grade, and then I turned it in the next morning. But what had I gained from this experience? Not much. And what had my professor learned about me as a person? Nothing at all.

My sophomore year of college, I took a Literary Studies class. This was before I had decided to enter into the Writing Minor, and I was still filling my schedule with writing classes in order to get an extra A on my transcript. I had become fairly good at telling professors what they wanted to hear; I knew what I needed to include and I never exceeded those expectations. In this class, I wrote an analytical essay about Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*. I made a relatively substantial claim about the presence of

maternal longing from the main character, Edna Pontellier. This was the type of claim that needed much exploration, and I simply did not deliver:

It seems as though Edna's instinct would be to return to her childhood in order to share a bond with her mother once again. She is led by her immature beliefs to want a womb-like world, one of protection and of innocence. The magnetic effect the sea has on her corresponds with the embrace of a mother. When she goes to commit suicide, Edna is very childlike and unthinking, returning to the island where she had originally “awakened”.

Once again, I listed claim after claim without enough evidence to back it up. And once again, I came away from this paper not any better or worse because of it. I got the grade I had aimed for, but my writing was leaving no impact, and I felt no connection to it. The one comment left by my professor was: *Dig Deeper!*

The next semester, I declared a new major, and found myself in an introductory Communications class. My professor was incredibly well known and well liked, and in a class of 250 students, I knew that I would never stand out. We were asked to read a book about media politics. The author made several eccentric political claims that I did not agree with. I suddenly was faced with a new dilemma: I knew what I had to write in order to get the grade, but was it worth sacrificing my ideals and beliefs in order to do so? Was it a question of swallowing my pride to agree with the boss? Or was this finally the time to let my own voice be heard?

I chose the latter, and I received the mediocre grade to match. The comment on my grade read, *Very well written, but I just don't agree with what you have said!* I had finally written something worthwhile, something that had taken real emotion and

consequently, had taught me something about myself. And although my honest writing had betrayed my GPA, I felt better about it than I ever had about any piece of writing. It was crazy to me how deeply I could analyze and pick apart a topic to which I felt such a strong connection. I spoke with an advisor about the Minor in Writing the next day. I had more to say about the topics I cared about, and more to learn about myself by doing so.

This past semester, I enrolled in a narrative non-fiction course. One of the main goals of the class was to create work that was meaningful to you as a writer. I finally was able to write about anything that I wanted, and at first this was daunting. There were no set guideline, no specific word counts or topics. These were not papers I could begin the night before they were due. They went through multiple workshops, and my peers questioned me relentlessly about the stories I told, uncovering my distinctive voice in the process. This writing process forced me to feel through my writing; every word I put down was put down for a reason. It was in this class that I wrote my favorite – and perhaps most challenging -- piece of writing to date. It was a philosophical narrative about my own fear of change. It read:

When I was eight, I was given my first camera. It was disposable, from CVS, and it rapidly manifested into my most precious possession. I became obsessed with capturing *everything*. To me it was perfectly logical: if I captured it in my small plastic box, I could hold onto it forever. Nothing would be able to change too much if I still had the memory imprisoned so precisely.

This paper was unlike anything I had ever written before; it *dug deeper* to discover a part of me that I didn't even know existed until I saw it on the white page in front of me. I slowly began to realize that my previous matter-of-fact style of writing was reflective of

my own love of control and need to adhere to strict rules in my own life. Similar to the pristine journals of my childhood, my academic papers had been devoid of emotion and significance. But by venturing off the map, writing what I wanted to write instead of what was asked of me, I started to like my words much more. Writing had transformed into a way to come to know myself; I was no longer writing for anyone else. I was creating things that were meaningful to me.

Now, as a senior, I have resumed my hobby of keeping journals. My journals look a lot different this time around. In fact, they probably wouldn't make much sense to anyone reading them. But I don't do it for anyone else. I fill them when I need to talk through something; when I have stories I want to remember, or letters I want to write. These notes scribbled down, with words crossed out and pictures drawn in the margins, have come to represent my own voice. I like to think that if someone were to read my journals, he or she would immediately know it was me who wrote them.

In the Capstone, I am being asked to create something that means something. Vague prompts such as this one have grown to be my favorite kind. I am able to veer away from the traditional form of writing, and work towards making something that is a reflection of myself. My promotional video for the University will explore my own favorite parts of my past four years here, while also reaching out to incoming freshmen. This kind of project is especially important to me, after experiencing severe homesickness my first year at UofM. As I prepare to graduate this spring, I am becoming more and more sentimental about the University of Michigan and the many gifts it has given me throughout my time here. I want to send the message that this is an incredible place to explore one's own interests and to finally let go of trying to consistently please

other people. I think this project will be extremely beneficial to me as I move onto the next phase in my life. Additionally, I now know that if I follow my instincts and stay true to my voice, my project will become much more meaningful.