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Lethargy Versus Literacy

Timothy VanWingerden

Amidst the noise of the crowd, my heart began to race as I heard the muffled sound of a piano. I started to walk towards the source of that faint sound, and as the sound became clearer, my mind became blurrier. I was at the lower level of an enormous convention center surrounded by the hundreds of high-schoolers who received an invitation to the National Fine Arts, just like me. While I continued to walk closer to that sound, my lungs felt as if they would implode. I approached a large noise-cancelling wall, the only object separating me from where I would present my piano performance. I could feel the hard, cool ground as I sank into the floor with my back up against the wall. Anyone else would be calmed by the majestic sound of the piano on the other side of the room, but as I sat against that wall, the music I heard seemed to emitting some sort of toxin that deprived me of the little sanity I had left. I couldn't help but imagine the three professors who devoted their life to teaching music, stare me down for four solid minutes while I embraced the inevitable vulnerability that a performance like this would entail.

As I sat against that wall, I looked back at the steps I took that lead me there. I thought about the many hours devoted to practicing, and the drive that was needed in order for me to succeed. Reminiscing further, I could recall a time when I wasn't ambitious or self-motivated. Flashing back to the eighth year of my life, I could hear my brothers and cousins yell at me, "Quitter!" they shouted. I just walked away from the competitive chalk four-square game, something I was accustomed to doing. The four-square was sketched the best a group of eight year olds' could draw it, but occasionally my older sister would make it for us, using the geometry that she learned from school. It seemed that every time we drew the perfect four-square, it would rain the next day erasing everything except for the memories. We sketched it on the pavement where the cars were supposed to park; it was drawn beside the towering pine trees

at the end of our driveway, which allowed for some shade to cool the pavement. A collection of pine needles would accompany the experiences stored in that 8ft x 8ft space.

I lived in the rural area of Kentucky, with my backyard consisting of rolling hills and luscious grass; thick, juicy grass. The kind of grass that would make you itchy just by looking at it. It really didn't help the fact that Kentucky is one of the most pollen-polluted areas in the country. Add being allergic to anything that's green, with something the doctor called "iron deficiency", and you have a kid who wants to do what all the other kids do, but without the energy to do it. Although having allergies and being anemic was a legitimate crutch of mine, I gradually began to associate that with a true weakness I struggled with: an indifference and unaggressive approach on life. From building LEGO to playing four-square, I would halfheartedly engage, and finish in the same lethargy I began. It was so normal for me to start something without completing it, that I didn't even know I was doing it anymore. This trend continued, and I continued to embrace the belief that my undisciplined habits were just something that defined who I was, a character trait.

I always had trouble expressing myself. Unlike my mom who could tell you everything about her just by the expression displayed on her face. I can see her waking up my brothers and I in the morning singing a cheerful song to get us out of bed. I remember my mom saying to me, "I can never tell what you are thinking." She would say with a thoughtful look on her face. My parents never treated me as a special kid, in fact, I even stopped telling everyone that I felt "dizzy" because I was tired of being called a quitter. I didn't want to be special, or different. I didn't want to have that handicap my dad talked about when he went golfing with my uncle. I still desired the attention, but just not the derogatoriness that was associated with it. My mom was always empathetic towards me because she understood that I enjoyed playing, and she assumed I wasn't using my excuse as a way out like my siblings and cousins would complain about. I remember the words she told me that stuck with me, "Our greatest weaknesses grow to become our greatest strengths." At eight years' old, I didn't understand what that meant, but it rang in my head again and again.

"Just be honest, you don't want to play, why can't you admit it?" Phil, my older brother yelled to me as I ditched out early from

the post-dinner traditional four-square game. Everything Phil said was loud, and people who did not know him would think that he was angry. Phil was not angry, just annoyed. Phil was like those miniature dogs; he had a really big mouth, but he never owned up to what he said. I wanted to tell him that my head felt like it was spinning and that it was hard for me to stand without holding on to something, “I don’t feel well, I’m going inside.” I said sluggishly. Engaging in a verbal battle with Phil is like trying to nail jelly to a tree. I cannot remember who the best at four-square was, or who stayed in “king” position the longest, or the top-ten plays, but walking away feeling the ominous stare of rejection by my cousins and brothers will remain clear in my mind. There was truth in what the others were thinking, and that is what scared me the most.

The door squeaked as I walked into the foyer of our house which was also the mudroom, and the hallway leading to the kitchen. It was a narrow hallway piled high with shoes of every size. The walls were decorated with ancient wallpaper that was curling at the edges, but thankfully coats were hung, covering the aged wall. The rough brick floor could be felt as I walked down the hallway towards the kitchen, these were the bricks that were responsible for the holes in my socks. As I walked into the kitchen, Mom was cleaning up after dinner, the smell of authentic Italian sauce permeated the room. I began to drag my feet and put my head down, waiting for Mom to notice me, “Honey, what’s wrong?” “I don’t feel well” I mumbled. I made it so that it was hardly audible, just enough for her to dote over me. She took me into the living room where Dad was watching the news. He didn’t really watch the news since most of the time he would be sleeping, but somehow he was always conscious enough to mute the advertisements. Mom set me up with ice cream and had me lay on the couch as she rubbed my head. What’s not to like about iron deficiency and allergies?

Laying on the couch, watching the news with Dad, those words that my mom told me come back to my mind, “Our greatest weaknesses grow to become our greatest strengths.” Eating ice cream while getting a head rub by Mom is any kid’s dream, but as I lay on that couch, all I saw was moving pictures on a screen, and the only flavor I could taste was cold. I lay there facing an internal battle. I thought about the words Phil would say to me, and I knew that they were true. I must overcome the desire to quit, and give up not

because I'm sick of being called a quitter, or because I wanted respect, but because I knew that it was a flaw and it was starting to define me. The truth was that I refused to admit I was content embracing the humility of being called a quitter, to ultimately please the desire to do what it was that I wanted to do.

It has been said that when an individual who has been obese for a majority of their life, finally breaks free and regains a healthy weight, family members and close friends are the last to accept it. Stereotypes have a way attaching themselves like that. Once one becomes associated with a particular stereotype, it becomes difficult to break. There is no way of preparing for something like this, but all I knew was that I needed to change, and it needed to happen now.

"VanWingerden" barked one of the judges. My heart skipped a beat. A sudden coldness enveloped me as I entered the large, dark room. I could feel the hundreds of grim faces piercing into me while I trotted towards the giant grand piano. It was exposed in such a way that the crowd could see my every mistake; the judges were close enough to touch. I sat on the piano and took a deep breath, my heart beat in my fingers as I brought my clammy hands towards the keyboard. But as my fingers began to move across the keys, I knew this is where I belonged. The room began to brighten as I pounded the rich chords on the piano. Catharsis swept over me towards the climax of my composition, allowing the genuine expression in all its fullness to be felt by the crowd. After my performance I bowed to the judges and the audience, and I saw the happy faces of the ones I loved. Later, I would learn that I received a superior rating for my piano performance that day. I was not only happy because I received a high score, but because that score was a reflection of the time and effort I sacrificed to develop that skill.

A weakness has its way of making itself known. It can be reflected by the responses of the ones we love, or exposed just by the consequences alone. As I look back on the weakness that I struggled with as a kid, I know that it was crucial for shaping who I am today. I learned how to overcome the desire to live in complacency. Even though I still start things without finishing them, and I still have a lackadaisical approach on things, having an awareness of that tendency is what allows me to kill that temptation. Weaknesses should not be treated as a crutch, but as a challenge. We need to view our weakness as an opportunity to improve. My thoughts drift back to my mom's words: "Our greatest weaknesses grow to become our greatest strengths."