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Retrospection

Falling seems so simple—by the time you are enveloped in a downwards spiral, the crisp trepidation preceding the jump has dissipated and all that’s left is open air swaddling your body. At this point, liberation feels almost infinite. But what about when you hit rock bottom?

Here was 2020 in a nutshell—I started off as a pre-nursing major, got my EMT license, was acing all of my pre-requisite courses, winning my slam poetry competitions, chosen to debate for BYU Democrats after a stressful audition, and almost bursting with excitement to start a new research assistant job. Of course, COVID-19 destroyed every last inch of that for me; as a bright-eyed freshman who thought she had finally figured out adulthood, who had become so intertwined with opportunity that she put every inch of validation into involvement, who thought that depression had become only a thing of the past, I was crushed. Harshly transitioning from floating to falling, I didn’t understand where I was supposed to go from there, of course feeling utterly and irrevocably lost.

This was rock bottom.

When I was making decisions on what Honors Unexpected Connections course to take this semester, I turned to this class because of its focus on identity. Having relapsed into depression, I needed stabilization in my life; I would use the activities that I was involved in as a distraction, but because those were canceled, I was looking for growth and distraction through writing. One thing that we learned in the psychology portion of this semester was the Pennebaker research. How this research is conducted is as follows (per our lesson):

*PENNEBAKER EXPRESSIVE WRITING PROMPT:*

*Once you are seated in the experimental cubicle and the door is closed, I want you to write continuously about the most upsetting or traumatic experience of your entire life. Don’t worry about the grammar, spelling, or sentence structure. In your writing, I want you to discuss your deepest thoughts and feelings about the experience. You can write about anything you want, but whatever you choose, it should be something that has affected you very deeply. Ideally, it should be about something you have not talked with others about in detail. It is critical, however, that you let yourself go and touch those deepest emotions and thoughts that you have. I should warn you that many people find this study quite upsetting. Many people cry during the study and feel somewhat sad or depressed during and after it.*

We learned that this study was conducted in 20 minute sessions over either 4 consecutive days, 4 consecutive weeks, or 4 times in one day. The majority of groups that participated in this study showed great health improvements. The two key factors in obtaining health benefits had to do with first, the degree of negative emotion expressed, and second, extent to which traumatic event is reconstructed as a well-formed story. Through acceptance of the truth of what happened paired with optimism for the future, we will be able to construct a meaningful narrative; however, if we do the opposite—avoiding or rejecting the truth—we will not be able to construct an integrated story.

The main message that I took from this class was the key idea that real stories create meaning. The purpose of writing about negative emotions—trauma, even—is to articulate them in a way that solicits acceptance, all the while granting relief through expression. Rather than keeping every emotion inside without any release, it is giving validation towards an individual’s emotion when it becomes a tangible story—evacuated from the mind.

As someone who likes to write, I took lots of value from this lesson. I learned the therapeutic effects of paying attention to my emotions, allowing myself to feel and articulate those specific feelings. However, what I learned more of was to write for myself. I generally write in a very performative fashion—I create art with my words with the intention of people enjoying my thoughts. Since I know that people are more interested in the survival story, or the triumph after the battle, I cater to those desires—however, that’s not completely representative of what narrative and essaying really is. True narrative requires much more raw depth, and far less masking. The only question is, how should I go about accomplishing that?

At the beginning of the semester, we had a class discussion of what narrative truly was. It had to do with an unadulterated version of our life’s journey; though we cannot provide a completely unadulterated version of our life to a foreign audience, we can hold ourselves back from using pride as a purpose for our writing. True narrative doesn’t necessarily always pose us as the hero; though we are the main character of our own story, that doesn’t always mean that we are perfect. Main characters have their own flaws, and so do we. Narrative at its core is simply a representation of humanity and life recorded on paper. This is meant for us to learn, to cherish, and to grow.

In my own narrative, I’ve struggled with my culture and mental health, especially this year. In my Filipino culture, mental health is generally not something that is to be seriously considered. This being the case, I have kept my depression a secret for 19 years, and was only able to find help for this through therapy in the past month, after finally confiding to my parents about it. Though they may not understand it as it’s not a pertinent part of their narratives, I have accepted it as part of my own narrative. Through this class, I have realized the importance of imperfection—it is irrational to believe spotless story, so acceptance is so significant.

Considering this, I have learned so much about myself and other people. I feel much more in tune with my own mind, cognitively and emotionally. Before, I’d put so much pressure on myself to attempt to achieve an irrational level of perfection. However, after learning about narratives, I have come to accept each less than ideal circumstance as something that crafts my future, rather than something that damages it. When I apply this to my relationship with others, I believe that my relationship with them has also improved as I’ve let in more room for empathy. True relationships aren’t perfect, and it would be foolish to accept that; each of our narratives are different, and it’s important to accept those differences. In regards to human culture, I’ve had a love-hate relationship with it, especially moving from a diverse city in California to a predominantly white institution where I’ve been faced with racism. I have come to understand why certain people act a specific way, and through our class discussions, I have been able to accept my own race as part of my narrative rather than rejecting it even when people from other walks of life make me feel that I should; I have also truly learned the concept of why people are like this, while still staying true to myself and not excusing it. Moreover, this class has been able to integrate education in my relationships.

So, I hit rock bottom—now what? I am ending 2020 as a political science major, having done a debate for BYU democrats, finishing up an incredible TA job, all the while trying to figure out if I should still go on my mission. This class has helped me learn that life goes on—there are so many facets of a narrative, and each one propels life through imperfection. I will never stop this learning, so my next step is to take that jump and embrace the fall.