**Submit an essay on a topic of your choice**

*How do you achieve extraordinary goals as an ordinary person? How does pen and paper become math champion when competing against living calculators? This is my story of how a nearly failing music student became an international piano competition winner despite the odds.*

“Livia is a capable, young girl if only she would stay focused and concentrate,” Ms Alice advised my mom as she was handed over my piano exam result. I failed, no surprise there. From pre-beginner class all the way through early intermediate, I was always a barely passing student. Struggling to focus, sitting down with a piano and practicing for hours were painstakingly difficult to say the least. For me, the amount of energy needed to generate that level of concentration seemed an impossible feat.

All my piano exam results came with mediocre grades noting lack of focus as my main weakness until I decided to call it a stop. “Something must be changed,” I thought. When my mid-term exam was coming up that year, instead of pretending to sit nicely and practice, I made a truce with myself by breaking my practices down to ten minute intervals at a time. Looking at the mirror, I nodded with determination, owning my unique learning style and shrugging off my peers’ hours-long machine-like method which had previously creeped into me. As I sat down to my authentic self, I would play the notes one by one, bar per bar.

“Time for break,” the alarm dozed off after my first ten.

I would play games, have a little chit-chat with my mom or the next readily available activity that would fume off the pressure build-up. The second, third and fourth rep started until I managed to secure a sustainable, workable rhythm.

“You’re an advanced student now, let’s do a Rachmaninoff piece.”

Before I realized it, I was already among one of the most skillful in class. I laid on my bed and asked myself how it happened. Yet it wasn’t necessarily about the strategy that I employed per se, it was about facing my biggest denial: that I am *not good* enough. I would frantically copy someone else’s successful routine, forcing my body to function just like others could. But that is exactly where I got it completely wrong. I thought to be able to beat a calculator in a math competition, I had to be one too. But there I was boxing myself too hard and not giving enough credit to all the agile wooden *sempoa* block users out there. Or simply the pen and paper kind of contestant like myself.

2018 was a momentous year for me. It would be a lie to say I wasn’t ecstatic when I received the gold award on the Ars Nova Piano Competition in Singapore. Yet it was more so about the justification of braving myself out of the norm. Competing heads on with my classmates seemed out of reach when viewed from where I was sitting a few years back, let alone with the world’s *crème de la crème* when it comes to aspiring young pianists. The award ultimately symbolizes the power that self-acceptance and believing in one’s self could bring forth.

I am indeed still the same girl who failed those piano exams, who possesses no extraordinary talent or skill. Yet being able to redefine ‘ordinary people’ as one who and embraces one’s beautiful flaws and turn it into one’s strength… was hands down my biggest win to date.

*Hi Monika!*

*Thank you for sharing your personal journey under the beautifully interwoven piano competition setting. I think the thought process that is truly the soul of this piece is inspiring, but as a reader I was yearning for the vulnerability aspect that is raw and deep down true to yourself. That’s why this edit came about.*

*Perhaps just a little extra elaboration on the above-highlighted comment on your “turning point” would be awesome. At any rate, great job and I wish you the best of luck in your admissions application!*

*- Matthew*