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**Sample essays 2017**

**Pomona College**

**The House of Cards Came Crashing**

**David McDevitt**

**C. There are limitations to what grades, scores, and recommendations can tell us about any applicant. We ask you to write a personal essay that will help us to know you better. In the past, candidates have written about their families, intellectual and extracurricular interests, ethnicity or culture, school and community events to which they have had strong reactions, people who have influenced them, significant experiences, personal aspirations, or topics that spring entirely from their imaginations. There is no "correct" response. Write about what matters to you, and you are bound to convey a strong sense of who you are.**

Just as the plane landed, I closed The Fountainhead interrupting Ayn Rand's famous courtroom speech. Everything Rand wrote about, from individualism to selfishness, all made sense. As I stepped foot into the dreary airport, I knew I wasn't in Scottsdale anymore. Being my first time below the equator, I was quite eager to visit Rio di Janeiro. A young man greeted my family and offered to drive us to our hotel for 60 real, roughly $18. I could tell our driver was sharp. He had a calculating look to him, but still had a gregariousness that made me feel comfortable; I thought to myself that he probably could have been quite wealthy if he lived in the United States. My father haggled down to 45 real and we hopped in the cab. At the time, I didn't think about how the driver could use the money we haggled away from him. After all, we live in a capitalistic world. As we drove into the congested city, I began to see tall skyscrapers, surrounded by tarpaper structures. The structures appeared as if a gust of wind would send them floating away. Our driver told us that the structures were called 'favelas.' Homeless people began squatting on government land and constructing houses with driftwood, old bricks and plywood scraps. What I found most incredible was that most of the people who live in the favelas are working class. Visiting impoverished neighborhoods was a sobering experience. Ayn Rand's idealistic views to which I had taken a liking, weren't so crisp and clear anymore.

After visiting South America, I realized that there is more to life than climbing the corporate ladder or becoming a high priced attorney. That's not to say that those are poor goals, but devoting one's entire life to that cause does seem quite trivial on a global scale. I want to use my fortunes to help those who weren't given an equal chance. Thinking of our taxi driver, I now understand how random life can be. How would I act if I were born in a slum or in a third world country? Would I be attending school or would I be working to survive? Our driver was just as bright as anyone I know. How would his life be different if he were born in Manhattan? It's quite possible I would work for him later in life. While the United States is developing into a meritocracy, many parts of the world have remained stagnant, leaving diligent members of society impoverished. Through this first-hand experience, I acquired a stronger sense of social responsibility and duty to those in need.

My life has insofar been quite privileged. My parents have provided everything I've ever needed to pursue my education, and there is nothing for which I am more grateful. But being appreciative doesn't better the condition of anyone else. My trip to Brazil was a personal call to action. The juxtaposition of my condition with that of the people living favelas displayed the serious inequity in the world. Visiting the slums of South America washed away my naive belief in Ayn Rand's philosophy of working for the individual. But it also brought my views to equilibrium. I will never feel guilty about earning a generous living. I also know that while it may be selfless, which is the pitfall of Randian philosophy, I cannot ignore the problems facing the world. I strongly believe in Rand's notion that a principle of all cultures should be justice; in essence, you earn what you deserve. Nobody deserves to be born into a life without hope. While a class system without lucid walls may always exist, I can only strive to provide hope for people less privileged.

**The Fall of Icarus and the Rise of Spirit**

**Silvia Lu**

**Describe a book, play, composition, poem, scientific discovery, technical achievement, myth, historic event or work of art that has inspired and intrigued you. You can assume we are familiar with the plot and details; instead, tell us what it means for you personally.**

A single pair of legs, kicking up from the ocean. Kicking up from the far right corner of a pleasant landscape depicting what may be the most tranquil morning in the history of pleasant landscapes. And there, the legs - added as almost an afterthought to the scheme of things - a splash unnoticed by the shepherd and his roly poly sheep or the farmer making even rows in the field.

In Pieter Bruegel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" I find a strange sort of inspiration and motivation; a call to action and compassion - ironically from a painting that could stand as the greatest conception of indifference in the history of art. I remember the first viewing; a sweeping glance that yielded only a mild reaction towards yet another typical renaissance painting. Then, a halfhearted examination of the title. Searching, searching for Icarus - and then finding him. Once mirth at the clever placement passed, I was filled with an unsettling feeling. Something, something about the painting was bothersome and continued to be so long after the slides had been put away.

Then, it hit me. A young boy, a boy who had flown with the birds and nearly touched Apollo's chariot, had fallen. A young boy had just plummeted to his death. He must have cried out before slicing into the dark waters and that splash must have been audible to every figure in the painting - and yet how everything turns away.

An accurate judgment on the nature of society centuries ago, the message is still applicable yet. The tragedies of others are nothing more than background noise for our daily lives - and we have willed it so. We advert our gaze from the ringing bells of the Salvation Army outside the store we enter for the purpose of buying goods that cater to more a want than a need. We change the channel on World Vision and Feed the Children programs, choosing glamorized sitcoms over the imploring eyes of a starving child. We avoid the evening news because "it's just too depressing," or worse yet, because we just don't care. We have taken to putting on an armor of apathy everyday to shield us from anything that might deter from our paths of self interest.

This is the reality.

This, I reject.

I refuse to accept apathy as protection from emotional disturbance. To me, the painting suggested the demon I have sought to banish with everything that I do. I teach to see my students excited to be playing Scrabble - not even realizing they are learning. The Junior State of America is founded on the assumption that there are adolescents who question the established and who seek to voice their opinion. Theater is all tears and screams and laughing and everything to every extreme. Yearbook documents a year with the mindset that the memories created do matter. Because everything does. I seek not to carry the weight of the world on my shoulders - one would collapse. But, I do seek to understand and to inspire. I have found my purpose in caring, in wanting to care. For so long my greatest fear was simply that nobody else would. That one day, I would awaken to find that like the painting, everyone had turned away.

After all, worse than hate or disdain is indifference. Our ability to feel is what makes us human. We are weak, we are vulnerable. We are supposed to be affected by pain - that is how we are made. So often now we allow machines and technology to dictate our schedules and thoughts, lending a sterile efficiency that has turned us into productive automatons. By allowing our minds to deny what our hearts recognize as truth is the mark not of progression, but regression. We are only able to maintain that facade of indifference so people look. My art, my voice, my words can tell the world, it is about one person. It is about every person. I can make them care.

**Rebuilding the Bubble**

**Anonymous**

**Open Essay Question**

When I was a little kid I used to carry around notebooks which I filled with hundreds of stories ranging in length from a single, whimsical sentence to pages and pages of fantasy. Every hour of the day, there were countless images and ideas running through my head. I remember writing down my stories while riding in cars, while walking down the street, while sitting through another day of second-grade math. My parents couldn't stop bragging about my creativity, and my third-grade teacher signed my yearbook with, "I'm waiting for your first novel." And then, somewhere along the way, I lost it. My mind grew up, and my colorful, crazy inner world was taken over by training in that purely adult skill: Logic. I started thinking, "Nah, rabbits can't dance." Gradually I turned away from creative writing, and after a few years, when I stopped to look for my imagination, it seemed to be lost.

Children look at the world with a certain clarity missing in adults. Children don't censor or second-guess themselves, and are thus able to express their ideas more purely. When they write stories, they don't worry about infusing each word with deep multiple meanings, and often come closer to expressing what is truly going on inside their mind. After re-reading some of my old stories, I've come to realize that my ease of expression was founded in my lack of self-consciousness about the English language. I was entirely unconcerned with grammar, with topic sentences and supporting paragraphs, and yet my ideas shone through in spite of -- or perhaps because of -- my unawareness of the science of writing. Language, if wielded with too much calculation, can be extremely limiting. Thoughts don't naturally come in coherent sentences; words are just a common ground that people have invented to make communication easier. A lot of pure meaning is lost in the translation of an image or idea into words. We all assume that language is such an innate part of us, but it's not, not really.

Perhaps it's not so with everyone -- I can't pretend to know what's going on inside other people's heads -- but my thoughts simply don't come in word format. I don't think in verbs and prepositions. My ideas, when they come, bubble up inside my head as bright, round, colorful pictures that are nearly impossible for me to describe. After those first few years of easy expression, it's become very difficult for me to put my creative ideas into writing, because it frustrates me that I have these beautiful pictures and emotions floating around inside my head that don't convey themselves readily onto paper. For me, words can get in the way of writing.

In high school, being a good analytic writer is considered far more important than being able to write a beautiful, imaginative story. Over the past several years, I've worked hard at becoming a good analytic writer, yet my attempts at creative writing have been few and far between. I remember one story in particular, a creative assignment on The Scarlet Letter. I was reading the final chapter of the novel when I jumped up off my bed, and ran to my desk to jot down a single sentence. It described -- badly -- an image that had just come into my head, an image of a young girl staring out the window of her apartment building, watching a woman standing in the glow of a streetlamp with hail stiffening her carefully-done hair. The words that I wrote at the time, however, did not describe the image in my mind. The story was horrible. I remember selecting each word carefully, loading each sentence with multiple meanings and terrible self-consciousness. What I realized then was that it wasn't that I didn't have the ideas; I just couldn't find a natural way to word them. I was trying to imitate people I considered "great" writers: Austen, Hawthorne, Ginsburg. What I hadn't yet found was my own method of expression.

Recently I've started writing stories again. I've been allowing myself to simply write down what comes into my head, sentence after sentence, without concerning myself with semantics and form. And, at last, here it is again: my imagination! When I allow myself to find my own way through my head, without concerning myself with how others might view my writing, I am at last able to tap into that imagination which, I now realize, has been there all along.

Perhaps imagination emerges only when the mind isn't being stifled by facts and rules, but when it is roaming and questioning and discovering new ideas, as it does during childhood. This year, more so than ever, my classes are making me think, and my teachers are giving me the freedom to develop my own ideas about what I'm studying. I've found that my class discussions overflow into my phone conversations with my friends, and are explored at the dinner table with my family. Every day I find myself questioning different things about my life, sparking my imagination and urging me to write. At last, I'm beginning to understand that there is a place for imagination alongside those "writing rules" I've learned, and I think I'm finally learning how to put the two together.

**Thinking Globally Angela**

**Viti Beckon**

**A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.**

Recently, my family unearthed a home video on an old Beta tape from when I was three years old. In the video, I was sitting on my dad's lap with a globe in front of me, and he was asking me to point out different countries. "Where's Vanuatu?" or "Which one is Fiji?" he would ask me. Sure enough, there I was, pointing to the little island nations. Undoubtedly I promptly forgot their locations after learning them, because I certainly don't remember them now. But looking at that tape reminded of some of the unusual aspects of my childhood.

My father made sure that we learned about the most obscure societies, and vociferously denounced mainstream American culture. His theory was, if it's what everyone else thinks, it must be wrong. I can't remember a time when he was not constantly telling us how much better the Chinese do this, how much better the Russians do that, or how much more polite the Japanese are.

My sisters and I did not immediately appreciate my dad's cosmopolitan view of the world. Like most little kids we just wanted to fit in; we enjoyed eating at McDonald's and listening to pop music, not eating somewhere "interesting" (which invariably meant trying something we could not identify) and listening to Global Beat on NPR. However, our dreams of being normal were not to be realized. When I was five, we moved to Okinawa for two years so my father could do his post-doctoral research on the birds of the Ryukyu Islands. With barely two weeks notice, we had to give up all that had become normal for us and move to a place where we stood out so much that people on the streets came up to ask if we had dyed our hair and if they could take pictures with us. Even in this foreign environment where we longed for home, my father still did not allow us anything familiar or mainstream. There are lots of American restaurants in Japan, but of course we were not allowed to patronize these purveyors of Western culture. We had to eat at the tiniest mom-and-pop places my dad could find.

Through it all, my dad never stopped telling us how wonderful Japan was and what a great experience this was. Eventually, I actually started believing it. I attended local schools and made friends despite language and cultural differences. What was once foreign and scary became comfortable and sometimes even enjoyable. At the age of five I was probably not conscious of it, but Japan and my father's incessant glorification of Eastern cultures helped me form a mind that is remarkably open to other cultures.

As I have grown older, I have learned to think critically about my dad's pronouncements, and to understand that he was prone to exaggeration, whether for the sake of argument or to counter prevailing cultural chauvinism. I learned to take everything my dad said with a grain of salt, but there was almost always some truth to his tirades. The Japanese really are more polite than we are, not to mention the fact that they make better cars. If I had taken everything my father said at face value, I would have seen nothing but the flaws in American culture and the good points of Asian culture. Obviously, there are good and bad aspects in both, and avoiding looking at the whole picture leaves one with a sort of tunnel vision that is not open-minded at all.

While my childhood experiences made me particularly sensitive to and appreciative of other cultures, they failed to make me equally aware of the importance of open-mindedness within our own culture. I confess I was guilty of a similar sort of tunnel vision, but on a micro scale. In part as a result of living in a liberal college town, I assumed for a long time that being open-minded and being liberal were the same thing. I knew in the back of my mind that conservatives existed, but to me they were only this vague, non-specific entity that I assumed dwelt somewhere in "middle America." I did not have to deal with them, and thus assumed that they held their beliefs only because of ignorance. A lot of Davisites share that opinion. Liberals, myself included, often criticize conservatives for not being open-minded. But by not trying to understand the other side and instead simply writing it off as being "wrong," I made myself just as closed-minded as the most Bible-thumping of moral conservatives.

My father taught me how to be accepting and welcoming of other cultures, but I had to teach myself how to be accepting of my own culture. The perspective I share is no doubt a little bit that of the little girl pointing to the island nations on the globe, but it is also that of the Davisite who is no longer afraid to encounter differing opinions.

**From Humble Beginnings**

**Anonymous**

**Open-ended**

My father has always told me that education can break down many barriers, whether they are class, racial, or religious. For this reason my father has made it a priority for me and my sister to attend well established private schools. This education has come at a heavy price to my father. As a truant officer, he has had to work extremely long hours in some of the toughest areas of Los Angeles.

I know there have been great accomplishments made over the last forty years concerning social and racial equality. My father and grandfather would have never been able to attend my high school, Pilgrim School. However, attending Pilgrim School has opened my eyes to the continuing inequalities in society. My school claims to be one of the most diverse schools in Los Angeles; however, I am the only African American student in four of my classes. Many of my friends drive new cars, while I could not even get my drivers license because my family could not spare the money. While many of my classmates drive home to neighborhoods like Hancock Park (a very ritzy part of Los Angeles), I must go home to Gardena, often taking an hour and a half to get home on public transportation.

During these long rides home I pass through many desperately poor areas of town. I know that most children living in these poverty stricken areas do not have the opportunity to attend a school like mine. These students are attending public schools that are under funded, overcrowded and mismanaged. These schools are the reoccurrence of Ringgold Colored High School in modern times. I know that if my father had not sacrificed and worked for me, then I would be one of those children attending these schools facing greater challenges and obstacles.

Because of the struggles and accomplishments of my father and grandfather I am proud to carry on their legacy of self empowerment and achievement. My grandfather wanted his heirs to be able to live in a society free from prejudice with equal opportunities for all. I see the influence of my grandfather in society and live my life as an extension of his work. One way that I would like to carry on this legacy is through education. I want to give back to the community through medical research and discovery. This is my dream, to help ailing patients and to contribute to the welfare of future generations.

**Nikki in the Bubble**

**Anonymous**

**Talk about the meaning of any photograph.**

As I watched my first black and white print slowly emerge from nothingness, the methodical ticking of the timer behind me, I smiled as a wave of excitement passed through me. Without thinking, I began to dance to the rhythm of the clock. From the moment I developed my first print, I have been captivated by photography: the smell of darkroom chemicals, the feel of a slippery print between my fingertips, and the way that the safelight makes everything look black and white, transporting me back in time to an old movie. After two years and hundreds of prints, I still do a little dance every time I watch a print materialize in the developer.

For me, manipulative photography is a unique and effective means of communication, a way to express my ideas and opinions about the world. I use "trick" photography techniques - including double-printing, superimposing negatives, dodging, and burning - as tools with which to transform my intangible ideas into concrete images. I approach my photography by first deciding upon a thought or feeling I want to express, or a statement that I want to make. I visualize the final picture, and work backwards to figure out how to create it.

I chose this picture of my six-year-old sister, Nikki, for two reasons. First, it demonstrates how much time and energy I devote to photography. More significantly, it exemplifies how I use photography to express abstract concepts visually. With this photograph, I am conveying my thoughts and feelings about the changing nature of growing up. Like most kids, I hear stories from my parents about the "good old days," where life was easy and kids were carefree. When I compare these stories to my life and other teenagers around me, it seems that we are growing up and maturing much faster. I see this already in my sister, who is only six. Living in a house with two teenage brothers, she has already started to move away from childhood. But she seems conflicted about this, desperately trying to balance her desire to be more "grown up" with a competing desire to retain her childlike nature. I, too, have a cautionary voice inside of my head. It reminds me, as I take on more and more academic and community responsibilities, to keep things in perspective, to remember to have fun, and to enjoy the lighter side of life.

It is this tension, this balance between maturity and childhood, seriousness and fun, that I was trying to capture with this photograph. I had a vision of my sister, Nikki, blowing bubbles, with an image of herself inside one of the rising bubbles. As she blows the bubbles upwards, symbolically pushing herself away from childhood into a more adult world, another part of her is reluctant to grow up. The juxtaposition of her concerned expression as she blows bubbles with her look of anxiety as she attempts to break out of the rising bubble serves to suggest this inner struggle. The image of her trapped in the bubble, frantically trying to escape, symbolizes the subconscious voice inside her head urging her not to grow up too fast, not to give up her innocent, playful side.

The technical process of transforming this idea into an actual photograph was a real challenge. I needed a picture of my sister blowing the perfect-sized bubble in a very specific position, with a facial expression that would indicate a feeling of angst and uncertainty. Not surprisingly, given that she is only six years old, it took almost a hundred pictures and the promise of chocolate chip cookies to get it just right. I also needed an image of Nikki crouching down, pretending to be stuck inside of a bubble, this time with an expression of panic. Another twenty-five pictures; more cookies. I then had to figure out how to print the two negatives taken under different lighting conditions on the same piece of paper, sized and aligned correctly, without losing print quality. I spent days attempting to create on paper exactly what was in my head. I made over thirty prints, but not one was quite right.

One Friday, after basketball practice, I asked my photography teacher for the darkroom key. After experimenting with a few new techniques and creating ten or so more failed prints, I still could not get it right. With the school now closed and all of the students and teachers gone, I decided that I would not leave the darkroom until I had perfected the photograph. On the twenty-first try, I slipped the still blank paper into the developer with anticipation and turned the timer to two minutes. As the rhythmic ticking of the clock echoed like a drum through the vast emptiness of the deserted school, I, alone in the darkroom, watched as the exact vision inside my head materialized on the paper. With a smile of relief and a sigh of accomplishment, I began my dance.

**Twinkle Twinkle Little Star**

**Sheliza Kabani**

**Write about a personal quality, experience, talent or contribution you will make to the ….**

When we were young, we were all asked what we wanted to be in the future. Some of us said a firefighter, some said an engineer or a lawyer, and the some even said school janitor. However, I only had one goal for my future. For me, all those hours of staying up until dawn, doing endless amounts of homework, and drinking coffee to keep me up were for one purpose: to become a doctor. I was always stubborn when I was little and I always had to have whatever I wanted, even if it took me years of hard work to get it. Similarly, I am truly determined to become a doctor, and I know that I will work hard, persevere, and achieve my goal.

I have wanted to become a doctor since I was in third grade, but there was one particular reason why I really wanted to pursue this career. My little cousin, Shawn, was diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes at the age of six. Shawn, now thirteen, has had to grow up giving himself injections and restricting his intake of sweets. Throughout the years, our family has always had to buy sugar-free items and low-carbohydrate foods. My family and I sacrifice eating sweets and candies for the sake of my cousin. Also, whenever we go to a sleepover or someone’s house, I have to make sure that Shawn checks his blood sugar and that he eats accordingly. Sometimes, Shawn’s blood sugar gets low at night, and he starts behaving strangely. When this happens, it is my responsibility to give him glucose or some form of sugar and to wake up my parents.

When I see my little cousin’s eyes light up with joy every time he is allowed to eat a piece of cake or a brownie, I know that many more kids might face this problem in the future. I realized that if I help them, if I give them support like I support my cousin, then they too could learn to control their sugar intake and to monitor their carbs. I know that if I get the chance to help children who are sick, I will be successful. I will work as hard as I possibly can to make sure the children are well taken care of and nurtured. The journey will be tough and it may have a few bumps on the road, but with the type of motivation I have, I won’t let anything get in my way.

I knew that I had really affected Shawn’s life when he actually wrote a report about me and presented it to his class. When Shawn was in the first grade, he had to write a report on his personal hero. At home, Shawn asked me questions about my favorites, my goals for the future, and my inspirations. I didn’t know why he was asking me these questions, so I answered the questions with silly answers, just to humor myself. For example, when Shawn asked for my favorite food, I said it was chocolate chip cookies with peanut butter. The next day, when I went to pick up Shawn from his classroom, his teacher started asking me what my secret was, and how I appealed to little kids so much. At first, I was confused, and I thought the teacher had mistaken me for someone else, but a piece of paper on the classroom bulletin board caught my attention. When I read it, I realized that Shawn had asked me all those questions, because he thought of me as his hero, and he wanted to write a report on me. It was then that I realized how much of an impact I had in Shawn’s life, and that my little cousin admired me as much as I admired him.

My little cousin is my main inspiration, and I know that because of him, I have always been motivated to become a doctor. I am 100% sure that I will do whatever it takes and I will work as hard as I possibly can to become a doctor, and help children like Shawn. Without Shawn’s bravery and courage to fight this disease, I would not even be half as inspired as I currently am to pursue a career as a doctor.

**Where Was I?**

**Sheliza Kabani**

**Newton's First Law of Motion states that an object in motion tends to stay in motion in the same direction unless acted upon by an external force. Tell us about an external influence (a person, an event, etc.) that affected you and how it caused you to change direction.**

The day: December 27th, 2007. The time: 6:45 PM. The location: Karachi, Pakistan. There was nothing out of the ordinary on this crisp December day, or so I thought. I did not know that this ordinary day would soon become one of the most important days in the history of not only Pakistan, but also the rest of the world. My family and I were visiting my cousins in Pakistan for winter break. We didn’t usually go out to dinner on weekdays, but because my cousin had just won a special award, we all decided to go out that night. The restaurant was located about five minutes from my uncle’s house, so it was a fairly short drive. We left the house around 6:30, and ordered our food at 6:42. During the wait, I thought briefly about how the lights had been going out at my cousins' house for the last couple of days, and how the restaurant would be thrown into a state of panic were such a thing to happen here. However, I knew that the restaurant used an electric generator, and I quickly dismissed the thought. About a minute later, the lights started flickering, and I heard three sounds that resembled gun shots. I didn’t think much of it - my first thought was that it was a couple of kids playing with fireworks. Soon after, all the lights shut off and people started whispering and screaming. I didn’t know what was going on, but then my grandmother told us that Benazir Bhutto, the former prime minister of Pakistan, had been assassinated. Just as I had predicted, everyone began panicking and running out of the restaurant. My family of nine gathered together, aware that we had to get back home as soon as possible. The assassination of Ms. Bhutto was an enormous shock to the country, and some people were rebelling by detonating bombs and initiating other violent acts.

Characters on TV are constantly being thrown into life-threatening situations in which they have to act quickly and make difficult choices. I always thought that if placed in such a situation I would save everyone before myself, but I was never sure of what choices I would make. No one can predict their behavior in a crisis, but I am glad that when the time came I made the right choice and ensured that each member of my family was safe and calm before considering my own well-being. We quickly went outside, and my uncle and cousin went to get their cars while the rest of us waited. I held onto my grandmother’s hand to make sure she stayed with us. When my cousin arfived with his car, six of us squeezed in. Luckily, the drive was short, and my cousin was able to take alleys, avoiding the main roads where the trouble had surely begun. Once we got home, my grandfather ran to turn the news on. Every single channel was talking about how someone had managed to kill Benazir Bhutto while she was campaigning for the upcoming elections in Pakistan. It was said that someone had shot her in the head and the chest, and had detonated a bomb right next to her car.

I was shocked, dumbfounded, and panicked all at once. I was particularly struck by the fact that my dad had been at a business conference in a city close to where the assassination took place. I could not believe that people were behaving like criminals at a time like this. Videos were being shown of people destroying random cars on the street with hockey sticks and stones, and then stealing from the cars; it was total chaos outside. It was announced that all the shops, businesses and marketplaces were going to be closed for the next three days in mourning. I was not only worried for the safety of my family in Karachi, but also for my dad in Lahore. We began getting calls from friends and relatives in the US and Canada, checking on us to make sure we were all safe. For the next three days, we were basically under house arrest; we couldn’t even leave to get food and supplies. My dad called to let us know that he was okay, but that he was planning to reschedule his flight for three days later, when it would be safer to move about.

Never before had I read so much and seen so many videos on the internet all regarding the same subject. Later on, we learned that Benazir didn’t die from bullet wounds; she was trying to duck from the gunshots, hit her head on the sunroof of her car, and ultimately died from a brain injury. All of these facts were circling my brain, and I didn't know what to do with them. When this incident happened, I realized the brevity of life, and how it can be taken away in mere seconds. Mrs. Bhutto did not know that she would die that day; her family did not know that they would lose a mother and a wife; the people of Pakistan did not know that they would lose a leader. From this experience, I learned to always act cautiously and make sure I have no regrets.

When Benazir Bhutto died, I realized that even though I am only in my first year of college, there is so much I can still do to help myself, and others, as well. The University of Southern California is full of people who know where they want to be and how much work they have to put in to get there. Previously, I didn’t know what I needed to do to prepare myself for my work as a biochemist. However, I have been through an ordeal that has taught me so much about life, and about what I need to do to accomplish my goals. More than ever, I am determined to get where I want to be, and nothing is going to stop me. I now understand the brevity of life and that I may not have all the time I thought I would have to accomplish my goals. Few people learn this lesson over the course of their lifetimes, and I have learned this in only seventeen years of existence. I can be a great asset to the University of Southern California because I belong there, and because I know that I will push myself to prove this. In today's age, personal initiative is a far better indicator of success than inherited privilege. Life is a blank slate, and it is within our power to write the story of our lives.

I am not going to brag about my college grades, my activities or my community service, because that is not differentiable in people. I am not trying to prove that I am better than every single candidate, but I know that the University of Southern California needs someone like me. One thing I can definitely ensure is that no other candidate has been through this kind of experience. People talk about the Reagan or Kennedy assassination and ask where people were and what they were doing when these important political personalities were killed. Where was I when Benazir Bhutto was assassinated? I was there, in Pakistan, experiencing everything alongside my fellow citizens. And although those were the scariest days of my life, they taught me a great deal about myself and my future. There is no better teacher than experience, and for this subject I had the best teacher in the world.

The Audacity of Openmindedness

Anonymous

Topic of your choice

The two party system of American politics is obsolete. Politicians need to recognize the futility of polarization and instead realize that it is moderation and increased openmindedness that better serves the interests of the public. Instead of only trying to prove the other side wrong, politicians should be more accepting of positive aspects from the opposing party’s viewpoint. My own openmindedness has proven useful not only in school and extracurriculars, it has also helped me gain a fuller appreciation of many other facets of life.

In my involvement on the policy debate team, I have found open-mindedness, innovation, and creative problem solving is rewarded. While I never hesitated to attack the negatives of an opposing team’s arguments, I always find it necessary to acknowledge their obvious positive aspects in order to appear more credible to the judge. Ignoring their positive issues or writing them off as unimportant would not help me win an argument; it would only make the judge more sympathetic to the other team. Only by acknowledging their strengths could I develop a more meaningful discussion of the issue that would illustrate to the judge true understanding and engagement. Approaching topics with an open mind allows me to think creatively and address issues holistically, developing unconventional, unpredictable strategies that are the foundation of my debate successes.

Being open minded has also helped me gain a greater appreciation of others’ talents, despite my lack of ability in a particular area. Polarization and closemindedness do not just exclude the undesirable aspects of life, they also eliminate some of the most enjoyable parts. Many have a tendency to dislike things they are not good at or viewpoints they may not understand. For me, watching someone else artfully master the intricacies of sheet music and violin solos or another person launch a perfectly aimed basketball through the hoop only fills me with wonder and joy at the ability of others to excel in fields I cannot. My lack of natural ability in things like the violin or basketball might limit my potential to perform in such activities, but I can still enjoy the things I am not good at and value those who excel in areas I am lacking.

My determination to be openminded affected my academic life as well. While some refused to acknowledge the usefulness of studying pre-calculus or European history, I knew it wise to commit my time to both the sciences and humanities. Participating in both debate and the math team gave me an opportunity to vigorously exercise my mind in two diverse ways. While others insisted on only their own viewpoints during class discussions, I advocated the pragmatic middle road during heated arguments.

The failure of the two party system can be attributed to the lack of that pragmatic moderate voice. Instead of displaying embarrassing gamesmanship at every opportunity, politicians should fulfill their promises of “reaching across the aisle” to establish truly impactful and sustainable policies, doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The adoption of a more openminded approach to problem solving, like the one I strive for everyday, would greatly benefit the American political system.

**How to Behave?**

**Anonymous**

**What was a difficult obstacle you encountered and how did you overcome it? / Topic of Your Choice**

This summer, while attending a camp designed for the best high school policy debate students in the country, I noticed that only one-fourth of the participants in this camp were female. In the three and a half years I have committed to policy debate, I have never thought the activity was hostile towards female debaters. Yet female participation was clearly lacking, a fact that both puzzled and bothered me.

Realizing this predicament, I began to take notice of the expectations many in the debate community had for female debaters. Some boys seemed downright surprised that I could be just as, if not more, assertive and confident in cross-examination as them. Others expected an easier win once they discovered they would be debating an all-girl team. Of course, in most cases, this expectation was duly shattered if they happened to be debating me, as they realized I would not conform to their expectations. Finding success at the top levels of policy debate has been one of my most satisfying experiences—not just because of the wins, the education, or the skills gained, but also because of the inaccurate stereotypes I’ve helped correct.

The issue of female participation in debate was a difficult dilemma. How should I act now that I have realized there is a covert but prevalent stereotype against female debaters? Some girls find it necessary to balance biases by being overly aggressive and needlessly hostile. This extreme I avoided, since this overcompensation only serves to fuel stereotypes and complaints about female participation in debate. After a few awkward experiments with changing my own behavior around those who seemed determined to intimidate me just by being patronizing, I realized the solution lay not in changing myself, but in changing the perceptions of others. Just being the happy, assertive, optimistic and straightforward person I am was enough. I could show those who wanted to impose a stereotype how wrong they were by continuing my dedication to research and hard work and by earning respect through evidence of my success.

Policy debate, an activity that ingrains the essential values and skills of political engagement and critical analysis, should not also be an activity that discourages female participation. If women are truly turned away from an activity just because of the competitive atmosphere, then it would not be unrealistic to expect diminished female participation in broader social contexts, like the corporate business market or national politics. To foster female participation, I have taken countless hours of my time to mentor young debaters and recruit more girls to the activity. Fortunately, thanks to these efforts and the work I and others who recognize this dilemma have put in, the trend for female participation is improving. This year, as the captain of a historically male dominated high school policy debate program, I have demonstrated by example girls can have just as much success in competitive policy debate as any boy.

**Saturday**

**Donald Tan**

**2. Although it may appear to the contrary, we do know that people have a life beyond what they do to get into college. Tell us about an experience you have had outside of your formal classroom and extracurricular activities that was just plain fun and why.**

I take a deep breath to steel my nerves. I ponder for a second how ridiculous it is that a small white ball has such a profound affect on me, the man with a long metal club. “The hell with it” I finally think as I strain every muscle in my body to beat the small white ball with my driver, while simultaneously making sure my wrist does not twist, my hips sway, or knees bend. PING! The ball becomes a small white speck in the blue, riding the winds to finally rest on the soft green of the fairway. 280 yards- I could’ve done better, I think to myself.

I close my eyes.

The ball is hiked to me and I scan the field for open receivers. All I see is a mammoth tearing his way through my defense line with fire in his eyes and vengeance in his heart. Panicked I begin to backpedal, searching frantically for a receiver. No one. “It’s time to be a man” I think to myself. I sprint towards the mammoth at full speed, intending to somehow dive over him or something of the likes. The mammoth grabs me…

My eyes are closed.

Sweat drips down over my eyes. The roar of thirty thousand people pounds in my ears. I stand at the line that I am so familiar with. I stare at the hoop, my best friend, my worst enemy. “I am not afraid” is my mantra, creating a resonant hum in my mind. Free points is the perfect revenge for being fouled, I smile. I dribble a couple times, just to hear the sound. I let the ball fly… swoosh

I blink momentarily

Giant colored blocks are falling into my room. “Why must they always fall?” I think to myself. My room is clean but the blocks keep falling. “I WILL ARRANGE YOU!”, I yell at the colored menaces. I must make them fit together, I must economize my space! The blocks fit nicely together with my guidance and with a flash they disappear. My soul feels satisfaction, but as I look up a purple L approaches the new gap in my space. I sigh as they fall faster and faster, defying the laws of gravity. They are falling too fast. My room is full and they have no place to fall. The blocks become a lackluster grey.

It is dark.

Bombers roar overhead; their engines are only interrupted by the deafening blast of artillery fire. I will not last long sitting in this foxhole so I try to take a deep breath. “OVER THE TOP GOGOGO!” I yell to my allies as we jump out, machine guns blazing in cover fire. I sprint to a soldier who is pinned under an airplane. As I apply first aid I am hit by a mortar shell. Blood blurs my vision, I fade into blackness.

I have a headache. I drop my controller and stand to stretch seeing basketballs and tetris blocks floating burned into my retina. “I should probably get some exercise eventually” I think to myself, but hunger prevails and I bee-line to the kitchen. After sating my hunger and thirst I crawl into bed and drift into the land of dreams.

Saturday accomplished.

**For the Love of Hockey**

**Anonymous**

**Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.**

I think I was Canadian in a different life. Not because of my love of French, though strong, or my craving for maple syrup, though incessant; no, this Canadian lifestyle manifests itself through a kind of hockey mania. While my friends enjoy watching baseball and eating hotdogs or tailgating at football games on Sunday afternoons, the American sport fetish skipped me completely, leaving a puck-shaped hole in my heart.

Of course being born and raised in the South makes this love a forbidden one. As we play yet another round of h-o-r-s-e in P.E., my soul yearns for the crack of a slapshot, the whistle of a perfectly timed wrister. The coach tells us to pick up the pigskin, we're headed to the field. No, my heart screams, not another touch football game! You're smiling! How can you enjoy this? We march to the stadium anyway, the others oblivious of the superior game waiting for them on the ice. Our team gets the ball first and runs it past the blue line, ahem, the fifty yard line. Stop, start; stop, start. Fifteen minutes later and we've advanced exactly zero feet.

This madness does not exist in hockey. There is no mass-tackling, blitz-faking, backtracking nonsense. Just the smooth sound of sharpened blades gliding over polished ice, the smack-crack-clang of a deflected shot hitting the post, the deafening silence of an entire arena holding its breath during the pressure-riddled penalty shot, the blaring siren of the puck finally meeting the twine.

A certain camaraderie runs through the veins of hockey fans. Unlike the plethora of basketball/football/baseball fans running amok, the population of the hockey fan is much like that of the dwindling polar bear. Once while at a restaurant (by the beach, no less) my family had a waiter who divulged to us that he was a Flyers fan. I could have cried a) because it was like being one of those poor polar bears, wandering solo, thinking you're the last of your kind, when all of a sudden you round a snow dune to find out it is in fact not a snow dune but another polar bear and you are no longer alone in the world and b) out of pity because, come on, really, a Flyers fan? You traded your captain away to the now two-time defending Stanley Cup Champions and for what? An undisclosed draft pick? The back-seat GM in me rages like an inferno, but I digress.

The glorious, nail-biting, edge-of-your-seat turmoil of hockey stems from the setup, not the goal. Sure, the siren is a relief to hear, but convincing the P.E. coaches to try a two week street hockey unit that turns into a three month ultimate tournament is what breathes life into my pseudo-Canadian spirit. Whether the score is a zero-zero stalemate in double overtime or a seven-one blowout in regulation, the game always offers something priceless, even if that's just getting to know the kindred polar bear chanting next to you in the bleachers.