My childhood was challenged by a mad cocktail of depression, ADHD, and mild Asperger’s Syndrome. I was very high functioning, but I always felt out of place at parties and social events. I hated having the attention of a group; I felt exposed, naked. I was often off in my own world, just wandering in my mind, not paying attention to the world in front of me. When I got upset, I would cry. Sometimes, this would lead to a full breakdown, with screaming and hitting and crying, culminating with me sobbing into my pillow for hours. My parents concentrated their efforts on getting me the help I needed. They took me out of public school, and every Friday my mother and I would drive hours for an hour long appointment with a specialist, and drive back home the same day. Even with all of that special care, without a school that had the proper resources and staff to support a child like me, none of it would progress quickly. So my parents decided to move us across the country, from our isolated mountain home to the suburbs of Northern Virginia. I spent the next three years at a school that specializes in aiding children with Autism and other social-learning disabilities, learning about the behavioral expectations that are required for successful interaction with others. It was a grind, but to say that I flourished is an understatement.

By 8th grade, there was nothing more the school could offer. So I jumped off into the deep end; rather than staying there for my high school years, I decided I wanted to go to a “real” school. My mother described it best: “It’s like he’s going from kindergarten straight to college!” In a way I did, as while the increased workload was manageable, to complete a one hour assignment took three. I wasn’t struggling, just prone to distraction. At the time, I was a freshman, and as the year moved on, my parents became upset with my performance. I explained to them that I wanted to fail. When I said this, I was just trying to get out of an uncomfortable situation so I could go play videogames, and I never really gave it much thought after that. They begrudgingly agreed. Before I knew it, the school year ended. 2 A’s, and everything else… I was horrified with myself. I felt *terrible*. I made a vow that I would stay vigilant while I was working, that I would keep myself from straying. And it worked. After school, first thing I worked on my assignments. I finished sophomore year with a 3.9 GPA.

Something in me had changed. I allowed myself to fail, allowed myself to see how a little absentmindedness can have serious consequences. I felt the embarrassment and the helplessness, the massive shame. I never want to feel that again. I unintentionally created this little perpetual self-propelled black hole of internal motivation. It never runs out, never fades, it always makes its presence known to me. It is what keeps me going, and it grows and spreads me out the more successful I am. As a senior, I am more social and outgoing than I have ever imagined myself becoming. When I am at parties, I still feel a little awkward, but I make it work. When I have the attention of a group of people, I feel empowered. And when I am upset, I control my emotions instead of letting them control me. Had I not had these challenges in my early childhood, I would never have had to struggle as much as I did. I would never have failed, and I would have never changed into such a driven person. I would be mentally weak, and a worse person for it. So I am grateful for a challenging beginning, because it has allowed me to create my own future.