

Common App

Shuffling through boxes of my childhood memories I curiously picked up a bright yellow folder, aged with time and beautifully labeled in my mother's impeccable handwriting which seemed to be camouflaged by overlapping faded brown coffee cup rings. With the sweeping of some 25 years of accumulated dust it revealed its contents, "Angela's school report cards" in bold red writing. For some odd reason my mother kept these detailed analysis of my academic abilities even though I was brutally aware of what those aged yellowed papers possessed. As I took a deep breath, rolled my eyes and flipped open the musty old yellow folder my eyes instantly landed on a section labeled, "Comments or concerns". There is was, in all its unflattering glory!

*"Dear Mrs. Leal,
Although Angela is very kind, respectful and helpful she seems to lack in academic excellence, especially in reading and writing. We have to remember not everyone is destined for greatness when accompanied with learning disabilities" - Mrs. Grey*

On a bright sunny day in May my heart felt like it wanted to beat right out of my chest and abandon the vessel at which it resided in. I stood up clutching my notebook so tightly that I'm surprised I didn't break the binding with my 6th grader hands. That walk through the long class aisle to the front of the class where a sea of hypnotic eyes pierced my confidence and there stood Mrs. Grey, hovering over me like the dark grey cloud she embodied. She eagerly awaited my attempt at reading a passage from an essay I crafted on the book, *The Call of the Wild*, by Jack London. I gulped what was left of my pride before breaking from the shackled stares and judgment that was solely focused on me. As my voice shook and I read, I stumbled, mispronounced and slowly, mostly painfully, read my essay. I was ashamed, embarrassed and felt even more alienated than ever before. It was a never ending nightmare that I had to repeat every Tuesday with the very public and verbal disapproval of Mrs. Grey. As I closed my

notebook a deep pause took over the room, so much so I could hear the long second arm on the class clock tick in a rhythm with my heart beat. In my head I chanted with the beat, “tick...tick...looser....tick....failure....tick”.

The powerful tick of the clock would once again roar in my head as I patiently sat on a cold blue plastic chair intensely fixated on the alphabet strung across the top of the blackboard, that is until a voice broke my focus. I turned to witness the sadness wash over my mother’s face when she was delivered this blow, “we think your daughter has dyslexia and is falling behind on staying at grade level with her peers and recommend she be held back a year.”

As the seasons and years passed I took that label and let it cripple me. I didn’t strive for greatness because I was told I would never reach it. I was a story teller without a voice and a writer without the ability to express. I let society, my teachers and myself place me in a box and close the lid. Although, I would privately read the dictionary and jot down in my journals while reading books scanning structure, form and punctuation to help evolve my mediocre abilities. I was told I would never be a strong writer, yet it was the one thing I kept working on so that I could share the swirling thoughts so desperately wanting to bleed out of my pen and onto paper. Most importantly I wanted it to be read, felt and appreciated without so much judgement.

At 39 years old I sat at a table encouraging my children of their greatness and their untapped abilities to overcome any obstacle as they frustratingly completed their school work. I heard that familiar rhythm, however this time it wasn’t the tick of the clock. As I looked for the source my eyes gazed down to see it was me tapping the pencil on the table. I pondered if I was a fraud or was I finally letting my real voice speak louder than the programmed voice that always echoed at a decibel that drowned out MY voice? That night I sat up and asked myself what I wanted in life? With every fiber of myself I wanted to concur college, get a degree and become a nurse. I wanted to be the first in my poverty stricken ancestry to tackle greatness and rip off the statistical outcome of people like me.

Fast forward to 40 year old me with that familiar rhythmic tap of my pencil on my desk, however this time as a college student eagerly awaiting for my English professor, Professor Warfe, to grade my essay. It was Tuesday ironically, the days I used to dread as a child in Mrs. Gray's class. My first official English class since High School and my third semester as a proud older college student.

This was my concluding essay in the class and through his encouraging feedback approach I grew as a writer tremendously. I wasn't afraid or ashamed to ask for help or that it took me three times reading prompts to understand. If it took me ten hours to complete an essay that took someone else only two. I looked at the time it took to complete an assignment with my disability as effort rather than failure. Perseverance rather than defeat.

And there it was in all its glory, an A! I passed the class at a college level with an A and real proverbial cherry on the top of my accomplishment is hearing the professor tell me I was a skilled writer who has "risen to every challenge of this class and then some".

Again, the familiar tick of the clock fills the room but this time in my home office as my 40 year old self waits for my mother to pick up the other line. "Hello darling daughter!" she exclaims as she holds the phone to her ear. Again, my heart feels like it's going to beat out of my chest as the words come spilling out my mouth faster than my mind can compute as I explained how my journey went in my first English class in college. I concluded the call by saying, "Mom, who knew that I could be great at something like this. I guess Mrs. Grey didn't know greatness didn't come from perfection. Greatness comes from grit."

In the trash the yellow folder goes along with its labels and its assumptions of my academic abilities. I'm happy to say that dark grey cloud has lifted and a bright future with a renewed sense of abilities has risen.