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Presented by the Department of English, Minnesota State University, Mankato
The previous autumn weeks had been particularly difficult with arguments between my parents, and eventually it lead to marital counseling a few days before. The morning I was broken from my fear of my father's abrupt and unexplained bouts of anger and aggression, I was riding in the car with her. Car rides with my mother were a special treat. I would want her to keep driving past our house and to be safe with me. We'd hasten past the dark pines on the way to school, I used to imagine they were full of wolves and other dangerous monsters tearing through, and chasing the speeding car just out of eyesight. Things out of sight, or unspoken about are some of the most mysterious things in childhood, but some create a fear. This fall morning, the leaves had already dropped and turned to shreds within the grass. There was a thick fog and everything was more mystifying and eerie as I looked out the glass from the backseat with tired eyes of a ten year old. I was shaken from my daydreams when my mother broke the silence and called out to my sister and I.

“Girls, I don't know if you know this,” she said as she shifted in her seat of the boxy green Jeep Cherokee, “but earlier this week your father and I went to counseling.” She kept one calloused hand on the wheel, the other on her worn stainless steel coffee mug, and both eyes on the road. My sister and I gazed at her, as if she would explain everything away.

“He took tests, and it turns out that he has something called schizophrenia. It's nothing to be afraid of, and he's going to be getting help, he's going to go to counseling.” She still didn't look at us. Maybe she thought that by not looking at us, she wouldn't have to admit to herself that I was already scared of my father, and had been for years. We remained silent as my mother tried to lightly describe how what I saw as his general personality, was actually a combination of symptoms from his mental illness. She ended the one sided discussion and explanations of his behavior traits with “Hopefully it will get better.”

The rest of the car ride was spent listening to the morning
news and weather reports from the local radio station. When we pulled up to the school, she had one last thing to say on the matter.

“Girls, don't tell people about this, you know, about your dad. It’s... a very personal family thing. It would just be better if you didn't talk about it with other people.” My sister and I remained silent, as if already in practice of her orders, and gave her a stare that showed our understanding.

My father’s paranoid schizophrenia includes the symptoms of auditory hallucinations, anxiety, anger, aloofness, violence, delusions, verbal confrontations, patronizing manner, and suicidal thoughts and behavior. I was told that he is less likely to be affected by mood problems or problems with thinking, concentration and attention, but what about the other symptoms?

There must be a hundred different potted plants in our house, and even more varieties growing outside. There is a large vegetable garden near the house, and a very diverse flower garden that over the years has gotten the best of my mother, and become more of a wild flower garden. Throughout the summer she can most likely be found in these places, silently toiling on her hands and knees after work. Her frame hunched until the sky twists with colors to match her tiger lilies, black-eyed susans, poppies, and tomatoes. She always came in a little before sunset, with hands stained and shoes packed with the rich soil, content in a whole new degree of dirty. The potted plants inside the house make every window appear as a tangled and unruly jungle when looking in from the outside, and are there as a good occupation in the winter. Every window ledge supports plants that crowd amongst each other. The leaves vary from waxy and thick, to branched and wispy, weaving and tangled together; they beckon and strain to be touched. Large pots sprouting mysterious varieties of foliage line up along the walls like strewn solders, and stretch up and out to greet a passer-by. Through the diligent care of her plants, my mother can be seen at her best. Nurturing silently, she fully enjoys the struggle that a new plant will give her in taking care of it.

Now there are between eight and thirteen bottles of various pills in his office. There are pills for depression, more pills for suicidal thoughts, more for anger, and more for the voices. Over time he seemed to fade away and there was less of what made a human noticeable in any favorable way. Less conscious hours of mental thought, less things done to help my mother, less contact with his three friends and numerous family members, less interest in anything other than a computer or sleeping while CNN updated him on news that used to create an irritation within him. He usually didn't say a word until my mother came home from work, occasionally a comment to himself or the dog, but never directed at me. I never
spoke to him either, and eye contact was avoided. Quite honestly, I'm glad for all of these, in some twisted way. I feel almost brave and truly safe in knowing that he doesn't have much brain function with all the medications he's on. I would rather have this hollow and mute person in my house than the man who scared me until I knew better. I truly consider any of his contact with people is fake, and done through a mask.

My friend's parents would make small talk with me, as I would be at their houses often. "What did you say your father does again?" they would ask.

"Oh, he's retired." I would say with practiced poise. Every once in a while, one might get really ballsy and ask me more.

"Oh, already? What did he do for that?" That one was harder to fake, and I could usually say anything I wanted in response.

"I don't know," I would reply with a gentle smirk, "You would have to ask him."

The last real job he held was at a small casino in my hometown. The high school prom was held there a few times, but the most exciting thing going on would be a group of middle-aged men posing as some big hit seventies or eighties band when the casino would sell tickets for their concerts. I think he was some kind of accountant there, if anything. His suits and business costumes are now concealed in hanging clothing bags, away from any of the more popular clothes. Now he wears worn-out and hemmed blue jeans that hang stiffly from his short squatty frame of five foot two. His dully colored t-shirts have become ratty around the collar, and because of his short stature and large belly, fall to a length just below the inseam of his tired jeans.

Once my sister had her license, I would ride with her to high school in her 1980 something Ford Escort, that he and my mother bought and somewhat forced on her. With a dimmed blue paint color, tiny black wheels, two doors, one of which featured a small brown bullet hole in the bottom center of the driver's side, the car had an ability for something to either break or magically fall off any time I drove it. The last thing was the muffler. Eventually she wasn't there for me to ride to school with, or get some ice cream just to get out of the house. She graduated high school when I was a sophomore, and left for college the following fall and I was left to drive myself in the mornings. After school I was at cross country practice in the fall, cross-country ski practice in the winter, and through all of the seasons except summer, I would spend as much time at the local skating rink that I could, dedicating all of my remaining energy to hours of figure skating lessons and practice.
My mother works at the U.S. Forest Service. Part of her numerous job tasks is going on forest fire details for three or more weeks at a time. Places like the Daniel Boon National Forest in Kentucky, around Troy Montana, somewhere near Walla Walla Washington, and places in California like the Sequoya National Forest and Big Sur, never seem to stop burning. During one of her absences in late fall my senior year of high school; I was downstairs on the computer when I noticed previous searches made through Google. I understand that people have needs. However, none of these needs should include looking for your daughter among millions of nude pictures in hopes to find one. I stared at the various offensive phrases in the drop-box of the search engine. I wasn't thinking about how my heart had likely stopped, my mind was blank and spinning at the same time. After I had regained a sense of where I was a few moments later, I quickly stole a fearful glance at him sitting in his old green leather Lay-Z Boy recliner. For the first time in many years he had awakened a feeling that was once a very familiar plague. This time it was tinged with biting anger and hate. I saw his disheveled grey hair, with matching empty and starring eyes, and the colored reflections of light from the evening news rapidly playing quickly across his round oily face. He was distant. I was distant. Anyone that knew the tormented situation was distant.

That winter’s mornings were an icy follow-up of the cold and silent nights before. Waking up with frozen toes, I would dawdle to the bathroom and get into the shower. Considering how the nearest neighbor is at least a mile from any of the windows, curtains and blinds were never seen in my house until after this day. I heard shuffling footsteps upstairs from my parent’s bedroom hustling down the staircase, and a swift snap of the front door. This had been happening for a while now. I had always figured that my father had simply needed to relieve himself and considering he knew I was getting in the shower, he would rather take his chances outside, even if it happened to be subzero. To my fear, that was not the case, it was another glimpse at noticing something that was acutely upsetting. As I glanced through the delicately frost-laced window, I saw a face. His face will be forever imprinted into my mind. His eyes were wide, mouth slightly agape, and his gray receding hair shot off in tuffs every which direction. It darted out of sight, and a few moments later I heard the creek and crack of the front door shutting again. When I left for school that morning, I left a “Fuck You” sign in the bathroom window.

During ski practice after school, I purposefully let myself get behind in my training group. Tears stung and froze to my cheeks, and as I propped myself up with my ski poles, I managed to maintain the forlorn silence on the trail. The snow was fading from a brilliant, fresh white to a dusky blue
as I looked down into a gully from a high point on the trail. The trees were transforming from harmless figures, to dark jagged shapes cutting from the earth and closing down upon me. If there wasn't a path, it would seem as though I was the only one in the forest. As I watched the early winter sunset, I prepared myself for what I knew was waiting for me at home. I practiced what I thought would be key argument points in a cause that I still don’t know the point of. I built up the anger of eighteen years, and tried to decipher how many of my childhood memories were truthfully with someone that I knew as trustable father, someone that didn't think of me as a piece of meat. I debated over memories, to try and figure out if they were made with a father, or a man that was crazed with delusions. I held my breath walking in the front door of my house, and once inside, stopped and stood strong slightly out of his line of sight of Wheel of Fortune on the television.

“Did you tell your wife what happened this morning?” I said with a bold, loud voice. He didn't even blink.

“Hey! I’m talking to you.” I said, nearly shouting. At that he looked surprised and eerily posed. I was struggling to maintain my tough front against him now, and I knew that if he carried on the innocent masquerade, I would crumble.

“I don't know what you’re talking about,” he said as he slowly directed his short, fat head to stare into my blazing eyes. From those words on it became clear through his calm responses, and denial of anything I spat at him through my anger, that he had been doing some practicing with the voices in his head. Ten minutes later I was in my room sobbing uncontrollably, disgusted with myself and how I had seemed to have done him no damage, and hating how upset I had let myself become over the whole scummy issue. Usually I’m composed in my misery, but this was the disgusting suffering that was by no means quiet.

“Dave, what is she talking about?” I could hear my mother’s voice drifting up through the floor. She sounded genuinely worried, her voice almost scared. I stopped listening, and a few minutes later there was a timid knock on my door as my mother's head apprehensively emerged through it.

“Kari?” She inquired to all of her concerns about me by saying my name. She shut the door softly behind her, and leaned back against the wall across from my bed with her worn and calloused hands clasped together behind her back shoulders hunched, head titled back, and eyes strained up at the ceiling. Now I was to act as a wilted flower in her garden, shredded from the repulsive nature of a beast. With the two of us in my tiny room, it felt as if the house was caving in around us, bringing all
of my childhood memories down upon me. She gazed out the window, to
the corner of the room, and to the floor, and tried to think of something to
calm my pitiful sobs and gasps. But I know what she was wondering. “Is
she certain of what she saw? Why would he do that? What can I say to
her? I wish things were different. I wonder what will happen because of
this, will she make a big deal out of it, or ignore it for the family’s sake?”
As I cried alone on my bed, she stood over me as if she was supervising
my despair.

“Why wouldn't he admit to it,” I managed to spit out past the confused
veil that I sensed between us. I felt like I was wilting through my bed,
down past the floor, underneath the basement, and spreading my roots into
the dark frozen earth. The cold air seeping through the glass of my win-
dow pulled me back to my bedroom as I looked out past the frosted glass,
and strained to see anything in the night. I tried explaining it to her again;
stopping when I had to gasp for breath, or stopping from the thoughts I
still couldn't believe.

“He doesn't know what he’s doing with all the meds he’s on, you know
that.” I was surprised and insulted that she thought to defend him.

“I don't care! He knows better. He is not my father, hasn't been in years.
But for shit's sake, what the hell... what the fuck am I supposed to do
now?” Cursing felt right, but no matter how much I damned him, it would-
n't change the wreck. I had already thought for years that I was
fatherless, since the medications had dissolved the human or fatherly char-
acteristics of him, and with my cold actions against him, it was definitely
clear that I didn't want him to think of himself as my father. Regardless of
all of that, I still fully expected him to keep that distance I had forced on
him as the stranger that I was forced to live with. With little else to say to
me, she returned downstairs, and tried to get him to talk as he finished
watching Wheel of Fortune, and she tended to the more receptive plants
and flowers that lined the dark frosted windows. It wasn't long after that I
had exhausted my tears, and was fairly certain what I wanted to happen,
and even more certain of what would actually happen.

Sometimes I still simmer over my childhood memories to decipher
which were made with someone, and which were made with symptoms.
The last time I was home, I walked in the door and looked into him. I
looked past his puffy red cheeks, past the bags under his eyes, whose pres-
ence is mocking to the amount of sleep he gets, and deep into the gray
eyes rooted below bushy eyebrows. I saw the pain and anger of his soul
suppressed from medications, what I felt was the desolation of his exis-
tence, and the want for more meaning in his life, but most importantly I
saw no remorse. He still lives with my mother, and though it’s tough to go
home to that on the holidays, I stay strong and remember that the only person I can blame for not taking what I want from life is myself. I've come to terms that the only person I can faithfully trust is myself, and since my father's breakdown, I have grown past him. Whether I've grown thorns, or whether I've grown stronger, my past has pushed me up and I wouldn't want to face tomorrow in any other way.
The Amazon rainforest has long been held in awe by modern man as one of the last strongholds of wilderness that continues to defy complete domestication. Often referred to as the “Green Hell” by explorers and anthropologists, this region pits a wide range of hardships and perils against those who dare to penetrate its territories—from various forms of diseases transmitted by the hordes of bloodsucking insects to dangerous beasts and hostile tribesmen. Modern scientists have long deemed this region to be too extreme to sustain large populations, being suited only to the hunter-gatherer lifestyle of the local indigenous tribes. Yet, in recent years, the work of a few persistent archaeologists has yielded findings that have made many rethink their assessment concerning the mysterious history of this massive region. Contrary to the claims of past Amazonian anthropologists, there is significant evidence to support theories that advanced and thriving civilisations once existed in the Amazon region.

What exactly is the definition for the concept of “civilisation?” Though recent popular trends in the anthropological community have tended to frown upon the use of the term, calling it bigoted, “civilisation” can still be used as a valid concept. In historical terms, civilisation is generally recognised as having evidence of a well-ordered, well-settled social structure rather than a basic nomadic hunter-gatherer society. Features characteristic of a “civilisation” would include a stratified social ladder with defined classes, sedentary life-style, a form of religious education, and progressive engineering skills that give the ability to alter the landscape. Examples found in the aboriginal populations of America were the Maya, the Aztecs, and the later Incas.

The Amazon region was probably made famous by the adventures of the conquistadores in the 16th century, who constantly made bold and desperate forays deep into the jungle in search of rumoured golden cities. The legend of “El Dorado” was born. The term “El Dorado” had come to represent the half-mythical tales of a rich empire that had escaped European contact. Spaniards had already come across several
great civilisations throughout their conquests in South and Central America. The Aztec empire in the north had yielded a vast array of gold and silver plunder, as did the Inca empire of the Andes. If such fabulous empires existed in Mexico and the Peruvian highlands, why would there not also be others in the deep recesses of the jungle? Thus, European adventurers once again set out into the steamy interior of the continent, in search of more kingdoms to subdue.

Initial explorations of the Amazon River had already yielded tantalising clues of what sort of peoples lay beyond the overgrown riverbanks. Gaspar de Carvajal, a Dominican who accompanied the expedition of Francisco de Orellana reported encountering densely populated areas along the banks of the river that grew and stored a great abundance of maize crops. What is even more tantalising is that Carvajal also reported to have seen “many roads and fine highways leading into the interior, some of which were like royal highways and wider” (Grann 153). Other expeditions that were conducted over land gave reports of thriving populations. Philip von Hutten, a German knight who ventured deep into the Venezuelan and north Brazilian interior in the 1500s reported having beheld an Omagua city that was “so great that he could not see the farther end. The streets were straight, the houses were well laid out and ably constructed, and in the centre of the settlement was a building of great height” (Chapman 189). All accounts hinted that these great cities were rich in gold ornaments and idols. There were even accounts that told of Amazonian natives claiming that certain tribes built stone houses with interconnecting roads (Chapman 162). Such tales hardly leave the impression that the Amazon was a solid wilderness.

Because later Victorian explorers failed to locate any existing evidence to agree with the conquistadores’ accounts, they promptly dubbed them to be erroneous. They condescendingly figured that these accounts were nothing more than lies conjured up by the imagination of the romantic minds of ambitious treasure seekers and adventurers. From Victorian times to the end of the 20th century, traditional historians and anthropologists dubbed the Amazon to be a “counterfeit paradise” (Grann 30). Basically, the Amazon region is so harsh and unforgiving that only the most primitive, most basic form of hunter-gatherer society could survive. The torrential rains, constant flooding and feverish heat from the equatorial sun constantly drain the soil of many nutrients essential for large-scale food production. Thus, observers throughout the last century noted how the small-scale structure of the nomadic tribes was essential to survival so as not to exhaust the natural resources. A tribe that allowed itself to grow too numerous could jeopardise its survival by starvation. Thus, certain cus-
toms practiced to control population size in tribal groups are brutal but can be arguably necessary. Humans are completely at the undependable mercy of the elements in the tropical jungle. Such conclusions concerning the Amazon basin completely disregarded the fact that the accounts from the first European observers were eyewitness accounts. Basically, many anthropologists were critical about the complexity of pre-contact Amazonian populations because of the simple lack of complexity in the modern tribes today. Thus, archaeological work and exploration was not too extensive for the most part in the 20th century, save by a few obsessive adventurers and amateur archaeologists.

However, by 1990s, interest was renewed in the Amazonian Pre-Columbian past. Certain archaeologists such as Michael Heckenberger began excavating the Xingu region in northeastern Brazil and slowly began to make several compelling discoveries. One of the most important features to the Amazonian archaeology is the study of terra preta—or Indian “black earth.” *Terra preta* is a concentration of extremely fertile, blackened soil that dots certain regions of the Amazon basin—particularly in the Xingu. The soil of these sites is the result of carbonised plant-material left behind from prehistoric habitation. The extensive patchwork of *terra preta* throughout the region “provides evidence that pre-contact native populations were in many cases large and sedentary” (McEwan 86). Another feature to the *terra preta* sites is the abundant presence of ceramic vessels, some skillfully shaped and intricately painted. The most impressive of these artifacts, found in the region known as Santarém, provide anthropologists evidence of the past existence of “an extremely developed indigenous civilisation.” Also, evidence hinting at the past existence of a hierarchical society is in the same area in the “presence of connecting trail networks and the building of wells in areas far distant from the large rivers” (McEwan 137). Obviously, a strong leadership is needed to delegate such extensive projects as trail building and digging and maintaining wells.

Probably the most compelling discoveries found yet were by Heckenberger, whose archaeological work in the Xingu region continued to reveal more elaborate finds. Excavation slowly exposed a network of arrow-straight roads set at uniformed geometric angles up to 40 metres wide in some places. Large, fortified settlements, built in an ordered grid pattern, were found that would have held more than 1,000 inhabitants each, stretched “over an area of about the size of Vermont” (Heckenberger). Moreover, the ancients had left behind great defensive earthworks such as moats and palisade mounds. There is even evidence of technology for bridge building. The well-built cities and large road systems agree with the
previously disregarded eye-witness accounts of the 16th century conquistadores. Most of these findings roughly date between 800 and 1600 A.D. Heckenberger sums up the ingenuity of these findings by saying “all these settlements were laid out with a complicated plan, with a sense of engineering and mathematics that rivaled anything that was happening in much of Europe at the time” (Grann 273). Heckenberger maintains that the reason why such a civilisation vanished was due to encroaching pressures and diseases brought by the Europeans. Therefore, the first explorers who came to the Americas during the 16th century were able to witness the Amazonian civilisation in its height. Yet, by the time the Victorian wave of explorers hacked their way into the jungle, centuries of rapid decline had decimated the indigenous peoples back into a simple hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

It is not surprising that the remains of such large civilisations would all but vanish from the naked eye over time. The jungle of tropical Amazonia, if left unhindered, will not take long to reclaim its own territory. Modern plantations and ranches which have been abandoned only a couple decades before have all but disappeared under advancing vines and trees. Even brick walls have crumbled and disappeared under the ruthless undergrowth. Therefore, the possibility that even larger man-made works exist in the Amazon can hardly be over-stressed.

To what degree of grandeur in material culture could these ancients have attained? The conquistadores of old and treasure-hunters throughout the ages believed fervently in the existence of a civilisation not unlike the wonders (such as pyramids, stone fortresses and palaces) found amongst the gold-hoarding Aztecs and Incas. This subject as yet cannot claim solid material evidence such as archaeological proof. Only tantalising clues and rumours exist to give modern explorers hints at what possibly still lay hidden deep in the tangled jungles of South America. The conquistadores wrote that Indians they encountered claimed that certain tribes of the region built “houses of stone” and, of course, were rich in gold (Chapman 162). The most alluring clue, however, is a written account that the famous explorer Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett claimed to have possessed. It was supposed to have been written by a Brazilian soldier-of-fortune in the 18th century who, with his band of comrades, found an ancient, abandoned city deep in the wilderness. It was reported to have had massive stone palaces and gateways with a large statue of a man chiseled out of black stone in the centre of the plaza (Fawcett 9). Efforts to rediscover this rumoured lost city have been fruitless. Such a vast and hostile environment continues to frustrate many expeditions. Many explorers, including Fawcett, have disappeared into the jungle, never to return. Therefore, the truth to this
soldier’s account remains still unverified. Most anthropologists tend to be of the opinion that the possibility that towering stone palaces and pyramids exist and have evaded re-discovery is unlikely. Nevertheless, the Amazon, as it has proven time and time again, is always full of surprises.

There actually is recent archaeological evidence of stone construction. In 2006, massive stone blocks, called monoliths, were discovered in Amapa, northern Brazil, on a hilltop. Numbering 127, some 9 feet tall, these stones are arranged in a ring 100 feet in diameter. The shadow of one vanishes on the winter equinox, compelling archaeologist Mariana Petry Cabral to think that this site was possibly an astronomical observatory, saying "we may be also looking at the remnants of a sophisticated culture" (Lehman). The very idea that the ancients studied the heavenly bodies is an important factor of civilization. But the fact that they possessed the administrative and engineering skills to haul and place these massive granite slabs on the crest of the hill more than strongly suggests that this people was no meager hunter-gatherer tribe.

The recent findings, boosted by renewed faith in older eye-witness accounts have opened a new door of possibilities to theories concerning the Amazonian past. At this point in time, anthropologists can safely assume that Amazon basin was not always overgrown wilderness inhabited by small and simple tribes, but harboured large units of population that were worthy of being considered civilizations. Possibly new efforts in exploration by a few vigorous adventurers and anthropologists will reveal even more amazing truths about the ancients of this region. What one can be sure of, though, is that overall potential that these past civilizations could have attained should not be underestimated.

**Works Cited**


Whenever I go through airport security the metal detector goes off, and I have to explain my unusual circumstance to the security guards. I show them the special card that I carry, and they immediately understand and let me through. Most people don’t have this difficulty when they travel. I guess I’m just one of the lucky few, and it’s just another one of the great benefits that comes along with having scoliosis. Scoliosis is the abnormal curvature or rotation of the spine. Its most commonly found in females and it usually starts progressing when they hit puberty and for me it was right on time. Starting at about the time I was 12, I’ve had to deal with countless doctor’s appointments and x-rays galore, all leading up to a corrective surgery when I was 15. The doctor sliced my back open and screwed in two metal rods to straighten my spine to keep it from curving any farther. As an awkward teenage girl, all I wanted was to fit in and be normal, but having this disorder gave me no chance whatsoever of accomplishing this. Even though I didn’t see it back then, this experience profoundly shaped my life, it made me a stronger person, and just like the scar on my back, I know that the confidence that I gained and the knowledge that I can get through anything will never fade.

It all started back in the sixth grade. It started out like any other day. I was sitting in class listening to my teacher babbling on about chlorophyll, photosynthesis, and god knows what else when the school nurse, Mrs. Ott, walked in. She politely interrupted, as if any of the students minded, and announced that she would be doing a scoliosis screening. We all lined up outside the screening room, which happened to be an old storage room, and waited our turn. My mind was focused on the usual things: my dream crush at the time, the Backstreet Boys, and of course, the princess of pop, Britney Spears. I had no worries and was just happy to get out of class, like everyone else. Finally, it was my turn to go in. I walked into the dark, dusty room. There were old desks and chairs lining the walls, books that hadn’t been opened in ages, and a potent musky scent lingering in the air. Mrs. Ott gave
me a friendly smile and asked me to bend over and try to touch my toes so she could check my spine for any signs of curvature. Her icy fingers traced along my spine and she told me that she felt a little curve, but it was nothing to get too worried about. She wrote me a note to bring home to my parents and sent me away.

This was only the beginning. After my mother read the note she scheduled a doctor appointment, as Mrs. Ott had advised. At my first doctor appointment they took an x-ray of my back. I would soon be all too familiar with this procedure, and know the routine by heart. The doctor, lit up my x-ray results on the screen, and my eerie looking spine flashed into view. He explained that they measured the angle of my curve to be about 20 degrees, which was minor, but would need to be monitored. The doctor scheduled another appointment in about six months. At this point, I was nowhere near concerned. In my mind, I had more dire and important things to worry about like friends and school. I merely shrugged it off my shoulders hoping if I didn’t think about it, my scoliosis would just disappear on its own.

I had no such luck. The next doctor visit consisted of the same routine except the curve had gotten worse. Again they just scheduled another appointment a couple months later, and hoped that the curve would stop progressing. This went on for quite some time. After countless doctor’s appointments and tons of x-rays my back finally got to the point where things were getting very serious. At about the start of seventh grade the curve of my spine measured about 50 degrees. This meant that I would have to start wearing a back brace to try to correct it.

Wearing the brace was truly embarrassing. I felt self-conscious as it was, and to add this to it was mortifying. The brace was made out of some sort of plaster, molded to my back, with Velcro straps to secure it to me. It was bulky, uncomfortable, and extremely confining. I was supposed to wear it every day but I rarely did, which is why it didn’t help my condition improve at all. I absolutely refused to wear it in school. I knew that if anyone noticed it I would be teased and tormented for the rest of my teenage life. It would be social suicide. However, it made me feel extremely guilty that my mother spent a fortune getting me this brace, and I only wore it for about a third of the time I was supposed to. The doctor told me to have it on 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, but I only wore it when I slept and on the weekends. I wanted to improve my back, and I wanted to fix things, but I just couldn’t bring myself to wear the horrible thing. When my mother finally forced me into it, I would try to hide it with my best ability by wearing big, baggy, sweatshirts. Gym class was the worst. My movements were so restricted by the brace, since it held my spine tightly in one
place, and straight up. It made it impossible to bend and do other normal physical activities. It was no surprise that wearing the back brace did not help my situation at all. To me this step in my journey only prolonged my suffering and put off the inevitable surgery that I would soon have to face.

The next thing I knew, my mother and I, were driving down the interstate on our way to Madison, Wisconsin to get a second opinion. After a 3 hour long car ride, the doctor, Dr. Mann, who specialized in scoliosis, told us exactly the same thing that we had from all the others; I needed surgery. The last x-ray of my spine taken before the corrective surgery measured to be about 60 degrees. As I looked at my spine on the x-ray screen, it was completely curved into an S-shape. It looked grotesque, deformed, and almost foreign to me. I could not believe that it had gotten that bad. I suddenly realized the cruel reality of the situation, and I was mad at myself for letting it get this way, for ignoring it until things got worse, and for not trying my best to prevent it. Dr. Mann explained that without the surgery, my spine would start pressing against some of my organs and damaging them. For example, it would press against my lungs, making it hard for me to breathe. Also, if the massive curve was not corrected, I would have chronic back pain, and be crippled when I grew older. Surgery was no longer an option, it was a necessity.

The surgery was scheduled for June 3. I would have the whole summer to recover. However, on the other hand, I would also lose a whole summer of carefree fun. For the first time in my life, I was dreading the day that school ended. I was terrified. I had never been in the hospital, broken any bones, or even had stitches before, and now I was expected to go through major surgery at the age of 15? My mother and I made the long, gloomy drive back to Madison where Dr. Mann would perform the surgery. We arrived at the hospital the day beforehand. I had an MRI, blood work done, and multiple other things done in preparation for the big day ahead. Dr. Mann explained the procedure to me, which only succeeded in making me feel more uneasy. He would be cutting open the entire length of my back, inserting two metal rods along my spine, and securing them in with multiple screws. This would straighten my spine and keep the curve from progressing in the future. It would be about a 4 hour surgery. The doctors would have to be extremely careful where they placed the screws, and not to make any mistakes. If they did, I could easily be paralyzed. In the past, I was used to running away from my problems, but this time there was no way out. The only thing I could do was face it head on, gather all the strength that I had, and choose to persevere.

The day had finally come. They took me into the operating room and laid me on the cold, shiny table. My mother stood above me, holding my
hand. Looking into her eyes was the only thing that was keeping me sane. Doctors and nurses were swarming all about, machines were beeping, and I was being poked and prodded by IVs. I was scared out of my mind, but I focused all my attention onto my mother, knowing that she was there for me, made me stronger. The anesthesia was administered, and I immediately began to feel groggy as it started rushing through my veins. The blurry figure of Dr. Mann came into view above me, and heard him tell me to start counting backwards from 10. I made it to the number 7 and then slipped into unconsciousness.

When I finally came to, I was in the intensive care unit. It felt like I had just woken up from a long nightmare, except everything was all too real. I was so drugged up, that I had no idea what was going on. I couldn’t think clearly, everything was a blur. All I could feel was the most intense pain and pressure in my back. My mom came to my bedside and gave me a hug, with this I slipped back into sleep.

The next day, Dr. Mann came into the room to check on me, and I learned that the surgery had gone exactly according to plan. Now all that I had to focus on was the recovery process, which would be about a week. I was still in the ICU and in very rough condition. The drugs were helping a lot but at times, the pain in my back seemed unbearable. For the next few days, I spent most of my time sleeping. Even this was difficult because every couple hours, they had to switch the position in which I was lying, so the pressure on my back would be evenly distributed. Nurses would constantly be in and out, checking up on me, changing my IVs, giving me more blood, emptying my catheter, and all the while my mom was there by my side. I stayed in the ICU for about three agonizing days.

Things finally started to look up, when they moved me from Intensive Care to a normal recovery room. I was relieved knowing that the worst was over, and things could only get better from here. I was still in a lot of pain, but I could feel my body getting physically stronger day by day. Now the worst part of my day, was when the nurse came in to change my bandages. She made me sit up in my bed in order to do this, which made my spine sear with pain. The next day, I ate something for the first time. At first it definitely did not agree with my stomach, but soon I started eating normally again.

Each day the pain lessened more and more, and by day 5 I was feeling pretty good. At this point, I started seeing a physical therapist. The first time I stood up it felt like sparks of pain were shooting up and down my back, but I started walking little by little. I felt like a child again, wobbling along, having to relearn how to walk. I started by going the distance of a couple feet and progressed into walking down the hallway the next day.
On my last day in the hospital, Dr. Mann instructed that I get an x-ray of the finished product. When I saw the results I was completely stunned. My spine looked like something out of the *Frankenstein* book with all the hardware around it, but that did not matter to me. The only thing that I cared about was that it was finally straight, and that all the trouble that I had gone through would now be a thing of the past.

I was discharged from the hospital and spent the next few weeks recovering at home. My back still hurt almost all the time, especially when I walked or sit up for a long time, but that was to be expected. My mom cared for me and waited on me hand and foot, and I was truly grateful to have her. I was fully recovered by late July, and got to enjoy what was left of my summer vacation.

Having scoliosis had a huge impact on my life. Even though I have to put up with tricky, travel situations, and people asking me about my scar, it is nothing compared to what I have gained from the experience. I have learned perseverance and the power of having inner strength. I am also much more compassionate towards people with disabilities now, because I have some idea of what they are going through. Also, I can help other people get through this ordeal as well. My little sister recently learned that she has scoliosis as well and will be having the corrective surgery this summer. It is very hard for me to watch her go through the same things that I had to go through when I was her age. However, I can help her get through it and persevere the way I had to.
As I sat on the flimsy plastic chair amidst the sea of other competitors I gazed lazily at my worn-out Asic running shoes. It was evident that a season’s worth of training had worn them and they were now on their last leg. My hands were clenched into fists, and they became more and more moist as race time grew near. I balanced my elbows on my knees to keep them from bouncing up and down. I strained to listen to the monotone race director as he gave important directions as to where to go and what to do once escorted to the track for the 800-meter run, but the cheers and screams from the crowd drew my attention instead. About five minutes before I was set to step on the track to race for a state title, I felt a tight and anxious squeeze on my shoulders. "You ready?" questioned coach Kellerman, surely expecting a confident answer in return.

"As ready as I'll ever be," I muttered quietly under my breath, still looking straight towards the ground to avoid eye contact with my competitors.

"You know what you're here to do and you've got what it takes to do it, just do your best and don't sweat the rest," he advised as he walked out of the clerking area. It was hard to imagine how I wasn't going to sweat considering the tent I was sitting under restricted any bit of breeze that might otherwise blow through the Hamline University campus on that particular day in June; but, I knew what he meant. That advice, along with many other words of wisdom from the previous weeks started going through my head. One bit of advice had quite the ring to it and stood out compared to the rest. It came from my soccer coach who made a special visit the day before I was set to leave for St. Paul, where the track meet was being held. It wasn’t simply about the race or even about the sport of track and field. What he told me was a life lesson that I will permanently remember. It is cemented in my head and even though these words were spoken over a year ago, they are still crystal clear as though they were told to me yesterday.

Coach Perske approached me, wrapped his arm around
my shoulders and looked me in the eyes. At first he didn’t say anything, which didn’t surprise me because I knew what he was thinking. He knew I was looking for another encouraging phrase, a joke to lighten the mood, or just a sarcastic comment that would ease my nerves; but, he was in search for something more than that. “I’m not even going to ask you if you’re ready... or nervous. I’m not going to tell you that I’ll be there cheering for you, hoping you do well. You want to know why? Because I know you’re ready, you’ve been training hard for three months. I know you’re nervous, it’s the type of person you are, thanks to your competitive nature. I know you’re going to do well, so what’s the point of hoping?” He questioned as he grasped my shoulder a little tighter.

He then began to tell me a story that aged back about twenty years ago when he was racing in the Olympic trials in Germany for a marathon type race. After explaining the preparation for the event and the pain he endured throughout the training process, he began to give me a short synopsis about the race itself. He noted the agonizing hills, the blisters that formed on every inch of his feet (or so he felt) as the miles went by, and finally, when he was defeated. His hopes and dreams of running in the Olympics were demolished. “I bet you’re wondering why I’m telling you this, knowing the fact that I lost and you’re set out to win a state championship, not lose one.” I glimpsed up at him, and half enthusiastically said, “Please, fill me in.”

“I’m still here. Life goes on. Persevere until you reach your top potential, and then walk away being satisfied with it.” Coach P advised as he walked away. I recall being slightly confused and perplexed for the rest of practice that day and the idea that ‘Life goes on’ tended to pop back into my head a few more times before the race.

"Okay girls, do your final stretches and follow the person in front of you out to the track. It's 11:44 a.m., and race time is in approximately three minutes," the director announced in the same low monotone voice that I had managed to ignore for the past ten minutes. My stomach dropped, and for a second I felt like I was riding a roller coaster that was dropping from 300 feet in the air. My mouth had become completely dry and swallowing was now physically impossible. My lips stuck to my teeth and I would have done just about anything to be sitting in team camp, drinking ice-cold water from my Nalgene bottle next to my teammates. Instead I followed the race director out to the track. There it was. A jet black, semi-soft 400 m circle. I was to run around this circle twice, in the fastest time I could force my body to go, in hopes of a good finish at the Minnesota State Track and Field Meet. It's not like it was a big deal or anything--there were only thousands of supportive and loud parents,
friends, and athletes lined up along the fence and sitting in the bleachers, patiently awaiting another race to be run.

I did my last sprint across the turf and calmly stood in my position next to the marker that read "LANE 3" in bright, neon-orange lettering. This was it, and as the clock on the scoreboard clicked over to 11:47 I heard a crisp and clear, "runners take your mark," command from the starter. After one last attempt to swallow and a final deep breath, the last commands were given and the shot of the starter gun sliced through the humid June air.

This was the finals of the 800-meter run and I was doing everything I could to perform at my absolute best. Thoughts raced through my head as I raced the other eight girls competing for first place. On a track surrounded with spectators screaming words of encouragement, I was able to tune in to a particular voice as if I were dialing into a station on an old AM radio. I heard the cry, "FORM, SARAH," from Coach Kellerman standing along the fence line. The first 600 meters turned to a blur as the last bend came into view. With one competitor ahead of the pack, I knew it would now be a fight for second. It was myself and another girl in an all-out foot race as soon as the 200-meter mark passed beneath our toes, and it wasn't until there were only 50 meters left in the race that I had managed to pass her. Attempting to use proper form, pumping my arms, and staying on my toes became more and more difficult. After my move had been made for second place, I was only able to helplessly watch the lead runner wearing red and black cross the finish line uncontested. I heard Perske’s voice “Life goes on.” If I could hold onto my position, second would be satisfying and I would walk away being happy with it. With my arms feeling limp and my legs feeling like Jell-O, I crossed the finish line. I had taken second place in the state meet and had never been so proud of myself. The miles of running, the sprints at practice, and the countless meets during the season had paid off. I felt a strong sense of accomplishment and it was overpowering and rewarding. After finishing, I stepped back onto the turf, put my hands on my knees, and breathed a sigh of not only relief but also of satisfaction. Still breathing heavily, hands shaking, knees weak, and heart pounding I sat down on the hot grass next to my pair of sweatpants and tennis shoes. I had done it. I had found out why I was in the sport of track and field. Never before had I known the exact reason I put myself through such grueling work and stress.

Given less than one minute of rest, we were next instructed to make our way towards the podium. The feeling I had earlier, which felt like I was on a roller coaster was quickly felt again, only this time, it was similar to when the roller coaster stopped and the passengers exit the ride. I
grabbed a tiny cup of lukewarm water and slowly limped my way to the podium, water splashing on my hand. A newspaper reporter gently tapped me on the shoulder, smiled, and said “Sarah. Great race. Can we talk?” The thought of talking at this point almost made me laugh, but even that seemed like too much work. I was able to muster up a sound though, “Mmhmm.”

“How does it feel?” The reporter questioned as he grabbed his pen and pad of paper out of his side tote to record my response.

“It feels good.” What a great answer Sarah. I think back and wonder if it was too hard to think of something a little more intellectual because of my exhaustion or if that was just how it felt. We’ll go with the second answer, for my sake.

“Did it go as planned? Did you run your race?”

“Yeah, I’d like to think so. I am absolutely thrilled with the result,” I replied. He asked a couple more typical questions and I answered them the best I could without throwing up all over him in his nicely embroidered “St. Cloud Times” gray polo. My stomach felt like it was in my throat and I nibbled on my waxy Dixie cup in attempt to distract me from the feeling.

“Well congratulations Sarah,” he praised as he shook my hand. I continued on my way towards the award stand located in the center of the stadium. With my sweats and Asics in one hand, and the tiny cup of water in the other, I gazed up into the sea of people. Oddly enough I spotted my mom, dad, and coach sitting towards the bottom half of the bleachers. All three of them had smiles from ear to ear on their faces. I knew they were proud of me, especially after my mom gave me the dorkiest thumbs up I’ve ever seen.

The staff at the award stand managed to line the nine of us up in the order in which we completed the race. I think the majority of us would have paid them to let us sit down for just a few more minutes but they were persistent in their efforts of distributing the awards as the races finished, in a timely manner. “And the finishers in the girls 800 meter run...” boomed the speakers as the announcer read off the names. “And in second place, Sarah Schellinger with a time of 2 minutes and 14 seconds.” I proudly stood up on the wooden block labeled “2” in bright red paint. I bent down as the red ribbon was placed around my neck. The scratchy material of the ribbon bothered my neck and it was somewhat of a distraction as I congratulated the state champ with an applause and a pat on the back. I could tell the ribbon was quickly absorbing the sweat left on my neck from the race. The weight of the silver medal attached to it was less than expected, and about the size of a sand dollar. We were all instructed to smile at the camera as they took a picture and I couldn’t imagine how
stunning I must have looked with the sweat still dripping down from my nauseated face. As we smiled a second longer I took a look in the direction of where my parents were previously sitting. Sure enough, the smiles were still from ear to ear and my mom could hardly stay sitting. She looked like a small child who was anxious for the teacher to release them to recess. I couldn’t help but to smile back at them.

Taking second place in the Minnesota State Track and Field meet was quite the achievement and I felt good about the ribbon hanging around my neck as I walked off the podium with extra caution. I was praying my wobbly legs would hold strong for a few more steps, to a place out of view of the spectators, and thankfully they did. In fact, they took me all the way back to team camp where my coach gave me a great big hug while my supportive teammates patted me on the back. “Congratulations runner-up. Impressive, perfectly run performance,” Kellerman commended.

I persevered and walked away from Hamline University satisfied that day, with a new piece of hardware in my Nike bag. It was a nice edition but certainly not the most notable thing I took away from the meet. Coach Perske was right. Perseverance takes you places and the lesson I learned that day was what I’ll remember about June 9, 2007.
Eliminating Standardized Testing in the Classroom
Jeffrey Kevin Nestrud

In today’s education system, standardized testing has become what is considered normal. Students expect to take multiple-choice exams that are supposedly measuring their level of learned concepts. School districts and governments, both at the state and federal level, use these scores to create and change curriculum based on proficient or deficient ratings. However, the problem arises when standardized tests fail to accurately measure what has been learned. For example, a student may be able to score well on a test that measures the ability to conjugate Spanish verbs, but they may not be able to carry out a conversation with another Spanish speaker (Darling-Hammond, G1). Standardized tests also don’t take into account any hardships or obstacles that a student has had to overcome. In fact, if a student is able to overcome a great challenge, even though their score on a test today may be lower, eventually they could have a greater potential to succeed than someone who simply maintained a high average their entire life. Finally, it is becoming ever more apparent that school districts, under pressure from state and federal governments to meet score requirements, are pressuring teachers to teach test material versus the intended curriculum. This can have drastic consequences later in life, as the foundation of knowledge for future concepts does not exist. Standardized testing should be eliminated from our school systems because it is ineffective at accurately measuring every student’s true academic ability.

Most people would agree that “being able to recognize misspelled words and identify synonyms does not necessarily mean that a person can write coherently or even grammatically” (Darling-Hammond, G1). Simply because someone can recognize one subset of a skill, does not mean that they are able to use the entire skill effectively. However, in the majority of the classrooms in our country today, students are subject to types of assessments that infer just that. These tests
only “measure the ability of a test-taker to recognize some particular application of a particular skill” (Darling-Hammond, G1). Going further, standardized tests are highly susceptible to compromise. In an extreme sense, they measure what a student is able to memorize, cram for the night before, or cheat off of others during a one-time performance, and that rating is used to infer many things for the future of the student’s education. Plus, many students who are truly brilliant are poor test-takers and a poor score on a multiple-choice exam has the possibility to hurt their future, even though they may have the ability to do great things. That said, standardized tests do not assess any form of real, applied learning, or at least any that indicates an ability to apply the knowledge to a real task. Marking A, B, C, or D on a bubble-form does not translate into a mastering of the subject at hand. It simply means that the student was able to learn and beat the system, regardless of if they actually learned what was expected of them.

One of the largest problems with standardized testing is also considered one of its largest advantages. Everyone is forced to take the exact same test or one with similar questions, which places every test-taker in the same state of equality. Everyone is looked at as having the same educational background, living in the same conditions at home, and effectively being the same person. Because everyone is treated the same and the scores are all based on the same scale, administrators and lawmakers are able to interpret them and dictate what needs to be improved upon and what is satisfactory as is. However, it is here that theory and reality conflict. In a perfect situation, this statement about standardized testing would hold true, that if everyone is treated the same, the results would show who has learned and who hasn’t. But especially in today’s diverse world, it is impossible to place everyone on the same level. People are different because of who they are. Some have a two-parent household, while others have none. Some grow up in poverty, while others lavish in luxury. And some have access to test preparation materials, while others are busy working to help feed their families. The hardships that some students face can negatively impact their score on a standardized test, but because of their ability to overcome such obstacles, can show other admirable character traits such as perseverance and determination that the test simply can’t indicate. In the Cincinnati Post article, “The search for alternatives to standardized tests,” author Clarence Page defines a group of extraordinary students called “strivers—students whose test scores alone say too little about hardships the student overcame.” He continues and concludes that “test scores alone do not tell everything about a student’s potential for
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success” (21A). Just because a student, who through no fault of their own, did poorly on a standardized test, doesn’t mean that they are a bad student or that they will forever continue in a cycle of poor performance. The outside factors in our lives certainly play an important role in molding who we are, and unfortunately many students suffer on standardized tests because their personal experiences differ from what test-makers consider to be average.

“When standardized tests are allowed to dictate how schools are run, education and, in particular, curriculum are distorted. Rather than being a sample of what students know, test items soon become the universe of what is taught and learned” (Darling-Hammond, G1). Because of the increasing pressure to meet test score requirements set by the state and federal governments, school districts and teachers have been disregarding potentially valuable learning opportunities and information in favor of material that will appear on standardized tests. In effect, they are “teaching to the tests, for the tests, and the tests themselves” (Darling-Hammond, G1). This is problematic for several reasons, the largest being that instead of learning everything that is meant to be learned for a particular grade level, students are only taught test-related material. Later on in the future, subsequent concepts are unable to be fully understood because the foundation knowledge doesn’t exist. They may solve a problem today, but standardized tests can create an even larger one tomorrow. According to Glenda Gaudig who cites a fact sheet from FairTest titled “How Standardized Testing Damages Education,” “The United States is the only economically advanced nation to rely heavily on multiple-choice tests. Other nations use performance-based assessments where students are evaluated on the basis of real work such as essays, projects, and activities. Ironically, because these nations do not focus on teaching to multiple-choice tests, they score even higher than U.S. students on those kinds of tests” (A31). As a country, we are behind many others in our world, because instead of focusing on truly learning the material, we are instead focused on learning the tests. Eliminate the tests, and all of the pressures to meet their required scores disappear as well.

Major proponents of standardized testing cite practicality as their main reason for supporting them. Standardized tests are able to provide an economical way to assess a large number of students in a short amount of time. In a way, they are correct, and because of it, these tests have become a standard occurrence in the majority of public and private classrooms around this nation.
They use this measure because it is cheap and convenient. It seems to be objective. It provides nice tidy statistics for data collectors, decision makers and the media. And it is more simple than spending the time and energy to make complicated human judgments about what students are learning and teachers are teaching. (Darling-Hammond, G1)

Standardized testing is also a way to “identify students who may need special help and point to pupils who are ready to be placed in more advanced classes” (Squires, 1). However, opponents of standardized testing would argue that other methods of assessing students would enable the same judgment to be made. If a student struggles with an applied-essay test, they can be given additional help, and if a student shows greater potential, they can have the same opportunity to move forward as with standardized tests. And standardized tests have a greater potential to be “detrimental if they are used to label and track children improperly” (Squires, 1).

They certainly are not perfect, but in theory, standardized tests do something that needs to be done, albeit not as well as we would all like. Yet theory and reality are not the same when it comes to this issue, and looking at the big picture, shouldn’t education be a top priority in our society? We like to think it is, but it seems as though when something in a budget needs to be cut, education usually suffers. And it takes far less time and costs far less money to score a standardized multiple-choice exam compared with an essay. Michael Winerip of the New York Times wrote, “Florida can do a million multiple-choice tests in a day, while correcting tests with essay questions can take weeks. It costs...50 cents to $5 to score an essay, compared with pennies for each multiple-choice question” (B7). Therefore the simple solution seems to be to eliminate any form of assessing creative thinking, and replace it with a simple regurgitation of facts. This may solve a problem today, but later in life, this will catch up to the students who weren’t taught what they should have been. If it’s in college or if it’s in the workplace, they will suffer because they didn’t have the opportunity to learn what they were supposed to just because the test was seen as more important. The obvious solution is to eliminate standardized testing from our school systems, and replace it with something that “challenges [students] to read, explore, investigate, think, and progress…” (Gaudig, A31), whether that be assessing with some form of applied-essay, or “attending to other indicators of good teaching and sound
learning [such as] the ability to consider and evaluate alternative explanations, to speculate on the meaning of an idea based on firsthand knowledge of the world, to synthesize and interpret diverse kinds of information, [and] to develop original solutions to problems [in order to] improve education, not just test scores” (Darling-Hammond, G1).

The truth is, there may not be one “standardized” method that would work for everyone, but because everyone is different, it makes sense that the test, instead of forcing the student to adapt to it, would adapt to the student. Expenses are sure to increase drastically, but education needs to be a top priority of this nation again if we are to effectively educate the world leaders of tomorrow. A non-standardized method as mentioned stands a good chance at achieving better results than the standardized method we know today. And in the end, the focus should be on the learning, not the test used to measure it.

Works Cited
My Worst Enemy
Victoria Elizabeth Swenson

Ever since I can remember, I have felt uncomfortable in my own skin. Growing up and going through puberty and bodily changes, everyone feels insecure. I don’t think I have ever met one person that could honestly say they love everything about themselves and their bodies. It is normal not to feel confident about everything, but it is not normal to obsess about imperfections. Once I started to notice the things that bothered me about myself, such as my thighs rubbing together when I walked or the way my arm jiggled when I waved at someone, is when “She” noticed that I needed advice. When “She” came into my life extremely suddenly and started to give me tips and teach me new tricks to improve my body, it was obvious that we would become best friends. However, as time went on, “She” started to reveal her true intentions and that is when I realized that “She” was really an enemy.

The “She” I am referring to goes by the name “Ana” which is short for Anorexia Nervosa. For five years of my life, Ana was my best friend who was always there for me and always willing to help me make myself a better person, or so I thought. Our friendship started the summer of 2004, right before I was going into high school. During the summer, I had started to feel kind of lonely because I was unsure of who I was as a person and it seemed as if all of my friends were completely confident in themselves. Slowly this loneliness crawled into my soul and overtook my body. I had no idea how to express the way I felt about any issues I was having, such as a stressful day at school or a fight with a friend. I would just leave my thoughts and emotions bottled up inside me. After my depression had made a home inside my broken thoughts, Ana came to the rescue and helped me release my feelings.

Ana convinced me that it wasn’t events or problems in my life that were making me depressed, it was my weight and appearance that made me feel upset all of the time. Since I had such low self-esteem, I agreed with her and once we had an agreement, there was no turning back. Right away Ana put
me on a strict schedule on what I would eat, when I would eat, how I
would eat, what I would wear, when and how much I would exercise and –
the most important thing – how well I could lie. My new habits consisted
of tearing my food into little pieces, taking cold showers, constantly mov-
ing even if it was just tapping my leg while I was sitting down and many
other odd things that normal people do not do. I followed every command
she gave me if it meant burning as many calories as possible. I started to
live my life on a number scale, the number of the size of my clothes, the
number on the scale, and the list goes on and on, but the most important
number to me was how many calories I consumed. An example of my
restriction would be only eating half of a banana for breakfast, a salad the
size of a small child’s fist with low cal dressing for lunch, and two vege-
tarian sausage links for dinner. I was between about 200 to 500 calories a
day. Now take the little amount of calories I consumed from food and sub-
tract the calories that I’d burn while working out, which basically put me
at negative calories. I loved the feeling of being empty and hollow and
once I noticed my weight dropping, I started to get used to consuming all
of my time with my new best friend.

Every day seemed to be the same: I’d wake up, pinch and poke at
every inch of my body in the mirror and shower, change my outfit three to
four times until I found one that made me look skinny and off to school.
At school it was challenging to keep my new behavior a secret. I usually
wouldn’t be caught dead in the lunch room, so I would roam the halls try-
ing to get in more exercise. My friends caught on fast, started to take note
of my isolation from the group and suspected that I wasn’t eating very
much.

My friends confronted me about my eating habits one night and told
me that they were going to tell the school counselor or my mom if I didn’t
do it myself. Not only did I freak out, but Ana did as well. You see, she
and I had made a pact before she started helping me, which was that she
would give me tips if I promised to do everything she asked and never tell
a soul what was going on. So I was devastated and embarrassed when I
was caught in my act of destructive behavior, but I knew that my family
sensed something wrong and it was an appropriate time to confront the
issue. After discussing with my school counselor how I was going to give
the news to my mom, I told my mom what I had been doing and she was
very confused but understanding.

During the next few weeks, my mom made phone calls to find a thera-
pist that specialized in eating disorders or a treatment program. Since we
lived in a small town called Mound, there were not many options for pro-
grams. However, my mom finally found a place that was called the Star
Clinic, which was located down by the University of Minnesota. My first appointment was July 14th, 2005, and that day I was officially diagnosed with an eating disorder. However, due to scheduling complications I stopped going there after about two weeks. Of course, I was thrilled with not having to go, but my family thought it was necessary for me to find another source of help because my eating disorder was making me crazy since my brain was starving. What I mean by crazy, is that I would fight with my family constantly, yelled at my mom all the time and always had a negative attitude towards everything. So in the winter, I had another evaluation at Methodist Hospital in order to start treatment there. After my evaluation I was diagnosed with the eating disorder classified as EDNOS, which stands for Eating Disorder Non-Otherwise Specified. I was confused at first because I had been practicing all anorexic behavior, but I was told that because I did not stop menstruating for 3 months straight that I was not anorexic. Either way, I had an eating disorder and at the time, I felt almost proud and so did my best friend. Ana kept telling me that I was doing a good job. Not because I had been discovered but because I was practicing eating disorder behavior, which was her goal all along.

I started treatment again in an outpatient program, but this time it was more intense. I was assigned a team of a doctor, a nutritionist and a therapist whom I would meet with once a week. I saw treatment as a joke and a reassurance that I was following all of Ana’s rules. My team did not see my illness as a joke though, and after a year of what I thought were pointless sessions, they decided that I needed a higher level of care. The next step at Methodist’s Eating Disorder Institute was called partial care. Partial was a thirty day program that met five days a week from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. revolving around group therapies, outings like going to restaurants, and other therapy sessions like art and music. One of my close friends had gone into it before and described to me how awful it was because you constantly had to eat and that is not something the eating disorder wants. I tried to explain that I did not need such an intense level of care, but my only other option was inpatient, which meant I had to live in the hospital, so it was obvious that I would go to partial.

I woke up at about 6:15 a.m. and was dreading my first day of partial. My mom, sister and I arrived at Methodist around 6:45 and my hands could not stop shaking. All I could concentrate on was Ana’s voice screaming at me for being so dumb and letting myself get put in this position. We got into the elevator and my mom pressed the eighth floor button which read next to it “In-Patient Living.” As I stood in the elevator and watched the numbers of each floor increase, my anxiety started to erupt my body. We walked down a quiet hall with dim lights and reached a re-
ception desk. My mom went over to ask questions and try to check me in, while my sister and I sat off to the side in cold stiff chairs. We heard voices from down the hall and then my sister leaned over and quietly said, “Oh my gosh, look at that girl... don’t ever get to that point.” I glanced up to see an emaciated woman slowly shuffling her feet down the hall with an IV machine dragging behind her. As she made her way towards us, every bone in her body was ripping through her skin and as she passed, a slight smile appeared across her gaunt face. It was at that moment that I realized why I was there; I was sick. Even though it had finally clicked in my brain, I was not ready to let my eating disorder go.

After weeks of group therapy, practicing meal plans, learning to exercise without over exercising and trying to accept my body for the way it was, I was finally discharged on January 14th, 2007. As I left the hospital that day, my heart was racing and I was hoping that Ana wouldn’t try to talk to me but at the same time I kept asking her for her help because I was in this mindset that without Ana, I was a lost person in the world. I tried to change my thoughts about Ana by going back into the outpatient program and I continued my meal plan for several months, but ended up relapsing when summer came around.

I will never fully understand what triggered me to beg Ana to come back into my life, but I think it was a combination of still feeling insecure about my body, realizing that my friends were not helping me stay healthy because they constantly were putting me down about my eating disorder, and I was trying to handle the fact that my dad had been diagnosed with Prostate Cancer. My dad’s illness came suddenly and surprised me because I knew he always tried to be healthy and he always talked to me about trying to eat healthy. So when he got sick it started to take a toll on my stress level and on top of that, I was still learning how to deal with my body image. However, I wasn’t looking at the bigger picture and was focusing only on myself and what I wanted, which was a body that would be impossible and deadly to obtain. I started to feel selfish that I was slowly killing myself while my dad was trying to fight for a healthy and long life.

To this day I still struggle with trying to block Ana’s voice out of my head, but I don’t think that I could ever relapse again because I don’t want to put my body and family through any more pain than I already have. I wanted to change my lifestyle of obsessing over little imperfections and just start living my life. My friendship with Ana made me become a stronger person. After struggling with an eating disorder, I realized that appearance does not make you a better, smarter or more likeable person. Also, therapy taught me that I need to express my feelings in healthier ways. Rather than taking it out on my body, I need to confront people or
issues that bother me. I decided that it was time for me to give up this battle that I was never going to win. After living with an eating disorder, I have started to appreciate my body a lot more. I try to eat healthy and multiple times a day. To this day, my dad and I are both healthy and Ana is my worst enemy. I hope one day to encourage others who struggle with any kind of eating disorder to overcome this demon and realize how beautiful imperfections really are.