

Standing in My Truth:

Random Thoughts on Life

A COLLECTION OF PERSONAL ESSAYS

WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU MAKES YOU STRONGER

BY COREY AUSTIN

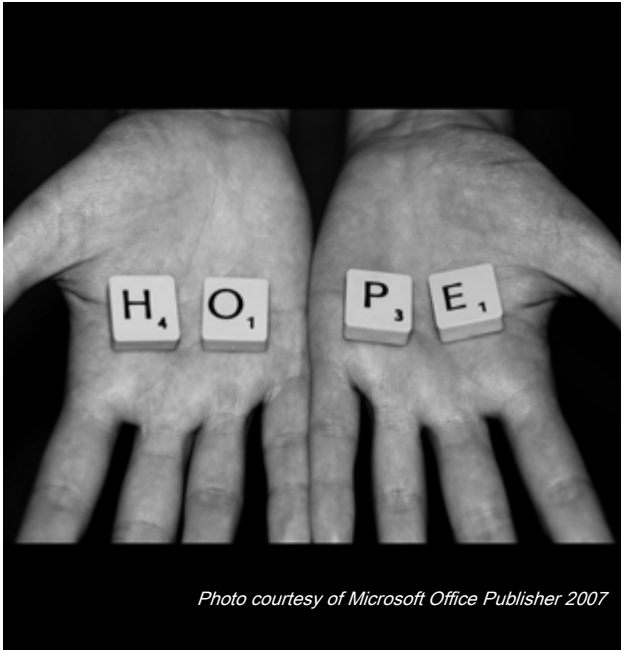


Photo courtesy of Microsoft Office Publisher 2007

I CAN NAME MANY turning points in my life that I believe changed me. But when I sit back and think about it, there is one particular time in my life that changed me for good. It was a time between 2010 and 2011 when I was sent to the psych unit for attempting to commit suicide. I was at a point in my life where it felt as though nothing was going right for me. And being young at the time, I was looking for an easy way out. I'm pretty sure almost everyone has been at this point in their life, but we all have different ways of handling it.

The day the incident took place, I had gotten into a big argument with my mother over something petty and I was looking for a way to blow off my frustration. So I went to my basement and started working out, I'm blowing my steam the right way, but then it got out of control when I started drinking tequila.

My anger grew and my thoughts scattered everywhere. The next thing I knew I was popping handfuls of pills (Percocet), and my blood started rushing faster than ever. To be honest I was enjoyed the feeling. But then I took it over-

board. I kept taking the pills. The doctor told me it was good thing I made it to the hospital because if I hadn't, and stayed in the house, there was a good chance that I wouldn't be here today. I believe God didn't want me to leave yet, and I'm thankful that he spared my life.

The time spent in the psych unit was the most draining and paranoid time I'd ever spent. Being surrounded by people who really don't have a care for life was really stressful; I didn't sleep for a whole week while there. Then I had doctors giving me medicine for the wrong treatments. They were messing up my nerves in the process of trying to stop my urge for alcohol.

That was a turning point in my life. It was also a great lesson to never let any struggle bring you down, be appreciative of what you have and work hard for what you want.

Today, I think of things in a whole different light. I've built my connection with God and I have a much better mindset about things in life. Looking back at the situation, I believe that my major issue was my aggressive drinking habit. I had a strong urge for alcohol, and when I'm under the influence my temper is real short. I had many occasions in the past when I was drunk and just went off — just because. I realize now that my drinking not only was hurting me, but my mother as well.

I knew this was not the route I wanted to take in life. I needed to find a solution fast because seeing my mother hurting was killing me inside. I knew I needed help and so did she. So, slowly but surely, I started getting myself together. I re-enrolled in school. I started playing football again. I also stayed away from drinking. I took this incident as a very good learning experience in my life. It was not a setback, but a growing point in my life.

In a way, I'm kind of glad it happened to me, because this actually made me closer and connected to God. I have started going to church more and joining programs within my church. I am helping others so that they won't go through the things that I went through.

SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING MORE

BY NANYAMKA A. SHARIYF-GREEN

I WAS 15 YEARS OLD WHEN I started to question my religious upbringing. My grandmother had been a Saturday Church School teacher since before I was born. At my church, what is known as Sunday Bible Study at other churches happened on Saturday for us. It was always fun going to SCS growing up, but when my grandparents and I were asked to give a Sunday speech on what SCS meant to us, things changed for me. I started questioning if my so-called religion was real. My grandfather started acting strangely as I wrote my speech. It was as if he wanted it to be perfect, as if it was more about the appearance of giving the speeches than the words and what they meant. Within two years, I noticed that my grandfather had become more and more overzealous with his religious convictions. I would not learn until much later that my grandmother had noticed it, too, and that she had been hiding the reality of what our family was becoming and how it was slowly being destroyed. This time period was really rough for me because I had never once thought about questioning my religious beliefs, and, as a result, the last year and half I was in high school and beginning to embark on my college journey, I felt really lost and confused too often for my liking. Even today, I still question religion as a whole because of this experience, although I do not feel as lost and confused as before.

Growing up in my church was fun. Most of the friends I had were members of my church. Some of them I'm still really close to today. Church brought us together, made us closer and better friends. I participated on the Junior Usher Board, and I was even president of the board for a few years. I was also on the dance ministry throughout middle and high school. When I joined the dance ministry, I was really shy and nervous, and I dreaded dancing in front of the whole congregation. After a few rehearsals and a performance of two, I became more comfortable. The ministry gave me a certain confidence I didn't know I



needed, and it allowed me to express my spiritual emotions. Later, in high school, I joined the dance ministry and, because I was on two different dance ministries, they gave me outlet to let go of a lot of anger I was harboring from being bullied at school. The dance ministries enhanced my spiritual growth, and it gave me a reason to want to go back to church every week without being dragged to go by my grandparents.

Unfortunately, for unclear reasons, the dance ministry of my church was disbanded by the pastor's office. At the time, I still had the dance ministry at my high school, even though it didn't feel the same as before. The loss of the church dance ministry was really hard on me and the other members. It was around this time that I started losing interest in church and I started questioning religion as a whole. My grandfather also started acting weird. He became more absorbed with religion. He was angry more often than he should have been. He was yelling more at me and my grandmother without cause, and he began to condemn my mother for not attending

church weekly. He even went so far as to take books from me that may or may not have had vampires, werewolves, and/or magic because he believed it wasn't right to be a Christian reading such books.

After that, I remember trying to leave my home once to go to my mother's. I was frustrated and angry, and my grandfather had just finished yelling at me because I was dating a guy my grandparents didn't necessarily approve of and he wanted me to break up with him, which was something I was unwilling to do. I started washing clothes and moving things around in my room. I guess my grandfather put it together and came up to stop me. He stopped me, threatened me that if I left, I could never come back. After he stormed off, my grandmother was a bit calmer than he was and she wanted me to stay; only she didn't threaten me into doing so. So, for her, I stayed, but I wasn't happy about it. I was miserable and unhappy, and I had no idea what to do. I could see that my grandparents' marriage was falling apart and I was scared.

It wasn't long after that night that I finally decided enough was enough. Grandmama and I had just come home, and I was sitting down to eat dinner. My grandfather started yelling at me about how my mother was a sinner and how I shouldn't stand by her. Next thing I know, my grandmother was there arguing with him and I was begging her to take me to my mother's. Thankfully, she took me there and that's where I stayed for a few months. Thinking that things would be better, I went back to my grandparents with high hopes, praying that things had changed. But I was so wrong, and things were only worse. My mother came over one day, and the world exploded. Curses flew

between my grandfather and mother. I remember screaming and crying hysterically, begging them to stop, and I remember my grandfather practically chasing my mother out of the house. I barely remember going back into the house, but I remember so vividly my grandfather grabbing my grandmother and running down the street to a neighbors. I was so scared for my grandmother, I called the police. I don't remember much after that, but I remember moving anything I needed into my grandmother's car and driving to my mother's. It wasn't long after that my grandmother joined me there after my grandfather threw her out of the house.

All of these events led me to one question: how does a Christian act this way? I grew up looking up to this man. He was a surrogate father to me because my own father wasn't around. Everything he did changed me. It changed the way I thought, changed the way I viewed Christianity. To this day, I'm still skeptical about the sincerity of Christians as a whole. I know that all Christians are not the same, but after that incident, I just feel so scarred. I've talked to my mother, grandmother, and a few friends about how I feel. My mother and sister understand that I'm just searching for something, that I'm trying to find some type of way back to something or into something new. Today, I deem myself to more spiritual than religious. I believe that there is something bigger than us watching everything, something that created everything that surrounds us. Most of the time I call that entity God because that's what I grew up calling it, or Him. I'm still just searching, wandering around trying to figure what I need, what my spiritual needs are. I'm hoping I'll figure everything out soon.



Photos courtesy of Microsoft Office Publisher 2007

WHY I LEFT

BY IMANI DAVY

THERE I WAS UP AGAINST MY own car with both of my hands around one of his, digging all eight of my fingernails into his flesh, attempting to release his grip from around my neck. I remember the repetitive sound of his grunting as his grip became tighter. He kept saying over and over “you’re not leaving me.” I was on my way to losing consciousness when he suddenly let go. Snapping back into reality, I remembered that my best friend was there with me, watching everything unfold. Her punches to his back were the only reason he let go of my neck. To this day, I still do not remember how my best friend and I managed to get back in my car to drive away from him. But I do remember how I felt the next morning: betrayed and confused.

My whole life did a complete 180-degree turn in one night. I had finally left my abusive boyfriend of three years. I grew tired of seeing blue and purple spots form on my arm. I grew tired of running my hands through my hair only to feel the sore spots where hair had been ripped out. I changed my number, blocked him from my email, and blocked and deleted him from every social website I had. I did everything I could to break all contact between us. I went out with my friends to keep my mind off of him. It was still my freshman year of college and I kept myself busy with schoolwork to get my mind off of him, but to no avail. I still felt empty inside and had no clue what the next step was. So I thought of other ways to get him and the whole situation off of my mind. I thought to myself “What better way to get over him than by talking to someone else?”

I had no real interest or desire to talk to other guys, but I forced myself to do so. I was desperate to forget about my abuser and the emotional baggage that came along with it. I found myself texting guys I used to date and guys I had crushes on in the past so that I wouldn’t have to start completely fresh and go through the corny, 20-question phase. Instead of holding up the wall and bearing the stench of sweaty bodies at parties whenever I would go out with my friends, I



Photo courtesy of Microsoft Office Publisher 2007

would socialize with men. It was all completely innocent until I began acting out of character. Things that I would look down on others for doing became an everyday thing for me. Every thought I had of my ex was quickly replaced with a cup of alcohol, marijuana, or a quick encounter with a guy I thought was for me. Even though I knew these things were wrong to do, I continued to do them because to me, it was better to not feel at all.

One night as I lay in my bed, I broke down into tears. These tears weren’t just pouring from my eyes, they were pouring from my heart. My lungs felt like they were shrinking into disappearance and my chest tightened more than my ex’s fists in rage. It was the first time since the breakup that I realized I hadn’t even cried about it. It was the first time I had realized that I wasn’t acting like myself. It was the first time I had realized I didn’t even know who I was anymore or if I ever did. My whole life at one point revolved around my ex. I spent all of my time trying to figure out the root of his anger and trying to change him. I tried with all of my might to

figure him out, never giving myself a chance to figure Imani out. It was a harsh reality, but reality nonetheless.

I didn't pull myself together that same night, but I finally had a direction, a next step. I began doing things that I enjoyed again like writing poetry, going to the movies by myself, and reading. There would be days where I just looked in the mirror and said to myself "you are beautiful."

Although this was a great first step to releasing myself from the emotional damage, I still felt like I was missing something. I was actually missing someone and that someone was God. I began attending church again and reading the Bible. The Bible had so many reassuring verses that only boosted my self-confidence and reminded me of my true identity and worth. I made the decision to rededicate my life to Jesus Christ

through baptism and it was the best decision I have made in my life.

During that phase in my life, I spent a lot of time trying to get over my unfortunate situation by doing the wrong things. As cliché as it may sound, the answer to my problem was love. Not lust, not intoxication and not even love from another person, but self-love and the love of God.

I have seen my ex since the last incident. I always imagined how seeing him again would be and what I would feel like, but it was nothing like that. We didn't even speak to each other, and that was okay.

I still think about him every day and when I find myself spiraling, I don't drink, smoke or anything else that I would later regret. I just begin writing, praying, and reading my Bible. These are the ways to keep my void filled and my life in constant rotation.

ESSAY

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

BY SHAM TAYLOR

HOW DO YOU KNOW when you've reached a turning point in your life? What has to occur and what obstacles have to be persevered to do so?

In my life I have seen friends come and go whether by death or by ending a relationship. Turning points are different to me because I do not know where to begin. I could choose going to college and having the opportunity to do better for myself but that is too easy. I have a decent job as a bank teller and it does help now but that is not my ending plan in life.

Honestly, there are so many different stages in my life that I have to chronically go through them all to be able to describe for myself.

As a young kid I was very complex. In my early elementary students, I was that annoying kid who always wanted to answer the questions and felt like I was smarter than everyone else. There was a time where I wanted to answer some question and when the teacher didn't call on me I flat out cried and caught a big ole attitude with the teacher. My parents had to come to school for a conference and gave had a positive conversation with the teacher. She said I had po-

tential but needed to channel my energy away from anger. This advice I could not adhere to at that age but I would need it later on in life.

In my pre-teen years, I lost focus in school. I began to hang out with the wrong people and do certain things I wouldn't do today. My grades began to suffer. My parents believed I was going through a phase that could be repaired. They did not know of the tactics I was learning from others and if I ever got out of line with them, best believe my butt was whooped!

In seventh grade, I was a scholar and made honor roll. For some reason I became a different person after that. I wanted to have a certain look and fit. That led to multiple fights, wearing clothes that weren't mine, female issues, etc. Grades were an afterthought for me and would become a problem in years to come.

Between the eighth and tenth grades, my grades suffered severely. My life of acting a fool and not burying my head in the books caught up to me. My GPA fell under 2.0 consistently and I found myself constantly grounded and punished.

In ninth grade, I didn't show my grades to my

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parents for the first two quarters. When my mom got home, that was the first time I really remember her laying hands on me. In that moment I never really thought of my actions as being bad. I knew I was doing so but I did not change.

In eleventh grade, everything changed for me, I got back on track as an honor roll student. My grades were so good that I didn't get one C the whole school year. Yes, my grades were good but I was saddened earlier that third quarter.

A friend of mine was murdered and I was completely shocked and saddened. He was a good guy and I could not understand why someone or some people would do this to him. Yeah, he hung out with the fellas, but nothing to the extreme for murder. I, along with a lot of my friends, were left in shambles from this occurrence. Learning to grow from that and mature helped me calm down

my behavior and helped me in my senior year. I stayed on the honor roll (got a couple of C's though) and graduated high school.

College was always a priority but I wanted to earn money. I never got handouts from my folks because they were parents who got their own means by working hard, I followed suit. I began to work at Blockbuster and Staples. With that money I was able to get my own car (Nissan Murano) and then begin the process of school. At Bowie State, I was not focused at the beginning but then changed my ways because I had to pay out-of-pocket for my expenses that weren't covered by grants. My mind has changed along with my life. My turning point was in high school after my friend's passing. I went from death to life.

ESSAY

THROUGH A CHILD'S EYES

BY ADRIENNE YANCEY

ALL ASPECTS OF LIFE, before the age of six, were incredibly vague to my comprehension of the world around me. I had grown only to love, understand, and appreciate only the people and things that I had known—Family, friends, recess, holidays. Often radiant, with an occasional bashfulness, I clung to what was familiar in the most exclusive sense.

My mommy was mine and only mine, although I was her youngest. I was Mrs Sherrod's (my 3rd grade teacher) favorite every single day. Crayons and magic markers were *always* the best option over classic No. 2's. As knowledge and growth crept into my flourishing mind, I welcomed it with an unforeseen authorization—brewing curiosity. Slowly, all that was typical and ordinary had begun to expand.

St. Alphonsus-Basilica School of Baltimore's downtown environment initiated a feeling of wonder and enlightenment. As I tip-toed swiftly down the busy streets of West Saratoga, clinging tightly to my mother as she carefully pulled me along, the large buildings differentiating faces, and flashing traffic lights intensified the tremors of my



Photo courtesy of Microsoft Office Publisher 2007

heart's steady beat. Where one timid child would have felt the need for extreme caution, I was fully aware of that elemental space and time. In my white collared shirt, green neck tab, plaid skirt, baby doll shoes and a book bag half of my size, I looked on carefully. I gravitated toward first impression sidewalk views of individuals unknown, but colorful in aura. As I glanced up to my mother, down to my feet and back to the

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air these auras were always welcomed with a high-cheeked smile and bug eyes that weren't shut to my surroundings. Moving between crowded crosswalks and intersections on Greene St, the horn honks of impatient drivers and intellectual phone calls of business advocates made no sense at all to my adolescent understanding but amused me primitively. These identities, sounds, and motions were stories—stories I wanted to know.

I am inspired by the awareness that keeps our world attentive. The seed of allure that was planted on that cemented sidewalk proved instrumental to my bloom.

Walking through unopened doors consistently shaped the vision of me from who I was as a child, to who I've become as a young woman.

That commemorated moment with my mother is never interrupted in my mind as it played to jog the memory of how I'd grown to appreciate the known, unknown, and all that life itself has yet to offer. Dusty galaxies, cultural merges, and untapped artificial intelligence are only the *new* beginnings. People, places, music, art.

The world that I've become accustomed to in real time, has continually produced never-ending conclusions. The world and all it offers is *endless*. What German people consider as "*Fernweh*" is the only logical explanation to my peaked interest in all that remains unexplored. I will forever be in wonder, for all that is unrevealed may surface with glorious value.



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1.5 M+ AT&T DriveMode[®]
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Illinois

Kentucky

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¹AT&T studies (Oct. 2013 & Sept. 2014) of Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, & Texas Department of Transportation Crash Data.
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HAVE A FOOD SAFE SUMMER



While the warmer weather conditions may be ideal for outdoor picnics and barbecues, the summer months typically see a spike in reports of foodborne illness. Make sure your fun in the sun doesn't get cut short by following some simple summer entertaining tips:

1 in 6

Approximate number of Americans stricken with food poisoning each year



128,000

Estimated annual hospitalizations from foodborne illnesses



Did You Know?

U.S. beef sales are highest during the week of July 4th, when Americans are expected to buy about **\$400 MILLION WORTH OF IT—25% MORE THAN AN AVERAGE WEEK** (according to the National Cattlemen's Beef Association).



Basic Tips

CLEAN



CLEAN SURFACES, UTENSILS AND HANDS WITH SOAP AND WATER. If you're at a picnic, bring moist towelettes to use!

Wash all produce under plain running water before eating, cutting or cooking, even if you plan to peel them.



SEPARATE



SEPARATE PLATES AND UTENSILS. When grilling, use separate plates and utensils for raw and cooked meat and poultry and ready-to-eat foods (like raw vegetables).

COOK



USE A FOOD THERMOMETER.

Burgers: 160°F



Just because your burger is brown, not pink, doesn't mean it's safe to eat!

CHILL



Don't leave food at room temperature for longer than two hours or 1 hour if it's above 90°F. If planning a picnic, perishable food should be kept in an insulated cooler packed with ice or ice packs.

CHILL RAW AND PREPARED FOODS PROMPTLY if not consuming after cooking.

What Are You Making?

Here are some food safety tips for preparing a few signature summer dishes.

BARBECUE

Cook all meat and poultry to recommended internal temperatures.

Burgers: 160°F.

Chicken and Turkey: 165°F.

Sausage: 160°F.

Steaks: 145°F with a 3-minute rest time.

FRUIT SALAD

Rinse all produce before peeling or chopping.

Chop all produce with clean utensils on separate cutting boards.

DEVILED EGGS

Refrigerate prepared eggs until they're ready to be served and once out, keep them nestled in ice to keep them cool.



ADDITIONAL SOURCE
CDC



For more summer food safety tips, go to

FoodSafety.gov