WHAT Kids CAN DO

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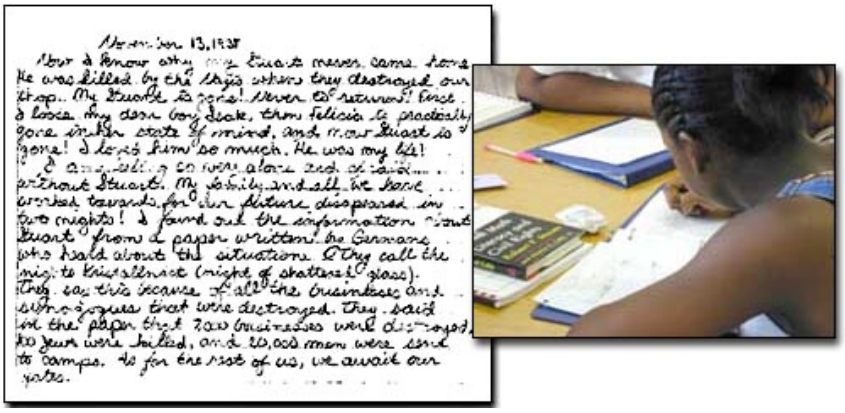

WKCD Student Essays: Writing as Revelation

> "*There are thousands of thoughts lying within a man that he does not know until he takes up the pen and writes.*" - William Thackeray
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> "*Writing is a way of talking without being interrupted.*" - Jules Renard

The abundance of outstanding youth writing that crosses our WKCD desks comes in a variety of forms and serves as many purposes. Students write poignant poetry about the places they call home, for instance, or professional-grade water quality reports, or persuasive essays both for and against the war in Iraq, even self-published books.

But among the most compelling writing is that which reveals something about its author. Whether by plumbing a new experience, or re-examining a past memory through a different lens, or simply putting on paper what may be too painful to voice, the writing that results makes for inspiring reading.

We present here, newly collected, several of the best personal writings by young people previously published on WKCD.org.

On overcoming hardship...

Myrta Ventura, daughter of migrant laborers in South Texas and student at Brown University, writes of what she learned in the peach orchards of Utah.

Emily Taylor, a high school student from Mountain View, CA, imagines a family visit to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

On the power of the arts...

Kellon Innocent works as a technician at the Educational Video Center, where he learned videography skills as a high school student at one of New York City's alternative public schools. He explores how video can help shape young lives.

Alice Ollstein, a tenth-grade musician at Santa Monica (CA) High School, shares what her passion for the clarinet has taught her.

On family...

Misty Wilson, a Brown University student and co-founder of a nonprofit community action group in Providence, discovers what it takes to keep her family afloat.

Edward Cummings, a middle school student from Austin, Texas, writes of a surprising discovery.

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On Overcoming Hardship

Myrta's View: From Peach Trees to the Ivy League
by Myrta Ventura, Edcouch-Elsa, TX

Edcouch, Texas is the only place I can truly call home. But as a migrant, it is not the only place I live in. Every year, as school comes to an end, and the heat begins to grow, my family packs our bags and boards up our house to migrate to Corinne, Utah.

It would be nice to say that leaving gets easier every year, but I cannot. It has gotten tougher every year. I can't say goodbye to my friends, because I'm not really leaving, and I can't get sad because I know that I'll be back.

Sometimes the only thing you can do is close your eyes for five minutes, because that is how long it takes to leave Edcouch and Elsa. Then, when I open my eyes, all I can do is hope that three months of upcoming labor will speed by.

I can honestly say that up until my 12th year of life, I did not know what work was. Then one morning, before the sun rose, my mother shook me out of bed and told me to get up. It was time to work. I did not take that moment seriously, because it was summer and I was still 12. No one under 20 woke up before the sun, especially when you did not have school. Who was I to break this unspoken rule?

Unfortunately, that thought did not pass through my parents' mind. That moment initiated my new stage of life: as a worker. I was to rise at the same time as the adults and to do the same work as the adults. Therefore, at 12 years old, my summer days were going to be spent in the fields.

We started by thinning peaches, the job that I came to detest with all of my heart. We rose at five in the morning to make the day shorter and cooler, and terminated each day at around three. This cycle continued for the first month, and then we proceeded with the picking of raspberries, cherries, and blackberries.

While other kids were at home watching TV and going swimming, I was beneath the sun in my peach tree, wearing my long-sleeved shirts. I did not complain as I worked, because I understood that this was what my parents needed me to accept. If I complained, I would only make myself look foolish, because every other person there was not complaining. Therefore, every morning as I rose my heart sank, as I longed to make the sun disappear or the clouds pour their rain. My 12th summer of life was spent in confusion and denial.

I'm now 18, and I've gone back to Utah as a worker for the last five summers. As each summer passed I learned new things that I know other people will take a lifetime to learn. I experienced life with a new perspective, and I found myself being thankful to my parents for teaching me what hard work is.

The opportunities that this type of work offers are overshadowed by society's stereotype of migrant farm workers. The positive effects are blurred by the negative statistics and other data that researchers, the media, and others collect.

My summers spent in and with the land have educated me. I still deplore thinning peaches, but I have an understanding of life and nature that makes my heart race. Every day that I begin before the sun is to my benefit. I have been afforded the opportunity to learn from an unbiased instructor. With this teacher, I have become a better student, not only of school, but also of life.

Quiet Lessons in Prejudice
by Emily Taylor, Mountain View, CA

You're a die-hard baseball fan. You take a vacation to New York City with your family over the summer, and somehow convince them to drive to Cooperstown, New York, to visit the Baseball Hall of Fame. You get there, and your kids are whining that they are tired and they want to go back to the hotel. Your wife is wondering why she agreed to this little outing, and is pretty close to putting the kids in the car and leaving you there.

You walk inside the building and look at the list of exhibits that are open to the public. The name Jackie Robinson catches your eye. There's a monument to him out in a park behind the building, and you decide that you all need some fresh air. You start walking out to the park, your kids still complaining. You tell them it will be an educational experience and that Jackie Robinson was a great man. In truth, you know little about him except that he was the first black player in the major leagues.

The heat is beginning to get to you when you finally reach the park. There's a gate with a large sign over it, reading simply, The Jackie Robinson Monument. You open the gate and there's a large wall made out of white granite. It stretches across the width of the small park. In the very center of the wall are two dark brown doors with a sign over each door. One reads WHITE and the other COLORED.

Slightly unnerved, you and your family turn the doorknob of the door marked WHITE. Your children ask what is going on and you tell them that in Jackie Robinson's time, blacks and whites were separated from each other, that blacks had to use separate bathrooms and water fountains, sit in separate places, and even go through separate doors. Your daughter is horrified that she and her best friend wouldn't have been allowed to be together.

Once you pass through the door, you are all quiet for a few seconds, taking in the sights. There is a bronze-colored path inscribed with writing directly in front of you, which leads to a large wall made of shiny black granite. The wall seems to have been cracked in two. Suspended directly over the crack is a baseball bat the same color as the path. It appears to have been the thing which cracked the wall in half. The larger-than-life-size bat bears the signature Jackie Robinson. Inscribed on the wall in white letters twice as tall as you is the word PREJUDICE.

You walk slowly down the path, noticing the soft green grass on either side of you. There is no fence preventing you from stepping onto the grass and walking across it until you reach the waist-high fence surrounding the park. You stop every few feet to read the writing on the path. They're quotes from Jackie Robinson. You read about his struggles while traveling the long road to finally cracking the wall of prejudice in major league baseball in two.

When you reach the wall, you touch it, tracing the letters from the bottom up until you can no longer reach them. Your children ask what it means and you explain. They are both quiet for a minute and then your son asks how people could be mean to someone without even knowing them. You tell him that you dont know, and that he has asked a question that people have been asking for a long time.

After a minute all of you walk around the wall, feeling strangely united. You see a plaque, the same bronze color as the path and the bat. It tells of Jackie Robinson's life, from his incredible baseball skills to his work as a civil rights activist. Your son who is just learning to read reads it aloud, stumbling over a few words before he reaches the end, which names Robinson as the greatest athlete of the century.

You tell your son he's reading beautifully and you all go and sit on the grass for a while. You and your wife tell your children what you know about the civil rights movement, leaving out the worst parts for until they're a little older.

Later, you quietly say thank you to Jackie Robinson.

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On the Power of the Arts

My Sequel to 'Baby Boy'
by Kellon Innocent, New York, NY

John Singleton's latest movie "Baby Boy" tells the story of a 20-year-old African-American man living at home with his mother. He has fathered two babies by two girlfriends, but he is not yet ready to take full responsibility for his life. And because I am the same age and race as Singleton's

main character and I live in a similar neighborhood, this film made me think about the urban dramas that I could tell some day, when I am a film director myself.

I like Singleton's filmmaking techniques, and I like his messages, too. But I started to think about the narrative choices that I would make if I ever had the chance to pitch my own ideas to a producer.

I could tell the story of a 16-year-old young woman I know, who has a baby girl and lives with her aunt. Having the baby makes it hard for her to get to school, because she depends on her mother and her boyfriend's mother for day care, and they both work. Now she wants to finish high school, but she needs a school with day care.

Do I want my narrative to have her stay with her boyfriend and get married? Maybe I do, if that meant that he would stay off the streets and be a good role model for his daughter. Right now he's working, but he's a high school dropout so it won't be easy to make enough to support a family. The young mother could get a job too, but probably that would make it hard for her to stay in school.

I don't really like the thought of my character and her baby not having a stable family with a husband and father. But if my movie is trying to show that stability equals responsibility, would it be the best thing to have her get married right now? I don't know.

What would be another way to play it? First, I could have my character not be so young when she has her baby. For that, someone at the big junior high school she went to would have to recognize that she was heading in the wrong direction and steer her toward the right track. When she went on to high school, I would have her go to a place where they would notice her artistic talent and keep her interested enough to stay connected to positive influences. If the movie did let her get pregnant, her school would have a day care center in it, and an adviser who knew her well enough to help her through the struggle. Her boyfriend would stay in school, go on to higher education, and get a good job.

I know these things are possible because my own experience has been almost the total opposite of hers. I started out at the same junior high school, but I ended up at City As School, a small alternative high school that helps students find interesting internships around the city. I interned at the Educational Video Center, where in a small hands-on workshop our mentors taught us to produce documentary videos. I now work as the equipment technician there, and when I'm ready to make my own movie I have the skills to do it.

I could have gone the other way, ending up like Baby Boy. But I relate more to his creator, John Singleton. I want to tell stories the way they are and at the same time educate people on how to avoid ending up in the same unstable situations that my characters are experiencing.

My Opus: A Symphony in Four Movements
by Alice Ollstein

I. Prelude

My story is not the flowery tale of the little girl who wandered through the music store until she found the one instrument that fit perfectly in her little hands. Nor did overbearing parents shove sheet music through the bars of my crib, shouting, "When Mozart was your age, he'd written four symphonies already!" I simply found my clarinet in the hall closet.

This particular closet was always locked, so naturally the one time I found it open I rushed in to get my sticky eight-year-old fingers on the secrets I believed it held. The pads on the clarinet were falling off, dust had collected in every crevice, and the once shiny keys were dull and rusted. I thought it was beautiful.

II. *Poco a poco*

You are climbing up the downward-moving escalator at Macy's. It's monotonous. Your legs ache from the exertion. But you are determined to make it to the top floor, the designer department. The longer and more vigorously you climb, the higher you ascend. Stop climbing, and you are plunged into the depths of the bargain basement. This is what practicing a musical instrument is like.

After I got into Wind Ensemble, my school's highest ensemble, I thought I deserved a break from practicing. I emerged from the cave of the band room into the sunlight. I stopped whistling Mozart incessantly. I got a tan. A month later, when I remembered the upcoming solo competition, I feverishly picked up my clarinet to prepare. When I tried playing the same piece I had mastered a month before, I was horrified. My musical skills had withered from neglect. My anarchistic fingers cavorted about, independent of my brain. My tongue, which once darted speedily, making clean tut-tut sounds, now flopped lazily, hitting the reed with a dull thud. I played the piece once. It was putrid. I played it again. Still putrid. By the end of the third run-through I wanted to throw my clarinet, javelin-style, out the window. By the end of the fourth I decided to save the clarinet to impale myself.

But nothing inspires one to be better than realizing how much worse one has gotten. I narrowed my eyes. I squared my shoulders. A little Mozart was not about to scare me. I cranked the metronome back down to largo, picked the hardest passage, and played it. Still putrid. I played it again, slower. Slightly less putrid. I was back on the escalator again.

III. Dissonance

In band, chair placement is the epitome of competition: stressful, embarrassing, and bloodthirsty. The person who plays the best in an audition is awarded "first chair": a seat in full view of the audience, automatic favoritism, and all the solos. As the chair number goes up, the skill level goes down; the sulky "last chair" makes his home practically out in the wings. I have known the pride of being placed in the top three chairs of a section more than 20 strong, but I have also known the shame of the long walk to the back row.

No place is more competitive than the music camp I attend every summer. Before the audition that will determine our chairs for the entirety of camp, hordes of clarinetists warm up outside the wooden classroom nestled in the woods. Nervousness spurs cruelty. One boy plays gaudy warm-ups, noodling around on really high notes like the next Benny Goodman. Several girls all loudly claim to be first chair at their respective schools. While warming up on my audition piece, I turn to find a girl

reading over my shoulder. “Oh, the Mozart Clarinet Concerto,” she sneers. “I played that two years ago.”

I am asked what chair I am at my school before I am asked my name. “We don’t have chair placement at my school,” I reply casually, and even the obnoxious showoff falls silent. “Sometimes we place people by alphabetical order,” I continue nonchalantly, “sometimes by age...” Jaws drop. Eyes widen. The concept of a school where the focus falls on making music together instead of beating out your fellow musicians is mind-boggling.

I have probably enhanced Santa Monica’s reputation as hippies who sing Kumbaya around the beach bonfire and eat tofu with chopsticks at yoga class. However, our school’s music program isn’t anything like a day at the beach. At the beginning of this year, Mr. Sakow spoke to the band. “I don’t care what happens out there,” he said, gesturing towards the door of the band room, indicating the rest of the school, or perhaps, the rest of the world. “You are responsible for acting with maturity and honor. Everyone looks to you to set the standard for how to behave.” This holds true. From local parades to national televison, we are Samohi’s most public group, and we represent our school with honor. However, our directors know that sometimes we can’t help but let our inner teenager out. Last year, when passing out an extremely difficult piece, our director told us, “You’re going to have to grow up about ten years to play this piece.” We did. It was beautiful.

IV. Harmony

As an art form, music exists only as long as you create it. As soon as I stop blowing life’s breath into my clarinet, it becomes a dead piece of wood and silver. As soon as the last echoes die away in a recital hall, audience members have only the emotions the music has stirred within them. They cannot go back and gaze lovingly at the music hanging in a frame on the wall. They cannot photograph it. They cannot take their favorite pieces home in plastic baggies to enjoy later.

Some people spend their lives trying to create a masterpiece that will endure forever, but I seek something more. The electric joy I feel when I’m creating music—whether I’m playing a solo or contributing to a 120-piece band—surpasses the beauty of any painting. I can hold in my hand great works of art by Mozart, Beethoven, Weber. And yet, without me, these masterpieces are nothing more than black dots on a page. I am the art.

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On Family

How a Family Turns
by Misty Wilson, Providence, RI

Just a year ago, my family was working toward stability, at a moment of precarious hope. I was starting my first year at Brown University. My brother and sister were both enrolled at the high school that changed my life. And my mother had finally made the decision to enter a residential drug rehabilitation center. It was a new beginning for all of us.

For much of my childhood my mother struggled with using drugs; this was her remedy to the pain of raising three children as a single parent in poverty. Although I always knew my mother loved us, at times I almost gave up on my family and accepted the idea that I would have to depend on myself. “Follow your dreams,” my mother always told me. “I never want you to be like me.”

At the age of 17, my mother had given birth to me and dropped out of high school. Her blooming years of exploration and growth were abruptly stunted, replaced with the burden of raising first one child and soon two more. She depended heavily for guidance and support on my grandmother, who helped her be a good mother and eased the harsh realities of her life.

However, a little over three years ago, my grandmother passed away. Her passing was hard on all of us, but it came down heaviest on my mother, who felt alone in the world. I remember often watching her cry. The stresses of raising three teens as she struggled to find work and pay the bills were harsher than ever.

Without my grandmother there, my mother began to escape regularly to the drugs she had sporadically used before to numb her pain. But her escape was a scary trap that hurt us all. She began to stop her normal cooking and cleaning and interacting with us. Vicious fights would break out between all of us daily, and we began behaving disrespectfully toward her and each other. Later she would leave home for days at a time, and as the oldest I found myself taking the responsible role in the family. My 16-year-old sister, very bitter towards my mother, became depressed and isolated. My brother, 15, would skip school and roam the streets, hanging out with older people. I was constantly worried and angry, but I was scared that if I asked for help the system would break up our family.

Soon holding back the stress became impossible, and I spoke to the advisor who had guided my education ever since I started at the “Met,” a small high school in Providence, RI that focuses on individual education and real world opportunities. That led to a counseling session with my advisor and our whole family, facilitated by the school’s guidance counselor. But that was only a first step. Even though we all left the meeting with a better understanding and a little more hope, the problem still persisted.

I graduated from high school and went away for a summer job. While I was gone, our house caught fire and my brother and sister had to move in with relatives. Soon after I returned, my mother disappeared, leaving us a despairing note with a friend. I moved into college without her.

But during that first week, as I began my new life as a Brown student, my mother decided to begin a new life, too. I got a call from her, saying that she wanted to meet with me and my siblings, along with some members of our church. She was going to do something about her problem.

The school year now unfolding brings a moment of victory and pride as I begin my second year of college and I watch my mother celebrate her first anniversary of sobriety. Both my sister and my brother are thriving at the Met, getting the same kind of education that got me to this point. For the first time I can remember, my whole family is moving in a positive direction.

Was it my grandmother’s spirit that changed my mother’s course? Was it the support of my advisors at the Met? Was it our church community and the amazing family that took my siblings in? Was it some strength deep inside each of us? Somehow I know that it was all of these things together.

I have learned that changing a family—just like changing the world—takes people who truly care and want change, working together, to make a difference. My family was among the fortunate ones who had that. Now I can go on and do the same for someone else.

My Family's Most Treasured Possession...
by Edward Cummings, Austin, TX

In my family everyone has a prized possession. My Uncle Lefty has his shining marbles from his trip to Washington, D.C., where he won third place in the nation. My Grandmother has her picture of when she was a skinny and lanky girl. My Uncle Jim has his army knife from the Vietnam War. My entire family has prized possessions, except for me.

This year I was awarded a ribbon for A and B honor roll, but I also have a lot more from third through seventh grade. I won a trophy for first place when I was playing flag football, and I also got first place trophies for basketball and baseball.

There was a time when I broke my nose playing tackle football with some friends. When I got home, my grandma was mad and she said, "Why is your nose broken?" I said, "I was playing tackle football." My grandma interrupted me and said, "I am surprised you didn't break your neck playing so rough." She was acting like I was going to die or something! The next day, my grandma took me to the doctor. My brother stopped by to check up on me. My brother Brian told me to be careful next time I played tackle football.

Earlier this school year, I got into a little fight with an eighth grader. He kept picking on me and I had enough of him and his stupidity, so we started to fight. The officer on the campus stopped the fight and took me to the principal's office. Then I went to the officers' office and he gave me a ticket. The principal gave me a permit to leave the campus. It seemed like my walk home was twenty miles further than normal because I knew I was going to get it! When I got home my grandma chewed me out like a piece of gum. She said, "You never get into fights! Why are you starting now?" I stammered, "I was mad because he would not leave me alone." That was when my grandma gave me a tip I will never forget. "Never let them get to you. Just try to control your anger, always walk away from a fight." She even gave me a saying from when she was a girl my age and people were segregated. Her father always told her brother this "Any man can fight, but a real man always walks away from one."

A couple of weeks ago I cut myself trying to use a kitchen knife. My grandma and I were going through the same old questions of who, where, when, why and how. I started to notice... that my most prized possession is my family; the way they care for me and the way I care for them. All I have to say is I am proud to be part of this wonderful family.