

The Unathletic Department
Meghan, Class of 2017
Johns Hopkins University

A blue seventh place athletic ribbon hangs from my mantel. Every day, as I walk into my living room, the award mockingly congratulates me as I smile. Ironically, the blue seventh place ribbon resembles the first place ribbon in color; so, if I just cover up the tip of the seven, I may convince myself that I championed the fourth heat. But, I never dare to wipe away the memory of my seventh place swim; I need that daily reminder of my imperfection. I need that seventh place.

Two years ago, I joined the no-cut swim team. That winter, my coach unexpectedly assigned me to swim the 500 freestyle. After stressing for hours about swimming 20 laps in a competition, I mounted the blocks, took my mark, and swam. Around lap 14, I looked around at the other lanes and did not see anyone. "I must be winning!" I thought to myself. However, as I finally completed my race and lifted my arms up in victory to the eager applause of the fans, I looked up at the score board. I had finished my race in last place. In fact, I left the pool two minutes after the second-to-last competitor, who now stood with her friends, wearing all her clothes.

The blue for the first loser went to me.

However, as I walked back to my team, carrying the seventh place blue, listening to the splash of the new event's swimmers, I could not help but smile. I could smile because despite my loss, life continued; the next event began. I realized that I could accept this failure, because I should not take everything in life so seriously. Why should I not laugh at the image of myself, raising my arms up in victory only to have finished last? I certainly did not challenge the school record, but that did not mean I could not enjoy the swim.

So, the blue seventh place ribbon sits there, on my mantel, for the world to see. I feel no shame in that. In fact, my memorable 20 laps mean more to me than an award because over time, the blue of the seventh place ribbon fades, and I become more colorful by embracing my imperfections and gaining resilience-but not athleticism.

Anonymous, Class of 2018
Connecticut College

One secret made me miserable for most of my life.

The moon poured creamy beams onto the Utah desert floor. I hid myself from the bitter cold in a sleeping bag under my ivy-colored shelter as I had done for the past seven weeks since arriving at a wilderness program. Slivers of light filtered into my shelter as I lay there contemplating my life. I could not sleep; thoughts buzzed through my head like an angered hornets' nest. I thought, 'If not now, then when?' I was scared though; I had been bullied for most of my life, and the abuse created a negative connotation of homosexuality. The bullying—students putting tampons in my locker, calling me a faggot and other slurs— forced me to build walls around myself. I was scared even to admit my sexuality to myself because that meant I had to be honest about it. I sought courage and I found it; I forced myself to admit it aloud. I whispered the powerful words, "I am gay." I began to feel lighter. I vowed to myself that on Tuesday I would utter the same words to Matt, my therapist.

Tuesday came and I was waiting for Matt. I was more nervous than I had ever been. However, I knew that I did not want to carry the pain around anymore. As I looked around at the staff who were there, I prayed that I would get the girl with the hipster glasses as my DAPS—the staff member who was designated to support the student for the week. I just prayed that it would be a girl. My DAPS was announced: his name was Dean. He had a shaved head and his muscles were almost as big as my fear of coming out. I was terrified. I was going to have to come out to my therapist and Vin Diesel's secret twin brother. At least it was sunny out.

My therapist, Matt, led Dean and me into the wooded desert for our session. I did not want to say anything in front of Dean. He was intimidating and unfamiliar. However, I remembered the pain, and I realized that I needed to do this. Another wave of courage surged in my being: "Well I've been thinking about passions this week, and I'm gay, and a lot of my passions tie up with that because I don't want people to think that I'm gay."

"Hang on, you just said something huge there that you just skipped over," Matt said.

"Yeah. I'm gay." For so long, I had trained myself never to say those words. They felt foreign to my tongue. A smile danced across my face as tears began to well in my eyes. My therapist smiled warmly, happy that I was finally honest.

Since that moment of authenticity, my life has only gotten better. I have been able to come out to my community at John Dewey Academy, my parents, and, most recently, my sister. I have grown into a courageous, confident, and strong man. I have learned that my sexuality does not define me. Coming out allowed me to let down my walls that I held up to protect myself from the bullying that I experienced for my entire life. Revealing my sexuality allowed me to be more honest about other facets of my life. I no longer let people walk all over me like I allowed them to do in the past. I now live from my soul rather than from what is believed to be cool. I have accepted other quirks—my voice and the energy that I put into my speech—all because I was honest about my sexuality. I am no longer ashamed to be an intelligent, powerful, and confident young man who happens to be gay.

Katherine Glass, Class of 2018
Tufts University

A portrait of Julia Child leans precariously on my bedside table competing for space with sticky notes, pennies, and a plastic alarm clock. Julia has been my role model ever since I spent an hour at the Smithsonian American History Museum watching cooking show after cooking show. As she dropped eggs, burnt soufflés, and prepared a whole pig, she never took herself too seriously and with her goofy smile and accompanying laugh. And yet, she was as successful in her field as anyone could ever be. Her passion completely guided her career. She taught me that it does not matter what I choose to do, it only matters that I do it with my whole self; zealously and humorously.

Unlike Julia, I do not aspire to be a chef. Brownies out of a box may just be the highlight of my baking career. Something I have been passionate about for my whole life, however, is teaching. The first traces of my excitement came from a summer camp that I founded when I was seven years old. Motivated by too many imperfect summer camp experiences, I established my ideal summer camp, one in which campers could choose their activities, from banana split tutorials to wacky hat-making. So that year it began, with seven five-year-old campers in my backyard. For six consecutive years, I ran my summer camp, each year tweaking and improving from the years before.

Chebeague Island, Maine, established a preschool in the spring of 2012, run out of a trailer by a recent college graduate. I volunteered as an intern. For three months, I helped organize for the summer and the following year. I took out the trash, cleaned, and sorted toys, all while studying how to incorporate educational material into preschool activities. I wrote curriculum and researched preschool regulations to ensure that we were in compliance. We created a safe classroom, an academic plan for the upcoming year, and a balance between learning and playing in the classroom. By the end of the summer the intern became the co-director of the summer preschool program.

This past June, I returned to the trailer to find the space and program in complete disarray. Since the previous summer, the preschool had seen two new directors and the latest was spread thin, juggling maintenance, finances and curriculum planning. My progress had not endured. After sulking for a week, I decided I was better suited to envelop Julia's mentality. What did she do when she flipped a burger onto the ground? She smiled, laughed at the camera, picked it up, reshaped it a little, and kept right on going. So that's what I did. I brought in a group of friends to clean and organize the trailer. I initiated a "lobster-roll" fundraiser, and Island lobstermen donated lobsters while their wives came together to pick meat from the shells. It was wildly successful and thrived on the community's spirit. Then I worked to reinstate some sort of educational value into the summer program. We danced to Spanish and Ghanaian music, crafted wacky hats, and read books about the lobstering industry, an aspect of their community that is so significant.

My past two summers have been exhausting and all too frequently frustrating but ultimately the Chebeague Island Preschool, along with many other teaching experiences, has exposed me to the ground level of education policy in the United States. After this past summer my goal is to become a future U.S. Secretary of Education.

So my portrait of Julia is by my bedside to remind me. Remind me that throughout the tedium of my extremely busy life there is something that I am passionate about. To remind me that personality and humor are essential to success. And remind me that the sort of passion I need to succeed is not the type that will let me give in to small setbacks along the way.

String Theory
Joanna, Class of 2018
Johns Hopkins University

If string theory is really true, then the entire world is made up of strings, and I cannot tie a single one. This past summer, I applied for my very first job at a small, busy bakery and café in my neighborhood. I knew that if I were hired there, I would learn how to use a cash register, prepare sandwiches, and take cake orders. I imagined that my biggest struggle would be catering to demanding New Yorkers, but I never thought that it would be the benign act of tying a box that would become both my biggest obstacle and greatest teacher.

On my first day of work in late August, one of the bakery's employees hastily explained the procedure. It seemed simple: wrap the string around your hand, then wrap it three times around the box both ways, and knot it. I recited the anthem in my head, "three times, turn it, three times, knot" until it became my mantra. After observing multiple employees, it was clear that anyone tying the box could complete it in a matter of seconds. For weeks, I labored endlessly, only to watch the strong and small pieces of my pride unravel each time I tried.

As I rushed to discreetly shove half-tied cake boxes into plastic bags, I could not help but wonder what was wrong with me. I have learned Mozart arias, memorized the functional groups in organic chemistry, and calculated the anti-derivatives of functions that I will probably never use in real life—all with a modest amount of energy. For some reason though, after a month's effort, tying string around a cake box still left me in a quandary.

As the weeks progressed, my skills slowly began to improve. Of course there were days when I just wanted to throw all of the string in the trash and use Scotch tape; this sense of defeat was neither welcome nor wanted, but remarks like "Oh, you must be new" from snarky customers catapulted my determination to greater heights.

It should be more difficult to develop an internal pulse and sense of legato in a piece of music than it is to find the necessary rhythm required to tie a box, but this seemingly trivial task has clearly proven not to be trivial at all. The difficulties that I encountered trying to keep a single knot intact are proof of this. The lack of cooperation between my coordination and my understanding left me frazzled, but the satisfaction I felt when I successfully tied my first box was almost as great as any I had felt before.

Scientists developing string theory say that string can exist in a straight line, but it can also bend, oscillate, or break apart. I am thankful that the string I work with is not quite as temperamental, but I still cringe when someone asks for a chocolate mandel bread. Supposedly, the string suggested in string theory is responsible for unifying general relativity with quantum physics. The only thing I am responsible for when I use string is delivering someone's pie to them without the box falling apart. Tying a cake box may not be quantum physics, but it is just as crucial to holding together what matters.

I am beginning to realize that I should not be ashamed if it takes me longer to learn. I persist, and I continue to tie boxes every weekend at work. Even though I occasionally backslide into feelings of exasperation, I always rewrap the string around my hand and start over because I have learned that the most gratifying victories come from tenacity. If the universe really is comprised of strings, I am confident that I will be able to tie them together, even if I do have to keep my fingers crossed that my knots hold up.

Issraa Faiz, Class of 2019
Connecticut College

"I just didn't think it was possible to be a Muslim Feminist, especially because, you know, you're an Arab. Isn't that, like, an oxymoron?" my friend asked, expressing a popular opinion amongst my peers. I had just referred to myself as a feminist, and her response was exactly what I had been expecting. I am a first-generation citizen. My parents are from Morocco and raised me with a love for my culture and origin. Nonetheless, growing up in the West proved to be challenging socially due to my numerous encounters with microaggressions and ignorant comments about my heritage.

I have spent the majority of my life trying to defy the stereotypes imposed upon me. My experience has been a bumpy ride of self-doubt mixed with a more powerful determination to persevere. I was not going to let anyone's opinions stop me from developing my identity. As a result, I was able to grow into a stronger, prouder and more passionate person. I am not afraid to push limits and make a statement. My outfits are bright and colorful, purposely intended to make me stand out. I walk with humble self-assurance, confident of the person I am. Most importantly, I am loud and assertive when expressing my beliefs.

I discovered my passion for social justice at a young age, but to most people, the scarf on my head automatically eliminates the possibility of me being a human rights activist. Introducing myself as a feminist has always surprised people, however, up until that day, I had never understood why. I realize now that the first aspect people notice about me is my scarf, which our society has deemed as a symbol of oppression. People often feel uncomfortable when they hear me advocate for the rights of women, because in their minds I am supposed to be oppressed. Therefore, every time I say I am a feminist, I am grouped in a separate category known as "Muslim Feminism"- which most people view as contradictory. Nevertheless, I never let this stop me from pursuing my passions.

I have considered myself to be a Muslim and a feminist for a long time, but the concept of being classified as a Muslim Feminist was new to me. I had never considered the two to be related. My religion was something that I was born into whereas feminism was something that I found on my own. Ever since I could speak, my parents worked hard to instill in me a quiet confidence. Growing up in a family mostly populated by males, I used this confidence to get the things I wanted despite being the only girl.

To this day I believe that the more definite a label is, the less meaning it holds. Terms like "Muslim Feminist" simply create boundaries that force people to feel as though they have to act a certain way because of their beliefs. Although it is human nature to conform, our minds and thoughts are constantly evolving and I do not think it is fair to limit ourselves to the permanence of our labels. By linking the word "feminist" with "Muslim," one is deducting from the significance of what it means to be a feminist, as if a "Muslim Feminist" is different from a "conventional" feminist. Both terms constitute large parts of my individuality, but combining the two would take away a certain complexity within my identity. I am Muslim and I am a feminist, but I am not a Muslim Feminist. I pride myself in having multiple layers to who I am and believe that my identity will never be as simple as black and white.