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My Experiences with English: Tales of a First Generation American

When I was a thirteen year old boy, my mother was obsessed with shopping and naturally we visited the mall often. One day when my mother was shopping, I decided to go to Barnes and Noble to kill some time. Walking through a myriad of books, I happened to spot one that caught my eye. It was George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*; the sword on the cover was impressive. We'd just had a history lesson about the renaissance in my school and I was obsessed with the thought of what my life would be like during that period of time. Being an impulsive thirteen year old, I asked my mother to buy the book. I began reading it, and it was impossible to put down. This was my introduction into the world of literature. My experience hasn't always been joyous. I actually had a hard time with English for the larger portion of my education. During my elementary years, one teacher even consolidated all my writing into a single portfolio to show students how not to write. In contrast, the eighth grade was a time I explored various complicated texts with authors ranging from Dostoevsky to David Foster Wallace. The experiences I've had with reading and writing have been a dynamic mess of good or bad, and with each new paper I write or book I read, my skills continue to improve.

My early experiences with reading and writing almost always resulted in failure. In my early years of elementary school, students were always surpassing me in English. They could read better, write better, and understand the text better than me. In contrast, I always did arithmetic and science based course work better than my peers; I wasn't a complete idiot. The

biggest factor that set me apart from other students was that I was born into a family of immigrants. My parents emigrated from Russia as refugees in the early nineties and always spoke Russian in the home. While other students received English practice in the comfort of their homes, I was forced to speak Russian at home and English only at school which propelled my brain into a state of confusion when switching from one language to another. I experienced disciplinary action often, and I was “too social” in class because I tried communicating with students as much as possible as an attempt to bring myself to their level of fluency in English. My teachers began to dislike me and as a result, I became reserved and fell further behind. My entire elementary experience consisted of a pattern of failures, and, in the fourth grade, I was told that I was reading at a second grade level. By the seventh grade, I was already a year ahead in science and three years ahead in mathematics; yet, I could never seem to succeed in any of my English classes.

Eighth grade became a landmark in my educational career; it was the year I blossomed and my experiences completely turned around. I began to reflect on my own educational abilities and came to the conclusion that class work wasn't helping me. I had to take matters into my own hands. *Game of Thrones* was the book that started it all. I was so fascinated by the intricate prose and story-telling of George R.R. Martin that I wasn't able to put it down. In the beginning it was tough. I had a dictionary next to me to look up words I couldn't understand. Progressively, the advanced vocabulary began repeating itself and I was able to read the last two hundred pages without picking up the dictionary. Before, I was never able to experience a book, to see, smell, and feel everything the author described. Martin opened my eyes to the world of story-telling. I read his entire seven hundred page book in a matter of a week and a half. I didn't sleep for multiple days in a row because I was so invested in his story that it felt like main-lining the

purest form of imagination; I was hooked. I had become a beatnik William S. Borroughs, and what was my drug of choice? Literature. After I finished Martin's book, I asked my mother for some books that she thought were important. The next day I received *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, she handed me the book with a smirk and said "I think you're old enough for this now." I read it cover to cover within two weeks. My mother and I discussed the philosophical implications of Raskolnikov's strange journey into Crime and Punishment over some tea. Of course I understood the story, but she opened my eyes to an entirely different realm. There are larger questions that the author always asks and they're masked by their story. She made me understand the sharp contrast between reading for the story and reading for the philosophy. As an eighth grader, I continued to read various novels by classic Russian authors which ultimately had a positive effect in my English class work. For the first time, I felt advanced in a classroom based English class.

In high school, I felt I had reverted back to those years in which failure was routine. High school was often too slow for me. I couldn't pay attention in class because the teachers was redundant. I refused to spend hours on homework reinforcing vapid concepts that I already had a strong grasp on. To add salt to the open wound, my social abilities took a downward spiral; I was awkward. I was still very far ahead of my peers in math and science, taking the highest courses that my school offered. In contrast, English was still a struggle. The biggest mistake was taking AP Language and Literature instead of a regular English class. All our writings were timed, and we were forced to read awful books that the teacher often looked much too far into. "The red on the carpet signifies the undying passion of the main character" my teacher would say. No, the carpet is just red, it's a descriptive color, not some obscure motif. My prose took a turn for the worst, the timed writings forced me to completely ignore any formatting and write one large run-

on paragraph separated into five different chunks. This gave my English teacher the opportunity to ridicule my work in front of my entire class as an example of how not to structure a paper. I gave up; I didn't want to write anymore. I never figured out how to write well, structure my prose, or even use proper grammar. I was entirely self-taught through personal reading in high school, similar to Malcolm X's experience in prison in his autobiographical excerpt *Literacy Behind Bars*. Although I didn't excel in my English class, I felt the communication between my peers was at a lower level than what I was learning at home. High School had become too slow, it wasn't structured for my learning style.

My last year of high school was filled with accomplishments masked by one big failure. At 17 years old, I basically gave all my teachers the middle finger. I went against my mother's wishes and due to pressing financial concerns, I dropped out of high school. The high school degree wasn't necessary for me. I had taken a residual ACT with the University of Utah during my sophomore year and received a 34 composite. The University of Utah would accept me without a high school transcript. However, during this time, I was also recruited to my high school's academic decathlon team two weeks before the regional competition. Having dropped out of high school, my academic decathlon coaches enrolled me in their classes so they could maintain my enrollment in school in order to participate in the competition. Out of eleven events, I received five medals: two gold, one silver, and three bronze. My gold medals were in the speech and essay categories. Immediately I knew I had done something right; the consistent reading had finally paid off in my writing. The team later went to the state competition where I would receive a total of nine medals, again, receiving gold in the essay category. Our team did so well in fact, we were invited to the national academic decathlon in Honolulu, Hawaii. This became the first time I was genuinely valued during my high school education. After the

competition, I went on to receive a GED with honors. I was in the top three percent of the entire country compared to all recent high school graduates. After academic decathlon ended, I met Rita Osbourne; the pre-med advisor for Southern Utah University. She convinced me to come to SUU and take advantage of all the resources she could offer me for the beginning of my college education. After looking at different statistics, I decided SUU would be an excellent choice as a beginning to my higher education.

My experiences with reading and writing have taken twists and turns that I never expected to take. It was important to recognize my failures in each step towards my accomplishments. Sal Khan, creator of Khan Academy, once said, "I'll never tell my kid he's smart." This is the same principle I've experienced throughout my educational career. An individual doesn't learn from success. Success brings comfort whereas failure allows for an opportunity to approve, apply yourself, and correct the mistake. Recognizing failures as a learning experience rather than something that can't be fixed is one of the most important philosophies in my life today. Being proactive as opposed to reactive is the philosophy I hope to apply to the rest of my life.

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