

# ONWARD ODYSSEY

# ORACLE

## ENGLISH 100 WRITERS' JOURNAL



### Contents

Why We Write ..... 2

Educational Journeys.. 13



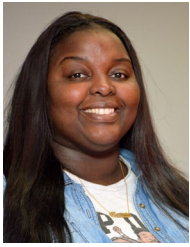
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# WHY WE WRITE



If I had a chance to really look back at my life, I can say that writing saved it. From the early years of me writing love letters to the guys who probably didn't know I existed to writing papers and poetry for my Odyssey class, putting a pen to paper gave me the space to express myself freely and unafraid. I knew that my silent power could take me into a world where what I said mattered and was appreciated.

Outside of my notebooks I was a gentle giant. I towered over most of my classmates, but I wouldn't utter a word aside from instruction. I thought that drawing attention to myself would make me a target of all the cruel things kids can do to people who are different. So instead, I kept to myself, investing in my love of reading. I was fascinated with all the characters I read about, and how different their lives were compared to mine. Some were royalty, some were powerful black leaders, and lots of them were seemingly girls like me. They had a bravery that I could only dream of and took on things that I could never imagine. Reading these stories had me longing to make a difference. I just didn't know how.

After noticing that I always had my head in a book, my mom decided to give me an outlet where I could create my own story. One day, she came into my room and told me that she wanted to talk. I look up to her excited face, seeing that she was holding something behind her back. Smiling, she pulled out this little booklet and handed it to me. It was purple, pink and sparkly. I remember being shocked that it even had a locket on it! While I sat admiring my new little item, my mom sat next to me and told me something I'd never forget. She said, "There is only one you. I know why I love you so much, and one day, the world will too." I think my mom initially thought that this journal would only help me to find something to do, but it ended up changing my life. For once, I could say what I

wanted and not worry about the backlash. I could explore my feelings with words instead of keeping them bottled up. It didn't take me long to fill my journal up after figuring out that I had something to say. I started to use my subject journals to jot down things in school, at family events, and even in church. It turned out that I did have something to say! Instead of holding on to the mean things I thought about myself at the time, I got them out. I was able to clear my mind while giving it space to recreate how I felt about myself. In other words, I'd struck gold.

As I grew older, writing became a part of my legacy. Having a physical copy of the different phases in my life means that I will always have a piece of me around. I've been able to keep about 15 different journals from my lifetime all together. Sometimes, I look through the gray worn pieces of paper just as a reminder. Those pages still have the ability to make me feel happiness, anger, and sadness. I continue to write poetry and journal entries as much as time allows me to. I've been able to break out of the hardest shell that's surrounded my entire life. Writing gave me the confidence to show my true self and celebrate it. Writing changed me into a young woman with something to say.  
**(Kayasia Blake)**



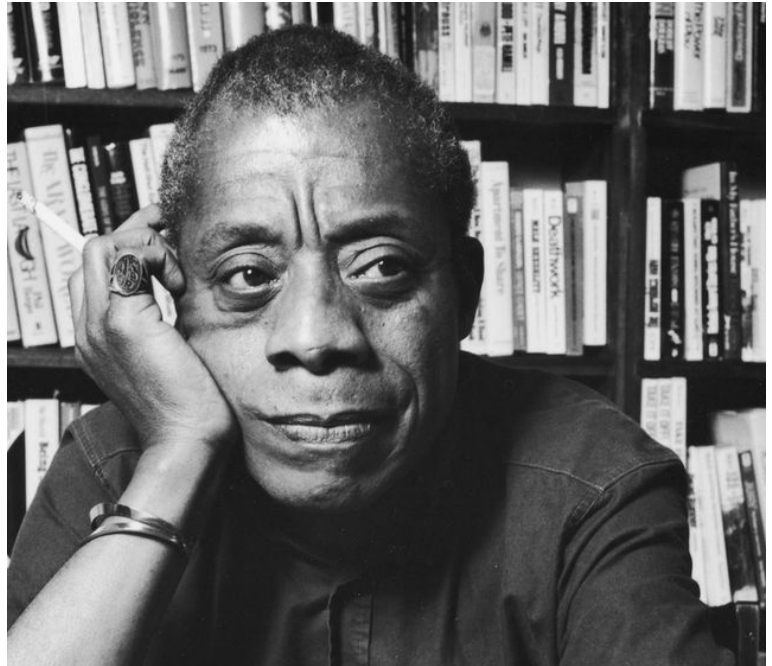




I find it interesting that it's still quite difficult to know why I write, especially after reading about it by James Baldwin, George Orwell, and Joan Didion. Therefore, in order for me to find out

why I write, it was important to look at why I don't write. I don't write because I love it, that's for sure. I get pretty upset and many times overwhelmed with writing. Plus, I don't always want to do the work. It's difficult to sit there staring at a blank page wondering, how do I get my thoughts onto this page? Because in my head I am usually looking for the best way to get the information on the page. There are times when I am in a flow and misspell a word or use the wrong punctuation. Plus, I think it's even harder to write when I'm typing because of all the distractions from spell check. When I am putting pen to paper, I don't bother as much with these distractions. So, why not just write it out by hand first? Right? No! I still have to type out whatever I wrote, finding myself doing the same thing while typing it: distracted and wondering if I should write it this way or that way. Besides, I just don't want to do all the extra work. I don't write for money, or at least I haven't. I don't write to hurt or harm anyone. Usually it's to uplift someone or, mainly, my writing is centered around me. So, I would guess that I write as a selfish means to help rebuild my self-esteem in the areas where I am lacking. And, as hard as that was to admit, I think this is one of the many reasons I write.

I write because I empathize with James Baldwin that we should consider writing as a means to grow, taking into account truths regarding things that may seem evil or dark at that time and using it as a tool to help cope with the ever-shifting changes of life. I write because I theorize with George Orwell on the four main motives for writing: "Sheer Egoism, Aesthetic Enthusiasm, Historical Impulse, & Political Purpose." I discovered that most people use at least two or more of these motives in their writing, even



unconsciously. I view these motives as writing mainly for profit, writing from a place of inspiration or for the love of it, writing for the purpose of record keeping, and writing to effect change in the world. I noticed that even as Orwell was giving his reasoning, he was using these motives. He wrote political poems, he kept records of these historical events, and he profited from his written pieces, even if that wasn't his original intent. I write because I sympathize with Joan Didion on "writing being an act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon another people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. It's an aggressive, even hostile act." This statement caused me to come up with my own reasoning instead of seeing writing solely as an aggressive or hostile act, even though it has been used as such, especially in our education systems and historical texts.

I write to get out what I am thinking or feeling; to have a record, to show as a sense of accomplishment; to discover who I am, was, or what I want to be; to see if, or how, I've grown; to help rebuild my self-esteem in the areas where I am lacking; and, as a passionate pursuit to help ease the mind of the other people that might share my experiences, in hopes it might assist them to overcome their own experience, situation, or circumstance. **(Ron Buford)**



Currently in my life, I write because I must; not because I want to. At work, one of my responsibilities is to answer emails that center around the rental of apartments, which was really overwhelming during the shutdown and the two following months. I literally had to rent apartments through email because the Order of Public Health for Madison and Dane County Emergency Order #2 denied landlords access to occupied apartments due to the pandemic, aka COVID-19, which was completely understood and agreed upon. But it was not just one email. Each email I received inquiring about our availability turned into at least fifteen if not more; they had questions, and I had the answers. My eyes were glued to the computer screen from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. At the end of the day, my head was pounding and my eyes bloodshot red. I had symptoms of a hangover without having a drink; it was brutal. However, this extremely difficult task was not in vain. I prevailed. I rented 42 apartments within 13 business days without showing not one nary apartment (old school talk). And based on this calculation, I typed 630 emails (probably more); not because I wanted to but because I had to.

So, this one day, I remember that it was not going well. I remember asking myself what can I do different; how can I make it better? Then it dawned on me, answer the questions before they ask! What in the world took me so long to figure that out? I then devised a plan. I would write meticulously. My initial responses would be vivid, detailed, precise, and professionally written, which worked for a while, but then I could not take it anymore. I was so fed up with responding to emails, I began using the following response:

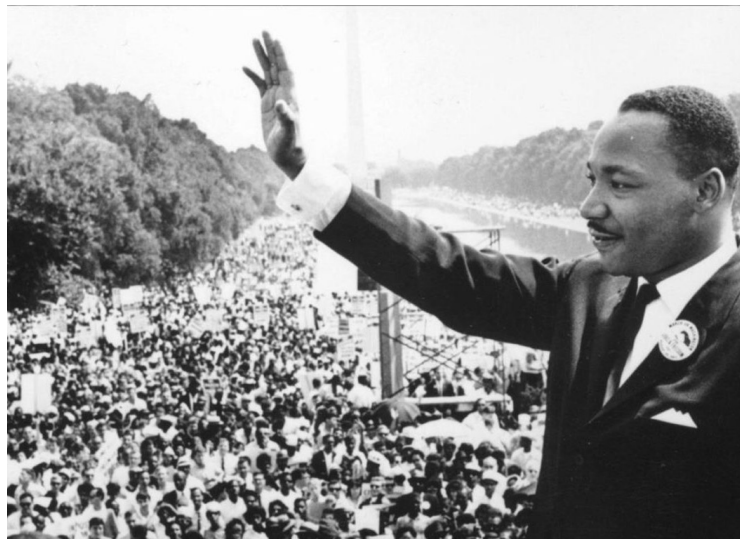
"Thank you for your interest in our apartment community, but I am emailed out. I cannot effectively respond to another email. Is it possible for me to call you? If so, may I have your number and a convenient time to call?"

And it worked. I verbally communicated the entire day and it felt so good. I am from the older generation (old school) and miss talking on the phone. It just seems a lot easier to me, but I get it. It is a new age and a different day that is centered around devices via text, emails, emojis and GIFS, which is okay, but, personally, I prefer talking on the phone or using face-time with family and friends.

I don't know or feel that I'm a writer, and I don't know if I will ever consider being a writer. But I do know, during this season of my life, my job is the only reason "Why I Write." Literally speaking, I cannot eat if I do not write. **(René Robinson)**



I like to write because writing is my voice. It captures the moment and opens the imagination. Writing is the only sound that makes no noise. I can be the creator of anything because ears and minds are drawn to it like the power of words through speech. Like the word freedom. When I write, I feel free because my words become visionary like Martin Luther King's speech. What motivates me to put the pen to the paper is the power behind my words. Being able to express myself through poetry is my Picasso, meaning that the reader gets to understand me through my work. The best part about writing is being satisfied with the outcome I just created.



Writing was the only way I knew how to express certain emotions; my journal became my therapy. I never liked the way my penmanship looked growing up, so I was always a private writer who wrote mostly for myself. I would write poems, rhymes, metaphors, maybe do a little art here and there. I started putting too much pressure on myself, trying to be too creative. At some point, my interest changed, and my creativity came to an end. It was like having writers' block. I kind of stopped believing myself as a writer. I felt it wasn't good enough.

Being a part of Odyssey has helped me to find my creative spark again. For myself, Odyssey was more than just an English Literature class. It was a chance to dig down and find my inner self again and learn me as a person again. We were able to create some amazing writing. Being inspired by others' poetry, artwork, and other classmates' creativity, I was able to create some pieces that were special and unique to me. Writing in the Oracles made me nervous to share my work and inner thoughts at first because I'm such a private person. After seeing my work and getting positive reactions and feedback, they made me look forward to getting my voice heard. For example, I wrote this in regards to Odyssey and our growth as a unit:

"My Odyssey is an angel. Each of my classmates represents the feathers in my wings. Because of Odyssey, we will fly high together and reach our goals."

A few years ago, I would have never imagined myself in a writing class on my own initiative without being forced to or someone telling me I had to do it. After writing this essay, it has inspired me to start a positive journal of my own to capture moments that are special to me whether they be funny, embarrassing, or just happy/positive moments in my life. Sometimes life moves so fast and, although we embrace these moments, they are also easily forgotten. Writing is my voice; it's relieving of the soul. I will forever be inspired by my peers, other artists and poets. Here is a unique poem that explains who I am, written by me:

I am a fish swimming in an empty tank wondering what life is.

I am a baby that can't go without her parents' love

I am a diamond in the rough waiting to be discovered

I am a seed waiting to spread its roots into the world

I am a lightbulb full of bright ideas

I am a mystery difficult to figure out

I am a dolphin, very intelligent

I am a tiger trying to survive in the jungle

I am like honey as sweet as can be

I am the shoulder everyone love to lean on

I am QUEEN (**Barbara Rodgers**)



If you asked me this question when I was younger, my answer would still be "because I love to," but I think the reason would be different. As far as my memory allows me to me think back, I can recall always writing. One would even say it

probably was not a good idea that my mom taught me how to write; call it a blessing and a curse if you must. I wrote on everything but paper. I could not deny it was me since it was my name that I wrote: that was the only thing I could write at the time.

I started to learn how to write the rest of the alphabet's letters other than the five letters in my name. So, it was only fair that I practice my new skills on the garage door. This time I denied it since it wasn't my name, but everyone in the house knew it was me. Besides the obvious that I had done this before, but they knew it was me because certain letters were facing the opposite direction and I wrote from right to left instead of left to right. Maybe I was destined to write in Arabic.



My mom bought me a little black board with chalk. I guess she was tired of cleaning up behind me; wow, no one appreciates my art. Although the black board was fun for a little while, I just could not forget my humble beginnings, my first (well, second) love, which was the garage door. I became smart and cleaned up after I would write on the garage door to get rid of evidence, never mind the obvious big wet spot I left behind trying to get rid of evidence.

I started first grade and read better than most, if not everyone, in my class. I even received a certificate for Literature. Everyone else received certificates for Conscientiousness and things like that. Why would you reward a first grader a certificate with a word they can't read and have no idea what it means? But hey, it was better than nothing. Point is you can now gather that I was quite the smart mouth, but an excellent reader. I could bury myself in books, so much that I no longer wrote on the garage door.

I loved reading; the library was my happy place. I always took out my book limit, which was seven books, but by the time I left the library I probably read at least half of a book. Later my mom taught me to read the back cover of the book to get a sense of the book. At this point I read books with little to no pictures.

When I was in middle school, one of my best friends gifted me a journal with a lock and scented pages. I didn't write in it since I just loved how pretty it was and didn't want the scent to disappear; besides, I was too busy reading and training for karate tournaments. I had no time to write in a pretty journal. It was when my mom had to be transferred to a different army base and my world came tumbling down that I stopped doing karate, stopped reading, just stopped doing everything. I hated that my mom had to leave, and I could not go with her.

Although I stopped everything, I started writing again. The love for writing returned, and I found



that writing made me feel better. My diary became my secret keeper. "Dear diary, my crush shared his candy with me," followed by tons of hearts. My mom noticed as years went by that I loved journaling, and she would buy me a journal every year. Most of my journals had scriptures at the bottom of the pages, which sometimes made me feel guilty, since I was at the age where I was doing ungodly things. However, my journal did not judge me. One of my journal covers was based on FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE, which are the words of my first tattoo. The last journal my mom gave me had anchors, which is also a tattoo I have; it just so happens to be the tattoo with her name in it too.

So, why do I write? The answer remains the same: because I love to write. But my reasons change. I write because there are many things I feel that I am unable to share with others, but I know bottling things up inside is unhealthy; so, I write. I write to let it all out, I write because I cannot run to a hill and just shout and let it all out; so, I write. Writing is my silent screams. Writing is my way out to a world where things are better. When I write, I can be whoever I want to be, I can be a better me, I can be the future me. Whenever I feel down, I read my old journals and realize I have grown so much as a person, I am not where I used to be. I am not stagnant, even if I feel that I'm not moving anywhere in life. I realize that I have achieved some of the things that I wrote down as dreams that I never thought would happen. I write because I know there is power in words! **(Loché Motha)**



Why do I write? Hell, why won't I write? That should be the current question. I have not written down and talked about what I would like to in years. But here I am! Almost 30, and a cat has my hands. It holds the tongues of insecure men afraid

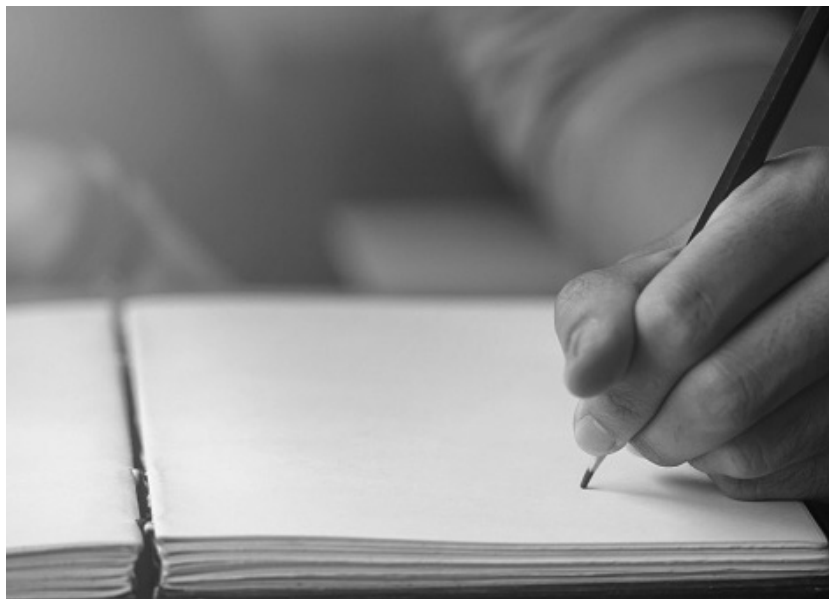
to speak as my wide sunflower hips sway into the gas station, and here I go again 'bout to roll up this weed and suppress my inner thoughts about a life I have always called my own, but I no longer feel I am present. Purposeful words, I am looking for you. Mysterious pencil in my mind, continue to tell the stories from my soul that words cannot justify; but I pick up that pencil trying to free myself and find my loved ones have tied my hands behind my back. They're scared of what I may say.

By the time I was in the fourth grade, I learned that the man whom I always assumed was my father was not. I knew my mother was unhappy, that I knew; she wanted me to be happy with what she went out and found for herself. But I wanted to know my father. Daryl Duane McElvain sat on my birth certificate like an irremovable stain that my mother had no will to explain. I also knew that asking about him would get a rise out of her my siblings never saw, so I started writing. I wrote down everything that I knew would make my mother uncomfortable. I wrote it down so that I would not hurt her with my selfishness and cloud everyone else with my selfish thoughts of wanting to know my father. After all, my mother would tell me, "You should be grateful Freddie Carter is here, providing for you. You owe this man." I would go to my room after screaming matches I never won, make up stories about him coming to rescue me, wondering what he looked like, if he loved me, and when he would come meet me. Little did I know my mother was reading behind me. Every ounce of reading into my life, the life I wanted with my father present, made her grow red and more furious—although sad, too, but I never saw that. She

screamed like mothers scream when death comes to their beloveds. I think that was the end of my relationship with my mother.

Even though she kept trying to peer into my life and read the next thought like a reporter, she would tell everyone my thoughts, and I would feel so naked, like I had nothing to give. She raped me of my words and told me to get over it. There I lay alone in the cold with no thoughts of my own to hold me safe while being raped of my most precious words. I'm just not sure if I should tell the truth anymore.

"I won't tell anyone if you won't because we're not really related." It is the sentence I play over and over in my mind. Who in the universe put those words in my life and made me swallow them? "We could have sex because we're not really related." See, I'm only 17, with no first-date type father to teach me how to deal with people with like you. And you know this because you're supposed to be my cousin. F\*\*\* you bitch, and who the f\*\*\* do you think I am? Greet me in war-like shields, protecting me from the soft emotional jelly waiting to ooze out of my ungripped intentions. Making me someone I never wanted to be. Protective. Of my most treasured words. "What's wrong, Ebony?" "Why won't you speak and tell us how you're feeling?" Right now I'll just be damned. **(Ebony Anderson-McElvain)**





It's hard to avoid writing. We are constantly writing and aren't even aware of it. Even when we are sending emails to coworkers or text messages to friends, we are writing. A lot of people associate writing with schoolwork and authors, but

we are all writers, writing everyday. I enjoy writing, but it becomes difficult for me when I start to overthink everything. It's hard to find your flow and keep it going. I can be really interested in a topic, but once I sit down to write about it I feel like my passion dries up. I write my best stuff when there is no pressure and I have control over what I'm writing about.

For example, last year we had to write a paper on Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Once I sat down to write, my fingers couldn't move. My thoughts got jammed, and I began to feel flustered and overwhelmed. Once they began flowing again, I had no idea where to put them or how to organize them. Thankfully, Kevin was there to help me, but without his encouragement I think I may still be sitting in our classroom on Park Street.

Writing is a release to some, and right now I am not "some." As I'm trying to write I feel suffocated and frustrated—frustrated that I can't get my thoughts down the way they sound in my head, and suffocated because it's Thursday and this assignment was due last week. I feel like I'm trying to squeeze lemon juice out of a stone. An impossible mission.

When I take my son to see his father in prison, I people-watch. I take down notes with a two-inch long pencil with no eraser on unevenly cut scrap paper. I watch the older white woman to my left interact with someone I assume is her son. They play cards and eat microwaved burritos while occasionally smiling at a play one of them made. Watching families leave is the hardest: the tears of young children not understanding why their dad can't go home with them. I can see the pain in his eyes as he watches his family disappear into freedom, without him.

Writing is something that I need to get comfortable doing. It's unavoidable, so I might as well enjoy it. I see how many people use it as an outlet and one day I hope that I can, too. I just need to get over the disdain I am currently experiencing towards it.  
**(Nina Salisbury)**

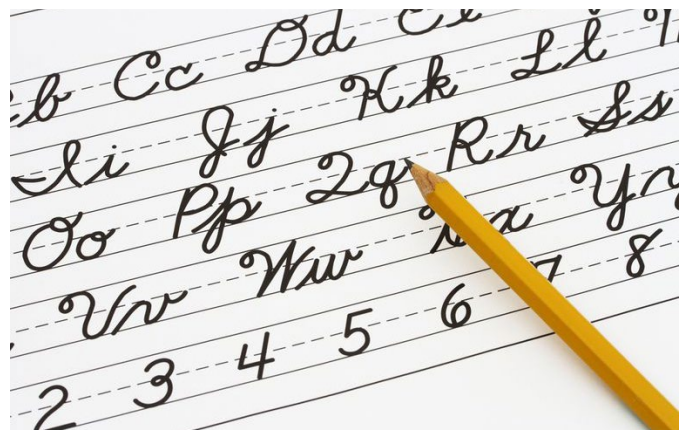


As I remember, third grade, my teacher Mrs. Kiwis told me I had incredibly good penmanship. That made me feel incredibly special because I enjoyed writing my letters neatly. I would always try to have them as perfect as I could between the lines on the paper.

I used to love the way the lead in pencil would rub smoothly onto the paper as I wrote. It made me want to write more and about anything. I would write my name over and over on everything—notebooks, folders, desk. I loved to physically write.

After a while I got into poetry. I fell in love with rhyming, I would make my parents cards with poems—birthday cards, Valentine's Day cards, Christmas cards, or sometimes just random letters because I enjoyed writing so much.

I was really fascinated with learning cursive. I would practice every day until I got it down pat. My big sister didn't see the big deal—why I was so fascinated with learning cursive? She thought I was weird, but I couldn't explain the feeling physical writing gave me. With cursive, the pencil just goes, not much hand lifting.





I began writing poems, which brought even more excitement to my writing. Becoming a teenager, I started to go through life-changing things, and it was hard to express myself, so I would write a poem about what I was going through. Poems about me missing my hometown Chicago, IL, from which my mother took me to reside in Madison, Wi. Poems about my newly found male friend who soon after became the father of my children. Poems about my incarceration as a juvenile, and poems about me conceiving children so young. I had two kids by age 16.

Those poems led me to writing songs, as I felt I would be heard more through a song than a poem. I felt people would want to listen to my words if there was a beat and a nice melody with it.

Today I still write poems, and I still love making music. But today I write because I feel the knowledge I've earned over the years can help change people's lives. I write because I feel I can help the world become a better place. I write because I have my own story I want to share with the world, and I feel it will help not only others but help me. I write because it helps me feel free.

**(Candace Howard)**



I write because it challenges me; writing allows me to put my thoughts, feelings, ideas, hopes, and dreams into perspective for me. Writing enables, empowers, and helps me to lament. Writing dispels acrimonious thoughts about some

of the lifelong struggles of black men, women, and children—financially, educationally, morally, socially, emotionally, and more.

I also like to write about the seemingly brief periods of dreams, joys, happiness, attainment of life goals, and resilience. Quite often, I dream and write about my legacies, children and grandchildren, and then I write.

I feel it is my responsibility to set my children up for success, and being physically, emotionally,

socially able to attain success, so I push and challenge, sometimes baiting in a loving manner, while saying I sincerely love you.

I sometimes write to them and discuss quality of life goals for them and my grandchildren. My goal is to inspire

and insure they have a better quality of life and an easier road to travel to achieve the American dream, without as many heartbreaks, soul beatdowns, and feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt.

I also preach and rant about having and displaying a certain sense and level of swagger, evidence of your being able to love you no matter where you go or whose room you're in—own your part of it, by right. I exude it, I own it, and I write it without reservations because I earned it!

I write about the state and overall plight for me and people like me. I write about the origins and causations of the socioeconomics of blight, which for me is caused by a systemic approach caused by whites (and to a certain extent blacks, also). For me it's similar to a mental disease, like an addiction in all of its characteristics and manifestations; like an incurable social cancer.

As I observe us existing in various states of mind and physical manifestations with and without social interactions, by nature we appear empowered, enabled, resilient, and beautiful in every way, in every shade of blackness! But alas, one race appears to have almost complete socioeconomic power in all of its configurations over another race, causing total subjugation in all areas of life for generations and generations. Having that power and causing emotional, psychological, moral, and financial decimation; annihilation . . . generations at



a time, with no remorse, no consequences, leaving one only faith and hope for future generations: it's a cruel social cycle that just revolves and evolves. I think about my parts in good and bad; sometimes in the darkness of my bedroom or living room in my chair I cry a little for me and us, and unashamedly I exclaim to myself, "Shit, I'm proud and awesome and cannot stay down. The fire cannot go out yet." Then I get my ass up and I write.

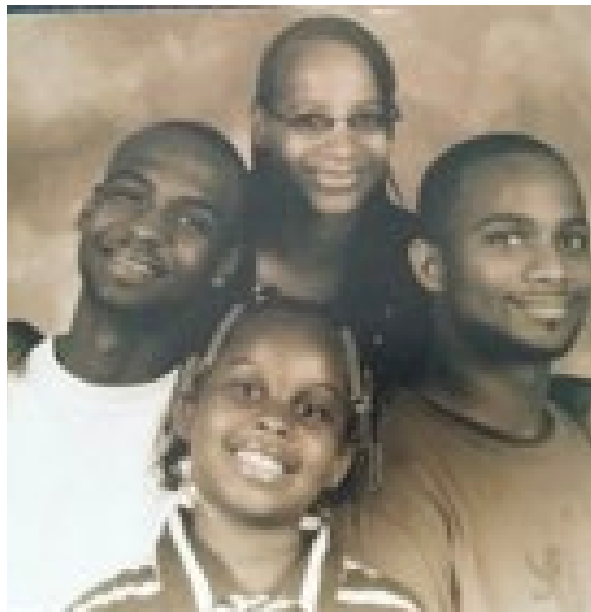
I see no end to this satirical, loving, briefly enlightening, and yet soul-crushing odyssey in my lifetime. I write sometimes just to feel, sometimes to let my feelings out. Sometimes my writing is my voice, my heart, my soul, my loves, my loathings, my passion, my escapes into my episodes of madness, and my dreams and deeper. They are parts of me that make me who I am.

Those are the reasons why I write. **(Bruce Moore)**



As a lifelong learner, the main reason I write is to continually build my confidence as a writer. Overall, I write for a few different reasons. Here are two examples:

Not long ago, I faced an almost paralyzing writing situation where I was asked to write a letter of support for one of my close family members—my granddaughter. I knew what I wanted to convey, but the lack of confidence caused me to pause and erase everything several times because I could not focus. Writing for a legal proceeding is very intimidating, and I wanted to choose words that will be well-defined and concise. I know how I can ramble on sometimes, and I know time is of the essence in these legal matters. I do have time to prepare a few drafts, so on the upside I know that the final document will feel better than the first draft.



As a budding genealogist I like to write for posterity's sake. Writing my family history has become very important to me. I would LOVE to one day stumble upon a journal that one of my ancestors wrote about their personal life. I would be so excited to hold a copy of a document that they actually wrote... heck, I wouldn't care if it was a grocery list, a note to the school teacher, or a letter to a neighbor, or another family member. One year, my aunt gave me an actual copy of a letter that her husband (my father's brother) wrote to my dad while he was in the war, stationed in Italy. My father was stationed in India. Not sure why the letter never got to my father, but I was so excited to read it. In 2014, I gave myself a trip to the National Archives in Washington DC for my birthday gift. I had been doing research about my grandfather, who was born in Havana, Cuba, and I was to get a copy of his draft registration card when he was in the Spanish American War . . . that had his signature. I was so excited to be at the National Archives building, just moments away from that document. Well, after ordering the document, waiting for an hour until they called me and others up to the 'viewing room,' my excitement turned into disappointment because the document I ordered was not there. I have not located that document to this day. So I feel that my immediate family, including my children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren will hopefully one day be able

to read something that I wrote and be excited to read what I wrote.

I write because . . . my self-improvement is imperative, my posterity, my point of view matters, my thoughts and ideas have power, and my writing is a powerful tool. I've attached a few family photos. Enjoy. **(Mary Wells)**



Have you ever heard that a book is always better than the movie? A book gives you more details. My life is a book, and I write to allow my readers to experience what I am seeing and feeling. I talk

too much, so I write. Speaking is powerful, but I believe to be heard you must leave a paper trail adding value to your words. Imagine if Martin Luther King Jr would have never written that “Letter” from a Birmingham jail cell, or imagine if Malcolm X didn’t write about his homemade schooling experiences. How would we ever know what was going on back then? Writing for me is like passing down history. Writing is free, and I’m only free when I write. **(Shanon Holmes)**



I write because I have a story to tell, and if I don’t share it, someone else will—unjustly. I am a survivor of domestic violence, a mother, an advocate, artist, writer, activist, and so much more. Expressing myself through writing is essential

to my healing journey, connecting with others, and bringing about change on an individual, familial, community, and institutional level.

Writing allows me to be on intimate terms with myself—to listen, reflect, mirror, empathize, and think critically. It fosters in me self-reliance and an undespairing spirit, bending me forward through



the ups and downs of life. I’ve heard it said that the stories we tell become us. Words, written well, transform; writing is my catalyst for personal transformation.

I used to write for peace—now it’s for justice. Unresolvable feelings of lingering grief might paralyze me if I remain silent. I am the author, narrator, and illustrator as I move through the thoughts that shape me. This practice allows me to connect with myself and others who have experienced similar trauma and heartbreak. Writing is as necessary on my journey as chemo is to the cancer patient.

Articulating my experiences is not simply a pastime. It is a crucial step to solicit change and accountability. I have lost what is most precious to me—my child. Institutions have enabled this abuse and injustice to occur and continue to carry on. I write to remember, to never give up, and to keep it from happening again; to me or anyone else.

**(Jamie Lovely)**



I WRITE BECAUSE WHEN I STARTED TO DO IT RIGHT,  
IT STARTED TO FLOW LIKE POETRY. THAT WAS WHEN I FOUND MY VOICE.  
THAT WAS WHEN I FOUND MY WORDS HAVE POWER.

POWER LIKE THE FIRST TIME I READ MALCOLM X’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
POWER LIKE MARTIN LUTHER KING’S LETTTER HE WROTE WHILE IN THAT BIRMINGHAM JAIL  
POWER LIKE PLATO’S, WHILE IN MY OWN ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

MEANING IN MY WORDS WHEN I FIRST HEARD MISS RENÉ READ HER SPEECH ABOUT “AIN’T I A WOMAN?”  
I WRITE BECAUSE WRITING IS MY ART, I AM CREATING, OR AS I REALLY LIKE TO SAY DESIGNING  
WRITING IS MY FORM OF EXPRESSION, ALLOWING ME TO BE CREATIVE. WRITING GETS DEEP LIKE ART—  
YOU CAN FEEL THE WORDS AND COLORS. I LIKE TO THINK THAT  
I USE MY WRITING AS A TOOL. I WRITE BECAUSE I CAN PUT IT ALL DOWN . . .  
ON PAPER **(Tina Martinez)**





I write so that the pen  
can be as light coming through  
My hand as I put letters to paper.  
As the pen sways my hand from side  
to side, up and down more letters  
Forms which give visions and pictures  
to the words.

I write to draw audience to the  
letters that form the words where  
It can take one's imagination and let  
it go to places you read.

I write for the tranquility I get holding a  
writing utensil, I get that relaxing vibe as  
I'm about to embark on this process called,  
"Releasing It On Paper," and finally, here  
Ooozing out calmness as Ink meets Paper.  
See, when I write I birth life into words (As  
the tree begins to grow, it starts with its  
Legs, gets taller showing its elongated arms  
fingers with green and other color decorations  
Growing from it) now people can vision and understand how  
I see.

My hand acts as if it has a mind of its own,  
taking control over this action called "Writing,"  
Showing power through a pen, pencil, crayon, etc.  
Having a pen and paper to use to put words on  
helps the whys, ways, whats, and hows of my  
Feelings and why I like to write, to show, because  
those are the most hard things people have hearing.  
So, with a certain writing utensil in one's hand (Mine) I  
could write and get out the way I feel and my love of Writing.  
Finally, I write as my mind is always going with thoughts,  
words (Supercilious: characterized by haughty scorn,  
Disdainful. Superfecundation: fertilization of more than  
one ovum within a single menstrual cycle, by esp. differ males)  
Meaning and pictures for the Imagination (in Spongebob's  
voice) to vision. And, even though I sleep, Writing continues  
To control my mind, still I vision me writing, and, writing (yawn)  
writing (yawn, yawn) wri (yawn, yawwn) wr (yawwnnnnn,  
Yawwwnnnn, yawwwwwnnnn) w (Zzzzzzzzz, "SNORE!")  
**(Quishanta Cary)**



# EDUCATIONAL JOURNEYS



## "The School of Hard Knocks"

I know, an interesting and leading title; sad, but true. The majority of my education is actually centered around achieving knowledge on my own—the hard way, which left indelible mental and physical scars.

But don't get it twisted; it wasn't all bad, and I will be the first to concede that a lot of the bad could have been and should have been avoided. However, the education I endured throughout the School of Hard Knocks transformed me into the woman that I am today.

But, it would be completely inconceivable to attribute the entire realm of my knowledge to just that. There was unequivocally a sequence of educational attainment in my life prior to my "adventure" out into the streets (as referred to back in the day), also known to some as society. I amazingly had amazing parents, which I can vehemently refer to them as after birthing two children of my own.

As an adult of forty years plus, trying to grasp my past to understand my present, it was hard for me to wrap my head around how two people, neither of whom obtained education beyond the sixth grade, were able to teach, provide, protect, and nurture fourteen children.

My mom's mom died when she was thirteen, and my dad never knew his dad, but somehow, they did it. And I believe in my heart of hearts that divine intervention along with pre-destination were gigantic factors in this complex equation.



I know I just defined my parents as amazing, but now, reflecting as I write, they were also remarkable. Who told them reading, writing, spelling, and math were the four most important things to learn to survive in this world? How did they know to correct improper English? Who taught them it was improper? I didn't enjoy cleaning, going to the laundromat and being neat, but they taught us that, too. My dad unknowingly taught us the importance of going to work every day as well as being on time were the keys to unlock the sustenance of a job. And my mom, through some type of unforeseen foresight, consistently reminded her children as they began to grow into adults of her refusal to apply for and receive welfare assistance, which was being purported by our government. How did an uneducated woman figure that one out? Because of that one decision, our family avoided inclusion into a designed, societal, generational, and economic divide. Remarkable!

So, I guess, by this time, you are wondering, if I had such amazing and remarkable parents, what happened to me?

Good question! Life happened; pre-destination or the devil, which ever one you want to call it, it happened.

If I remember correctly, I think the bulk of my transition began during high school. Some things happened before then, but my pleasure is to start here.

I was a sophomore and was chosen (because I was smart) to attend a prestigious all-girls school in Boston, an opportunity that was only given to a few high school students throughout Chicago. I was so excited, but then my Mom said it was too far away and totally unaffordable. I will always remember that day. I was standing in the kitchen by my brother's bedroom door. I was devastated. And that's when my life changed. I didn't care about school anymore. I didn't care about anything anymore. It was all downhill from there.

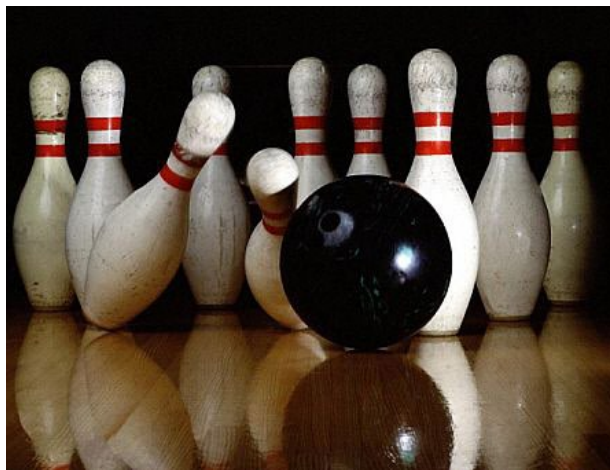
Here's the Cliff's Notes version:

I was pregnant at 16, married at 17, pregnant again at 18. In the beginning, I was a pretty good housewife when it came to cleaning, but I didn't know how to cook, which meant we ate out a lot at fast-food joints. Pepe's taco place was my favorite.

My husband worked swing shifts and his off-days were spent at the church. He was their handyman; he was never at home. Personally, I think he didn't like being married just as much as I didn't. I left that out earlier, but that's okay. We may or may not circle back to that; this is a Cliff's Notes version, remember.

Moving right along, we needed extra money, or maybe I was bored being at home, or maybe I just thought I needed to work; every adult works, right? So, I got a job, then another job and another; none of them worked—for the employer mainly, and maybe one for me. I can't distinctly remember. But during that time, I met some people, which now I kind of wish I hadn't, but I did. I became a bowler and then a roller-skater, which one would think are harmless extracurricular activities, but they weren't. At the time, they were popular "scenes" in Chicago filled with glamor and clicks; I became mesmerized. And just like school, I wanted to be the best, glamorous and popular, which caused insurmountable problems at home because I was never there.

And even though my family meant the world to me, I couldn't stop. I wanted more and more of the streets, the outside world; the School of Hard Knocks, which I thought it was fun and exciting. I thought people were actually my friends. I thought people cared about me, and a few did in some ways, but for the most part, not really. But unbeknownst to me at the time, it was all a



game full of twists and turns, lies and deceit, and, unfortunately, consequential endings; the loss of my family.

Then I moved to Madison, December 13, 1998 and now I'm here in a writing class telling you my business.

### The End (René Robinson)



Third grade. I sat in a meeting listening to my mom and teachers going back and forth about me and something called an IEP (individualized education plan). I heard it loud and clear—I was not reading and writing at grade level.

The teachers suggested that I should be put in a smaller group for a better chance of catching up to my peers. Reading used to be one of my favorite things to do until I heard those words. It stuck to me like a tattoo.

It only got worse when the teacher started picking me to read aloud. It wasn't long before the other kids knew. I felt so ashamed and humiliated, and my attitude towards school changed. It didn't

take me long to figure out how to avoid being singled out. I became the school bully. I stayed in trouble, and it saved me the embarrassment of not knowing how to read. That idea didn't last long, as my family was being forced to move and I knew that meant a new school. I wouldn't dare let my secret be revealed, being the new kid, so I had to make a great impression. I became known as

the class clown. Nothing was funny when it came to graduating from high school and I was only reading at a 5th grade level. I could never forgive myself for giving up so easily. I should have never been present at the IEP meeting. As an adult it's easier to hide, but 20 years later I'm still feeling stuck at the 5th grade level. (Shanon Holmes)





One of the unspoken rules my parents instilled in my siblings and me growing up was “a child should be seen and not heard.” This stayed with me as I matriculated through the Madison Metropolitan School District and into my adult years.

I recall how I often felt invisible and discouraged as teachers would overlook my raised hand. They made me feel that my opinion didn’t matter much and my points of view weren’t important. My parents and my teachers unknowingly sealed the deal.

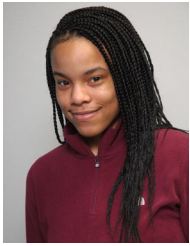
In elementary school, all students were required to recite the Pledge of Allegiance everyday while placing their right hand over their heart at 8 am sharp! I was shy, but I protested quietly each morning, sitting in my desk, similar to Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the NFL National Anthem, because I knew this ‘pledge’ did not apply to me or my family. The statement that was most upsetting to me was, and still is, “WITH LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL.” While growing up in South Madison, I remembered my mother telling stories of how her friends loved to go out to hear Count Basie and Duke Ellington, who came to Madison to entertain both black and white audiences but were refused hotel accommodations, so they needed to find homes of black families in South Madison. My oldest brother sold JET magazine as a part time job. I loved to read the weekly magazine as this was my source for positive news that gave me a look outside of the Madison scene to see positive African American life.

In high school, I recall how one teacher in particular inspired me. She was a black woman who certainly left an impression on me. She taught typing and shorthand. The typing skills were rolled into her daily demonstrations on how to carry yourself in a professional manner, how to conduct yourself in an office setting, and how to transfer these skills into an actual paying job with a decent wage. Her professional manner rose above many unruly students. In my sophomore year, I made choices that derailed my educational journey for

quite a while, but I didn’t give up. I obtained my GED, and then I was motivated to apply for, and received, a Martin Luther King Jr. award.

My educational life was comparable to jumping Double Dutch. As life circumstances would have their way, I would attend a few semesters, then stop. One day, a close friend of mine encouraged me to take a class that she had recently attended over the last two semesters. She said it was a learning experience like no other, and that I wouldn’t regret taking this class. I waited until the next year to apply. I honestly didn’t think I was a good candidate. I applied. I was so nervous after I turned in the application, and while patiently waiting on the decision I started thinking maybe I shouldn’t have applied. Fear of the unknown was rearing its ugly head, fear that my raised hand wouldn’t be called on. I was accepted into the class! On the first day of class I had to push past the fear and had two semesters of a wonderful experience. I’m thankful since graduating from the UW Odyssey Project with the class of 2007. Because of Odyssey, my confidence level has increased and helped me attain Dean’s List status, graduating from the IT Help Desk program and the Health Information Technology certificate program, both at Madison College. As I continue being a “life-long learner,” my personal motto will always be: “learn something new every day.” **(Mary Wells)**





### The Seed That Was Planted in Me

The year of 2020, I'm sure, has been a crazy experience for all of us, dealing with COVID-19. I never expected COVID-19 would personally affect my life in the way that it has. Unfortunately, my mother contracted COVID-19 at work, and within a blink of an eye I saw my whole world just fall apart as my mother's health declined. I'll never forget the empty feeling at the pit of my stomach, wheeling my mother into the hospital, not knowing if I was going to ever see, hear, or touch her again. In that very moment I realized how precious life is, and how much time I've taken for granted with the ones that matter most. I had never seen her so vulnerable, weak, and dependent on others. I really had to pull myself together because the one person I relied on for everything was now relying on me. As Bob Marley said, "You don't know how strong you are until being strong is your only choice."

Growing up, my mother was always a giver, never a taker. Over the years, she sheltered those in need, working two or three jobs just so her children wouldn't go without. If we didn't always get what we wanted, she made sure we had everything we needed, which taught us to be humble and grateful. She entered the health field as a caregiver, and for 20+ years I've been watching my mother give 150% of herself to her residents; nothing less has inspired me to get into the health field and make a difference in others' lives. My mother's traits over the years have been a life lesson that has molded and motivated me to strive and give my best, even when I'm at my lowest. My mother always leads by example. Just the other day she was telling me that one of her proudest moments was when she

was taking a math class that was difficult. Although she was sad that she didn't pass the class, she still thought it was one of her most successful moments because staying until the end, and not giving up, was the successful part for her. Having talks like that pushes me to give things my all, no matter how big or how small, or how easy or hard something is.

In my eyes my mom is like my superwoman. She has been my protector and provider. I used to think my mother was overly protective and strict, and I absolutely used to hate it!! But now that I'm older and look back, it all makes sense—she was protecting me from the things I could not see. Although I can't imagine life without her, I'm so very grateful for the seed she planted within



me. She is the reason I see light at the end of every dark tunnel I've encountered. She gives me strength when I am weak, and when I was losing faith, she helped me find it again. I could never thank her enough. Over the years, she's given me life traits that are priceless.

When I think about someone who has had a major impact on my life and the way I see the world today, I think about my mom. She's the reason I'm so loving, patient, and can find the good in bad situations;

she taught me to be grateful for the good and the bad I've encountered in my life because, as they say, "Without the pain we wouldn't know joy." A life teacher is so important because there is no rule book to this thing we call life, and nobody ever said that it would be easy. Although I can't imagine my life without my mom, with the proper guidance and unconditional love my mom has given me, I can pour on to others the seed that was planted in me. Sometimes it's hard, but we have to be the change we want to see in the world.

**(Barbara Rodgers)**



### The History of the Old Me

As a teenager, I must've watched the movie *"Drumline"* a million times. Everything about the movie was fascinating

to me: the band, the football games, the music, but most importantly the student culture. Growing up in Wisconsin, I'd never seen so many young Black people in an educational setting, with the background of so much history and pride in where they came from and where they were going. I was only in middle school then, but I told my mom that I wanted to go to a Historically Black College. I wanted to be the real-life version of those actors, in the stands with my school colors on, cheering the football team on, and having a great time with my best friends. At a young age, I imagined that life for myself, and I dreamed of a degree from one of these prestigious schools. I was determined to get there.

What I didn't see on the TV screen was the reality of being an adult and how much it changes you. I was far away from home and so many things had changed for me in only a short summer. I went from being with my mom most of the time, letting her pretty much guide my decision making, to making all decisions on my own. Alabama State University was a new territory for me that I was ready to claim. There was nobody around to tell me to go to class, making sure I studied, or making sure I ate every day. I left home with the morals that my mother taught me and the excitement of being somewhere I'd never been before. I'd convinced my two best friends from high school to attend the same college. I can still remember how excited we felt. If I smiled any harder, I would've cracked the skin around my mouth. For the first time in my life I was able to follow my own rules. I was 19 and thought I knew everything about what the world had to offer me. I had so much to learn, and still do.



It took my family about 16 hours to drive down to Alabama. Packed in a little silver Chevy Equinox were my mom, my brother, my grandmother, and me. My brother had also decided to take the route of attending a black college and his school, Morehouse College, was about two hours away from me in Georgia. After a 16-hour drive from Wisconsin, we had arrived. When I stepped on campus, I was amazed. Aside from videos online, I'd never

seen the school. I'd only relied on my intuition that it was the place for me to be. In front of my dorm, the CJ Dunn Towers, there were about 30 fraternity men outside, helping women move into their dorms. The building had 12 floors, and at the top there was a pretty good view of the whole campus. I shared a suite with five other girls, including one of my friends from back home. It was the perfect setup! After we got everything clean and unpacked in my room, I was so excited about the new journey I was about to embark on. I don't even think I cried when my family left. I was too excited to explore.

I spent my first semester at school going through what I thought were some of the toughest times I'd ever experience. I stayed out all hours of the night and would often negate my responsibilities to my education the next day. My once 3.0 GPA started to suffer because of it. No longer was I attending my small high school back home where I could just talk to a teacher one day after school and make up all of my work. I was in a new territory where teachers only showed up for the students who showed up for them. Now looking back, I know that I wasn't fully prepared for college-level schoolwork. That, or I wasn't pushing myself as hard as I knew I could. I had dropped as many classes as financial aid had let me, and for the first time I was scared about what my future would hold. My education wasn't the only thing that was suffering.



My first lesson about heartbreak didn't come from a man but from my dearest friends. The relationship with them had grown to sour. Between class schedules, small flings, and new adventures, we had grown apart. It turns out that it is difficult to balance out all of the things my new life as an adult had to offer. To be more specific, my other friends had grown closer, all the while leaving me behind. At least that's what I felt like at the time. At the time, I felt like I was alone, and I cried for weeks about it. Small disagreements turned into unspoken hostility, which led to friends becoming strangers. It had gotten so bad that I moved out of the suite we shared so that I wouldn't have to see them every day. The end of our friendship meant that I truly had to fend for myself. No longer did I have the cushion of friends to vent to, or to borrow laundry detergent from before I got a chance to go to the store. I could call my mom, but I couldn't crawl in her bed and vent. For the first time in my life, I was physically, mentally, and emotionally alone.

For the first couple of weeks, I walked around like how I felt—lost, confused, and misguided. I didn't go to class regularly, instead choosing to sit in my room and wallow. I'd stopped going to social events, and it even got to the point where I wouldn't eat or talk with anyone for long periods of time. It was difficult coming to terms with the crumbling of my support system away from home. Then, I started to realize that life was going on without me no matter what. I had to make a choice to be better. As each day went on, I decided to stop wallowing in what happened and to live over what had happened. My heart mended itself a little more as the days went on. I started going back to classes and mingling with the new people I met. It didn't bother

me as much to sit alone at the food café, as long as I ate. I came to terms with the fact that I was okay by myself. I was learning that being myself didn't mean that I had to be alone. I learned the difference between feeling lonely and just spending time with myself.

Before leaving for school, nobody could pay me to believe that I wouldn't come back with my best friends and a million stories to tell between the three of us. I came back home to Wisconsin for the summer, excited to see my family without the stress of classwork or tests for the next couple of months. The mere thought of disappointing my mother pushed me to finish out the semester the way I started it, with hope and motivation to seek out my dreams of that degree. My friends from high school and I eventually made up, but the chemistry was never the same again. I didn't go to their houses anymore, and we barely spoke over the phone or through text like we used to. I spent so much time mourning what I lost instead of soaking in what was in front of me. I learned about my own identity outside of two people whom, at one time, I thought I couldn't live without. That lesson taught me more than I had learned in all the classrooms I walked into that year. My first semester at Alabama State University began a journey of independence and moving on. Now I can look back and tell myself that maybe it wasn't a new me after all. Maybe this was who I was all along. **(Kayasia Blake)**





I got most of my education and inspiration from my parents, siblings, nieces, nephews, in-laws, and my favorite seventh and eighth grade teacher – the best ever!

OK, so check this out: both my parents, before passing, taught me the importance of always being involved in your children's education, whether it's volunteering, PTA, whatever it may be—just make your presence known and felt, even heard. Of course, they were both like that till they both left me.

I'm like that with my Black, gifted and talented princess, my daughter and best friend, Blessing Norris. I've been following in their footsteps since she started preschool, and I'm still doing it. Everything my parents did, I am doing!



Peep this: my parents had their own sayings that have stuck with me, and I have instilled them in my daughter. I can still hear my daddy saying, "I can do everything that a man can do equally or better. Never depend on a man, nor even family—only God and yourself!"

My mommy, I can still hear her voice saying that I should be my own woman, have my own style, and always know how to budget wisely. All of these sayings of my parents have molded, stuck, helped, and made me into the Black, educated, goddess/queen woman and mother that I am today, and that's how I'm raising my Blessing to be!

Both of my sisters told me about their experience, which has helped me today. My oldest sis, while she was still alive, showed me through her experience that I should never let a man say that he'll stop doing something he knows you don't like, make you promises, and get your feelings up and then decapitate them. And if you are tired of trying to get your feelings heard through family, then write them out. Just don't keep them bottled up!

Both experiences have helped my relationships and me, and they stopped me from doing something I would regret. Until this day, that's mainly why I love writing—because my oldest sis taught that to me. My daughter does the exact same thing.

My other sis has always told me how I am a very strong person, no matter how hard it may seem. Where there's a will, there's always a way. I always tell Blessing that she is a strong, Black child who will be the same type of woman one day and will know there is always a way!

My lil'/big brother, nephews, nieces, and in-laws have always said, wrote, or even showed me in their own ways things that have made a difference in the stages of my life. They have showed me how they look at certain things happening or going on in the world (past and present), how not to get my feelings involved, and that I better get it done now while I have the chance. All of these things have helped me in different stages of my life like you wouldn't believe!

I finally get to mention my forever and always favorite seventh and eighth grade teacher (stand up, put your hands together for her): Miss Josephine Tate, the best teacher St. Ambrose ever had! This teacher taught me a lot, though I used to think she was a strict and mean monster . . .

When she became my teacher for two years straight, I found out that she wasn't a monster. She just really cared about her students learning and getting them prepared for the next step after eighth grade, the world, etc. She made the most boring subject interesting, like looking at the news and reading the paper. I also learned how to write from dictation and the importance of it. Now the difficult part of my education was me getting through my home life and the problems that were going on there, and my grades going from "The Bomb" to D's.

I was at the point where I just wanted to drop out of seventh grade because of my home life and being picked on, which always caused me to bring a knife. Maybe if I had spoken to some teachers or a priest it wouldn't have gotten that far. What stopped me from actually dropping out was my parents and myself because I wanted to be a teacher. Plus, I wouldn't know how to tell my family and my teacher, Miss Tate.

There was also this TV show I loved to watch, until it went off the air when I was a 15-year-old sophomore in high school, called "A Different World." This TV show helped me to keep pushing and showed me that no matter what changes, don't stop or give up. It taught me the realness of the world, the good and bad of different races and



people in general. I also took from that show that life won't be easy, but you got to keep doing what you need to do till you finally got that horn saying, "Boom, shockalocka, I did that s\*\*!" Through all of the blood, sweat, tears, racism, etc., your True Blues had you all the way.

When I read, that's where my insecurities come in because I despise the way I talk and pronounce words. I am tongue-tied (especially when I need to repeat myself, I stutter and speak with a lisp at the same time). I add an "S" on words that don't need it. Now I love reading out loud when I'm alone, and

reading is my passion. I put lots of emphasis when I read in Kevin's writing class, so if I mispronounce something, it won't be noticed.

Writing is a whole different type of planet that takes you into a different galaxy, with moons, suns, and stars as far as one can write! Writing takes you on a trip to eternity where you could write nonstop. Writing is my spouse, life partner, my other me! We're always confident with each other, like it will continue to have my back, and writing knows it can count on me to always share everything that's on my chest—mind, feelings, and all. Writing has always had my interest from the time I held my first marker and wrote on myself.

With all I've been through in my education and the inspiration that has helped to get me over, I won't quit or give up! My family didn't raise me or teach me to, and I have a Blessing who needs a Black Queen, an educated woman to look up to. And I'm her mother, the Black Queen who will do all of that along with what was passed on by the elders, so she'll be the next Black Educated Queen! **(Quishanta Cary)**





Life is filled with continuous, never-ending lessons. It has taught me a lot about myself, or how I see the world. I do not believe it has been different at various stages of my life; however, I am constantly evolving. At different parts of my

journey, different lessons are applied and learned. I am constantly learning. One of the lessons I never quite understood as a child now makes perfect sense to me. It is the lesson my mom taught me about generosity.

As an only child, I was not used to sharing things with siblings. Everything was mine and mine only. My mom would always give away my old toys and clothes. Although I no longer played with those toys or wore those clothes, I just hated the idea of parting with them. I just wanted to receive but never give. My mom would always say I should not be selfish and should give to those in need or who have less. But in my logic as a child, I thought that if I gave away my things I would have less, and they would have more than I would. My mom reminded me that even if I might think I do not have a lot, to someone else I have plenty. I should always be grateful with everything. As a child, I did not know what it meant to be grateful—the only thing I saw was my clothes and toys being donated. Even though my mom bought me new toys and clothes, I was still bitter about the things I had to give up. If that was not bad enough, our home always had people in it since my mom felt the need to help everyone and feed everyone.

My mom's mom did it, and so did her mother. Since this is a generational pattern, I realized that I needed to accept it. I was annoyed by this because, again, I had to share my bed, share my toys, share my space. I have seen people throw my mom's kindness in her face, but she continued helping others even if they became ungrateful after being helped. I finally asked my mom why she continued to help people even if they often do not appreciate her kind-heartedness. She told me that she was not doing this for herself—she was doing it for me. Can you imagine the confusion on my face? She then

simplified it by saying, "I don't know where in the world you'll end up, and I won't always be around to help you. But I am hoping that by helping others when I can, someday someone will help you too when you are in need." It did not make any sense then, but now it does.

As an adult, it makes perfect sense. I am no longer suffering from a bad case of only-child syndrome. I always try my best to give back. I do not have much, but I am grateful because I was raised to be grateful with everything. I have also helped people who I should have avoided at all costs. But I did not let bad experiences change my views on being kind and generous to people, even if they took my kindness for granted. I saw how it never changed my mom, grandmother, and great-grandmother.

The year 2020 has been and still is a very challenging year for me. Being unable to work or find work really takes a toll on you. But the amount of people who have helped me during this time is mind blowing. I have had people help me who have never met me before, but they extended a helping hand and continue to do so. I am overwhelmed with everything and feel defeated, but I am also overwhelmed with gratitude; there is no amount of words to describe how thankful and appreciative I am to all those who have helped and continue to help me. I finally understand what my mom meant. I hope to teach my kids the same lessons.

Believe it or not, movies have played a role in my life as well, specifically the movies where there are scenes of rape or molestation. I could relate to it on a deeper level because I too have experienced molestation by a family member. I do not say I am a victim of child sexual molestation because I do not see myself as a victim; I see myself as someone who unfortunately had to experience it. Those movies, like *I Spit on Your Grave*, taught me that I do not

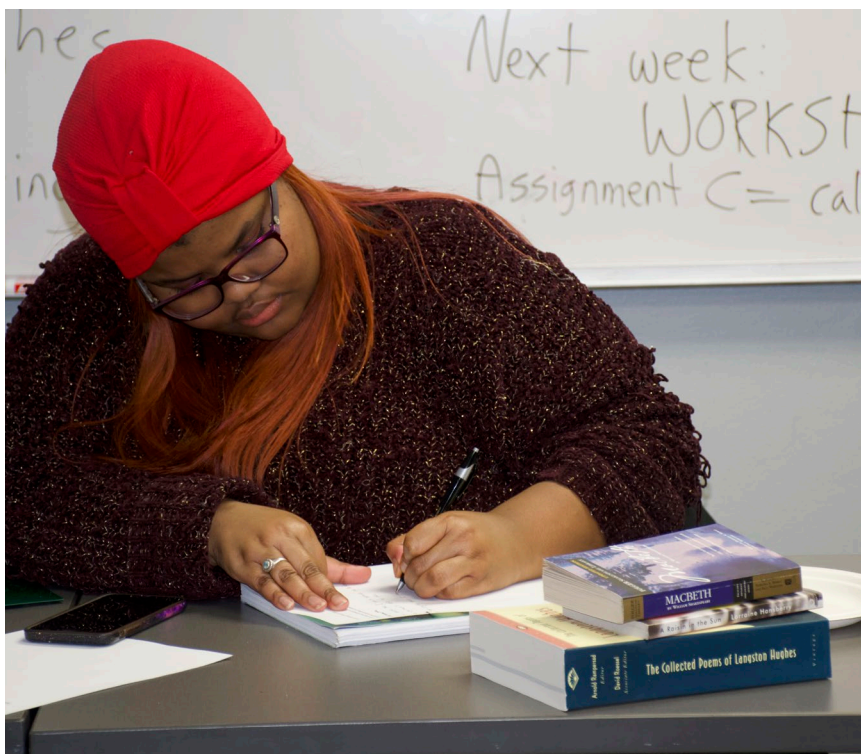


want to be filled with so much anger, that it is the type of anger that consumes you. I do not want to go down a darker path of drug abuse. I sometimes do feel that is what my family expects from me, that they are waiting for me to fail. I still don't know why I am the problem in all of this since I did not do anything, yet the person who was in the wrong is living his best life, and my family swept it under the rug as if it never happened.

A few years ago, I made the decision to disown my family—not legally, I just did not want to be affiliated with people who still welcome the person who sexually molested me as a child with open arms. I speak about it openly, and whenever I do I receive texts from my family. “Don’t bad mouth my family.” “This is not how you should deal with it.” “You shouldn’t be mad at these people, but be mad at this and that one.” “Think about how this and that one should feel when they see you posting these things.” I must admit, I find it quite funny that the very people who chose to sweep it under the rug are now the same people who have a lot to say. I do not speak up to name and shame; I speak up to help the next person going through the same thing. I speak up to bring awareness to an ongoing problem. No one should tell you how to deal or how

to heal, especially if they are part of the damage, and especially if they never experienced what you have gone through. That is a permanent scar. You do not just get over it; I think you never do. You just learn to live with it and rock the scar as a reminder that I am a warrior. I am grateful to the movies for showing me the path I do NOT want to take, and I chose not to.

If we are being honest, I cannot think of anything school taught me that I apply to my life today. I developed negative feelings towards math, physics, English, accounting, and biology. I honestly did not like school; you would think I loved school since I was there an hour early every day and I never skipped. I figured that, since I hated it so much, I did not want to repeat a year and stay longer in school. Looking back, I probably just did not like the teacher, not the subject. I find that I enjoy biology, and Odyssey revived a love for English in me that I did not know I had. As for physics and math, I want to work on loving them, too. My ledgers were hardly balanced in accounting, and neither is my life years later. But like my many attempts in accounting to get my numbers to balance, I am attempting the same to get my life to balance.



I never knew how insecure I am about my writing until I had to read it out loud or have other people read it. For the longest time I could remember, my writing was always just for me. I never allowed anyone to read my work. It wasn't until 2019 when I started Odyssey that I was forced out of my comfort zone. Reading was never an issue; I do not mind reading, but reading my own work? Now that is a whole new ball game. It does not help that everyone in my class is an amazing writer. Over the summer, I tried to write as much as possible and read it at the Zoom meetings to help with my insecurities. Rome was not built in one day. I am working on my insecurities. I am a work in progress! **(Loché Motha)**



My academic education was not something I enjoyed most of my life. It was painful, difficult, stressful, and overwhelming. Sometimes I hated going to school because I knew at that time that the learning processes just didn't work for me. My

education started and stemmed from the dreams, plans, focus, discipline, consistency, and passion from my sport, weightlifting.

I believe in fifth grade my teacher asked my mother to come to school to talk about my progress. I tried to keep up in class assignments, but when I'd ask my teacher questions or ask her to repeat stuff, she would call me out and say I should have been paying attention. In fact, I was, and she could see it. I kept trying, but I stopped asking questions because her only replies were to ridicule me in front of my peers.

I worked hard in school and at home. My mother would tell me that at fifth grade she had to quit school because she needed to help her family, who were sharecroppers. She picked cotton on the land her family owned and learned to cook because she hated picking cotton. She only had a fifth-grade education but wanted more. She wanted more for her life and more for me, so I didn't want to let her down, no matter what.

On the day my mother was to come to school, she dressed up in an African skirt and colorful dashiki, top, big round gold earrings, and a big afro. She was beautiful! She walked me to school that day, and we talked to the teacher. She was a big, tall white woman. She was kind of mean and had a menacing look most of the time, like she didn't want to be there and didn't want to be bothered.

During the meeting, the teacher showed my mom some of my grades and my assignments. Then the teacher told my mother, "I don't believe your child is able to be educated here. I think he should be taken out of normal classes and placed in slower classes." I was devastated, and the room went silent.

Then my mother stood up in all of her beauty and blackness and said to my teacher, "This is my child, I know my child, and he works hard on his assignments, at home and in school."

My mom said, "I tell you what, lady, maybe you're the problem, not my son. Maybe you can't or just don't want to teach him, so you just don't! Let me tell you this: you don't have to concern yourself about teaching my son anymore because I'm taking him out of this school right now!"

And she did.

My mom took me out of public school that day and put me in a Catholic school called St. Susanna. She worked extra to pay my tuition because my father didn't want to. I went there for two years until my mother got sick and couldn't pay tuition. I transferred back to public school for eighth grade, and before graduation my mom had a heart attack. She believed in me and my education, so I made a commitment to not let her down, no matter what.

When I got to high school, I was good at football, wrestling, and weightlifting, but academics were still hard. I realized that what took other kids an hour to understand and complete would take me three hours, sometimes more. I saw some letters and words backwards, and I didn't know why. I was so frustrated, and hurt because I tried so damn hard to just understand stuff and would only get parts of details and concepts—like seeing parts of a picture, a story, or a tapestry.





My mom got me tested by this Psych Dr. Guy who said my IQ score was 138. It didn't do me any good because I still couldn't grasp concepts and processes in time to get decent grades and pass classes. I realized by my junior year that I was not college material, which hurt, so I worked more. I worked, went to school, and stayed involved in the weightlifting club and found something I could be good at!

After school I'd lift weights, and some days I read about weightlifting correctly. I even bought the Charles Atlas bodybuilding course advertised in comic books! I'd then lift weights. I bought weights in eighth grade, and in high school I built my own bench, squat rack, and sit up chair, and worked out in my garage. I found a passion and something I could be good at! I graduated high school with about a low C or high D average, but I won the overall bodybuilding contest for our high school district and placed in the state AAU competition. I taught myself focus and discipline, planning, and consistency to accompany my dreams.

I worked hard after high school and tried classes at various schools. I bombed out each time, but the gym became my second home. I eventually won my weight class for the state of Illinois and qualified to go to nationals to compete. I ended up not competing because my family needed money, so I had to work more to help my family keep our house.

Working out, dreaming, planning, focus, discipline and consistency gave me pride and purpose, swag and more. I learned to put those processes into everything I did because they worked for me. They became my academic process for success. I tried, and tried again, to pass the test to get my CDL so I could drive trucks, but I couldn't pass the damn test. Eventually I got through it and drove trucks, trained,

and mentored other truck drivers. I had difficulty taking and passing that test, but I did it.

Over the years, I've taken, failed, and retaken many classes. While taking prerequisite classes for the LPN program, I had to retake some of the classes. I had a savings account just for paying to retake classes after I failed the first time. I failed the nursing boards test for my LPN, but retook it after the 90 days and then passed it! I've been an awesome nurse for 13 years. I train nurses and mentor nurses in my department. I get awesome yearly evaluations, but tests are still difficult for me, like the CPR and nursing education tests.

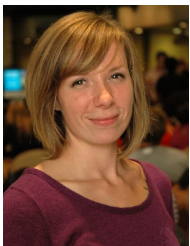
I also shared my passion for athletics with my daughter and grandson! I started my daughter swimming at six months, and now she's 12. She has been on the swim team for three years. Sidney truly loves swimming. If it's just being in the swimming pool, snorkeling in the Florida Keys, or swimming with dolphins, it's one of her passions. I started my grandson, Bruce, in swim class at five months. Now he's five and has been swimming in the deep end in his class. He said, "Papa, I'm a water monster!" He's the fastest swimmer in his little class, and so animated in the water that it's awesome to just watch him thrive. Swimming and just being in the water has become one of his passions! I talk to both of them about dreams, goals, planning, focus, discipline and consistency



related to their passion, swimming, and they get it! I also talk to them about the same principles related to education and other goals they want to achieve, and about how those same principles can be applied in their young everyday lives. And they get it. It's amazing to be a part of that.

They are both doing very well in school and in life. My daughter is working on taking her girl empowerment business and creating a series of online girls' empowerment videos to help girls work through self-esteem, focus, goal setting, and other topics during the

pandemic. My grandson called me two weeks ago to tell me his word for the week was perseverance. He is to talk about how he can apply it in situations in his everyday life. He said, "Perseverance is like I practice at swim class every week so I can swim fast in the deep end and be the water monster! It's when I'm riding my bike and I fall down but get back up and keep riding until I'm good at it." Those actions by my daughter, those statements by my grandson, to me are priceless; they not only get it, they exude those qualities in their young lives already. **(Bruce Moore)**



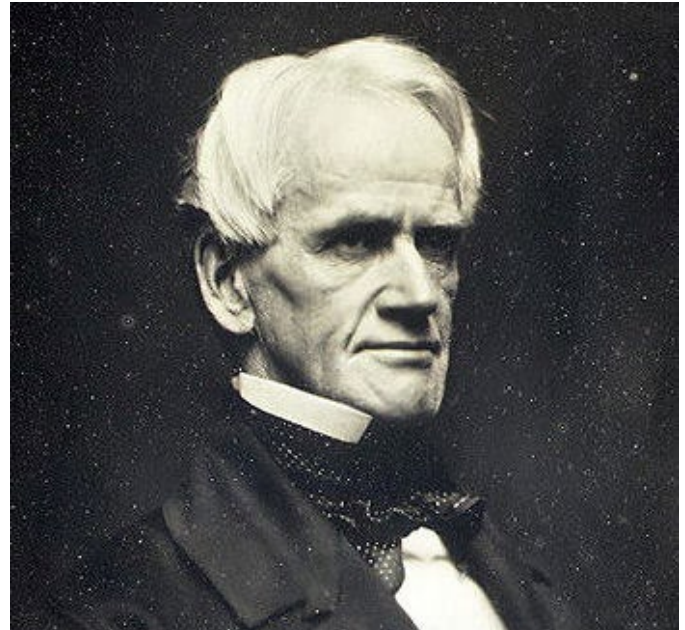
When I was a child, we were always on the move. My mother was a perpetual victim of domestic violence and found herself in the same scenarios everywhere she went, leading to my education resembling a disoriented, disorganized mosaic.

Sometimes I moved as often as three times in one school year, fracturing my ability to learn much more than local dialect, social hierarchy, and classism. They told me that I was fortunate to access free public education. However, I'm not sure that I ever liked school.

There was a narrative I often heard related to public school. If I weren't learning these concepts in school, I would be laboring in fields somewhere. For that, I should count my lucky stars.

What I didn't hear was the truth. Knowing it doesn't make it feel any better. Civil obedience, capitalism, and white supremacy are the core values of our public education. Now I sound like a conspiracy theorist. I realize that.

Even as I did a basic google search about Horace Mann, the so-called "Father of Education," the story is the same. The truth is far more oppressive. Why is this where the story begins?



Where did Horace Mann get the concept that would spread like wildfire across our burgeoning nation? He learned about it in Prussia, modern-day Germany, in pre-Nazi times. The military had lost a war; leaders believed the loss stemmed from the soldier's free-thinking versus conditioned patriotic loyalty. Universal education would fix that.

Squeezing critical thinking out of their pupils, differentiating the poor from the elite, and perpetuating white supremacy laid the foundation of this new education. Early Ph.D. holders gained their degree in Prussia, came back to America, and founded the major universities. The system is operating as intended.

I'm beginning to value the fact that indoctrination was not entirely successful in my education. **(Jamie Lovely)**