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Developing the Question of “Who?”

The exploration of the nature of identity, or the question of how one knows who they are, is something that has permeated many of my classes at Loras College. As an English major, I have been constantly exposed to a variety of perspectives; by default, every piece of writing I have ever read has allowed for the experience of a different perspective on life, and every piece that I have ever written expresses a different aspect of my own perspective. Yet, this notion of identity has not only been central to the classes directly related to my English major, but has also permeated a number of general education classes that I took during my two and a half years at Loras College. These interconnections among different fields of study have instigated the development of a theoretical foundation revolving around identity formation. This foundation has, in turn, generated a number of writing topics throughout my years here.

The liberal arts aspect of Loras College has enabled me to participate in a number of general education courses ranging from topics on Comparative Politics and Worker’s Justice to a Psychology class called “Drugs and Human Behavior.” In Comparative Politics, I was able to compare how different aspects of government, such as electoral systems, are implemented differently and for different purposes around the world. Similarly, in my course on Worker’s Justice, I read a variety of arguments from different religious perspectives about the definition of fair treatment for workers. Reading about the implementation of government from a variety of argumentative standpoints helped me to see how one subject can be thought about or talked about in a variety of ways, and that there is no one concrete way to view the world. The psychology class I took also contributed to the development of this notion, although the class did not have any strong political undertone. In that class, we talked about how all drugs function the

same way by manipulating the chemical structures of the brain, but our culture creates rules about which drugs are acceptable and not acceptable to use, and under what situations exceptions arise. While the message was not overtly political, understanding this contributed to my realization that there is no inherently right or wrong way to live life. Instead, our culture gives us a lens through which to see the world, and this perspective guides our behavior.

Not only did these classes further develop my capacity to think from a multitude of perspectives, I also couldn't help making more and more connections between them as time went on. These connections could be organized into a variety of categories: the pressures of increasing cultural standardization, industrial expansion, technological advancement, or the destruction of eco-diversity. Yet, all of these different connections converge with the idea that our identity as humans is based on a relationship with the earth. This relationship may involve being uplifted by nature's beauty, inspired by the self-sufficiency of regeneration, or may focus on negative relationships with nature, such as tearing it down or being torn down by it. At the same time, every article or idea that we possess stems from our natural environment, and these possessions in turn become the language of our identity. Oftentimes my creative nonfiction essays and poems deal with such topics involving a relationship with nature and its influence on identity.

Not often, but sometimes, the way I was asked to think about the world in one class clashed with the way I had been encouraged to think about the world in classes directly related to my English major. While literature tends to view the world in more ambiguous terms, seeing beyond the cultural constructions of what the world is, other disciplines prefer to see the world in more concrete terms. The best example of this happened in my Comparative Politics class. The entire class was involved in a discussion about land ownership and taxes. Most of my classmates argued that it only makes sense for people to pay taxes to the government, because the

government owns federal land and this ownership then allows the government to implement projects that benefit us using tax money. I, in turn, made the comment that taxes shouldn't exist because nobody truly owns the land, and if the government has too much authority, then land may be utilized in ways that are beneficial to the majority of people without being beneficial to the people who actually live there. For example, while fracking has been used as a way to deliver cheaper gasoline to market, those living in areas where fracking occurs find gasoline in the drinking water. My teacher encouraged this different perspective on the issue, but my classmates—all political science majors—thought I was nuts, or at least ignorant about what I was saying.

However, my politics class did not always clash with my ability to view the world objectively; it certainly allowed me to take a more political tone in an essay I wrote about genetically modified foods. In the essay, I discuss the way in which my culture procures its food as if there were other, better ways to do this. Since the way in which any society obtains and distributes their food ultimately reflects the way the entire society is organized, studying different forms of government in my comparative politics class helped me to understand how social organization starting with the government can in turn affect many of the different ways a society functions. The essay is titled, “Bacon, Bands, and Skeleton Hands,” and in one part of the essay, I wrote that:

I packed a bag full of organic salad greens for the camping trip. A mix of Romaine lettuce, arugula, and spinach. Religiously, I ate a bowl each day. But what good did it do me? Spinach keeps for a while, especially if blanched, but half of the Vitamin B contained therein had already depleted just one week after being picked. The loss of nutritional value over time is true with my bag of apples as well (Markham). With the way we have sectioned off certain parts of the earth as orchards and farmlands, shipping the lemons, strawberries, and oranges to countless grocery store shelves all across the continent, the food we consume is a carbon copy of true, earth-ripened fare. The amber waves of grain sail to processing facilities where corn and soy morph into additives that make up the bulk of our processed food supply (United States International Food

Information Council). In the name of convenience, we have sacrificed the ability to procure our food directly from the earth.

Not only did my Comparative Politics class help me to see the concept of social organization as something that can be executed in a variety of ways, but it also helped me see the world from a more universal lens since government is something that impacts every human being's life.

Understanding how government is organized, and how this organization impacts other aspects of society, has allowed me to discuss issues through a perspective that touches everyone's lives.

Other classes have also given me the opportunity to explore this concept of identity in a less overtly political light. Studying Spanish was my gateway into learning about another culture. Reading and analyzing works that were written in a different language allowed me to see the world from that author's cultural point of view. I also had the chance to learn about cultures different from my own by enrolling in a class on Catholicism and Taoism, as well as another course that ruminated on the cultural conceptions of nature throughout Irish history called "The Nature of the Nature in Ireland." Studying the perspectives of other cultures has allowed me to conceive of the world in new ways by expanding my mind to see that the world is not black and white; that there is no one set way to view reality. This conception of identity as fluid is something that has helped me to understand what messages are the most universal to human experience, and thus, the most powerful. My exploration into the theoretical components of identity formation inspired me to write an essay about the impact of my surroundings as a child on the formation of my identity. In an excerpt of it, I reflect on a number of memories and how the psychological and the physical become inseparable in the mind:

I remember standing under the open sky on a hill watching the western glow ease down behind the gently pulsing canopy on the horizon; where we would hack wood, haul the logs in a cart behind the lawnmower, and stack them into neat rows on the front porch as fuel for the winter fire. On this hill, I remember discussions with my mother about the creamed-coffee smudge on my knee. She always said it was the place where the angels

had kissed me. And just like that, my little mind grew not to inhabit an afterlife, but to adopt a life before. My earliest memory is of walking towards my dad in the corner of the yard by a boat, the trees brushing against the translucent sky; yet when I think of this memory, I always wonder, “And what before this?” as if this life were a birthmark on some other bigger picture, the edges fuzzy.

Writing this essay was as cathartic as it was aesthetic, because, as I had learned in my classes on identity, being in touch with and in control of your identity is one way to empower yourself as a human being. Learning this for myself, I have come to understand that this notion of identity formation is a powerful one that relates to all of human experience. Therefore, by focusing on how the psychological and the physical realities that we experience form our identity, I am able to make my essays more relatable.

Other pieces that I have incorporated this notion of identity into have been more forward-looking than reminiscent. In a prose poem written as an imitation of a Jorge Luis Borges poem, I explore the phenomenon of expanding one’s identity as an act of self-preservation. The poem is called “Out of Myself,” and is a meditation on being in the midst of an identity change. For example, one part of it reads:

And anyway, these garments won’t fit me forever. After I die, they will be parceled away to new denizens, but my skin’s dust will remain tucked in the crosshairs of the fabric’s weaving. Dressing and undressing, I am getting closer to the day when everyone will remember me by the ensemble laid down inside of my casket. They say tarantulas crawl out of themselves from time to time; they understand such trappings of circumstance and leave their hollow carcasses behind. I know I can’t be anyone outside of Hayes (although the laundry is tiresome), yet my clothes are just the rivers I swim in to get to the eyes of another looking at mine. There was a time when these stilettos, these knee-length dresses, these hand-me down lockets were entirely new to my wardrobe, but their rotation turned into monotony and now I need to create a new assemblance. Thus, I’m always crawling out of one self and into another and I’m not sure who picks out the accessories anymore.

This passage, rather than reflecting on the past, is much more uncertain and forward-looking.

Thus, by having the chance to think about the notion of identity from a variety of cultural

perspectives in the classes I took while at Loras College, I was able to develop the notion that identity formation is constant, taking place not only in the past, but in the present as well.

For my last semester at Loras, I was able to enroll in a class that is intentionally geared towards talking about identity formation and change. In fact, it is not just one class, but two classes—one about Spanish Colonial history and the other about American religious history—that converge on the theoretical foundations of identity formation. One of the most important pieces of theory that we have had to acquire for the class is that of an in-between identity. An in-between identity is both non-identity, and the center of one's creation of their conception of identity. This portion of the theoretical thinking helped to influence an essay I wrote about the time I spent with my grandmother as a child, and how it affected my idea of who I am. The following is an excerpt from the essay's conclusion, where this idea is most explicit:

Sometimes we would spend the night at Grandma's house and take turns fighting over who held her hand. We'd lie beside one another bobbing on the waterbed's gentle waves as we watched the lights from passing cars project shapes across the ceiling, distorting as they ran along the corners of the room. She always said she'd never let another man into her bedroom besides Lloyd, and she was right. A picture of him, pen in hand, surrounded by papers at a desk hung on the wall beside her most recent portrait taken for the Church yearbook.

I wish I could tell you about her funeral, but to be honest, I don't remember much. I remember she looked beautiful and her coffin was cream with pink roses airbrushed onto the sides. We all plucked a flower from the bouquet on top of the slightly curved lid. I can't even remember what kind of flower I chose. What I do remember was that the air draped a thick layer of humidity around us, and the sky bore a dull blue faded by the brightness of the sun without a cloud in sight.

Two days later, I was sitting on the back porch when a double-decker cloud streaked with lightning from the inside rolled towards me. A week later, I was camping with friends when a sudden downpour and sky-splitting thunder sent us scattering. We eventually found each other huddling for warmth in the early reaches of dawn within the shelter of a tent. It is in these sudden shifts in the atmosphere that my memories are most clearly formed, that I remember who I am; that I remember that these changes never stop, that the weather, that our lives, are not for granted, that the memories of our ancestors will be replaced by memories of our own lives that pile onto one another and become distorted like headlights moving across a bedroom wall; that it's impossible to settle down in a world of constant change.

Death is such a change, and yet there is something else that I've learned about it. Despite these changes that we pass through all our lives, there's something self-contained, something that remains constant within all of us. When our time comes, we cannot stop it. All we can do is give our stuff away, box up the rest, and maybe even hand down a locket with a woman on the front from its nail on the bedroom wall to a child with the same middle name as ourselves.

Here my concept of identity is focused on the interaction between the external forces that shape identity and the internal sense of self that one harbors throughout their life. By developing an understanding of how these different aspects of identity formation interact to project a stable identity, I have deepened the complexity of the ongoing discussion of identity in my work. Focusing on identity formation in my liberal arts classes has opened the door for me to continue to develop my complexity of thought on the subject for the rest of my writing career, which will allow me to continue to find better ways to relate to others through my writing.

Since identity is such a universal subject, the more I can grasp this notion of identity formation, the more powerful the messages of my pieces might become. I foresee this to be a line of thinking that I continue to develop after I graduate, and continue to allow to influence my writing.

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