

How I Arrived Here: A Personal Narrative Essay

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IDS-493: Electronic Portfolio Project

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March 30, 2024

Abstract

I am a senior at Old Dominion University, soon to be graduating with a Bachelor of Science in Cybersecurity. This paper will recount my story of how I arrived here, at this point in time. It will be told in narrative format while also applying some of the concepts I have learned along the way, particularly those I learned at ODU. These concepts have helped me reflect on who I am and the decisions I have made this far, especially my motivations behind those decisions. It will also briefly describe how I see those motivations working for me as I move forward.

How I Arrived Here: A Personal Narrative Essay

There are some things I must first explain so that you can understand how I have arrived at this point in my life. First and foremost, integrity is of the utmost importance to me. I am honest, some would say to a fault. Even my closet friends sometimes disparage my seeming inability to lie or exaggerate the truth. This being the way that I am, this account is wholly truthful and accurate. I will not sit here and pretend that I've known my whole life that I wanted to choose this career, that it is my life's greatest passion. It feels (to me, at least) that everyone wants to say that about their career choices. But that would be a lie and, although I don't know you, I refuse to lie to you. That being said, this path has snuck up on me a little more gradually, and when I started my journey, I definitely did not see this destination at the end (or, I suppose, in the middle) of my road. Another very important background note about me is that I have always been extraordinarily driven, a perfectionist, some might even say an overachiever. I would not describe myself as an overachiever. I would say I achieve things just right, to the best of my ability, always. Just as it is not in my nature to lie, it is not in my nature to complete tasks carelessly or lackadaisically. That is just not who I am.

History and Challenges

Although I graduated from high school as co-valedictorian of my class, I picked a private school that offered me a much smaller scholarship than the public schools did. I very much liked the school, it was far enough away from where I grew up (eight hours) to give me room to breathe and find myself, but I also, fortunately, had my uncle and aunt who lived in the same town. One of my oldest friends also went to the same college. It just felt like the right place for me and, at seventeen, I felt like the world was my oyster. What was money, anyway? I would find a way to make it work! While I loved my classes and continued to excel, I found myself

working two part-time jobs trying to make ends meet. Eventually, even two jobs and loans were not enough, and I dropped out of college when I couldn't pay off my outstanding balance. At that same time, my father was in a devastating accident, and I spent several months helping to take care of him. I also wondered, although never articulated it to them directly, if my parents would need help paying for medical bills. How could I help them when I had to drop out of college for lack of money?

At this point, I felt completely unmoored, and not in the freedom-to-do-anything-I-want kind of way. Everything I had worked for was no longer a possibility, and I didn't know what to do. I wanted to help my parents but didn't know how to make that a reality. I also didn't want to just sit on the sidelines, letting life pass me by. I didn't want to get stuck where I was, in my hometown, and look back twenty years down the road wondering what happened. I was looking for some way to take back control, something I could do to get me away from there so that I wouldn't get stuck. I also needed something to provide me with a stable income so that I could help my parents if they needed it.

Then, inspiration struck. Both of my parents were in the Navy, and although my mom was out before I was born, my dad was in until I was eight. So, I was somewhat familiar with the lifestyle, as far as an eight-year-old can be. My favorite uncle, who I was also close with, had been a Navy veteran, as well as my grandfather. It was never a path I had envisioned for myself, but it felt like something I could choose to get me out of my circumstances, so I chose it. I initially wanted to join as a linguist, but the recruiters convinced me to go in as a nuclear reactor operator, telling me I would get to do calculus if I picked that, which I loved (spoiler alert: I never got to do any calculus). Being in the Navy was difficult for me at first. It was the first time I had ever truly been alone in my life. But it also gave me a sense of independence that even

college didn't provide. Then, I came to the realization that I had some hidden skills. I wasn't just good at math, science, and the humanities. I could also excel at technical things and the hands-on application of that technical knowledge.

Thoughts, Reflections, and Motivations

Nguyen (2013) describes an e-portfolio is a "living portal" through which students can describe themselves to others. This ties into how students strive to follow their interests while simultaneously living their most authentic life. People, I think, more and more are trying to stay true to themselves and what they want out of their lives rather than trying to fit into the boxes that people want to put them in. At least, that is true for me. I don't know how many people have told me over the years that they don't understand the choices I have made. As a valedictorian who excelled at just about everything I tried (first-chair saxophonist, lead vocalist of my school's most elite choir, winning awards for my leadership and community service, etc.), people think I should have taken a prestigious jobs and be making piles of money. While I have always been in pursuit of academic excellence, I never wanted to slave away day after day in the endless pursuit of money. I have other goals and want to stay true to myself. In fact, during my first attempt at college, I was a theology major. I wanted to be a missionary. I always saw myself in service to others. Now, although my focus has shifted, I still have that same desire to serve others. But what are my exact motivators? And how can I best live that out?

McAdams (2001) helped me to accurately pinpoint my deepest motivators, the "why" behind my choices. He postulates that thematic coherence in a narrative essay encompasses an "overarching theme, value, or principle" (p. 105) that directs or guides how a person writes their biography. This might include specific belief system that a person uses for organizing their life (p.106). People may describe their themes differently based on the drive for power, relating to

agenic themes, or intimacy, relating to themes of communion (p. 112). Redemption is a commonly used theme in narratives as is the converse theme regarding contamination sequences (p.113). After much soul-searching, I realized that my driving motivators align with communal themes: friendship, love, caring for others, and a sense of community.

Relationships are of the utmost importance to me. My roles as daughter, wife, mother, and friend have driven me to make the choices that I have. I chose a college because it “felt right” but also because I had my best friend there. I joined the Navy, in part, for me, so I wouldn’t get stuck, but also so that I could help my parents. I finished my six-year contract in the Navy and left so that I could better take care of my son. I met my husband in the Navy, and two parents in the Navy does not make for a stable home life, which I desperately wanted for my son. I then had another son and took a part-time work-from-home job as a bookkeeper so that I could simultaneously take care of our family and help provide income so that it wasn’t all on my husband’s shoulders.

Present Day

That brings me to now, nearly graduating with a degree in cybersecurity. So, why cybersecurity? The single biggest reason I chose cybersecurity, staying true to who I always have been, is for job security so that I can take care of my family. It is an industry that is quickly growing and, as such, there many jobs available, meaning I will (hopefully) never struggle to find one. I want to provide security and stability for my family. There are also many work-from-home cybersecurity jobs, meaning I can move to a small town where my nieces and nephews live, where my kids will grow up surrounded by family, while still being able to provide for them. My husband is also getting a cybersecurity degree (through another university) and encouraged me to get into the field. Because I value that relationship, I took his advice and very

seriously investigated it. Once I investigated further, I realized it would be a good fit for me and an area that I will do well in. The Navy helped me realize that I have the technical skills and mind to make it work, which I also took into consideration. I wanted to be able to be successful at whatever it was that I chose. Not only that, but it also will take some of the financial pressure off my husband to have to work so hard to provide for our family.

According to Smith (2017), we take the disjointed and seemingly unrelated pieces of our lives and put them together into our personal narrative. This is what allows us to make sense of our lives and give it meaning. These are the pieces of my life that have come together like a puzzle, revealing to me my “why” for how I arrived at this place in this moment of time. If I had realized a long time ago that I make most of my decisions based on relationships and the deep-seated need for community, I may have felt embarrassed or ashamed. I may have felt that it wasn’t good enough, that I needed to find my “own thing” for me. But now, I don’t feel that way. I think it is an honor to serve others. I loved that sense of purpose of serving my country when I was in the Navy. Even through my bookkeeping job I was able to serve my clients so that their businesses could be the best that they could be. I will take that same attitude of serving others into this next chapter of my life. While my primary purpose in choosing this specific career path may be so that I can best serve the needs of my family, I will still have the opportunity to serve my employer, company, and clients.

Through the course of my studies at Old Dominion University, I have learned far beyond the technical skills that I expected to learn. I have learned how cybersecurity applies to so many other parts of life, really, nearly every part. I have learned why cybersecurity is important to society and why it matters. I have learned how valuable it is and how careful we have to be with it, but also how incredible it is and the positive affects it can have. There are two sides to the

cybersecurity coin, and you must keep that in mind when working with it. It is both a sword and a shield.

Conclusion

Now, to bring things full circle, I always do everything to the best of my ability. My life experiences have brought me to this point in my life, but this degree allows me to see down the road to what is next. While my past relationships have led me here, the relationships I will form in my cybersecurity career will help me continue to serve others, as cybersecurity is becoming more crucial every day. Relationships have helped me make it this far, and they will keep me going and doing my best. I want to make this world a better place and help people. It is who I am. Just as I have excelled at everything else I have chosen in my life, I will excel at this, too. That is, also, who I am.

References

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