

Transforming Adversity Into Meaning

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Abstract

Throughout my life, education has always mattered to me. However, my journey to my last semester at Old Dominion University was not without adversity. In my personal narrative essay, I will link together my life experiences to illustrate why I grew into the person I am today. Narrowing a life into one storyline can be difficult. Yet when I reflected on my personal brand and the achievements that mean the most to me, I uncovered a map of inspirations rooted in my early life experiences.

Transforming Adversity Into Meaning

Narratives are an ever-changing constellation of experiences and influences. We have no say in our nature; yet we can still nurture ourselves to excel. I am a dynamic individual who strives to exceed my mentor's standards. Education was difficult for me. However, I persevered because of the values I have reinforced throughout my life.

Early Life Experiences

During my early years, I was diagnosed with sensory processing disorder, which made me more reactive to 'normal' sensory stimuli due to its heightened intensity. This led to a fractured educational experience; I was enrolled in public school, removed for homeschool, and then placed in a dysfunctional private school. Although I was eager to learn, I disliked the way I was taught in formalized education. Even in elementary school, I was a perceptive individual who was quick to notice irrationality or unfairness. I disliked the way I often saw adults disparaging students who were unique or disruptive. This led to my interest in social science and my drive to learn the ideal methods of teaching and empowering young people.

In middle school, I severely fractured my ankle and required surgery. Due to my sensory disorder, I felt the pain much more acutely than the average person would. At the time, I understood little about the disorder and was unable to work through the turmoil of my healing process. Mental health issues soon followed, and my body never returned to normal. Instead, it experienced widespread pain with no apparent cause. My memory and ability to learn rapidly declined, and I was fatigued most hours of the day. Fortifying my intellect mattered to me. Yet for reasons I did not understand, this factor of my personal brand, and how it was interpreted by others, atrophied.

Once again, I did not possess the knowledge to understand my disability. I assumed that I was just unlucky, and internalized others' assumptions that I was lackadaisical. Any encouraging statement about my intelligence in the proceeding years was paired with judgment towards my lethargy. I made the honor roll in high school, but resented how formalized education marginalized students like myself who were warring against their minds or environments in unseen ways. This frustration reignited my interest in social science. I knew that instilling low self-esteem in adolescents as they attempted to learn could not be the ideal way to share knowledge.

Entering Higher Education

Although the thought of further education intimidated me, I enrolled in Virginia Peninsula Community College to work towards earning a social science degree. When I enrolled, I met with a disability accommodations advisor who encouraged me to seek psychiatric diagnoses. Over the next few years I was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder, which both contributed to my “difficulties in dealing with academic demands” (Rosello et al., 2018). Learning more about these disorders helped me devise methods to achieve despite my setbacks.

I did not attend VPCC without interruptions. For a year, I decided to enter the workforce because I was unsure of the direction I wanted my future to take. While working for a nonprofit charity, I realized that my interest in social science was not constrained to a single discipline. Knowing that I was assisting members of my community was a wonderful experience, but the physicality of the work I was doing was not sustainable for me. I researched interdisciplinary career options during this time, searching for one that manageably fit my interests. Once I decided that working in a

public library was what I wanted to do with my future, I reenrolled at VPCC and volunteered at my local public library while waiting for the fall semester to start.

When an entry-level position opened at my library, I jumped at the opportunity. My volunteer coordinator provided an influential reference, and I was offered the job. I proceeded with my education at the same time, but the amount of work I piled on myself wore me down. The unexplained pains I had endured since middle school worsened and became too intense to ignore any longer.

A decade after my symptoms began, I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia, a central nervous system disorder that often results from trauma and causes widespread chronic pain, fatigue, and cognitive disturbances, among other symptoms (Bhargava, 2025). Receiving medical intervention and advice helped immensely, but the disorder is incurable. Although participating in both work and university was exhausting, I knew that proving myself and demonstrating effort would elevate my opportunities to serve others and turn my adversity into something meaningful.

Advancing My Opportunities

My perseverance afforded me this opportunity when I was promoted to an information services specialist during my third year with the library. In this role, I was mentored on how to improve the library's collection. When our head librarian assigned me to pick a section of our collection to work with, I immediately chose health. Throughout the next year, I evaluated and removed outdated books on health and recommended replacements. I was determined to provide a superior collection for our community, and did extensive research to ensure I was ordering reputable materials on as many health issues and disabilities as I possibly could.

When people checked these books out, I felt that my adversities truly made a difference. Lack of information caused me suffering. Yet it also taught me how empowering health information can be.

That year, I finished my associate's degree in social science and enrolled in the sociology program at ODUGlobal, Old Dominion University's online university. My initial semester reaffirmed that majoring in one discipline was not what I wanted from my education. My advisor recommended the leadership major to me instead, since it offered interdisciplinary opportunities and prepared learners with the skills necessary for workplace advancement.

Achievements in the Present

Now, I am in my last semester at ODUGlobal and work in the Collection Services department at my library. I have earned several certificates on collection development from self-learning courses for library workers, and I take on any responsibility I am offered to widen my skillset and serve the public's need for knowledge.

My interdisciplinary education has provided me with wide-ranging social science knowledge, just as I wished for while assessing what I wanted from my future years earlier. In my time enrolled at ODUGlobal I have finished leadership, sociology, psychology, human service, and criminal justice courses and expect to graduate cumma sum laude. I will be most proud of minoring in ODUGlobal's children's rights program. My interest in advocating for young people is a lifelong value that directed me towards social science early on, when I felt underserved.

Experiences that marginalized me in life made me realize the values that mattered to me most. Providing accessible information fulfills not only my academic interests but my determination to make meaning out of suffering. As I've grown, I have

turned myself around from a misunderstood youth to a persevering adult who knows the opportunities steadfast efforts unlock. Yet no effort is made alone; my mentors, advisers, and disability activists I learned from are also to thank for my journey.

I would not say that I have overcome my disabilities; that would be dishonest. The disabilities I experience are permanent, often painful, and embedded in every area of my life. However, we define our own stories and singularly develop the narrative identity we assign to ourselves (Smith, 2017). No human should endure the indignity of having a life defined by tragedy, including myself. Years earlier, I could have thrown away my opportunities and rejected further education entirely, but that is not who I am.

I am driven to serve the public's right to knowledge, which is fulfilled through purposeful learning and valuing human dignity. Ultimately, I would enjoy a career as a health sciences librarian. I am eligible to enroll in ODUGlobal's Master of Library and Information Studies program if I decide to. Yet no matter where life takes me, I will retain my values as a part of my personal brand. This will not be the end of my education. A personal brand "requires consistent upkeep" (Montañez, 2023), and there is always more insight to discover and turn into empowerment.

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