Me, Myself, I, and Alex (2011)

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My story is not one of traditional origins. There are no epic myths. There are no deep-rooted stories. There are no amazing beginnings or fantastic endings. It does not include great kingdoms or lands, nor does it include heroic villages or tragic communities drawn together with hope. I am not a leader; I am not a grand champion. My story is one of personal triumph. I stand here because of it. Without this origin—without its great significance—I would not be in this classroom, or this college, or even in this state. It is not a story of my birth, at least not in a physical sense, but a story of metamorphosis. It is the story of my Origin.

The beginning is not at my conception or delivery, but at my childhood. To fully grasp the meaning of my story, one must understand where I grew up and how I was raised. I am the second of three boys, the middle son, but often I was considered the oldest child. My elder brother Alex was born with Autism—a debilitating social and cognitive disorder—and so even though he came before me by two years, oftentimes his maturity level was far below my own. Aaron, my younger brother, did not arrive until I was four and Alex was six. However, despite the difference in our ages, my parents brought us up in the firm belief that “family comes first.” It was stressed to us over and over again that the relationships forged in family are the strongest and longest relationships in life. Because of this, Alex became a huge influence in my life at a very early age.

As a young child I came to understand my older brother. Regardless of his Autistic condition, I looked up to him. I learned to love science, to enjoy the outdoors, and to grasp creativity because of him. In this early stage of my life, he was my best friend and my closest companion. He was my older brother, and I idolized him. I was too young to understand what Autism was or to realize that Alex was different from other children, but I didn’t care.

Unfortunately, other people did care. As I started school—as a well-homed, somewhat sheltered child—I acted a lot like my brother. All of his quirkiness and introvertedness was a part of me now, for just as he had taught me to love nature and imagination, he had taught me not to seek friends but to stay within myself. I emulated his unusual characteristics: squeaking in public and waving my hands around. I did not know what a friend was or how to make one—I had never learned; however I did not believe I needed one. All of my life up to that point had been with Alex as my only playmate.
For the first couple of years of school this was not an issue, as most children at that age are too young to realize such oddities. As the years dragged forward, though, people began to see me as different. I was teased, laughed at, and poked fun at. I had no friends, and now that it was the fifth grade, I was old enough to understand the consequences of that. But what I did not understand was how to form these friendships. I never played sports; my brother was not interested in sports at all, so neither was I. I was skinny and frail. At recess I would sit on the hill above the playground and watch other kids play, but because of my weakness I could not join. As other children bullied me, I began to fear them, and whatever self-esteem I had once had deflated like a balloon left far too long in the cold. I was afraid to go to school, afraid of what kids might call me or do to me, afraid to approach anyone, and afraid to open myself up to anyone to create a friendship. I felt utterly trapped.

It is the worst thing for a child to not have friends. Even though at this point I had realized Alex was different, and I no longer acted like him, I did not know how to function socially. Awkwardly I would hover silently around the outside of groups, never daring to get involved. I would wake up in the morning drenched in a cold sweat, dreading the school bus so much that oftentimes I would throw up right there in my bed. As I graduated from elementary school into middle school, the situation deteriorated. In the classrooms of that middle school, I excelled. My grades were as high as they could possibly be. However, in the halls it was a different story. People no longer cared enough to bully me; I was simply ignored. I walked from class to class in complete solitude, brewing in my own thoughts. I craved the affection I saw everywhere but feared rejection so much that I kept my mouth shut and my eyes on the tiles in front of my sneakers. It was the worst time of my life.

Gym class was the crux of my anxiety. I huddled in the corner during dodgeball games, stood in the outfield by the woods during baseball, and avoided contact with anything in basketball. If I touched anyone, I feared that I would screw up and be laughed at. Which was exactly what happened—time and time again.

One afternoon as we were changing in the locker room after gym, I looked up from my tiny bench on the back wall. I saw the other boys, with muscles beginning to stand out on their arms and chest, talking loudly amongst themselves, ignoring me entirely. But for some reason that picture stayed in my mind. That night, in my bedroom, I looked at myself in the mirror. My reflection gawked back at me: a scared thirteen-year-old, scrawny and underdeveloped; my chest was an empty hollow that caved inward, jutting my shoulders outward. My eyes looked sunken. My hand could wrap around my bicep. I was pathetic.

Something sparked inside of me then. I am not sure to this day what it was, but that very night an idea popped into my head and fueled my rejuvenation to where I am today. I remembered the muscles that the other kids had. I remembered their raucous laughter and jokes. I wanted that.
That very night, past midnight, I dropped to the floor for the first time. Shaking, and barely able to pull my weight, I struggled to complete my first ever push-up. But I completed it. Panting, I fell back onto the hard floor of my bedroom, determined. I rolled into a sitting position and unsteadily lifted my head to my knees in a sit-up. Even though I could not do many, I knew that I was now doing something.

Over the course of the next year, every night I would do my exercises after my family was asleep—fearing someone would jest at my attempts. I could feel myself growing stronger, and I expanded my repertoire of workouts, eventually lifting books and dictionaries and rocks I had pulled up from the garden. As I gradually became more defined, my shoulders broadened and my arms thickened, but most importantly my self-esteem grew. I was accomplishing something all by myself.

No longer was I intimidated by contact with people. If I was pushed down here or there it did not matter as much because I knew I could do something that I was good at other than academics. Within the next few years I became involved in competitive biking and running, both of which I would never even have thought about doing as a young child. I connected with people and created some of the greatest friendships I could have ever imagined. I became more expressive not only vocally but creatively; I began to play the piano and write stories.

But the capstone to my transformation did not occur until the eleventh grade. It was something that many people would laugh at or consider ridiculous, but to me it meant the world. I got a girlfriend. Now, granted, the relationship didn’t last, but it was important to me that I had accomplished that feat. My self-esteem shot through the roof—the kid who had had no friends and didn’t talk to anyone just four years previously now had a girlfriend. I felt as if I could accomplish anything.

Over the next few years leading up to where I am now, I have found myself content at last. Though I will always struggle with my self-image, simply because of my childhood, I now know how to live and how to enjoy living. I find myself today looking back on those years not with bitterness or embarrassment, but rather with fondness and pride. I am who I am today because of something I led myself to do. No one told me how or why—I just did it. I understand my background and realize that it is a crucial part of me, and it will be that way forever.

My Origin is not a traditional one. It is nothing particularly special to anyone but myself, and I realize that. For without this origin I would not be here today. I do not know where I would be, but I know for sure I would not be this content or happy with my life. There are no epic myths or deep-rooted stories. There are no heroes or villains. It is not a story of battle, or tragedy, or hope. It is a story of personal triumph. It is the story of my Origin.