
Vicky Zaplatosch
Valparaiso University

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At the beginning of the school year here at Valparaiso University, I was a freshman with not too much figured out in life. And Core appeared simply a tedious, required class full of discussion and writing—things that I was comfortable with, things that I had practiced. Yet Core somewhat took me by surprise with its relevance and complexity. Because it examines the intricacies of the “human experience” as a whole, Core is a holistic life lesson that helps students build up their understanding of the world around them. For me, Core (especially during its second semester) has been a roadmap for a greater thematic idea. It has highlighted an important thread in the meaning of life, one that concerns how humans work together to make something meaningful from our time spent on Earth. Throughout my studies of many texts and after much self-reflection during this semester of Core, I have come to understand that life is one complex blend of joys and challenges that we all try to confront and cherish together. People rely on others for so much more than they realize, and in order to achieve the most fulfilling human experience possible, they must work together.
The first text during this semester that hinted towards my realization of the importance of living and working peacefully and productively with those around us was *Mountains Beyond Mountains* by Tracy Kidder. This text focuses upon the life and work of Doctor Paul Farmer, a tirelessly ambitious man determined to provide quality healthcare to the people of rural Haiti. Reading this biographical text during the Leadership and Service unit revealed to me the value in dedicating oneself to helping others. Paul Farmer left his promising and dignified medical school education from Harvard to assist the poor Haitians in desperate need of healthcare. This act was the key to Dr. Farmer’s self-actualization as a warmhearted savior for the men and women who need him most. Through his work in Haiti, Farmer shows audiences that it is natural and normal for humans to need other humans’ help sometimes. And by collaborating so efficiently, Farmer and his team were able to change the lives of many, enriching their own lives and saving those of thousands. *Mountains Beyond Mountains* showed me that dedicating your time and talent to others is extremely valuable in a very basic way; we need others and they need us. In the memoir, author Tracy Kidder interviews a local Haitian worker who epitomizes the spirit of interdependent lives of helping. The peasant talks about Paul Farmer affectionately, saying, “God gives everyone a gift and his gift is healing” (Kidder 27). And, if we could all learn to recognize and embrace this fact, the world may have more people like Paul Farmer.
The film *Billy Elliot* (directed by Stephen Daldry) is the story of a young man in the United Kingdom who defies society’s expectations of a typical teenager. Billy’s ultimate passion is dancing; it is in this calling that he finds his truest sense of self. Yet, as I have found throughout my studies in Core, Billy’s most important pursuit in life revolves around the people around him. Watching and analyzing this film has demonstrated the interdependence that individuals have between one another, and how that is something we must accept in order to achieve our dreams. *Billy Elliot* illustrates a family divided between individual interests and dreams. Because Billy’s dad desires to raise a masculine son who boxes, he is extremely disappointed with Billy’s newfound urge to take dance classes. But both Billy and his father must learn to transcend their differences—when Billy confides in his dad about his self-doubts about dancing, saying, “I think I’m scared,” his father replies lovingly with “That’s okay, son. We’re all scared” (*Billy Elliot*). They realize that Billy can only reach his ultimate goal with the full support of his entire family. This film played a key role in defining the most important thing I have learned from Core. A family is one unit of people that all must live in harmony and depend upon one another for love and courage. *Billy Elliot* displayed the joy that people can achieve when they compromise and accept one another. I began to understand this lesson of unity in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, and then its potential was emphasized through my study of the family dynamics in *Billy Elliot*. 
As my Core experience comes to a close, it dovetails with realizations about my role in the lives of others in the Life and Death unit. The text that primarily fueled my understanding of how people make meaningful and beautiful histories together was *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien. O’Brien tells the story of his experiences in fighting the Vietnam War. This text has even further emphasized the idea that we can and should work with others to create an engaging human experience. O’Brien wrote the war novel after his own stint in Vietnam as a United States soldier, and wrote his stories down as a way to save himself and others through his stories. The stories he tell reassure his audiences that they are not alone and provide a healing outlet for their all-too-real realities. O’Brien even speaks of his storytelling as a saving grace for other people when he states that one particular story was “Tim trying to save Timmy’s life” (O’Brien 233). In this way, *The Things They Carried* proved to be an influential piece of writing for me this semester because it even more reinforced to me the idea that all humans are essentially in life together. O’Brien helps others around him heal through his writing abilities, building emotional and mental strength for those who need it. Similar to Paul Farmer, O’Brien makes a connection to other people that leaves them with a happier and healthier life experience. Because humans share similar experiences, they can and should also share the strength with those around them.
Core is an incredible learning experience for first year students, one especially rich with critical thinking and writing skills. Before Core, I appreciated writing immensely, and worked to better my own writing. I learned how to properly structure an essay, how to find my own unique “voice” in writing, and how to construct lucid arguments. Yet it was in Core that I began to make a different but crucial stride in my writing. It was through the writing process of the worker profile paper that I truly learned how to make assignments personal to achieve worthwhile and lasting lessons. Previously, I had a constructed an idea of writing as an impersonal, solely analytical endeavor used as a tool of furthering my understanding of a text. But in researching for and actually writing the essay, I was not just analyzing from the outside, but learning to really grab my education the reigns to make it relevant. I was not simply outlining a vague idea that we had read about, but uncovering the real-world validity in the career I researched. Through my writing I was able to learn much more about myself and my own career ambitions, and this assignment helped me to understand a tenet of writing well. I learned that essays do not always need to be objective, methodical procedures that foster growth. It is rather the personal attachment of the writer and the unique context around that that builds writing growth and understanding. In this case, the subject matter was vocation. But I learned that building a thoughtful conclusion about my own calling would involve interpreting the assignment in a new way, one that would
call for the genuine effort of a personalized writing experience. And
during my time spent in Core, I learned that this is the only way to make
writing purposeful for the writer and her audience.

The everlasting unity of mankind has proven to be the most
overarching theme that I have observed during my Core experience, but I
have come to understand many other important things about the journey
of life that we all experience. With these great conclusions about
humanity in mind, my Core experience comes to its pinnacle in the
following semester writing portfolio. The portfolio can be seen as a sum of
my understandings of the texts I have diligently studied. I have drawn
many unique conclusions about the human experience as a whole, and
the collection of writing here is demonstrative of my thoughts and
arguments throughout the semester. In the portfolio, there is a variety of
both informal and formal writing that I am proud to call a representation
of the growth of my writing skills over time. The portfolio displays the
varied writing of this ever-changing, ever-thinking author and human; it
is the perfect final project for a course devoted to a lifelong
understanding of the world around us. I am proud of the progression on
my writing this semester, but even more proud of the progress I have
made on an intellectual level in Core.
Works Cited

