There and Now (2012)

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Recommended Citation
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Coming to Valparaiso University was, to put it lightly, a change of pace for me. I grew up in a ghetto in Chicago called Englewood, a part of Chicago that, a few years ago, was named the murder capital of the United States. When crime was going down everywhere else in America, Englewood’s crime and murder rates steadily grew. Others feared it, but it was home for me, I loved it. I guess I didn’t know any better.

Crime ruled everything around me. Every house around me was filled with single parent families, but I was fortunate to have a “two parent” household. My father worked as a clerk for Cook County and my mother was a stay at home mom. My father’s income was steady, and we probably could have moved out of that neighborhood if my father wanted to. I often asked him if we’d ever move, just out of curiosity, but he always gave the same reasoning behind staying: “Our family lives here. We need to stay with our family.” That was good enough reason for me. My father was a family man. Not many kids around me could even say they knew their fathers. I was one of the lucky ones, or so I thought.

Soon my mom went back to get her GED and eventually got a bachelor’s in criminal justice. Earlier, she had to drop out of school
because she had my older brother when she was 17. With her newfound education she went and pursued a job as a Chicago police officer. She had a pretty good starting salary, more than my father’s from what I heard. Things went downhill from there. My father hated the idea of my mom making more money than him. Domestic abuse started to happen, both verbal and physical. My mom would go arrest those who beat their wives, and come home to get abused herself. After years of this, my mom had had enough. She left my father, and eventually I came to live with her, along with my brother and sister, and we moved to the suburbs just in time for my last two years of high school. I haven’t seen my father since.

However, there were some things I couldn’t leave behind. I still had an unfriendly attitude; the rift between my father and I made it hard to trust any authoritative figure. Simply put, I didn’t want to be let down again, especially by a man. I hated him for breaking up my family, and it took until my final years in high school and my football coach to separate me from that hate.

Coming to Valparaiso, I felt like an outsider, I had only come to this school because my mom wanted me far enough from my past but close enough to easily get to. I didn’t think anyone could relate to the shit I’d been through: gangs, domestic violence, fights, etc. But I promised her I would give it my best efforts, and I intended to keep that promise.
My first few weeks went by easily enough. I had made some friends but not a lot. All my classes were going well, but I didn’t see the meaning in Core. It was like an English professor’s philosophy class. My professor was alright but I didn’t think much of him. I just thought he was teaching me to get a paycheck, and that was fine, since I was just using him to get a grade. We mutually benefitted from each other. I would feel this way until we had a class discussion that positively opened my eyes for the first time in a while.

One day while discussing *Alcestis*, my teacher brought up the pain of losing a loved one. He shared a story about his mom, a woman who had fallen victim to dementia, I believe it was. As the years progressed she remembered less and less until finally at one point she had forgotten who her son was, and at one point fought him inside of a moving vehicle he was driving. He lost her shortly after that.

My teacher sharing that type of personal story showed me that he actually did care about us. He wasn’t just doing this because he wanted the money. It was at that time that I shared with the class the day I lost my best friend on the football field. Another girl shared a similar story. My entire class connected that day. It was weird, connecting with people that you didn’t know a month before in such an intimate way. I guess that’s what college is about, sharing positive experiences and bad ones. I just wish I had more positive ones to share.
Our first paper helped me grow in ways I don’t think it was ever meant to. Before that paper, I would never talk about what happened to my mother, or what happened to me after she left, but that paper forced me to dig inside myself and talk about the years when I had to stay with my dad. However, it also helped me to realize the good in my life. That paper, along with a trip to prison I took with my criminology class, helped me put my life in perspective. They helped me see the positives in my situation.

A few days ago, I saw the movie *Wit*, a movie about a college professor dying of cancer. I did not want to go see the movie, because I had recently lost my grandmother to cancer. As the film went on, I got lost in my thoughts about my grandmother. All the things she helped me get through in life, the talks we shared, and the days I used to spend my weekends at her house, helping her cook. I did not like the movie for obvious reasons, but more because I didn’t think it portrayed what most people go through when they have cancer. My grandma had a giant support cast, and seeing someone die in a hospital alone like that hurt, but it made me thank God that I was still alive.

College, and especially Core, taught me to pursue my dreams. Before college I didn’t think much of myself, but now I know that I could easily become an FBI agent like my mom if I put my mind on it. Core was about more than earning a grade. It’s about being vulnerable to change
and being open to love people you might not see outside of a 15 person classroom. If I hadn’t had Professor ________ these last two semesters, I can’t imagine what my views on college would be right now.