The Experience of a Life Time (2012)

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College is an intimidating first step for many students. There is the worry of purchasing the right books, finding the correct building, and worst of all: the pressure of doing well. The fear of messing up and not being as prepared as you thought you were is overwhelming for all students, especially during their freshmen year of college. All of the stories from family members, teachers, and friends begin to creep in on you during those last remaining weeks before classes start. You wonder if their horror stories will become your reality. Finally, the big day comes: all of your books are organized on the shelf by class, you have every writing utensil imaginable stocked up and ready to go in your book bag, and a single notebook ready for your first class. The class is called: Core: The Human Experience. You are not sure what that is supposed to mean, but it’s required, and that scares you even more. You walk into the classroom and take a seat, not too close to the front but not all the way in the back either. The time comes, and class begins.

It is common knowledge that freshmen in college believe they know every bit of information they could possibly know about the world and the people in it. Students Like me believe that they are the top of the food
chain (though really they are the lowest link) and that there is nothing they do not already know. Being in theatre all four years of high school can fill your head with tons of false beliefs, and my head was definitely full of dreams. Upon entering college and the real world, however, many things come into perspective. Starting out, the world is seen as simple, there are basic steps to living, and then we die. There is not much in between, except for every day experiences which eventually lead up to your dying day. You eat, sleep, work, and learn; that’s all there is. After taking Core, however, a different perspective is gained on life and every moment is seen differently. There is much more to it than the mundane actions human beings go through from day-to-day and, in a way, it is split up into many different stages. Origins, education, love, leadership and service, work and vocation, and life and death all make up what is known as The Human Experience. In order to get to this conclusion, a number of texts had to be read, films had to be watched, and essays had to be written. No one part was more important than the others, but there are a few items in particular that had a great impact on me as a student.

Ishmael Beah’s A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier was one of the first texts read to start off the year. This text was meant to introduce the unit of origins, but in reality, it introduced everything that is Core. Beah spoke about where he came from, his life experiences, and even the inevitable presence of death. The presence of death does not have to refer to the literal translation, but it can also infer the end of
Core. His writing was not a made up story, designed to make millions of dollars, but instead was the true story of his life in Sierra Leone as a soldier starting from the age of twelve. Not many people have gone through the trials and tribulations that Beah did, especially not myself. Beah put a lot of life’s experiences into perspective for me and showed how nothing I do is as unimportant as it may appear. He influenced the thoughts about life being more than guileless tasks with his sentimental appeal and descriptive detail about what happened to his family, his life, and the world as he knew it.

Sophocles’ *Antigone* was influential in a different way. While it is not known whether or not it is a true story, it brings into light the choices a family and a leader must make. This text was placed in the Leadership and Service unit, but just like Beah’s book revolves around many other topics as well, bringing them all in and solidifying their presence. Culminating in the death of nearly everyone in Antigone’s family, Sophocles places his readers into a position of political and familial drama. On the one side there is Antigone, who has lost everyone in her family besides her sister Ismene and uncle Kreon. On the other end, however, there is Kreon, the corrupt ruler who wants nothing more than for his people to obey him. Sophocles allows the idea of self worth and personal gain to play a huge role in the decisions of his characters. This brings to life the concept of choosing family over personal or political gain. Although I have never had to make a decision where I had
to choose between my family or what I so desperately may have wanted, I know I may have to in the future and Sophocles has shown what it means to be loyal. Where you once took friends and family for granted, Sophocles shows what can happen when you do not treat them with unconditional respect.

With unconditional respect, however, comes the task of laying a person to rest when the time comes, not just physically but also mentally. *A Grief Observed* by C.S. Lewis is a journal of the personal journey through coping with the death of a loved one. Lewis illuminates the idea of death in such a way that it makes you realize it is not all about how to memorialize a person, but when to do so. Life and death are the beginning and ending steps of all forms of life, and it encompasses all units of *the human experience*. When a person passes, humans and animals are said to go through stages of grief that help them to cope with the loss. Advancing through the many stages of grief Lewis captures some of the most pertinent parts in his musings about H. (his wife) and what life would be like if she would return to him. *A Grief Observed* has influenced the growth and realization about what life is really like by showing how all human beings have feelings. It does not matter what sort of person I am, nor who has passed on. Because of Lewis, I know everyone goes through the stages of grief, and some people just take longer than others.
Tim O’Brien’s *The Things they Carried* is almost along the same lines as Beah’s story, though it is more closely related to Lewis’s journal. O’Brien’s story shows how every instance is interconnected from life to death. Although everything in between eventually leads to death, it is pertinent to live every moment to its fullest. Otherwise you may feel cheated. With the stories of the Vietnam War, and some of his life before the war, O’Brien draws in his audience and shows them what it is to be part of a group. He shows that no matter the circumstances people are needed to keep you strong, just as Kreon realized all too late in *Antigone*. Each of the men in O’Brien’s book carried an item that had differing levels of importance. These items ranged from a Bible, to a pair of old pantyhose and created a personal relationship between the reader and the character, by allowing them to see inside of the man’s bag and ultimately his mind. O’Brien shows the importance of relationships by placing you in the story yourself creating moments where you question what your reaction would be and wonder about your own experiences.

Stephen Daldry’s film *Billy Elliot*, in a sense, tied all of the texts together. It was placed in the work and vocation unit, putting an emphasis on a person’s calling and what it means to be truly happy with your job, but it meant so much more. The film focused on life, death and the little things. It showed the importance of the relationship between Billy (the son) and Jackie (his father), while also showing the effects of death with the loss of Billy’s mother. Origins and education also played a
huge role as it was not well known for boys to become dancers, nor was it easy for the lower class to get an education. In this, Billy went against almost all social norms to become what was best for him, showing that it is your life experiences that make you who you truly are. I do not know if I could go to such extremes as Billy did, but I have not met any obstacles where my parents disapproved as greatly as Jackie did of Billy. *Billy Elliot* taught me, however, that when the time comes it is up to me to choose which path will be the most beneficial.

In order to drive every point home of the Core curriculum, a number of essays had to be written, some informative, others narrative, and some argumentative, forcing you to have your own opinion. The one essay that drove it all home and had the greatest impact was the essay written for the leadership and service unit. This paper focused greatly on the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., his beliefs, and his actions. It was not only about how to live life to the fullest, but also what it means to make a difference. There was a focus on how we should learn as students and as teachers. This essay brought together the underlying idea from each unit of Core and made it one. This allowed me to see not only what was looking me in the eyes, but what could be done to change it to fit my lifestyle along with those of others.

By the end of their freshmen year of college, many, including myself, have realized they still have plenty more to learn. This does not
only apply to the knowledge of their chosen career path, but to the knowledge of life in general. Although Core revolves around a select few texts, these texts are not the only ones that can teach life lessons. Core has strengthened the need to experience more of the world, before throwing each day aside as something wasted. You now sit in the front of the class, chat with the professor on a daily basis and only carry one pencil with you. The nerves have gone, and you know the ropes of being a student. But then, the time to sign up for next semester’s classes rolls around and you realize: Core is over and something else is going to take its place, more lessons are coming, and you honestly don’t know everything.