

Essays That Worked

Just Keep Folding—Jodie

Having explored the myths from ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt, my curiosity was piqued in eighth grade by a simple legend from Japanese lore. If you fold one thousand paper cranes, the gods will grant you one wish. I took it as a challenge. My previous forays into origami had ended poorly, but I was so excited to begin my quest that this detail seemed inconsequential. My art teacher loaned me a piece of origami paper and, armed with an online tutorial, my quest began. Like an early prototype of the airplane, I ascended towards my dreams for a glorious moment before nose-diving into the ground. The first crane was a disastrous failure of wrinkly lines and torn paper. Too embarrassed to ask for another, I turned to my stack of Post-it notes. By the third attempt, I ended up with a sticky pink paper crane. Holding that delicate bird, I was flooded with triumph and elation.

The first two hundred cranes were all crafted from Post-it notes. Armed with a pack of highlighters, I decorated each piece of paper individually. I folded cranes at home, between classes, and in the car. My fingers were permanently sticky from the glue I scraped off every square. Slowly, my collection grew: first ten, then fifty, then one hundred. Before the task could become monotonous, I started experimenting. How small was it possible for a crane to be? Smaller than a golf ball? Smaller than a dime? Small enough to sit on the end of a pencil? Any size was attainable. I could make a crane smaller than almost any arbitrary form of measurement. Soon I could finish a crane in fifty seconds or with my eyes closed. Anything square and foldable became my medium. Paper towels, candy wrappers, and aluminum foil joined my vibrant menagerie of carefully folded paper. I was unstoppable; that wish was as good as mine.

By six hundred cranes, the increasing demands of high school academics caused my pace to slow. I despaired. I wouldn't let this be another ambitious project that I couldn't finish.

My cranes mattered to me. As an outlet for expression, they served as a way to defuse frustration and sadness, and a source of pride and joy. Their creation allows me to bring beauty to the world and to find a sense of order in the bustle and chaos of life. There is a lot of beauty to be found in tiny things. I'm reminded that little gestures have a lot of meaning. I have given away cranes to my friends as a pick-me-up on bad days, and I have made cranes to commemorate people, such as the dark green crane I made the day my grandmother died. They are a symbol of hope to remind me what I have accomplished.

So, I pushed myself to keep working and to keep folding one crane at a time. My determination paid off, and in the summer after sophomore year, my passion was reinvigorated. One month before the end of junior year, I folded my thousandth paper crane. As I leaned over the open drawer brimming with origami pieces in a multitude of sizes and colors, I felt a rush of satisfaction and triumph. Not only was 1,000 cranes an achievement in its own right, but I proved to myself that I can finish what I start.

The world is filled with big numbers. College tuition, monthly rent, and car prices deal in the many thousands. Those figures are incomprehensible to someone who has never interacted with anything so large, and I wanted to understand them. A thousand will never simply be a number to me: it is hundreds upon hundreds of hand-folded cranes combined with years of effort.

So what did I wish for? It turns out, I didn't need the wish. I learned I have the power to make things happen for myself.

“What was most impressive about Jodie’s essay was not the accomplishment of making 1,000 paper cranes, but how much we were able to learn about her through this simple anecdote. We determined she is someone who perseveres, as seen through the personal growth that arrived from her initial failure and eventual completion of a goal on top of the demands of high school. We learned she is kind and caring — traits exemplified through sharing cranes with friends having bad days and those made to commemorate

people she lost. Her essay also showed us she is curious and willing to experiment, like testing out how small she could make cranes. These characteristics stood out and gave us an idea of how Jodie will contribute to our community, which is important in a holistic process where we try to learn about the whole student.”

—*Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee*

The Palate of My Mind—Meghna

A question that every high school senior is familiar with is: “What kind of college is the right fit for you?” My criterion doesn’t appear in the deluge of admissions pamphlets; that’s because I want my school to resemble my favorite dish: the hummus-tabouli wrap.

...and Johns Hopkins University is the creamiest, tangiest, most flavorful hummus-tabouli wrap in existence.

The secret to any savory wrap lies in how its flavor is contained. Regardless of what outside influences are imposed upon it, the pita bread expertly holds all of its ingredients without allowing them to spill. Hopkins opposes outside pressures, unapologetically supporting individuals who are unafraid to break tradition. The OUTlist, an online database for Hopkins affiliates who openly identify themselves as members of the LGBT community, revolutionized the visibility of LGBT individuals in higher education and created a support network at the university. For students who are struggling with their identity (due to the fear of coming out to their families or friends), I want to help them express themselves and understand that they are not alone. I want to serve as an advocate as well as a source of comfort, like a homemade pita that is warm and soft, yet tenacious.

Next on our wrap is the core layer of hummus, lathered on the pita and heavy with expectation. Being the most renowned staple of the Mediterranean diet comes with its pressures, but hummus handles it well, always stepping up to the plate, ready for any intimidating food critic. Similarly, Hopkins’s academic diversity lives up to its reputation and more. The Classics Department offers 83 different undergraduate courses, with varied paths that students can take in the pursuit of cultural and literary knowledge. I hope to study the interrelationship of modern literature and culture and its classical roots in Latin by examining international texts in courses such as Latin Literature Beyond Hermeneutics taught by Professor Butler. I intend to further facilitate international communication—a modern necessity—by researching how English is adapted by different cultures. I can imagine narrowing my research from World Englishes to the fundamentals of the English language that bring about its malleability under Professors Celenza or Roller of the Classics Department.

After the hummus follows the influx of diced tomatoes, onions, and parsley, all varied in taste, combining to form the tabouli sauce. Tabouli is accepting of its ingredients, which when combined, bring to it a taste that is unparalleled by any other ingredient of wrap. I hope to spend my next four years in the Hopkins community learning alongside students from backgrounds starkly different from my own, who, like each component of tabouli sauce, bring their varied perspectives to discussions, an invaluable trait when studying how English has been adapted by different cultures.

In this world of flavorful foods and people, the delectable allure of Johns Hopkins University entices the palate of my mind. And I hope to eat my fill.

“Meghna effectively connected her academic and extracurricular interests with opportunities available at Hopkins. It was clear she understands what the Hopkins experience could look like for her. The most exciting thing about this essay was the way she elaborated on her academic interests while also telling us something about her that we couldn’t learn through any other part of her application—her favorite food.”
—*Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee*

Intercom Enthusiast—Isaac

The most exciting time to live in Vermont is mid-February. This is the time when one is given the privilege of a 30-minute walk to school in sub-zero temperatures, with a 30-minute trudge home in the dark after a long day. It's been four months since winter began, and it'll be two more until it's over. The firewood is being rationed to keep the house at a barely livable temperature, a steamy 50 degrees, and colds are so rampant that people lose half their body weight in phlegm each day. Yet, however dull Vermont may seem to students and teachers as they wrap themselves in layer after layer of flannel, make no mistake, today is the beginning of an era. Today is the day when Isaac (that's me) starts his job of putting smiles on grim faces as the reader of the morning announcements.

"But Isaac, that job is super boring! You just read what's written on a piece of paper," is what an uninformed person might say, someone who obviously doesn't know about my passion for annoying the tired and melancholic with smiling positivity. While expression and humor has not historically been a part of this process, and while ad-libbing has been strictly advised against, I go for it anyway. And why not? The worst possible outcome involves only a stern lecture and an expulsion from the job.

Fortunately, there is not much going on this week, which means I have some wiggle room with what I can say. The loud buzz of the intercom whines throughout the school, and the silent apprehension of the day is met, somewhat unexpectedly, with a greeting of 20 "yo's" and a long, breathy pause. I artfully maneuver someone else's writing into my own words, keeping the original intent but supplementing the significant lack of humor with a few one-liners. I conclude by reminding everyone that just because the weather is miserable today does not mean that we have to be as well.

Luckily, the principal loves it. And despite the fact that I urge everyone to interrupt my history teacher's classes to wish him a happy birthday, I get to keep my job for another day. I have people coming up to me left and right, telling me that I made them smile. When I hear that, I smile back.

For the rest of the month, I work to make sure that people hear my message: even though we are at the time when school and winter are beginning to seem endless, there are still reasons to grin. I urge people to attend basketball games or sign up for spring sports. I announce birthdays and other special events. Before every day, I make sure I have a message that will make people think, "you know, today might not be so bad after all." After my month ends, the announcements have been changed. The next readers tell jokes or riddles, or sing songs and invite others to sing with them. I watch the announcements evolve from an unfortunate but necessary part of the day to a positive and inspiring event. It is now more than just a monotonous script; it becomes a time to make sure that everyone has at least one thing to smile about.

Life shouldn't have to be a dreary winter day; it should be the satisfaction of a good saxophone solo or the joy of seeing one's friends every day at school. It is the enthusiasm of a biology teacher, the joy of a sports victory, and even the warm messages of a disembodied voice on the intercom. I use that message to help freshman feel less nervous at their first race or to encourage my friend to continue taking solos in jazz band. And in the most dismal time of year, I use that message in the daily announcements.

"Many high school students become hyper-focused on attaining school leadership positions with flashy titles, but Isaac's essay showed how he made a positive impact in his community in a less expected way. Isaac's essay was light-hearted, comical, and fun to read. Most importantly, it gave us insight into his personality and hinted at the type of presence he's likely to have on our campus. It also told us about what day-to-day life is like in his hometown and school, which provided more context for the rest of his application."

—*Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee*

Growing Strawberries in a High School Locker—Seena

One day this year, as I was walking by my perpetually empty locker, I was struck by an idea. I cannot identify what sparked its conception, but as my idea started to grow, thinking of possible solutions and analyzing and assessing feasibility issues began to consume me. My father calls this a “designer’s high,” and it was very familiar to me. I’ve experienced it often while collaborating with my robotics team, and in the hours I’ve spent with my father on design concepts for his prefabricated homes. Still, nothing I had worked on before was similar to the feeling this “out of the box” idea had triggered.

Growing strawberries in a high school locker seemed fairly simple at first. Despite knowing that this is not the typical habitat for strawberry plants, I knew from my green-thumbed mother that strawberries are among the easiest fruits to grow. Many students and teachers became interested in my project, yet were skeptical of my botanical prowess and quick to conclude that a plant could not possibly receive its basic necessities in a locker, which didn’t have proper ventilation, was hot and humid, and was shielded from both sunlight and any source of water. Still, I was determined to make this work. The unfriendly habitat and logistical obstacles did not deter me.

My horticultural roots stem from my mother and elementary level biology. It wasn’t until this year that my knowledge expanded beyond this casual level into a realm where biology, chemistry, and physics found beautiful, synergistic intersections. I was determined to apply what I had learned and get to work.

Due to the lack of electricity and direct sunlight, I decided to use a solar panel paired with a light sensor on the outside of my locker to power a strong, blue LED light, which is best for photosynthesis and plant growth. A friend taught me how to solder and helped me create the solar panel setup, which turns on the blue light only when it is dark outside so the plants experience the proper light cycles. I also set up a system to slowly water the plants automatically. This involved a series of drip bottles—which another friend had for his old, now deceased, pet guinea pig—arranged to drip into each other and then onto the soil.

Having addressed the issues of light and water, I focused on the need to circulate air. Leaving the door closed would provide essentially no circulation and would create a hot and moist environment, making the plants more susceptible to mold. After experimenting with various designs and a 3D printed prototype, I came up with an extension of the latching mechanism on the inside of my locker, which I called the “strawberry jamb.” The jamb, which I cut using our school’s CNC router, sufficiently boosts airflow by allowing the door to remain ajar about two inches while still maintaining the integrity of the existing locking mechanism. I made a beautiful wooden box, emblazoned with the laser-cut engraving “Strawberry Fields Forever” and provided proper drainage onto a tray inside the locker to avoid water damage to school property. The strawberry plants are now growing in my partially open locker providing a topic of conversation and much commentary from students walking by.

What began as a seemingly improbable idea fed my passion for creative thinking and mechanical engineering. This project not only allowed me to practically apply isolated academic principles I had studied, but it also pushed me to traverse multiple disciplines to creatively solve problems. Furthermore, its uniqueness beckoned for community input and collaboration, allowing me to access resources to achieve fiscally responsible solutions and ultimate success. For me, it was invigorating to propel a project that many deemed impossible into the realm of possible. I intend to continue to explore and invent because only then are new realities possible.

“Seena’s essay not only provided us with background on his academic interest—mechanical engineering—it also gave us a sense of the kind of student he would be on the Homewood campus. His account of successfully growing strawberries in his locker showcased his ingenuity, sense of humor, and, most crucially, enthusiasm for collaborative work. Seena lets the details of his story illustrate that he’s team player, which is much more powerful than merely telling us directly. The combination of personal and intellectual anecdotes made it easy to imagine how Seena will contribute to life at Hopkins both in the lab

and in the residence halls, which is exactly what the committee looks to the personal statement to do.”
—*Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee*

On and Off—Tan

“On and off,” I squealed as I fiddled with every remote control device in the house—from the TV to my RC toys. For hours, I strove to unravel the connection between the wires, circuits, and switches that “magically” activated these appliances. Although my ruminations did not provide immediate explanations, they spurred my imagination and fueled my fascination for electronics.

Later on, I turned my attention toward circuit configurations, which I explored through AP Physics and LC’s Robotics Team. My design, assembly, and programming capabilities compelled me to identify new applications for my skills. With Cooper Union’s Summer STEM Program, I explored other engineering branches through the development a hydraulic-powered Rube Goldberg Marble Machine. These lessons sparked my curiosity for renewable energy and led to the creation of a self-powered hydraulic ram prototype capable of delivering water to isolated communities, like my hometown in Thai Binh, without using electricity. Although my contraption is not perfect, these variegated episodes widened my perception of Electrical Engineering, its mission, and my role in the field.

My experiences also helped me see that the essence of engineering lies in serving social needs. As an Electrical Engineering major and History of Science & Technology (HOST) minor, I will harness JHU’s multidimensional platform to fulfill my purpose as engineer and citizen.

My quest begins with an introduction to the fundamental building blocks of engineering. Courses like “Digital Systems Fundamentals” unravel important concepts in logic and design that are applicable to more advanced research initiatives. Meanwhile lectures in “Introduction to Renewable Energy Engineering” unlock ways to improve Vietnam’s outdated energy sources, opening new opportunities for other industries to grow with the new technology.

Because engineering does not exist in a vacuum, a HOST minor will complement my work by helping me understand the sociopolitical, cultural, and ethical issues that drive scientific developments. Equipped with this holistic vision, I will be able to adopt technically-sound yet socially responsible methodologies toward the solution of different problems.

Beyond the classroom, JHU’s legacy as America’s first research university merges theory with practice, transforming abstraction into reality. The Spur Scholar or Provost Awards facilitate cooperation with faculty and in-depth exploration of various interests. Similarly, student-led initiatives like Hopkins Baja promote teamwork and the active exchange of ideas with peers of diverse intellectual and social backgrounds. Alongside my teammates, I will work toward the perfection of nimble race cars. Furthermore, internships and the Vredenburg Scholarship will expand my career choices and ease my transition into the workforce.

Having served as prefect, residential assistant, and student council advocate I will join the Student Government Association. Given my experiences with poverty and inequality in Vietnam, I will also my share leadership and mentorship skills to empower underprivileged children in the Baltimore vicinity through involvement with Alternative Learning Coaches.

A JHU education integrates intellectual and personal lessons that will alleviate Vietnam’s and the world’s needs. With the creation of effective, affordable, and sustainable engineering solutions, I hope to make a difference in the 21st century.

“Tan’s essay effectively connected his interest in and experiences with robotics with specific coursework and opportunities available to undergraduates here. It showed us why he wants to pursue these things specifically at Hopkins. He was able to talk about the flexible curriculum, ways to work beyond the classroom through research opportunities like SPUR, student government, and the Alternative Learning Coaches program. As a whole, it was clear why Tan would be a strong member of the Hopkins community both in and outside the classroom.”

—*Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee*

From Yonkers to Accra—Ansley

“Do you have body bags? The leak-proof kind...we need as many as you can spare!”

My shoulders slumped as the voice on the phone offered me camera bags instead. I was sixteen and had just returned from an infectious diseases course at Emory University, where my final presentation was on Ebola. Within weeks, the first infected American arrived at Emory for treatment. Our country panicked, while thousands lay dying in Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone, their last visions strangers in spacesuits. I ached for the people, especially the children, who were dying alone, and I needed to help. Drawing on my new knowledge of Ebola’s pathology, I had an idea that I thought might work.

Ebola Kits. Rubber gloves, masks, and bleach, shrink-wrapped together inside a sturdy bucket, instructions in pictures to bridge the languages of Mende, French, Krio, Fula, and Susu. While the kits contained only the bare necessities, they would allow people to care for family and neighbors without inviting the spread of Ebola. Doing nothing was genocide, with generations of families disappearing overnight. The images haunted me, lifeless bodies in dirt, oblivious to the flies swarming around them, as everyone watched from a safe distance. I pitched my idea to The Afya Foundation, a global health NGO I have worked with since the 2010 Haiti earthquake. I was on a mission. Ebola kits in every village. Easy to assemble and ship. Potential to save thousands. While I received an enthusiastic response to my idea, Afya’s team sent me on a different mission: obtaining body bags, the unfortunate reality of people who were invisible in a world that waited far too long to see them.

I spent two weeks calling body bag suppliers after school. Treatment centers were desperate, wrapping bodies in garbage bags with duct tape and tossing them mindlessly into the ground. It was disrespectful, even inhumane, because West African burials include washing, touching, and kissing the bodies. Without these rituals, West Africans believe the spirit of the deceased can never be at peace. Culture and medicine were colliding head-on, and there was no easy solution. While Ebola made these rituals lethal, at least body bags allowed people to be safely buried and not treated like garbage. After many failed attempts, I reached a funeral home director who donated body bags from his own supply.

Public health is one of the most pressing and complex issues we face as a global society, and it is my passion. I am disturbed that not all lives are valued equally. I cannot accept the fact that children die from preventable diseases, simply because they are born in countries with less wealth and stability. In America, we are curing cancer with a mutated poliovirus strain, but we haven’t eradicated polio in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We come together in crises, highly publicized earthquakes and tsunamis, but we haven’t come together to solve the problem of basic human health, a right for every person on earth. Ensuring our health is complicated and daunting and requires the mass coordination of agencies and governments to build sustainable infrastructures with local citizens in charge. I want to be part of the solution and am engaging in public health in every way I can: in the field, in the classroom, and through global health charities.

From Yonkers to Accra, I have met the most amazing people from all walks of life, and I feel a deep and stirring sense of purpose in my global health work. I am empowered and proud of my contributions, but I also experience humility at a level that transforms me. I am blessed that I have found my passion, one that combines my intellectual curiosity, determination, and my moral compass. I am optimistic for the future and the journey that lies ahead, as I do everything in my power to make basic healthcare a reality for the world.

“Ansley’s interest in global health jumped out at us from the first sentence, and she carried this same theme through the entire essay. What her essay did particularly well, though, was show a clear path from passion to action. Rather than just talk about her interest in the field, we got the sense that she is motivated to take initiative and get engaged. Students at Johns Hopkins routinely display an entrepreneurial spirit in their pursuits, and Ansley demonstrated a similar approach in her fight to prevent additional outbreaks of Ebola in Africa.”

—*Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee*

In Pursuit of the Sublime—Kaylee

Goal: 40,000.

I wrote because it made me somebody else—somebody who mattered.

The power of writing, I believed, existed solely in one's ability to pursue the sublime. So I wrote to create different, better manifestations of my life.

I grew up dreaming and writing (and thinking they were the same) about being a Hermione Granger with Harry as my sidekick battling twenty Voldemorts (twenty!); my stories were dynamic.

I was cool.

Status: 5,000.

My mom once joked that I should audition for the role of Cho Chang. I threw a chopstick at her. Cho Chang was weak, so terribly weak that Harry dumped her.

I knew why she said it though—I rarely existed in books and when I did, I was the Cho Chang, the inconsequential, insignificant Asian girl who could never assert herself.

In a fit of spite, I killed my Hermione, realizing I could never be her.

Status: 1,000.

Somebody once told me to read *The Joy Luck Club* but I never bothered. A book about a bunch of Cho Changs couldn't possibly be sublime.

Instead, I buried myself in the books hidden under my bed, away from Mom, about girls in high school who didn't do anything besides fall in love. So, to improve my own story, I decided to fall in love with the first boy to call me pretty.

I was satisfied.

Status: 8,000.

Living life vicariously was comfortable and easy.

Perhaps that's why, at fifteen, I paid no mind to my grandpa's deteriorating health or my dad's anxiety. Because these were not the kinds of pain I had ever read about, I didn't find them good enough to write about.

So, I went looking for better inspiration—for more mockeries of love, ways to validate my insecurities, and priorities that shouldn't have been labeled as such.

It was all so cool that I couldn't stop writing about it.

Status: 11,000.

During this magnificent, glorious streak of writing, dreaming, and pretending, I learned that 40,000 words make a novel.

I had to do it. Once I get published, everybody would get a taste of my sublimity. Mom and Dad would be so impressed. I'd probably even become famous! Hence, I became fervently obsessed with word count and cared for little else.

Status: 15,000.

But then I turned seventeen and finally began to process what I had experienced years earlier. I had been witness to my grandpa, reduced to flesh and bones (but hardly any flesh), barely clinging to life in a maggot-infested hospital in Dengzhou—something I had forced myself to forget.

Suddenly, I couldn't keep pretending that crafting a fictitious version of my life on paper could replace what is real.

I erased everything.

Status: 0.

I started over.

I wrote about my real thoughts, my family, the times I was happy, and the times I was not. I wrote about my grandpa.

I showed Dad. I thought he'd be proud.

He was not.

What? You wrote this? Why? What are you trying to prove?

Nothing.

For the first time, nothing. I'm just writing about life.

But you should keep that private. It's too revealing and distressing. It's not...

Sublime.

I know.

It's. Not. Sublime.

I crumbled.

Then came the summer before my senior year. I finally read *The Joy Luck Club*.

In the entire novel, I didn't come across a single Cho Chang. What took the place of sublimity, instead, were real people. Mothers and daughters who breathe and hurt and love.

I laughed and cried and began to write.

Status: Not counting anymore.

I don't write to create the next Hermione, become the best cliché, or impress Mom and Dad. I write to express the thoughts that are most real to me, ones I cannot confine any longer.

I am real and I care about being real—that is my power, not just as a writer but as a person.

“We were impressed by Kaylee’s ability to creatively relay important information about herself. The unique format of her essay suited the content and also showcased her passion for writing. What the essay did particularly well, though, was effectively explore experiences (both small and large) that shaped her growth as a person and writer. Her conclusion to write for herself, rather than to impress others, demonstrates her maturity and confidence. Through these anecdotes, we got a better idea of the kind of scholar she is outside the classroom—something not found anywhere else in the application.”

—*Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee*

Grit - Tyler

“Heads down and hands up to cast your vote” echoed across the conference room as I sat forward and looked down at my shoes, nervously tapping my heel against the carpet. “Michael Steen”. I heard rustling as a group of boys across the room raised their hands. “Zachary Quinto”. I heard chairs from everywhere creaking as boys moved to raise their hands while I stared down at my shoes. The seconds ticked by as the votes were counted which wasn’t a surprise; Zachary was a gargantuan football player with a booming voice who had received a standing ovation after his speech just five minutes earlier. Lastly, the moderator said “Tyler Clark”. I put my hand up instantly but could hear no other noises. My hopeful demeanor turned to disappointment, a feeling that would become familiar in the coming days. The level of applause after my speech may not have compared to Zach’s but did it warrant a shutout? I put my hand down in embarrassment and raised my head, as the moderator needed no time to count votes. They announced Zachary Quinto as the new Speaker of the House and he was warmly welcomed into the position. When I arrived at Keystone Boys State, a large-scale government simulation, I was excited to have been selected and wanted to run for as many positions as possible. Sure, the first loss was a hard introduction to the democratic political system but it was nothing compared to the defeats that followed. Seventeen defeats, to be exact.

At 2 AM three days later I stared at the blank piece of paper, unable to fathom how I was writing my 12th speech in a quarter as many days. Nor did I understand why I had lost 11 elections: I tried being serious, I tried being silly, I tried being conservative and liberal and everything in between. I had demonstrated my capability in my city, Stelacio, by passing legislation, negotiating trade agreements and making friends. But when I stepped on stage in front of two hundred boys from six different cities, I became a small fish in a big pond. Lined up next to towering football stars and cunning speech and debate champions, I was being overshadowed. Still, I felt the need to keep trying despite the fact that I was afraid to write even one word on the college ruled paper laid out in front of me. Failure was supposed to be a part of the experience, but tonight I resolved to not let failure define the experience.

I lost five more elections in the last two days of Boys State in spite of this resolve. I did, however, continue my spirited effort to improve Stelacio City and at the end of the week I was unanimously elected to be Head City Councilman. It was an unexpected honor to win the most important position in the city legislature given my bruised ego and my winless election record. I realized that my city had seen my hard work and dedication to further its economic, political, and cultural standing and my results had done the talking my previous speeches had failed to convey. Did I want to quit writing speeches? Of course I did. But I knew that if I quit, I would only take away a bitter taste of defeat and a knot in my stomach from the entire Boys State program. So I forced myself to grit through it, knowing that my commitment and dedication would make the difference. I believe grit is the unwillingness to accept defeat. There will always be times when I want to throw in the towel, but I have learned that it’s better to use the towel to wipe off defeat and just keep going.

I Am Woman – Amanda

As a young woman in today's society, I have been conditioned to act a certain way and am expected to be treated a certain way. I am expected to be demure, I am expected to be nurturing, I am expected to be lovely. While there is nothing wrong with women who *are* demure, nurturing, and lovely, I am more. I am independent and strong. As a woman pursuing academic leadership and musical excellence, I have learned it is not easy to navigate being influential and strong as well as being female.

If I am a woman and want to be nurturing and caring, but also want to be a professional at a high level, the expectation is that I am only domineering and controlling. Often times the dichotomy of those two sides presents a significant challenge. The dance of demanding respect, yet being an elegant and respectable young woman is an exhausting performance. As president of my high school's National Honor Society chapter, I must lead meetings. However, I am often spoken over during these meetings. In these instances, I use my unexpectedly large voice, honed from my years of vocal training, to call the room to order. As a result, I am able to conduct a formal meeting, gain the attention of my peers, and set a precedent for future meetings. I claim my role as president but I still hear critical voices as the commotion dies down. Not everyone agrees with my style. Often I speak up for myself, and my gender, but sometimes I remain silent for fear of more ridicule. Sometimes it seems like a strong woman is the worst thing you can be. Girls get called bossy. Boys do not.

If you ask my friends their favorite thing about me, most would respond praising my attentiveness to birthdays. Even for friends who dislike their own birthday, I will paint a card and bake a cake for them. I enjoy seeing happiness in the eyes of those I love. I *do* know my way around in the kitchen and I unashamedly enjoy baking. I am loving, I am soft. I am woman.

I am the high school's choir intern, as well as a *Maestra de Coro* in the Girl Choir of South Florida, leading warm-ups, running sectionals, and stepping in to conduct or teach music theory when the director is unavailable. This is my art and my passion. Though I have established myself in the music community, I still meet resistance to my leadership from the boys. In these moments, I look to my mentors: strong choral conductors, both male and female, who encourage me to be both assertive and a leader. They show me it is possible to be caring, while getting important work done. Girls get called bossy. Boys do not.

In addition to my leadership roles, I spend many hours babysitting, teaching young girls music, and using my Spanish proficiency to teach English as a Second Language to children after school. In these roles, I am nurturing, kind, and giving. I do not challenge societal norms. In these moments, I am what society expects a proper young woman to be. I am loving, I am soft. I am woman.

My existence confounds and challenges the belief that women cannot be lovely *and* opinionated, loving *and* strong, soft *and* respected. The balancing act of being Amanda Goldberg is not a choice. I did not decide to challenge the societal standards that have been imposed upon me: it is inherent to who I am as an individual. Throughout college and beyond, I will aspire to be the kind of young woman that my mentors have been to me. While difficult at times, I know I must continue to challenge stereotypes for future young women. I am bossy. I am loving. I am opinionated. I am soft. I am inquisitive. I am loud. I am woman.