

By Hayley McCormack for the University of Minnesota First-Year Writing program
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Falling on Ice: Picking Myself Back Up

There are some people who might say that to rise to the peak of your highest, you must first hit the bottom of your lowest. While I cannot say for certain that I have hit my lowest point, I can say this: When you feel that you have nothing more to lose, you may find that you suddenly gain access to something which you may not have had before. I was fortunate to find this in my own experiences - I gained an amazing and unique friend in a time of darkness. With her help, I was able to rebound, become more self aware, and acquire a deep love for learning.

Perhaps I should give a little bit of background. It was my junior year of high school. My classes took place in an **orthodox** institution - long hallways with waxed floors and dingy walls, bathrooms graffitied with phone numbers and expletives, and classrooms that were just the right temperature for taking a nap. I never took my classes seriously. Many days, my friends and I preferred to skip the monotonous drone of our teachers' voices and instead spend our stolen time outside. Behind the school, hidden from sight, we found patches of shady grass which provided the perfect backdrop to our conversations. The location also served to conceal the **copious** amount of cigarettes that we smoked during said conversations.

As the crisp fall leaves gave way to winter's bitter wind and snow, the holidays arrived. During my break from school, my days followed a set routine: Sleep in, eat lunch, and spend the afternoon **devising** mischievous escapades with my companions until it was well past curfew, at which time I was forced to retreat to my mother's house. This pattern continued until that **calamitous** New Year's Eve, on which everything changed. My friend and I had been kicked out of the park by a couple lousy police officers who likely had little else to do. We decided it was just as well, as the moon was high in the sky, and we went our separate ways.

As I approached my home, I quickly noticed something was awry. Bright red and blue lights flooded our lawn. A police car flew past me; its screaming sirens sounded dull and distant as it screeched to a halt in front of our driveway. A stretcher was being loaded into an ambulance, surrounded by a dozen or so spectators. Yes, something was very wrong. I don't recall exactly what happened after this - someone grabbed my arm as I stumbled, and they led me to the police officers. I was thrown onto the hard bench in the back of the squad car and whisked away to the hospital, closely following the ambulance.

The next few days were a blur, but to summarize, my mother had overdosed on Norpramin, a strong anti-depressant. Fortunately, the ambulance had gotten to her in time to save her life. Unfortunately, I was sent to live with my father and his girlfriend at their residence in the suburbs for the time being, as the court decided that an evaluation on my mother's mental health was necessary before I could live with her again. This was only the first of many changes to come.

My father lived in a outer suburb of the city I called home, the city where my friends, school, and neighborhood existed. There were no buses that ran the stretch between my old school and my father's residence, and I knew without asking that my father had no interest in driving me to school when the trip took forty five minutes each way. Thus, an entirely different school was **foisted** upon me, and I was expected to cope with everything that had just happened over the past week in addition to the new, stark change in scenery.

Where my old school had a vast student body to the point of individual anonymity, this new school had a class size of about fifteen students. I no longer had the capability to skip class whenever I pleased; I was forced to sulk in silence, my only available defiance now being the refusal to do any class work. I sat alone at the lunch table, purposefully glaring at anyone who

dared to try and sit with me. I never showed my true feelings to anyone - not even myself. Deep inside, I knew I was drowning. I preferred not to think of it. Instead, I was the outsider, strange and mysterious, and I played that role beautifully.

After a few weeks, I was failing most of my classes. My so-called friends had not bothered to call me or even return my calls. I became depressed. I stopped eating lunch. I simply pushed the unwanted, flavorless food around on my plate, trying to form it into a Rorschach test. So consumed by this process was I, one day, that I did not notice as a girl sat down next to me at the table. It was only as the scent of her perfume reached my nose that I realized I was not alone. I looked up to find the source of the citrus and mint aroma staring at me. She smiled, her painted burgundy lips a stark contrast to her pale freckled skin and strawberry blonde locks. She didn't say anything, but looked down at her tray and started eating. I, for some reason, couldn't bring myself to spit out a snide remark, as I normally would. Instead, I sat with her in silence until she had finished eating.

This patterned repeated itself over the next week, until one day when she spoke to me, breaking my focus from the food I was re-arranging. "Why don't you eat that?" she asked, gesturing to the mess on my plate. I said nothing to her, and the silence relapsed for a bit. "Are you new here too?" she asked, persistent in her quest for conversation. I remained silent. Realizing that I was not in the mood to talk, she decided to take matters into her own hands. She began doing all the talking, filling in the hour long lunch gap with her melodic voice until it was time for us to part ways.

Her solo dialogue continued over the next few days. She began to tell stories about her herself and about her past. Some were funny; together, we laughed. Some were not so funny, however; we shared a moment of silence. One day, she was telling an animated anecdote and I,

without thinking, commented on the similarity of her story to one of my own. The moment of silence that followed was broken by the sound of our laughter, the noise flowing from us like water from a babbling brook. After this incident, we became as thick as thieves.

We spent most of our time outside of school in her room, giggling, debating, and sharing experiences and secrets. Occasionally, we would turn on the Sochi Olympics and watch the figure skaters twirl gracefully as they etched the ice with their footwork. While watching these events, I often found myself connecting with the athletes as they rode a roller coaster of emotions. When Yulia Lipnitskaya, a Russian skater who was about my age, fell sharply on the ice during a triple flip in her short program, I blinked back tears. My heart broke as her emotions flooded into me, and in a moment of utter comprehension, I realized that these emotions were my own. These feelings that I was sharing at this moment had been welling inside me for the past two months: Frustration at my own actions, anxiety at what would happen next, sadness and disappointment in the incident. My friend intuitively put her arms around me. I buried my face in her warm, soft sweater and allowed myself to weep quietly. I surrendered as the wave of feelings from the recent events in my life that washed over me for the first time. I was not completely devoid of happiness, however; the joyfulness portrayed by the U.S. couple, Meryl Davis and Charlie White, as they won a gold medal for their ice dancing was contagious. The excitement of their victory made my friend and I jump up and dance around her room in elation before collapsing back onto her bed in a fit of laughter. All of this was a good reminder that even in a time of darkness, someone can come into your life and turn on the lights once more.

There came a day on which the frosty winter clouds had receded long enough for the early spring sunshine to begin trying to melt the snow. We were sitting on the floor in her bedroom while she worked on a project for our biology class. I was doodling in my notebook.

When she noticed that I was avoiding my homework, she was confused. “Why don’t you ever put in any effort?” she had wondered aloud. I told her that I didn’t really know, that I had stopped caring about school long ago, and that it didn’t really matter anyway, because your grades are not an accurate measure of knowledge. I’ll never forget her response. She touched my arm gently, and without a shred of patronization, said this: “It’s no wonder you’re so apathetic towards school; you haven’t even realized its true purpose. School is not meant to test and measure your knowledge - rather, it is meant to provide the process of education, to teach resilience and determination, to pique your curiosity, and to stretch your imagination. You have so much potential, you know.”

I sat quietly for a few minutes, mulling the statement over. Meanwhile, she grabbed my notebook from me and began writing something on the inside cover. When she handed it back to me, I read the pirouetting cursive letters aloud, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world. -Nelson Mandela.” She smiled knowingly and returned her focus to her project. A grin coaxed its way onto my face as I shook my head; she knew me so well, knew that I wanted to make a difference in this world one day. Reflecting on that now, I think everyone does, in one way or another.

With her **exhortations** motivating me, I found myself beginning to take baby steps towards participating in some of my classes. At first, it was only the classes which came naturally to me, composition and sociology. Through certain writing assignments, I began to feel freedom. My opinions on the topics discussed in my sociology class were listened to and valued. With help from my friend, I began to understand the theories that were discussed in my biology class. All of these small victories **impelled** me to try harder in my other courses. There was only one stumbling block that stood in my path: It was incredibly difficult for me to accept criticism from

my peers.

Looking back on those feelings of resentment toward my critics, I can now see that those **sentiments** were mainly due to a lack of self-confidence. I was still constructing myself, and especially myself as a learner. When I heard people disagree with me or imply that I might be incorrect, I took it as a personal affront to all the work I had done to get to where I was at that point. I think that perhaps at this time in my life, I still needed that barrier between my critics and myself, for if I had let the commentary of my classmates bring me down, I'm not sure that I would have been able to get back up again, to put myself out there again after feeling so vulnerable.

I believe that my friend had already figured out how **indispensable** my success was in these first real efforts in the classroom. She always spoke up in defense of my opinions, even when my they seemed **untenable**. I could not help but notice however, that when she was criticized on a piece of work, she accepted the criticism with grace. Watching her, I slowly began to realize that these seemingly harsh remarks were meant to be helpful, most times; after coming to this realization, my fears of being under personal attack began to subside.

The days started to bring warmer rays of sunshine, and the flowers peeked out from under the last of the melting snow. My friend and I studiously toiled away as our final exams approached. The improvement I had already shown in my classes was immense, but I was not complacent with this small success. I was beginning to notice changes within myself. I felt truly curious for the first time that I could remember; this curiosity was evident in the amount of time I spent reading and researching things that were unrelated to school. I began craving a good mental challenge, and overcoming the challenges that I set for myself felt empowering. It made me realize how stagnant my mind had grown over the past few years.

I finished the year with the best grades that I had ever achieved. Looking at that report card, I got my first taste of the feeling of accomplishment that accompanies giving your best effort. That feeling was addicting. Not even the disinterest of my father could quash the excitement I felt at having reached this goal. This powerful desire to give my best and to gain and share more knowledge would carry me through my final year of high school, and would ultimately influence my decision to go college. Without realizing, I had just taken first steps into the adventurous journey that is learning. To this day, I know that I could not have done it without the help of my best friend: my partner.

VOCABULARY APPENDIX

- 1) **orthodox** - "Sense of Style" by Steven Pinker
- 2) **copious** - "Circles" by Ralph Waldo Emerson
- 3) **devise** - "Sense of Style" by Steven Pinker
- 4) **calamitous** - "Sense of Style" by Steven Pinker
- 5) **foist** - "Sense of Style" by Steven Pinker
- 6) **exhortation** - "Coming Into Language" by Jimmy Baca
- 7) **impel** - "Minding American Education" by Martin Bickman
- 8) **sentiment** - "Circles" by Ralph Waldo Emerson
- 9) **untenable** - "Sense of Style" by Steven Pinker
- 10) **indispensable** - "Sense of Style" by Steven Pinker

The Development of *Falling on Ice: Picking Myself Back Up*

This essay was very difficult, but also very interesting for me as a writer. I don't often find myself in a position of self-reflection during my writing. This probably reflects my lack of experience in the field or the type of writing that I generally do. As soon as I read the topic for this essay, I knew what I would write about. I would write about the most influential period of my high school education. It is also, fortunately, a most interesting story to tell. Yet, I struggled with parts of it. Writing about myself is my least favorite type of writing, because I am not entirely comfortable pouring my soul out onto paper for someone else to look through and pick at (I believe I said as much in a previous journal). I must say, though, that I felt incredibly satisfied when my work on this piece was done. I believe that stepping out of my comfort zone to tell a story that encapsulates a tiny piece of me increased my capacity for self-awareness. That said, it was also incredibly difficult. When writing about myself, I feel as though I can never find the right words or the right phrases, and no amount of hunting in a thesaurus can help me. I am always in search of "le mot juste," to steal a phrase from Steven Pinker's, "Sense of Style." I wrote this essay in the style that is most intuitive to me; whether that is plain, practical, or some other style is not entirely clear to me at this point. I did my best to evoke some kind of emotion from the reader, any emotion at all, really. As of yet, I'm not sure whether I was successful. I do think that by adding in a few extra sensory words and sentences, I was able to appeal to the reader's emotions more effectively. I found it difficult, however, to follow the rubric's level of descriptiveness throughout the entire piece without compromising some of my storyline. I went above the five page minimum by a decent amount. Despite this, I feel as though I ran out of room. I still have very little idea as to how my reader will react. I'm really looking forward to getting feedback in that area and hearing what people thought of this piece overall.