



Impromptu



Ruth Bisek – Impromptu

J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series will undoubtedly live on as one of the most read and most loved children's series of all time. The characters in every book entail such depth and character it is nearly impossible not to feel connected to them. The title character, Harry, is a complex character with quirks and personality traits that make him seem almost tangible. One such trait is his bravery and perseverance in times of struggle. Amidst the perils Harry faces against the Dark Lord, Voldemort, he remains steady in the face of danger. He does not give up easily, although he has been presented with the opportunity to quit many times. He has willingly stood up against his enemy in order to defend his beliefs and his community, and he is a hero among the wizards, for he is the only one to ever defeat Lord Voldemort. This dedication is an imperative lesson that is often overlooked when we are weighed down by the stress of life.

Harry Potter teaches, in his own way, to persevere even through the most difficult of times. This lesson is extremely important to me, especially in my academic career. Throughout high school, it has become increasingly more tempting to let my grades drop or to stop putting effort into academic challenges. I have always prided myself on being a straight "A" student, but it is often hard to resist the temptation of taking the easy path and giving up. When the stress of school is overwhelming, finding the motivation to do good work is a daunting task. Harry Potter never gives up, even when the stress of his own life is most unbearable. Reading about his continued bravery through unthinkably difficult situations makes the problems in my life and my schoolwork seem significantly more manageable. This perseverance is important to me in that it helps me to achieve what I am truly capable of achieving and to completely dedicate myself to every task I pursue. This lesson can open many doors for me should I continue to persevere through all the challenges I face in life.

In his bravery, Harry Potter also exudes confidence and a mainly optimistic outlook on life. This attitude is important not only in my life, but to the entire global community. The universe naturally moves towards disorder, and it becomes easy to fall into a pattern of giving up on the world and letting it take its natural course towards disorder. The increasing poverty and violence around the world are indicative of this. However, through Harry Potter's brave spirit, these problems can be faced. Through his perseverance, the burdens can be lightened. Although poverty may never be fully stopped, especially on a global scale, giving up on the situation will only make it worse. Giving up on stopping violence can only lead to worse situations as well. For Americans, it is seen in the attacks of September 11 that tragedy can strike at home, and that we are not assuredly safe from the violence of the world. Unfortunately there is no way to know if or when tragedy will ever strike again. In this uncertainty lies the fear that another attack could happen anytime, and the fear that it could hit frighteningly close to home. If Americans caught on to Harry Potter's dedication and courage, the growing spirit of optimism would overshadow fear and all the horrors that come with it. This could lead to a significant decrease of violence in the world, for violent acts are often acts of fear. Bravery and perseverance are the only ways to go about solving the problems in society.

The importance of Harry Potter's lesson also echoes in the bravery shown by soldiers fighting the war in Iraq. Recently, a graduate of my high school was killed in hostile fire in Iraq. Although I did not know him personally, his death has affected my community, and it will take an increased amount of bravery and optimism to overcome this hardship and time of grieving. Harry Potter too has been faced with the death of someone near to him. During an altercation with Lord Voldemort, Voldemort kills Harry's classmate Cedric Diggory. Although the loss of his peer is obviously devastating and quite frightening for Harry, he must continue fighting for the good of the cause. With the death of this soldier so close to my own life, fear has come to the forefront of my mind, and certainly to the minds of many others. The thousands of other soldiers continue on even amidst the loss of this brave soldier.

Society as a whole has something to gain from the bravery of Harry Potter, whether it is persevering through adversity, or remaining strong while the world seemingly falls apart. As violence increases in the Middle East and the world continues to move towards the disorder of poverty and unhappiness, this lesson will only become more relevant and more important in daily life. Harry Potter may not seem to be the most likely teacher, but he has taught me, through his

bravery, never to give up. I try very hard to hold myself to this standard and I sincerely hope the rest of society will follow suit.

Zi Gong – Impromptu

As literary characters go, comic books are not the first place any would look. Most would live straight into what society has deemed our “classics” and pull out people like *Oliver Twist*, or *Tom Sawyer*, or even *Hamlet*. However comic books have been a part of and will inevitably help shape our culture and society. They are perhaps the truest form of literature that exists, reflecting our society’s needs, wants, and fears all in one explosion filled package. Though I don’t profess to know true greatness, classical literature never quite managed to connect with me the way these a \$1.25 volumes did, and it was in these that I discovered the most profound personality portrayed in any medium: the Dark Knight.

Bruce Wayne was a pampered child. Born to a rich family, Bruce had everything he wanted. His father owned the city’s largest industrial company, and his mother doted on him. Although he was an only child, Bruce was happy for most of his life, enjoying time with the family’s butler Alfred as well. Tragically, this life soon ended, for after a certain night out in the streets of Gotham, a mugger shot young Bruce’s parents. Bruce was devastated. He fell into despair, soon leaving Gotham in an effort to run from his painful memories. He trained all over the world, learning various arts both deadly and urbane. However, after stumbling upon a bat cave near his home, Bruce eventually came to a realization. He had been so privileged, and yet had done nothing to try and stem the tide of corruption infesting his hometown. He had the resources to do so, and yet, he had sat idly by. He decided to take action, and don a mask so many of us still find familiar and exciting. He became Batman.

Many of us will remember Batman mainly as a fictional character from his or her childhood Saturday mornings. I know I do. Every eight o’clock the now corny theme song would play and I would eagerly prostrate myself in front of my television to absorb more about the caped avenger’s newest exploit. Growing up, I lost interest in Saturday morning cartoons, instead finding new hobbies in video games and spending time with friends. Still I never lost interest in Batman.

After growing up, and after expanding my base of comic book knowledge by a few hundred characters at least, several revelations came to me. There were lots of things that were distinctive about Batman, things that somehow made other superheroes pale in comparison. Though many of us took no more out of Batman than weekend entertainment, Batman had much more to give.

Outfitted with a plethora of nonexistent gadgets rivaling the famous Bond, one of the more intriguing parts of the comic and the show was seeing what exactly Batman would use to escape a particular situation. Batarangs, zip lines, and water breathers are only a few of them immediately come to mind. What I most admired about Batman and his gadgets, though, was Batman’s abject refusal to use any item designed to be lethal. He was only someone trying to prevent harm from coming to innocents, and preventing criminals from proliferating. Far from making him look weak and important in the face of characters like “The Punisher” and “The X-Men” who seemed to take no notice of the lives they were taking, Batman’s refusal to take the life of any person idolized him in my mind.

What Batman exemplifies is that it is unnecessary to use great force to resolve one’s problems. Most often it is Bruce Wayne’s detective work and sharp mind that help put a criminal behind bars than Batman’s brute force. Also, Batman helps us remember that each life is special, even that of a criminal. Murder is wrong no matter who is doing it, and for whatever reason.

Batman once jumped in front of a crime boss who was being interrogated by the Joker. Batman took bullet after bullet for the man, even though the man by all means probably deserved the fate. Batman survived due to a bulletproof vest, but he still suffered cracked ribs and other maladies. When asked why, Batman responded that he wasn’t a judge and jury. Even though the man was scum, the Dark Knight couldn’t simply let the man die in cold blood. This restraint is something that makes Batman greater than anyone who can shoot lasers from their eyes, or leap over tall buildings in a single bound.

But this, perhaps, is the most profound aspect of Batman. Batman can't shoot lasers from his eyes or hurdle over buildings. Batman doesn't have the bulletproof skin or proportional strength and speed of a spider. Batman is just a man, like you or me. That is the beauty of Batman. He exemplifies the creed that anyone can be a hero. Batman teaches us that it's not fancy powers, fantastical gifts, or adamantium claws that make a person a hero. It is the choices and actions that a person makes every day that determine their status as a hero or villain. If any one of us truly wanted to, he or she could become Batman.

Every time my mind wanders back to the subject of Batman, I always end up wondering which one I qualify as: hero or villain. Every time, this mental path leads to an evaluation of my virtue or lack thereof. This is the reason that Batman has always interested and imparted so much to me: because his lessons are so accessible and personal. It's something everyone can learn from in order to make the world a proverbial better place. It's because Batman's lessons are ones about character and moral virtue, something that always seems to deteriorate as time goes on.

Cliché as it is to say, these are all things society can benefit from today. Too many people think that all life is about is getting ahead. Competition has reached new heights in the race to become the next Bill Gates, Donald Trump, or even Britney Spears. Too many people forget that as people who live in a place with running water, countries with stable governments, adequate food, and a whole list of things that goes on and on, there are other people out on the street who have nothing but the blanket wrapping their bodies. Down the street, there may be a family living under abusive conditions. Across town, there might be a gang shootout that took the lives of four or five innocents. Across the country, there might be a corporation scamming millions out of retired workers. Across the Atlantic, there might be a country undergoing an atrocity only recently identified as genocide.

The greatest lesson is that we can do something. It doesn't have to be big, but we can do something. We can teach our children and our families to value life. We can ourselves restrain from using force even when we think it's necessary. Most importantly, we can take action. The will to try is often buried by a helplessness that many feel. Moreover, this will often finds itself replaced by interest in the newest episode of *Desperate Housewives*. But Batman is a reminder that we, ordinary people, can make a difference. The open minds of the young is a perfect place for this to take root, and we should let his lessons blossom. We can help the homeless down the street. We can help prevent young men and women from turning to gangs for support. It doesn't matter that I can't levitate objects with my mind. It doesn't matter that you can't run faster than the speed of light. We can take actions, and Batman would be proud.

Emmamarie Haasl – Impromptu

On Learning

There are many ways that people learn about the world around them. Some people want to do everything and experience as much as possible. Others look to the lives of others to teach them what to do or not. Through observations, they feel that they can avoid the mistakes of those who went before them. These people can sometimes see the world through many perspectives, viewpoints which change the way and extent to which they can judge people. They can become writers; they can find truth hidden in the ordinary things in daily life. However, without experience, knowledge can be disregarded. I have often felt in the past that I could be categorized as one of these observers. I have become acquainted with thousands of people, hundreds of voices. One of the ways I do this is through my reading. Very early on I found I had a hunger for reading. However, I wouldn't merely read books; I would devour them and immerse myself in everything that they could teach me. It was my way of finding people I could relate to.

One such character I came across during the past year was Siddhartha, from the book by Hermann Hesse. I found, without quite meaning to, that my life ran parallel with that of this character, who the author had recreated for his own devices. Siddhartha started out as privileged and with a good future set before him, but he chose to seek out enlightenment through becoming a *semana*, an outcast. Though he eventually left behind that lifestyle for a material one, it took him almost a lifetime to recover his sense of belonging, because for a time he had tried to cast his

earthly self away in favor of the self that is at peace. His journey taught me that happiness can come from a sense of oneness with the universe around a person; it allowed me to see that the similarities between people are more important than the difference.

Siddhartha underwent many changes before he was able to let go of his past. He realized that he could no longer recognize the guiding voice inside him, and he chose to leave his past once again and seek out life by ferrying people across the river, watching the faces of those whose lives cross with his and realizing what their happiness was like his. He ultimately left behind his score for people who had not suffered as he had in trying to gain enlightenment. What struck me most about Siddhartha was that I knew what he was going through. My family lived in Venezuela for three years when I was younger, and, upon returning, I unintentionally isolated myself. My years overseas had taught me about poverty and political upheavals; I looked down on people who lived such a carefree existence when people were dying. As a child myself I found very few peers who could relate to my experiences, and I was frustrated with people in general. They seemed to be contradictory. In many ways, I think this was one of the reasons I started reading with such fervor. I wanted to find people I related to, but I also wanted to understand people in general. Subconsciously, I believe I was trying to find a place where we connected.

When I reached my teens I began to overcome some of these differences, because I was tired of feeling alone. I was searching for a common ground, and in doing so I began to read the fantasy books everyone else was reading. I started branching out in my friendship and at school, looking at the world around me as not only a study, but also as part of me. I began, at long last, to heal and to belong.

In reading Siddhartha, I was able to identify my shortcomings as well as my growth. I could see how people could find more joy through sharing their lives and realizing that they are all connected, than by dividing themselves into groups. In order to share life, however, people must identify with each other's pain as well as joy. In today's world, there are many people who fail to see past differences such as religion, ethnicity, or intelligence. This is the main reason there are wars and poverty. If nations only look out for themselves then suddenly it becomes okay for them to kill, and even to disregard the consequences. Although Siddhartha didn't kill anyone, he refused to see situations from other people's points of view, and this caused him to unintentionally hurt people, both by running off schedule at his job and by leaving Kamala when she was with his child. If people only look at their own wants and don't stop to consider what others are experiencing by standing in their shoes, then they cannot know what they are doing.

It is an ongoing fault of humankind. If someone does something to you, and you cannot come up with a reasonable, sound explanation for their actions, then likely you have not looked far enough into his life. People rarely do things without at least some provocation. It could be stress and hardship causing them to blow something wildly out of proportion, but underneath it all most people believe, if only for a moment, that what they do is right. That is what I have tried to discover through reading, and ultimately, through life. It is when people understand this that they become able to accept the flow of life, and stop fighting people around them for their differences, as Siddhartha learned in the end. It is in accepting one's own shortcomings that one can limit one's judgments on others. This growth can only be achieved one person at a time; no one can be forced to see life in one way or another. I do not claim that I have achieved this by any means, but it has become part of my journey.

I have begun to spread my wings into society. More and more I try to move from learning about people in books to learning about them in person. What I read on paper can only tell me so much, and I am striving to reach beyond that into the person that I will ultimately become. By becoming involved in the school speech and swimming teams, I have started learning how to speak to people, how to test my limits in mind and body. Eventually I will go to college and come to know the world as my home, a vast expanse of people and hopes and dreams. I would like to thank you, the parent organization at this school, for considering me as a candidate for this year's annual scholarship, and for supporting me in this journey of discovering who I am.

I am always learning new things. One of these is that people are complex and beautiful. The amazing thing is, despite their many different backgrounds, they maintain the same basic characteristics. It is through striving toward these common fears and joy that conflict can result.

However, it is through recognizing these commonalities that they can move past their differences and end of the conflicts they have started.

Shannon Morrissey – Impromptu

Lemon Meringue Pie

At age six, my favorite fictional companion was Amelia Bedelia. As a hired homemaker and cleaning hand, she taught me to draw pictures of curtains, throw dust on the furniture, and cut holes in bath towels. These were casual misunderstandings and accidents, but in my mind, each was a means of escaping my otherwise tedious and uninteresting household chores. At the end of the day, Amelia Bedelia's mistakes were always forgotten and Mr. and Mrs. Sprinkle tasked just one bite of her delicious desserts baked from their own oven.

When it came to my own "Kitchen creations," I learned a lesson the hard way. Apparently these delectable sweets were only enough to please Mr. and Mrs. Sprinkle, not my own parents; they kindly explained to me that twisting peoples' words and intention was only a "funny joke" in storybooks. Even if I had been told to draw the curtains, dust the furniture, and change the bath towels, that sort of "nonsense" from a "big girl" is never acceptable. Nevertheless, a few of Amelia Bedelia's lessons from her house sitting adventures are worth repeating.

My mother was quite irritated with the "crazy ideas" I was getting from this picture-book series. Lucky for me, my father, anxious to win my approval, took my side. He insisted there were a few lessons to be learned from the books. After all, each episode presented the consequences of misinterpreting others' words; it was a way of exposing me to misinterpretation and teaching me to be specific: "Always say exactly what you mean... ask questions when there's something you don't understand."

As a fifth grader, I was forced to switch school districts, leaving just before my last year of elementary school. I was devastated. Having attending since kindergarten, I was well aware of all the exciting "grown-up" activities I would miss: fifth grade graduation, the exchange student program, kindergarten buddies, and a trip to Valleyfair. But four years and nine tooth fairy visits later Amelia Bedelia was still with me.

I walked into the classroom, imitating her class and confident smile, and introduced myself to the first group of kids standing by the door. Nerves were nonexistent for Amelia, and I was determined that that day, the same would be true for me. Reactions were consistently sterile and dry. My optimism and spark seemed to be the only of its kind in the room. Hypersensitivity had me on-edge the rest of the day and in my ten-year-old opinion, things couldn't have been worse.

Subject and predicate rules were no review for me; I had never been exposed to long division; and I most certainly did not know there were multiple ways of playing tetherball. The end of the day couldn't come soon enough. Sitting alone on the bus, I could reflect on my day only by the number of laughs my embarrassments warranted. Sure, it was entertaining for the other kids, but I couldn't help feeling disappointed.

As I got off the bus and headed up my driveway, I looked back one more time at the school bus, and unbelievably spotted Abby waving at me from the window. I instinctively smiled and waved back, triggering more smiling faces and flailing hands. I knew the next day would be better. The bus pulled away and I heard Amelia Bedelia's closing line: next time.

Amelia Bedelia is a simple fictional character. Her own creator was no great writer, and the lessons she teaches are not earth shattering or profound. What I learned from her as a child is still applicable to y own life, and I believe if more of the world gave their own childhood idols a second chance they'd find teachable moments amidst those stories too. Reading Amelia Bedelia books with my cousin is one of my fondest childhood memories – one that I'm able to relive any time a misinterpretation or first impression fails to go as planned. I try to keep my mind on the

tasty dessert at the end, persevering through any obstacles met. Amelia Bedelia provides insight for the world on a grander scale through her shortcomings and her successes.

U.S. society focuses too much on order and perfection. Throughout her books, Amelia Bedelia reveals that the feeling of delighting her customers with delicious sweets was much more satisfying than correctly following their directions when it came to the household chores. At the end of the day, Mr. and Mrs. Sprinkle had dusty furniture, cut up bath towels, and pictures of curtains posted all over their walls, but they too felt most at home when they simply stopped to reflect on their day and enjoy each other's company. Sometimes we lost what's really important in the mumble-jumble of politicians and grudges held against other countries. Christina Aguilera's own idea of going "Back t Basics" might be just what our world needs.

Another admirable quality of Amelia Bedelia is her ability to adopt a holistic approach to the crises and problems that arise. The countries of our world are all too inwardly focused. Major issues like finding renewable energies as a solution to the problem of global warming are not giving precedent over more trivial efforts like world power and economic growth. At the end of the day, the facts and figures are worth no more than the bath towels – taking up space and creating problems.

I'm not saying that a slice of lemon meringue pie can save the world, but it just might make someone's day.

Travis Panneck – Impromptu

There is a recognizable problem in schools today. This problem has been called to the attention of nearly everybody, and it is no coincidence that nearly everyone involved in the modern day school system can identify a component of this problem. The difficulty that every school faces is one of discrimination.

Discrimination, although build upon strong thoughts and sometimes upbringings, can be combated. It is through methods of spreading toleration that discrimination can be effectively combated and in turn reduced. There is not, however, a cure-all to this problem. With such an extensive problem as discrimination, a decent amount of time will need to be allocated to rectifying such a problem. But, as a society, no one can remain docile. Action must be taken in order to see change.

Therefore, a program must be laid out in order to resolve some of these problems in society – a program that should be taken upon sooner rather than later. Although the problem of discrimination is deeply rooted in society, a regiment of communitarian ethics is necessary in order to best battle this problem with some efficiency. Communitarian ethics are simply reinforcing intermediate groups such as the family and the school with work ethic and duty to the community. It is through increasing civic duty and obligation that society will begin to better recognize the problem of discrimination and how personal opinions expressed can have negative effects on the general public.

First, it is important to note that the problem of discrimination is widespread. Discrimination is a penetrating evil that infiltrates into even the most tolerant societies. It begins fro preconceived notions about another group. It does not matter what that group is – as long as there is some for t of identifiable group, then there is room for discrimination. Once this group is identified, people of society can begin to form opinions about these groups. Opinions themselves are of no danger to society. It is when these opinions are expressed on either an individual or group basis, that they become harmful to society. In this simple process, it can be seen that the formation of such opinions and actions is much easier than to shatter them.

Discrimination is not exclusive to the school system. Although some it its most harmful effects can be seen in the school system, the schools are not the sole carriers of this disease. Many institutions reinforce discrimination: families, churches, and even pop culture. Discrimination, It its pervasiveness, will never be eradicated entirely. However, by looking within our own locale, one can begin to process of reducing discrimination. By starting with our own school, the aforementioned communitarian ethics regiment can be implemented through the creation of new programs to give a sense of duty to the student body. In this manner, discrimination can be dismantled, brick by brick, stone by stone.

The problem at our school is not as apparent as some schools. There are some schools throughout the nation where certain ethnicities are in constant conflict. Discrimination at our school is more veiled, and less violent. There is one clearly identifiable cause of discrimination at our school: group behaviors.

The behavior of groups at our school speaks volumes to the idea of a veiled discrimination. The arrangement of cliques at our school is a discrimination of exclusion rather than a projection of negative thought or ideas. These groups are not necessarily negative until people are either rejected from these groups or become so insular that they refuse to associate with other groups. These arrangements can be based off of a number of categorizations, but are often associated with certain characteristics, whether it be socioeconomic status or simply academic prowess. This discrimination of exclusion that is spoken of is not discrimination in the traditional sense. The cliques do not engage in hate crimes against one another. Rather, it is that these groups become so atomistic that they become almost incapable of working with other groups. When they refuse to work outside of their group, whether it is for a project of sorts or other school-related activity, that in itself is a kind of discrimination. It is also to be considered that when these groups are so narrow, people that have certain characteristics are forced into these groups by a guiding hand.

The administration has taken steps to try and improve this problem through the institution of a program called PAWS. This is very much like a homeroom that takes (in general) five students from each of the classes (Freshmen, Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors) and places them into a classroom with a teacher that meets for about 15 minutes a day. This however, has not gone far enough. The cliques remain as insular as ever and show no real sign of improving. The problem that can be isolated here is the lack of civic duty – the absence of an obligation to one's fellow person. Without this, even mixing the groups will not solve anything. The parts of a tossed salad, the cherry tomatoes, the lettuce, the croutons, have no incentive to combine with each other. However, if one were to place the salad into a blender, the results would be very different. That's exactly what this plan of action entails – placing the student body of our school into a metaphorical blender.

The problem here is one of insularity. Even though these cliques operate on a group level, they are still very much individualistic, uncaring about their effect on the general community at our school. However, it is imperative that these groups be given incentive to work together to accomplish a goal. Thus, the proposal here is to take the communitarian ethics of service and duty and apply them to the real. The best way to motivate these groups to work together is the institution of mandatory service projects that have some relation to the school or at the very least the city.

This is an incredibly modest proposition. There is not a lot of work that would have to be done in order to see this project come to a reality. First, groups would have to be created. For convenience, the currently established PAES groups could be used. However, in order to obtain a better cross-section of the student body, several PAEWS groups could be combined. Everyone would have to be included in these projects to some degree. There is no one that is immune to discrimination. Isolating "problem groups" would only exacerbate the issue and would be contrary to ending insularity. Then, projects would have to be decided upon. These would not have to be expensive – as long as they showed any sort of commitment to improving the community, they could be done. There might even be some cases where the school may have already been planning to spend the money to make improvements where the work could be delegated to one of these groups. To smooth out this process, the teachers of these PAEWS groups could approve the projects and be the leaders of such projects. These projects could be as simple as replanting shrubbery around the school or cleaning up certain areas. The longevity of these projects would likely approach the length of the school year, so the sense of duty placed upon the community would be constant. This also allows for a decent amount of flexibility, allowing a weekly meeting for a longer project or a series of short projects that happen once a month, for instance.

A leading position is not exactly genuine to the idea of decreasing isolation. Of course myself as well as supporters in the student body would carry out this proposition; however, the important part of these projects is that everyone is treated as the same – that no one receives privileges based on their individual characteristics.

Such projects would surely help the student body to actively integrate instead of the passive integration shown by trying to just place different cliques in closer proximity with one another. By imbuing the student body with a sense of duty, significant steps could be taken to improving the problem of the discrimination of exclusion mentioned above. There would be no incentive to exclude others if you had recently worked with them to improve the community. If a persona had recently worked with another on a service project, they would be much more likely to at least recognize and tolerate their differences as they had worked toward a similar goal. By giving a group a goal and driving them to work toward that goal, cooperation must occur. This cooperation would lessen the amount of discrimination, as it is rather hard to work with someone to achieve something that both want to achieve and at the very least learn to tolerate him or her.

It is through a proposal such as this one that efforts can be made to reduce the amount of discrimination in the student body. By encouraging cooperation to improve the community, work can be made to stifle these growing problems and reduce discrimination.

Charlie Pope – Impromptu

To quantify the American dream is to make an ever-lengthening list of stuff. Stuff to make us thin, stuff to grow hair (or remove it), stuff to make us look, feel, and smell strong, sexy, and rich.

And there's nothing wrong with that. It is what the American people desire, and so it is marketed to us with an almost brainwashing quantity. But amidst our worldly clutter, a small voice can be heard among the fury of buying and selling and excessive self-indulgence. A voice that speaks of love, friendship, and appreciation of little things. The voice of a simple children's cartoon character: SpongeBob SquarePants.

In my words, (that is, a world where running water is easily accessible, and those who do not have cable television are considered the "unfortunate") survival is not really an issue. I have access to a plush grocery store, a good education, and jeans that have already been ripped for me. Life is good. So good, in fact that the human goal has moved well beyond survival and into a strange world where a man's value is judged by his ability to buy fast cars and to order people around. This attitude is simply a product of America's success. It is unfortunate that our country has come to this – our lofty values of freedom and equality have been replaced by plasma TVs and expensive cigars. SpongeBob SquarePants would argue differently.

It goes without saying that the SpongeBob SquarePants name and image has been licensed to the point of exhaustion. There are few places one can look without finding his buckteeth and huge, unblinking eyes returning the stare. This is a gross perversion of the SpongeBob name. SpongeBob places no value on worldly goods, and certainly would not stand to see his face filling the aisles of Toys "R Us. Americans value large mansions with an acre of lawns and a view of Lake Minnetonka – SpongeBob lives in a hollow pineapple. We spend hundreds of dollars on expensive sporting and leisure equipment while he is perfectly content to sit and blow bubbles. SpongeBob is employed at the Krusty Krab, where he takes much pride in being the best burger-flipper he can be. There was once an entire episode in which he played with a single sheet of paper, making his neighbor quite jealous of all the fun he was managing to have. There is a lesson to be learned here. True happiness is relative; I may revel in what makes you weep, and if you find joy in my garbage, then so be it. Every man holds something dear, but only the wise know what. SpongeBob knows. He is happy while jelly fishing, flipping burgers, partaking in karate, and spending time with his friend Patrick. We must assess our world and relieve ourselves from the chaos and clutter of the "American dream." Happiness is easily found in those who surround us, so let's cast down our credit cards and spend some time thinking about what truly has value. SpongeBob SquarePants did, and he is all the happier for it.

Samantha Stepp – Impromptu

In the natural world, all groups and species of animals have a common tendency: to form a pecking order amongst themselves. As long as two or more animals are put together, they will always rank themselves so someone is on top and someone is on the bottom. It's not necessarily a bad thing. This caste system of the natural world often helps keep a herd or group in balance, and keeps things running smoothly. Things have been this way since the beginning of time.

As humans, we are part of the natural world, and we are certainly not exempt from this phenomenon. In fact, no hierarchical society on earth is as strict, as vicious, or as extreme as ours. In the animal world, members are only judged upon their strength and ability to survive – the classic “survival of the fittest.” In the human race, many other factors come into play. We are judged upon our looks, our money, our race, our religion, our age, our intelligence, and many others. So diverse is the world of human beings that we have splits entirely. Different castes have broken out of the mold to move away geographically and form their own customs, languages, and, essentially, their own cultures. You’d never witness that happening in the animal world.

Another tendency people have is to exclude. We ignore, shun, and ridicule those which do not conform into some definition of normal that is unwritten, unspecified, and constantly changing. Whether an individual or an entire group, humans as a whole will shut them out and, if possible, shut them down. This cruel trademark of our race often has catastrophic outcomes. We need look no further than a history textbook to find countless examples: the Holocaust, the Civil Rights Movement, and every war there ever was, to name a few.

If we take it down a few notches and look at the social condition of our schools, we can find an example that pertains to us, the student body. No harsher is the hierarchical system of society than in our school years, namely Junior High. Here the exclusion focuses more on individuals than groups. I can’t tell you of a single student who wasn’t secretly terrified to walk down those crowded hallways each day, knowing every single person he/she saw or came into contact would be judging every stop, every word, and every article of clothing they had on. What exactly is there to be terrified of? What is it that makes us fear each other so? I’ll tell you: It’s the exclusion. People, more than anything, seek out the approval of each other. This can be a positive trait in moderation but it’s gotten to the point where our every action and motive is driven by the opinions of others. We are a school of pleasers, always looking over our shoulder to see what the next guy is doing. Our school, as with our nation, has the brittle holdings of thoughts propped up against each other, and led by a few. But no matter how rigorous or frustrating, it’s this oneness that we crave. To be love by one another is our greatest longing. Consequently, our greatest fear is to have that taken away.

Unfortunately, this is a travesty that has befallen hundreds of thousands of students who have walked these halls, all throughout history, for the reason that they do not fit into the unanimous mold. Why? Take your pick. There are thousands of reasons for being excluded, and thousands of ways to stick out. The most common transgression in this situation is called being yourself. Most damning characteristics come as a result of this rare occurrence. They include being: poor, smart, stupid, fat, ugly, of a different (race, religion, sex), talented at something “uncool” (such as chess or reading), or friends with anyone who possesses any of the aforementioned characteristics. I know the question you’re thinking of now: why? Why do we decide to condemn those who are different with exclusion, our collective worst fear? I’m telling you right now: don’t ask. Stop and think before you even ask why because the next thing I’m going to tell you is it doesn’t have to be this way.

It doesn’t have to be this way. We can change it and make it better. When I say this, I’m talking to each and every one of you, because it starts with the individual. That’s the first lesson: always be comfortable with yourself before you look to others. The first thing to do is to go home and take a good, hard, long look at yourself. Try to separate what is actually you from what you’ve gotten from your friends and peers. So often we spend more time looking at those around us rather than ourselves. We go through our daily motions with trepidation, always keeping one eye on the wants and preferences of others. And in this, we lose ourselves. Our wants, our needs, our fears, our likes and dislikes... they have all been lost to the sea of society. So take a good long look and try to retrieve some of them, to bring back a little of yourself. It won’t happen all at once, but it can be done. You may make some surprising discoveries when you examine yourself. For instance, that mint chocolate-chip was *Sarah’s* favorite flavor of ice cream, and yours was actually berry berry berry good. Or that you can’t stand rugby, and would rather go out for tennis. Or that you hate the skater shoes you’re wearing, and would rather go for ballet flats or commando boots. Whatever it is, search for it with your life, and bring it back. If we all turn up our sense of self, we can transform our school back into a school of individuals. Those who stand tall and independent and true to themselves.

The second half of fit is to find where you fit in with others. When you start to live for yourself, I think you'll find that you care less and less about what others think. It's because you value your opinion of yourself more, and it's a definite step in the right direction. But now that you are your own person, you also need to be attentive to the people around you who have found themselves, too. You wouldn't want to anyone ridiculing your tastes and talents, so don't do it to anyone else. Of course there are going to be some aspect of your personality that conflict with others' – it's inevitable in a student body of individuals. The best thing you can do is to avoid these conflicts, or even better: work around them. Once you – once all of us – have done this, we can find where we fall in line with others. And you will find a place where you fit in; I promise. The result is an entirely new school and an improved social life. Where students don't have to be terrified of being judged as they walk down the hallway. Where the vindictive, self-absorbed, and cruel become the gracious, self-confident, and caring. A school and a society whose framework is not constructed of students leaning on each other, but of students supporting each other.

I'm not telling you this to reverse thousands of years of biological history with this, or to fight centuries of natural-born tradition. Forming ranks is a natural occurrence, and to change human nature would be asking the impossible. No, I'm just asking two small things of you: to find out what makes you different and turn it up, and to make allowances for the differences of others. It's a simple equation, this theory of one-plus-one. And what are we but a result of many equations throughout scientific history, a pulsing dot in the great, dark sweep that is our universe? We are living proof that equations can make miracles. One plus one always makes two, but sometimes two can make all the difference in the world. Change is waiting. Can you make it happen?