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3-31-2016

Life in Paper: How Words Can Build a Person

Jennifer Wu

Washington University in St. Louis

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Recommended Citation

Wu, Jennifer, "Life in Paper: How Words Can Build a Person" (2016). *Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition*. 54.
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec/54>

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Life in Paper: How Words can build a Person

Two giant cardboard boxes laid open on the cool tile floors, both filled to the brim with clothes, shoes, and bed sheets. I knelt down next to a box and dove elbow deep into the sea of fabric, depositing books into every crevice I could find. The waist of the box began to bulge, straining to hold in all its contents.

“Jenn, do you really need to bring all those books to college? They’re not anything you haven’t lived without,” my dad said as he scanned through my choices.

He’s right. These books are not the ones that accompanied me on reading marathons late into the night, or the ones that laid by my pillow when I finally fell asleep. They are not the books that came in a pack of five from Costco (which I finished reading in a week) or the books I checked out from the local library and kept until the very last day of the checkout period. They have all been acquired recently, but each reserves a unique position in the small private library I plan to have one day.

For now, the books stand cover to cover on the top shelf of the book stand in my dorm. I lie in bed, glance at the titles, and remember how each one ended up in my hands. Some were picked off the shelves of secondhand bookstores, some were delivered to me in Amazon shipping boxes, and others handed down to me from my mother’s collection. Each title tells me something about the decisions I’ve made for my future and the conclusions I’ve arrived at about myself.

Quiet by Susan Cain was the first book that truly spoke to me. Mrs. Ishimaru, my high school counselor, introduced it to me. We were discussing how I should present myself in my personal essays, and words like “quiet”, “keep all my thoughts in my head”, and “not a good

speaker” escaped my mouth. She looked at me for a second and said “There’s this book I know you will like, that talks about quiet people, introverts, as leaders and thinkers.”

Several pages after I creased the cover of the brand new paperback, I saw myself in the author; a young, timid lawyer who felt no control in social settings because she did not see the merit of her quiet voice. But she soon realized that the merit of her words did not solely come from the volume of her voice, but emanated from her firm and thoughtful speaking style. She would always think before she spoke, and would formulate targeted responses that addressed a point rather than attack with a reply just to assert dominance in a conversation. The author’s story gave me the confidence to accept my introversion. I began to embrace being the calm in a heated debate, and enjoyed offering the succinct answer in class that was formulated over the time period of three or four convoluted responses.

Despite coming to terms with being “the quiet one,” a copy of *Talk like Ted* leans against the back cover of *Quiet*. I may struggle with speaking, but I am a thinker. I have these ideas that flow out easily on paper but only manage to sprout out of my mouth when prompted by surges of excitement or familiarity about a subject. This inability to vocalize my thoughts on command frustrated me, until I read about how simple and personal public speaking can be. The essence of good TED speakers, or any speakers, is not their expertise on a subject, but rather their passion. By being passionate about your subject, you are not simply telling the audience its observable attributes, but the emotions it elicits from you, the actions it drives you to perform, the identity it allows you to discover. Realizing this component of public speaking allowed me to think with my words and drive my thoughts through conversation. Even the act of discovering what I am passionate about erases any reservations I have about articulating my ideas.

Undoubtedly, though, determining my “true passion” can be an unpredictable task. I was hard set on becoming a psychology major when I accepted my letter of admission from Wash U, yet within the span of three months, I landed right back into art school. Just like Bilbo Baggins, I went on an impromptu journey of imagination and artistic creativity that I knew would not have manifested in lecture halls. *The Hobbit* reminded me of all the times I would fall into a book and not move from my seat for hours. The fictional characters and worlds within pages led me on fantastical adventures that I would sketch out in my head. Sometimes, after reading a short passage, I would flip to the drawings in the book, study them, and wonder how Tolkien created Middle-earth. Did he start with the interior design of Baggins’ quaint little house? Or did he picture himself traveling with dwarves and elves among the grand forests and epic mountain ranges? The questions never cease, fueling my passion to create a world all my own.

Yet I don’t want to limit my creativity to illustration, a personal enjoyment of my abilities. I want to design something that serves a purpose in other people’s lives, as well as satisfying my own aesthetic desires. *Creativity in Tokyo*, a journal-esque publication on the effectiveness and level of personalization in Japanese product design, outlined the kind of design thinking I want to pursue. The designs are not generated by celebrity trends or the lifestyle of an affluent minority, but the lifestyle of common consumers. Different consumer demographics began to generate products tailored to a specific need; a rise in the number of single adults led to the development of restaurants catering to dining alone, for instance, or a phone with abnormally large buttons and a single call function made especially for the expanding senior population. This kind of creativity requires thinking that pushes the boundaries of what can be produced, yet it also effectively addresses a targeted audience and is unique enough to stand out from

competitors. I want to embody such a versatile way of thinking and never settle for a single idea until I find the simplest, most effective solution.

These books aren't the ones that made my backpack unbearably heavy, or gave me horrible headaches on a bumpy road trip, but they are the ones that will give me answers and direction. These books tell the story of my life—what I am, what I want to be, and what I hope to become. When they are not standing on the top shelf of my book stand, I deposit them in the soft gray fabric of my papasan chair, stack them on my desk with yellow post-it notes sprouting from their pages, or tuck them in the back pocket of my backpack, accompanying them until the day they can lean against the many other books that will line the shelves of my future library.