

CLASS of 2029

A Collection of
College Essays



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, DC

Each year, the admissions process introduces us to remarkable young people from across the globe. These students entrust us with their stories of challenge, discovery, resilience, and joy. In reading their essays, we are reminded that behind every person lies a lived experience that has shaped who they are and who they are becoming. These vignettes give a voice to their hopes, their questions, and their convictions, revealing the ways they will contribute to the AU community.

The essays included in this collection are just a glimpse into the range of perspectives and journeys of this year's incoming class. They remind us that a university is the collective courage of individuals willing to share themselves with others. We hope you find these stories as inspiring as we have and that they affirm the profound impact our students bring with them from the very beginning.

We would like to give thanks to these students who graciously allowed us to share their words with you.

Sincerely,

The Office of Undergraduate Admissions



KAPOW! BOOM! PEW! Batman's fists connect with jaws, Joker's bombs boom, and explosions are heard throughout Gotham city. Tax-evading vigilante Lego Batman introduced me to Lego-style cinematography. Comparable to most movies, this one begins with a black screen and a blank slate. Batman's, yours, mine and a little girl's life all start the same: pliable to the world leaving its mark. I always struggle to comprehend while sharing the same beginnings, due to lack of opportunity, that little girl could never achieve her dreams like me. Unorthodoxly this movie opens with a Michael Jackson quote: "to make the world a better place take a look at yourself and make that change." Moved by a Lego figurine's rhetoric, this quote became my mantra and the following is how it shapes me.

Origin stories are a pivotal part of a character. Batman and I were catalyzed by our inaction. Batman stood frozen, as his parents were killed; I spent a lengthy part of my life walking past those I could've lent a hand to. One winter morning I drove past a mother and her young son, asking for anything. That moment I realized I had excess blankets in my car, but I. Kept. Driving. Since then, I have prioritized community service and urged my peers to do the same to ensure my inaction was not in vain. The innumerable hours I've spent aiding others has a considerable impact on me. Serving others is gratifying; I dedicate significant portions of my everyday actions to guarantee I never drive past a family in need again. I also acknowledge that one person can't do everything. So, I turn to friends, family, peers, and my community to broaden my efforts of making a tangible difference every day.

Leadership is where Batman and I diverge. While Batman would rather spend his time being an affluent bachelor, I have always been drawn to being a leader. Despite this, I find myself questioning my abilities because I'm not a man. I eventually came to understand that systemic sexism feeds into my self-doubt and is my biggest (albeit latent) adversary. I've realized that the little girl is unable to achieve her dreams and other women alike struggle with similar situations and I didn't have to overcome this alone. So I and a few others formed a girls empowerment program, and what started as a vagabond idea became much more than a weekly occurrence. This was my way of helping girls like I am to overcome self-doubt and realize their potential. Ensuring, when their moment in the spotlight came, they had the confidence to fight the fear society embeds and would not be afraid.

An instrumental part in Batman's growth was determining his legacy. I want to inspire the people around me to enact meaningful change, just as Batman, with his fellow vigilantes, fought to leave Gotham a better place. Synonymously, the people around me shape my legacy. My friends have always been there for me whether it be being the loudest cheerleaders in the stands to pushing me to perform my best inside and out of school. The people I have met and the people I will meet will continue to shape me as a hard worker and an involved member of wherever I call home. I believe we have the responsibility to leave a meaningful impact on every person's path we cross. That, to me, is of far greater importance than any superpower.

I am no vigilante decked in black. But, I'm a good friend. A good citizen. A good leader. I inspire girls and high schoolers like me. The Lego Batman became more than a movie when it showed me how to be a decent person. Only when the end credits roll will I be content with the change I've made, the legacy I've left, and making the world a better place one Lego at a time.

I never imagined the Secretary of State would drive a 2012 Toyota Camry. I also never imagined I would end up in the back seat of it. Peering at the Minnesota Capitol Building through a veil of peeling My Little Pony stickers, we barreled down the freeway at speeds much too high for an elected official. As we drove, we discussed the address he was about to give at a university about AI's involvement in elections. While we were talking, I remembered an interesting fact I had seen.

"Secretary Simon, did you hear about the AI robocalls of Joe Biden? I saw it in the newspaper." Secretary Simon grinned, "No, I did not; I'll have to include that in my speech. What else did you hear about it?" I felt like a little kid as I continued explaining to him how the robocall scheme had worked.

"Yeah, I saw it in the newspaper this morning; they were talking about how the FCC was fining this group and how AI replicated Joe Biden's voice." I tried to remain casual, but enthusiasm about the subject was creeping into my voice. I could sense excitement in Secretary Simon's responses as well. This moment in the back of that Toyota Camry as we both became more enthralled in the subject—and in each other's fascination with it—morphed conversation into connection.

Like the warmth of a fire always seems warmer with more hands around it, this connection with Secretary Simon had stoked my passions about politics because the two of us had shared in it. Through moments like this, I realize that the potency of any passion lies not in the depth of interest or proficiency at it, but in the ability to share it with another human or with the world. It truly is all in the exchange where passion and knowledge thrive and empower.

Three weeks after meeting Secretary Simon, I found myself in the Hennepin County Jail. Now, I hadn't committed a crime. I and a couple other students were allowed to go visit the jail for educational purposes, learning about the criminal justice system. However, upon showing up to the jail, traveling through 4 locked doors, and up an elevator, I was pronounced by a corrections officer to be 'too young' to go to see the rest. And so I ended up in a windowless corner of the jail infirmary, accompanied by a nurse tech named Sharon. We talked for a while about college and life, but when the topic of criminal justice and reform came up, her passion for the subject shone through. I now felt like I was in the driver's seat of that sticker-covered Toyota Camry hearing someone else talk about something they're passionate about. As she talked more about her experiences in jail, I felt the familiar sensation of utter interest as she talked. The conversation began to flow as we exchanged ideas, ultimately transforming into a connection. The roles were switched, but it was still just as potent of an interaction. Sharon and I, sitting in the unlikely meeting place of a cubicle in a jail, had connected through the mutual discovery of passions within each other. And although I didn't contribute to a speech in this interaction, the impact was there. To see a smile on the face of another human and to feel the smile illuminating my own face is more than enough.

I take these experiences with Sharon and on I-94 with Secretary Simon as samples of the hundreds of connections, both everyday and extraordinary, that lie on my road ahead. As I head off to the next chapter of my life, I excitedly anticipate the opportunity to connect, to grow, and to build the bridges of intimate human connection through sharing passions and creating an impact.

Salt. It is a rock of true inspiration. From humble beginnings, it is and has been part of practically every culture and individual life across the world. Salt captivates me not just for its many cooking benefits—though I do know a dash of salt in boiling water is a “need” for cooking—but instead for its particularly interesting presence in the entwined roots and branches of the human story. From Egyptian mummification, to 16th century Sub-Saharan trade, and through its essential role in making foods shelf-stable, salt is around us. For the love of salt, humans have fought wars, made countless inventions, and traded treasures. I will admit, at first glance it is a strange topic to be fascinated by, but when I read more into its various stories throughout time, I find myself all the more entranced in the mineral.

While the history of salt is definitely underrated, my interest can also be better sourced to my fascination with drawing connections. Almost every civilization now and in the past has touched the sandy shores of the salty sea or climbed a mountain full of deposits of rock salt. A rock that creates a map to the world in a unique way and forces one to travel beyond their usual everyday thoughts to notice its presence. You may see salt shakers on the old-timey diner’s table, but do you know its importance? Do you know its story? A story that goes beyond its glass exterior and metal cap. The capture it has goes beyond basic history; it allows one to draw a red string from one grain in South America to another in Siberia. If we see salt as an idea, not just an object, it creates a substance that sparks curiosity to learn more about the less understood world. I began to connect dots that I never knew were there as an innocent topic now built my appreciation for the large and mysterious world. It caused me to dig deeper and find how it involves so much more than its basic beginnings on the periodic table. When I pick up a book that tells the history of salt (yes, they exist) I pick up my love for knowledge. My unquenchable thirst for answering the question with no answer: how the world works.

Despite my love for the books I read, learning, for me, is not something only sourced by a library. People are the essential ingredient. People give you stories you may have never heard before; people show you how the things you read come alive in the world; and people, when keenly observed, are open books. Salt can enter into the mundane—you talk with family members about how many dashes the sauce needs—or the inane—you talk with friends about how they used Na in chemistry class—or even the most erudite—you talk to your professor about their trip to Egypt and fascination with mummification. Experiences like these give you a perspective on the things you learn that can’t be put on paper, and are my favorite steps in learning something new. When I notice the connections that I never knew were there, a topic can grow into a web that connects millions of strings of silk, and I gain perspective of how people all around me are caught in the story.

Knowledge is something I strive for, but I know it is not something I can simply glean from books that line wooden shelves or conversations with those around me. Instead, it comes from drawing connections between the two and from finding meaning in the everyday ways one lives in the world. In a world that today is increasingly described as global and inordinately complex, for me, the humble salt has become as vast as the very oceans it imbues.

He didn't just tape her mouth shut—he filled it with cement, silencing her forever.

The Tragedy of Heaven, the seven-year-old girl who had cement poured down her mouth, became one of the most violent expressions of tribal conflict within my home country of Ethiopia. In 2021, the Ethiopian government waged war on the Tigrayan region, marking the beginning of a brutal civil war and genocide. Heaven, a Tigrayan girl, was one of many girls who were raped and killed during the war. Over the next year, as my speech and agency became increasingly censored, the cement that filled Heaven's mouth began to reflect my own experience as a Tigrayan.

Following the breakout of the war, Tigrayans spoke out against the genocide to the best of their abilities. They attended protests, raised awareness online, and engaged in civil debate. As a Tigrayan, I longed to do the same. However, due to my mother's position as the Ethiopian Minister of Health, I had to be reticent. It was made clear to me that speaking out would not only put my mother's professional position at risk but also endanger her life and the lives of my entire family. I became filled with a profound sense of fear and stayed silent, afraid of the repercussions I might bring upon myself and my loved ones. That year, my history teacher asked what role we thought governments should play in civil wars. A nearby hand shot into the air, and a classmate answered with a passion. My stomach knotted at the question. I yearned to voice my opinion and to advocate for my people, but I stayed quiet. My deafening silence felt like a deep betrayal to Tigrayans, the very people who had raised me and who were now struggling for their survival. The cement oozed through my veins, cooling the blood that carried my Tigrayan heritage. I had become a statue, silent and trapped in a mold not of my making.

It wasn't until meeting Kirubel while on a school trip to rural Ethiopia that I began to break free. Kirubel was a young boy who wore a smile, a mask concealing his deep-seated trauma. His father and brother were killed in the war, leaving him in horrific conditions. Thinking of those like him and Heaven who had lost everything to the war ignited a fire inside me. I could no longer be a bystander to the silencing and destruction of my people. In the subsequent months, I had one goal: repurpose the cement that had once suffocated me into a new foundation that Tigrayans could stand upon without completely jeopardizing my family's safety.

In September 2023, I co-founded the Truth Fund, a nonprofit organization that advocates against Ethiopia's ongoing state of violence. The Truth Fund laid its foundations by taking a trip to an internal displacement camp in Tigray and donating 20,000 Ethiopian birr worth of food. From here, the cement began to transform. The Truth Fund visited two more displacement camps and donated 280,000 birr to those camps. The Truth Fund has reached over 7,000 people through online advocacy and has several upcoming trips planned. Through The Truth Fund, I broke free of the silencing cement that had confined me for so long.

Reflecting upon my journey, I've understood that achieving justice often requires giving up one's comfort and security. True progress demands courage, sacrifice, and an enduring commitment to the greater good. The once scared boy in history class has broken free from his cement and refuses to let it dry and define him. I aim to use my college education to learn more about political conflict, socio-economic development, and public policy. I aspire to return to Ethiopia and use my education to create political and social change that can free others of their cement and allow them to pave a path of greater opportunity for themselves and all Africans.

“The prungo whant on a miassin.”

I read from my blurry English book through my teary eyes. “Mami, io non capisco niente! Possiamo tornare a casa?” I told my mother I didn’t understand a thing and questioned if we could go back home. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I buried my face in my arms in frustration. The unfamiliar smell of bacon and pancakes topped with syrup wafted through the room. My mother’s glare signaled that I had to finish my English exercises before I could eat the “American” breakfast. Turning my head to the side, the strangely shaped windows made me think of just how different houses were in my new country. I kept telling myself that this was temporary, persisting that NYC’s drab skyscrapers could never compare to the vibrant coastlines of Termoli. Rebuilding our lives from scratch seemed impossible.

“The group whant on a miassin.”

I repeated the sentence again, correcting the errors I made. Agitation flowed through my body; I was supposed to finish reading the book by the end of the week, yet I couldn’t get through a simple sentence that my classmates pronounced effortlessly. As mami pronounced the sentence out loud to me again, I took long breaths to stop myself from crying. My mother reminded me that patience was the key to success and that I had to keep trying. While she was right, I couldn’t understand why reading, that once came so easy to me, now seemed like one of the hardest things on the planet.

The anticipation of the next sentence felt like a never ending cycle, adding to my frustration. It dawned on me that I still had more than half the book left to read. Trying to push down the feelings of uneasiness and defeat, I thought about everything I had left behind—the loud roar of the waves as the soft warmth of the sun touched my skin at Lungomare Beach, banana-flavored gelato, Saturday nights at Casareccia Pizzeria, and the cool breeze brushing through my hair while riding on my father’s scooter through Termoli.

However, these distant memories only made my desperate need to fit into this new world more evident. Days later, word by word, my pronunciation improved and the feeling of defeat began to fade away. The blaring sound of English grammar YouTube videos in the background intertwined with my voice. With each repetition, I started to place the accents in the right place and understand the sentences I was forming. A smile crept across my tear-stained face while my mother congratulated me on my small victories. Finishing the book didn’t seem so bad after all—“The group went on a mission.”

Years later, I look around the room and realize I find myself in the exact same situation; however, the roles are reversed. At the GoProject program, a first grader is looking up at me for guidance on her reading assignment, waiting for my approving expression. Pride filled my body as I noticed that young immigrants now turned to me for help in English. I realized that giving up is never the answer—comfort will never bring a person the success they seek. The harder you work at something, the better the result.

“¡No puedo hacer esto! Quiero volver a casa.”

Tears appeared in the young girl’s dark eyes as her scream of frustration and desire to be home muffled the sound of chatter in the background. Tripping over words and stumbling through syllables, the first grader was quick to toss the book aside in defeat. Thinking back to my struggles, I knew this feeling too well; I once was her. As I read the words out and she repeated them, pride began to exude from her small frame. “I knew you could do it—I am so proud of you,” I shared with her, something I wish I could tell my younger self.

I am a picky eater. Now this is, past the age of 6, an inherently embarrassing thing to admit. Being a picky eater is generally something that one should outgrow, like a fear of the dark or monsters under the bed. But I haven't outgrown it. As a result, I am always thinking about what I'll eat. I think about it going to a new restaurant with friends. I think about it visiting my family for dinner. And I was thinking about it the night before I went to Philmont - the remote high adventure Boy Scout camp nestled in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

I first heard of Philmont when I joined the Boy Scouts. Older boys would discuss their treks like King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table discussing their legendary conquests - epic summits and stunning vistas. As soon as I could, I signed up to go. There was only one problem. Not the 80 miles I would be hiking. Not the remoteness, rugged terrain, unpredictable weather, or many purported encounters with bears. The problem was food.

On a backpacking trip weight is crucial, as everything - tents, clothes, gear, cooking supplies, food - had to be packed up into our bags. i.e., no goldfish, grilled cheese or chicken tenders. And I doubted my crewmates would be willing to tack on 200 miles to the nearest Chick-fil-a. Instead I could look forward to hearty meals of spam and dehydrated beef stroganoff. Essentially a picky eater's armageddon.

But I had a plan, I would pack dozens of small lightweight packets of Energy Gel, a nutrient goo that could've been just as at home in a sci-fi movie as my hiking pack. This goo was tasteless, textureless, yet much more agreeable to my food preferences.

So as we set off into the wilderness I wasn't as afraid as I should've been. That first night, while everyone else feasted on their hearty meals of spam, I cut open my first two packets of energy gel.

But my solution quickly revealed itself to be not as brilliant as I had thought. I discovered eating nothing but gel for breakfast, lunch, and dinner is an incredibly demoralizing experience. I started to suspect that packets of gel were not enough to sustain me in the midst of our strenuous daily climbs.

By day 6, these issues, compounded by constant rain and cold, came to a head. That night in the midst of a downpour, we made beans. I hated beans. And these beans, having been stored in a damp backpack amidst muddied camping equipment, were about as far from something I'd want to eat as possible. But my cold, fatigued, hungry self knew that those beans were my only option.

So I ate the beans. And they were disgusting. Watery and mushy and foul. Every bite was a titanic struggle against my gag reflex. But, after forcing down the final bite and guzzling a large amount of water, I noticed something odd: I felt better, a little warmer. Perhaps a little less lightheaded. The downpour, constant dampness, biting cold, all seemed less miserable. So when the next day's dehydrated meal came, I tried it, hated it, and ate it anyway.

Now, to be clear, those beans did not teach me to be a more adventurous eater. But I took something else away from it—that there are times when there's no easy way out. Sometimes the only way forward is an unpleasant route you're desperate to avoid. But you'll have to do it anyway. Study long and hard to get an A on a test. Apply and be rejected from a bunch of internships to land one. Tear up a draft to make a better one from scratch. And eat the most damp, mushy, disgusting beans ever to be able to summit the mountain at the end of your 80 mile trek.

To imagine the collapse of a nation is unfathomable—until it becomes a reality. I giggled when my brother called to tell me about the conflict arising in Sudan, presuming it was just the usual protests and that we'd soon be back to visit in the summer. However, when I returned home to find my mother in tears and my father frantically switching between news channels, my backpack slipped to the ground, and with it, my heart.

What we expected to be a few weeks of minor conflict in early 2023 has turned into a year of destruction, gunshots into missiles, and the fear of losing my homeland a closer reality. Yet in this unraveling, my Habooba's presence anchored me. "Habooba" is the Sudanese word for grandmother, rooted in the Arabic word "hubb," meaning love, yet it signifies so much more. The war destroyed many things, but not the core of Sudan she instilled in me—a connection I was only just beginning to understand.

My most vivid childhood memories took place in my once idyllic childhood home, specifically, my Habooba's kitchen, one now untouched for over a year. In her eyes it was a sacred place, where generosity wasn't just a virtue but a daily practice. I handed her tomatoes, utensils, and spices, watching as she crafted trays of flavorful food. "These are for whoever knocks on the door," she'd say before I could even ask. Her hands moved with the same care and precision for both family and guests, refusing to distinguish between them. Her kitchen was more than a space for cooking; it was a classroom that taught abundance through sharing.

My own journey with sharing wasn't as supple. When the men carried trays, I'd grip my dad's shirt, avoiding sitting around the tray with everyone else. My Habooba noticed, everyone did, though she was the only one who gently persisted. Now, far from home, I finally understand why. Recently, I joined my family as we ate from a shared tray, watching the rhythmic motion of hands reaching for food and hearing the harmony of conversation and laughter. It filled a void I had from missing home; these shared meals weren't just about food. They were traditions preserving love and camaraderie—a symbol of unity in the bigger picture. In this simple act, I found a piece of home, a tradition threading our community together across distances.

As war reshapes my homeland, my Habooba's lessons resonate deeper than ever. What once seemed like simple traditions—shared meals, quiet generosity, and gentle persistence—I now view as acts of cultural preservation. As my family mourns the soil we may never return to, I find myself stepping into my Habooba's role. Through the Sudanese Women's Association, I help organize educational and charity events, where every shared plate channels her kitchen's warmth. Like her, I ensure every new member feels at home, every young girl knows she has a sister to confide in. While setting up these gatherings, I never worry about having enough food, knowing that somehow, like her love, there will always be enough for whoever knocks on the door.

During our International Day celebrations at school, I scoop aseeda, a traditional Sudanese porridge, onto plates just as my Habooba taught me. As my curious classmates crowd around, eager to learn, I find myself sharing stories about her kitchen along with each serving—no longer the girl who once hid behind her father. In sharing these traditions, I realize that our heritage isn't confined to a place; it lives in how we care for one another. Each shared meal, each cultural celebration, and each new connection reflects what Habooba instilled in me: traditions aren't just for preserving—they're bridges that build and sustain community. I carry my Habooba's lessons with me, ready to share the warmth of our culture with a new community while advocating for the one that shaped me.

So many decisions in my childhood were made that way, with me balancing a coin on my thumb and pointer finger, flipping, and then catching it to turn it over onto my left hand. I tended to be quite indecisive, so the move is muscle memory for me even now, almost ten years later.

“Sit down,” my mom said, “We need to talk.” This was the conversation I had been dreading for weeks. She told me that I needed to decide, but for the life of me, I couldn’t pick between the two options. I loved them both in such different ways; how could I even compare the two? In the end I flipped a coin: heads for dance, tails for gymnastics. The coin landed on heads but to this day I often wonder if it was the right choice. Would I be happier if I stuck with gymnastics instead?

Even now, I am tempted to flip a coin to make my decisions. It would be so much easier, wouldn’t it? I could skip the worrying and the stress, wondering if I’m a bad person because of the decisions I’m considering. But just flipping a coin isn’t an option for me anymore. As I’ve grown up, I’ve discovered that some decisions are too complex to defer to an inanimate object.

Sitting inside the warmth of an Italian restaurant in the windy city, I finally worked up the courage, and without flipping a coin, to ask my dad a question that had been eating at me for years. It was just the two of us at the table, eating our outrageously expensive pasta. “Do you believe in God?” A heavy silence for a few moments, and then a reluctant “no.” So that’s it, I thought, my parents have been lying to me for years? Not only did they keep a secret from me, they kept part of their identity from me. Ever since that cold January day, I have wondered about my own identity as a result. If my mom is a Christian but my dad is an atheist, what does that make me? Some sort of hybrid? Or do I have to choose my mom’s or my dad’s side?

In today’s society, there are so many absolutes. Heads or tails, right or wrong, with me or against me. It can be extremely restricting to think that you can only choose one with no in between gray area. As little kids, we were encouraged to think outside the box. Now, as we enter the adult world, we have to fit inside boxes so others can gain some sort of understanding of who we are just by knowing how we label ourselves. It feels too simple. Every person is so complex that many of us don’t even know ourselves. However, after much deliberation, I decided that I am a Christian, yet not in the most traditional sense. I do label myself with other words, too; words that carry a lot of meaning to me but little to others. But the most important part of my identity and what defines me are the gray areas that can’t be simplified with a single label.

When I think back to the little girl that made decisions by the flip of a coin, I feel bad for her. She didn’t know that there were more than two paths for her to take. I can see now the infinite paths before me, and I feel excited for my future. I know that I want to feel fulfilled at the end of each day, and so many things fill me up that the possibilities are endless. Why flip a coin and limit myself when I can do whatever I set my mind to?

Nervous chatter filled the room as competitors milled about. I sat on the gray mat, tapping my hands and feet, pushing nearby conversations into background noise. I squinted up through the dusty, chalky atmosphere at the collection of seemingly haphazardly placed hand and foot holds on the wall in front of me. In the bouldering discipline of rock climbing, while holds appear to be scattered randomly on the wall, they are actually carefully placed by a professional climber, creating a puzzle that tests both the athlete's cognitive abilities to decipher the climb as well as their physical abilities to complete it. As I stared up at the pink fiberglass holds, a friend from my age group, Mark, gave me a fist bump and sat down saying, "I can't figure this one out." Over the next hour, we discussed a multitude of approaches, calling out instructions to each other as we took turns. Some crazy, "Now – Swing and JUMP to the next hold!!" Others, more cautious. Each impact on the crash pad further rattled our teeth. Finally, I suggested he position himself over the hold before reaching up. Mark seemed apprehensive, concerned he was not strong enough for such an awkward position. I replied, "rotate your knees and get your hips closer to the wall – take pressure off your arms." Mark shrugged and tried again. With my encouragement he pulled himself up, tensing his body and holding his breath with effort. As his hands grasped the top hold, he looked back down in shock. As the competition ended, Mark stood proudly on the podium.

Over the next few days, I grappled with conflicted feelings. Did I give up my own spot on the podium by helping Mark? Should I have left him alone so I could succeed? What kind of friend would I be if I didn't help my friends? One day I was upset with myself about my decision; another, it felt good to help someone else succeed. These feelings would continue to stick with me.

A few weeks later, the president of Gilman's Investment Club, Aman, announced that we would be entering a national investment competition as small teams. I started to sweat. Being relatively new to investing, I had no idea how to invest for a competition. As the upperclassmen coalesced into groups, the freshman members were left sitting at our desks. Aman looked up from his group, seeing us still sitting there. He came over and said "Guys, what's up?" I spoke up, "I don't think any of us understand the strategy for these competitions." Aman looked back at his group, "Give me a sec." I sat there, wondering if I had just made a fool of myself in front of the president. Aman walked back and to our relief said, "I am forming a group with you guys." At the time I was focused on my own worries, but looking back, I realize he sacrificed doing well in the competition to teach us.

This brought me back to my feelings about helping Mark during the bouldering competition. I realized that being part of a team, a school, a society, means that sometimes you need to sacrifice your own success to help someone else achieve their goals. I've been able to achieve what I have because of help from my parents, friends, coaches, and teachers. And my friends and teammates depend on support from me. While I may not have placed in the bouldering competition, neither of us was going to top that climb if we didn't work together, but by doing so, one of us did. It just wasn't me that competition. In the investing contest, Aman may not have been on a winning team, but he taught a whole group of underclassmen how to approach competitions. We are able to achieve more when we invest our time and energy helping each other succeed.

I have a list entitled “Grateful For” pinned in my notes app. It’s exactly what it sounds like: a gratitude list. This is a note I’ve opened at least once a day for the past four years, adding to its ever growing record. At last count, there were 1,513 items listed. I reflect on my gratitude for events both specific (borrowing my sister’s earrings for a concert) and general (being a junior in high school). It contains components that are material (my blue sweater) and abstract (my ability to plan for the stressful week ahead). Without all of these little things I would not be who I am, showing that this note is one of the most meaningful things in my life.

My gratitude list has many repeats; one of those is my friends. There are singular names that can be found dozens of times. Reading through my list, I can watch myself grow closer with the people who have supported me throughout high school. For example, in 9th grade, I wrote that I was grateful for my new friend Addie’s texts about Taylor Swift, a shared interest of ours that helped begin our friendship. A few weeks ago, I reflected on my appreciation of feeling like a part of Addie’s family, who have graciously included me on family vacations and game nights. I recently wrote how grateful I was for my friends’ support at my music recital; I recall looking into the audience and seeing a row full of my people, all there to cheer me on. My confidence and sense of belonging have improved immensely due to my friends, and their influence is seen in my list. I know that I would not be complete without my friendships, which have taught me that I value support, having fun, and the growth of genuine relationships.

Another theme found throughout my list is food: it’s mentioned 91 times. Although it’s a wide variety, some frequent players are chocolate (11x) and mango (5x). However, as I tallied up the foods for which I was grateful, finding it humorous how many types of chocolate I enjoy (brownies, hot chocolate, etc.), an underlying theme emerged: my enjoyment of food was scarce at the start of the list and has since increased tenfold. I’ve struggled with my body image in the past, believing I was less than others due to my body’s size. This is a viewpoint I’ve put in work to change, and seeing this represented in my seemingly mundane list makes me proud. During my junior year, I often appreciated the packed lunches I took to school, knowing that the excitement of a dessert or favorite fruit awaiting me in my lunchbox was what might give me the push I needed to make it through a tough 5th-period biology exam. This mealtime appreciation is something I’d have been unable to do as a freshman; lunch brought with it a feeling of dread as I decided how much I should eat that particular day. My growth in this area of life demonstrates just how meaningful gratitude and its impacts are.

My gratitude list has seen me grow. I began by appreciating the little things, but what I have truly come to appreciate is the trait of gratitude that I now hold. When I look at the list, I see what has remained constant in my life, but I also see the many additions that I now find gratitude for. My list makes me feel excitement for the future and for the things I’ll one day feel grateful for, things I’ve yet to even conceive of. Whether they are commonplace or monumental, I know they will shape me as a person. Without brownies, my favorite clothes, and dance parties with my friends, I wouldn’t be me.

Sunday mornings, I would sing in the choir at my mother's Catholic church. Then, that afternoon, I would put on a hijab and pray in my father's mosque. At a young age, nothing about this system felt peculiar to me; it was who I was.

At school though, these differences seemed to follow me everywhere. When my teacher would ask my class about where we went over the weekend, my responses were met with both curiosity and unease. I struggled to explain the routines that felt normal in my mind, yet so foreign to others.

At Arabic school, I felt those differences in a new way. I cried every time I went to the mosque, fearing what the other kids were saying about me. I knew learning Arabic would bring me closer to my culture, but I couldn't bear the feeling of being so unwanted. Soon, my understanding of Arabic felt insignificant in comparison to the pain I felt from not fitting in, and I noticed myself struggling to understand conversations around me. My dad's family would question him, asking why I hadn't learned Arabic, and he would respond, "She didn't want to." I did want to. I just didn't know how. Eventually, it felt easier to ignore my Arab culture than to bridge the gaps it created in my life.

During my earlier school years, I did everything I could to blend in, but in high school I was told to stand out. Suddenly, diversity was something I was expected to embrace, and everyone had an opinion on how to do so. My classmates would pester me about why I couldn't answer questions about the Quran for their history homework, or claim that my cultural disconnect was my own fault. They didn't see the silent battles I'd fought to balance two worlds that felt miles apart.

My perception shifted last fall, however, when my uncle returned from a trip to Lebanon. Every time a family member comes back home, my aunts send a tin of baklava for me, remembering how much I adored the treat. Holding the package, I scanned the top right corner to find my name written in Arabic as it always is. Seeing more words than usual, I stumbled. I attempted sounding out the script, searching back in my head for the Arabic letters I had known all those years ago.

Determined, I traced each letter, whispering their sounds under my breath, hoping muscle memory would guide me. I didn't expect any sudden revelation, but something inside me refused to let this go. After sounding out the words, I recognized "Laila" and "baklava," but the rest was beyond me. I gave in and asked my father to translate it for me.

"Laila, the baklava niece."

As my dad spoke, I felt a warmth spread through me. "Laila, the baklava niece." Such a simple phrase, yet it carried the weight of something bigger. Baklava was more than a pastry. It was a piece of home carefully packaged for me, wrapped in layers of memory, family, and tradition—a reminder that I could still find my way back.

Part of me wishes this story ended with more than just baklava. I wish I could tell you I became fluent in Arabic or I have the ability to do the Dabke like you've never seen before. The truth is, I resent being led into conflicting cultures without a guiding hand to help me reconcile them. Still, baklava has opened my eyes to something essential: I am enough for my culture. This dessert isn't just a pastry I enjoy, but a gracious invitation to reconnect with where I come from. Yes, my upbringing is complex, but it is who I am. I don't need to run from it. Instead, I can reclaim it on my own terms, and if that means being the "baklava niece," then I embrace it wholeheartedly.

“The potency of any passion lies not in the depth of interest or proficiency at it, but in the ability to share it with another human or with the world.”

“Our heritage isn’t confined to a place; it lives in how we care for one another.”

“Sometimes the only way forward is an unpleasant route you’re desperate to avoid. But you’ll have to do it anyway.”

“It was a piece of home carefully packaged for me, wrapped in layers of memory, family, and tradition—a reminder that I could still find my way back.”

“Heads or tails, right or wrong, with me or against me. It can be extremely restricting to think that you can only choose one with no in between gray area.”



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