Accomplishing Big Things in Small Pieces

by William Wissemann

I carry a Rubik's Cube in my backpack. Solving it quickly is a terrific conversation starter and surprisingly impressive to girls. I've been asked to solve the cube on the New York City subway, at a track meet in Westchester and at a café in Paris. I usually ask people to try it first. They turn the cube over in their hands, half-heartedly they make a few moves and then sheepishly hand it back. They don't even know where to begin. That's exactly what it was like for me to learn how to read. Letters and words were scrambled and out of sequence. Nothing made sense because I'm dyslexic.

Solving the Rubik's Cube has made me believe that sometimes you have to take a few steps back to move forward. This was a mirror of my own life when I had to leave public school after the fourth grade. It's embarrassing to admit, but I still couldn't consistently spell my full name correctly.

As a fifth-grader at a new school, specializing in what's called language processing disorder, I had to start over. Memorizing symbols for letters, I learned the pieces of the puzzle of language, the phonemes that make up words. I spent the next four years learning how to learn and finding strategies that allowed me to return to my district's high school with the ability to communicate my ideas and express my intelligence.

It took me four weeks to teach myself to solve the cube — the same amount of time it took the inventor, Erno Rubik. Now, I can easily solve the 3×3x3, and the 4×4x4, and the Professor's Cube, the 5×5x5. I discovered that just before it solves, a problem can look like a mess, and then suddenly you can find the solution. I believe that progress comes in unexpected leaps.

Early in my Rubik's career, I became so frustrated that I took the cube apart and rebuilt it. I believe that sometimes you have to look deeper and in unexpected places to find answers. I noticed that I can talk or focus on other things and still solve the cube. There must be an independent part of my brain at work, able to process information.

The Rubik's cube taught me that to accomplish something big, it helps to break it down into small pieces. I learned that it's important to spend a lot of time thinking, to try to find connections and patterns. I believe that there are surprises around the corner. And, that the Rubik's cube and I, we are more than the sum of our parts.

Like a difficult text or sometimes like life itself, the Rubik's Cube can be a frustrating puzzle. So I carry a cube in my backpack as a reminder that I can attain my goals, no matter what obstacles I face.

And did I mention that being able to solve the cube is surprisingly impressive to girls?

William Wissemann was raised in Hastings-on-Hudson, NY. A freshman at Bard College, he is studying economics, computer science and photography. When not at school, Wissemann lives with his mother and younger sister.

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A Duty to Family, Heritage, and Country

by Ying Ying Yu

I am a good child, obedient. I grew up in China, a country where education is the center of every child's life and a grade less than 85 percent is considered a failure. Grades mean more to us than a mother's smile, more than the murmur of a wish lingering on birthday candles. I had homework during lunch, math and language classes two times a day. There were punishments for not paying attention. I was beaten with a ruler. I learned to do anything to get a good grade.
I believe in duty, but that belief comes with sacrifice. The achievements I make come with a cost.

I remember first grade, the red scarf flapping in the wind, wanting more than anything to be the first one to wear it, that, the symbol of responsibility, excellence and loyalty. The first thing that flashed to mind when I put it on was how glad my family would be, how proud the motherland would be of the child it had borne and how my accomplishments would look on a college application.

All my pride, love, self-esteem — they merge into duty. There have been times I wanted to throw away everything, but duty and obligation were always there to haunt me and to keep me strong. I would think: My parents and grandparents brought me up, my country gave me shelter, my teachers spent so much time building my foundations just to have me throw it all away? No, I can't do that! I must repay all that they have done. "I must," "I should," "I have to," all those little phrases govern my life and the lives of many of my classmates. We struggle on because duty reminds us that the awaiting success is not just for us. It's for our families, our heritage and our country.

I used to want to be a gardener. I liked working outdoors and the gritty feel of dirt was much more tangible than a bunch of flimsy words strung together. But I can never grow up to be a gardener. Everything I have done so far points to the direction of becoming a lawyer. That's a job my family wholeheartedly supports.

There is no other choice for someone who's been brought up by such a strict system, someone who has ambition. Here in America, there is almost a pressure to follow your dreams. I don't want any more dreams — dreams are illusions. And it's too late for me to work toward another future, to let the foundations I have built go to ruins.

I believe in the power of duty to impel. Only duty will offer me something true, something worthy of my effort and the support of my family and country. Duty can bring me to an achievement that is greater than I am.

Ying Ying Yu was 13 years old when her social studies class was assigned to write This I Believe essays. Yu and her parents immigrated to the United States in 2001. She starts high school this fall in Princeton, New Jersey.

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