Red Camouflage

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This was the identity given to me when I joined the Iowa State community. A nine digit number is all the help the university gives you to start forming yourself, and I was under the impression that by the time I would leave, five years later, I would have everything figured out. I would need to know, down to the details who I was and what wanted to do with the rest of my life. If this was not the most intimidating thought ever, then I don’t know what could be more terrifying.

But forward I went, into the architecture program, with the intention of “discovering myself.” I wanted to be known; I wanted to be successful, and I wanted the world to know it. I am not alone in this. People, whether consciously or not, desire to project a self-image to the rest of the world, and to their peers; an image that everyone else recognizes as belonging to that individual. And I wanted to master the image I displayed.

My first attempt started with a bold move. I threw subtlety out the window, and I colored my entire project red. Red and glowing! The color red incites passion, intensity, vigor, and it is described as “the most powerful color we have, and the one which drives people mad quicker than any other.” I started as part of the faceless mass on the campus of Iowa State, and suddenly, I defined myself as the ‘red designer.’ My projects screamed out across the room that they belonged to me. They were recognizable by my peers because of the color I used. I thought I had an identity.

In reality, I had found a semi-effective camouflage. A camouflage that for my career in architecture school acted as a good Halloween mask. I used the color, at the time, thinking I had figured out who I was, but realizing now, at the end of my college career that I haven’t even begun to discover what I am truly passionate about.

People use so many tactics to create an identity through work, family, hobbies, and fashion. But eventually, as I did, we end up hiding behind the ‘thing’ (or in my case, the color red) without really knowing ourselves. This camouflage of red became my comfort zone, a place where I felt successful. It became a placebo for my mind, convincing me that I knew what I was good at. Convincing me that I knew what I wanted out of my college career. But, in reality that’s all the red was, a placebo, a camouflage covering up the potential opportunities that would have placed me outside of what’s comfortable, but would also have challenged me to discover my own identity. Which is what I wanted all along: to discover who I was and who I wanted to be.

All of these realizations could be very detrimental to myself, and to my career, if I let them. I could just give up. I could blame the system for not trying harder to understand the designer that I want to be: the person that I want to be. I could blame myself for not realizing all of this sooner. I could have confronted this realization last year when I first noticed that something was not right. Ultimately, late though it is, this realization can be a way to start forming a real identity around the things that I am most passionate about which happen to be things that I am just starting to discover.

Even though I am starting again in a way, my collegiate experience and a camouflage of red has not been a waste of my time. Life is a continual process of learning, and although I have started shedding a false identity to discover what else I am capable of, I have learned from my ‘red experiences.’ I have learned to understand the progression of my thoughts, and to base my actions on the instinctual gut feelings that tend to get ignored once the intellectual ego sets in. I came to college to discover myself. I will leave the architecture program behind, ready to forge ahead with the will to thrive. My path forward may still be a little blurry, but the red tint has been removed, and I can start to look for the many different opportunities that lay in front of me.
RED CAMOUFLAGE