Durability

Christofer N. Sheafe
Iowa State University, cnsheafe@iastate.edu
Blue, jagged, and magnificent fingers, with icy fingertips, jut their way into the clear sky. There is no fog or haze to conceal their beauty. On that morning commute to high school, I had never really taken the time to appreciate the Rocky Mountains in the background. For most of my years growing up, I only used the mountains as a means to tell west from east. Yet, that morning, I looked at the mountains through a different lens. One in which didn't view it in terms of direction, but of aesthetics.

I grew up in Colorado Springs, Colorado with its high altitude, dry climate, and heavy gales. The community I lived in was predominately Black and Latino. While some who grew up in white communities might find this bizarre that minorities were the majority in this place, I did not think much of it. Perhaps it was because I was multiracial and could fit in easier just because of my appearance. Or perhaps I thought this was normal.

As I became older, I began paying more attention and learning about the place in which I reside. I learned that even though I considered the house I lived in to be large, my household was still poor. It was not easy for me to understand as a youngster. My parents repeated that we were a poor family that had to be frugal with our money but could still afford luxuries like satellite TV, plasma screen television sets, gaming systems, and computers. For sometime, the illusion of being in good financial standing held strong and I could not understand why my parents said we were so poor. However, I would learn soon enough what they meant.

At the onset of the 21st century, gas prices began to increase slowly. For most people, this was more a tough inconvenience. However, for my household, this was a threat to our living. My
father was a truck driver who originally signed up under a larger company and eventually became his own contractor. For a while, he was earning more than enough but with the increasing gas prices, most notably in diesel, his earning dropped dramatically. Around the time of the financial crisis in 2008, my mother showed me a summary of my father's earning and costs for the previous year. His net earnings that were meant to pay for the house, food, and utilities came up to be nearly $20k. The cost of fuel was about $35k. Presents became infrequent on birthdays and holidays, Thanksgiving dinner portions became much smaller from last year, and my parents obsessively spoke of winning the lottery in between puffs of cigarette smoke. At that time, I was now old enough to understand that we scraping by to make ends meet but still too young to feel the same nerve-racking stress my parents went under. Thinking about it now, I'm uneasy wondering what problems I will experience when I become independent.

My US Government teacher in high school refer to the school system as “disadvantaged”. When I first heard him tell the class this, I did not believe him at first. But, the more I thought about it, I felt foolish to not take notice of the evidence. Aside from low test scores, there was gang and drug activity that impacted some of the student body and created an atmosphere of hostility and deviance. I think I felt foolish not because I didn't notice these things, but because I felt that this was not normal and that other white schools did not have these problems(Of course looking further into it, white schools still had drug problems since many of them can afford more lethal and potent substances like heroine). But I suppose my worst fear, was that I thought I was not of the same caliber as my white counterpart because the school I attended was labeled “disadvantaged”.

Initially coming to Iowa State University, I felt disadvantaged. Some of the material in class required understanding concepts taught in high school that I don't recollect ever learning
like matrices. It was somewhat discouraging to feel as if I was handicapped in my classes, to see that my peers were able to understand the material better than I. Yet, I feel now that I have rigid footing in the classes I am taking. I feel competent and believe that I transcended this initial hump. And even with the difficulty of taking 17 credits, I am rather content that I was able to do so relatively unstressed and, most importantly, grow.

For my short time here at Iowa State University, I believe I've grown considerably. One form I've grown is that of an engineer. My critical thinking skills have become sharper and my interest in Electrical Engineering has increased. I have my professors in the ECpE department to thank for sparking an interest in their students. Starting freshman year, I became fascinated with circuits, microcontrollers, computer programming, and signals. I don't wish to specialize in all of these, but I am particularly drawn to signals—especially after this year in which I built an AM radio receiver for my circuits class.

Additionally, I've not only grown as an engineer, but as a person. Coming from a predominately Black and Latino community, I underwent somewhat of a culture shock coming to ISU. I had never been surrounded by so many white people that I felt out of place, like I didn't belong. My brushes with racism in Colorado was small in comparison with what I had experienced walking home on a Friday night. I was angry initially angry at these pig-headed bigots and how they would never say this to anyone in any other situation. Eventually, it became a numb feeling. A sense of loneliness and bitterness which in turn would become resentment for my light-skinned peers.

As the months went by, I thought more about how I identified with race. I could pass off as either Black or Latino, yet I did not feel akin to these ethnicities. Growing up, I had thought that it was how you looked that was enough to be part of a race. But now I feel that ethnicity is
deeper than that. That it requires a cultural nurturing to provide a solid foundation on what it means to be part of that ethnic group. But I also learned that ethnicity does not have to be central to a person's life. Just because I look different, doesn't mean I have to let my race control my life. At this point in my life, I prefer to think of myself as not as my race but an individual. An individual with guiding principles that has to see the world as grey rather than just black and white.

My perspective has broadened since being away from home. Talking and interacting people with different backgrounds is one my perspective has widened. Listening to what people say and what they think adds substance to my own thoughts. It gives me an opportunity to inspect something again and look at it through someone else's point of view. This is especially true of people who are very religious. Before college, I don't recall meeting anyone so fervent in their religion. Talking with people with a different view helps to expand my own. Additionally, I've never interacted with people before with a conservative political view. My community is for the majority a rather liberal one. It was interesting to debate with someone who has nearly polar opposite beliefs as I.

I've also expanded my horizons my trying new things that I wouldn't normally have done. I believe that college is the perfect place to experiment and to get out of one's comfort zone. It is a time in which most don't have to worry about working a full-time job, taking care of kids, paying bills, and managing one's retirement plan. As such, it is a period in a person's life to have the most freedom while having the least amount of responsibility. It seems to me, that it can be wasteful to not take advantage of this opportunity to grow and learn, especially, about one's self. Being here I have met people I wouldn't have imagined making friends with or trying things I would've deemed unlawful or deviant. Pushing myself out of my comfort zone has added quite a
bit of perspective to my life.

In my time here, I have also hit a few low points. My mistakes and failures have left a dent in my confidence and overall self-efficacy. In the first semester, I ended with less a 2.92 GPA. I felt mortified that I had slipped so badly. I felt guilty and shamed all that I had worked for and all the effort my parents gave to raise me. Additionally, my efforts at relationships have not been as fruitful as I had hoped. Being rejected several times can sometimes make a man's view a bit bleak. Negative thoughts began piling on top of one another.

Over the summer, I looked inward. I looked to see what the root of my problems were. What I could have done better to avoid being in the same mess. I learned that for my first year in college, I was not easily motivated. It was very easy for me to sleep in and miss class. And strangely enough, not having a roommate for the bulk of the semester made it so much easier for me to neglect class work and stay in my dorm. A lack of self-discipline had led to my subpar performance.

But I think what I learned most importantly over that summer, is that while we can not predict the mishaps we will experience in the future, we can brace ourselves for the worst of it. I believe the best way to prepare is by one's attitude and mentality. It is easy to be a victim. Someone who is unfortunate and powerless in certain circumstances-that people will rally with them. But, the sad truth is that when plays the role of the victim, they aren't helping themselves. There is no opportunity to go through the trials of life if one collapses at the first sight of difficulty. Only those who can stay the course with their head held up high will be able to continue growing and enjoy life.