Acknowledgements

We are pleased to present the Best Essays Anthology 2019-2020. It is through such an anthology that we are able to honor our finest writers. These pages are the work of students enrolled in the West Valley College’s English department’s English, Literature, and Composition courses. The focus of these courses is mastering several varieties of essays. The WVC privileges and supports good writing; that is why this collection of student essays is so vital. Taken together, they illustrate that students work diligently to understand, master, and hone the skills that enable them to write perceptively and creatively. The panel of judges comprised three English faculty who read and rated the works anonymously.

On the Cover: *Vertumnus* by Giuseppe Arcimboldo
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I wrote this essay for my English 1C class for an assignment about writing an open letter regarding current issues. I considered many different topics, but ultimately landed on social media because of how prevalent it is in our everyday life. With most people having at least one account, I think we need to understand how these sites can manipulate us and to be aware of how fake news spreads. Social media itself isn't bad, but it's important for us to use it responsibly.

An Open Letter to Social Media Users
-Dorothy Chin-

To my fellow social media users,

I won’t deny that social media is a huge part of our lives. Giving it up is impossible for many of us. But please, for God’s sake, learn to take some responsibility!

The people of our generation have been disparaged for years by our parents and grandparents for excessive use of technology. No doubt you, like me, have grown tired of the jokes and the comments, of the ads and animations depicting a dystopian society where everyone is glued to their phones. It’s insulting. It’s demeaning. But they have a point.

Now, I am a social media user myself. The thing about social media, though, is that it’s designed to be addicting. It is designed to be the first thing you think of when you reach for your phone. And this may sound like a fear-mongering spiel straight out of a technology-averse grandmother’s mouth, but it’s true. You know it’s true. You, like me, have spent hours and hours scrolling through posts, reblogging and liking and commenting until our fingers are sore and our eyes ache from the screen. We cannot bear to take ourselves away from the screens. Even during school or work, a simple notification from Facebook or Twitter or Instagram will have us reaching for us phones for a quick glance that turns into fifteen minutes of scrolling.

Now, you might be reading this and think: Big deal. So what if I spent fifteen minutes on my phone? It’s not like I took half an hour. And sure, it’s only fifteen minutes. But what happens to you when you take that break? I know I find it difficult to focus on whatever I was working on
before after a social media break. I can’t concentrate on my task afterwards. Even when I find my stride again, there’s always that thought in the back of my mind. *I wonder what else has happened since I last checked?*

And that’s just for one such ‘quick glance’. How many times does your phone ring or vibrate with a new notification? I bet it’s more than one. In fact, I’d bet it’s more than ten. Or fifteen. Or twenty. And if each notification takes you fifteen minutes to recover from, then even as little as four can have you wasting an entire hour on social media. This is part of the addictive formula social media companies use to keep you hooked. Though this issue can be solved with some self-discipline, there are other dangers to social media.

How many times have you seen a controversial tweet or post and raced to reblog it to ‘spread the word’? How many times have you taken a social media post for the truth without analyzing where it came from? More than once, I’d guess. This way of participating in social media can lead to the spread of misinformation and fake news, as shown in 2015 Paris terror attacks. Thousands of people fell for an incorrect eye-witness account describing the attacker as a Middle-Eastern man, while ignoring the correct identification of him as a white man. This is partially the fault of the reporter who posted both tweets in the first place, but the blame also lies on those who retweeted a post without considering its origin. If the people who had come across the incorrect tweet bothered to stop and realize that eye witnesses can be unreliable, or that the reporter published two contradictory tweets, then the false report would not have spread so far.

Of course, it’s impossible to expect everyone to think things through. Some people don’t want to make the effort. In fact, there is a third factor to the spread of misinformation: social media platforms themselves. The same algorithm they use to make social media so addicting for us prioritizes showing its users popular posts and posts related to our interests. Do you see the
problem yet? Fake news posts and misinformation become popular through various means, whether it be controversy, shock value, or fear. Just look at the amount of ‘miracle cures’ for Coronavirus circulating the web, or rumors of further government shutdowns. By bringing up these posts, social media companies aid the spread of fake news.

They make no effort to stem the tide of misinformation, even when there are solutions to the issue. For example, these companies could focus on promoting posts by verified authorities and creating algorithms to flag false information. But these platforms will not tell us about the dangers of social media addiction -- for obvious reasons.

Until social media platforms step up, we are the ones who will have to take responsibility. Next time you have to work, put your phone on mute and away. Next time you see a controversial post with a lot of reblogs, take a moment to check its sources. Do your part to keep yourself from becoming the phone-enslaved caricatures featured in a boomer political cartoon - and together, we can become responsible users of social media.

Sincerely,

Dorothy Chin
I wrote this essay back in May as part of Bill Davis’s English 1A class. At the time, it represented the perfect cathartic exercise for me to unpack how I was feeling about the impact COVID was having on my life and the lives of those I love. When I submitted it for consideration for the 2019-2020 Best Essays Anthology, I felt sure that it would quickly lose its currency as we all emerged from our self-imposed isolation in the early summer and moved on with our lives. Little did I know how pervasive and enduring this pandemic would prove to be. Reading the essay again now I’m reminded of the lack of basic knowledge and sheer naivety of those early days, but I’m also struck by how lasting the impact has been to our social interactions and to our collective mental health. I hope my attempts at an honest account of my feelings at the time can help bring some perspective to this terrible worldwide tragedy.

One World
-Ciarán Doyle-

We know now it all started with two people at a seafood market coming down with flu-like symptoms in Wuhan, China—a city of 11 million people. A 34 year-old ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital, Dr. Li Wenliang, tried to alert fellow doctors to the danger. For his troubles, he received a visit from the police and instructions to stop spreading unfounded rumors (Hegarty). The massive influx of people to and then returning from the city around the Chinese New Year ensured that what had started off as a local, novel transmission of a new strain of a virus—from a bat to another mammal to humans—would turn into a worldwide pandemic that is disrupting our daily routines and threatens the lives of many.

What started out so far away, in a city in China few Americans had ever even heard of, has caused our lives to be turned upside-down as we struggle to protect ourselves from the coronavirus—a virus we can’t see, that has, as yet, impacted few we know personally, and yet which we are quickly learning to fear and to take deadly seriously. ‘Sheltering in place,’ ‘self-isolation,’ and ‘social distancing’ are not only terms we have come to understand, they are strategies we actively deploy to keep us safe. And yet, as we form barriers to our friends and neighbors through social distancing and self-isolation, at the same time, we must surely become acutely aware of how intimately connected we are to everyone in the world.
To help cope with this rising pandemic, my wife, Jane, and I have settled on the routine of taking an evening walk around the neighborhood to get some exercise and to relieve the boredom of staying put in one place. It provides a change of scene, an opportunity for us to talk, and a chance for serendipitous encounters with friends and neighbors. On a recent outing we met Lynn, who had just returned from a trip to Maui. Trained now in the new dance, we all maintained the appropriate social distance, shared our views on the situation, exchanged any news worthy of comment, all while standing remotely. Lynn is a friend we’d normally have hugged, exchanged gossip, and made plans to meet up with. But now, all we could manage was a brief “We were thinking of having you over, but obviously….” Lynn appreciated the sentiment, and we parted, the experience leaving with it a very real manifestation of the world reality we are all dealing with.

The last time we’d met Lynn was a few months before at the memorial service for her wife, Susan. Susan had died suddenly and unexpectedly in her early sixties from a stroke, shocking our tight group of friends. She had been my wife’s tennis doubles partner for a couple of years, before the ranking system required them to play on separate teams. Their kids and ours had gone to the same schools over the years, and we’d shared together the various ups and downs of life as parents. Susan and Lynn had been mainstays at all the neighborhood parties, we’d lived in each others’ worlds for over 20 years, and now Susan was gone. Beyond the memorial service, meeting Lynn on our walk was the first opportunity we’d had to console her for her loss, to ask how she was coping, to see if there was anything we could do to help, to find out how her trip to Maui with their kids to scatter some of Susan’s ashes in a place Susan loved had gone. And yet, faced with the realities of the new world order, we couldn’t even embrace, let alone invite her over for a meal, or make plans for the future.
This new world order became even more apparent when our daughter, Niamh, found herself stranded at college in Boston. Initially determined to tough it out, she relented and agreed to come back to California. While we knew it was the right thing to do, none of us were sure what protocols to follow to keep us all safe. The situation was further complicated by Niamh having taken a trip to New York—a hot spot, as we’d learned—the previous weekend. As we met her at San Francisco Airport, we exchanged words but no embraces. The journey home brought with it an overflow of conversation, as we looked to catch up after months apart. But there was no physical contact, no help from me with her oversized luggage—containing what remained from her life on the East Coast—just words, and some hummus to break the fast from the flight.

We had a similar experience with our son, Connor, who has settled down in the Bay Area with his girlfriend, Quinn. After completing college, Connor had taken a job with a startup. He’s enjoying life there, feeling challenged in a good way, and starting to get used to earning real money for the first time. Quinn had gone back to college to train to become an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), something she’d wanted to do for a while, mainly to help others. Having passed her exams, completed all the necessary certifications, and successfully interviewed with a local emergency response organization, she’d finally started her new career just as the pandemic really hit in the Bay Area. We’d long since established a routine of having them over for dinner on the weekends, or treating them to a meal at a restaurant. Now, though, what should have been the cause of celebration—Quinn’s new job—became a focus of anxiety, as Jane and I wondered if it was even responsible for us to meet up as a family. A virtual cocktail hour via FaceTime was fun, but nothing could paper over the flaws in the communication medium. Connor expressed how difficult it was for him, emotionally, to work
from home, and we all missed the direct contact we’d grown used to. Finally, Niamh went to meet them for a walk, an activity that resulted in all 3 showing up at our house. Connor hugged us both; Quinn kept her distance. No-one really knew what to do or how to act—something we all reluctantly acknowledged.

As we were grappling with our emotions and how to act to keep ourselves safe, word came from Ireland of the death of my uncle, Joe, from the virus. He was in his eighties, in poor health and, because of the onset of dementia, had recently moved to a care home for the elderly. All of these factors played together to make him an obvious target for the virus. ‘A blessing,’ was how my aunt, his sister, Pauline, described his passing, a sentiment I agreed with, although I felt sure his final days must have been horrible for him, no matter his mental state.

Joe had never been my favorite uncle—having sixteen, there are many to choose from for that accolade. But he was family, and had been an ever-present part of my growing up in Ireland. His humor, when not directed at you, could, at times, be wonderful. He, like many of those on my mother’s side, shared a selfish streak, which, growing up in a family of thirteen children must have been something of a survival strategy. He was, in short, human. And now he was gone. His passing moved the pandemic from the abstract—something I knew was happening, that I needed to take seriously, but that I somehow couldn’t quite find believable—to something now real and personal for me.

As real as the challenges we all face are, though, many of us at least know we have sufficient funds to ride out this crisis, and excellent healthcare to at least ensure we can seek the best treatment should any of us fall prey to the virus. While it would be nice to imagine a world where everyone is in a similar, privileged, position, the reality is this isn’t the everyday world a large section of our community lives in. The 10 million-plus undocumented workers the
Brookings Institution estimates live in our society certainly don’t have sufficient funds to survive, little access to medical support, and, after years of being cynically played by politicians as an ‘issue,’ a large incentive to avoid any contact with the establishment in this country (Kamarck). Equally, the 28.5m uninsured people the US Census Bureau estimates are in this country, must face a bleak choice of going without medical care for a potentially deadly infection, or seeking treatment and risking financial ruin (Berchick). And as enormous as these numbers are, they are being added to every day as mainly low-paid workers are furloughed, the majority of whom will certainly not be able to afford to keep up their medical insurance as they join the ranks of the unemployed.

These statistics of the uninsured and the undocumented have very real implications for how we as individuals navigate this pandemic—the reality being that our actions alone will not keep us safe. No amount of social distancing or sheltering in place will provide the protection we need unless our wider community is in a position to follow the same procedures. We are connected to every person in the world, intimately interdependent on each other’s actions to help us get through this emergency. And the sad truth is that the society we’ve allowed to develop around us—tolerating millions without medical coverage, millions more without proper legal status, as a price worth paying for our shot at the American Dream—is the very type of society least equipped to successfully beat off a pandemic. As we look around the world at countries ahead of us on the infections curve who are struggling to deal with the pandemic, it’s worth pausing for a moment to recognize that the likes of Britain, Italy, Spain, and China do not face the social challenges we have here, with each country, unlike us, providing universal healthcare as a basic right.
There is no doubt we will get through this crisis. A planet that has survived two world wars, the 1918 Spanish flu, the Black Death, the Great Depression, will eventually emerge from the pall placed over it by the coronavirus. Equally, though, we need to understand how intimately connected we are to every single person on this planet, that our own survival is dependent on the behavior of brave people like Dr. Li in Wuhan, China, who risked imprisonment to get word out of the virus, and who eventually died from a coronavirus infection passed on to him by a patient. As we struggle to balance our real need to maintain our distance with our equally important need to maintain our relationships, we surely must understand that our lives are inexorably interconnected with the lives of everyone else, spanning the globe. We are truly one world.

Works Cited


Everyone who calls San Jose their home has probably been to the Santa Cruz beaches at least once. They’re painfully windy and the water will give you hypothermia if you swim too long, but it’s hard to beat an ocean so close. I was there last summer and it was in those freezing waters that I found the idea for Riptides. More than anything, it’s about the pain of staying in place, that idea of giving something your all and lacking the progress that makes it worth it. It’s about feelings of inadequacy that I think plague us all from time to time, and it’s about pushing through those feelings no matter how tough they may be. Writing it was a cathartic experience for me and gave me a chance to grapple with some of my greatest flaws. I hope that anyone who reads it can take something similar away.

Riptides
-Jack Murray-

Last summer I went to Santa Cruz with some friends of mine. They’re all swimmers and love the ocean, and while I’m not inclined to water, I still went in after some teasing. After the initial system-shock of the freezing waters it was fun. We tossed a beach ball back and forth and dove beneath the crashing waves. With each surge however, unbeknownst to me, we were slowly drifting away from the shore. After half an hour we were already thirty yards out. I noticed something was off when I could no longer feel the sand beneath my feet, and so I turned to head back to the shore. I ducked my head and swam, rowing my arms and breathing in between strokes, until I thought I was over the shallows again. When I tried to plant my feet however, I only struck water. I was caught in a riptide. As I began to panic, I pushed harder and harder, wearing myself out with each kick. Inch by inch I moved closer struggling to keep my head above the waves, until finally, gasping for breath, I planted my feet into the welcoming sand.

The worst part of the whole experience wasn’t even the threat of being too weak to swim back. It was not being able to move forwards. It was the feeling of putting every ounce of effort I could muster into something only to stay in place. It’s a bit of a fear of mine and I feel it frequently in day-to-day life as well. I’ve been trying to improve my skills for my entire life, and there’s not a day where it doesn’t feel like I’m swimming against the current. Each minor bit of
progress is met with an immense feeling of hopelessness as I realize more acutely just how far from the shore I truly am.

Part of that feeling comes from comparison to others. When I first began learning music, I found enormous progress. I practiced every day and I could almost feel myself improving. My hands became less awkward and more dexterous, my mind became quicker, and before I knew it, I was willing to call myself a decent musician. With my improvement came an interest in listening to other great musicians and that lead me to artists like Steve Vai and Jimi Hendrix. Their sounds blew me away not only from a technical level, but from a sort of sheer emotion and energy that they conveyed through their music. After I got over the sense of awe however I found myself feeling incomplete. Their songs had showed me what was possible with music and it made me realize that I wasn’t actually a good musician, I had just made a few steps on a journey of a million miles.

Perhaps worse than the comparison to others is the comparison to myself. Not with music necessarily, but with other aspects in which I strive to be better. School is probably the best example. There’s been a lot of times, especially late in high school, when I just hadn’t given my all to my work. I’d gotten caught up watching Netflix or playing video games, and I’d neglect to do work on time or I’d forget a minor part of an assignment. The prior year I had been a model student, always giving it my all and never procrastinating, and seeing myself fall from grace was disheartening. It was hard to be content with my current situation when I had proof that I could be better in the form of my past. This sort of ‘glory days’ mindset is often seen in people who felt they had a purpose when they served in the military but lack one on the outside. Often times they “longed for who they’d been back then” since, by comparison, their current state seems meaningless (Junger 67).
Part of the reason I feel it is so important to be competent in today’s world is due to the competitive nature of modern society. All my life I’ve been told that I need to perform to the best of my potential; anything less than that was simply wasted time. I thought that if I didn't get As in school I wouldn’t get into a good college or that if I didn’t play my best I wouldn’t make any friends. Nothing is fundamentally true about those ideas, but the overwhelming impression I got from society to perform transformed them from good advice to rules. I grew to worry about every single assignment and detail, convinced that because I wouldn’t be as impressive as the next person, I would be doomed to a life of mediocrity. This seems to be a common problem in society these days. The tension between students in high school, especially as we approached the deadlines for college applications, was palpable. Everybody was willing to sacrifice their own sense of wellbeing just to seem more competent externally.

In college it's been different. While I am still nervous about transferring, the concept of succeeding seems much more manageable since I can optimize my schedule to my liking. As a result, despite the increased workload, I have paradoxically been more comfortable. This relief can often be something that people cherish. Win Stracke, an ex-artillery gunner, remembered his service fondly, saying, “You had fifteen guys who for the first time in their lives were not living in a competitive society… I liked that feeling very much” (Junger 92). The feeling of cooperating towards a goal instead of competing takes the weight of needing to be competent off of our shoulders. It essentially makes it so we are inspired to be competent for the good of all, not simply to thrust ourselves ahead of everyone else.

Then there’s the need for validation. Part of the reason I started trying to learn music was simply to have something to do that I could call my own. I spent several years without any ambition. I had no interests outside of xbox, and I had no desire to do anything differently. I
threw away months of my life to virtual worlds and neglected my responsibilities and relationships. Eventually I realized that I could spend my days doing nothing of value, but if I did then I wouldn’t have anything that made me who I am. I would just be another boring person living in the background of everyone else’s lives. I didn’t want to live like that, so I took action.

Part of it was proving to myself that I was capable of doing something productive without being forced, but a much larger part was that I wanted to prove to society that I wasn’t simply a waste of space. In a sense, it was a way to validate myself to the world. Most people struggle with this through their adolescence. As we grow up we feel a need to develop a place in society and prove that we belong. Men especially “do their best to demonstrate their readiness for manhood in all kinds of clumsy ways,” and one of the ways in which we are able to do this is through competency (Junger 37). If someone is able to show that they are skilled at something, that validates them in the eyes of society and instantly gives them a place. If not, they’ll often feel as if they cannot find a foothold in a world that increasingly blurs what it means to be useful.

For me, the need to feel competent is pervasive. It infiltrates my thoughts almost every day and it takes me right back to the Santa Cruz currents. No matter how much I improve at anything, when I start comparing myself to others, I can’t help but feel less talented, less competitive, and less worthy of a place in society. I swim as hard as I can only to be swept back to where I began. But that doesn’t mean it’s better to give up. It might seem more comfortable, but letting the riptide take me away would just leave me in a worse place than where I started. I need to keep struggling forwards, no matter how hard. No matter how uncomfortable or how painful it may be, it’s still the only way to reach the shore.

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TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

BEST ESSAYS
When I was 13, my fondest dreams were that of the apocalypse. The apocalypse, where we would all get to wear cool bandanas and masks, shoot slingshots, drive abandoned cars—you know what I’m talking about. There was something enormously intoxicating about the idea of fighting alongside my band of fellow outcasts, living in a world where the only goal is survival. Yet those wondrous dreams often left me sleepless for weeks—I would awaken with an ache in my heart so strong that I would write countless stories and poems about the battles I never fought, and I’d catch myself mourning the people I’d never truly known. I had anything I needed and everything I ever could have wanted, so why would I so deeply miss a world in which I was destitute and I lost those I loved? According to Junger, it’s because suffering is something that humans secretly crave; if you ask me, however, I’d just tell you that I didn’t know any better. I was a child like any other, longing to have and know my place in the world. How privileged was I to dream about the end of times from within the walls of my warm bedroom, only to turn my nose at a too-bruised apple the next day? I had yet to understand that a lot of what I was rejecting about society was not society itself, rather the way it made me feel.

This essay is a vitriolic response to the idiosyncrasies of Sebastian Junger—that is, his enraging habit of acting like a 13-year old who wants the world to end so that they can feel important—and all those like him. My goal throughout this paper was to outline how one’s upbringing can drastically affect the way they view even the most basic of concepts, like the value of human life, and what it means to truly suffer. I also wanted to convey the importance of connection, and how connection is what truly inspires a community. I’m now 24, and by all means a productive and grateful member of society, but I won’t lie and tell you that I no longer dream of slingshots and a ragtag gang of misfits (I’ve been wearing a cool face mask for a while, oddly enough). I simply know now that I have no right to decide what happens to others’ rights, lives, and futures. I believe that the path forward is, in fact, forward. We find our misfits along the way. Thank you, Chrissy, for believing in me!! I’m really sorry I forgot to delete the swear word before submitting!!!
“Modern society has perfected the art of making people not feel necessary” (xvii) according to Junger, implying that as automation takes over the roles previously held by humans, people are cast aside with no direction. A feeling of worthlessness and purposelessness has resulted in a high percentage of Americans suffering from mental illness, and the suicide rate increased 30% in 16 years (Hedegaard et al.). Throughout Tribe, Junger urges society to step back from greed-driven, selfish individualism and consider our long-forgotten tribalistic lives. Without anything threatening our survival, what do we live for? A divide has grown, Junger emphasizes, as we evolve further from the tribes that we originated from; when we once relied on one another to survive, we now are capable of thriving without any direct support from others. Close contact and close quarters are no longer essential for survival, and humanity is, according to Junger, more isolated than ever. In modern society the sense of unity, interdependence, and community known to our ancestors has been lost to materialism, wealth, and selfishness. The real reason that citizens of “fully developed” countries are so unhappy, as he implies, is because we have strayed away from our selfless, primal beginnings. Were we to focus on our instinctual, primitive methods of survival as well as abandon our modern wants of beauty, fame, and other materialistic values, then, Junger imagines, we could collectively step out of isolation and back into what matters most: community.

Junger shares a longing that many Americans experience—a need for purpose, connection to one another; a desire to have value, and to be valued. Growing up, he coveted an experience that would change his community and force them to rely on one another for survival. As a young man, Junger asked himself, “How do you become an adult in a society that doesn’t ask for sacrifice? How do you become a man in a world that doesn’t require courage?” (xiv). In an effort to answer that question, Junger set off to Bosnia as a war reporter, which granted him a
unique first-hand experience; after all, he wasn’t obligated to fulfill military duties, only to observe the aftermath of war and interview those who lived through it. We’ve all heard the tales of how materialism is a temporary solution to unhappiness; greed is destroying our economy; and that selfishness will ultimately be humanity’s downfall, but Tribe offers an explanation that goes far deeper than what we’ve already been told. Junger’s research into the aftermath of great human tragedies is more soul rather than analytical—or at least more anthropological than psychological—imploring us to consider whether contentment is more black and white than we previously thought. Could selfishness be the effect rather than the cause? Junger observed and interviewed several survivors who all felt the same way—they felt more connected in their fight for survival than they did during their pre-war lives. So, what’s the difference? Why were these survivors feeling more connected during trauma than at any other point? Junger offers a compelling argument—we’ve evolved a little too far for our own good, and now we’ve lost sight of brotherhood in favor of selfish behaviors that, in our tribalistic days, would have been punishable by death.

It is abundantly clear Junger believes that societal collapse is, in more ways than one, a good thing. He considers all forms of disaster, war, desperation; yet he rarely recognizes the existence or possibility of peace, or the positive impact it may have. Junger lacks real personal experience. He himself states that his privileged and sheltered upbringing led him to actively seek out danger, which shows his tendency to glorify trauma in the name of “solidarity” (Junger xiv). He was not thrust unwillingly into peril due to circumstances beyond his control, nor did he volunteer to be the “sacrifice” he hoped that his community would ask for (Junger xiv). Junger is a journalist who routinely speaks to and romanticizes a past he didn’t live in and communities he doesn’t belong to. This effectively silences and ignores those who are unlike him; women are
only mentioned when speaking of the necessity behind gender roles; not a single word is said about one of the most collectively traumatic things that occurred in American society—slavery; he turns a blind eye to the absolute terror and carnage that rained down upon the Middle East during the very wars he speaks so grandly about. This is a recurring habit of Junger’s—be it due to an unsettling ignorance, or because he doesn’t find morality to be something worth mentioning—to overlook the horrors and devastation caused by war, poverty, and disaster. Obsessed with our “evolutionary past”, he thanks misfortune for bringing humans back to more primitive times, wherein “everyone is equal” (Junger 43). Junger’s view is so limited because those in his demographic (white, affluent, men) are the most fortunate—how else could one believe that society is at its greatest when they are fueled by fear and at its most desperate? Junger shares the longing for solidarity and community that many Americans experience—what is questionable, however, is whether those outside of his demographic are also willing to march through a war-torn graveyard to get there.

Junger’s lust for a glimpse into human trauma is undoubtedly influenced by his comfortable upbringing in Belmont, Massachusetts—a town whose demographic is predominantly white with a median household income nearly double the national average (U.S. Census Bureau). With a Bachelor’s degree in cultural anthropology—from the prestigious Wesleyan University—he is well-educated, but his overly sheltered suburban background reveals itself in his fixation on risk-taking and life-threatening situations, otherwise known as “sensation seeking”. As a war reporter Junger indeed experienced life-or-death scenarios, but even when describing his time in war zones he admits he “rarely lacked a quick way out” (Wood), of course referring to his ability to return home at short notice, unlike those around him. The victims of perpetual war zones, you see, don’t have the same safety nets or support that Junger has been
blessed with since birth; it is their homes, their families, and their lives that are upended by the 
very chaos that Junger suggests is a solution to American isolation. Catastrophes, Junger insists, 
create a “social bond that many people sorely miss” (66). Trauma, apparently, strips us of our 
ego and self-serving outlook in favor of a tribe-oriented, selfless lifestyle more akin to our early 
ancestors, whom he lovingly refers to as a “community of sufferers” (Junger 55). This is coming 
from a man whose entire career is examining suffering victims in their bullet-riddled shelters 
only to return, briefly humbled, back home to his millionaire lifestyle.

Some may truly believe that disaster leads to the dismantling of social classes and the 
abandonment of gender and racial discrimination—and they are correct! Tsunamis, earthquakes, 
hurricanes, and other Earthly displays of disaffection care not of our man-made prejudices; in 
other words, the planet will kill whoever, and whatever, whenever it sees fit. The survivors, 
however, will not release their bigotry so quickly—it is, after all, how certain people stay in 
power. When the world ends, for example, those who’ve invested in a bunker below sea-level 
will be far better off than those living paycheck to paycheck. People don’t suddenly care for one 
another solely because they are forced to, they must be taught. A critical example of what 
appears to be an unforgettable selfishness among the American people is the response to a 
modern global health crisis. In December of 2019, China reported the first cases of what later 
became a global pandemic known as Coronavirus, or COVID-19, and within a matter of weeks 
thousands were infected, and hundreds were dead. Upon COVID-19 taking its first life on U.S 
soil in late February 2020, the public became massively divided, with some pleading for fellow 
citizens to learn how to wash their hands, and the others dismissing it as a political hoax 
(Franck). More disturbing, however, was the mass hoarding of disinfectants, essential goods such 
as food and toiletries, and medical supplies by citizens. One might say, “Well, people have the
right to prepare themselves!” Of course, but it’s not just their health that these people are preparing for—it’s profit. On March 1st, the day after the first death, brothers Matt and Noah Colvin set off on a three-day trip throughout Tennessee and Kentucky, spending thousands on respirator masks, hand sanitizer (17,700 bottles, to be exact), sanitizing wipes—on and on, aiming to clear the shelves of every store they entered (Nicas). The goal? Exploitation of desperate, at-risk individuals, and the Colvins were not the only perpetrators. People who were surrounded by empty shelves turned to Amazon and Ebay, only to be met with price-gouging so extreme that Amazon later removed well over half-a-million products from its site, and suspended 3,900 sellers (Amazon). Junger maintains that “class differences are temporarily erased, income disparities become irrelevant, race is overlooked….” when humanity is confronted with a threat to its survival, but this just isn’t true (54). In fact, Americans are using the origins of COVID-19 as an excuse to hurl verbal abuse, racial slurs, and physically assault Asian-Americans. For instance, in California, a 16-year old boy received a vicious beating after classmates at school accused him of having COVID-19, landing him in the emergency room. Does this sound at all like the selfless, great community that Junger promised with societal collapse?

The thing that Junger fails to understand is what truly inspires and forms a community. While he may believe that communal hardship and suffering creates the strongest bond, it’s actually not that serious. Many tribe-like groups come together just for the hell of it. Thursday night bar crawls, book clubs, and who could forget the often shamed, yet fully passion-driven players of Dungeons and Dragons? Ethan Gilsdorf, who started playing Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) as a young child, fondly remembers what he’s learned from his community, “Celebrate your differences; it’s OK to rely on each other; I’ve got your back” (Gilsdorf). D&D’s only
requirement for a game—a community—an escape—an adventure—is a twenty-sided die, perhaps a scrap of paper, and most importantly of all: your imagination. There’s no need or mention of trauma, war, or loss of life; there is nothing bringing these people together other than passion. Junger believes that humanity is so out of balance because we have neglected to listen to our primal brains crying out, “There’s no reason to live if there is nothing coming to kill us!” Yet it appears to be that humans connect more, and more often, through their passionate hearts rather than their primitive minds—is that really so surprising? A seat at a knight’s round table, a mutual love of Dean Koontz novels, a temporary connection with a stranger at a bar that you’ll think about for years to come; that’s what makes us feel at one with the consciousness that evolution gifted us with. Junger might be right in that humanity will need to unite to survive if we hope to preserve our species, but shouldn’t we embrace the communities that we have now?

We have more to offer than disaster-relief or the outlaw of exploitation. Junger even says himself, “As soon as relief flights began delivering aid [...] class divisions returned and the sense of brotherhood disappeared” (55). When we define a community, or a “tribe” by what they are capable of in times of disaster; catastrophe; and war, the distance returns when we thrive. We enable ourselves to be the judge of when it’s time to step up, or who is worthy of assistance. For example, depression is an extremely common mental illness that people either don’t understand, or choose to ignore until it results in a tragedy—suicide. Suicide is not, of course, a guaranteed outcome for those afflicted; however, how many times have we witnessed the mass mourning of victims of depression? How many times have we seen people online writing, “I’m sorry we lost touch, you’ll always be my best friend” about a loved one after their lives were ended? While some might think that this proves Junger’s point correct—that we need to lose something in order to come together—it’s the exact opposite. We need to come together to prevent loss.
Junger believes that we thrive on hardship, but what good is hardship if it’s all you’ve ever known?

It makes far more sense to build pillars of support *into* our community than it is to wait for society to crumble so that we may fix the foundation. A community is far more than mutual suffering, it’s mutual success. One does not necessitate the other. Millions of communities, both big and small, invest in scholarships to send disadvantaged youth to school; begin large gardens to share healthy food and feed the hungry; foster children; volunteer at shelters; provide no- or low-income therapies and support groups; the list goes on. It’s so easy to see all of the selfishness and greed in the world and think, “Oh, the humanity! When will we ever learn?” and that *is* a valid concern, in a way, but it’s not as black-or-white as you might think. Dismissing the kindness, community, and efforts made in the world because its motive isn’t sacrificial—or not enough so—is perhaps the worst that we can do to one another. People don’t kill themselves because modern society has told them that they have no value, they kill themselves because *they feel* they have no value. Instead of worth being inherent, we are measuring value in what someone has to bring to the table. The more dismissive we are of the subjectively “little” things that bind us together, that connect us to the pull and passion in our hearts, the sadder this world *will* truly be. People don’t need, nor do they *want*, to be placed in life-or-death situations to come together, or to care for one another—they wish only to be given the time and space to do so. We must make space for temporary connections; weekly book clubs; heroism in an imagined world; and trivia nights. We must make time for tending gardens; volunteering; founding support groups; and having potlucks. Consciousness and connection may be two of the strongest pillars in a community, but in the end what really matters is that it works—it protects everyone—and its members feel valued.
So, are communities forged in fear? Absolutely. Are communities forged in passion? Absolutely. Are communities forged in—? Yes. Community is not only a place, it’s a feeling; hardship is a constant, not a tool. Despite his playdate in Bosnia, Junger’s ideals are an immoral fantasy influenced by a privileged upbringing. It’s clear that Junger is willing to risk a security he has never been forced to go without. In the end, the motivation behind all communities, both life-saving and passion-fueled, is a positive one—we just want to connect with one another. If our tribalistic nature was integral to our survival, wouldn’t we have retained it throughout evolution? There’s a reason that we left our primate ancestors behind, and it’s because the consciousness that we share has made it possible to enjoy our lives and not just survive. We should be uplifting the communities that we have, not comparing them to something that hasn’t existed in two million fucking years.

Works Cited


Essay writing has always been a challenging task for me. I usually find it difficult to focus my ideas and portray my thoughts clearly in my writing -- but this assignment was different. I found myself pouring my thoughts and experiences into my work and felt like I was finally able to bring this issue of school dress codes to light by addressing the topic that has relentlessly prodded my mind for years now. Through researching this, I found myself connecting my past experiences of being targeted through my schools’ dress codes with the similarly infuriating stories from other women and girls who had experienced the same kind of hounding from their school administrations too. I am extremely proud of the work I put into creating this essay, and I am honored to have been chosen to contribute to this anthology.

Sexualizing Young Girls Through School Dress Codes

-Kathryn Krull-

It was infuriating and humiliating. Being called out in front of the class for a shirt that was ‘too booby’ was a kind of discrimination I never wanted to experience -- especially in front of all my peers. Even though I always dressed modestly for school, it happened anyways. Dress codes are present in 55% of U.S. public high schools and each prohibit around 32 items (Thomas 2019). These rules are usually put in place for a variety of reasons like protecting students from gang association/violence, but they are mainly used to prevent the distraction of other students so that their learning will not be disrupted by their peers that choose to dress inappropriately. However, this not only makes it difficult for students to find clothing that aligns with their school’s dress code, but it also fosters a learning environment where students fear getting in trouble at school for what they have decided to wear that day. While some dress codes have been revised to be more lenient and gender neutral, many current school dress codes need to be amended because they hypersexualize young girls, disproportionately target and place blame on female students, and perpetuate rape culture on and off school grounds.

There are usually three main reasons why a dress code is put in place at schools: to have students dress for success, to protect female students from comments and actions made by boys, and to prevent distractions from occurring in a learning environment. Many supporters of a dress
code argue that it is a way to “prepare students for future workplaces where they would face similar expectations or have to follow clothing policies regardless of their personal preferences” and that it separates the “educational environment from other less professional or less respectable activities” (Neville 2019). While this is definitely a valid argument, there is a clear distinction between regulating dress for a more professional/academic environment and dictating how clothing should fit down to the “finger-width” in order to keep shoulders and bra straps covered in an effort to prevent children from being too promiscuous. The second main reason schools have dress codes surrounds the idea that by enforcing that students dress modestly, schools will be able to protect female students from ridicule, harassment, and assault by their male peers. The issue with this kind of reasoning is that the blame is being placed on the dresser who is “simultaneously portrayed as the victim and the instigating party” instead of holding boys accountable for their actions (Neville 2019). Lastly and most commonly, 76% of dress codes are put in place to prevent the distraction of male classmates and more disturbingly, sometimes even adult men (Thomas 2019). Disciplinary actions for breaking the dress code vary but usually involve removing students from class, asking them to change, and/or even suspending them (Jones 2020). Ironically, the punishment for breaking these rules is to disrupt that student’s learning by removing them from class in order to protect the learning environment of others. Because girls are disproportionately targeted, schools that enforce these policies show that they value the quality of their male students’ education over that of their female students’.

Like Amber Thomas and Dana Schwartz, “my earliest memories of feeling sexualized came from the adults who were enforcing my school’s dress code” (Thomas 2019). The first time I was ever dress coded was when I was in the 4th grade at Lietz Elementary School and only nine years old. Over the summer my mom bought me a beautiful rainbow-colored heart-shaped
tie-dye tank top to keep cool and I really wanted to wear it to school on a particularly hot day. She warned me that it was against the rules because it had skinny straps, but she let me wear it anyways because she and I both thought it was appropriate. Once at school and running around outside during recess, I was stopped by one of the staff members on yard duty who told me that I was never allowed to wear that shirt to school again because the straps showed “too much skin” so it was “too inappropriate for school”. The only skin showing on my upper body was on my arms, shoulders, and upper chest right around my collarbones. I was completely flat chested at the time and didn’t need bras yet, so this disciplinary action wasn’t an issue of showing any undergarments either. To say the least, I was mortified and disheartened that I was called out for being inappropriate with the way I chose to present myself that day even though it was never my intention to do so. Looking back on that day, that was the first time I ever felt ashamed of my body and the clothes I wore. This problem continued into my time at Dartmouth Middle School when administrators began to crack down on strap-widths and shorts’ lengths. Being the tallest girl in my school, there weren’t any shorts available for me to buy that actually fit me and reached down past my fingertips because my legs were so long. I remember feeling panicked and dreaded going to school each day knowing I would risk being punished for the clothing I wore. I ended up wearing flowy knee-length skirts the rest of the school year to avoid this, but even then, staff still made comments that my skirt “clung to my body” or that my scooped shirt neckline “dipped too low”. When I started going to Branham High School, I was dress coded during my freshman year for wearing spaghetti straps. The dean had pulled me aside between classes to give me a verbal warning about my inappropriate clothing and to remind me of the dress code rules. While talking to me in the hallway, a boy in my grade came up to ask the dean a question. On his shirt was a picture of a completely naked woman sitting on a bar stool with her legs
spread open. In one hand was a bottle of beer and in the other a lit cigarette. The dean answered his question and never blinked an eye at his clearly inappropriate and pornographic shirt. As he walked away, I immediately asked the dean: “Why didn’t you dress code him?! Didn’t you see his shirt?!”. She replied with: “This isn’t about him, this is about you.” and pointed her finger at my chest while completely dismissing my comment. After moving my junior year and now attending Leland High School, I was dress coded yet again by one of my male teachers during class for wearing a fitted tank top with skinny straps. In front of everyone, he said: “Hey Katie, I need to remind you of the dress code rules. You’re just a little uh--” and proceed to cup his hands at his chest and jiggle them to signify my own breasts. I was disgusted and angry that someone old enough to be my own father had noticed my rather small breasts in that way and that he had chosen to handle the situation so poorly. For the next two years I spent at Leland, I always felt subconscious about my body when entering his classroom and couldn’t help but wonder if he was noticing me in that way again. However, I am not the only girl to feel targeted and sexualized by her school. Like me, Dana Shwartz was made to feel embarrassed and sexualized in 5th grade when her shorts were too short (Thomas 2019), and in April 2017 at Braden River High School, 17-year-old Lizzy Martinez chose not to wear a bra under her loose-fitting t-shirt that day because of a painful sunburn. When Martinez was reported by a teacher for her “lack of undergarment”, she was asked by administrators to wear another shirt under her own. To test the effectiveness of this remedy, she was asked to “move around to see if her breasts moved” and was then provided with four Band-Aids to “x-out her nipples” when it was deemed insufficient (Neville 2019). Needless to say, dress codes fail to protect female students and only add fuel to fire that is sexual harassment. By aiming to protect young women from sexual harassment by their male peers at school through the use of dress codes, administrators are choosing to blame
victims and make them out to be the offenders instead of addressing the root source of the problem: the aggressors. In doing so, schools are choosing to place burden on the victim to prevent their own assaults and thus perpetuate rape culture.

A rape culture is one in which sexual violence is normalized and trivialized through preconceived behavior and beliefs. These beliefs “encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women” (Rape Culture 2004) -- even if indirectly. Rape and sexual assault are often seen as inevitable because of the belief that “sexual aggression in men is biologically-determined” rather than learned, and that the rapist’s actions are thought to be out of his own control because he “just couldn’t help himself” (Rape Culture 2004). Although our society does not outright support sexual violence against women, we are all conditioned at a young age to diminish the severity of these events through the media that is shown to us, the stories of injustice told of those before us, and the kinds of actions and behavior that are permitted to occur between young men and women in social settings like a school campus. In a rape culture, women and men are socialized into believing that men are “natural sexual aggressors” and that it is the woman’s responsibility to “take precautions against being attacked” (Rape Culture 2004). We see this kind of mentality extended into the establishment and enforcement of many dress codes nationwide. By requiring that female students dress modestly to prevent the distraction of their male peers, schools are perpetuating this notion that boys can’t help themselves and that it is a girl’s responsibility to dress appropriately in order to avoid the goggling stares and inappropriate harassment that boys are allowed to enact. Furthermore, if a girl is sexually harassed at school, she is usually blamed for not taking the correct steps to prevent it rather than the school’s administration choosing to blame the real offenders for their own actions instead. This mentality is often seen in a rape culture that “blames the assault on the
actions of the victim (such as her walking alone, drinking alcohol, or being in a date’s apartment), rather than questioning the behavior of the rapist” (Rape Culture 2004) and “it sends the message to boys that it's all girls' fault” (Sunseri 2015). By allowing these situations to exist in schools, administrations are also allowing assaults to happen off campus and throughout life by teaching our young people that sexual aggression is permitted and excused by our society.

Dress codes send complex and underlying messages to all students that “girls are responsible for the way that others see them” and that “boys are not in control of their own actions and that others’ bodies are theirs to judge” (Thomas 2019). Furthermore, Amber Thomas infers: “If these are the lessons that students learn at an early age, it’s not a far leap to see why victims of sexual assault are often asked “what were you wearing?” as if their clothing choices excuse the violence they endured” (Thomas 2019). Both of our local middle schools, Dartmouth and Union explicitly list that “student clothing must not disrupt the education of any student” (Dartmouth 2019) and it should not be “distracting, disruptive or unsafe” (Union 2019). Additionally, Union adds that the hemline of clothing on the bottom half “should be no shorter than midthigh and worn in good taste” (Union 2019). A dress code like this that is specific yet vague at the same time allows for subjective disciplinary actions to take place even if not explicitly stated in the dress code. Clauses like this give the school more power to regulate student clothing, thus making it increasingly difficult for students to avoid breaking the rules. Dartmouth and Union along with 71% of public schools in the U.S. also prohibit any clothing that exposes the midriff, which is interesting since your front between the chest and waist is not an inherently “sexy” part of the body, yet it is now increasingly becoming so (Thomas 2019). In a study of clothes available in online ‘tween’ stores, it was revealed that a whopping 41% of the clothing for sale for girls were considered sexualized according to school rules and would not
meet the requirements of the dress code (Thomas 2019). This means that it has become exceptionally challenging for girls to find ‘school appropriate’ clothes when shopping in the ‘girls’ section. For a girl like me who was already an above average adult height by the time I was only twelve years old, it was near impossible to find shorts and dresses that reached past my fingertips according to the dress code that was in place while I was attending Dartmouth Middle School. Even when trying on the shorts that were long enough for other girls, they were nowhere near close to the ends of my fingers even though they fit everywhere else and appropriately covered my body. At another local school, Leland High School, their dress code explicitly states: “School-directed changes to a student’s attire or grooming should be the least restrictive and disruptive to the student’s school day. Any school dress code enforcement actions should minimize the potential loss of educational time. Administration and enforcement of the dress code will be gender neutral and consistent” (SJUSD 2019). While this is an excellent addition to the dress code that protects students from losing class time and also protects the school from a gender discrimination lawsuit, words like these don’t matter unless they are enforced -- which they clearly were not when I was a student there from 2016-2018. Female students were disproportionately targeted as offenders over boys, even though most of the students there would agree that both male and female students equally broke the written dress code. Additionally, while I was never asked to leave the class, I have seen others asked to leave and change during class time. Unlike Leland, Pioneer High School’s dress code states: “A student may not remain in the classroom when not dressed according to the school dress code” (Pioneer 2019). This strict enforcement of the dress code teaches students that if they don’t meet the requirements with their clothing choices that they won’t be allowed to participate in class time and learn vital material. In schools like Pioneer where there are such extreme punishments based on the way you dress,
students end up spending a lot of time focusing on how they look so that they don’t risk breaking the rules and being punished. Because of this, studies have shown that “when people are consciously thinking about their appearance, they perform worse on various cognitive tasks like math tests and are more likely to experience eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression” (Thomas 2019). Ironically, by enforcing this intolerant policy in order to reduce distractions, Pioneer is in fact worsening school performance by increasing distractions that students face during the school day by forcing them to fixate on their appearance while at school. Dress codes are even used for younger children at schools like Lietz Elementary and Guadalupe Elementary. Lietz aims to “eliminate any unnecessary distractions from the academic program” by banning “short shorts or skirts” (Lietz 2019) and Guadalupe bans “spaghetti straps, backless tops, and dresses” in order to eliminate “distraction from learning”. It is disturbingly revolting that administrations that supervise children ages 5 to 11 years old are sexualizing these young kids by instilling the idea that other students and adult staff would be attracted to and distracted by girls wearing spaghetti straps or dresses. Furthermore, by implementing dress codes that ban these articles of clothing, “students receive the message that those body parts are bad, should be hidden, or are important to others” (Thomas 2019) from a very young age.

It has become clear that dress codes are in need of a remedy. NOW, the National Organization for Women in Oregon released a model student dress code with a set of values and basic rules in 2016 as an example of the kinds of dress codes that should be implemented in schools across America. They hold the values that “all students should be able to dress comfortably for school without fear of or actual unnecessary discipline or body shaming” and that teachers should be able to “focus on teaching without the additional and often uncomfortable burden of dress code enforcement” (Oregon 2016). They advise that a model dress code should
require students to wear a shirt, shoes, and a bottom (or dress); require coverage of the “genitals, buttocks, and nipples”; and ban any clothing with violent images, drugs, pornography, hate speech, profanity, or that shows visible underwear (Oregon 2016). Part of their model also aims to train educators how to properly enforce a dress code without discrimination, and also advises that dress codes for elementary school should be limited to safety, non-violence, and “should not include messages predicated on body maturity or ‘professionalism’”. A dress code like this would protect students and teachers, promote a healthy learning environment, and most importantly prevent the sexualization and harassment of young girls.

In order to prevent the sexualization of young girls, lessen the effects of rape culture on school campuses, and stop the discrimination that female students face as a result of unfairly instated and enforced school dress codes, it is essential that these sets of rules be reformed. While many argue that dress codes prevent distractions from a child’s education, many studies have found that dress codes actually do the opposite by diminishing a student’s learning and test-taking ability because of how hyper aware they become of their body and others’. By replacing schools’ dress codes all across the U.S. with guidelines similar to what the National Organization of Women has proposed, schools can enact real change and improve all students’ education experiences.

Works Cited


Hello, my name is Pebbles and I’m a second-year student at West Valley. “Supernatural Coping Mechanisms” was written for my English 1A class with Nils Michals. It was inspired by my modern fascination for the realm of astrology and tarot cards. In awe, I wrote this essay while allured by society’s growing obsession of valuing intangible labels as an excuse for tangible scenarios (i.e. being a Scorpio altering the way I approach a situation thus resulting in x,y,z). I was nervous turning in this writing because I felt it poked at an existential crisis topic that many try to avoid. However, this essay sparked an internal flame within my bones that helped me grow confident with my writing. I was able to experiment, expand, and dabble into a less confined and formal writing style, but rather a blunt, realistic, and heartfelt exhale. I’m finally beginning to reach a point where I feel my words can come across from my mind and heart.

This essay opened my eyes to the fact that I am the one in control of my own life, and if I wanted change, I am the only one who is responsible and can initiate it. I was able to reflect on my own actions and reconsider how I approach different decisions or changes in my life—an epiphany and inspiration I hope is carried through to the reader.

Supernatural Coping Mechanisms
-Pebbles Moomau-

A few months ago, one of my old classmates that I never talked to in high school messaged me over Twitter and simply asked me, “What's your birth chart?” Supposedly a birth chart is a chart stating how the Sun, Moon, and planets in the solar system are symbolic to you on the basis of when and where you were born because of their positioning. The placement of one planet will impact your love life, while the placement of another could alter your financial prosperity. I sent her a screenshot of mine that I found on a random horoscope app and she responded word for word with: “Omg wow, this is so fascinating” and “It makes so much sense”. I was staring at my phone screen completely perplexed. What do you mean it makes sense? What makes sense? What was she seeing that I wasn’t? I’m only recently beginning to find security in
who I am as a person and feel I’m only now on the cusp of upward growth. Yet this stranger could come to terms with who I was as a person before I could?

Astrology is defined as “the divination of the supposed influences of the stars and planets on human affairs and terrestrial events by their positions and aspects” by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Simply, it’s the belief that celestial bodies are significant to the motions and fortune-telling of our lives. There’s no doubt, though, that ancestors from thousands of years ago were also contemplating the universe and their lives as beings. In his novel, A History of Western Astrology, Jim Tester explains that “the first mention of twelve equal signs, as opposed to the constellations (of unequal extent in the heavens), was in 419 B.C.” (Tester 14). According to modern Western astrology, the 12 astrological signs (Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius, and Pisces) which were determined from constellations, make up distinct personality traits. For example, Libras are known to be hesitant and bad at commitment, while Cancers are stereotyped as moody and emotional. The characteristics are broad and vague, but that’s what makes them so intriguing. Humans are so focused on being able to fit themselves into a group. They are even more intrigued if they’re able to fit themselves into an imaginary box that won’t realistically inflict damage onto their present and physical world.
Astrology is referred to as a pseudoscience, which is defined as “a system of theories, assumptions, and methods erroneously regarded as scientific." Even if it isn’t genuine and reliable science, that doesn’t stop people from referring to it. In Charles Clark’s work, *Pursuing the Paranormal*, he brings up, “One reason that many people reject science, writes mathematician John Allen Paulos, is that ‘New Age’ beliefs in astrology, biorhythms or Tarot cards comfort them by offering ‘personally customized pronouncements.’ Such people shy away from cold and impersonal scientific questions - How long? How fast? Which is more likely?” (Clark 10). Astrology answers questions that real science can’t. It doesn’t mean it answers the questions factually or realistically, but just gives an answer. Science can tell you how things in the physical universe work. Scientists get frustrated that people turn to pseudoscience, but can you blame them? People are seeking affirmations. If someone is going through a hard time in
their life, saying that Mercury is in retrograde so things will get better soon is a lot more reassuring than, say, the chemical makeup of our galaxy.

The popularity of religion with millennials is massively decreasing. Pew Research Center found that a predominant number of millennials are “religious nones,” i.e. atheists, agnostics, those whose religion is nothing. More and more, millennials are rejecting religion (Pew Research Center). People aren’t getting the same cosmic experience of religion like they used to. Religion is the same as astrology in the sense that it’s a coping mechanism. It’s faltering because its explanations and purposes are not as necessary anymore. I don’t think people are as concerned to know about morality from a book written by dead people, but rather more focused on themselves. Will I be okay? How is my future? The Los Angeles Times writes, “...millennial nones are not abandoning organized religion to become secular, science-loving humanists. Rather, they are turning toward more individual forms of spiritualism, including yoga, meditation, healing stones, Wiccan spell casting, and astrology” (Asma 3). People are finding other methods to find solace besides religion. Notably, more individually. As a society, we don’t really need religion as a survival tool that, in the past, it was. Thus, we find another tool to cope. Christine Smallwood from The New Yorker expands, “The popularity of astrology is often explained as the result of the decline of organized religion and the rise of economic precariousness...Then, there’s the matter of political panic. In times of crisis, it is often said, people search for something to believe in” (Smallwood par. 7). Astrology is becoming so prevalent because pseudosciences give people hope. If astrology can reassure people there’s security in their future, they’ll take it. Similarly, in Carl Sagan’s article, “Does Truth Matter? Science, Pseudoscience, and Civilization”, he explains, “Pseudoscience is easier to contrive
than science because distracting confrontations with reality - where we cannot control the outcome of the comparison - are more readily avoided” (Sagan 3).

I don’t believe that astrology is a reliable source of fortune-telling, but I noticed that I would ironically and jokingly mention it in my day to day life. Yet, taking a step back further, I realize that I allowed it to subconsciously take control of my own free will. The concept that the time you were born, one of the factors you ultimately had no control of, can dictate the type of person you are and are bound to be is compelling. Since I was born at this time, and not that one, and in this month rather than that one, because of the stars and the planets it translates to me having this type of personality, and not that one. This is why I am me, why I think what I think, act how I act, say what I say. It sounds utmost foolish, but I still seem to catch myself falling into it.

From personal experience, I felt like it was all starting to make more and more sense. I was a teenager who felt like I was constantly running in circles. I felt as though my third eye opened when I had the mind-altering realization for the reason that people that I was
romantically interested in did not have reciprocated feelings for me. I’m a fool, it was right in
front of me: they were all Geminis! Every single one of them. I know it was a total coincidence,
or was it? I realized that I had blamed the situation on something entirely other than me and
something out of my control: their horoscope signs. I took the blame off myself and instead of
taking a pause to reflect upon my own personal habits and mannerisms, I was absolved of any
responsibility for my faults, when I noticed such a coincidence. It felt like the stars literally
aligned and it all made sense now. Clearly people born between May 21st and June 21st were the
problem. Geminis are stereotypically known to be two-faced and hypocritical anyway. Scorpios
are known to be mysterious and dark, so I was able to justify my distant behavior with the
mindset of “It’s just my personality”, when really it’s a fault that I should heavily take into
consideration to fix. If I was an Aries, I wouldn’t have an excuse to be mysterious and vague to
people, so I’m relieved that my poor character traits can be blamed by the stars and not myself,
right?

But I suppose that’s the thing. I’m inhibiting myself from character growth on the basis
of what websites and magazine columns say I am or how they say I should act. I feel that I have
a lot more potential within myself, so it’s ironic having some source who doesn’t know my back
story, only sees me on the surface of being born in mid-November, guiding me on what to do. It
sounds ridiculous, but I still find myself subtly relying on horoscopes to tell me what to do.
Astrology is a coping mechanism masked with humor. A very small portion of people genuinely
believe in astrology, (Pew Research Center says that only 23% of millennials do), but even if it’s not true, I continue to seek and appreciate the guidance and advice it does provide.

Without promoting the app entirely, there’s been a big wave in the app, “Co-star”. A personalized horoscope app that you can add your friends to see your similarities with one another. It gives you a daily notification with a sentence or two of advice, just for you. The app is specific and personalized to the user. To start your account you input your date of birth, time of birth, city of birth, (luckily not your social security number), so they can figure out the exact placement of planets, the sun, moon, their angles and so on to guide you with what the universe feels like you need to hear. One evening, my friend was ranting to me about some friend troubles that she was having. I let her vocalize her annoyance, and I thought nothing more of it. The next morning, she sent me a screenshot of her notification which read, “Try not to bash your friends behind their backs.” We were both eerily uncomfortable because we both quietly knew what she had said about others the night before. Another time, I was having friend problems too, I was
extremely frustrated and one of my friend’s notifications for the day was, “Help your friends become the best versions of themselves”. (These examples both coincidentally are about friends, but that’s beside the point).

The app knew exactly what to say to us in a moment of crisis. There is no doubt thousands of other users received the same notification, but somehow, the artificial intelligence behind Co-star knew we needed to hear something about friends. It sounds foolish saying that, but Co-star knew. The notification put us in our place. It made us reflect our actions over the past few days and realize that maybe talking poorly about people isn’t a good idea. Let me repeat: a notification for an app about stars and planets made us pause for a second about our actions. Out of all the coincidences, it gave us a glare that a parent would out of love, but disappointment. A glare that kindly reminds you to rethink your actions, before you get too carried away with impulsive emotions.

This branches into the concept of the Barnum effect, which is defined as “The psychological phenomenon whereby people accept general personality interpretations (Barnum profiles) as accurate descriptions of their own unique personalities” (Dickson and Kelly 1). Examples of Barnum statements are “You have a great need for others to like and admire you” and “You have a tendency to be critical of yourself”. The statements are vague, but applicable. If I took a personality test and received these as my results, I would be in awe of how detailed and accurate they are. The Barnum effect is applicable to astrology because if people hear their
astrological word of advice, they will find it applicable. The vagueness allows us individually to piece together exactly what we want to hear and how we wish to interpret it, even subconsciously.

I believe that’s why the concept of astrology as a whole is so incredibly popular. Daily horoscope apps give people advice in which they feel the vague message it reads is personally directed for them in the moment. Sagan expresses that, “It caters to fantasies about personal powers we lack and long for…” (Sagan 4). It’s no surprise people give so much control to something like that- it guides them on what to do and what decisions to make. The messages are malleable enough where they’re able to be so easily interpreted, while simultaneously focusing explicitly on what the person felt like they needed to hear. If there’s a concern weighing down on somebody, sitting in the back of their mind, they’re probably waiting for the slight nudge to go for whatever they deep down want to go for. Yet, as hesitant and uncertain human beings, we’re oftentimes too scared to take the jump. But if there’s an omnipresent message, it’s clearly a sign. Humans are so desperate for signs as a reason to justify an action. In National Geographic’s publication titled, “Science of the Supernatural”, author Daniel Levy explains, he writes, “Unusual events thus become tangible by the sense that some sort of mythic being, some unseen force, willed its occurrence…” (Levy 4). Astrology becomes so foreign, but almost tangible resources that we use for guidance. We forget that we’re in control of our own lives and decisions, so much so that we call “shotgun” and ride the passenger seat in the car for the ride of our life.

Levy continues, “As humans sought to wrap their beliefs around the ungraspable, societies fashioned explanations for all they could not understand in order to define the infinite” (Levy 4). Society as a whole does not sit well with the idea of question. People get eerie when
there are things they do not know. Astrology plays a tiny role in attempting to meditate the pacing questions running through people’s minds. “I’m scared of the future. I don’t know what it holds.” Horoscopes can help predict the future if people want their future predicted. I don’t believe it’s my right to invalidate the beliefs of others though. Is that because my rising sign is Cancer? Even if they believe in something that can’t even be factually explained. Sagan exclaims, “Naturally people try various belief systems on for size, to see if they help. And if we’re desperate enough, we become all too willing to abandon what may be perceived as the heavy burden of skepticism” (Sagan 3-4). I feel as a being coexisting with all these other beings in a universe we all mutually don’t seem to understand, if someone finds comfort or peace in one belief, so be it. I feel it’s unnecessary on my end to destroy that for them. There’s nothing that I can gain from belittling someone else’s point of view.

Bluntly, the mysteries of the world and the universe are overwhelming. It’s understandable that throughout the rises and falls of countless civilizations, the millennia of human life, that in order to ease the anxiety of the unknown, humans put faith into seeking answers. Religion and pseudoscience help answer questions that people are silently and subconsciously asking. A band-aid in a situation in need of surgery; the internal ache of impending existential crises that nobody dare bring up. The only way for science to outflank pseudoscience and religion would be for it to answer the questions we are using pseudoscience and religion to answer. If one copes with the uncertainty of life through messages from the stars, let them—at least they’re coping.
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LITERARY ANALYSIS
BEST ESSAYS
Written for my final English 1B essay, "Standing at a Cultural Crossroads" provides an analysis of the short story "Interpreter of Maladies" by Jhumpa Lahiri. Utilizing research from scholarly articles, I expanded on the themes of culture, gender roles, and inclusion, specifically in the case of Indian Americans.

**Standing at a Cultural Crossroads**

-Kristin Murakami-

In the L.A. Times article “Intersections: Identity and Standing Up Where You Fall.” by Liana Aghajanian, Salman Rushdie, British Indian writer and author of *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, states “Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools” (Aghajanian). Through this quote, Rushdie expresses the experience of many second-generation immigrants or people caught between different cultures: disconnection and lack of belonging to both cultures one is a part of. In the short story “Interpreter of Maladies,” British-Bengali born and American raised award-winning novelist, Jhumpa Lahiri also reflects this culture clash through the interactions between the visiting Indian American Das family and their Indian tour guide Mr. Kapasi. The Das family represents the second-generation immigrants who have lost the connection to their family’s Indian heritage by choosing to follow a more American lifestyle. On the other hand, Mr. Kapasi, a native Indian with more traditional values, provides his perspective on the Americanized family and his own experiences. Throughout the story “Interpreter of Maladies,” Jhumpa Lahiri comments on several branches of cultural conflict and their effects on the sense of belonging and acceptance of second generation diaspora while discussing the issue of the repressive gender expectations spanning, in varying degrees, both Indian and Western cultures.

Second generation immigrants face a battle between their cultures due to the differing belief systems enforced by their families and surroundings. One example of the contrasting
practices between Indian and American cultures is the form of self-expression that is clothing. In the article “Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘Unaccustomed Earth’: A Study of the Second Generation Indian American Diaspora Experience” Jonali Chowdhury Bora, of the department of English at K.R.B. Girls’ College in Guwahati, India, offers the perspective of a second generation Indian diaspora: “One cannot wear an Indian dress in an office like mine. If you do so, your colleagues will admire you or even give you compliments, but as a result they consider you an outsider who will never be treated equally” (Bora 113). While living and growing up in America, many second-generation immigrants favor wearing more Western styled clothing in order to blend in with their surroundings and feel more accepted by their peers. As this choice of clothing becomes more comfortable and normal, Indian cultural dress naturally grows more foreign to the individual. Although the second-generation immigrants, who chose a more Western approach to physical appearance, may have gained a greater sense of acceptance within their American environment, their Indian side is consequently weakened. Therefore, upon returning to India, these Indian Americans may no longer be accepted or thought of as true and whole Indians. The Das family in “Interpreter of Maladies” is described as preferring American styled clothing, as observed by Mr. Kapasi: “The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors” (Lahiri 1).

Mrs. Das’s appearance is also noted on multiple occasions to stand out or appear abnormal from an Indian point of view. For example, Mrs. Das’s display of her bare legs, due to her above knee length skirt, appears to pique the interest of Mr. Kapasi and the men at the tea stall since skin exposure is not very common or accepted among most Indian women. Mr. Kapasi highlights this contrast when he reveals that “He had never seen his wife fully naked. Even when they had made love she kept the panels of her blouse hooked together, the string of her petticoat
knotted around her waist. He had never admired the backs of his wife’s legs the way he now admired those of Mrs. Das” (Lahiri 22). Although Mrs. Kapasi’s display of modesty might possibly have stemmed from the lack of true love in their relationship, the couple’s interactions show a significant cultural difference. Contrastingly, Mrs. Das’s choice of clothing would not stand out as much in the United States as American culture has evolved to accept more free and unrestrained forms of expression. However, in both America and India she may have gained some attention, positive or negative, for dressing in form fitting and shorter clothing. This is due to the generally cross-cultural concept of the objectification of women. Furthermore, married women like Mrs. Das are typically expected to dress more conservatively to deter the attention of other men. Additionally, by deemphasizing their outer appearance to an extent, women may project the image that their focus is on family rather than themselves.

Relationships and marriage present another form of cultural conflict and serve as key elements of the story. The article “Conflict and Healing in Family Experience of Second-Generation Emigrants from India Living in North America” by North American Indian Romola Dugsin, M.A. in Clinical Psychology, reveals the perspective of a group of interviewed North American Indians on dating in Indian culture: “Dating is not an acceptable thing for Indian youth. It is seen to interfere with the primary goal of obtaining an education and career. Dating is only acceptable just prior to marriage, and dating should begin only when one is ready to marry and had the family’s input and support” (Dugsin 238). On the other hand, American culture typically allows for more open and noncommittal relationships. This difference in belief systems leads Indian Americans to be caught between the need to follow their parents’ wishes and the external pressure of their surroundings to follow a more American approach to relationships. If one decides to abide by their family’s beliefs when it comes to relationships, they may feel
alienated and left out of the experiences their peers have access to. Additionally, they may be influenced to engage in arranged relationships, which can be beneficial in some respects. For instance, if a family arranges a marriage, both sides are more likely to get along and actively support the relationship. On the other hand, if one chooses to take on a more American dating style, they may face rejection and ostracism from their family. This consequence has the potential to be especially severe if their choice of partner possesses less than satisfactory traits in the eyes of their family. In the case of Mrs. and Mr. Das from “Interpreter of Maladies,” because the families were close to begin with, the couple face little opposition: “Our parents were best friends who lived in the same town. My entire life I saw him every weekend, either at our house or theirs. We were sent upstairs to play together while our parents joked about our marriage … They never caught us at anything, though in a way I think it was all more or less a setup” (Lahiri 7). Although Raj and Mina are not formally set up to take part in an arranged marriage, their relationship is highly encouraged and supported by their families.

Unfortunately, many other Indian Americans face more difficulty due to the incompatibility of the American and Indian approach to marriage: “They found themselves caught between American values, which stereotyped and derided arranged marriage as a restrictive social practice, and the value of their own parents, for whom arranged marriage, including in most cases their own, was the central mechanism for maintaining stable family life” (Bora 114). Mr. Kapasi and his relationship with his wife helps to represent the culture of arranged marriage and its potential consequences. Since the marriage between Mr. and Mrs. Kapasi was arranged, the only thing that appears to hold them together are their surviving children and the societal and familial pressure to live together. Therefore, the couple is forced to fulfill their respective roles in the household and preserve the image of a “stable family life”,

while leading unhappy lives filled with “bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences” (Lahiri 4). Despite the issues in Mr. and Mrs. Kapasi’s marriage, relationship problems are not limited to those in arranged marriages. Although Mr. and Mrs. Das initially find love and affection in a relationship that may as well have been arranged, Mrs. Das reveals several issues that stemmed from her early marriage: “After marrying so young she was overwhelmed by it all, having a child so quickly, and nursing, and warming up bottles of milk and testing the temperature against her wrist while Raj was at work” (Lahiri 8). Since Mina marries Raj while still in school and has children at a fairly young age, the differences between her and her peers grows, isolating her. Over time, Mina’s loneliness and Raj’s preoccupation with work causes a rift in their relationship, eventually leading to Mina’s infidelity and decreasing affection for her family.

The Das parents’ apparent lack of interest in their children may have been caused by problems in their relationship. However, the difference between American and Indian methods of parenting may also contribute to Mr. Kapasi’s perception of the issue’s severity. In Indian culture, “There is a very strong identification with the ‘we’ of the family as opposed to the individual freedom characteristics of Western culture” (Dugsin 236). Therefore, “Indian families inhibit the process of individuation and separation in youths and move them toward a duty-based morality whereby the child will think of his or her family’s wishes first before making a decision, whereas Western culture places high value on individualistic values” (236). The dependency on each other in many Indian households leads to a population of parents whose worlds revolve around their children. Therefore, the parents are led to believe that their “worth is measured by the education, success, and their children’s adherence to Indian values” (Dugsin 237). Additionally, the Indian culture generally expects that children care for and follow the
commands and desires of their parents. This leads many Indian parents to establish strict rules and expectations for their children since their own reputation and dignity rides on the prosperity of their family. On the other hand, American culture preaches a different approach to parenting and overall family dynamics. In this different style of life, parents are comparatively not as involved, and there is more emphasis placed on the encouragement of individuality and independence. Mr. and Mrs. Das are described by Mr. Kapasi to take part in a more American style of parenting, which involves little discipline and more self-centered priorities: “The little girl began to play with the lock on her side, clicking it with some effort forward and backward, but Mrs. Das said nothing to stop her. She sat a bit slouched at one end of the back seat, not offering her puffed rice to anyone” (Lahiri 15). Since Mrs. Das displays little evidence of typical motherly behaviors, Mr. Kapasi infers that the relationship is unlike what is expected in Indian culture. However, Mr. Kapasi seems to identify more problems in the Das family dynamics as the relationship between the parents and children of the Das family more closely resembled that of the relationship between siblings.

While Mrs. Das’s parenting style may be attributed to her American upbringing and an unhappy relationship, Mr. Kapasi’s perspective and changing impressions of her reflect societal expectations for women in India and in general. Devotion to one's children and husband is a trait which many women are pressured to possess. Although Western cultures promote this standard for women to a degree, Indian culture appears to place more pressure on women in comparison. According to the female second generation Indians interviewed in Dugsin’s study, an “ideal sense of womanhood … involves upholding the Indian morals and values in maintaining the home, as well as being well-educated and successful” (Dugsin 237). Therefore, Mr. Kapasi, who represents the general beliefs of Indian society, is displayed to take notice of Mrs. Das’s
seemingly unconventional behavior towards her family, and consequently begins to view her character in a more negative light. At the beginning of the story, Mr. Kapasi notices that Mrs. Das does not act in the expected motherly and protective manner when she involuntarily takes her young daughter to the restroom: “Mrs. Das emerged slowly from his bulky white Ambassador, dragging her shaved, largely bare legs across the back seat. She did not hold the little girl’s hand as they walked to the rest room” (Lahiri 12). Later on in the story, Mrs. Das maintains her display of this uncommon Indian behavior: “She was lost behind her sunglasses, ignoring her husband’s requests that she pose for another picture, walking past her children as if they were strangers” (Lahiri 22). Mrs. Das’s sunglasses serve as an emotional barrier between her and the people around her. Therefore, this scene displays the lack of affection and emotional connection between Mrs. Das and her family. The abnormality of the presentation of Mrs. Das’s feelings and actions is not entirely due to Mr. Kapasi’s different cultural perspective. On the contrary, Mrs. Das exhibits the consequences of the repressive set of standards many women are held to. At a relatively young age, Mrs. Das was forced by societal standards to abandon her life in exchange for a life of childcare and housework. Consequently, Mrs. Das grew increasingly isolated and miserable, leading to an association of negativity to her family: “I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away” (Lahiri 27). Therefore, the consequential repression of societal standards led to Mrs. Das’s emotional disconnection.

Through the differing experiences and perspectives of the characters in the short story “Interpreter of Maladies,” Jhumpa Lahiri discusses cultural differences and general societal gender expectations as well as display their potential consequences. Although the characters in Lahiri’s short story possess their own life experiences, the readers may find pieces of themselves
in the characters and connect the story to some aspects of their own lives. In the video, “At Home with Jhumpa Lahiri,” Lahiri comments on her writing and how she has grown to find comfort in literature: “My experience of loneliness as a child, my experience of feeling so estranged and being convinced that nobody else lived in this particular way wasn’t the case. That's the enormous power of literature in that you can write out of such a specific place and yet it’s really about entering into other peoples’ consciousness … and in that sense … I think we’re less divided than we think we are” (Lahiri, “At Home with Jhumpa Lahiri”). Therefore, as Lahiri suggests, readers across the world will hopefully find solace in knowing that they are not alone in their struggles and triumphs. Despite the differences found in cultures, beliefs, and individuals, we are all connected by the overarching human experience. Once that connection and commonality is discovered and recognized, the differences and disagreements become smaller and less impactful in the relationships we may form with others. For that reason, although one may think that “sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools,” we as humans have the power and capability to embrace all parts of ourselves and determine how we choose to lead our lives (Aghajanian).

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