

What Motivates a Man?

Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion.

-Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Ninety-ninth percentile. Usually, being in the ninety-ninth percentile for something is fantastic. Ninety-ninth percentile for English. Ninety-ninth percentile for math. This was a different sort of ninety-ninth percentile, though: ninety-ninth percentile among boys my age group for weight.

I wasn't always fat. Pictures of me as a little kid showed me as waif-thin; I wasn't even a fat baby when I was born. Somewhere along the line—some summer bacchanal of Reese's—things went pear-shaped, literally and figuratively. For years afterwards, my athletic abilities, never phenomenal, were reduced to almost nothing. I would eat a full breakfast, lunch, dinner, midmorning snack, and afternoon snack. I fell into a habit of not particularly caring about my health, and I would always brush off others'—especially my parents'—complaints. Every time they tried to force me to do some physical activity, I fobbed them off, using all of the energy and intelligence I wasn't spending on sports to talk my way out of commitments. Life was, for lack of a better word, comfortable. *Too* comfortable: the secret is, nothing is more comfortable in the short term than mediocrity, including in one's own fitness. Whenever I went to the doctor for my checkup, and got those percentile figures (which averaged about 97), I just let them slide like water off a duck's back. I didn't care. Until, eventually, I did.

The decision to lose weight for me was a completely personal one. No outside pressures changed between the times when I was content to let my chin rival Mama June's and the times when I decided to put an end to it. I didn't face a wave of taunting, nor did I want to impress a girl, nor was I forced onto some hot new fad paleo-keto-lo-carb-hi-protein-hi-fiber-low-fat-probiotic-glorified-anorexic fad diet. I never tried reading the latest and hottest dieting weight-loss dieting advice from Oprah or Dr. Oz or Gwyneth Paltrow. I just decided, quietly, to myself, that enough was enough, and I decided to change my

habits. They always say that the hardest part of losing weight is changing your eating habits, but for me, once my determination had steeled itself, unconsciously, for what lay ahead, it was relatively straightforward. This is not to say that it was easy; I faced hunger pangs more often than I ever had before. But deep inside me, some latent instinct overruled my petty inner desires and passions, and reconditioned my body, and, more importantly, my mind, to simply expect less food.

Something else that most weight-loss guides tell you is to set targets for yourself, to that *force* yourself into completing them, goals that provide you with a cheap dopamine hit when you complete them and leave the stench of guilt and Cheetos when you don't. I never felt the need for them, though. I just knew that if I changed my habits for the better, things would change for the better, and I would lose weight. External reminders of your weight can only do so much to drive you forward; true motivation, as Thoreau says, comes from within. I never weighed myself for several months, which may seem strange for someone trying to lose weight, but I felt like an outside measure of progress, bringing with it unwanted pressures and unneeded goal-setting, would be counterproductive. Only I could judge myself, internally, on whether or not I thought I was doing enough work, and whether I was happy with how things were going. As time went on, I did start keeping records, but today, I try not to base my satisfaction on them.

When it comes to self-improvement, extrinsic, direct motivators, such as peers and society, can only go so far to disrupt our tranquil mediocrity. To break a cycle, get out of a rut, and set a new course for ourselves, whether it be in health, education, or employment, only a deep, internal drive for success can change it.

Weight 1/1/19 (est.) 90.0kg

Weight 1/1/20 70.0kg

Writing: My Key to Reasserting Myself

“Describe yourself in five adjectives!” “What is your biggest flaw?” “Which *Friends* character is JUST LIKE YOU?” Every day, we’re barraged with questions and prompts that ask us to summarize who we are in pithy, gimmicky ways. I’ve always hated those, because they strike me as impossible assignments, especially when done as a way to explain yourself to other people. In my relatively short life on Earth, I’ve been, by my own estimation, a leader and a follower; a hothead and a cool head; warm and aloof; gregarious and shy; and an introvert and an extrovert. Of course, I am, to a greater or lesser degree, all of these things, but when you’re in third grade and have to describe yourself with a drawing on a popsicle stick, there’s no room for nuance.

Because of these bad experiences, I was always loath to commit myself to writing anything beyond what I had to. I wrote for school assignments, of course, and always got a pat on the back and a little sticker for them, but it was never anything that I felt was substantive; I never went above and beyond on assignments, never challenging myself to prove the ability that I and others felt I had. So my pen languished, brought out once every few months to write a grade-appropriate school assignment, then swiftly put back while I focused on important matters, like my FIFA career mode. Without writing, about myself or others, I never indulged in any self-reflection. Since I was still a voracious reader, I was constantly absorbing others’ opinions about people, places, and things, whether it be reading movie reviews or the *Time For Kids* magazine supplement. I regarded others’ opinions as gospel, blindly accepting whatever people said about me as a person as being absolutely true, since I had no preconceived notions to dispute them.

In 7th grade, at the tender age of eleven, I came to a new school, a selective school unlike any I’d ever experienced. I thought of myself as hot shit, since I had coasted by life at my previous school without breaking a sweat; socially, I had had the same friends for years at my old school, and as always happens when one gets complacent, I was ill-adapted to make such a drastic change in my social patterns. I was in

for a rude awakening. At my new school, things moved at a pace unbelievable to my overconfident, underused brain; social dynamics were completely different, and I was as disoriented as a deer in the headlights. I struggled deeply that year, unable to make any friends and getting bullied, and my self-confidence took a staggering hit. My suffering was compounded by the fact that I just couldn't describe it: I didn't have the tools in my arsenal to verbalize my pain. Since I could not put into words my own opinion of myself, what I saw as my strengths and my flaws, and why I was the way I was, I let others determine that for me. The reason why I, at the time, called football "American football" and soccer "football" was not because I was the proud product of a multicultural upbringing and the son of two Colombian immigrants, but because I wanted to be a snob and annoy everyone — or at least, that's what I was told, and that's what I believed.

Things got better in 8th grade as I learned to navigate the academic and social spheres of my new school. Although I was still letting others decide my opinions for me, I was also forming my own opinions, little by little. I had opinions about politics, strong ones, for the first time; I joined interesting extracurriculars like Quiz Bowl and History Bowl for the first time; and I became a steadier, more assured school writer. But writing was still an end, not a means; I didn't see writing as something that could be explored, nor did I see the act of writing as having any inherent virtue. It was still just something to be done, to be overcome and never thought of again. And when what would become the most important moment in my life came later that year, I was still totally unprepared to face it.

When I moved to Switzerland, I knew, based on past experience, that it wasn't going to be easy. I thought I had the tools in my arsenal to handle it, having lived through one wrenching transformation already. How wrong I was. My mind, and my mental health, spent that whole year like a boat in a whirlpool, seemingly dragged around and around in circles towards the all-encompassing vast emptiness of Borges' Aleph. And still, I could not describe what I was feeling. There were tears, sure, and familial screaming matches. During one such argument, in the car, I felt a pang of such unexplainable and

uncontrollable rage that I somehow tried to take control of the steering wheel. Whether this was stupidity, desperation, or a latent desire for an early-morning murder-suicide (or who knows; maybe I just really wanted to be on the news that day), it was clear to me that a life like this was not worth living. Somehow, I made it through the full year, and I landed back in New York to the warm early-summer sound of honking cars and cursing cabbies. But something inside me clicked, as if to say that I needed some way of exploring myself, of understanding why I was the way I was and why I acted the way I did. And this time, my educational curriculum came to my help.

In tenth grade, we read *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. I didn't particularly care for the book, but the assignment we got for it was a personal literary essay. I had never written a personal essay before, so the format intrigued me; in fact, I had never really sat down and written about myself before — not in the context of long-form prose. At first, I thought I would hate it, since it seemed almost vain and I felt like I didn't really have anything to write about. But I sat down, and, to my surprise, I found myself enjoying it. I wrote about Switzerland, an experience still raw in my mind, and I tried, for the first time, to write how I really felt. At first, I wrote entirely stream-of-consciousness: three or four paragraphs each one sentence long, reflecting the jumbled thoughts of my mind. That's what I initially handed in as a rough draft. But when I talked it over with my teacher, he made me realize that there was a way of making my thoughts clearer: if I focused on making the writing make sense, the mind would make sense too. It became an organized piece of writing. But in making it an organized piece of writing, I learned something about myself too: I thought deeply about what stories to share and what stories not to, about what really affected my life and what was just a funny, or tragic anecdote, about what was an actual reason for my behavior and what was my mind making up excuses to avoid self-examination. Even though it was not my best assignment that year, it's the one I remember most, and the one that had the greatest formative impact.

Since then, I've come to appreciate the power writing has. To Gloria Anzaldúa, writing is a way of complementing the real world, of asserting herself in an unfamiliar world. For me, it's a way of explaining it. I never grew up in a writing household — neither of my parents being native English speakers — so I feel like I missed out on opportunities for self-reflection, for forming myself. Now, finally, I have a tool to rationalize the irrational world outside me, but more importantly, to rationalize the irrational world within me. I know that when I'm writing, I can't lie to myself or others like I can if I feel like I have to defend my actions; the only constituency I'm trying to impress is myself, and I know, mentally, that writing can only help me verbalize my feelings. If I put down the pen, and leave my thoughts to the mercy of stochastic life, I risk losing the ability of making sense of myself, of introspection, of forming my own opinions. The pen is my insurance against others trying to explain the world, and my own self, to me. With the pen, I contain multitudes; without it, what am I?