

John Drosdowich

Professor Brendyn Smyth

Senior Capstone Final Paper

5/16/2022

No Stone Left Unturned

There is no cookie cutter path to life. As human beings we often learn by trial and error. We fail constantly, but through these failures we learn the most. That is how we are programmed. We set out on a journey hoping to find the right answers and a place to settle comfortably. That comfortability is of utmost importance, but we cannot ignore the journey. What brought us to where we are, the things we learned on the way, and how it made us feel. But we are far from perfect, and we don't always achieve our goals. March of 2022, I turned 29, the last year of my twenties. It has been one hell of a ride and every step I took led me right here, right to where I am today. The path was not easy and has been full of turmoil and pain. But that pain humbled me, annihilated my sense of "self", and armored me to keep pushing on and complete what I set out to do. I am not alone on this endeavor; I am not the first and I will not be the last. For centuries human beings have grown at their own rate and written their own tales. That's the beauty of life. It is wild, diverse, and beyond unpredictable. But one thing we can control in life is how we approach each situation we fall into. Each hole we decide to jump in or decide to climb out of. Thousands before me have traveled similar paths as mine. Starting something later than most and all the trials and tribulations that follow. This is a story representing all those who came before me and all those who will come after me. This is a story of perseverance, courage, and most importantly finishing what you started; no stone left unturned.

We cannot venture further into this thought without exploring the very real pressures society thrusts upon us. This must be explored before we can dive into the immense pressure, we put on ourselves. From the first moments we can even start conceptualizing our future, we are constantly comparing ourselves to our peers. We see success and failure everywhere, whether it's on tv or just hanging out with your friends. We are riddled with certain expectations and visions of what our life looks like and what it should look like. This type of scrutiny and analyzation of self is evident at any age, and through all walks of life. It really starts to manifest at a super young age. Highschoolers without even a clue of what the next few years has in store for them. See, when you're making your grand plans for life, we forget to factor in how certain experiences we face will drastically shape our future worlds. Kids aged 14-18 preparing themselves for careers and futures that will dictate the rest of their lives. That's no easy task at such a young age. The scary part is that the choices never get easier, life adjusts with you, no matter what stage you're at. 17-18 is a peculiar age; we come out of high school ready to engage in the free world, ready to find our footing. A tough sell if you ask me. Most kids coming out of high school really are not prepared to face the challenges ahead. Most of us haven't received the proper guidance. Then you add in financial costs, emotional instability, and a general lack of structure. We make a choice at that age that will affect us for decades to come. There are systems in place to help young kids get into college and prepare for what the future holds, but a lot of those systems need some serious reworking. When funds become not properly allocated and resources do not find a way into the hands of people who desperately need it; the system in place fails. Humans are not simple; we are complex and sometimes incredibly difficult to deal with. Human beings need patience, empathy, and help with direction. There are wonderful people who give it their absolute all to help guide those in need. Their efforts cannot be appreciated enough.

But some academic institutions instead, approach these young adolescents like cattle, sending one after another to their slaughter. An article from the Education Digest, “Recent Grads Advise High School Students About College” , written by Beckie Supiano, highlights how highschoolers are not receiving the guidance they need. The article touches on how artificial relationships between students and those employed to guide them really are. “Counselors don’t necessarily spend much time helping students choose and apply to colleges.” wrote Supiano. Now this is partly since educators are not responsible for the time students spend outside of school, but this is also directly caused by the systemic nature we have instilled into our education system.

Adolescents need guidance and a strong support system to prepare for the world in which they are about to enter. This is no easy feat; human beings are complicated and not every student’s path after high school is the same. Some of us choose to work straight out of high school, convinced that this is the right way. Some of us choose to go to college to pursue a career in a very specific field. And some of us do a mixture of the two without any real knowledge of what the future has in store for us. All of these are great options, that’s the beauty of freedom, we can all choose the life we want. We have options, but when careers and these massive life choices are monetarily incentivized, there are always bumps in the road.

When we find ourselves at a crossroad, unsure of our next step, often people advise you to “find what you love, find your passions, your motivation.”. Now that’s true, and that’s good advice but its impersonal. Motivation does not just grow on trees, and it is incredibly difficult to manifest at any stage of life. It takes years of failure, resilience, and hardships to light that fire. Young kids in high school haven’t had many of the life experiences that fuel that motivation. In an article titled “Motivation: Approaching an Elusive Concept Through the Factors That Shape It” educators begin to explore how they can connect with students. The article suggests that

“Attitude, interests, and value do not develop spontaneously. They are acquired gradually, as the result of innumerable experiences.”. These educators have concluded that motivation is a necessary educational tool to connect with students, and I believe this to be true. But for a large majority of young adults, they are not quite developed enough or have experienced enough to fully tap into what drives them. Finding those passions imbedded deep in the fibers of your being is nothing short of incredibly tough. I can say this because I was that young adult not quite ready for the road society told me I should travel down. I didn’t have the proper guidance and it took me over 10 years of painstaking trial and error to fully manifest my motivation.

To fully conceptualize my motivation and the fuel that was feeding my fire, we must venture back to September of 2010. I was seventeen preparing myself for the start of my senior year. Just as my friends and peers before me, I was getting ready to make my decisions on what life looked like after high school. I come from a family of all college graduates, and elite ones at that. Both of my parents have their masters, my mother an educator, and my father an attorney. My sister was the Valedictorian of her graduating class and finished college with a 4.0 gpa from the University of Rochester. At the time my brother was finishing up his senior year at SUNY Albany. The decision was simple for me, finish this final year and attend a four-year university to do right by myself and my family name. I didn’t have any plans for after college, I was just ready for that next chapter. Most of my friends had specific studies they wanted to pursue, and we were all super excited to enjoy our last year together. But things didn’t exactly go to plan. On the 6th day of my senior year, my entire world was flipped upside down.

It was a Sunday when I received the news that my brother was hospitalized up in Albany. But this wasn’t the first time I had been introduced to the grim reality of my family members in the hospital. To explore that, we need to travel back in time to 2005: my first traumatic event.

At the start of my sister's senior year of high school she was struck by a car while she was attempting to cross the busy road in front of our high school, George F Baker, in Tuxedo NY. This accident left her fighting for her life in a coma with a severe traumatic brain injury, blind in one eye, and a severely broken left leg. She was in a medical induced coma for two weeks. By a miracle, she made a full recovery. But it took months of hard work, sweat and tears for my sister and our family to come out on top. And we did. We persevered and used this accident to embolden our Drosdowich spirit. But life has a funny way of reminding us of just how fragile life is. Just five years later, my family is at the front of yet another traumatic experience.

While I was preparing for my senior year and my life ahead of me, my brother was hospitalized from an apparent overdose while in school at Suny Albany. I didn't quite know the state of my brother's health until I arrived in Albany. Prior to my arrival I was thinking "okay here we go again". This was not my families first rodeo in the hospital. I guess you can say the traumatic experience my sister went through kind of numbed me to my brother's initial situation. Upon arrival, the severity of my brother's status was undeniable. He had been without oxygen for 45 minutes before first responders showed up on scene. The human body starts to highly deteriorate the longer it goes without oxygen. 90% of my brother's organs had started to die if not died already. The doctors told us he would have a 5% chance of regaining consciousness and an even smaller percentage of coming back intact. On September 9th, 2010, I held my brother's hand and watched him die. I could feel the life leave his body as he slowly turned blue; fading into whatever realm is after life. This all happened 10 days into my senior year. The most pivotal year of my young life so far and I felt lifeless. My brother was my hero, my rock. Everything I knew was because of him, I nearly mimicked everything he did. Losing that, meant losing a

massive part myself. A huge hole blown through my heart and mind and that pain was just the beginning.

So how does one cope with such a loss of life at 17? What was I to do? Did it even matter what I do? Driving home from the hospital later that day, I thought to myself “What the hell do we do next?”. How on earth was I supposed to return to school anytime soon and just pretend that I was still an innocent kid, preparing myself for college. Everything changed for me, I felt like a soldier returning from war. How could I explain what I saw, felt, and was currently feeling to my teenage friends? I didn’t know anyone in my school with an even slightly familiar situation. It’s one thing to witness death, the slow chill of life departing from this world, seamlessly moving on to the next: a monumental shift in energy. A surreal event yet one of the only things promised in life. But it’s entirely another instance of death to be completely blindsided by it. Knocked to the ground as death did its dance, taking what it wants, when it wants. My brother had just turned 22. He was as much a child as I was. Both of our innocence died that day. Immediately after that moment, it was like my emotional intelligence time travelled 30 years into the future. I started to view life through a certain lens, a pair of bifocals that didn’t even belong to me. A major gauge of maturity is how emotionally intelligent a person is. For a lot of young kids, emotional intelligence takes years to manifest, and for some people it never truly does. This is important in telling my story because that emotional intelligence hit me like a meteor and wiped out everything else, I thought I understood emotionally about life. We are awarded one life and at any moment we can be stripped of it without any warning. I truly understood this at 17, I watched it. So, when I finally returned to school a couple of days later, nothing was familiar to me. The hallways looked different, the classrooms, the teachers, the students, and even my friends. I was hellbent on being strong and not letting this tragic event

break my spirit but at the same time I wasn't allowing it to help me grow either. I was stagnant and living vigorously in the moment; the world kept moving but I stood still.

As I watched my peers toss their caps into the sky, celebrating and congratulating each other for a job well done, I felt nothing. All those months following my brothers passing, I detached from whatever idea I had in my head about what my future looked like. I had already felt little motivation, and I wasn't the best student to begin with. I graduated high school by the skin of my teeth. I spent the summer clinging desperately to my friends, consuming as much time as I possibly could with them. I knew everything was about to change. I had decided with my parents that I would take a year off after high school. I was convinced I couldn't possibly go to college in the fall. So, with that established, I felt like I was nobody, and I was going nowhere. That was a big wake up call for me. I always felt like I was too smart and had too much potential to be left behind while all my friends were off at college. I was constantly putting an unhealthy amount of pressure on myself to just get up and do something. I was always the leader of my friends, they looked to me for guidance and emotional support. Teachers, parents, peers; always had such high praise for me and deep down I believed it. I believed in myself, but I could not figure out how to tap into that potential. Eventually I decided to enroll in community college after bouncing back and forth between meaningless jobs like a broken ping pong ball. Even though I hardly had any college experience at the time, and honestly never saw myself graduating, I was still convinced that there was no future for me without a college degree. So I went, and sure enough I dropped out after 3 semesters of holding a 1.8gpa. I couldn't stand college. But really, I just hated myself. Hated who I had let myself become. For the next couple years, I helped my friends celebrate their success in school and wished them well as they packed up their belongings and headed out into the world. I was so happy for them, and so disappointed

in myself. Next thing I knew I was 22, the same age as my brother was when he died. I thought to myself “alright, you’ve now outlived your older brother, but what have you done with that gift?”. I spiraled into a depression that I wasn’t sure I’d ever get out of. Riddled with guilt and genuine sadness, I faced the reality of my situation. “Alright John, you can’t figure out school, well it’s time to work.” I put school far in the back of my mind and decided to see if I could survive doing manual labor for minimum wage. 2 years of office liquidation in NYC and that degree that I felt I couldn’t live without slowly crawled back into my mind.

I went back to community college, and I managed to scrape together enough strength to continue my dream of graduating from college. For the first time in my collegiate career, I truly felt that motivation to get done what needed to get done. It was liberating, but momentary success can often be over celebrated. I earned my Associates Degree in Liberal Arts and just like that I was back at square one with a decision to make. I decided I was going to use that degree to become a member of the NYPD. So, I moved to NYC, I took the test, and I got a 103. I was list number 268 out of thousands of potential candidates. I was so prepared for this next phase of my life, I still didn’t have my bachelor’s degree, but I could live with putting on the uniform and trying to make a difference in the community. I went through the whole process with no doubt in my mind that I would get a call. But instead, I didn’t. I received the unfortunate news that they were not going to offer me a position as a police officer. I had restructured my entire life around this career decision and just like that it was gone. I had just turned 26 and the rug had been pulled out from under me. I moved back home and worked whatever odd job that would hire me. “This can’t be it for me” I used to think every day as I walked out the door ready to face the world. “We cannot change the past. All that has happened, has happened. But not all that has occurred has happened.” Ross Cloney wrote in an article about motivation. It finally hit me, all

that I've gone through, every experience I've had has led me right to where I am. Whatever I desire in this life is mine, but I must be willing to reach out and take it.

2019 came along and I decided I was going to apply to universities to finish my degree. I had my associates degree, but I graduated from that school with a 2.4 gpa. I knew my options were limited. I applied to 3 schools: SUNY Buffalo, SUNY Brockport, and SUNY Purchase. I didn't get in to Buffalo or Brockport, the schools I desired the most. I had never even heard of SUNY Purchase, but they were the only ones to give me a shot. I didn't even visit and explore Purchase, I just made a schedule and come the fall of 2019 semester, I was ready to give it my all. I immediately felt comfortable at Purchase, the courses were engaging, and the faculty genuinely cared. This was the college experience I was looking for. My first semester at Purchase I finished with a 3.7 gpa and was awarded a spot on the Dean's List. This was an unbelievable achievement for me, and I could not believe I was where I was. All that pain and struggle led me to this one moment. I was on top of the world starting my second semester at Purchase. But once again, life has a way of testing your strength. March 16th of 2020, my birthday, life as we knew it shut down: Covid was here. Everything switched to remote learning, and I was genuinely nervous about my future. I finished out that semester but barely. I decided that summer that I was going to take time off from school. Just like that, I reverted to my old methods of running away when times got tough. So, I took an entire year off with only needing two more semesters to graduate. The looming pandemic made existence miserable, and I felt like my ship was sinking. It was hard for me to go from my highest academic success to being a drop out, again. I was listening to a Joe Rogan podcast one day and he had Jordan Peterson on, and they were talking about mindsets. Dr. Peterson said something that day that hit deep, he said *"Humility is recognition of personal insufficiency and the willingness to learn. You must*

determine where you are going in your life, because you cannot get there unless you move in that direction. The secret to your existence is right in front of you. It manifests itself as all those things you know you should do but are avoiding.” That was all I needed to hear. I thought about all the great skills I was learning at Purchase and how much I loved applying them to my everyday life. I realized it’s all on me and how important this degree was to me. It no longer was just a degree to me; I am the degree. It’s true importance shined bright that day. A few weeks later, and I was reenrolled and back on my quest again to finish what I had started back in 2012. Rasmussen University had a piece on their website titled “Starting College at 25 (or Older): Why It’s Not Too Late”. Ashley Brooks said, “This understanding of why earning a degree is so important to you can be a strong motivator in succeeding in a degree program.” That was the backbone of my discovery. I kept trying and failing, but it wasn’t until I got to Purchase that the dream became lucid.

Society likes to highlight success stories from those who got it done on their first try. Or those fortunate enough to have it all figured out. But we’ve all faced a goal or scenario that is just not achievable immediately or when we want it to be. Sometimes we need to take a step back and reassess and evaluate what the goal is and what we need to achieve said goal. This can take days, years, or even decades. But we glorify celebrities and professionals and compare their success to our own. For some, this works, and the success of those individuals directly influences that person to allow them to find success of their own. Society looks at us to produce immediately. I’m sure if we all had Aristotle guiding us, we too might become Alexander the Great. To highlight this is not to say that it’s not possible or just as important, but I believe society leaves out critical plot holes in some famous success stories. Let’s look at LinkedIn for example, the quintessential networking service for all young professionals hoping to get an in

somewhere. I don't know any business professionals who are not on LinkedIn. As soon as kids graduate from high school, they are pressured to create their online business portfolio. Success seems farfetched without a well-produced and polished LinkedIn page. But we only analyze LinkedIn for its face value and what it offers, but what about the brains behind it? When we dig deep into the origins of LinkedIn we find Reid Hoffman, a Silicon Valley mogul and co-founder of LinkedIn. The important thing to highlight is that Reid Hoffman did not create LinkedIn until he was 35. 35 is 14 years older than when most students graduate from college. Yet as soon as we graduate, we're told we must produce immediately or get left behind. Reid Hoffman had this to say about growth and future planning; "If you're not growing, you're contracting. You have to be constantly reinventing yourself and investing in the future.". Investing in the future means exactly that, investing in your future despite what you have going on now. Whether you are unemployed or the head of a fortune 500 company, never lose sight of your goals. That is the heart of this story. It does not matter when you get there, all that matters is that you continue to push towards the future you see for yourself. I knew I didn't want to take a shot at life without getting my degree, I don't have it in me. I knew life without a degree would be incredibly difficult for me physically and psychologically. I had attempted to make it without one and was constantly reminded of the hardships one faces without a proper education. The odds of success in a manner of fortune significantly decreases with less and less education. Mark Friedman published an article out of Arkansas on income based of a wide range of young professionals with all different types of education levels. "People who either dropped out of high school or only finished high school will have a tough financial road ahead of them. Their average wage after five years was just \$12,500. Can you imagine trying to make a living with \$12,500, especially if you have children and especially if you're a single mom?" Gibson said. "The future's

pretty bleak. The good news is that more education means more money. The average wage for someone with even a little college after five years was \$23,000.” determined Friedman. But high school dropouts are not the only dropouts. College students have an incredibly high chance of dropping out. I know this firsthand because I dropped out multiple times. But in 2021 Forbes put out a shocking article showing the staggering statistics revolving around college students.

According to their data more than one million college students drop out every single year.

Friedman stated that “The numbers indicate that the longer students stay in college – even if they have no credentials or degrees to show for it – the better off they’ll be financially.”. Now while this holds weight just based on opportunity, there’s one major piece of information being left out.

Most college students must take out an exorbitant amount of money in student loans. Most federal loans still do not cover the incredibly expensive price of college and being a college student for 4 years. “College is generally a good investment, but only if you graduate. Among students who are pursuing a bachelor’s degree, students who drop out of college are almost 100 times more likely to default on their student loans than students who graduate.” suggested Mark Kantrowitz a contributor for the Forbes article. This was a very real possibility for me given that I took out a large chunk of change to pursue this degree. After reading more of the Forbes statistics, it really become apparent that I was a part of these metrics. Kantrowitz also wrote how “Less than half of college students graduate on-time. Even after six years, less than 60% of students at 4-year colleges have earned a bachelor’s degree. The track record for community colleges is even worse, with less than 20% of community college students earning an Associate’s Degree or Certificate.”. These statistics are egregious. Our society does not allow for much wiggle room in terms of success without a college degree or a certification proving that you are a worthy candidate for certain compensation. Yet numbers show just how many people do not

make it to the finish line to walk in a graduation ceremony. Why is so hard for kids to graduate from school? I ask these questions because I almost became a statistic. But why did I almost become a statistic, it's not because I didn't have the intelligence to do the work. It's not because I didn't have the drive to show up every day and give the best effort I could that day. So, if all those things are not true for me, how many others are they not true for? How many young adults slip through the cracks of the education system because of a lack of guidance, money, structure? Are we doing enough as a society to ensure a strong future for our nation and our youth? When I look at those statistics it's hard for me to feel optimistic. But then I remember my journey, and the pain I endured to get here. As I sit here writing my Senior Capstone, I can't help but think of two JRR Tolkien quotes from my time reading the Lord of The Rings trilogy. As Frodo Baggins is starting to feel the immense pressure of his quest to destroy the ring, he turns to Gandalf and says, "I wish it need not have happened in my time.". Gandalf turns to him with reassurance and says "So do I, and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.". Gandalf nailed it. That is the exact motivation that kept me fighting for 10 years to finish my Bachelors. We cannot always control the situations that we are in. But we can control our reaction to said situations, and we can control how we chose to spend our precious time. The last quote from J.R.R Tolkien that resonated with me is "All that is gold does not glitter, Not all those who wander are lost; The old that is strong does not wither, Deep roots are not reached by the frost.". This is a model for what determination looks like. It does not matter if you didn't get there on your first try. Or if you explore and take time to get there, all that matters is that you get there. The road to success is not paved in gold.

Even when we think we've reached the top of the mountain we've been climbing for years; there's still more to climb. The work is never truly over until there's no longer a heartbeat in your chest. SUNY Purchase helped reinforce this idea in my head that I can pursue anything I put my mind to. Purchase was my light at the end of the tunnel. 10 years it took me to get to where I am standing today. 10 years of blood, sweat, tears, laughs, and pain. It is through our greatest struggles that we find ourselves. I wouldn't be who I am today without facing the things I've faced. "experiences shape the formation of attitude, the identification of interests, and the overall awareness of proficiency.", is another exceptional quote from "Motivation: Approaching an Elusive Concept Through Factors That Shape It." That really struck me to the core. Therefore, the concept of finishing what you started is imperative to anyone's success story. Part of my experience going to college so late in life is realizing how different the experience would have been had I done it the "right" way. Fact of the matter there is no right way. There is only the way you're going. If you happen to finish college in 4 straight years, that's incredible and that admirable. But for all of those who take a little longer to get where they want to be, just hang tight and keep on keeping on. We only slip and fall if we lose our footing. My first semester at Purchase will forever be one of my happiest memories. Purchase helped me find my footing and cement it. Before I transferred here, I had never gotten higher than a 2.8 gpa. Now I could take all the credit if I wished, but that wouldn't be right. There was something about the engagements, the learning, the overall experience that elevated me higher than I have ever gone before. I learned to love myself in a way I never have. And all these things that led me to this exact moment is because of a little idea I planted in my head over 10 years ago. You see that's how ideas work. All it takes is one moment to penetrate the mind and it'll be there. There's no idea

too great that you can't manifest. See it through, finish what you started; and leave no stone unturned.

Works Cited

- Brooks, Ashley. “Starting College at 25 (or Older): Why It's Not Too Late.” *Rasmussen University*, 7 June 2021, <https://www.rasmussen.edu/student-experience/college-life/starting-college-at-age-25/>.
- Cloney, Ross. “Motivation.” *Nature (London)*, vol. 505, no. 7484, 2014, pp. 580–580, doi:10.1038/505580a.
- Friedman, Mark. “Even Some College Means a Higher Paycheck: Not Finishing High School Can Cost Workers Thousands.” *Arkansas Business*, vol. 30, no. 22, Journal Publishing, Inc, 2013, p. 14–.
- Jang, Bong Gee, et al. “Motivation.” *The Reading Teacher*, Jang, B.G., Conradi, K., McKenna, M.C., Jones, J.S. (2015). *Motivation : Approaching an Elusive Concept Through the Factors That Shape It*. *The Reading Teacher*, 69(2), 239-247. doi: 10.1002/trtr.1365., vol. 69, no. 2, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2015, pp. 239–47, doi:10.1002/trtr.1365.

- Kantrowitz, Mark. “Shocking Statistics about College Graduation Rates.” *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 21 Apr. 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markkantrowitz/2021/11/18/shocking-statistics-about-college-graduation-rates/?sh=74179ee72b69>.
- Medhi, Trisha. “20 Powerful Quotes by Reid Hoffman, Ex-Paypal Coo and the Man behind LinkedIn.” *YourStory.com*, 23 Mar. 2020, <https://yourstory.com/2020/03/20-powerful-quotes-reid-hoffman-paypal-linkedin/amp>.
- Rogan, Joe, host. “Jordan Peterson Episode #1139.” *Joe Rogan Experience*. Youtube, July 2, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Xc7DN-noAc>
- Supiano, Beckie. “Recent Grads Advise High School Students About College.” *The Education Digest*, vol. 76, no. 7, Prakken Publications, Inc, 2011, p. 35–.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. HarperCollins, 1991.

