

Chronicles of a Once Pessimistic College Freshman

By Bilal Rahmani

I'm in, and then I'm out. I don't feel like I belong here. Why *am* I here—in this school? I've been pushed around the crucible of the New York City public education system for so long now. Rejected from my middle school of choice and shoved into The High School for Health Professions and Human Services on the Lower East Side, that no one has heard of. I'm one of the smart kids. I always performed well in school: I did all my assignments, was friendly to my teachers, and got an impressive score on my SAT's—the ideal student. Sure, I slacked off sometimes. Maybe I cut class a little, maybe I shouldn't have spent so much time with my girlfriend, or with my best friends, but should I really have been punished for the mistakes I made as a naïve teenager? I mean, looking back on it, high school was horrible in the way it sifted and sorted kids so arbitrarily. There was never a rational grading system. I've worked endless hours on certain assignments only to fail, and alternately, I've skipped entire semesters of classes and ended up with an "A." A part of me says "stop making excuses Bilal, get out the golden cage of your fragile ego." The other part refuses to listen, preferring to wallow over what could have been.

In the middle of June 2010, I could no longer push back the need to register for classes at City Tech, so one evening I set off on a two-hour journey on the wonderfully-organized and ever-so-punctual New York City Public Transportation System. After another long wait, I met with a guidance counselor who was supposed to help me select my classes, but who simply dictated to me that I would be taking English, math, biology, and psychology for my first semester. I wasn't given much of a choice about class selection, but, to tell you the truth, none of the classes really interested me.

My first month of college passed in this depressed state. I was completely indifferent to anything and everything. I didn't join any clubs; I didn't make any friends; I didn't go to any rallies or shows or games. I didn't care. I believed that everyone here was in a general state of apathy. No efforts were made on either side. You went to class, spoke to no one; you left class, spoke to no one; and you went home to do your homework, alone. From my dreary perspective at the time, my lackluster professors seemed to give little effort towards inspiring their students, and the students made no effort to better their classes in any way. I sat through these classes with no ambition, while my instructors taught out of books I had no interest in buying. To me, no one seemed to really *attend* this college; everyone seemed to be in a state of leaving, ears pinned to an invisible evacuation siren.

The following semester in the spring of 2011, English class rolled in once again. Here I was with my classmates discussing the short story, "Cat in the Rain," by Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway! What an amazing author. But, I thought to myself, these simple students will never be able to understand the enigmatic allegories he presents in his writing, so I guess I'll have to answer all the questions. I raised my hand to offer an interpretation that the cat represents a woman trapped in a man's world, when the dumb girl next to me raised her hand. She got called

on first and explained that Hemingway was being misogynistic; to her, the author believed all women just wanted to be dominated and to have long hair and children. This was utterly ridiculous; I mean it's Hemingway! How could one ever interpret him in that sort of way? As if the great Hemingway could possibly possess such an immature trait. This was what I thought, before the teacher explained that Hemingway was, in fact, very sexist. Just a minor slip up; I was still sure my interpretation is smarter and more creative than hers anyway. I settled down and listened to the class discuss the piece. Suddenly, they were shooting out ideas that all made so much sense. My prejudices crashed in on me. The classroom became ink, penetrating the water, which was my mind, adding new colors, creating something completely new, something I alone could never hope to create. The discussion dragged me in, and I too began to share my ideas, adding to the excitement of the classroom. To my surprise, my wall of egotism vanished, and a new air of life breathed in me. At that moment, I began to see this class—no, this college—for what it truly was.

When I first entered this college, I had no ambition to pursue anything. I walked through its doors only to find myself counting the hours until I could leave. I expected nothing from this school, but I'm now inculcated with the ideas and flashing wisdom of hundreds of peers and instructors. I had completely overlooked the potential greatness that this institution could bring to each student, to each class, and, in particular, to me. Now, my mind has opened to this college and has been flooded with the thoughts of hundreds of students as eager and ambitious to learn as I am. This public institution of learning, so often looked down upon, has come to shape the person I've always wanted to become.

Today, as a functioning member of this vibrant community, I find myself engaged in my classes in a way that I never had before. I take courses which grab my attention, with professors who are just as eager to share their wisdom with me as I am to receive it. With every debate over the meaning of a painting in my Art History course, every question about our country's business laws in Microeconomics, or every question about the thoughts of Sartre, Kierkegaard, or Descartes in my philosophy course, I grow stronger. I, in turn, offer my skills to the community by tutoring my peers. I also participate in literary contests, and I join the many City Tech clubs, giving all I can, and receiving much more in return. My experiences, knowledge, and ambitions have joined together to create who I am, a no-longer-pessimistic student at New York City College of Technology.

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