

Introductory Letter:

Dear Reader,

The past few years have been difficult for me to say the least. This year especially threw curveballs at everyone – myself included. A major theme discussed in the following essays and throughout this class was battling the storm that the COVID-19 pandemic introduced to my life. Therefore, the pieces within this portfolio are bursts of emotion that were invigorating to write. You will notice that each piece is framed by loss – and what I’ve gained from the experience of loss as well.

The “How We Are Essay” describes loss figuratively and metaphorically. It addresses my personal experiences with COVID-19 and how I have grown through the loss that surfaced during this difficult time in my life. “The Ones We Are Supposed to Remember” presents a more literal representation of loss, where I reminisce on significant moments spent with my mom who passed away from pancreatic cancer almost three years ago. I use holidays to guide readers through detailed moments that shaped me into the person I am today. Finally, “Another Coming of Age Tale” represents the mindset associated with growing older. I have gained so much insight in my short time on Earth through moments that helped me improve as a daughter, sister, friend and person. However, my experiences are likely shared with those around me to some extent. Therefore, I wrote this piece in the third person point of view so readers can relate and imagine their own experiences through the representation of mine.

Throughout this class, I have improved as a writer through revisions and critiques from my fellow classmates. This course has been one of the first instances where I have shared personal pieces with others. I felt more connected to my work by doing so and I gained valuable insight from classmates about how to improve my writing. I also learned new techniques from my classmates about the best ways to capture readers and leave a lasting impact.

I especially enjoyed the revision process introduced in this class of reorganizing an essay by physically cutting it up and deciding what fits where. This process helped me reevaluate my essays and interpret them from a different perspective. I effectively revised my essays by taking a step back and looking at my work line by line.

My hopes for this portfolio are to reach a reader that can relate to my experiences. For the past few years I have struggled with finding others who understand how to incorporate a deep loss into their lives. I have often felt isolated in dealing with the loss of my mom at such a young age. The pandemic has intrigued loss in many forms in most people’s lives, and sharing my experiences in dealing with losses in different ways helped me grow. My goal in my writing is to encourage others to do the same. I learned throughout this class that writing about emotional moments is a great coping mechanism. Additionally, sharing these moments with readers is another way to heal and grieve.

These pieces are deeply personal illustrations of the inner workings of my brain and heart. It was extremely difficult for me to share such personal experiences with an audience, but I felt rejuvenated by doing so. There are most definitely flaws within these pieces but overall, I am

proud of my work. I gained strength from sharing my story with others. Hopefully, at least one reader will resonate with the following pieces.

I am grateful for the opportunity to take a course that challenged me as a writer. The emotional depth of writing personal essays is intriguing and I hope to continue to use writing to reflect on the obstacles that life throws at me. Once I put a pen to paper, who knows what will come next.

Sincerely,

Abby Schirmacher

“How We Are” Essay

Abby Schirmacher

The pressure to be a good human is greater than ever before.

COVID-19 divided us. Politics divided us. Life divided us. And by us, I mean our brothers and sisters, best friends and neighbors, acquaintances and lovers. The division is rotting away at the core of humanity like a plague of misery, arguments and grief. Well, this is the plague that we’re living in – literally and figuratively – so I guess it makes sense.

In my lifetime specifically, I haven’t fought a battle with the world on my side until now. This battle is eating away at every single one of us. It’s a shared connection that we could take advantage of and get through together.

I bet we all remember the moment when we realized that every person around us is fighting a battle of their own. The time when we thought, “wow if I was in their shoes right now I would feel pretty awful.”

In some of my life experiences, I’ve felt alone in the trauma that now defines me. I forget to tell myself that everyone has some form of trauma in their life. Someone once reminded me that “your 2 is someone else’s 10, while your 10 may be another’s 2.” On a scale of 1-10, a grandparent dying is a 2 for me. I lost my mom and let me tell you, that was a 10. But my friend

losing a great-grandparent was her 10. And as much as that hurt me, I had to respect it. I am obliged to level with her. That's what being a human is all about. It *is* human.

I remember some moments with my mom. She lays next to me in my bed, like she often did. She reads me a book, a simple remedy for both of us to fall asleep. Sometimes we lay there for hours, our anxieties and worries keeping us awake. Even at my young age. But we are together, and that's all that matters.

If she were lying with me today, we'd have never slept. The anxiety brought upon by COVID-19 is debilitating. But I lay alone, and maybe it's for the best. She would've hated this.

COVID isn't everyone's 10. However, the repercussions might be. I thought losing my mom was my 10. But if I lost my mom and couldn't celebrate her life at a funeral and turn to friends and family in my life to grieve... If I couldn't have that precious human interaction necessary to overcome adversities life throws my way... That would be my 10.

Loss is showing up in different ways than ever before. Those who lost someone pre-pandemic are struggling with a new obstacle in their way: weathering through without the ones who passed on. But the worst part about loss is the powerlessness we feel. Our inability to change what's gone and what happened before. The life we had before COVID will never remerge, just like the ones who are no longer with us. Loss is inevitable, which makes it hurt worse.

How are you? How am I? How are we? I guarantee no one *really* feels okay right now. Reasons to be happy appear in little bursts every day. A warm orange sunrise, a tinge of success, a smile beaming from ear to ear. We can be happy. We *should* be happy, and I will be happy for you because you're happy. Joy is contagious.

Then there's the anxiety of monstrosities flashing before our eyes on the TV screen which became a reality we never would've expected, tearing us away from the happiness residing in our bellies. We can't look away because the TV screen is all we have. It's connecting us to a world outside filled with dispute, fear, grief and loss.

So how are we? Collectively, we're broken. Inside we might be too. Maybe it's just me, but the future looks bright and feels promising once we understand that this is not meant to tear us apart, one by one. It should bring us together.

Lyric Essay: The Ones We're Supposed to Remember

We learned to write our memories down. As time passed, they became foggy. Lingered fragments of moments almost erased in our minds. We strained to remember all five senses in those moments – taste, smell, touch, sound, feeling. But life moves so fast and we forget those moments in an instant.

The first time we recorded those precious moments was Thanksgiving, 2017. Mom was sick, but I was naive. I convinced myself that she would live. Well, she convinced me. Dying wasn't an option. She wouldn't even bring it up.

All of the family was there and she revealed a jar, "I am thankful for..." beamed across the front in her messy scroll. Everyone took a scrap and cemented their gratefulness. For family, for work, for love, for life. "Starbucks and my pets," I wrote. How ridiculous, my innocent 17-year-old self. Luckily, life hit me hard the following year and Starbucks will never be on the top of my list of things that I'm grateful for again. Although, sometimes I wish it was.

At that moment, the tradition began. The following year the jar was methodically placed in the middle of the table. The centerpiece for a Thanksgiving I'll never forget. Mom weighed about 70 pounds, every bone peeking out of the crevices of her body. Her eyes glowed a bright green – jaundice. Her stomach bulged from the fluid filling her insides. She now had a port in her chest from the chemo and a port in her stomach to drain fluid. They stuck out of her skin like protruding veins. She couldn't walk, so Dad strapped her into the wheelchair that the hospice

center lent us to roll her to the Thanksgiving table. Normally, she loved turkey. Cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole. Her favorite was french silk pie from Village Inn. This year, she didn't eat. Everyone knew it was the last but me. After all, dying wasn't an option. She still didn't bring it up.

I remember some Christmases, one of which stands out. Maybe it was 2012? She would deck out the house with nutcrackers, village pieces, lights, ornaments... the full nine yards. Funny, because she was Jewish. My brother would track Santa's progress on some website and we'd sprinkle sparkles in the lawn. Reindeer food, she claimed. On Christmas Eve, the whole family would pile into the car and drive around to look at Christmas decorations. We knew the neighborhood names and the houses. One of which we called "Tin Cup" after the street it resided on. Massive crowds would gather to see incredible window displays, light shows, and decorations at this festive mansion. The owners sold the house the year before Mom died. I wish I could go and see it still, but it wouldn't have been the same without her. I'm starting to think that everything happens for a reason. The strings of life that bring us all together often work overtime to tangle in ways that will protect our hearts and souls. I'm glad that visiting the Christmas house is one less thing I have to stress about enduring without my mom. It's just gone altogether. Maybe that's some good luck in my favor.

One year we went on vacation. We never traveled. Mom and Dad are homebodies. Their happy place is the whole family being at home safe and sound. I always found this annoying growing up. But now I understand. You can't pick your family, but there's nothing in the world that I would rather do than sit at home with mine. We went to Sanibel Island, Florida with the whole

family. Dad rented a huge van to drive everyone around but they all rented their own cars too. So my brothers and I each had a row of seats to ourselves. The sand was soft, the air crisp, the sky clear. We woke up in the mornings to collect sea shells. We rode bikes around the island. We ate fish, on fish, on fish. We swam to the buoy, made sand castles, waded in the pool, soaked in the hot tub. We kayaked over manatees, drove to the lighthouse, played cards, laughed until we cried. I wish we traveled more often.

After Mom died, my dad, little brother and I visited Sanibel for spring break. I was disappointed that all of my friends were going on a trip without me. I wanted my boyfriend to come with me. I was scared to go back without Mom. We drove across Florida – Sanibel, Captiva, Naples, Key West, Bonita Springs. We talked about Mom. We brought her picture along to restaurants and set it up next to us while we ate. We woke up for a sunrise and spread her ashes on the beach. The three of us and one lone bird, circling the sky above us. She beamed from the heavens and touched us softly with her presence. She smiled down on us in approval. She was so proud of us. We could've been a wreck without her – we should've. But we're strong, tough, hard-willed, resilient. "I don't want you to be sad," she once told me. I am, but I'm not. We're okay. It ended up being the best trip I've ever had. The three of us together are **unstoppable**.

We've taken the adversity that life has thrown our way and ran with it; not just on this trip, but in general. My brother, Joe, was 13 when Mom died. She wasn't there to attend his eighth-grade graduation. She didn't get to see him without braces. She missed him growing up in a time when moms are meant to be there. To cope with his grief, he traveled across the country to several hockey camps by himself. He hired a personal trainer and began to workout to better himself. He

purchased a grand piano and taught himself in just a few short months how to play. Now, he's playing "Bohemian Rhapsody" and the soundtrack from "La La Land." The kid is brilliant.

My dad loved my mom to the ends of the earth, and would've done anything for her. I watched the "in sickness and in health" vow play out between the two when she was battling the pancreatic cancer that took her from us. He stepped up in ways no one could have ever imagined to be the best father, caregiver and husband that he could be. Following her passing, he has been the support system my brother and I have desperately needed. He's our dad but most importantly, he's our friend. The three of us tell each other everything and are blindly navigating through grief and life together. We are a team unlike any other. Therefore, we are unstoppable.

We don't celebrate Easter but Mom used to try to make it special. We would go to the Easter egg hunt in our neighborhood then I would usually go to a movie with friends. The movie theaters were the only places open. She would leave out a basket with a stuffed bunny and candy for when we woke up that morning. She reused the baskets and bunnies every year so after the day was over, they would return to their home in the storage unit.

I always looked forward to birthdays. She decorated the kitchen with streamers and made "the birthday chair" at the table. It's still a tradition but I do it now. Dad tries but he isn't the best at any of that kind of stuff. This past year, he got me the same journal that he found on a Facebook ad as he did last year. It's the thought that counts.

I used to have extravagant birthday parties at this farm near our house when I was younger. Mom would invite everyone we knew and kids could play with the animals, ride the tractors, and run around while the parents drank. As I got older, birthdays became smaller but I cherished them more. For everyone in the family, Mom got a raspberry truffle cake from our favorite bakery. It was lavishly decorated with pink macarons on top – my favorite.

Fourth of July was spent at the neighborhood pool. Mom managed the clubhouse and pretty much ran our neighborhood. She organized the pool parties every year and would drag us all along to help with set-up and clean-up. When I was old enough, I lifeguarded at the pool and I always dreaded the 4th. It was packed with bouncy castles, potlucks, screaming kids and drunk adults. In the evenings, we drove to a spot near a golf course to watch fireworks. It was the “tamale guy” spot because there was a man in a van that sat out there everyday with a homemade sign on his car that read, “tamales, red and green.” I haven’t seen him in years.

The neighborhood clubhouse closed for renovations right before Mom died and hasn’t been open since because of the pandemic. There’s a plaque on it now naming the building, “The Schirmacher Clubhouse.” It reads, “The residents of Arapahoe Ridge dedicate this community gathering place to Julie Schirmacher, whose tireless and selfless efforts to better our community have touched all of us. We welcome all to gather and enjoy the company of friends and neighbors.” They installed the plaque before the renovations, and there’s talk that the HOA is going to tear down the building anyways. They planted a tree in memory of my mom by the pool, in a corner that the sprinklers don’t reach. It died the following summer and they haven’t

bothered to take it down since. “She would be pissed,” we say everytime we walk by. It’s almost comical.

Is a deathiversary considered a holiday? People hate it when I call it that but what else am I supposed to call it? Those who don’t know how it feels to be in my position cringe when I say it and those who miss my mom desperately urge me to find a better word to celebrate her. I will admit, I do see their point of view. However, it’s the only day people care. Before Mom died, I had numerous people in my life that claimed they loved me. They said they were my best friends. Then I stopped reaching out because I was grieving and they stopped reaching out because they could care less. Every year on November 27th they come crawling back. “I love you, I miss her,” they say. “No you don’t,” I think to myself. I’ve begun to realize that’s just life though. Sometimes I wonder what she would think about that too. If only we knew before we died which people would be there for our loved ones. Life is ultimately a guessing game and everything can change in an instant. People can too.

I can only remember holidays. Maybe because I write them down. Or because I have a bad memory. Maybe it’s because they’re the ones we’re supposed to remember. Is that the purpose of holidays? Not just to celebrate? But to cement the moments in our minds? To put a tangible day, idea, and occasion towards the memories that mean the most?

Now that we write them down, I’m starting to remember. I’m terrified to forget.

Hybrid Essay: Another Coming of Age Tale

She blinked her eyes and found life rushing by, moment by moment. One day she was learning how to tie her shoes – bunny ears or the loop around – and the next she’s registering for college classes for the final time.

The girl who once refused to remove her tattered Snow White dress that was ripping at the seams, is now facing the challenge of deciding where her next chapter of life will take her. Every precious moment defined by childhood experience is slipping away. Doors are opening to adulthood while others are closing. Her memory of the times she learned to ride a bike, swim with floaties, read a book and how to live life to the fullest are slowly fading away.

She’s living the “best years of life” in a pandemic, where social interactions are sparse and anxiety is more prevalent than ever. Though the country is getting vaccinated at record speed and hopes of normalcy are on the horizon, life is unlike anything she’s ever experienced. For over a year, she’s been cooped up inside with family and a few friends. She’s ready for life to return to normal. But will it?

She used to think that life was defined by a plan. She would plan the future and be prepared for anything that may get in the way. Then poof, a global pandemic arises and she stops planning. She’s starting to think that maybe, that’s okay.

She ponders the topic of coming of age and how time changes people. Growing up shapes us as members of society and determines who we will eventually become.

According to Jennifer O'Donnell at [Verywell Family](#), “coming of age is a term used to describe the transition between childhood and adulthood. For some cultures, coming of age is determined when a child reaches a certain birthday and is no longer considered a minor; 13, 15, 16, [18](#), and 21 are commonly thought of as significant ages for young adults.”

Those years were filled with defining moments in her life, there's no doubt. But she's learning that the moments are what make the person. And those moments pop up regardless of age or year or circumstance.

She registered for her last two classes this week after deciding to graduate college a semester early. Her hopes to be a journalist don't require graduate school or additional years of overpriced college tuition. Soon, she's going to be on her own and the opportunities will be endless. It doesn't feel like it now due to the state of the economy as a result of the pandemic, but she dreams of big cities, bright lights and new opportunities.

She used to love to read and would take a weekly trip to the library in her neighborhood. She would dart to the young adult section and scour through covers until she decided on one that caught her eye. She would usually take 3-4 books home to finish in a week and return to the library and do it all over again. She thrived off of romance novels and stories of characters who

are struggling to make their way through the intense journey that we call life. She pretended to be alongside the characters, imagining detailed scenes as if she were there too.

There was a time when she was a little girl who loved to play at parks, swim in pools and run through fields. Adventure was her middle name and she beamed in the sun. She made friends along the way and challenged them to take life by the arm and guide it through each day.

Middle school was hard. She made friends, they fought, they grew apart and she made new ones. Girls were mean and she was insecure. She tried her best to be the person that everyone else wanted her to be. It wasn't until much later in life that she realized there was no use being someone she wasn't. She would eventually realize that happiness came from within.

When she was 16 she fell in love. She craved this boy and would move mountains for him. She did. She ignored red flags and pushed her friends away. She convinced herself that she was happy. He was her support system through many ups and downs. He was there when nobody else was. He was there when her mom took her last breath. He distracted her from the perils of watching her mom deteriorate from cancer. He drove her brother to and from school when nobody else could. He meant everything to her.

One day, he broke her heart. On her 20th birthday he chose another girl over her. She grappled with her own feelings of insecurity and weak self-worth, but also felt betrayed by him. He had sat next to her at her mother's funeral. He had been by her side for 4 years. He broke her.

She spent the following two weeks alone in her room, because she contracted COVID-19 the day he broke up with her. She was miserable, but not at her lowest point. She realized that even though life will throw daunting challenges and curveballs her way, the sun will always come out. And that's a reason to smile.

There was a time when she was experiencing difficulty in school. It was fifth grade, and she felt anxious to leave the house. Anxious to spend time with friends. Always anxious. Her parents began taking her to a therapist, where she would build blocks and color on paper. She didn't understand why she was there. To this day, she still doesn't. But the therapist helped her learn how to cope with anxiety, and from then on she figured out how to help herself.

She hasn't seen a therapist since. After all, according to the [Anxiety & Depression Association of America](#), "anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the U.S., affecting 40 million adults in the United States age 18 and older, or 18.1% of the population every year. Anxiety disorders are highly treatable, yet only 36.9% of those suffering receive treatment."

She was always very active and excelled in school. Nobody ever told her she had to maintain good grades or that homework was due. She took pride in being a student and held herself accountable. That also meant that she held herself to very high standards that were often difficult to reach. Cue the anxiety. But it made her the person she is today and she wouldn't trade that for the world.

She still drives through her home town and is overcome by memories of specific places. The route she would take to cheer practice. The highschool football field where she would gather with her friends under the Friday night lights. The Dairy Queen where she would walk with her mom and dog to get an Oreo Royal Shake. Now, both her mom and dog are smiling down on her from the heavens. The street that led to her childhood best friend's house. The Safeway that her family visited every week to buy groceries. The mediteranean restaurant that her family loved. The red light where her ex-boyfriend used to turn and kiss her in the passenger seat. The home that she lived in her whole life. The purple bedroom that still looks just like it always has. The room that her mother peacefully passed away in.

She is me. And I am probably just like you. We're all the same when it comes to growing older and paving the paths of our future and the lives ahead of us. The little bumps along the way make us who we are – they make us human.

The future is scary, but I'm trying to remember moments from my past. The moments that make me, me. Those moments that make my heart hurt or sing. Those moments that will make all the difference.