

My take on the Common Application Personal Statement – 2026:

Sometimes story is what you need to make sense out of all the disparate pieces. But the way we tell even the same story can change with time; what we remember from our own past shifts based on the meaning we seek to make sense of our present.

My 9th grade classroom, plastic chair-desk in the third rows. We read *1984* when that year still lay in the future, although, with President Reagan, we wondered. Senior year, the Challenger space shuttle exploded followed a few months later by Chernobyl; in between my AP English teacher sat on his big desk, long legs dangling, expounding on *Heart of Darkness*. Why are these the moments I remember now, when reading the endless stream of breaking news?

I've been reediting my short story from 2018, based on time I spent in Poland in 1992. The 2018 version of me was still enamored with the overall 1992 vibes: the Wild Wild East, the winds of freedom blowing for those former eastern bloc countries. She didn't wonder, as I do now, what did we do? Now I wonder, did we ask enough questions? And would that have changed anything, or is the current of history simply too strong to swim against?

In 1992, I went to a Passover seder in Warsaw, where the entire still-living Jewish community could fit around several folding tables pushed together, where unvisited museums in former ghettos held dusty everyday Jewish objects that looked like they belonged in my grandmother's house. Whose responsibility is it to tell the stories of those who aren't here anymore? A Polish friend asked me. The question that haunts me to this day.

My grandmother liked to say that you can never put your foot in the same river twice. She loved to read philosophy, anthropology, history, anything to make sense of her world, the changing river, her constantly evolving foot. The only true constant is change.

It's taken me a while to embrace that idea. I'm not sure I'm quite there yet.

I visited East Berlin in March 1989, six months before the wall came down. But there was no hint of that at the time, those gray gray streets and dingy sidewalks and all the guards and tinny light coins that bought you chalky pastries; the color and flavor all lay on the other side of the concrete wall and barbed wire, the one with my fortunate passport, I was able to cross just for the day. By the end of that year, all passports could. In a few years, Checkpoint Charlie would be nothing more than a tourist attraction. And if that hadn't happened?

At the beginning of 2025, we planted weeds in our yard to combat climate change-charged drought. Two days later, intense Santa Ana winds abducted those seeds we'd scattered and fueled catastrophic fires that threw life in Los Angeles into a disarray that continues to this day.

In 2026, we tried again, with rain in the forecast. This time, given a half-decent chance, the clover took root. Green resilience blooms with the right opportunity.

These days, I'm finding some comfort in mysteries. I think it's the unravelling that appeals most, learning not only what happened, but also what could have been.

In coaching an idealistic student applying to graduate school on what to write for his admissions essay, we talked head-on about hope. I told him that in March 1989 when I crossed to and then from an entirely separated East Berlin, the streets that crossed countries, I had no idea of what lay ahead. Drawing a straight line from then to the future would have taken me somewhere entirely else.

Back and forth. Spirals and circles. Such is my story, all that has led me to today. Unsettled. Uncertain. But illuminated by hope of the unexpected. In that flux, the way both change: the river, and us.

My take on the Common Application Personal Statement – 2024:

You are a “Glass Child.” Not fragile, but rather, transparent.

Your younger brother had so many problems: learning, language acquisition, social skills, physical health, sensory issues, poor coordination, not to mention the odd habit of eating rubber erasers. But in the 1970s and early 80s, there was no diagnosis, no popular understanding of neurodivergence, no specialists or therapies or social support. Only misguided blame and shame. Given that context, can you really fault your parents, your whole extended family, your brother himself, for attempting to pretend nothing was different, or wrong?

You didn’t share your brother’s particular constellation of problems. Things that posed substantial challenges for him came easily to you. Academics, making friends, playing any childhood game (without cheating) that involved a ball. But, if your brother was “normal,” then...?

A shadow of uninvited one-sided competition eclipses your family. Somehow, you always end up feeling guilty, internalizing the judgement of cousins or family friends who haven’t lived the particulars of your situation, who offer unsolicited advice to the 4- and 6- and 9-year-old you: “be the bigger person”, “set a good example,” “be a good sister,” “just try to understand.”

You learn to not have problems. Or none that you dare share with you family. At night, you dream about luggage. So many bags, requiring multiple trips to move everything. And you have no idea what’s inside. Not really. Only that these belong to you, somehow, and you’re supposed to keep track of them. And that this keeps you from everything else.

In the days, you become hyper-capable. High-achieving (school isn’t home). Independent. Hyper-driven to go out into the world to forge your own path. You become valedictorian, involved in debate, journalism, tutoring, zero period philosophy class. You attend a prestigious university, another for grad school; earn well-regarded summer internships in DC (Congressman, then State Department); study overseas, Fulbright Teaching Fellowship in France; travel further: Poland, Israel, Uzbekistan where finally you feel as far as you possibly could be from home, geographically, culturally, emotionally, without coming back closer.

And yet.

Even that far away, you are still *you*. That familiar nag of guilt and longing, of outsider-ness, always on the edges, never in the center; of not deserving. “Wherever you go,” your therapist will tell you one day, “there *you* are.”

You decide to return to where your family still lives, to create a new home there for the now-you. To show yourself that you are in fact a good person, capable of not only achievement, but love.

You try different careers, hobbies (rollerblading, biking, yoga); you expand, say yes to (almost) every invitation. You forge adult relationships with your grandmothers, cousins, parents; even your brother, once you realize what he is and isn't capable of, because of who he is and how his brain works. In 2005, when a friend's child is diagnosed, you read about Autism Spectrum Disorders; how much that explains about your brother. Later, you learn the term "Glass Child": the sibling of someone with significant health issues or other needs that subsume nearly all a well-intentioned family's time and attention. The TED Talk makes you sob with recognition. As if seeing yourself for the first time.

Grasping that you are not alone.

You realize that many of your closest friends have siblings they hardly mention who are addicts, or struggling with serious physical or mental illness. And while each situation is distinct, you also share much.

And, while the identity of "glass child" doesn't answer all your lingering questions, it helps you begin to understand; it's an authentic origin story for what you've grown to consider your personal superpowers: deep empathy; resourcefulness and the ability to think unconventionally about what can be done within limits; and most of all courage, to face and understand the gray areas most prefer to avoid, the deep complexities of situations, of relationships, of every one of us.