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Espresso Yourself

It’s a hole-in-the-wall type of place. Across a street, down a brick alleyway. A multicolored sign standing awkwardly in the middle of the brick sidewalk promising coffee and a word I don’t quite recognize – *valor*.

Coffee. A drink I don’t understand quite yet. It’s strong and dark, tolerable only when masked by foamy milk and sweet caramel syrup. For me, a treat for a once-in-a-while; although the majority of my country requires it to function daily.

 My backpack droops slightly, heavy with textbooks and binders. Notebooks and worksheets. I should get going; logic and the drooping sun, threatening to set, tell me to continue down the brick sidewalks along the busy streets on my way to the local library. But my achy back and school-prompted fatigue tells me otherwise, so I’m compelled to enter. It couldn’t hurt to get a bit of caffeine in my system.

 Five minutes later, I emerge with a steaming cup in my hand. It’s white and flimsy, yet strong and valiant, decorated minimally and containing a revitalizing array of character. Espresso, steamed milk, caramel, cardamom. I turn the cup in my hands and let a hesitant smile slip, spotting the peculiar word again on its front – *valor*.

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 Valor is defined as the trait of having great courage in the face of danger or battle. You wouldn’t think it’s something people of our society would tend to possess considering the sedentary nature of the average lifestyle. Jobs requiring danger and physical courage have grown scarce, and the ones which still do are strictly regulated by the government. The average citizen faces minimal daily risk, and social contract and law have fostered order. The progression to society and urbanization has generalized the modern lifestyle into one of safety and ease without the prominence of violence and danger which plagued the lives of our ancestors.

But in the same, our society requires valor in its own way. For, as violence and barbaric danger has slipped away, as society has gained massive control in dictating lifestyle, in has crept pressure and hardship – financial, academic, occupational, legal. Blaring alarms and early mornings followed by late nights with notebooks and papers and textbooks. For students, due dates, constant assessment, report cards, the pressure to graduate and, for some, move on to college. Promotion, evaluation, and the threat of dismissal for professionals in the work environment.

People act quite differently when under pressure. Some thrive – dance under the stress, power through it, display great courage in its face. Many simply crack; take the easy way out, live lives of mediocracy and ease but lack the experience of recognition and accomplishment.

The ones, however, who choose danger; the ones who take on difficulty, who pursue high-reaching careers and graduate top in their classes and embrace their primal thirst for challenge, typically find themselves reliant. Almost nobody can tolerate the late nights, early mornings, and generalized pressure which come with the pursuit of the modern lifestyle without leaning on some sort of pick-me-up. A reason to crawl out of bed in early mornings, even before the sun himself has arisen.

For the majority of the country, the energizer is coffee. It’s become a profound aspect of the common lifestyle. Wake up groggy, mug of coffee. Another in a to-go-cup and out the door. Refill at work to keep the fatigue from creeping in. It’s a wicked cycle.

Others perceive coffee drinkers as wide-eyed, jittery, energetic individuals. Morning people. We walk slightly quicker on the sidewalks, are the first in the office, and seem to lack the typical fog of morning weariness which irks so many working Americans. Those of us who choose to caffeinate don’t simply make up a mere fraction of the country; our group has grown to be a whopping majority. The Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health reported that fifty-four percent of Americans over the age of eighteen drink coffee every day, drinking an average of 3.1 cups per day (Harvard). Financially, the United States spends an estimated $40 billion on coffee each year (Harvard).

I became a part of the vast group of coffee-drinkers at the mere age of fourteen – my freshman year of high school. With an AP class and four honors classes on the weekdays as well as a part time job at the brink of dawn each Saturday and Sunday, I found myself with an abrupt abundance of late study nights and early morning shifts. It began with the occasional iced coffee while studying at Starbucks, but these Starbucks sessions grew more and more consistent and regular. Many shots of espresso later, I was in tenth grade with two AP classes, a heightened workload, a new coffee spot and an espresso machine of my own. Quite the lethal combination.

But after dozens of mochas and caramel lattes – hot and iced – my coffee-drinking grew to be about more than just energy and vitality and caffeine withdrawals. It became about weekday visits to new cafes, about the reassuring walk to my favorite coffee shop, about feeling compelled to pursue academic success and about feeling strong and courageous in the face of academic battle. I’d begun to feel like part of a community – *my* community – primarily after discovering a peculiar hole-in-the-wall coffee shop in my own town, downtown Alpharetta, known as Valor.

I liked the taste of their espresso. The way they steamed their milk. Topped it off with caramel cardamom and slapped it into a funky cup. It was the perfect latte.

However, my frequent return to this newfound coffee shop wasn’t simply the quality of their coffee, but the values, attitude, and overall mood of its existence. The owners – three young guys, passionate about community outreach and ethical business tactics – sought to make each customer feel valued. They got to know you; asked about your day, inquired about your intentions. Upon my returns, they remembered my name. My order. Asked about my job, school, academic workload and studying plans for the day.

Although I made frequent trips to the spot, I never asked about the intentions, goals, values they possessed in running their shop. For that reason, I had many inquiries on a windy, lively day in the midst of January when I had the opportunity to interview one of Valor’s owners – Ross.

Apprehensively scanning my list of questions with uncertainty, I inhaled the shop’s features. Clouded by a smell reminiscent of vibrant coffee bean, the small shop even more smelled of community. Outreach and interaction. Petite enough inside to cram people close together. Almost uncomfortably close, yet brilliantly close. Breaking the threshold of boundary. I was uncertain whether my questions could encapsulate the rich atmosphere of community essence which was so densely abundant here.

*How has owning a coffee shop shaped your ties with the community? How has it altered the relationships you have with those surrounding you?*

“It’s cool to have a place where people can come in and make their day better. Even if it’s just in a small way. You build them up, and the hope is that they leave and, in turn, go build up the people around them.”

*What is your main goal here? What compels you to do what you do?*

“I like the idea that everyone in here feel seen. And loved. And *cared* for. It gets me psyched.”

For them, coffee isn’t about the money. It’s not about the way it tastes, about the way the caffeine makes them feel and about the way it warms them up on the inside. It’s about community. About the *love* of people. It’s about providing customers with both a warm beverage and a positive attitude to start their mornings because, in this day and age, the local café is commonly the first place someone goes upon waking; the first interaction someone has to start their day.

 It is the culture and simplicity of local coffee shops such as Valor which tightens and fosters not only the community of coffee drinkers, but the community of people. Arian Horbovetz described in his article, “The Power of the Coffee Shop” how local coffee shops are, “local alternatives to Starbucks” and the way they, “bring people around a simple, daily routine” (Horbovetz). He described them as, “places we visit on the way to work” or “comfy places to study” or even “meeting places for good friends” providing a “loose, cozy, commitment-free venue where everyone can feel comfortable” (Horbovetz).

 My favorite coffee shop serves that exact purpose in downtown Alpharetta, and it has too served its purpose in shaping my own identity. I’ve been exposed to entirely new perception of my hometown – one of admiration, of wonder, and of value. I’ve found comfort in its presence, and I’ve learnt to value the hidden gems and centers of community which make my perspective of downtown more precious.

Most impactful of all, I’ve built relationships within my local community of coffee drinkers and learned to treasure the people I interact with. It’s easy to love those who you see on a daily basis – your family, friends, coworkers, schoolmates – but being exposed to this community has altered the way I value even the most seemingly insignificant interactions with others. Looking forwards to the friendliness which radiates throughout the shop, the goofy smiles, the constant positivity and the high standards of customer service that they’ve implemented has taught me to apply these positive interactions with customers at my own job.

Local, hole-in-the wall coffee shops form the hearts of downtown communities. They’re atmospheres of productivity, interaction, community building, and revitalization for all aware of their presence. For me, they’ve become centers of growth in identity and personal empowerment.

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 Coffee grinds in the palm of my hand. They’re coarse and dark, slightly damp, smelling reminiscent of distant early mornings and street lights with a hint of darkish chocolate and brown sugar. The blend name on the package says “Freethrow – *It’s a slam dunk*”. The label on the bag from which they came tells me that the coffee originated in Guatemala and Ethiopia. They’ve traveled rather far from home.

 I, on the other hand, haven’t traveled far from my origin. In fact, I’ve stayed put in the same, small town all my life. Downtown Alpharetta. A bubble with particularly low crime, top schools, and minimal economic trouble.

 My parents were present, but let me be. They taught me to be smart, to be strong, to be driven, and to pursue my personal values to the best of my ability, yet they enforced no boundaries or molding of their own on my identity. Rather, I was allowed to dictate, grow, and develop my own identity with unfailing support no matter where I went. They praised me when I wrote poetry and stories as a young child, supported me when I explored a vast plethora of sports, understood when I quit them all together for my interest in cooking, and allowed me to regulate my own grades and academic progress from the time that I received my first report card. Self-regulation and self-advocacy were instilled deeply into my core of values.

Through the years, I took on the hardest classes possible and held myself up to the highest standards with regards to academics. By freshman year, school was a battle – a battle over numbers and report cards, eighty-nines and nineties, grade point averages and PSAT conversions.

Productivity became a frequent affair – early mornings, late nights, and long school days were sacrificed to it and sleep became rather scarce. Drinking coffee, however, made the late nights bearable and the early mornings endurable.

Coffee chains and marketers thrive off of the mindset of constant productivity, especially in buzzing city areas in which people – particularly workers – are expected to be productive at all times. Krystal D’Costa, in her article “The Culture of Coffee Drinkers” asserted that, “we’re surrounded by coffee and caffeine” because our society has morphed into one in which there is a, “demand for productivity at all hours” (D’Costa). For many, including myself, coffee doesn’t solely get the day started, but it, “gets us through the day” (D’Costa).

 Coffee’s origin is widely associated with the legend of Kaldi the dancing goats. It tells the story of an Ethiopian goatherd called Kaldi who, “observed his goats prancing and frolicking about” (Lokker). Upon investigating, he saw that the goats were, “merrily eating the red berries and shiny leaves” of a tree which he didn’t recognize. After trying some of the berries, he joined the goats in their dancing and became the “happiest herder in happy Arabia” (Lokker). A monk soon passed by the caffeinated crew of frolickers; Kaldi told him about the berries, and the monk realized that they were the “answer to his prayers” (Lokker). Trying the berries, he realized that, “when he ate the berries, he stayed awake” and he thus decided on “drying and boiling” them to “make a beverage” (Lokker). According to the legend, coffee was thus introduced to human society and soon spread throughout all of civilization.

Perhaps, like the Monk, Kaldi, and his dancing goats, I fell in love with coffee for its highly stimulating, fatigue-numbing, almost drug-like properties and addictiveness. It is a quick solution for getting us through “non-optimal periods for productivity” as it “tends to cross from the bloodstream into the brain quickly” allowing us to “feel its effects relatively quickly” (D’Costa).

When my nights grew late with studies, when work mornings and alarms came painfully early, the boost of caffeine provided by coffee became my crutch. It made the days bearable, numbed me to fatigue, and compelled me to persist.

The generalized, almost daily exposure to caffeine was a small price to pay for the academic success I experienced in return. I could focus, concentrate, tune in; be present with the work and tolerate the long periods of concentration. In fact, its impact on my identity has been far more lasting and precious.

I’ve been molded into someone who values productivity, academic success, and the pursuit of my absolute best in everything that I do. My goals have been reshaped and realigned; rather than put in the bare minimum effort and thus receive the bare minimum results, I strive to put my best effort into every situation. My perception of my own self has shifted drastically following my partaking in the consumption of coffee. It provided me with a means of reaching my academic goals; after reaching those goals, I learned to recognize and perceive strength, persistence, and a passionate will for success within myself which have bubbled and dwelled internally for too long.

Perhaps I have traveled far from my origin. Not geographically, like my favorite Ethiopian coffee grinds, but internally. In the way in which I perceive myself and my identity, in the way I value my community, in the relationships which I’ve formed, in the academic values I’ve developed, in the drive I feel to succeed, and in the way I handle adversity. Perhaps I’ve traveled exceptionally far from home.

The ride here has been bumpy. Exhausting. It’s required me to portray a *hell* of a lot of valor. I frequently pause and contemplate why I persist in fighting such a constant battle; why I continue to push my own thresholds, test my own boundaries, wake up early, work long hours, and take on such challenge particularly in academics.

But then I consider what my everyday latte has revealed about my identity. I *thrive* under pressure. I *like* difficulty. Paired with a bit of caffeine, challenge keeps my days motivating, my brain spinning, and my heart content.

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*I’m not quite sure who I am.*

 That’s slightly daunting, considering that I live in a society in which, by my age, I’m expected to have at least the slightest idea or taste of my own identity. Identity, simply put, is the internalization of values, pursuits, and perceptions which are inflicted upon us by culture and family and should align with one’s “authentic self” in order to achieve fulfillment (Heshmat, Ph.D.). I know that I like challenge. I like adventure and difficulty. I like solving issues and situations which make me think; I like hardships which make me learn, grow, and adapt. I like versatility and diversity; periodic change which fosters exponential personal progress. I value learning and education, the pursuit and power of knowledge.

I like the serenity of the countryside on summer evenings, but the way the city bustles with productivity on winter mornings. It makes me feel exponentially powerful. I like colorfully scented candles and the vastness of nightfall and the primal tranquility of nature.

 I like the occasional simplicity of a cold brew iced coffee, and the depth of an iced latte. The soothing warmth of a hot caramel latte and the harsh bitterness of espresso to wake me up when I need it.

 All of these values, these desires and likes, however, solely blend into a peculiar sort of mish-mash of color and character and ambiguity. My identity, who I am, is still a densely gray area. Psychologists tell us that harnessing the meaning of life and internal joy is as simple as acquiring one’s identity, choosing one’s purposes, and fulfilling those purposes. As if life, in its deeply confounding complexity, is as simplistic as the plot of a Disney movie. It’s comically pathetic.

 I’m not in a rush to find the essence of my identity like some sort of clear truth of certainty. It’s far too fluid and complex to be harnessed and implemented like concrete. I’d rather spend my life pursuing irrational, passionate desire than live solely with the intention of understanding myself.

I am a lot of things. Daughter, sister, coffee-lover, strained student, young worker, challenge-chaser. But in the same, I am *not* a lot of things. Perhaps, one day, espresso, time, and my portrayal of valor will blend together to reveal the peculiar thing which society calls my identity.

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