More Hydra than Hercules:

Overcoming Setbacks through the Mechanisms of Antifragility and Perspective

When it comes to Greek mythological tales, Hercules' seems worth idolizing. We look at how mighty he is, to champion his doubters and gods while moving throughout his twelve labors, and upon his death, to his ascent to the status of a god. Hercules was about overcoming adversity to rise to a pinnacle, and even today that sense of overcoming is a deeply embedded and modern day American characteristic, if not narrative. While the theme of his story is in tune with the theme of this essay, it is worth noting that the star to learn from was not Hercules alone. The one that teaches us the most is one of his labors: Hydra, the mythological serpent creature of ever-growing, snapping heads. That might sound backward, but I will not only show why Hercules won, but also why Hydra was more human in its response. We want to be Hydra and hope for the swords of change.

Across my collegiate arc, I found tremendous reassurance in the stories of how people overcome change, life’s true constant. Our defining moments can be setbacks, which might initiate unexpected surprises and open up blueprints for the future. Obstacles, even ruin, may seem traumatic in the moment, but they are frequently smoothed over with time. Moreover, we benefit from the experience acquired throughout the process of recovering from failure. As the late Dr. Randy Pausch, Professor of Virtual Reality at Carnegie Mellon, and author of The Last Lecture put it: “Experience is what you get when you didn’t get what you wanted” (Pausch). From that perspective, it seems we tend
to learn far more from our defeats than our victories. But why? This leads us to the overarching theme of this reflective essay: how we overcome obstacles and continue on, despite all that deny us.

Obstacles are there for a reason, noted Marcus Aurelius, the last of the “Five Good Emperors” of the Roman Empire. Two millennia ago, Aurelius wrote: “The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way” (Aurelius, Hays translation). The most important part about obstacles is how we respond to them, whether they are an unwanted adversary, an unlucky turn of events, or the loss of a loved one. Even one of Pausch’s mantras, carved out of his battle against cancer, echoes this: “The brick walls are there for a reason. They’re not there to keep us out. The brick walls are there to give us a chance to show how badly we want something” (Pausch).

For better or worse, we find ourselves in experiences that shake us. Some buckle under the weight; others thrive under the harsh spotlight. There are numerous reasons why some break down and others succeed despite hardship; we will dive into some of the overarching reasons why. Essentially, from my own background, I seek to understand the mechanisms behind how we respond because I have seen myself grow wonderfully, intellectually, and as a person; meanwhile, others are crippled by their losses. How can failure work for us rather than against us? I might not always bounce back quickly from adversity, but I feel undeniably better as a result of loss, in the long run. I lost mentors and realized how important they were to me. I found a new sense of purpose in the journey of rebirth through the crucible of hardship. I lost several bones in my wrist yet gained the perspective of so many people who have lost in their lives and never recovered. Rebirth (or simply starting over) is a cornerstone of self-growth, and there is a technical framework underlying it.

Our responses to life’s challenges can be explained by the triad of “antifragility.” Levantine philosopher and author of *The Black Swan, Fooled by Randomness,* and *Antifragile,* Nassim
Nicholas Taleb coined the term “antifragile”: that which gets stronger upon breaking, like humans improving due to adversity. The concept of antifragile, albeit a new term in scientific and philosophical discourse, is supported by various discourses and research, from gaming to post-traumatic growth. Antifragility can be understood from three scenarios. Picture a box labeled “fragile,” if it is shaken, it breaks. Taleb’s question follows: what do we think is the opposite of fragile? Some would answer “robust,” yet robust, that which remains, is not direct opposite of fragile, that which breaks. Robustness is how something returns to normal, like a sturdy building after an earthquake or an item in the box that simply does not break. Taleb took this even further to his conclusion: antifragile, that which gets better upon breaking. Examples include: the heads of Hydra in mythology, where two heads grow back when one is removed; or, the muscles of the human body, which tear in order to build anew, stronger than before (Taleb). Using this triad, I am able to review an expansive collegiate career that grows tremendously over time, and not despite the setbacks, but because of them. “Antifragility” will serve as the underlying framework for this reflective journey.

Dr. Jane McGonigal, gamification expert and researcher at the Institute for the Future, also had a traumatic experience that shaped her studies. Her research in quests and gamification support the notion of antifragility, albeit indirectly. After suffering from a concussion, she vividly recalls how her brain injury induced a deep depression with suicidal thoughts. She dove into the work of “post-traumatic growth,” where “some individuals find that struggling with highly challenging life circumstances helps them unleash their best qualities and eventually lead happier lives” (McGonigal). Her book, SuperBetter, details an expansive array of research on the matter. McGonigal was particularly concerned with how “quests” might provide a valuable alternative to outright trauma. A critical part of the antifragility is the ebb and flow between recovery and the journey. This is also found in our
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mythological battle with Hercules, where Hydra needed to buy time in order for the two heads to appear. Only when Hercules eliminated recovery was he able to defeat Hydra. Throughout my journey we will also mark the points of recovery as a key ingredient for antifragility.

It was in the process of rebuilding that I found the pieces of myself I needed most. Through my Ora Sublette Scholarship, Nassim Taleb’s Antifragile, my “Brief History of Imagination” course binder, my La mia rivoluzione folder, Dr. McGavran’s Romanticism class and his support, a Founding Storyteller piece for Maptia.com, and the screws embedded in my left wrist, I will be able to show how I have grown intellectually and personally through my college experience.

When it comes to looking back and reflecting on our journey, I go back to before Charlotte was even a reality to me. The only way for me to search for what helps us overcome our obstacles is to describe my own hardship. The greatest brick wall before me was how to find a way to get to college. For reasons that would need another essay, my mother kicked me out of the house. She slammed the door with two parting messages: first, “you’re worthless,” and second, “you have no effin’ chance at college.” No other quotations are more permanently fundamental to who I am now. With little to no support system given all our moving up and down the eastern seaboard, I found myself homeless: meek, hungry, and begging for a chance to start over—when I wasn’t begging for a meal. I had no confidence to speak of, and barely spoke at all. I camped out on a small island in the international waterway near the bridge that connects tourists to Daytona Beach, a prime spot to solicit people for help.

I learned first-hand that a lot of the connotations and perspectives surrounding poverty are vastly out of proportion. From my experience, we lose much of what makes us problem-solvers and pattern-finders when we are lost in homelessness. It is ruin for many: everything is gone; the past, the future, today. This is where few have the strength to recover. I found my perspective hijacked by stress
and my ability to search for options reduced to a tunnel vision that only sees obstacles and problems in the way. That is the day-to-day woe, an ever-current of stress and worry that cripples some people past the point of no return, as we see them mumbling to themselves hunched in a corner or genuinely trying to find a glimmer of hope. This emotional deregulation clouds our judgment and perspective. Back then, it would have been beneficial in the short-term to dive into darker alternatives: drugs, cigarettes, anything which makes people feel numb to their circumstances. Thankfully I didn’t succumb to these harsh realities. Somehow, despite the terrible sense of helplessness our society projects on the homeless and impoverished, I realized there weren’t many other options and I had to look for help.

Though I barely knew him, I reached out and reconnected with my father. I knew that I was not able to keep up the draining and repetitive routine of homelessness for long, nor did I feel like I was making any progress toward my goal of college whatsoever. At some point I realized that I simply had nothing to lose by reaching out to him. My mother’s side of the family had already rejected me from my mother’s lies, given her tendency to taint reality; my father was likely a better person than she led me to believe. Despite the poisoned-well of things I was told about him, he welcomed me in with open arms after thirteen long-gone years.

He immediately drove down from North Carolina to get me, and put me up in a Marriott Hotel while he was on the way. I distinctly recall writing on the free hotel-provided pad of paper about how I was going to completely start over. No matter the obstacles, I was not only going to college, but do as much as possible to make it a valuable experience. It turned out he was a cheery, go-get-’em 20-years-older version of myself. Within two weeks, I ended up transferring into my fifth high school to finish my fifth year and hope for a shot at college.
Quite simply, our challenges are not ours to fight alone; for me, it was my father providing time to recover. We can be pushed into corners where our only recourse is to reach out for help. I did not have the social network or mentors to help out at the time. Moreover, my mother tainted any ability to reach out to any of her relatives by warping the situation with lies, claiming I was “an abusive son on the run.” My only connection, albeit weak, was my father. Sometimes, the challenges before us are useful in that they help us recognize that other people can boost us over the brick wall toward the other side. Many of those still drowning in the darker realities of homelessness have no support system whatsoever. I was genuinely lucky not only to reconnect with my father, but find out that he had wanted to be there from the start.

Naturally, however, challenges are not simply removed by a reset button, each change in scenery will bring new challenges. As Jennifer Hecht put it in The Happiness Myth: “When life circumstances change, the situation turns worse, since none of your long-developed shortcuts and coping methods work now. You crash into walls” (Hecht, ). When I started at Ragsdale High School for my final year, I was met with severe disdain and several walls from admissions. In my first meeting with my academic counselor, I was treated as a failure. My transcript was scarred by four transfers, and admissions held this firm belief that the only reason I could have so many transfers, without being military, was that I was nothing but trouble. Older than my classmates with a underdeveloped, disproportionate physique made me look more like a kid who did drugs than a student who wanted more than honors classes.

At the start I was told all of what I wasn’t allowed, all that I wouldn’t be given, and all of the restrictions that would be imposed upon me. The most painful charge was that I was not allowed to take AP courses, with completely arbitrary reasoning behind it. When I showed the counselor the AP
courses I was scheduled to take in Florida, she stated: “Oh but there was summer work and you won’t be able to turn it in on time.” I replied by taking out a stack of inch-thick paper and handed her all the AP coursework. Yet another quotation for the archives: “You weren’t told to do that. Who told you to do that?” I replied, “I looked it up online, because I’d like these courses.” It was a defining moment that set the tone for my final year, as I took charge of my circumstances instead of being a victim to their unrelenting waves.

Far removed from the toxicity of Florida and given a new chance, I found a surge of strength and self-determination that I had never felt before. The basis for this surge came from not only my own motivation to go to college, but the safety and security I felt at home. While there were initial worries about how this chapter would unfold, my father reassured me by giving me the comforts expected of a growing teenager: three meals a day, a room of my own, belongings that were not dangled above my head, and so forth. Instead of coming home to fights and arguments, I came home to laughter and dinner. That was a tremendous emotional shift for me. This type of change is found in the fabric of nature, too. As Lisa Heschong wrote in *Thermal Delight in Architecture*:

> Each species [...] has definite limits within which it can survive and an even narrower range of temperatures [...] Ecologists have discovered that as little as a 2°F change in the average temperature of a lake will shift the dominant fish population from bass to catfish as one species becomes more efficient [...] Thus, not only extremes but even subtle variations can be critical to an animal’s survival. (Heschong)

She continues by stating that “the most direct way to cope with an adverse climate is simply to not be there when it gets too hot or too cold. [...] Migration is a way not to be there without a seasonal pause in activity” (Heschong). My father offered me the complete opposite of a toxic climate, which
allowed me to thrive. As much as antifragility attributes its philosophy to the test of the individual, there is a tremendous compounding effect derived from the nurturing of others and our own “climate,” underscoring Heschong’s argument. Other people can make us antifragile. Without any worries about safety or food, I could focus on school entirely. My father was rooting for me as well, and having someone in our corner provides a tremendous boost to our work ethic. Regardless of my advocacy for AP courses, she gave me two of the eight courses, AP English and AP European History. We cannot always slay every dragon.

I managed to excel my final year with a stellar academic record and a remarkable presence on Ragsdale campus. I joined the football team as their lead videographer, which put me in the same social circles as the campus heavy-weights. Despite my shy nature from an isolating amount of transfers, “the guys” having my back sparked an immediate sense of reassurance and comfort. In addition, one of the more popular ladies on campus invited me to homecoming with her. All these little social victories brought me to the belief that I can be loved, that I am worthwhile, despite the my mother’s remaining daggers. Regardless of how many times I have started over in a new school, each experience was exactly that: a new start. This particular reset manifested in exponential fashion not only out of serendipity, but the recovery in time, a foundation in my new environment, and the monumental perspective shift having “survived” homelessness. Few things seem troublesome after life-altering experiences. My meteoric rise on-campus was two-fold: first, I was one of a handful of transfers, which instantly made me stand out among classmates that had known each other throughout school; secondly, my traumatic experience gave me a new start point, one where I could become the fun-loving and go-lucky person I am at my core, without such tremendous and crippling worry. I am not so sure it was
a conscious decision to be happier and cheery so much as it was exuding happiness because of how grateful I was to have another chance.

When the time came to apply for college, my mother’s words hung over me like storm clouds. Even with recent success, doubt can cripple our future by bringing up all the mistakes of the past. Our inner critic feasts on fear and doubt, and I began to wonder if I belonged. UNC Chapel Hill was the first to reply, with a rejection. NC State put me on the waitlist. But next to Chapel Hill at a college fair in Greensboro was UNC Charlotte, which was warm and inviting. I described my tortured transcript to a few UNC Charlotte recruiters and each was receptive. There was something about their warmth. Heschong describes this thermal delight, but substitute “things” and “object” with places or people:

Like the toddler, we tend to cherish the things that have provided us with warmth or coolness just when we needed or wanted it. This association between an object and our thermal well-being may become semiconscious and vague, and yet it can strongly contribute to our affection for the object. How hard it is to give up the old misshapen sweater or the old shade hat that kept the sun off for so long. They are rather like old friends who have done us a good turn over and over again. (Heschong)

As mentioned earlier, sometimes it is other people which serve as our beacons to shore. In the end, this entire story was written and submitted as the essay portion for a scholarship to college. There was a $5000 scholarship, the Ora Sublette, “for perseverance despite hardship” throughout high school. It serves as the symbol for the tumultuous year because it provided the realization of my dream: to go to college and show I have far better than “no effin’ chance.” The scholarship would help fund my first year at UNC Charlotte. The day I was told I won the award, I called my father and we both broke down in tears. I was accepted into UNC Charlotte’s Leadership Journey Learning Community and offered a
home at Lynch Hall the next day. Coincidentally, I will graduate from Charlotte on May 14th. I was told about my scholarship on May 15th, and was accepted May 16th. Needless to say, mid-May is a favorable time of the year.

Once I arrived at Charlotte, I took off like a rocket... or like the catfish in a warmer lake. My first year, 2012 was full of milestones: I joined the Honors College, became an Atkins/Storrs Library Aide, earned a 4.0 my first semester, and packed my schedule with people, student organizations, lectures, and events. I was a six-foot-tall sponge. My learning community would often remark: “there goes Ryan,” as I scurried off to another lecture or meeting over coffee.

Such a whirlwind of a first year would put me into a sort of tailspin the next. At the start of my sophomore year, I reached burnout from overextension. I signed up for far too many student organizations, tried Greek Life, became a Resident Advisor (RA), and failed to invest enough time into my relationship. It was all with good intentions: I merely wanted to experience everything college had to offer now that I had arrived, although trying to have it all at once was an unhealthy operation. I was not able to effectively slow down and pace myself into reasonable chunks. I was free, in charge of every aspect of my life, and the exploration in excess became bewildered stumbling.

Thankfully one of the tools I brought with me was the notion that books and literature were tremendously comforting in any situation or life event. I was always a voracious reader, and in the past practically fled to Barnes and Noble whenever arguments arose. Even with their comfort, it was only when I faced more challenging life experiences that I realized how much literature offers. Serendipitously, Nassim Taleb published Antifragile around this time. As the authoritative text of his Incerto collection, Antifragile became his foundational work for not only the term “antifragile,” but the spark for variety of other paradigm shifts in my own life. Coming from such a low-point in my life, I find
myself in a state of “permanent beta,” which is defined as “always a work in progress.” I am always a work-in-progress after those darker times. In the course of this renewal, I gravitated toward authors with tremendous conviction. While I could not agree with all of Taleb’s assertions, it was the introduction to the triad of “FRAGILE → ROBUST → ANTIFRAGILE” which offered me the most (Taleb). QQQ

Rather than trying to predict my future and plan too obsessively over the things that I needed to apply for, I looked at my life in terms of what was fragile, what was robust, and what was antifragile. I looked through this lens across all areas of my life: who was breaking me down, keeping me stagnant, building me up? Going further with Taleb’s framework, in what areas of my life did I have more to lose than gain? I saw homelessness as a fragile point in my life, my final year as a robust rebuilding, and my first year of exploration as my antifragile self. Cycles and seasons of the self remain, and I slipped a bit my second year. As Tim Ferriss, a lifestyle guru, once noted: “Things in excess become their opposite.”

Taleb writes passionately and broadly about an unbelievable scope of topics, where the weaving of each helps refine his overall idea of antifragility. That is the beauty of breadth: refinement, like Leonardo da Vinci trying on a different trade in order to look at a problem in a different light. One of the concepts in particular that stood out to me was domain dependence. In one context, we understand how something works with seeming certainty; and yet, when that same exact event or function happens in a different context, it goes completely amiss. Taleb provides this example: he once saw a man who used his valet to carry his things, even taking the elevator, and yet he found that man later in the hotel gym, trying to exercise—he completely missed those small opportunities to exercise outside of the gym’s environment. This happens in a variety of circumstances: people will advocate against the tyranny oppression, yet transfer into tyrannical road rage inside an anonymous car. The beauty in perspective
and antifragility is seeing where we are locked in these domain dependence scenarios, the freezing of a particular idea to a certain location. For me, a cocktail of perspective made from reflection, therapy, and literature genuinely helped me see where I have built these imaginary roadblocks in my contextual framework. We make challenges insurmountable when we forget to introduce varying perspectives (including other people), such as the financial crisis economists who do not look outside of their models, or the girl who stays in an abusive relationship because she won’t listen to what everyone else finds obvious. As Hecht noted: “the moment someone snaps you out of your thrall, you can see that the whole thing is a small, dark, crazy mess, like a tangle of seaweed on the beautiful beach of a majestic continent. You somehow got your head stuck in the tangle of seaweed and haven’t looked up in four years.” (Hecht)

Antifragile also introduced me to the philosophy of Stoicism and Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Contrary to popular notions, Stoicism is not the stiff, upper-lip with complete disregard for pain; rather, it prescribes indifference to overwhelming emotional changes; if we can center ourselves and employ the right perspective, things are rarely as overblown as initially perceived (Aurelius). Stoicism happens to be a philosophical basis for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), in how both prescribe the removal of one’s hysteria and roller-coaster-like emotions from the situation. Philosophy of CBT is an online resource which publishes books and articles on the inherent link between Stoicism and CBT. I used CBT not only after I was homeless but during more strenuous times at Charlotte. Stoicism provides a timeless practical philosophy with techniques on how to craft a life in a world of hardship and uncertainty—which even Taleb notes as quite refreshing despite its source material being over two millennia in age (Taleb). Antifragility as a concept and philosophical lens looks to endure in similar fashion.
Antifragile made me look at the world in such a variety of ways that I have run out of colors to underline passages and quotations in the book. Each story or anti-story resonates with me in some way. This is foundational and symbolic to me because oftentimes the only way out of a situation or problem is to look at it from a completely different angle, be it from the top of a table or upside down, written and rewritten, drawn and explained, talked about and bounced back. Perhaps the most powerful tool in our efforts against harsh changes is changing how we see them in the first place. As Hecht found: “Coming to know yourself and re-creating how you experience the world is a more efficient way to get comfortable than directly altering the world” (Hecht). It was from these inquires in paradigm shifts that led me to the honors course that catalogued the entirety of human thought.

“The Brief History of Imagination,” co-taught by Dr. Michael Swisher, of Architecture; and Dr. Al Maisto, of Psychology was my favorite University Honors course. This course covered the vast expanses of the Roman Empire, religion, western expansion, and the various struggles and emerging theories as humans tried to figure out our purpose, and what we can do with our fantastic capabilities in the process. We established early on that our model would be learning for the sake of learning. The only component with rules (in order for us to free ourselves from grids and lined pages) was the blank-page binder in which we kept our notes and progress throughout the course.

This course signified the pinnacle of the collegiate experience: mash as many ideas as possible in one room, and see what happens. It was pure magic in its simplicity and execution. Part of that magic comes from the ease with which we could approach learning without being hinged to grades. Other times it felt like magic merely for how the class spilled into every avenue we cross in our lives: pragmatism, faith, ideation, and even how we look at achievement. Our paralyzing moments are often remedied by that of history. As much as we forget and stumble over the same stumps, there is still an
incredible amount to pick up from the past. Examining the built-up heuristics and knowledge and comparing it to now breeds a comfort of knowing everything is going to be okay. I do not worry over the wolf, and no matter how many invented worries I manufacture, I am fine (Hecht). Nothing is physically coming after me or threatening my ability to live, to thrive. Over the years, I still can’t shake the happiness I would feel whenever I left that room, reinvigorated and inspired to examine the world in new and old ways, in addition to examining myself. That is the mark of a powerful, well-taught course: we walk out far, far better than we ever arrived. In many ways, it embodied the mental antifragility I needed to continue with my studies by struggling with concepts in order to achieve breakthroughs. Dr. Swisher said it best: “Doubt your own intelligence, then use the hell out of it.”

There is a page I refer to often on the inside of my imagination binder. It starts with a tiny cloud at the center and then spirals outward as such: IMAGINE → CREATE → PLAY → SHARE → REFLECT → IMAGINE → CREATE, ad infinitum. The process of getting unstuck can be exactly that: a bumpy, unsightly, and messy process. Little mental and physical models can help us work through a situation in more of a routine or checklist manner. Habits often perform these functions, as most of our day is simply the accumulation of little habits. New rituals and habits can break down the walls we are experiencing at work, home, or with life overall. QQQ

This course, and its subsequent writing exercises and review, helped ease the intense sense of pressure I put on myself with each successive year. While this has not been cured entirely, the first step in recovery is realizing that there is something to recover from and improve upon in the first place. Clearly, my anxiety and need for certainty went completely unchecked freshman year because I “still had plenty of time.” Yet only recently did I find out this was an actually a mental roadblock derived from my tumultuous past. My therapist called it “Imposter Syndrome,” which is essentially the feeling of
tremendous anxiety and inability to internalize our achievements and love. It’s believing that at some point people will “figure me out,” as if I were a fraud and none of my accomplishments belonged to me. It turns out that many highly functioning people on the outside are deeply torn on the inside by this feeling. It may have taken five years of college to arrive at this conclusion, but the feeling that I am “worthless” is deeply seared into who I am, to the point where I have trouble internalizing compliments or success, and must continually feed this bottomless need for belonging and feeling worthwhile. Each artifact here, in a way, was a coping mechanism for this over my collegiate arc.

At some point I started developing my own commonplace book, but instead of creating some elaborate filesystem (which invariably halted progress due to my penchant for overloading organizational techniques), I simply used a folder. I’d like to think I have had this since the beginning, or maybe after my History of Imagination course, but I’ve lost track of when this folder actually began. Obviously it was around the time I started learning Italian, as “La mia rivoluzione” is written in semi-cursive on the front flap in deep red sharpie, which is dandy and motivational except for the fact that it’s la mia rivoluzione; however, an incorrect spelling doesn’t deter the meaning: “My revolution.”

The creation of this was monumental to me because in my darker past I never felt I would have many chances for self-improvement. I recognize that I caught quite an amazing opportunity to turn my life around and start over with Charlotte. Part of that overhaul involved learning a new language. To ensure I remain antifragile in my curiosity, I must seek out new challenges and perspectives. A new language meets the qualifications perfectly. These “gains without pains,” as clinical psychologist Ann Marie Roepke notes, is the basis for “post-ecstatic growth” (McGonigal, emphasis mine). This is similar to post-traumatic growth, except that it was not trauma that provided the boost, but the challenge of embarking on a quest (McGonigal). During this time the business school was obsessed with
resume-fillers and job-finding languages, such as Chinese and Spanish, but I would have none of it. I fell in love with Italiano, simply for the fact that it was beautiful, and that is how I wanted to feel about my life (an observation that coincided with author Elizabeth Gilbert from Eat, Pray, Love). I want to feel glorious in the process of starting over, the exact opposite of how my hellacious past felt. In this manilla folder lie all the to-do lists, to-be lists, aspirations, ideas, personal goals, and even day-to-day nonsensical doodles. This folder's grown to such a point now that I simply need to create a new and improved system for it, though well-worn folders that achieve such a great degree of usefulness are difficult to let go.

The reason why I consider this folder as such a developmental inflexion point in my life is how it shows I changed emotionally in retrospect. In regard to changing our perspective to overcome adversity, we simply need a mechanism for reflection and a sense of where we stand in juxtaposition to our past. No longer was I living day-to-day or meal-to-meal, but instead I was thinking in terms of years, decades, and my life overall. The long run, an extended time horizon, offers the perspective we cannot usually fathom in the moment. Stoicism and CBT even advocate for this in an exercise that involves either star-gazing or transporting ourselves high above the earth and looking down on our existence. Time, while it can be seen as the greatest of change, also allows moments for reflection and analysis, and in retrospect a lot of our hardships make us feel disproportionate pain simply due to their recency. I often find myself using this as a reminder before tests or thesis draft deadlines: this is nothing compared to the pain I felt before Charlotte. Time is recovery. Perhaps the most informative line from Dr. McGonigal is: “If we bounce back too quickly, we miss the growth.”

So after two years of college and finding myself in this microcosm of stress and pressure to succeed, succeed, succeed, I knew I needed to get away and shake myself up a bit. I wanted to see
what it was like somewhere else, not in the “grass is always greener” sense, but rather by activating change myself rather than waiting for it to happen to me. Thus it was through the creation of this folder and my appreciation for Italian that I sought to study abroad in Italy, which takes us to my writing adventures abroad.

Thanks to my ideas folder and newfound love of Italiano, I embarked on the path of studying abroad in Italy. Rarely in the same place for long, be it force or choice, I needed some time from the bubble of UNC Charlotte. My parents never traveled abroad, which merely stoked the flame even further. There were tremendous convictions building inside that said I must get out of America and see what is different. With Dr. Maisto raving about the Italian way of doing things (slow, focused, and yet relaxed), and my Italian professors urging me to dream big, I chose Milan, Italy.

This was also the perfect writing experience for an English major like me, knowing that I was going abroad for the first time at the age of twenty-two. Coincidentally, Maptia recently emerged as a brand new company out of a Seattle incubator that wanted to tell the stories of places with maps. Essentially, Maptia’s vision for how their website and essay experience would work is a large map where suddenly a person could click on a place and the stories that have been uploaded about that place would pop up. It is wonderfully simple and beautifully executed, much like Milan itself. After a few conversations with their team, I became the founding storyteller for Milan, Italy, and it was in the process of collecting my study abroad experience on paper (and the internet) that I was able to reflect. I saw far more through writing about my experiences than had I simply wandered through the days without any method of self-reflection and that which gets stronger under duress. For instance, I found myself smiling when I submitted pieces for the NinerTimes or Maptia. It’s those smiles breaking out of nowhere in which we realize that things are going well. Later, after finishing up a piece, I was walking to
a bookstore and felt rain, but it was completely clear outside. Looking up, I realized a lady was
watering her roof garden, and I couldn’t stop laughing at this little moment that gave me such bliss.

The page is the canvas upon which one can paint all these different ideas in one area and create
something entirely different (Lamott). With Maptia, my stories pop up whenever one clicks on Milan. It
is a marvelous feeling to make an impact through writing. Anne Lamott of Bird by Bird puts this best:

[we] enter into these fantastical worlds where we feel like we’re looking through the wrong end
of binoculars, where everything is tiny and pretty and rich, because real life is so often big and
messy and hurtful and drab. But when someone [...] turns and twists her people and their lives
and their families and their ghosts into universal curves and shapes, then the writing resonates in
such a way that you think, Yes, yes, that’s exactly what life is like. (Lamott).

Back at Charlotte, I registered for Dr. McGavran’s Romanticism course because one of my friends
said, “He’s as passionate about English as you are.” Neat. What I did not anticipate was that Dr.
McGavran would fundamentally shift my appreciation for the romantics and the outdoors. As a
movement born out of the tough times of the industrial revolution, Romanticism is deeply concerned with
the degrading impact of industrialism and individualism. The remedy being the return to nature;
coincidentally, stoicism motto is to live in accordance with “Nature.” While I took this course, I joined
the #unplug campaign, where we drop all digital connections for a month. I loved it. I went most of the
semester without a phone, facebook, and so on. Shockingly, nothing bad happened. The world went
on. I actually got outside and enjoyed being present as the seasons changed and the leaves grew.

Not long after sharing life stories and experiences, Dr. McGavran became my mentor. We
shared a lot of the same curiosities and zest for living fully and passionately, without masks. I would
often swing by his office to bounce ideas off of him. He gave me a rough average of two books per visit.
I took any of his courses I could, and wrote several papers, but my paper on my #unplug experience and returning to nature was especially significant. It signaled a point in my life where I not only needed to branch out intellectually, but physically, recognizing the importance of the mind-body connection. To get out and move can be one the best remedies to a mental block.

At the start of British Literature with Dr. McGavran, in September of 2014, I was happy to have yet another course with him. I worked at IKEA that semester, and one night after a late shift I cycled home in a flash for dinner. Unfortunately, a Trek wheel-release lever malfunction seized the front tire and I wound up mangled in my bike on the ground. When I reached for my glasses, my left wrist was clearly unlike the right. An ambulance came screaming and much of everything else is fuzzy. The diagnosis wasn’t pretty: I shattered eight bones in my left wrist, and much of what I knew would change quickly. My life fell apart in a rapid downward spiral. With nine screws and a metal plate holding my wrist together, all my “plans” to graduate that May and several dreams were put on the backburner (I even had skydiving scheduled the following week). I was pumped with such a variety of drugs and doses that I firmly believe parts of my brain were burned off entirely from the side effects. The mountains of paperwork with the Dean’s Office, work, and hospitals seemed unending. I was restricted to an extensive physical therapy routine, as IKEA was not as forgiving when it came to my inability to lift furniture. But some people did understand, and treated me with tremendous love and care.

When I reached out to my professors hoping they would understand, Dr. McGavran called me within minutes of my “I’m okay” email. I have always appreciated that moment in time. Never has a professor cared more about my well-being. I distinctly remember his end of the line going: “Ryan I can’t have you dying on me because of your writing! And of course because your wedding is going to be quite the party!” Always the jokester and supporter, Dr. McGavran was a bright spot in my self-pitying
heap of broken bones. I returned, drugged-up though still semi-coherent, to his class weeks later and do my best simply for him. QQQ

We had a blast, as usual. As I was scheduled for another class with him, I looked forward to spring, as romantics always will. Around that Christmas, my girlfriend Olyvia and I were reading on our couch when she looked up at me with a solemn look. Dr. McGavran passed away. I haven’t fully recovered from the shock... and think about him constantly. The semester felt like an unyielding set of waves: crash, crash, crash. Death cannot be conquered or won, but simply avoided for a brief amount of time in the random dance of life. Heschong made a similar observation in *Thermal Delight*: “We are more likely to notice the function of something if there are times when it is not in operation, to notice the significance of something’s presence if there are times when it is not there.” (Heschong). *Memento Mori*; “Remember Death.”

Part of reasoning for our obstacles’ usefulness is the perspective that such a challenge endows upon us. Potential ruin requires acute recovery, and that can be time, reflection, a change in strategy, someone’s helping hand, or simply turning away. Obstacles and quake-like events cure us of the gridlock of domain dependence, where we only recognize a concept in a specific context, while completely blind to it in other environments. Hardships shake us up and help us to see anew, if we allow some time for such recovery. In the process of crafting myself, I was fortunate to have my share of setbacks in order to learn. Setbacks helped me grow. Indeed, the best part about challenges is that every time we rise to meet them, we level up, undeniably better than before.

This goes back to Hercules vs Hydra. Hercules won by eliminating the period of recovery, something we all need to grow. If we are unable to shift with a period of recovery, failure *does* define us. We could even take this a step further metaphorically: Hercules is death itself, the final blow, or a
debilitating illness from which we can’t recover. There is a line: with ruin, there’s finality; with obstacles, we still have a chance to recover and grow. Hydra is what it is really like to be antifragile, growing with adversity, gaining from experience, and embracing recovery. Sure, it might not involve growing a second head for us, but it could mean gaining a second perspective with which to tackle our obstacles.

That is the theme of my entire collegiate experience: overcoming setbacks. Through the ebb-and-flow of my life, I am held in this grand astonishment for what I have been able to accomplish. Writing in that hotel room years ago, I worried that my hopes at turning my life around were merely a glimmer of light and nothing more. Reflecting on my own hardships and successes, I wonder about how people overcome their obstacles and continue their story in the face of all their brick walls. In each way, there is a bit to each article here. Most importantly, someone needs to be there, a helping hand. The solo idealist is merely a narrative of prideful individualism. When we look closer into the stories of achievement and reflect on a life well-lived, there are plenty of people involved; perhaps not always as we expect or even directly, but indirectly. The stranger with a compliment or smile, the simple warmth of someone else listening to your story and accepting us in a moment of vulnerability. These connections matter, regardless of their size.

Each experience mattered, regardless of any label of “good” or “bad.” I am outside more often than not, and invoking serendipitous moments by running into people and sometimes even getting the chance to help them or their community. Disconnecting from our own little microcosm helps alleviate the blind spots in our perspective and knowledge. It is not coincidental that the notions of antifragility derive many ideas from nature. We must break down to improve. In order to break down the narrow-minded corners of domain dependence and the plateaus of our former self, we must get outside: of ourselves, our minds, our isolated apartments, and put ourselves out there, open to the possible paradigm shifts.
that come from attention, reflection, and awareness. While it could mean some bumps and bruises in the process, we might very well learn something, perhaps something as important as how to live. In regard to loss and Dr. McGavran, a quotation from Mrs. Maple in “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” sums it up nicely, when it comes to death: we must lose those that are important to us to recognize how much of an effect they had on us in the first place.

Looking back, while our grand notions and ideals are rarely achieved, it is in both the pursuit of ideals and the radical acceptance of our imperfections in which we craft ourselves. We may fall short of our goals at times, but that is what makes us antifragile. From the days of Hercules to today’s massive information streams, the recipe of a life well-lived remains the same: be as open to new experiences and ideas as possible, including the setbacks, for we never know which one might change everything if we embraced it.

While I may not know what the future has in store, I do know it will greet me with waves and waves of change, as the future always does. With regard to my inability to ever have a chance at college, I would say there is a sunny disposition glimmering on the lake of what I learned and loved throughout this part of the journey. As long as I have people to share my experience with, loved ones to think warmly upon and reflect on, the power to write about my experiences and most importantly to share those experiences so that others may gain, I am better than okay. I am not worthless, but worthwhile. As life rips forward, I merely have to look back through my past and recover the knowledge of what I can overcome. This provides all the ammunition I could possibly need. No assignment at school or work comes close to starvation, no argument with a loved one comes close to not having anyone at all. People are remarkable, and are a boost to our antifragility. I’ve learned through my experiences that while not everyone will grow beyond their hardships, one can recognize those that
are fragile, robust, and antifragile. The trick is not to support the antifragile folks as much—they’ll be better than okay. Instead, the trick to this whole thing is helping out those could use the support to feel what it’s even like to love, to grow, and feel antifragile in their hearts. That might not be the most scientific way of describing it, but it’s a worthy heuristic to try on. We never know who we could save. If someone seems fragile, we must build them up.

It’s as we see with trees, how the branches stretch out every which way, each in the effort to caught a little bit of sunlight. We must learn and help in every which way we can, to expand ourselves to great heights, achieve root-like depth, and most of all: catch a little bit of sunlight, as each experience can yield the enlightening warmth of a new idea. There will be cold snaps, and stress that makes us sway violently in response. Yet we need these changes. Trees grown in a vacuum whither; we must welcome the wind and encourage stress to achieve stability and growth (Taleb). We might not recognize it at the time, but our absolute worst might lead to our very best with enough recovery, self-love, and reflection.

“Above me, wind does its best
to blow leaves off
the aspen tree a month too soon.
No use wind. All you succeed
in doing is making music, the noise
of failure growing beautiful.”
— “August in Waterton, Alberta,” by Bill Holm
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