

Staunton

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I grew up in Staunton, Illinois, a small town in the middle of the state about an hour northeast of St. Louis. Staunton is a rural community like many others in the midwest, populated by hardworking, down-to-earth people who value friends, family, and tradition. Staunton was not an easy place for someone like me to grow up and flourish. As a gifted, inquisitive kid who was more interested in books and science than football, I was an outsider in an environment where natural physical ability and adherence to tradition and the status quo was valued far more than intelligence, innovative thinking, questioning, and academic aptitude. At best, I was treated with a kind of curious respect by classmates and the community, but more often I was simply ostracized. I was lucky enough to have survived that phase of my life with my relentless motivation to learn and to excel intact. I persisted despite the continual pressure to conform to a standard that I didn't understand and didn't believe in. In many ways, I have my parents to thank for my tenacity; they were and always have been enormously supportive of my intellectual pursuits, and they pushed me to focus on my strengths despite these (and other) pressures. I'm not sure, however, that their support would have been enough to lead me to my current place in life had I not left Staunton and attended high school at the Illinois Math and Science Academy (IMSA).

At IMSA, I discovered a culture I never knew and could never have hoped existed, a culture where inquisitiveness was encouraged, individuality was cherished, and being a "nerd" was the norm. IMSA's effect on me was profound. The course of my life was irrevocably changed. At IMSA, I came to realize that I had been given a seed of potential, and it was at IMSA that I was found the fertile ground in which to sow that seed. I realized at IMSA that the reason I didn't fit in at Staunton

was not that I was missing something, but because I had something in me that other people either didn't have, didn't understand, or perhaps were simply afraid of: the constant and unceasing drive to learn, excel, achieve, and grow. IMSA forever instilled a fundamental and foundational belief and confidence in myself and my abilities, and the conviction that life is about the continual search for answers, the never-ending quest for self-actualization, and the lifelong pursuit of learning and inquiry.

Of course, many of these realizations remained unspoken and unformed in my mind while at IMSA and for years afterward. It was through the challenges I faced after leaving IMSA that I eventually become conscious of how my time at IMSA had transformed my outlook on the world. In particular, it was through the pursuit and ultimate realization of my lifelong dream to become an astronomer, a pursuit in which I had to bring to bear all that I had learned at IMSA, that I finally understood how different my outlook on life was from so many people. I finally understood why I felt so disconnected from my peers in Staunton, and I finally understood that the attitudes I encountered in Staunton were not relocated to such small, rural towns, but were in fact epidemic in our country.

The challenges I faced after leaving IMSA were not the challenges I was expecting. Based on my experiences at IMSA, where my potential was limited only by my own motivation, the only obstacle I was expecting was my own motivation to push myself to the limits of my abilities. Instead I found a formless, faceless, pervading, external opposition. I found myself mired in mediocrity; not a drive to excel or achieve, but rather a mindless, formless, and unspoken form of

inertia. I found myself fighting people who perpetuate mediocrity so that they never have to work hard and never have to look bad. I found myself fighting people who disliked me because I was driven and successful. I found myself fighting the attitude that I was too intense, worked too hard, or cared too much. These fights were not easily won: the enemy was very hard to define, pinpoint, and make explicit. There were times that, because of my inability to make concrete the opposition, that I began to question whether there was an enemy at all, or whether the enemy was me, my convictions and my beliefs. I began to wonder if indeed I was too intense, if I worked too hard, if I cared too much. But it was in wrestling with these tensions that my experiences at IMSA gave me the resolution to win these battles. Secure in my belief that self-actualization was a fundamental human right and a moreover requirement for happiness, I worked harder, and held on even more stubbornly and defiantly to my beliefs in myself, my abilities, my goals and my convictions.

I can't help but think that the struggles I faced growing up in Staunton, and the struggles I've faced since leaving IMSA, are just one aspect of the larger cultural chasm that is currently dividing our country. This chasm is apparent in many different arenas, but was exemplified by the dichotomous nature of the last three elections. However, I don't see it so much as a question of rural versus urban, red versus blue, or Republican versus Democrat. Rather, what I see is a fundamental difference between people who believe in an open, questioning, freethinking, and liberal society, and people who believe in a society that strictly adheres to traditional moral values and normative behaviors as the cornerstone of civilization. The former encourages inquiry and growth, whereas the later prohibits it, and in fact encourages just 'getting by.'

What is the ultimate cause of this cultural rift? I really don't know, but I think I have a clue from my own experiences. While I have ultimately had many successes, they have not been achieved, and the knowledge that I acquired has not been gained, without many failures along the way. So, I don't believe that my successes are primarily due to any kind of superior intrinsic ability. Rather, I think my successes are ultimately linked by the fact that I never stopped asking why, never stopped trying to achieve, never stopped trying to excel. Indeed, I have never (permanently) relinquished my basic morals and beliefs. I believe that all people are born with the natural inclinations to learn, to achieve, to question, and to strive, and the natural ability to excel in some area. It is only later in life, often under tremendous pressure to conform, that these natural inclinations are suppressed. I was doubly lucky, first because I had parents who fought against these pressures, and second because I attended IMSA, which forever enabled me to ignore these pressures. So, whereas I don't necessarily don't know how to avoid quenching the flame of human inquisitiveness, and so allow all people to achieve their potential, I do know that IMSA, and schools like it, are at least part of the answer.