

MJ Santry

Graduation Thesis

Intro:

One day in 4th grade, we did a “what type of learner are you?” test. The thought had never occurred to me that there could be different *types of learning*. I think I remember my results being that I was a kinesthetic and visual learner. We later tried a “Right or left-brained?” test. I was completely right-brained. They were such revelations to me. They amazed me because they made so much sense! I started wondering why the way my brain “worked” wasn’t being catered to in school? Well, I supposed, because the other kids in my class were different types of learners too, and there just no way that our one teacher could teach in 28 individual ways, right? And so the thought faded, and I went about my school days as usual.

Where I’m coming from (past)

Throughout my elementary and middle school years, I was an excellent student whose love of school and learning was insatiable. During this time I struggled with focusing, time management, and completing assignments on time; but I was able to overcompensate with other areas of my character such as my determination, curiosity, and creativity to get by. My transition into high school went fairly smoothly as I immediately became involved with student government, dance team, school plays, as well as other things. Although the honors classes in which I was enrolled made my work load more challenging, I continued to be a good student, making honor roll and achieving academic awards. However, as I continued my high school career, I found myself questioning the content and quality of my education. It felt as though I was on an academic treadmill, endlessly being forced to try cramming to memorize facts and figures, spitting back the information for tests, and then often forgetting said information once the tests were over. I so desperately wanted to have the time to truly absorb what was being taught, analyze it, respond to it with my own original and creative ideas, and discuss what I was learning about with my teachers and peers. By the end of freshman year I began to research alternative forms of education. I felt that an educational system had to exist that would better fit what I was looking for. I wanted a program that would help me to successfully absorb what I was being taught, have more freedom to choose or direct what I wanted to learn about, and that would not force me to sacrifice my happiness, my health, or my passions. Having made so many wonderful friends at Camden Catholic, I convinced myself that I should just continue on the path I was on and try my best to just work in all my interests and passions around my busy academic schedule. That was easier said than done. By junior year, I knew I was not doing my best work academically, but I was also not doing my best work in the things I was truly passionate about. I felt that I was losing my sense of creativity as well as happiness; which for me really go hand in hand. A big part of being happy is knowing one’s self. Since my creativity is so much a part of who I identify myself as, the feeling that I was losing that part of myself was deeply upsetting. I had all but lost my motivation academically, because I felt that I had all but lost what made me who I was. Rather than just accepting that, I recognized that I needed to make a change.

While I loved all of my classmates and teachers, and couldn't imagine having to start again in a new environment; I knew that it would be foolish of me to waste any more time hating the way I was spending my life. On my own, I continued to search for a solution, as I was determined to find a program that would work. In April of my junior year I found an option that seemed it could fit that search. Jersey Shore Free School – although every ounce of my logic wanted to go against it, my heart decided for me. Something told me that to force myself to go back would be a devastating decision.

Where I'm at (present)/ My basic journey acclimating to JSFS

Phase 1: I feel so so so relieved and happy. I don't know if I made the right decision, and I don't really feel comfortable trying to explain this to other people, and I feel so out of the loop here, I don't know anyone – but I'm just so relieved to be done that I don't care!

Phase 2: I don't know what to do with myself, the people here are nice but I just feel like I am intruding on their lives and don't fit in, I don't get it. Was this the right choice?

Phase 3: IT'S SO BEAUTIFUL OUTSIDE AND I CAN GO FOR A WALK AND THE KIDS HERE ARE HAPPY AND GAHHHH!!!!!! I LOVE MY LIFE!! I'm awesome for doing this :)

Phase 4: I still feel awkward and unsure, but I'm getting to know people here better. Some days I see everyone doing their own things, and other days I don't. I can't tell if I (or anyone else) is learning anything. But I am starting to feel happy again, and I am starting to see a glimpse of my creativity. That's more important to me than "learning" right now.

Phase 5: Back to school! Is that what I should call it? I'm happy to see everyone. I feel a bit anxious about this year. Driving, moving school buildings, and college applications – it's all up in the air.

Phase 6: I'm doubting this whole Sudbury thing. I want so badly to believe in this whole-heartedly, because it makes sense; but at the same time, every ounce of my logic goes against it, and it doesn't help that my friends and family are also mocking it. I don't feel like I'm learning anything, but maybe I'm just lazy. I'm definitely just lazy, and a failure. I couldn't even make it through high school. And I just don't know if this college app thing is going to work. The colleges aren't getting it, I don't even know if I would be able to *handle* college. Do I really want to go to college? Some of my friends have already gotten acceptance letters. What if I don't get accepted anywhere? I miss Camden Catholic.

Phase 7: Things are going great now! :) I've had the chance now to spend more time doing what I love. I am able to be more committed to dance, I am taking more classes, working as a dance

teacher for three classes, and serving as the elected dance captain of the dance company (The Teresa Andris Dancers, lovingly known as “Troupe”). I enjoyed being cast in my first (semi-professional?) show; Guys and Dolls at the Broadway Theatre of Pitman, and volunteering at my old elementary school as choreographer for a program called Broadway Kids as well as for their 8th grade Musical.

Phase 8: The acceptance letters keep rolling in!; so do the rejection letters, but I know that everything happens for a reason. I do miss some of my friends at Camden Catholic, but I have grown so much as a person during my time at Jersey Shore Free School - I feel more relaxed, mature, and so much more confident in myself and my abilities. My creativity is back, and I feel at peace. Perhaps what I have learned during my time here can't be measure by a test, maybe I can't even explain it. But I know that this was (and will continue to be) an important part of my journey.

Where I'm going (future)

Next year I plan to attend Drew University in Madison, NJ. I plan to create my own major so that I am allowed the freedom to continue exploring and finding interconnections in my interests such as psychology, dance, theatre, art, sociology, human rights, and many more that I'm sure I'll discover along the way.

I remember once in a conversation talking about people using JSFS as a “break” and how we severely looked-down upon it. I kind of jumped on the band-wagon, half-knowing that perhaps I myself was guilty of doing the same. But recently in thinking about it, I don't think that “break” is really an accurate description. A more fitting word might be “recovery”. Recovery isn't a break. Recovery takes work. It takes energy, it takes openness, it takes time, but it often also takes a supportive community. I can't think of a more supportive community than Jersey Shore Free School. Whether or not you are aware of it, each of you have helped me so much throughout this process, and I am so thankful for that.

I'm not sure exactly where the rest of life will take me, no one ever is. But I know now that I have to power to have a say in my life, to change the things I need to change, and that I have the strength to get through those things that I cannot change. And because of those assurances, even though I don't know what I'll be doing 10 years down the road, I know that I have the ability to be happy.