Accomplishing Big Things in Small Pieces
By William Wissemann

I carry a Rubik's Cube in my backpack. Solving it quickly is a terrific conversation starter and surprisingly impressive to girls. I've been asked to solve the cube on the New York City subway, at a track meet in Westchester and at a café in Paris. I usually ask people to try it first. They turn the cube over in their hands, half-heartedly they make a few moves and then sheepishly hand it back. They don't even know where to begin. That's exactly what it was like for me to learn how to read. Letters and words were scrambled and out of sequence. Nothing made sense because I'm dyslexic.

Solving the Rubik's Cube has made me believe that sometimes you have to take a few steps back to move forward. This was a mirror of my own life when I had to leave public school after the fourth grade. It's embarrassing to admit, but I still couldn't consistently spell my full name correctly.

As a fifth-grader at a new school, specializing in what's called language processing disorder, I had to start over. Memorizing symbols for letters, I learned the pieces of the puzzle of language, the phonemes that make up words. I spent the next four years learning how to learn and finding strategies that allowed me to return to my district's high school with the ability to communicate my ideas and express my intelligence.

It took me four weeks to teach myself to solve the cube—the same amount of time it took the inventor, Erno Rubik. Now, I can easily solve the 3x3x3, and the 4x4x4, and the Professor's Cube, the 5x5x5. I discovered that just before it solves, a problem can look like a mess, and then suddenly you can find the solution. I believe that progress comes in unexpected leaps.

Early in my Rubik's career, I became so frustrated that I took the cube apart and rebuilt it. I believe that sometimes you have to look deeper and in unexpected places to find answers. I noticed that I can talk or focus on other things and still solve the cube. There must be an independent part of my brain at work, able to process information.

The Rubik's cube taught me that to accomplish something big, it helps to break it down into small pieces. I learned that it's important to spend a lot of time thinking, to try to find connections and patterns. I believe that there are surprises around the corner. And, that the Rubik's cube and I, we are more than the sum of our parts.

Like a difficult text or sometimes like life itself, the Rubik's Cube can be a frustrating puzzle. So I carry a cube in my backpack as a reminder that I can attain my goals, no matter what obstacles I face.

And did I mention that being able to solve the cube is surprisingly impressive to girls?

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Returning to What's Natural
Amelia Baxter-Stoltzfus

I believe in semi-permanent hair dye: The kind that lets you have a few wacky purple-headed weeks in the depressing months of winter term, but leaves you plain and brunette again in time for graduation pictures. The kind that lets you be whoever you want without letting go of how you got there. The kind that lets you embrace those internal contradictions that make up an entire, oxymoronic, complex, complete human being. I believe in hypocrisy, just a little.

Semi-permanent hair dye is about finding security within unlimited freedom. It's about recognizing what I have in my life and holding on to it, even if only at the base of a follicle, because I also believe in roots.

My mother always tells me that the hair color you're born with is the one that looks the best on you, and I want to make sure that there's something inside of me that's always going to be worth returning to. Maybe the house I lived in with my parents will never be home for me again. Maybe I'll fall out of touch with people I thought I was pretty close to in high school. Maybe I'll hate the way a darker brown washes me out. But I'll know that in 20 to 26 washes, I'll come back to something that I've had naturally forever, and I'll know it looks pretty good.

Here's where the hypocrisy comes in. Every time you get away from home, thinking how you're going to reinvent yourself, you end up hanging on to the things about yourself that are the most familiar. Feeling safe isn't about setting limits on the outside. It's about hanging on for dear life to what's on the inside, no matter how your context changes. Because, honestly, you'll never know whether you look fantastic as a redhead unless you've tried. What you will know is that you have brown to return to, when you're ready.

I've just moved into my first apartment all on my own, and New Jersey has never felt so far away. But this new independence could only come from dependence, from knowing that there are unshakable things in my life that have made me ready to face all the Big Bads in the world. We can't be toddlers or teenagers forever, and there's too much out there to experience to make me want to dwell too much in the past. So I do believe in permanent change; just not for my hair.

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Inner Strength from Desperate Times
Jake Hovenden

Only a handful of people know this about me, but five years ago my father died of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis or ALS. This is a fatal disease that literally eats away at a person's muscles until they cannot walk, talk, or even breathe. It was a life changing experience, but I can't really say that I developed any defining beliefs from it. Rather, the whole thing just really confused me on what to believe.

But, this essay is not about my experience with my father's passing. It's about my stepmother. I believe in inner strength. It was my stepmother, Janey Hovenden, who really had the hardest time when my father was suffering from ALS. For three years she juggled work, my dad and me with virtually no breaks, but she never gave up. Every day, right after she got home from work, she would cook dinner for us. She'd have to feed my father because ALS made it so he was incapable of feeding himself. During the nights my stepmother would stay up with my dad to make sure he wouldn't suffocate while he slept. She'd stay up and comfort him, even though she had to work early the next morning. Janey even fought past her fear of needles in order to treat my dad at home because the last thing he wanted was to lie in a hospital bed during his final days.

My dad was a proud man and didn't want people to see him when he was wasting away, but Janey went against his wishes and invited old friends over to say their final goodbyes. Although he didn't want to admit it my dad cherished every visit.

I really had not appreciated what my stepmother had done before, but looking back I realize how much she did for my dad. She kept him alive as long as she could, almost single-handedly. Today Janey is doing well and still taking care of me, just as well as she took care of me and my dad when he was sick. Before my dad passed-on he told Janey that she would have to be my father figure, and though she isn't my dad, she is the next best thing. She jokes around with me about it. Even though I live mostly with my Mom, I still get to see Janey once a week and she has helped me immensely in getting through this and I think I help her, too. She says I remind her of Dad, and spending time with me and cooking dinner for me helps her remember.

I believe that inner strength emerges when times are desperate. I believe people sometimes refuse to give up, and they help others no matter the personal cost. My stepmother proved that to me.

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Finding the Flexibility to Survive
Brighton Earley

Every Friday night the cashier at the Chevron gas station food mart on Eagle Rock Boulevard and Avenue 40 offers us a discount on all the leftover apples and bananas. To ensure the best selection possible, my mother and I pile into our 20-year-old car and pull up to the food mart at 5 p.m. on the dot, ready to get our share of slightly overripe fruits.

Before the times of the Chevron food mart, there were the times of the calculator. My mother would carefully prop it up in the cart's child seat and frown as she entered each price. Since the first days of the calculator's appearance, the worry lines in my mother's face have only grown deeper. Today, they are a permanent fixture.

Chevron shopping started like this: One day my mother suddenly realized that she had maxed out almost every credit card, and we needed groceries for the week. The only credit card she hadn't maxed out was the Chevron card and the station on Eagle Rock Boulevard has a pretty big mart attached to it.

Since our first visit there, I've learned to believe in flexibility. In my life, it has become necessary to bend the idea of grocery shopping. My mother and I can no longer shop at real grocery stores, but we still get the necessities.

Grocery shopping at Chevron has its drawbacks. The worst is when we have so many items that it takes the checker what seems like hours to ring up everything. A line of anxious customers forms behind us. It's that line that hurts the most—the way they look at us. My mother never notices—or maybe she pretends not to.

I never need to be asked to help the checker bag all the items. No one wants to get out of there faster than I do. I'm embarrassed to shop there, and I'm deathly afraid of running into someone I know. I once expressed my fear of being seen shopping at Chevron to my mother and her eyes shone with disappointment. I know that I hurt her feelings when I try to evade our weekly shopping trips.

And that is why I hold on to the idea of flexibility so tightly. I believe that being flexible keeps me going—keeps me from being ashamed of the way my family is different from other families. Whenever I feel the heat rise to my face, I remind myself that grocery shopping at a gas station is just a twist on the normal kind of grocery shopping. I remind myself that we won't always have to shop at Chevron—that just because at this point in my life I am struggling does not mean that I will always struggle. My belief in flexibility helps me get through the difficult times because I know that no matter what happens, my mother and I will always figure out a way to survive.

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Tomorrow Will Be a Better Day
Josh Rittenberg

I'm 16. On a recent night, while I was busy thinking about important social issues, like what to do over the weekend and who to do it with, I overheard my parents talking about my future. My dad was upset—not the usual stuff that he and Mom and, I guess, a lot of parents worry about like which college I'm going to, how far away it is from home, and how much it's going to cost. Instead, he was upset about the world his generation is turning over to mine, a world he fears has a dark and difficult future—if it has a future at all. He sounded like this:

"There will be a pandemic that kills millions, a devastating energy crisis, a horrible worldwide depression, and a nuclear explosion set off in anger."

As I lay on the living room couch, eavesdropping on their conversation, starting to worry about the future my father was describing, I found myself looking at some old family photos. There was a picture of my grandfather in his Citadel uniform. He was a member of the class of 1942, the war class. Next to his picture were photos of my great-grandparents, Ellis Island immigrants. Seeing those pictures made feel a lot better. I believe tomorrow will be better than today—that the world my generation grows into is going to get better, not worse. Those pictures helped me understand why.

I considered some of the awful things my grandparents and great-grandparents had seen in their lifetimes: two world wars, killer flu, segregation, a nuclear bomb. But they saw other things, too, better things: the end of two world wars, the polio vaccine, passage of the civil rights laws. They even saw the Red Sox win the World Series—twice.

I believe that my generation will see better things, too—that we will witness the time when AIDS is cured and cancer is defeated; when the Middle East will find peace and Africa grain, and the Cubs win the World Series—probably, only once. I will see things as inconceivable to me today as a moon shot was to my grandfather when he was 16, or the Internet to my father when he was 16.

Ever since I was a little kid, whenever I've had a lousy day, my dad would put his arm around me and promise me that "tomorrow will be a better day." I challenged my father once, "How do you know that?" He said, "I just do." I believed him. My great-grandparents believed that, and my grandparents, and so do I.

As I listened to my Dad talking that night, so worried about what the future holds for me and my generation, I wanted to put my arm around him, and tell him what he always told me, "Don't worry Dad, tomorrow will be a better day." This, I believe.

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We Are Each Other's Business
Eboo Patel

I am an American Muslim. I believe in pluralism. In the Holy Quran, God tells us, "I created you into diverse nations and tribes that you may come to know one another." I believe America is humanity's best opportunity to make God's wish that we come to know one another a reality.

In my office hangs Norman Rockwell's illustration Freedom of Worship. A Muslim holding a Quran in his hands stands near a Catholic woman fingering her rosary. Other figures have their hands folded in prayer and their eyes filled with piety. They stand shoulder-to-shoulder facing the same direction, comfortable with the presence of one another and yet apart. It is a vivid depiction of a group living in peace with its diversity, yet not exploring it.

We live in a world where the forces that seek to divide us are strong. To overcome them, we must do more than simply stand next to one another in silence.

I attended high school in the western suburbs of Chicago. The group I ate lunch with included a Jew, a Mormon, a Hindu, a Catholic, and a Lutheran. We were all devout to a degree, but we almost never talked about religion. Somebody would announce at the table that they couldn't eat a certain kind of food, or any food at all, for a period of time. We all knew religion hovered behind this, but nobody ever offered any explanation deeper than "my mom said," and nobody ever asked for one.

A few years after we graduated, my Jewish friend from the lunchroom reminded me of an experience we both wish had never happened. A group of thugs in our high school had taken to scrawling anti-Semitic slurs on classroom desks and shouting them in the hallway. I did not confront them. I did not comfort my Jewish friend. Instead I averted my eyes from their bigotry, and I avoided my friend because I couldn't stand to face him.

My friend told me he feared coming to school those days, and he felt abandoned as he watched his close friends do nothing. Hearing him tell me of his suffering and my complicity is the single most humiliating experience of my life.

My friend needed more than my silent presence at the lunch table. I realize now that to believe in pluralism means I need the courage to act on it. Action is what separates a belief from an opinion. Beliefs are imprinted through actions.

In the words of the great American poet Gwendolyn Brooks: "We are each other's business; we are each other's harvest; we are each other's magnitude and bond."

I cannot go back in time and take away the suffering of my Jewish friend, but through action I can prevent it from happening to others.