DREAM. DRIVE. DO.: BECOMING THAT ‘SOMEONE LIKE ME’

BY

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DISSEPTION

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Abstract

The author presents an autoethnographic account that captures the vulnerable moments, emotions and critical incidents to produce an evocative story about becoming a role model. Applying the theoretical lens of cultural capital, broader implications are made about identity development, race, disability and discrimination. A fusion between social science and screenplay yields a compelling story where the effects of reality, vivid details, and human experience come together. This unique intersection relies on the power of dialogue as well as rich visual imagery and cinematic techniques to capture key moments and the emotions of certain critical incidents.

The overarching story pertains to a federal lawsuit and serves as the anchor point. By moving forward and backward in time from this main event, other pieces pertaining to race, adoption, disability, sport and family are weaved throughout. The result is a survivor’s tale that encourages others to empathize and reflect about his or her own tale and engage in moral and ethical conversations. The author wants others to feel motivated to take control over their own lives, to think differently about the notion of diversity and to feel empowered to become a role model to others. This dissertation gives a voice to the autoethnographic “I” through scenes and challenges hegemonic ways.
This dissertation is dedicated to anyone who has ever been left on the sidelines in life to serve as motivation to become a role model for others
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This Introduction is Brought to You by the Letter “I”

“Our stories have the power to heal, to make the world new again, to give people metaphors by which they can better understand their own lives.”
– Christopher Vogler, Hollywood Development Executive

Ingenuity

There are several “I” words that are affiliated with this introduction—ingenuity, inspiration and the ethnographic “I.” The first “I” word is ingenuity, or skill or cleverness in devising or combining (Merriam-Webster, 2011). The pages that follow are a result of my own ingenuity in action. This dissertation is far from what is considered traditional and the approach was pieced together from what we do know from qualitative autoethnographic scholars such as Carolyn Ellis (1999, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2009), Arthur Bochner (1997, 2000, 2005), Norman Denzin (1989, 2000, 2003a, 2003b, 2006), Tamy Spry (2000, 2001, 2006, 2011), Sophie Tamas (2008, 2011), and Johnny Saldaña (1999, 2003, 2005, 2011) among others. But part of the beauty in being the creator is the freedom to illustrate my autoethnography and to also be an inventor.

Bochner and Ellis have contributed greatly to the field of autoethnography providing rich stand-alone stories that instantaneously capture the reader and bring you into the moment as if you are a fly on the wall with beautiful reflections. Saldaña and Spry are both experts at taking these stories and displaying them visually on the stage through performance. Denzin, building on the emphasis of performance,
pushes us to also include and interweave the historical, political and cultural into these reflexive moments to yield a critical performative piece.

Taken together, these autoethnographers have contributed greatly to the work presented here. Though the spin I have elected take on autoethnography is more in alignment with a movie script rather than a stage production. To me, it is about capturing the movie reel I can see vividly in my head on paper, allowing a unique intersection of not only the power of dialogue but also of rich visual imagery and cinematic techniques to capture key moments and the emotions of certain critical incidents. The idea still remains that through performative writing contributions are made to a broader discourse addressing central social justice issues and identity development.

The format I have created, through applied ingenuity, is one of specific movie scenes that appear throughout the text. The specific scenes appear in a different font with a scene description, production notes, character description(s) and the ensuing dialogue or visual representation that appears on the screen during this scene. The conversations are based on existing documents such as court transcripts, emails, or online chat messages. If the thoughts are coming from within the speaker’s head, not spoken audibly, they appear in within quotation marks and in “italics” and are to be treated as a voice-over. Descriptions of the images or movements to appear on the screen are provided in parentheses and are specific directions for production. The scenes themselves bring critical moments from my life to life. Following the presentation of the scene(s) at the conclusion of the Act is a section capturing some
of my critical reflection process connected to the theoretical underpinnings
described later in the introduction is provided.

**Inspiration**

The second “I” word is, inspiration. That is where this story begins. The one
word that I have run from my entire life has trapped me here. If you were expecting
these next pages to be about all of the inspiring events and occurrences from my life,
and for you to be moved to tears as these stories are re-told, you better stop reading
now. Consider this your warning.

Inspiration is a funny word; it is a word that I have loathed the majority of
my life, because I didn’t want to be just another inspiration story because of my
disability. Yet, it resurfaces in my life regularly like an infinite loop. The reality is,
throughout the majority of my life, I never liked the word inspiration even if you
cast my disability aside. And yet, this very word is what some might say, launched
my career in athletics. At the ripe age of 6 years old, with pigtails and a dashingly
cute smile, I was competing in my very first track meet. People would say, and still
do, that my smile is infectious; the truth is, I was just being a kid, being me. And yet,
at the conclusion of the track meet, I won the biggest, prettiest trophy there was to
offer at that meet, for being the “most inspirational female athlete.” That trophy still
sits, albeit, covered in dust, in my old room (high atop a shelf that I can’t even
reach!) in my parents’ house. It’s time to take it down, dust it off and explain my
dislike for this word.
As a person with a disability we all want our own identity to live our own destiny and to not "inspire" others just for living. I get tired of being told how much of an inspiration I am to others because I breathe, because I go grocery shopping, because I do these mundane tasks of everyday life. Do you walk up to someone who is gay and tell them how inspiring they are because they are out in public? Or someone who is Latino and praise them for driving a car? No! That would be ridiculous, yet there is a double standard because for people with disabilities, this is a daily occurrence.

Why is this? Is it the fact that other people without disabilities cannot fathom living their life with some sort of physical impairment? I believe it is people who see disability as tragic or something to take pity over who perpetuate this stereotype of inspiration.

Historically, people with disabilities have been subjected to being poster children for various ad campaigns. The image of Tiny Tim (Shapiro, 1994) is one that has shaped the disability rights movement and is the epitome of the bad taste in my mouth when someone utters the word, “inspiration.”

I have wasted a lot of time and energy trying to just slip in under the radar, not drawing attention to my accomplishments for fear of being called an “inspiration.” Some might call it being exceptionally humble, others might call it being stupid. Take your pick. I laugh to myself now, thinking back, wondering why on Earth I picked that fight when there were so many more legitimate ones I was dealing with on a day-to-day basis.
Characters:

Anjali
Friend: This friend has known Anjali for almost ten years. Together they ran a diversity education museum for the campus and often engage in scholarly discussions and perspectives on each other’s worldviews.

Scene 1:
The two are just sitting together having a casual conversation over a cup of coffee.

Production notes: See a cut out of a letter “I” and hear an off-screen voice before we enter the scene in the coffee shop. At the coffee shop, there are various magazines strategically placed where the camera highlights headlines such as, “An inspiration to all!” or “Inspiring our Youth” or “A True Inspiration” before panning out to the dialogue that will transpire.

VOICE

It is time now for the letter of the day. The following presentation is brought to you today by the letter “I.” “I” as in inspiration.

ANJALI

(Audibly sighs out of frustration.)

FRIEND

Do you find other people inspirational?

ANJALI

For so long, I told myself not to. Because it was a bad word to me.
… and even now I’m hesitant to use the word, but I’d be lying if I said there weren’t people in the world who wow-me.

(Pause.)

And so, I guess, yes. I do find some people to be inspirational. . . .

FRIEND

So in the general definition of inspirational, yes. We just can’t use the word?

ANJALI

Yeah.

FRIEND

Fair.

ANJALI

Well, on second thought . . . are there people who I am in awe of? Who I aspire to be like? Who hit at something deep within me? Yes.

(Pause.)

But do I think of myself as that person for others? No. I just live my life. To be inspirational is not my mission. My mission is to make the world a more accessible
and accepting place for people who are left on the sidelines, possibly because of a disability, but not solely for them. How do I do that? Share my story.

FRIEND

But that IS what is amazing.

ANJALI

My story may not be the cure all solution, but it can lead to discussions, lead to someone asking the right questions. It can just open the door for a conversation to even be had. But to me, it’s not inspirational.

FRIEND

When I look at it overall, yes, I am amazed by everything you have accomplished.

(Pause.)

FRIEND

But that’s more intimidating than anything.

What I love is that you are wholeheartedly genuinely real. Because I think that’s what many role models tend to lack... is projecting a sincere sense of “I can be them, because they’re human too. And it wasn’t easy.”

ANJALI
That’s the thing, I mean, when people ask about my Paralympic medals, yes, it was a huge personal accomplishment for me, I admit that. But the real power in earning Paralympic medals is watching a kid’s eyes light up when they get to hold it, wear it and they see/taste that their dreams can be within reach too.

FRIEND

Yeah, that’s what inspires me about you. (I know you hate the word, but the truth is, you inspire me). It’s the fact that it’s not about the medals. It’s that you genuinely love life and want others to love it too.

✦✦✦

Perhaps I should just adopt the category of the intimidator, but I guess “inspiration” has a nicer ring to it. The piece of this dialogue that is telling, to me, is that yes, I do get inspired by others, yet I don’t view myself as an inspiration. This leads me to my larger discussion of this term, disability aside. Disability aside, I don’t think somebody should be inspiring “in spite of” their differences, whatever those differences may be. They should be inspiring because of the emotions they evoke within you, because of how they hit something deep within you to be the best you can be. I believe a continuum of inspiration exists.

Insipiration is not a term that should be thrown around without taking the step back to think about what it means and where it comes from. To be inspired means that you are deeply moved by a person’s actions or their story, perhaps to even change something about yourself, your actions or your path in life. But, this is
not the same thing as, “wow, how awful, I couldn’t possibly live in their shoes, therefore I am inspired.” The true meaning of the word inspiration goes much beyond that. It is deeper than simply being in awe of someone. Before you say, “wow, what an inspiration!” ask yourself, “why is this an inspiration; how am I really moved by this?”

The continuum of inspiration has on one end of the spectrum are those who throw the term around when really they are referring to the ah-ha moment of accepting one’s own life for what it is. On the other end are those who understand the genuine application of the term. We all want to be inspired by others, and as much as I hate the word, I admit that I too, am inspired by others.

What has this taught me about being the inspiration? It has taught me that perhaps it’s not all that bad, depending on the circumstance. I can’t get away from adding this qualifier, no matter how hard I try. Through my own journey, I have realized there are facets of my story that have been and are "inspiring" to others.

It took me a long time to actually admit that I was inspiring to others, given my extreme dislike of the word. Though, in the world of Facebook, and in comments people have shared with me after speeches, the thank you notes and pictures from students, I have come to realize that perhaps I am that inspiration to others, even though it is beyond my wildest dreams as to how. Who do you inspire? It is still something I cannot fathom, but I see in these messages, or in person when I see my picture hanging in their bedroom, that in some way, I help them to see that they can achieve their dreams. I see that I am enabling them, and encouraging them to dream,
and to dream big. I do know that I cannot save everyone; I really do know that. But, being a positive role model to set the ball in motion is rewarding.

These people I inspire, kids or adults have given me hope in times of uncertainty of my own life. Regardless of if it is inspiration or not, the ability to provide those left on the sideline with a chance to dream and an opportunity to see the bigger picture is fulfilling. This is why I'm writing my story; to show that the blasted "I" word perhaps isn't all bad after all. Though numerous disability scholars may disagree with my position, when you live it, breathe it, experience it, and take the time on reflect on it, inspiration abounds, and perhaps it ain't all that bad. In fact, you will read later about how my own role model showed me the possibility of what I could do and who I could be one day. It is humbling to know that I can be that for children today.

**The Ethnographic “I”**

Since that is out of the way, I now move on to the ethnographic “I” as the next “I” for this introduction. Stories are exceptionally powerful tools. It is amazing how stories are an integrated part of our everyday lives; whether sitting at dinner with friends or family, in the hallways at work, or even through social media outlets such as Facebook or Twitter, each one of us tells micro-stories all the time! The purpose of these stories can be seen on a continuum—on one end it might be to tell a story for the sake of telling a story: something funny, reporting news, or just because. But, as we move along this continuum, stories can stir up emotions in our listeners and
in ourselves as the storyteller. They can make a statement and contribute to bodies of knowledge in a different way.

Stories allow us to organize and share our experiences as they connect to the political, social, historical constructs in which we live. They allow us to interrogate, or question the very world in which we live in, where we’ve come from, where we are at today. I like to think of our personal stories as the underlying foundation or structure of reality—it’s something that shapes our very existence and provides rationale for our own perceptions. Through the telling of story, this deeper exploration and reflection can lead to the generation of new knowledge and meaning.

In alignment with Ellis and Bochner (2000), writing using this autoethnographic “I” is a way that “make[s] the researcher's own experience a topic of investigation in its own right” (p. 733). Autoethnography is "an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739); and in my case this connects my personal story to the cultures of disability, race and privilege, followed by a deeper reflection to generate new knowledge and meaning. This methodology gives a voice to the “I.”

For a more detailed discussion of how I settled upon this methodology of autoethnography and my approach, refer to Act IV. The significance of this research rests in what Ellis describes as producing survivor tales that open up a moral and ethical conversation; the power of this methodology is to influence others to critically reflect on their own lives by beginning to engage in such conversations.
It is important to remember that the practice of ethnography is not innocent (Denzin, 2006). This approach, “instruct[s] our readers about this world and how we see it. The pedagogical is always moral and political; by enacting a way of seeing and being it challenges contexts or endorses the official hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other” (Denzin, 2006, p. 422). This being the case, I do hope to inform readers about how I see the worlds with which I live in—including the realms of disability, interracial adoption, athletics, education, privilege and discrimination. I do not want readers to feel discouraged by my experiences, or to feel belittled by my accomplishments; rather, as Ellis (2004) explains, I see this as a survivor’s tale. I want others to leave feeling motivated to take control over their own lives, to think differently about the notion of diversity and to feel empowered to become a role model to others.

The majority of information on the power and benefit of role models is focused on youth and adolescents (American Association of Women, 1991; Ferreyra, 2001; Hall, 2003; Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002; Southwick, Morgan, Vythilingam & Charney, 2006; Speizer, 1981). However, even adults often need mentors or role models to guide and support them in reaching a self-authored state where one is acutely aware of their beliefs and social relations or to work through identity crises that may arise throughout the lifespan (Baxter Magolda, 2008).

There is a common belief that role models are beneficial for minority groups. While numerous assumptions are made that minority group members benefit from somebody like them, the empirical results are inconclusive (Lockwood, 2006). One study (Maylor, 2009) explored whether or not African-American pupils would
automatically see African-American teachers as role models and make a connection between the behavior modeled by these teachers and their own behavior aspirations or achievement, yet the results were inconclusive.

Research suggests that being a role model may be inherent for some minorities who want to give back to others like them, who they feel a bond or connection to (Bennett, 2007; Cunningham & Hargreaves, 2007; Ross, 2002; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003). Plus, while some minorities may be the role models offered for others to emulate (Bennett, 2007), it is clear that some object to being automatically assumed as the token role model and lack the desire to fulfill this role.

Personally, I see myself as a role model not just to those with disabilities, but for anyone who is left on the sidelines for whatever reason. It is my belief, minority status aside, that that we all need role models. I draw attention to the psychological benefit of having someone to aspire to be like—someone who motivates us to change something within us or someone who keeps us going when the going gets tough.

After telling my story, I want to know that I have left a mark on the world. I want my story to ignite a fire for readers to realize the potential they have in themselves. It is absolutely, indescribably amazing when you are there to witness that fire igniting deep within somebody or to even be that fire-starter through your own actions of mentoring and inspiring others. This concept of being a fire starter is one that I have grown to embrace. I get to be this fire starter naturally in a disability sport setting just by being me, but I am also realizing the power of the ripple effect is so much bigger than just that setting. While the lens of my story is coming through
me as a disabled woman, I am confident there are other elements of my identities that will resonate with a much broader audience as issues of discrimination, race, power, education and privilege are explored. Sometimes as the person who starts the ripple effect, or who starts the fire is unaware of its true impact or its long-term impact. The truth is that we all need people to help to point out our impact sometimes, the effect of the fire that is started or of that ripple effect is often hard to fathom or even recognize ourselves.

It is my hope that readers will feel inspired, (using my definition of the word) by the fire that is already within them, that I am helping to unleash. Lastly, I want to finish telling my story knowing that I was true to myself and did not hide behind any false images. Through these stories it will be shown how these façades have taught me valuable life lessons and are intertwined with my true collective identity.

One hallmark of a good story is connecting to the storyteller on an emotional level allowing the heart, body, mind and spirit to be openly and critically reflective throughout this process (Spry, 2011). There is also a level of authenticity that we strive to achieve when using this methodology. This autoethnography will present personal and emotional experiences framed in such a way to act as a catalyst to have discussions about social injustices and hardships to then give us a better world. Exposing the vulnerable allows for engaging with deeply held values and beliefs developed through our communities, political, educational and other societal structures (Denzin, 2006; Spry, 2011).

My story is as much about how I affected the world and those systems throughout each of these critical moments as it is how these systems and
experiences affected me and my identity development. It would have been easy, according to society, for me to fail and become one of the dismal statistics facing underrepresented students, employment for persons with disabilities, but I have not. Using autoethnography, my story describes how critical epiphanic moments from my own life instilled cultural capital. I demonstrate how these accrued experiences shaped my thought processes and contributed to my successes as an underrepresented individual. This story underscores some of my interactions as I transitioned between various social fields thus developing my own habitus.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

Habitus, as defined by Bourdieu (1977), can be defined as a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions. The individual develops these dispositions in response to the objective conditions he or she encounters. The field, or environment where people exist and go about their everyday lives, is “complicated by the interaction of social structures such as institutions, rules, and practices” (Trainor, 2008, p. 150). According to Wacquant (1989), Bourdieu also insists on individuals reflecting on how and where one’s own habitus came from—from what social institutions, internalized structures and interactions, which is why this theoretical lens fits naturally with this proposed autoethnography.

By exploring my own habitus as being as a person of color in the field of a predominantly White community, as a person with a disability in an inaccessible educational system, and emerging onto the world stage as an athlete, it becomes
clear that structures and institutions play a part in producing inequality. Furthering this notion, there are also experiences that led to the development of my own reservoir of cultural capital thereby enabling me to overcome negative experiences and persevere and ultimately succeed.

Applications of the cultural capital lens can be seen across a vast array of disciplines ranging from anthropology to economics (Dika & Singh, 2002; Putnam, 2000). Though the majority of empirical applications relate explaining the function of cultural capital and educational attainment or retention for students (Aragon & Kose, 2007; Harker, Mahar, & Wilkes, 1990; Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

Theories about cultural capital for diverse students are conflicting. As Aragon and Kose (2007) explain:

On one hand, scholars argue that diverse students need mainstream cultural capital to succeed in schools. On the other hand, other scholars contend that rather than defining and exercising cultural capital in only traditional, mainstream, or dominant ways—which likely creates conditions for student disengagement or opposition—cultural capital development should include and build upon diverse students’ backgrounds and cultures. (p. 107)

I believe that early exposure to the dominant forms of cultural capital placed me in a complex position to move successfully through the pipeline coupled with the socialization, encouragement, and mentoring to take full advantage of my life around me, both in and out of the context of education.

Other scholars have furthered this notion to show that cultural capital can be employed to increase diverse individuals’ opportunities and success in life beyond the institutional walls of formal schooling, rather to include the school of life such as through sports (Eitle & Eitle, 2002; Engstrom, 2008; Stempel, 2005), occupations (Tzeng, 2010), healthcare (Abel, 2008). While Kingston (2001) cautions us with his
argument that “cultural capital has expanded almost to the point of not being distinctly recognizable” (p. 95), Aragon and Kose (2007) believe cultural capital needs a broader and reconceptualized definition. Trainor (2008) was first to examined this including students with disabilities and Trueba (2002) examined this pertaining to students with multiple ethnic, racial, and cultural identities and presented ways in which these persons of color overcame challenges and persevered through various educational contexts beyond higher education, but I posit that this can be expanded beyond the educational system for disadvantaged individuals.

Much of the literature explains school success by the amount and type of cultural capital students inherit from experiences rather than through measures of individual achievement. For Bourdieu (1977, 1986), ability is socially constructed and is the result of individuals having access to large amounts of cultural capital. Ability is itself the product of an investment of time and cultural capital, and the outcome is success or achievement.

Cultural capital encompasses a broad array of linguistic competencies, manners, preferences, and orientations. While the lens of cultural capital has traditionally been used to examine success or achievement in education, I believe the concept can be used to explore success in a broader sense. Considering this broader application, I adapted Aragon and Kose’s (2007) definition of cultural capital to be defined as: knowledge, skills, dispositions, experiences and corresponding organizational practices that influence achievement outcomes, civic
responsibility, persistence, interpersonal development, intrapersonal development,
and social identity development for diverse individuals.

Conceptually, I adopted the framework put forth by Aragon (2008) where he
built on Yosso's (2005) work to include: aspirational, familial, social, navigational,
resistant, linguistic, citizenship, transformational and spiritual capital as pieces of
cultural capital. Taken together, these pieces of cultural capital help us to
understand the key components for diverse individuals to succeed in life, or in my
case, how I have garnered successes and became a role model for others.

Transformational capital is the ability to engage in critical reflection of
experiences in order to align value system and actions (Aragon, 2008). As
mentioned earlier, after each Act presented, I share a piece of the critical reflection I
engaged in as I wrote those scenes. Describing this and possibly reconnecting to my
values allows for new habits of mind and behaviors to be created, and a broader
sense of social responsibility emerges.

The other types of cultural capital are also discussed and highlighted
throughout the Acts as they come up. Resistant capital “refers [to] those knowledges
and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso,
2005, p. 80). Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams
for the future even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).
Individuals embody this resiliency by not letting their current situation prevent
them from dreaming of something better. Familial capital “refers to those cultural
knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history,
memory and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005). Social capital “can be understood as
networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions.” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Navigational capital “refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Linguistic capital “includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). Citizenship capital “refers to the knowledge, skills, dispositions and experiences that help develop citizenship capacity” (Aragon & Kose, 2007, p. 118). It is about acting responsibly in the community and greater society.

My entire story is meant to take all three of these “I”s—ingenuity, inspiration and the ethnographic “I” to help other’s to learn from my survivor’s tale and better understand and act upon their own life. Yes, it is my story and experiences, but the influence of my story transcends beyond just me. It differs from other autobiographies that may exist because of viewing it through the cultural capital lens. It is more than simply stating my story, rather it equips individuals to see how their own daily experiences and interactions with systems around them can be compiled and traded in for success. It is extremely hard to recognize your own shortcomings, and to identify areas to improve upon, but even more of a challenge to actually change.

While I recognize that telling this story through the lens of cultural capital draws attention to the fact that in order for change to happen, all parts of the systems involved—the individual, the group(s) and the community and/or society must work together in synch. My story brings to life the ways in which these
systems and types of cultural capital can be leveraged to help fuel one’s own personal change and quest towards success. But, I didn’t think my story was worthy enough to be told, at first. Nor did I want it to be another *inspirational* story.

***

**Characters:**

Anjali

Steven—Steven is Anjali’s adviser and has known Anjali for nearly five years. He is known to take on the ‘black sheep’ students who struggle to fit within the confines of the Department or College and self-identifies as a ‘black sheep’ too. He is also known to have a non-traditional advising style with his students, where he views them as true colleagues from the start. He becomes and remains friends with many of the students he works with. They share many similar worldviews and types of experiences that led to their own identity development. They talk about anything and everything because they get each other. Most advising sessions take place over dinner or drinks, never in an office and never during normal times of the day.

**Scene 2:**

The two are sitting together having a casual conversation over dinner.

**Production notes:**

Thoughts from Anjali that appear in italics are in her head and said as a voice-over.

STEVEN

Anjali, what are you doing?

ANJALI

Sitting here, having dinner with you? What the hell are you talking about?

STEVEN
I mean about your dissertation. What are you doing?

ANJALI

(Uneasy.) Um, you know what I’m doing. . . . We’ve been through this. We finally decided, I thought, that I’m going to design a qualitative study and explore how other women become role models within disability culture.

STEVEN

Go back to what you said when we first sat down.

ANJALI

What? I’m really having a hard time following here . . . my coloring book?

STEVEN

Yeah, that.

ANJALI

I told you I was really excited because my coloring book is officially in press and that the opportunity to educate kids and share my story in a big way was finally here.

STEVEN

Yeah, and I can tell how excited you are. So, what are you doing?
ANJALI

"Is he freaking kidding me right now?"

Changing my dissertation topic?

STEVEN

Think of it this way: You’ve now told the kids’ version of your story—it’s in press.

Now, you need to tell the adult version.

ANJALI

For my dissertation?

STEVEN

Well tell me this, why are you wanting to tell the stories of those other women?

ANJALI

“So maybe that’s why I haven’t gotten any feedback yet, he hasn’t read my proposal!”

Because, they are amazing role models and kids with disabilities and their families look up to them. I remember the power of having someone to look up to, and wouldn’t be who I am or where I am today without that.
STEVEN

But don’t you see, your story is the one that should be told first, you can tell those other stories later. Do you remember when we first met?

ANJALI

Yes. I was in your doctoral seminar class on transformational learning by accident actually . . . and also in your other class.

STEVEN

And?

ANJALI

I shared my story with you. Then, you convinced me to apply to the PhD program, and here we are now.

Why are we going through this?

STEVEN

And I also told you then that looking at the impact of your story on the educational system should be your dissertation topic!

ANJALI

True statement.
STEVEN

I know it’s not exactly like I had envisioned back then, but the underlying idea is the same.

ANJALI

(Skeptical.) But...*can* that be my dissertation?

“There’s no way a committee would let me do this!”

STEVEN

Why not?

✦✦✦

I resisted the initial idea for many reasons. I did not want to be defined solely by my disability. I did not want to revisit this piece of my past. I did not want to open those emotional wounds. I did not think it was a worthy enough story to tell. I did not understand the power of the ethnographic “I.” I did not want to be an inspiration. I did not want to be non-traditional. I did not want to go down this path.

✦✦✦

Continuation of previous scene:

ANJALI

I need some time. I’m not entirely convinced this is the best path for me.
STEVEN

You also just told me about how stimulating and refreshing the interpretive methods class is you’re in with Norm Denzin.

ANJALI

“Why did I tell him that?”

Yeah, I know. And maybe things happen for a reason. But do you realize what a leap this would be? This is a crazy idea. I can’t even believe I’m considering it right now, actually. It’s so not traditional, like at all!

STEVEN

What about your life has been “traditional” thus far?

ANJALI

Good point. (Pause.) I still need some time. I’m not convinced that my story is powerful enough for what we’re talking about here.

STEVEN

Of course it is. When you first shared your story, I could see how much of an impact it had on the entire American educational system, the political systems at play, the social aspects of being a minority, the broader culture of our society.
It's a story people can relate to, learn from and change things about themselves because of. Trust me.

***
ACT I:

DREAM IT
"If you've been dreamin'
  For all your life
This is your chance
Everybody is a star
It don't matter who you are, no
Keep on reachin' for your dreams
'Cuz it ain't as crazy as it seems"

- Black Eyed Peas, Own It (Adams, 2010, track 12)

Characters:
Lawyer 1: Lawyer 1 is older and seasoned in his early sixties with a deep and boisterous voice.
Lawyer 2: Lawyer 2 is a younger hot-shot lawyer who is awestruck by the conversation. He struggles to wrap brain around the conversation and vocalizes his doubt.

Scene 1:
The pair is sitting in Lawyer 1’s office discussing this case.

Production notes:
There is no visual picture on the screen as this dialogue occurs. There is a black screen and we hear the short conversation as a voice-over. Descriptions of the images or movements to appear on the screen are provided in parentheses.

LAWYER 1

The face of public education will never be the same. Did you know this is the first case of its kind?

LAWYER 2

That can’t possibly be true.
LAWYER 1

It is.

LAWYER 2

But, how?

LAWYER 1

Well, first off, very few people have the persistence to see something like this all the way through, especially a kid.

LAWYER 2

A kid? (Hear shuffling of papers.) Hmm . . .

LAWYER 1

I’ve gone through all the case law, there’s nothing else like it. Not these allegations, and the demands . . . If this sticks, (Pause.) wow . . .

LAWYER 2

That big huh?

LAWYER 1

Monumental. Think Brown v. Board (1954). I’m not sure how we’re going to stop her.
LAWYER 2

So who is this kid anyway?

(On the screen we see a quick image of the straight-away of a 400m track.)

✦✦✦

Photo 1.
Anjali’s childhood house on the first day of high school. Caption on screen reads: 7:00AM, 1998

I was the type of kid who laid out my clothes out and packed my school bag the night before; in fact, I still pre-plan my outfits and all the accessories, gadgets and things I will need for the various adventures of the day. For anyone, the first day of high school is a milestone. Finally, I’ve reached the big leagues. No more recess, no more naptime as part of the school day; this marks the real deal. There’s no turning back from this milestone, it’s a rite of passage.

✦✦✦
Characters:

Anjali

Scene 2:

This scene captures the thoughts inside Anjali’s head as she is tossing and turning the night before the first day of school. The timestamps represent the bright red numbers on her bedside alarm clock.

Production notes:

If the thoughts are coming from within Anjali’s head, not spoken audibly, they appear in within quotation marks and in “italics.”

ANJALI

11:00pm “Better get some sleep, big day tomorrow.”

12:30am “I wonder if they’ll like me . . .”

1:40am “I better not oversleep!”

2:15am “I hope I don’t get lost tomorrow.”

3:30am “I can’t believe the day is finally here! Few more hours . . .”

3:45am “Where is my homeroom again?”

4:00am “2 more hours . . .”

4:10am “Hmm only 10 minutes passed since I last looked . . .”

4:30am “Did I pack enough pencils?”

4:50am “I hope I make some new friends.”

5:15am “Still not time to get up?”
5:30am “It’s gotta be almost time to get up!”

5:35am “Should I even bother trying to fall back asleep?”

5:40am “Uh-oh, I’m going to be so tired today!”

6:01am (Hear the annoying, pulsating drone of the alarm clock going off.) “It’s finally here! The big leagues!! Time to get up and go!!”

(Throughout all the excitement, Anjali leaps up from bed, puts the clothes on that have been laying at the foot of the bed since the night before and goes through the essentials of the morning routine.)

Characters:
Anjali
Mom: Anjali’s mother.
Nancy: Anjali’s sister.

Scene 3:
This scene takes place inside childhood house growing up in the suburbs. The characters are getting ready for the first day of school. We hear typical morning banter amongst siblings and parents with the underlying race against the clock for everybody to be up, dressed, fed and out the door on time.

Production notes:
The scene takes place in the kitchen where Mom is standing by the sink, and doing other assorted tasks around the kitchen, all other dialogue is heard such as the banging on the bathroom door and the front door opening and closing.

1 This is a pseudonym.
ANJALI

Moooooom, I need to get into the bathroom and finish getting ready! Nancy has been in there too long, it’s my turn!

MOM

Okay okay, Nancy! Hurry it up in there.

NANCY

Yeah, yeah yeah.

MOM

Thomas, don’t forget your lunch money, it’s on the table still, put it somewhere safe! Has anyone seen Ian yet? Did he already leave?

ANJALI

(Closes door to bathroom to finish getting ready, audible sigh.)

I guess it’s go time.

(On the screen we see a quick image of the same track, this time a close-up view of a wheel and pushrim with a gloved hand fidgeting at the 2-o’clock position on the wheel.)
MOM

Anjali, what do you want on your English muffin? Butter? Jam? Peanut butter?

Nancy, your cereal is on the table, eat it up before it gets soggy. Harry², your bus will be here in 2 minutes, do you have everything together?

✦✦✦

I decide to go with some butter on my English muffin, but as I approach my usual spot at the table, suddenly a wave of worry comes over me and the excitement from the night before dissipates. Sensing this, our dog comes over close and simply rests her head on my lap as if to tell me it will all be okay.

My dad enters the kitchen and collectively asks if we’re all ready for the first day of school? Not waiting for an answer, he is out the door off to catch his train, followed by my brother leaving too. It’s just us girls left at the house now. My mom joins us at the breakfast table and finally has a chance to sit down for a moment with her cup of tea.

✦✦✦

Continuation of previous scene:

MOM

Anjali, don’t worry, high school will be different. We’ve done all that we can, they know you’re coming. They’ve promised to be ready for you.

✦✦✦

² This is a pseudonym.
I want to believe her, I really do. But deep down, there is that pain of doubt that suddenly has also made me lose my appetite for the English muffin sitting in front of me. I pick at it, like a bird, trying to force down just a few bites at least. Getting lost in the sea of doubt and worry, I decide there’s nothing I can do about it now, it’s now or never. I take a deep breath, I toss my barely eaten English muffin to our dog and add to the dishes in the sink to be dealt with later. I leave the table to collect my backpack, knowing that I don’t want to be late for my first day of high school.

✦ ✦ ✦

Characters:

Voice 1: An announcer whose voice is heard off-screen.

Scene 4:

This scene takes place at a track.

Production notes:

Descriptions of the images or movements to appear on the screen are provided in parentheses.

(See the same image of the track again.)

VOICE 1

(Deep and boisterous announcer-type voice.)

On your marks!

(See a spoked front wheel gradually roll up to the white line on the track.)

✦ ✦ ✦
Just as I exit my house to wait for my ride in the garage, I feel a warm, friendly, familiar pat on my back. It’s my mom there to reassure me again that it will be better. This familiar touch rescues me from my sea of doubt and empowers me with a newfound optimism to face the day. Maybe she’s right? Scratch that, she is right! Moms know best. Today is going to be different. I’ve waited a long time for this. It’s off to the big leagues—now or never.

I hear a vehicle turning the corner—you can always tell when someone is coming living towards the end of a cul de sac—I know that it’s my ride. I should warn you, though, that it’s not exactly the stretch limo that you envision bringing someone to their first Major League Baseball game, or the convertible that it would be so fun to roll up to a first day of high school in to instantly get acceptance from others and to win the “cool” award. It’s the short bus.

Social. Suicide.

But, this is my life. I roll down the driveway in my wheelchair onto the lift to be greeted by the semi-retired smelly old man whose pants never quite fit right. The drone of the lift goes up, I roll myself on. The smelly old man has to awkward climb all around me getting far too close for comfort as he spends another 10 minutes attaching a bazillion straps and metal clips to the frame of my wheelchair. He is muttering under his breath carrying on and on about how difficult it is to secure my wheelchair. It becomes like a treacherous game of Twister for him as he is trying to stabilize himself while reaching under my wheelchair without losing his balance. I
smell the morning coffee on his breath, and gasp as he loses his balance, and I get his plumbers butt crack so close to my face I hold my breath and lean over out of the way—not exactly how I wanted to start my morning. And now, I’m officially off to day one of high school, short bus and all . . . but still trying to hold on to that ounce of optimism.

Optimism has always been important in my life. They say I have a smile that can brighten up an entire room, and that my middle name, Joy was appropriately given. There have been countless times when I could have taken the pessimistic route and tossed the towel in, so to speak. But, there’s just always been something about me that always looks at the glass being half-full. I remember thinking about this on the bus ride to school. I was thinking of an image of a balloon, and that I could fill it up with all of the positive thoughts, hopefulness and reassurances from my mother. It had to be better than middle school, right? I remember trying to make a conscious effort to believe that it was all going to be okay. I never liked the phrase, “seeing is believing.” I always thought it should be “believing is seeing.” I was believing that I had with me a balloon in tow inflated close to its popping point with optimism.

Arriving at school that very first morning, disregarding the whole short bus incident, I was greeted by a series of let-downs.

**Let-down #1**

To start off, when I got off the short bus right in front of the school . . . oh yes, I always thought it would be better for them to drop me off around back, then
nobody would know, but in the interest of social suicide, the short bus gets the premier spot directly out front! Lucky me. As I got off the bus, there was a crosswalk that was met by a curb at the other end. Once I finally located the ramp, a car blocked it making it impossible for me to use. So now, this big first day of high school was something that was juuuuuust out of my reach. I could see it; I was technically on the property, with absolutely no way to get in. What a tease! I was slowly feeling like my balloon of optimism was deflating. This pattern would continue over the years, sometimes blocked by the local police car, sometimes by teachers, by parents by administrators . . . it didn’t matter. *I didn’t matter.*

**Let-down #2**

There I was, clutching a piece of paper with my schedule written out on it with corresponding room numbers. I had rehearsed it and memorized classes and room numbers, but I was feeling a little flustered from the previous let-down, and was starting to feel overwhelmed by the number of people around me in the hallway.

✧ ✧ ✧

**Characters:**

Anjali

Teacher 1: Teacher 1 is dressed in a suit and tie and appears to be a hall monitor there to direct lost students on the first day of school.

**Scene 5:**

This scene takes place in the hallways of the high school. The building is older, built in the 70s and has tile floor.
Production notes:
If the thoughts are coming from within Anjali’s head, not spoken audibly, they appear in within quotation marks and in “italics.” The camera adopts the perspective from Anjali’s eyes and vantage point.

ANJALI

“Man, there sure a lot of people here. I wish I was taller, I can’t see where I’m supposed to be going!”

(Pacing for a while. Look at watch, realize time is running out. Panic.)

“Shit, I don’t want to be late for my first homeroom of high school!”

A hall monitor! Hope!

“There’s that optimism coming back to guide me. They must be able to help guide me!”

Excuse me, can you tell me how to get to room A154?

TEACHER

(In a matter-of-fact tone.)

Yeah, just go straight down the hall, take your first right through the set of double doors and then an immediate left and the classroom will be straight in front of you.
Anjali

Okay, thanks.

(Roll away following his directions, recite them again.)

Down the hall, first right, through the set of doors, immediate left . . . seems easy enough . . .

(Pause.)

Well, there’s the classroom alright. Right in front of me. Why didn’t he tell me about the freakin’ stairs too??

“Is he kidding me?? Can you believe it?! This is going to be a long 4 years . . .”

Now what?

✦✦✦

Silly me for thinking the hall monitor, dressed in a suit was a knowledgeable adult. And so my battle against injustices, inaccessibility, and discrimination began.

Document 1.1
Excerpt from May 28, 2002 Boston Globe article:

“The obstacles Anjali Forber-Pratt would face at Natick High School were clear from the first day of her freshman year, when she rolled her wheelchair up to a staff member and asked how to get to a classroom. The directions led to a stairwell. From that day on, Forber-Pratt, a paraplegic from an early bout with the spinal disease transverse myelitis, said she encountered a climate of insensitivity to the needs of the disabled. School buses blocked the concrete ramps, crumbling anyway from poor upkeep. Accessible bathrooms were scarce and hard to find. Passageways were so narrow she’d skin her knuckles. A teacher complained in front of a class that her disability was an inconvenience.”
Let-down #3, #4, ... #7 ... (You get the picture.)

For some, not having a locker on the first day of high school would be a tremendous let-down. To me, I just chalked it up to the list. It was one of many let-downs. But, yes, I was disappointed that I could watch all my friends get their first ever high school locker and have the opportunity to decorate it, personalize it, scope out where it was in relation to the hot boys at the time and to be a part of this social scene. This is something I will never get back. I did not get an accessible locker until the end of my junior year.

Large areas of the school on this first day were simply inaccessible to me. The school had three principle wings: the A Wing, the B Wing and the S Wing. Each of these wings had two stories. On this first day, I simply could not access the upper S wing and upper A wing at all. I could access the lower A, B and S wings by using ramps which were very long and steep, and from what I understand, much too steep and long to comply with any building code or regulation. One of them even had a brick wall at the lower end, which was dangerous. Because of this physical layout of the school, I could not take the cooking class, which was offered as a freshman elective, because it was in the upper S wing. The same was true for the brand new, highly publicized applied technology class, (put in with federal grant money) that even had a wind tunnel! When I signed up for this elective, after much debate, the only alternative that was presented to me was for me to sit by myself in a remote location isolated from my peers, the instructor, and the laboratory space. Separate but equal was the prevailing attitude, in the year 1998.
I decided after my first day of high school to begin the process of petitioning to leave my school district. How could a school like this really meet my needs? How was I going to get an education if I spent the majority of time being sent on wild goose chases and feeling like I was the horse with the carrot dangling in front of me? I couldn’t. I spent time researching, finding and visiting alternative placements for myself where I could actually get an education in an accessible building. Silly me, for thinking that in this day and age, nearly 50 years post Brown v. Board of Education (1954), 25 years post Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and 10 years post Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), that I actually was worthy enough to get a free and public education regardless of my disability status?

★★★★

Continuation of Scene 4:
Production notes:
The imagery for this scene starts off with a close-up of the same track we’ve seen previously. As the camera pans out, the rest of the scene comes to life and the enormity of the stadium is captured through the sights and sounds. The audience now sees a stadium filled with thousands of people. Flags from all around the world are flying in the wind. It is apparent this is the world stage.

★★★★

Characters:
Anjali

Scene 6:
This scene takes place at a speaker’s podium where Anjali is addressing an audience on a school stage in an auditorium.

Production Notes:
Music plays in the background during the delivery of the speech with a crescendo building up as the power and emotion of the speech is shared
with the audience. At the conclusion, of the delivery the music cuts out abruptly and ambient room noises are heard—shuffling around, candy wrappers, coughing, but no applause. The scene ends with a truly awkward silence.

ANJALI

An up-to-date issue dealing with accessibility and ADA compliance is Natick High School. As mentioned, there must be complete program access, and Natick High School currently fails to provide that. In this day and age you can’t tell a person who is of a different ethnic background that their classes have to be somewhere different, or that they cannot take a certain course because of their color. It is the same for people with disabilities. Remember, the ADA is civil rights!

Anybody coming to Natick High School, by law, should have access to all programs. When you think about the layout of the school, how is someone supposed to get to the library, the science labs, the technology lab or to the cooking room? None of these programs can be reached using routes that comply with ADA. The ADA is one of the most important Acts of the century, yet there are still numerous public places that are not accessible or do not treat people with disabilities equally. Achieving ADA compliance begins with a person wanting to make a difference.
Day-to-day sacrifices are made primarily in relationships with other people, whether they are administrators, teachers, students, janitors, or anyone else. Each day if someone takes a stand he/she will get dirty looks, may lose a friend, and their life is always changing. Here we are, fast approaching the year 2000, and people still have to fight for their civil rights! Civil rights are not just about White people, or people of color, or about women’s rights; it is about equal rights for everyone of any color, sexual orientation, old, young, women, men and for people with disabilities.

There were no remarks. The grade earned on this assignment was a D- with no comments as to why, despite the fact that the assignment merely was to express yourself about a rule or law you felt passionately about.

Continuation of Scene 4:
This scene takes place at the same track and stadium that the images have been portraying up to this point.

Characters:
Anjali
Voice 1: An announcer whose voice is heard off-screen.

Production notes:
The imagery for this scene starts off with a close-up of the red Mondo track itself, then the camera pans to zoom in to the front wheel and follows
the frame of the chair making every individual paint chip evident to the naked eye. When reaching the part of the racing wheelchair where the frame runs into the rear wheel, the camera follows the tire in a clockwise direction slowly zooming in to see just the black rubber hand rim at the end of the frame. Then we see Anjali’s hand in a glove fidgeting.

If the thoughts are coming from within Anjali’s head, not spoken audibly, they appear in within quotation marks and in “italics.”

✦ ✦ ✦

I can feel my heart pounding in my chest, and my mouth goes dry. As the adrenaline pumps through my body, I feel like I’m trying to tame a wild tiger, just waiting for the moment when it can be released. I concentrate my energy on slow and relaxed breathing anticipating what is to come next. I don’t hear anything around me at this point.

“I am fast. I am ready. I am strong. I am Anjali Forber-Pratt.”

I think about how these things make me different from my competitors; how much they don’t truly know who I am. It is true, at the Paralympic Games, or World Championships, we all have the approximate same level of athletic ability; it wouldn’t be a high caliber competition if that wasn’t the case; but what is the difference between us? That is what these pages set out to explain.

It’s easy to allow oneself to be overwhelmed by a sea of emotions, with the expectations of others, or by the blood, sweat and tears that it took to simply make it to that starting line. What do you do in that situation? What can you do? You simply take a deep breath; it’s now or never. I worked all my life for this; as strange as that may sound to some, at 6 years old this was my dream. There are multiple videos,
newspaper articles, news stories that corroborate this; being on the world stage, being a Paralympian; but I knew I had to get myself there. Nobody will ever hand you your dreams on a silver platter, and if you cannot accept that, then you will never achieve your dreams.

✧✧✧
Continuation of previous scene:

ANJALI

“This is my dream come true. I knew I was destined for something great, to leave my mark on the world.”

VOICE 1

Set.

(Silence. The camera is shooting from behind start line and shows Anjali on the line with hands locked into position on the hand rim. There is subtle movement of her torso rising slightly.)

✧✧✧

When the starter utters this simple word, the entire world just casually comes to a stop. It doesn’t matter how high the pile of work is on my desk, what final exams I might have, how many unread emails are in my inbox, what unfinished business exists. It’s a way of escaping; it’s the time to show myself who I really am. I don’t do sports for other people, I do it for myself. It’s about channeling all of those
emotions, all of that worry to the race at hand. It is about proving one’s worthiness. For me, “set” is like a slingshot being pulled back. My arms are in the 10-o’clock position on my hand rims, my fists are clenched and my gloves are perfectly aligned in my groove of wear and tear. Hearing that word set, I rise up just a bit, hold my position with all of my energy and power at that moment on hold, waiting to release that tiger from within.

Anticipating the sound of the gun, or when I was a ski racer, the beep that indicated that “green light,” it’s about building up all that pent up energy, capturing it in a small itsy bitsy bottle, and just waiting for that trigger to be pulled.

“Here I am, take it or leave it.”

It’s being able to forget about the rest of the world, what it stands for and just enabling me to do my thing. I envision myself as being the bullet exploding from that gun.

(BANG!)

All that energy, all that hatred, all that pent up frustration, all the doubt is released. And I’m off, pounding my push rims with mighty force, flexing the aluminum chair as I go. Hammering away, bam, bam, bam . . . my speeds increase, 15mph . . . 16mph . . . 17mph . . .

♦ ♦ ♦

Continuation of previous scene:

(The 200m race is shown on screen while we hear the following commentary.)
I feel like I’m flying through the air. Within the first 60m of the race I have a lead on the field. Coming into the final straight away stretch, I hear the noise of my competitors pounding away, I know they are close. But not today; today is my day. I kick it into high gear and pull away, finishing the race with nearly two chair lengths on the entire field. I did it. I am the world champion.

***

Photo 2. Credit: Karen Boyle © 2011
Caption: Anjali Forber-Pratt celebrates 200m win at the International Paralympic Athletics World Championships in Christchurch, New Zealand.
High atop the podium listening to the surreal sound of our national anthem, watching our American flag wave in the wind, I took a moment to think to myself about how I got there and how I created my gold medal moment. My balloon of self-worth and confidence was filled to the brim this day soaring in the wind along with those stars and stripes. The truth is, not everybody will become a world champion. I get that, but the pathway to getting there is something that we can all learn from. The lessons I learned along the way are ones that can help others to create these gold medal moments in your lives, on or off the track. While this story begins on the top of the podium, I am astounded to this day of all that it took to reach there. Where does this dream, this drive, and this act of doing so extraordinarily well come from? It’s a complicated answer, but one I hope you too can take something from to create your own gold medal moments in your life.

Certainly, being high atop the podium I was instantly transformed into a role model by many outsiders looking in. However, it is my contention that I actually emerged as a role model much earlier than this gold medal moment. How I became a role model is closely connected to all of the worlds and systems with which I interact as well as my own identity development. How does one have so many highs and lows in life? Why is it that in this glorious, wonderful, dream-come-true moment, I think about some of the darkest moments of my past?

One such moment involved my English teacher sophomore year. At this point, one year into high school, all of my classes were relocated to the one area of the school that was actually wheelchair accessible. This meant, for my English teacher,
she had to carry her teaching materials and walk down a flight of stairs in order to teach my class.

My classmates shuffle in, claiming their probable seats for the remainder of the school year. Picking your seat the first class is a big deal you know; in high school, you want to make sure you’re sitting next to the cool people or your friends, and by golly you better stake your claim so nobody steals your seat for the remainder of the term! Come on, admit it, you remember doing this!

The teacher, amidst all the hustle and bustle of high school students bargaining for seats, clumsily walks into the door appearing slightly disheveled and out of sorts. Time to take roll, alphabetically of course.

 Characters:

English Teacher: This character is a middle-aged female.
Student Voices 1-6: Various male/female high school student voices.
Anjali

Scene 7:
This scene takes place in a classroom at the high school.

Production notes:
If the thoughts are coming from within Anjali’s head, not spoken audibly, they appear in within quotation marks and in “italics.”

ENGLISH TEACHER

Adams?

STUDENT VOICE 1

Here.
ENGLISH TEACHER

Anderson?

STUDENT VOICE 2

Here.

ENGLISH TEACHER

Brickman

STUDENT VOICE 3

Here.

ENGLISH TEACHER

Coughlin? Coughlin?

STUDENT VOICE 5

Oh, here!

ENGLISH TEACHER

Fey?

STUDENT VOICE 6: Here!

ENGLISH TEACHER

(Mumbles.) Forber-Pratt?
(Looks to Anjali.) You?

(Pause.)

Why are you here anyway? This is an honors level English class, you should be in the sped resource room, it’s not like you’re going to college anyway.

ANJALI

(Looks left and right to friends, with doubt.)

Did she just say that? What the hell?

“I always thought I would go to college! She doesn’t get it. I am going to college, who does she think she is?”

(Everybody is silent.)

ENGLISH TEACHER

Really, you are a major inconvenience to me. I can’t believe I have to walk down the stairs to this room for class.

✦✦✦

That did it. Those scathing words have been with me ever since. I remember that moment like it was yesterday. Essentially, my English teacher took a shroud of glass and punctured my balloon of self-worth and confidence right there in front of everybody else to witness. It was humiliating.
Nobody likes to be in the spotlight during their worst moments. This feeling of vulnerability is difficult to describe. It is like being unexpectedly naked with nothing around you to hide your own private imperfections, scars or the true you. In this moment, I feel like the words from my English teacher have literally stolen the clothing off my back. My clothing was my shield or armor of protection from exposing the true me. This vulnerability causes a physiological reaction. Research shows this is common in high stress situations; it is the essence of the “fight or flight” response. Even though the incident is not the same as a physical injury, this deeply penetrating emotional wound elicits the same increase in heart rate, rise in body temperature, sweats and having to deal with the competing reactions of wanting to punch the person’s lights out or to just slip away under the desk out of the moment into a cave to hibernate forever.

To this day, whenever I am faced with a naysayer in my life who doubts my ability, I think back to this moment, and I remember how those words burned my core, but I also remember how I rose to the challenge to overcome adversity and to not let her words stop me. It took me a while to piece together my plan of attack. Her words motivated me to prove her wrong, I was bound and determined to show her that I was capable of being in an honors English class, and that of course I was eligible to go to college, who did she think I was? That assignment I earned a D- on was from her. But, over the next few months, the other incidents just kept piling up. At the time, I was internalizing these incidents, and trying my hardest to put my tough skin on, to just smile and nod, because in my mind, that made everything go away. I took the attacks as they came, and tried really hard to not let them truly get
at me. But, there was something about that English teacher and the way that incident panned out that I couldn’t just shake off, no matter how hard I tried. It kept me awake at night; it would infuriate me, to this day, rehashing the story stirs up the same emotional and physiological response.

Reflection

Discrimination up to this point in my life was equated to racism. It was not something I understood. It was something we read about in school, learned about just by living in New England hearing the stories of Harriet Tubman and the Freedom Trail. Racism was defined as prejudices against people of color. I was aware of the lingering effects of racism, and remember thinking it was odd that I was one of two people of color in my class who actually lived in town (both of us are international adoptees), and the other people of color were bussed in from inner city Boston. Yet, my neighborhood growing up had several families from different ethnic backgrounds, and it was not seen as weird that our family was comprised of two White parents, two Indian children and two White kids.

It’s not to say that there weren’t experiences as a younger child when I distinctly remember being told “you can’t” because of my disability, but as a kid I just said, no right back and did it anyway. For example, there was a time I was told I couldn’t go on the monkey bars in elementary school and I just waited for when the teachers turned their backs and did it anyway, since I knew I was quite capable of doing it, and that I could probably do it faster than the boys! As a 6 year-old, I made a home video called, I Can Do Different Things. I was aware that people doubted my
abilities because they were scared of my wheelchair, but I was determined to show the world that there are always ways of adapting and making the situation work.

To be in the throws of true discrimination on the basis of disability, and to not be able to smile my way out of it, or to be bullheaded and plow through leaving others in my wake wondering, forced me to change my own perception of discrimination. Early on, I just wanted to teach others and to show them how wrong they were, and to get them to understand how wrong they were. I wanted to brainwash them and force them to get it. I often wonder if this is how Anne Frank felt or Rosa Parks or Harvey Milk or Martin Luther King Jr. Through writing and journaling during this time, I was beginning to question if all that was going on around me was in fact discrimination or not.

It felt wrong, but nobody had used such strong words to describe what was going on. I kept trying to give people benefit of the doubt, and to convince myself it wasn’t really that bad; it wasn’t like living in the South in the 60s. But, over time, I realized it was that bad; and that it was in fact discrimination that I was facing square on.

I remember yelling and screaming at my mom as I was trying to get my brain wrapped around it all. I would scream telling her she didn’t get it and that she never would get it. I was “triple-whammied” as I liked to call it—a disabled, Indian woman—with White parents! This anger would come out and I would end up getting so worked up I might have an outbreak of hives and crying until eventually falling asleep for 12 hours at a time. Processing this at such a young age was not easy, and during moments such as these my body literally just shut down. What else
would elicit such powerful responses? My core was being threatened; it was
discrimination.

So how does a triple whammied girl stand up to authority, to White authority,
to White senior authority? It is not easy. The power dynamics were interesting
during this time. I had been raised to respect your elders and that you don’t talk
back and speak only when spoken to, especially to a person in higher power than
you. Thus, coming from this habit of mind made it even more challenging to
negotiate the situations described earlier. It makes me sympathetic to victims of
abuse and empathetic in the process of having to directly challenge perceived
authority.

Bourdieu (1977, 1986) defines habitus as a system of lasting, transposable
dispositions that function at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations,
and actions. As the individual encounters various objective conditions, he or she
develops these dispositions. The field, or environment where people exist and go
about their everyday lives, is “complicated by the interaction of social structures
such as institutions, rules, and practices” (Trainor, 2008, p. 150). As mentioned
earlier, Bourdieu also insists on individuals reflecting on how and where one’s own
habitus came from (Wacquant, 1989).

For me, I think my habitus about not standing up to authority also stemmed
from being a person of color with White parents. I was grateful for the opportunity
to have a life in America, an opportunity to live, despite my disability. These were
things I never shared in public, but as is common with many international adoptees,
I believe I did internalize some feelings of guilt, which translated into my belief and
perception of not challenging authority and to “just be grateful for what you have.”
Right or wrong, there were plenty of other people in the world worse off than I was, and I was aware of this and didn’t want to make trouble. Even if it was the short bus coming for me with the smelly old man, I had an opportunity to get an education.

Children internalize many bizarre things, and they create their habitus simply from their environment around them. I open speeches sharing the story that I was a naive kid who believed that I was one day going to outgrow my disability. I thought, in preschool, that in order to grow up and get an education, get a job, have a family that I first had to outgrow my disability and become able-bodied.

Why? Because every adult I had met could walk, so I thought this was a logical assumption. When I was a baby was hospitalized for months, my older brother, also an international adoptee, had tears in his eyes and was petrified to stand up to authority, asking my parents if they decided they didn’t want me anymore and sent me back to India. He missed me, and felt it was his duty as my big brother to find out where I was and why. In his 4-year-old mind, and his habitus, he was grateful for the opportunity he had to stay in America, but if I was going to be sent back, he was going to go with me. I was not the only one in my family to create these bizarre childhood habits of mind surrounding power dynamics and race.

The stories shared above, particularly with the English teacher, show how one can be paralyzed by these strong power dynamics. I know “paralyzed” may be a funny choice of words, but truthfully, it’s not my disability that prevents me from participating in life’s activities; it’s the attitudes of others and discriminatory mindset coupled with the fear of standing up for what is right.
In the heat of the moment in that English class, I was paralyzed. Not only was she drawing attention to my physical paralysis, her words left me dumbfounded and extremely vulnerable as was described. The fact that she was the teacher, and I the student, I was paralyzed by the power dynamic too—I quite literally did not know how to respond. If I blew up at her, I was convinced I’d just get myself kicked out—even though I was never the kid in school who was sent to the office for talking back to my teachers. I knew that it wasn’t going to end well if I argued.

I was doubtful that I had a leg to stand on, that my words could ever challenge hers, because, she was the teacher, and I was the student. She was the adult, and I was the teenager. She was White, and I was Indian. She was able-bodied, and I was not. These first experiences and stories led to a lot of important lessons learned particularly about the definition of discrimination and the role of power dynamics. While I took a submissive and passive role in these early encounters, I was not going to remain that way for much longer.

I had a history at this point of taking the high road, to a certain degree. For example, writing about the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) for her class, it was a very purposeful passive-aggressive move on my part. I admit that! The first version of that assignment was laced with emotion and pointing fingers at the teacher, I decided to take a more diplomatic approach and back up my claims with other examples from Natick High School, not bad for a 15-year-old!

I believe that early exposure to the dominant forms of cultural capital placed me in the position to succeed. For Bourdieu, ability is socially constructed and is the result of individuals having access to large amounts of cultural capital. Ability is
itself the product of an investment of time and cultural capital, and the outcome is success or achievement. Thinking back to my adapted definition of cultural capital as: knowledge, skills, dispositions, experiences and corresponding organizational practices that influence achievement outcomes, civic responsibility, persistence, interpersonal development, intrapersonal development, and social identity development for diverse individuals. The incidents described up to this point certainly influenced my achievement outcomes, both educationally and athletically, and therefore were critical in the building of my own reservoir. I attribute these challenging early experiences as to why and how I became the successful athlete that was also alluded to throughout the telling of these stories. Transformational capital is the ability to engage in critical reflection of experiences in order to align value system and actions (Aragon, 2008). Through critical reflection, I explored my habit of mind in relation to what constitutes discrimination to broaden my own definition beyond racism. As described, I was in the process of creating a new habit of mind while appearing seemingly passive and submissive during these incidents. The beauty of transformational capital, is after reflection and purposeful change of one’s habitus, a broader sense of social responsibility emerges. This will be expanded on in following acts as my reconceptualization of discrimination occurred, and I then began to understand my social responsibility.

Aspirational capital refers to the ability to “maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Individuals embody this resiliency by not letting their current situation prevent them from dreaming of something better. To me, this connects to the stories shared
thusfar, because despite all that was going on in my life, I did not let it stop me from living my life.

Again, with the images from athletics and high points interspersed in the telling of these low points of my life, I made the conscious decision to continue with the mentality I had as a 6-year-old when making the home video, that “I Can Do Different Things.” It just became more challenging to combat adversity the same way as I had as a child, because when you add layers of complexity to the definition of discrimination, and power dynamics infiltrate, it is easy to become a doubter of yourself and your own thoughts. But, throughout the telling of my stories, the words that appeared in italics were the thoughts in my head. To me, the thoughts in my head embody my resilient nature and desire to dream of something better.

Familial capital “refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005). Parents (McNeal, 1999; Perna, 2004; Perna & Titus, 2005; Smith-Maddox, 1999; Valadez, 2002; Yan, 1999; Yan & Lin, 2005) and siblings (Gofen, 2009; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003; Swartz, 2008) are also critical pieces of this type of capital. To me, challenging of my own habits of mind and realizing the influence of where I came from in relation to family were apparent in this discussion particularly of power dynamics. Exploring and understanding the family dynamic will also continue to be interrogated as the rest of the story unfolds, but this act sets the stage for some of the key dynamics at play.

As I was getting ready for school that first day, the reassurance from my mom was powerful, and physically feeling the weight of her hand on my back was
my indication that she was hopeful, and supportive. She wanted me to be happy and successful at school, and she too believed that it was going to be different, different-good. Up to this point, the other instances of injustices or lobbying for school fieldtrips to be wheelchair accessible, or to be allowed to attend an elementary school where there was front door access with no stairs—these battles were my mother’s. To this day, I am extremely grateful to her for that. Only some snippets of our conversations in these early high school years were included. Some were supportive and hopeful, whereas others were emotional and perhaps counter-productive in terms of our relationship.

I do believe that my strong sense of independence came from my mom’s faith in me. It also came by her living example; as she left home without supports or parental guidance at age 18. She knows how to be resourceful and independent. She instilled those values on both myself and my sister, and the importance of being who you want to be, regardless of what you look like or what other people say. With this strong sense of early independence, though, as will be explored in more depth later, her view of being a supportive parent is different from mine. Different is not bad, but through various challenges in my life, I would be lying if I said I didn't hope for more support and acknowledgment that she cares and is proud of who I have become.

These concepts of discrimination and power dynamics will continue to play a role in the rest of the story left to tell. Going back to the definition of cultural capital, the experiences and knowledge gained up to this point in my story are fundamental in understanding and interrogating the rest of the story. The stage is set, and we
know that teenager Anjali is tired of being walked all over and adopting this passive or submissive role. Though, we do also know this seemingly passivity was a key period of time to allow for the critical reflection and redefining of habits of mind.
ACT II:

FINDING THE COURAGE TO STAND
“Cause when push comes to shove
You taste what you're made of
You might bend, till you break
Cause its all you can take
On your knees you look up
Decide you’ve had enough
You get mad you get strong
Wipe your hands shake it off
Then you Stand, Then you stand.”
- Rascal Flatts, Stand (Daly & Orton, 2006, track 1)

I was a downhill skier at this point in my life, competing and ski racing every free moment I had. There is something serene and peaceful about the top of a mountain. Being there is a way to escape the harsh realities of life and gives me the chance to compose my thoughts.

Photo 3. © 2011
Caption: Anjali Forber-Pratt sits in her monoski high atop Peak 10 in Breckenridge, Colorado

I know it sounds odd to some, but there’s something pure about exposing oneself to the elements—subzero weather, the wind whipping across your face, disconnected technologically from society and just time to reflect. I do a lot of thinking outside, or staring out of an airplane window at 30,000 feet up in the air.
One such day, after a long day of skiing and training, my mentor and coach at the
time sensed that I had other things on my mind. “Hey kiddo . . .,” as he affectionately,
and to this day all these years later, still refers to me as. “Hey kiddo, let’s go take a
run together.” There was something in the tone of his voice that led me to believe
that he was on to me. Typically, I am bubbly and engage in conversation and jokes,
but that particular week had been a trying one at school, and so I was trying to avoid
eye contact with people, to just ski really fast and perhaps recklessly to just escape
from it all. Those who know you best, you cannot hide from, no matter how hard
you try. We rode the ski lift up together, and got off and went over to a closed trail
and just sat there waiting for the ski lift to shut off. We waited for all the last skiers
to clear the area and we sat there in silence for a while. He broke the silence by
asking: “What’s eating you?” He could tell that I was wrestling with some deep inner
turmoil and that I was not my usual self.

I told him pieces of the stories already shared, such as about that English
teacher and the other snide remarks, the frustrations I was facing each day. There
was something safe about telling him high atop the mountain, far away from all of
the actual naysayers, a whole state away actually! There I was, sitting high atop the
mountains, bundled up wearing my ski gear, layers and layers of protection from my
true feelings. To me, every layer of clothing was a sheet of protection from my true
feelings. Even my speech was muffled underneath my helmet, neck gator and
thermal underwear zipped nice and high for added protection from the frigid air. In
that moment though, I felt defeated and helpless. As much as I clung to my layers of
protection, I was beginning to realize that my problems at school were bigger than I alone could handle.

And so, I talked: Quietly, somberly, and matter-of-factly. Afraid of his reaction, or whether he would view me as less of a person or as a weak athlete who should be the warrior tough-guy, I let my guard down that day. I then found out his other job, other than ski coach, was a real estate lawyer, who also took on disability law cases on the side. What a blessing! After our conversation, I went home to Massachusetts and promptly asked my parents to sit down with me at the dinner table, the place where important conversations occur in our household.

Characters:
Anjali
Mom
Dad

Scene 1:
Anjali enters the house from the back, coming up a noisy elevator and yelling to her parents to first determine if they are home. As she exits the elevator into the family room, she sees her parents sitting on the couches watching television and the following conversation begins.

Production notes:
We hear the noise of the elevator. Anjali is visibly nervous and doesn’t even pause to take off her winter coat and gloves. Sitting around the dimly lit dining room table at Anjali’s childhood home, the same location as seen earlier.

ANJALI

(Nervously.) Mom? Dad? Can we sit down at the table? I need to talk to you, yes you both.
(Pause, audibly take a deep breath and say next three sentences hurriedly in one breath.)

Mom-Dad-I've-hired-myself-a-lawyer-you-can-choose-not-to-support-me-if you-want-but-I'd-really-like-your-support-but-I-understand-if-you-choose-not-to.

PAUSE.

This is what I'm doing.

✦✦✦

Document 1.2
Excerpts from May 28, 2002 Boston Globe article:

“This was a really important case and hopefully other municipalities will watch what happened here,” said, acting director of the Massachusetts Office on Disability. “

"She should be very proud of herself and her family for having the stamina to be able to stand up and say this just isn't right."

“Executive director of the Disability Rights Council, a Washington-based advocacy group, said it's up to fighters like Forber-Pratt to forge a new era of awareness. "It makes another teenager who's experienced another kind of discrimination stand up and say, 'If she can do it, I can do it,' ”

My desire to fight the system and to stand up to inequalities, it was not a rash decision made by a young teenager, though, admittedly it was a bold move for me as a 14-year-old to hire my own lawyer and embark on a federal lawsuit. It is inherent to who I am. I think about the times in my life when I could have quit; it would have been easy. I’m not entirely sure why I never did quit. Naysayers in my life, such as
that English teacher, have made me want to prove them wrong. It’s the drive in me. I am a fighter. Maybe it’s not a good reason to do things, maybe it’s dangerous. If I don’t channel this anger into something worthy, such as athletics, I would be destroyed, mentally and physically. But, there are numerous examples in my life when I could have conceded to the world and simply given up. Quite honestly, if I were a cat, I’ve outlived my allotted nine lives! These examples, however, serve as my own character witness and helps to explain why a 14-year-old girl made the decision she did.

Characters:

Anjali
Nurse

Scene 2:

I woke up alone, disoriented, in a bed, in a dark corner in a 5-point restraint and was intubated. I didn’t know where I was exactly, but I had this vague recollection of who I was, but even that was questionable. I started running through what I knew in my head, I knew I had a really long day, but I couldn’t remember why.

Production notes:

If the thoughts are coming from within Anjali’s head, not spoken audibly, they appear in within quotation marks and in “italics.”

ANJALI

“Focus Anjali, focus! I just need to figure out where I am. That will help . . .”

Pause. (Camera fades back in to show passing of time.)

“City lights. Definitely means I’m not at home.”

(Hear a cacophony of beeps in the background.)
“Ah-ha! You only hear those types of beeps in one possible place, a hospital.

That must be where I am! Surgery! That’s it, I came to the hospital to have surgery. But, surgery for what? And, why? And, if I am in a hospital, why is it so dark? Where are all the people? What time is it? What day is it? Why can’t I talk? Why can’t I move?”

I started feeling claustrophobic, trying with all my might to make motions for someone to notice me who might be able to tell me what was going on. My first attempts failed miserably. I had an automatic blood pressure cuff on and it was reading my vitals and the continuous humming and normal beeping of that was surely not going to get anyone’s attention, especially since I couldn’t actually move, even though I was trying; by golly I was trying! I was grateful that I could at least still think through this process; I figured that meant I might be okay.

Continuation of previous scene:

ANJALI

“I’m just going to close my eyes and rest a little. Let’s try this again in a bit.

It’s all going to be okay. It has to be, right?”

Pause. (Camera fades out and back in to show passing of time.)
“Spinal surgery! That’s right, I went in to have my scoliosis fixed. Did the surgery work? But why can’t I move? Hm, I can’t move my left arm. Wait! I can’t feel my left arm! What was going on? This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

(Pause.)

“If I’m in a hospital, and apparently in rough shape, where the hell are my parents?”

✦✦✦

My heart rate started climbing into a zone where the beeps changed, luckily that brought some nurses over who helped to explain what had happened, where I was and why. That is what it is like to die, and to come back to life. In 2000, I went in for a major surgery and found out the hard way that I was highly allergic to a particular pain drug. While this is the only time in my life that I have legitimately died, there have been numerous other events in my life when I probably should have died. There have been at least nine times, but honestly, I’ve lost count.

When you die, or almost die, or have that brush with reality, there are a lot of questions that ensue. Why me? Why am I still here? What does this mean? It also stirs up some emotions of anger too as you wrestle with these questions. Apparently, I had so much anger that the first thing I did when I came out of that surgery was I slugged a nurse and gave her a black eye, hence the five point restraint . . . In my defense, they did kill me! I think I had every right to be angry! And sidebar, all they needed to do was read my medical record to realize there was
no humanly way possible for me to kick someone, so I think the five point restraint was a bit of overkill if you ask me!

When people ask, where does your drive come from? It comes, in part, from these nine plus lives. The high road, to some, would be giving up and simply letting death be the winner instead of standing up to adversity. It would have been easy to quit when I was born and rejected by my birthmother as an orphan, when I acquired a life threatening illness as an infant, when I was held hostage at gunpoint in middle school, when I was told how much of a failure I was by that English teacher, when I fell 30 feet off a ski lift into rocks, when I ran into an eighteenth century stone house in my racing wheelchair, when I woke up in that hospital bed in the five point restraint after flat-lining or in the next story when coming head-to-head with the scariest moment of my life.

Characters:

Anjali
6 Lawyers: Anjali’s Lawyers Bill and Dave and four opposing lawyers
Court Stenographer
Audience: Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Special Education Director, Principal, and Every High School Teacher/Admin/Assistant I had ever had.

Scene 3:

My parents dropped me off a few blocks away in a parking lot where my lawyers met me. Together we then walked a few blocks and entered the court house. I had been well prepped, but not for what was about to unfold. Today was the day for me to share my side of the story (Forber-Pratt Dep. 1:32+.).

Production notes:

If the thoughts are coming from within Anjali’s head, not spoken audibly, they appear in within quotation marks and in “italics.”
ANJALI

“It’s now or never.”

ANJALI’S LAWYER #1 - DAVE

You ready kiddo?

ANJALI

I’m as ready as I’ll be. Let’s just get this over with.

ANJALI’S LAWYER #1 - DAVE

Remember, I am here today not as your lawyer but to be your support. I will sit
next to you and leave the talking, objecting, and legalese to my partner. I’m proud
of you kid.

ANJALI

Okay, thanks.

ANJALI’S LAWYER #2 - BILL

Uh, Dave, we have a situation.

ANJALI’S LAWYER #1 – DAVE

What’s that?

(Whispering among the lawyers.)
Can they even do that? Have they forgotten that she is a minor?

ANJALI’S LAWYER #2 - BILL

I know. I know. Trust me, I plan to vehemently object to their antics. I think our hands are tied though, I say we proceed as was planned anyway. Talk to Anjali.

I’ll be back.

ANJALI

Dave, (Concerned.) what’s going on?

ANJALI’S LAWYER #1 – DAVE

We knew they were sleaze balls, but I didn’t think they would ever stoop this low. They have brought everybody you have ever come in contact with on faculty and staff from the high school to try and intimidate you.

ANJALI

As in . . . they are all going to be there for my deposition?

ANJALI’S LAWYER #1 – DAVE

Yes. I’m sorry. Just pretend they aren’t in there. Focus on their lawyer and his questions just as we practiced. Answer only what is asked of you, offer nothing more. Remember, I’m here for you.
ANJALI

Okay. Let’s go.

✦ ✦ ✦

Just thinking about this moment, my heart rate soars, much like laying in the hospital bed in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). How was this fair—I was just a kid trying to stand up for what I believe in, trying to make my own voice heard to help other’s coming up after me. I never was one to be confrontational or keen to stand up to authority, but here I was being thrown into the lion’s den so to speak. It is not an everyday occurrence to come face-to-face with some of your deepest fears. I remember my palms sweating profusely, biting my lower lip until it bled out of nervousness and feeling like a little ant about to be stomped on by the big meanies on the other side of the table. I had never felt so alone and vulnerable before. Truth be told, it was not until 10 years later that I began to realize and discover that I was not as alone as I thought.

✦ ✦ ✦

Characters:

Mom
2 Lawyers: one opposing side lawyer and one of my lawyers
Court Stenographer
5 representatives from the town (Principal, Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Director of Special Education, Karrie3-Anjali’s High School Guidance Counselor)

Scene 4:

It’s 2011, and Anjali pulls out a cardboard box from under her bed and pulls a slightly musty smelling stack of papers out. Sitting on the floor of her

3 This is a pseudonym.
bedroom, alone in her apartment, leaned up against the wall, she sifts through the papers reading her parent’s accounts (Forber Dep. 1:308; Pratt Dep. 1:30.) for the very first time, almost 10 years later. As she reads, the audience is transported to that place in time, back to January 3, 2002 at the lawyer’s office from the opening scene.

LAWYER

Isn’t it true that your daughter travelled on these alleged ‘illegal’ ramps for an entire year with no problem?

MOM

Yes, she did travel on them during her first year, but I didn’t realize how dangerous they were at the time, and it was not without problems.

LAWYER

What problems?

MOM

It’s hard for me to recall exactly, Anjali would be able to answer that better than me.

LAWYER

Are there any documents here that would help to refresh your memory?
MOM

Not that I can recall. The assigned pusher would not show up on time.

LAWYER

How often would you say that occurred in a given week? One to five times? Five to 10 times? More than 20 times?

MOM

I'm not sure, Anjali kept notes on all of that.

LAWYER

Did traveling the ramps cause Anjali undue pain or hardship?

MOM

I think traveling those ramps that first year was hard on her. Her spine was starting to twist, and I didn't really realize the extent of it. I think she went through far more pain than I realized or was willing to listen to her about actually. So that's physical. Her wrists are bad, and pushing up the ramps is damaging to her wrists, or was. And mentally, even though you would look at her and think, this is a bright student and always cheerful, I see her at home where I see her collapse after
these hard days at school, needing a rest, needing a break, needing to regroup
to go back to face school the next day.

LAWYER

You said earlier you were not a good listener, didn't have an attentive ear. Could you explain what you mean by that?

MOM

(Somberly.) I thought she should tough it out.

LAWYER

Why would you think that? I mean, I have children. So why would you think that?

MOM

We were trying to be cooperative. I wanted us to put forth whatever effort we could to help the school meet her needs.

LAWYER

So when she started to complain, you thought that it wasn't that big a deal, what she was complaining about?
MOM

I didn’t realize how much it was impacting her physical comfort and safety. I think it’s been hard for her to maintain her motivation in school with some situations. For instance, that English class where she felt right off the bat that the teacher did not appreciate having her in the class. That’s one example.

LAWYER

Did you or your husband ever have to seek any kind of counseling or medical assistance as a result of having to watch your daughter undergo these various things with the high school to get access?

MOM

Not medical assistance, but we have undergone counseling. I’m not sure that it is totally because of Anjali, but it certainly feeds into the strain that one feels.

LAWYER

Because she does have a difficult obstacle to overcome; is that fair to say?

MOM

That’s fair to say.
LAWYER

So you have offered her to go get counseling to help her deal with the fact that she has an additional hurdle that most other’s don’t have; and that it was true before she went to Natick High School, and it will be true for the rest of her life?

MOM

Yes.

LAWYER

And, Anjali refused?

MOM

Yes.

LAWYER

And as a parent, you were okay with that?

MOM

Right. She is a very independent-minded young-woman, and I think I trust her judgment on that score.
LAWYER

Well tell me then, how have you, if you have been injured, how have you been injured in connection with the efforts that the school made to grant access to your daughter?

MOM

She is my daughter, and it pains me to see what she has gone through. It has pained her dad to see what she has gone through. She is a wonderful child, and these issues should have been resolved before. So I feel that any injury that we have obtained has been the hurt that a parent feels for a child, and . . . that’s about it.

✦✦✦

That’s about it. These hundreds of pages of documents contained the conversations we never had, and if we did, I blocked them out completely probably trying to save face. There was content I had blocked out from my own eight and half hour long deposition.

✦✦✦

Continuation of Scene 3:

LAWYER

Are there any things you can’t do?
ANJALI

Well, I can’t stand. I can’t walk.

LAWYER

But other than that you have been very active, would you say?

ANJALI

Yes.

LAWYER

(Camera makes quick cuts to show passing of time and rapid fire of this string of questioning)

What parts of your body do you use to ski? This is downhill skiing you do? When did you begin skiing competitively? Are those flat surfaces or are they moguls? Do you jump? Do you ski fast? And the goal of the races is to get to the bottom as fast as you can? Is it fair to say you that you have to have a strong back to do this type of racing? Could you describe your training, please? Is the idea to push as fast as you can?

ANJALI

Yes.
LAWYER

To get the wheelchair going as fast as you can? Is the object of the race to complete the course in the shortest time possible?

ANJALI

Yes.

LAWYER

With the javelin, what did you do?

ANJALI

Throw it.

LAWYER

And you’ve won awards for your performances in these sports?

ANJALI

Yes.

LAWYER

How many would you say you’ve won?

ANJALI

I’m not sure.
LAWYER
More than 1?
ANJALI
Yes.
LAWYER
More than 10?
ANJALI
Yes.
LAWYER
More than 20.
ANJALI
Yes.
LAWYER
Would you say you are independent?
ANJALI
Yes.
You are proud of your independence?
Yes.

Would you say you are athletic?
Yes.

Are you proud of your athleticism?
Yes.

You are physically strong?
Yes.

You are proud of that, too?
Yes.

Is there anything you can’t do?
Yes.

LAWYER

What is that?

ANJALI

I can’t stand or walk.

LAWYER

Notwithstanding your disability, is there anything you can’t do?

ANJALI

Like?

LAWYER

Let me rephrase that. Are there any possibilities that are not open to you?

ANJALI

Yes. Attending certain colleges, holding certain jobs because of my disability.

LAWYER

So is it your view that your disability limits you?

ANJALI

Yes.

Yes.
LAWYER

But let me go back to athletics for a moment. Would you characterize yourself as an excellent athlete?

ANJALI

Yes.

LAWYER

As you are an Olympic/Paralympic aspirant, correct?

ANJALI

Yes.

LAWYER

So you must be good.

ANJALI

I guess.

"Is he trying to suggest that just because I'm an athlete I'm not actually disabled? What does this have to do with anything?"
LAWYER

Would you say that your athletic prowess and physical strength make you stronger than the typical handicapped person?

ANJALI’S LAWYER #2 - BILL

Objection!

LAWYER

You must answer the question.

ANJALI

No.

LAWYER

No?

ANJALI

(Shakes head.)

LAWYER

Would you agree that you shouldn’t be viewed as a typical handicapped person?

ANJALI’S LAWYER #2 - BILL

Objection!
ANJALI

(Looks to her right for affirmation from her lawyer that she should answer.)

No.

LAWYER

Does your athletic ability allow you to do things that others with your disability cannot do?

ANJALI

No.

LAWYER

So others with your disability could do the same things you do?

ANJALI

Yes.

... 

LAWYER

Anjali, were you ever denied access to any classes because of your disability?

ANJALI

Yes.
(Pause.)

LAWYER

Why couldn’t you get to the classroom?

ANJALI

Because there’s no accessible route there.

LAWYER

Why was there no accessible route?

ANJALI

What do you mean?

LAWYER

Well, were there ramps in the school?

ANJALI

Yes.

LAWYER

Wouldn’t then, the use of ramps allow you to get from the main entrance to the applied technology lab?
ANJALI

No.

LAWYER

Why not?

ANJALI

There was no elevator.

LAWYER

Would the ramps allow you to get there using them, though?

ANJALI

No.

LAWYER

Why not?

ANJALI

Because there’s no elevator.

LAWYER

Why do you need the use of the elevator to get to the applied technology class?
ANJALI

Because, the ramps only lead you to the lower level. And, I can’t stand or walk.

LAWYER

Were there stairs in the way?

ANJALI

Yes.

LAWYER

So there was no possible route for you to get to the applied technology class from the front entrance of the school?

ANJALI

Correct.

LAWYER

Did you ever complain to anyone freshman year that you could not get to the applied technology class?

ANJALI

Yes.
LAWYER

Why couldn’t you get to the planetarium?

ANJALI

Because there was no way for me to get down to the planetarium. There was no elevator.

LAWYER

What did you want to learn in planetarium?

ANJALI

About the stars. I don’t know.

LAWYER

The stars?

ANJALI

Yeah.

(Camera fades out and back in to show passing of time.)

LAWYER

Well, you understand the difference between the word “excluded” and the difference of an “inconvenience” don’t you?
ANJALI'S LAWYER #2 - BILL

Objection!

ANJALI

Yes.

LAWYER

So thinking about having an aide to push you up and down the ramps to attend class with your classmates, which is this?

ANJALI'S LAWYER #2 - BILL

Objection!

ANJALI

It was a major inconvenience.

LAWYER

But not an exclusion?

ANJALI

I guess.

LAWYER

Well, which is it?
So it is your testimony that you made every class during your sophomore year that was held in the library. You didn’t miss any? You were not excluded?

ANJALI

I ended up coming very late to some.

LAWYER

What did you miss?

ANJALI

How am I supposed to know? I wasn’t there!

LAWYER

Were you ever punished academically because of your inability because of a chair or an obstruction in the stack aisles in the library during your sophomore year?

ANJALI

I would have less time to complete the task.

LAWYER

Did you complete the tasks ultimately?

ANJALI

Yes.
LAWYER

What did you do when computer use was necessary in chemistry?

ANJALI

My friends did the work, and I just copied their answers because I couldn’t use the computers.

LAWYER

Did you ever complain to anyone at the Natick High School about that problem?

ANJALI

Yes.

LAWYER

When you say you were marked down for it, what are you referring to?

ANJALI

My grade in the class.

LAWYER

Is it your testimony that you were punished academically for not being able to reach the computers in chemistry sophomore yet?
ANJALI

Yes.

LAWYER

How so?

ANJALI

Because, I didn’t complete the checkpoints on the computers, and she didn’t give me credit for those, which bring down our grade as a homework grade. Then I struggled when it was exam time because I never learned the material.

(Camera fades out and back in to show passing of time.)

LAWYER

Describe your relationship with your guidance counselor, Karrie⁴.

ANJALI

(Looks to Karrie in the room.) We have a very good relationship, because she’s been my guidance counselor for the past three and a bit years. She was the advisor for peer mediation too.

LAWYER

Are you friends with her?

⁴ This is a pseudonym.
ANJALI

Yes.

LAWYER

Are you close to her?

ANJALI

Yes.

LAWYER

Do you confide in her?

ANJALI

Some things.

LAWYER

What kinds of things?

ANJALI

If I’m having problems about what colleges to go to, what I’m looking for in a college, if there’s things going on at home that I feel that I want to talk to Karrie about.
LAWYER

Do you ever take your complaints to her, complaints about the school to her?

ANJALI

No.

LAWYER

Why not?

ANJALI

Because, Karrie’s job as my guidance counselor is to help me with my academics, with being prepared for college, and picking my course schedule, and it’s not her position to deal with the other stuff. It’s the responsibility of Dr. Harker as principal and superintendent and the others in this room.

(See and hear guidance counselor Karrie crying in the room at this moment.)

LAWYER

Do you feel she has intentionally done something to discriminate against you?

ANJALI

No.
LAWYER

You said you felt you were being discriminated against though, is that right?

ANJALI

Yes.

What did Dr. Harker⁵ do to discriminate against you? What specifically did he do to you to discriminate against you?

ANJALI

(Looks to him.)

As I said, when I would complain about different issues that—within the school, nothing was ever done about them. I couldn’t take certain classes. I couldn’t carry on the normal school life. Going through school, some teachers and personnel within the building just didn’t seem to have general awareness of proper disability etiquette. After complaining and seeing the issues weren’t being dealt with, time after time it leads me to believe that it’s intentional.

LAWYER

So Dr. Harker never said anything specifically to you that caused you to think he was acting discriminatorily?

⁵ This is a pseudonym.
ANJALI

He did.

LAWYER

Like what? When? That’s what I’m asking.

ANJALI

(Looks to him.) One time, Dr. Harker called me out when my class was going into the auditorium for an assembly and said weirdly, “I’ll be watching you.” Then he quickly added, “in a good way.”

LAWYER

Are you personally looking for Dr. Harker’s money?

ANJALI

No.

LAWYER

Is money a goal of your lawsuit?

ANJALI

Yes.
LAWYER

How so?

ANJALI

Because, I was deprived of a large part of the social and academic portion of high school, and that’s already said and done. There’s nothing they can do at this point physically to the building that will bring back my freshman, sophomore or junior years.

LAWYER

What was this “social experience” as you call it, that you were denied?

ANJALI

First off, having to have my classes in specific rooms as opposed to the regular classroom. By having my classes move to the rooms, I didn’t get the going-through-the-hallway-interacting-with-kids portion of high school. I didn’t have the same opportunities to engage in the extracurricular activities, such as class meetings. I didn’t have the same lunchtime that my other fellow students had because I had to find an accessible bathroom to use that cut a large portion out of my lunch time. Those are the things I can think of right now.
LAWYER

And have you ever experienced any emotional harm as a result of being deprived of access to a class?

ANJALI

Some days I’d go home pretty bummed out, if that’s what you mean.

LAWYER

What do you mean by that?

ANJALI

Because, I wasn’t able to get somewhere, or I see that my friends are able to just go to the meeting, and I can’t. They are able to just swing by a teacher’s classroom and either get extra help or just say, “Hi!” and those are some things I was not able to do.

REFLECTION

I don’t think I’m invincible; in fact, I really hope I’m not. There is a burden associated with having survived nine plus lives and being forced to face your deepest fears. There is the deeper question of why me? Why and how have I survived all of these seemingly life threatening, horrific incidents? The pressure of surviving such incidents is unbearable at times. It has led me to fantasize about
quitting, about slipping away, running away—who would really notice anyway? And yet, I don’t: Why? What am I so afraid of? Is it people’s judgment of me? Is it fear of failure? Is it fear of rejection? It is like by constantly seeking approval that it serves as an affirmation that I, Anjali Forber-Pratt, belong here, that I deserve to be here because look at all of these things I’ve survived. Perhaps I’ve been given too many chances in life. I should have died so, so, so many times, but I didn’t. I believe that surviving is partially where my resiliency comes from; it is where my tough skin, for better or for worse, comes from. But, I’m left asking why? What does this mean? Am I just lucky?

Or is it destiny? Is there something bigger out there for all of us? Maybe this is part of a search for my finish line in the race of life. Who else can rattle off at least nine times when they have died or almost died? Some of the incidents were serious, some were just plain stupidity, and others are just hilarious! Spiritual capital, added by Aragon (2008) to the discussion of cultural capital, is the recognition of and reliance on a higher power for guidance. For me, it is interesting to see how in the experiences presented here my own spiritual capital has evolved. In part, I borrow from experiences from different types of more formal religious experiences such as being raised in a household with Christian Science to joining a Jewish sorority to exploring Hinduism in India to also coming back to this acknowledgement of a higher power for comfort, support and guidance, yet still not being able to fully define it. I firmly believe that I was put on this earth for a reason, and there is a reason why I did not die on that operating room table, or any of the other times.
My development of spiritual capital was contingent upon: (a) seeing the world as comprised of multiple truths and realities and (b) having a sense of self-authorship to make meaning of my accrued experiences. I had to have the experiences of questioning the world around me in order to identify my greater purpose. It may have started as an act of rebellion, when I made the decision to stop attending the Christian Science church because I felt I was living a life of a hypocrite who relied on doctors and medicine because of my disability, but then had to disassociate from that and show dedicated reliance on prayer to be an accepted member of the church. In actuality, it was the start of a spiritual journey to figure out my destiny and reason for being on this earth. Personally, being able to process this journey and explain where I had come from and why I am here only came after reaching a level of self-authorship. Kegan (1994) describes this as a state that one can articulate his/her beliefs, identity and social relations.

Self-authorship development is at the pinnacle of theories of identity development such as Erikson’s (1963, 1968), because it involves integrating collective work and personal experiences to develop one’s own perspective. Marcia (1966, 1980, 2002) expanded on Erikson’s ideas on identity development by suggesting that it is not quite as simple as the discrete stages proposed by Erikson. Josselson (1987) and Whitbourne (1986) were among the first researchers to examine the identity process beyond the adolescent years, into adulthood. Related to identity theories, the theory of the evolution of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2004, 2008) explores further to include dimensions of epistemology, intrapersonal and interpersonal and the interplay among these dimensions.
In particular, Josselson (1987) expanded on Erikson’s and Marcia’s theories to develop a theory of women’s identity development. As women create their identity, they are more focused on the image of their future self. The intrapersonal component is built directly from Erikson’s and Josselson's views of identity. Together, an understanding is reached of how an individual’s identities evolve based on the actions and reactions within various life contexts. This process of critically questioning and reshaping one’s identities allow individuals to recognize their own needs and the needs of others when facing a decision, or in this case, relying on a higher power to help identify one's purpose in life.

Resistant capital “refers [to] those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Being a 14-year-old kid and deciding to take a stand against inequality by hiring my own lawyer and taking my school system through the federal court system, including giving my deposition, is the epitome of this type of capital. In all honesty, that experience touches on every single area of cultural capital, and I learned a great deal about myself, about the legal system, about the political world and about my own community as I went through this process. It would have been easy for me to give in to the teacher who told me I could never go to college, but drawing from my aspirational capital described earlier and from these daily experiences of fighting discrimination square on, I persevered.

The power dynamics of resistant capital came to fruition in my own deposition experience. To be the underdog face-to-face with every educator, administrator and adult I had encountered in my high school career teaches you
something at your core about resistant capital. Just if you are an adult does not mean you are omnipotent. I had to rehash incidents with them right there in the room.

Reading back through my own deposition, yes there were other more concrete or specific instances of discrimination that were captured in various other documents and accounts. But, to be asked and expected to share them in the heat of the moment with your naysayers starring right back at you, I understand why I did not go there at the time. It was another act of self-preservation. I remember trying with all my might to not let them crack me, to not breakdown and cry as I did so often during these years of my life. Despite the fact that as a young minority, I believed those who were in positions of authority were always correct and ought to be trusted I learned this was not true. Challenging authority and calling them out on their wrongdoings is something that took immense bravery and tapping into my accrued spiritual capital; I had to believe that I was doing it for a reason.

To this day, the words you hear in the movies or on television, “Everything you say can and will be held against you in a court of law.” means something different to me, because it is so true. My deposition experience showed me that everything I said, in the hallway, in the classroom, even one-on-one with my guidance counselor was recorded and twisted and tried to be used against me by the town’s lawyers. That one experience has become intertwined with my own competitive or athletic drive, because if I could come out of that experience alive, I feel that I could handle just about anything that comes my way.
This section caused me to revisit the concept of familial capital, specifically related to my parents. As a reminder, familial capital “refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005). Parents (McNeal, 1999; Perna, 2004; Perna & Titus, 2005; Smith-Maddox, 1999; Valadez, 2002; Yan, 1999; Yan & Lin, 2005) play a critical role in the development of this type of capital. Before revisiting their legal documents and accounts of my lawsuit, I struggled to understand my parents’ love for me and their support.

My childhood was very much: If you wanted to do something, you had to be resourceful and find a way to make it on your own. They instilled a value of independence in us. Growing up prior to obtaining a driver’s license, I had to be creative. Yes, my parents certainly encouraged me to dream. However, along with that came a sense of responsibility. I laugh looking back now, but I was the 11-year-old kid who came up with an idea or a dream, a plan on how to execute it, and a persuasive argument for my parents as to why I should be allowed to do it. I guess we all give our parents trouble in our own way, and that was mine. I was the 13-year-old who convinced my parents to just drop me off outside the airport and let me go to Colorado for a week of skiing. Or, to drop me off underneath the overpass at Exit #10 off the Massachusetts Turnpike where I could meet up with the other family who was going up for a weekend of skiing, so as not to inconvenience my parents.

Specific to my mom, she raised me to be independent and to chase my own dreams, but it was and is very much understood that I was expected to make it on
my own. But there is also the same element of wanting me to have a better life than her. She provided for us, cared for us, and allowed us to spread our own wings and fly, something she, to this day, has never done for herself. I know she is proud, and she loves me, even if she doesn't always know how to show that. And the truth is, I am grateful that through her selflessness and trust in me, that I have become who I am today. Reading her deposition made me realize how deep her love goes, and this was eye-opening. Her support of my decision to pursue this was never in question, even when the lawyers were bullying her and they questioned her ability to be a good parent.

There was also comfort reading her remarks about my dad’s support for my decision(s), though reading his deposition also left me feeling disheartened because of a different type of validation. The 50-page deposition in comparison to my mom’s 300-plus-page deposition also spoke volumes: That my dad does not know who I am, why I made the decisions that I did, and that we truly do have a very distant relationship. It was hard to read and to see in a legal document just how convoluted our relationship is—how even then, he didn’t know me. But, deep within those few pages, I could also see glimpses of him standing up for me, because the lawsuit was something I wanted to do. I never knew that he supported my decision to sue the school, he has never ever to this day has ever said to my face. He believed I was doing the right thing and actually was more supportive than I realized, even when the lawyers tried to get him to admit that it was his idea or my mom’s and it was not. It also made me sad to see him describe our relationship as distant and that it always had been and that it always will be.
I look at the relationships they both have/had with their parents, and neither of them ever had a healthy relationship with them, so I cannot blame them. They do not know how to be what I think of as supportive parents, and that is hard; yet they still successfully instilled important values in me and showed me the depth of their love as they stood up for me during this time of trouble. I credit my parents for allowing me to become an independent thinker and problem solver to get to wherever I wanted in life.

When I became sick and the end result was my paralysis due to transverse myelitis, my mom had to stand up for me. She had to explain to doctors, to the adoption people that they still wanted me even with this disability, because my adoption wasn’t finalized. It was a tumultuous time for them, one that I will never ever fully understand. When I made the decision to hire my own lawyer, I did recognize the battles and fights that my mom had always taken on as her own, but I also realized that it was not my mom’s responsibility to always fight for me. I have held on to that small ounce of love and support for many years. Because, there have been other times when it’s been hard to see the love and support from my parents. These times—such as when I’ve would be struggling with a medical problem and they would not call to check in, or when I made my first Paralympic team and they were more concerned about the unpaid leave from work than the excitement of my accomplishment. I know that it is not that they don’t love me or are not proud; they just struggle with how to show it.

In many ways, I became an outsider looking into my own family. I didn’t want to be a burden. I thought I was supposed to handle this life stuff by myself. Through
revisiting this time in my life, I realize now how supportive they actually were and are of who I am.
ACT III:

INSIDER LOOKING OUT: DISCOVERING THE REAL ME
“Foolish heart looks like we’re here again
Same old game of plastic smile
Don’t let anybody in
Hiding my heartache, will this glass house break
How much will they take before I’m empty
Do I let it show, does anybody know?

But you see the real me.”
- Clay Aiken, The Real Me (Grant, 2008, track 7)

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Characters:
Anjali
Anjali’s Lawyer #2 - Bill

Scene 1:
This scene takes place in the newly built federal courthouse in Boston, Massachusetts. Anjali is getting acquainted with the courtroom with her lawyers as part of the pre-trial preparations. During this type of meeting, the judge presiding on the case meets the plaintiff and informs the parties when the trial date is scheduled for. The judge then makes an offer to participate in federal court mediation with the defendants to try and amicably reach an agreement. If an agreement is reached, the trial date is cancelled.

Production Notes:
Descriptions of the images or movements to appear on the screen are provided in parentheses.

ANJALI’S LAWYER #2 - BILL

Anjali, in a while, you will sit here because you are the plaintiff, I will be here next to you. Over there (Gestures to the empty table.) is where the defendants will
— Dr. Goldman⁶, Dr. Harker⁷, the representative from the Town of Natick, and the representative from the Natick Public School District along with their lawyers.

ANJALI

Okay.

ANJALI’S LAWYER #2 - BILL

Up here, obviously, is where the judge will sit.

ANJALI

Okay. So, can you remind me, what is the purpose of today?

ANJALI’S LAWYER #2 - BILL

We meet the judge. This is a private session and it is all part of the pre-trial process. As a result of accepting court mediation, the judge will first meet us and discuss some logistics of how your trial will proceed, and then we will go with the court appointed mediator to a separate room and see if we can reach an agreement.

During this process, a court official notified us that the judge wanted to meet us in his chambers. My lawyers were not entirely sure why this was happening, as it

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⁶ This is a pseudonym.  
⁷ This is a pseudonym.
was not typical protocol. We were ushered to a secret elevator in the federal courthouse and brought to his chambers. Before my lawyers could ask what the reason was for the abrupt change in location, the judge introduced himself.

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Characters:
Judge
Lawyer
Dr. Goldman*

Scene 2:
This scene takes place inside the judge’s chambers of the federal courthouse in Boston, Massachusetts.

Production Notes:
Thoughts from Anjali that appear in italics in quotation marks are in her head and said as a voice-over. Actions or specific emotions to be captured during filming appear in parentheses.

JUDGE

Hello, I am the judge presiding over this case. I apologize for the last minute change. I know this type of proceeding would typically occur in the courtroom, but as you see, I have a disability and use these crutches to get around. (Points to the crutches that were leaning against his desk to his left). Ironically, when they rebuilt this beautiful federal building, the judge’s box in the courtroom is not accessible to me. I hope you understand, and we will proceed here instead.

*This is a pseudonym.
ANJALI

(Wide-eyed in disbelief.) “The power of universe is amazing. Things really do happen for a reason! I wonder what the town’s lawyers are thinking right now . . .”

(Looks to opposing lawyers and to mine with disbelief.)

DR. GOLDMAN

Wait a minute! How can . . .

LAWYER

(Elbows Dr. Goldman in the side.) Shut up.

DR. GOLDMAN

But . . .

LAWYER

Just shut up, you don’t have a legal leg to stand on.

✦✦✦
Continuation of Scene 1:

ANJALI’S LAWYER #1 - DAVE

You did it! This is huge Anjali.

ANJALI

Yeah, uh-huh.

ANJALI’S LAWYER #1 - DAVE

I know you don’t see it now, but this case is setting precedent. It’s the first case that we know of where punitive damages are being awarded under the ADA in the educational domain. I know that may not sound like much to you, but legally, it’s a win. $110K is a steep price tag for a school district to have to pay out, and it is an

Excerpt from May 28, 2002 Boston Globe article:

“It got to the point where I was beyond frustration,” said Forber-Pratt, now a senior. “I needed to do something else.”

Fed up with fruitless complaints and letters to school officials, Forber-Pratt filed a civil rights lawsuit against the school district in federal court in 2000. As part of a settlement agreement reached in March, the district paid her $110,000 and agreed to correct a number of accessibility deficiencies identified at the school.

Forber-Pratt and her family hope the district addresses the rest on its own accord. Though Forber-Pratt, who is scheduled to graduate next month, will hardly get to enjoy the benefits of her long battle, she, along with advocates for the disabled, hope the settlement of the Natick lawsuit—the only such case in Massachusetts that area experts are aware of—will pay off for future generations of disabled students in Natick and beyond.”
acknowledgement that they were in the wrong. You should be proud of yourself. I know I am. Someday you’ll look back on this and see what a difference you made.

Kid in a Candy Store

It sure did not feel like a win. Truthfully, it all happened so fast, I didn’t really understand it all at the time. I was officially burnt out. Standing up for social justice is not for the faint of heart, in fact, it was through that fight that I realized how few people actually do care about the world that we live in. Life moves on, and so I tried to as well. This experience greatly impacted my college decision. At the end of high school, I was faced with a difficult decision: to leave ski racing, which I had been focusing on for the past seven years consistently and go to college at a place that was fully wheelchair accessible and a true leader for students with disabilities (University of Illinois) or to be the pioneer again and continue with ski racing and attend college in New Hampshire as the first student-athlete with a disability. I chose to go to Illinois, where little did I know at the time, many more dreams would
come true. Making the decision to walk away from the sport of ski racing, I feared also meant walking away from my Paralympic dream. There were so many mixed emotions after the settlement, but the truth was I wanted to get as far away from that place as possible and to start fresh.

As a freshman at Illinois, initially I tried to still be a competitive ski racer and would fly to events a few days early and expected my talent and determination to make up for the fact that I had no mountain to train on. This plan failed miserably and ultimately, I chose to table my athletic side and got involved on campus. I was like a kid in a candy store: There were so many opportunities that were not accessible to me in high school. I took on many leadership roles in organizations and was living the college life. I was still training, but with no dream in mind. This went on for a while, but then I got antsy. I realized that I missed competition; I needed to refine my dreams yet again. I eventually found my way back to the track in 2007, and decided it was time to finally chase my Paralympic dream.

In the meantime, while filling my plate with being president of multiple student organizations and making up for lost time from my high school experience. I suppressed the whole legal battle and just was focused on living in the moment. Low and behold, after graduation from my undergraduate program and starting graduate school, some of this unfinished business resurfaced and could no longer be ignored. I started questioning whether the whole experience had been worth it or not. The problem was, I had no idea how to process that whole experience. Trying to make sense of the lawsuit was like trying to build a house starting with the roof. I didn't have the developmental capacity to fully comprehend all that I had been through,
and all that had happened. Like many college students, I was questioning at my very core who I was and why I was on this earth.

I could not process what it meant to face discrimination and understand that experience until I developed these other parts of my identity. Up to this point, my own identity development had been sequential, but it needed to be integrated into multiple identities to be able to relook at the lawsuit and understand the other dynamics that were at play. This was a crucial missing piece. I went to India to try and piece together some of my past and answer some of these core questions such as, who am I? I found I had more dimensions to me; Anjali Forber-Pratt is more than just an athlete with a disability.

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Characters:

Anjali
Ian – Anjali’s older brother, also an adoptee from India
Guide – driver for who brought them to the location of the scene

Scene 3:
This scene takes place in rural Kolkata, the place of Ian and Anjali’s birth. The essence of the streets of Kolkata is captured on the screen as we see dust in the air, vibrant colors of fabric worn by folks on the street, vendors selling assorted goods, villagers carrying items on their head and we hear the drone of horns honking.

Production Notes:
Descriptions of the images, movements or emotions to appear on the screen are provided in parentheses and are specific directions for production.

IAN

Big day today, going back to our orphanage, I wonder what it will be like.
ANJALI

I know. I don't really know what to expect. But, I'm glad we got to make this trip together.

IAN

Me too.

GUIDE

Here we are. This is what is left of the International Mission of Hope (IMH) orphanage. It is now called, IMH Handicapped Home. There are no adoptions taking place anymore; these are the individuals who remain here and we care for them. Come.

ANJALI

(Looking at the building before us.) I don't think there's going to be an elevator.

IAN

I got you. Hop on.

ANJALI

(Climbs onto Ian's back and he picks up my wheelchair and we start the climb up the four flights of stairs of the old building before us.)
Ian, do you think these kids ever get to go outside?

GUIDE

All of these kids are handicapped. Nobody wants them. So they stay here. They get food and care.

ANJALI

(Quietly to Ian.) This so sad. These kids have so much potential. You know, I could have been one of them left trapped here . . .

IAN

I know. Who’s your friend?

ANJALI

I want to take him home. He could do so many things with his life; he’s engaging, responsive and so bright.
Photo 4. © 2006
Caption: Anjali Forber-Pratt with young smiling orphan on her lap in India at International Mission of Hope’s Home for Handicapped Children.

GUIDE

Over here, we also have a private school. Come and meet these kids!

IAN

How is this possible?

ANJALI

I don’t know. Irony isn’t even the right word for this. It’s just wrong.

IAN

I know.
Do you realize that a mere 25 feet, just on the other side of this windowless institution wall there is a school educating, providing opportunities, hope and giving the gift of life? It’s not fair.

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Photo 5 and Photo 6. © 2006
Caption: Rows of beds in the orphanage at International Mission of Hope’s Home for Handicapped Children (left). Children in school uniforms learning and huddled around books in India (right).

It is rare in life we have the opportunity to see exactly what life could have been—to be an insider looking out. Take a moment to think about that phrase, an insider looking out. What does that even mean? What does that look like? During my first trip to India, where disability was the sole focus of the experience, I had to come to terms with what my life could have been while visiting what was left of my orphanage.

A trip like this is one that stays with you. Even though it wasn’t on the forefront of my mind all the time, it was in the back of my head and would resurface periodically throughout the next 3 years. Eventually though, I was blindsided by an
18-wheeler truck of emotions and found myself plummeting into a pit of despair. Dissecting those 3 years, there was a lot going on and life was very much a constant roller coaster.

My first experience of being an insider looking out came from my first trip to India in 2006, though I did not have enough time to process everything. I was thrown into starting graduate school the next morning less than 12 hours after returning from this life-changing trip. My brain was trying to make sense of the trip, but I was also rapidly sinking, trying to juggle graduate coursework, seeing clients at an elementary school and hospital, in addition to working in a research lab and serving as a teaching assistant.

Three months into graduate school, I was beat down and ultimately decided that the career path I was on was not a good fit for me. Not sure of what my career path should be, I then rededicated myself back to wheelchair racing to try and make up for the fact that everything else was in disarray. Sport was always something that made sense to me. There is power in going back to the fundamentals when living on the edge of chaos. I then made my first national team in 2007 and realized I was on a pathway for the Paralympic Games in Beijing and felt like I had to see that through.

Simultaneously, I was learning an important lesson about the difference between redefining your path versus quitting. Oftentimes, choosing to go in a different direction is equated with quitting and feeling like it was a failure; my undergraduate and initial graduate school program was not a failure. I learned valuable transferable skills, life lessons and more importantly, about my own values. Sure, I discovered there was not alignment between my values and that initial
chosen career path as a speech language pathologist, but I was able to recognize that and eventually found a better fitting academic program in the College of Education. I started taking some classes there, and continued to focus my energy on athletics for stability. I then represented my country in the 2008 Paralympic Games and was on the top of the world, feeling euphoric in cloud nine about this childhood dream coming true. I returned from what was one of the most memorable, happiest experiences of my life to date, and then found myself falling down this pit of despair. It made no sense. To me, there was no logical reason for me to be feeling this way after coming off of such an emotional high and positive life events.

I knew that graduate school is a path of self-discovery in and of itself, and I knew that perhaps I was a little too ambitious on my course load during this particular semester, but for me to drop a course each week seemed excessive, even for me. With each dropping of the course, I went to speak directly to the professor to explain the reasons for dropping and that it wasn’t personal, that I just felt totally disengaged from my classes and had no idea what is going on in them or in my life. I was physically there, but no matter how hard I tried to focus and try, it wasn’t working. This eventually got worse to the point of truly struggling to even get out of bed, and countless sleepless nights. The truth was, at the time, I had no idea why I was feeling so empty, lost, disengaged and unhappy. I knew something wasn’t right, and that I needed to devote time to trying to listen to the signs and figure out the cause. I had to put the brakes on everything else and reassess my life path and figure out why I was having such cognitive dissonance. For me, the best way to sort it all
out was to journal and to just write what I was feeling even if it was incomprehensible or fragmented thoughts.

Characters:

Anjali
Ian—Anjali’s older brother, also an adoptee from India

Scene 4:

This scene takes place in two separate locations: Anjali’s residence and Ian’s residence. The two are reading a letter exchange between each other simultaneously.

Production Notes:

When we see Anjali reading the letter on screen, we hear Ian’s voice over and vice versa. At certain times, designated in parentheses, we see certain snippets from their Indian adventures on the screen or photo montages of examples of the concepts they are writing back and forth about. Notes in parentheses are productions notes. Comments in quotation marks and italics are the thoughts within Anjali’s head. Descriptions of the images or movements to appear on the screen are provided in parentheses and are specific directions for production.

ANJALI

Ian, something’s not right. I’ve been journaling all weekend, not just today. I’m having a hard time processing everything and figuring out why I’m so depressed right now. Read this all if you want, or don’t. I do value your opinion and did not know who else to write to. Growing up it was obvious that we were adopted, and it was something that was talked about. It wasn’t a secret; it wasn’t hidden. Our family was amazing and supportive. (See pictures of childhood on the screen
including a family portrait visually displaying the racial diversity of our family—two White parents, two Indian kids and two White kids. We see various footage of the kids out playing basketball, climbing the trees, making snow forts, gathered for Christmas and sitting around the dining room table for game night.)

More and more now though, I feel like I don’t know myself, and that with a critical look at every academic shift I’ve made, every job I have had, every organization I have been involved with, every relationship I have had, there are some common threads that I never wanted to admit. To be honest, it all feels pretty stupid.

IAN

Great note. And yes, I sure have thought about a lot of the things you’ve been thinking about.

ANJALI

(Breathes audible sigh of relief.)

“I’m glad I’m not alone. There is somebody like me!” (Camera pans back to Ian’s place of residence and Anjali’s voice continues.)

On this tumultuous path of self-discovery, I am afraid of what I am discovering, what I have boxed away and not wanted to discuss. The reasons my guard is
always up. I feel like I live like a chameleon, in that I can make any situation work and succeed in it, but then I always come back to, is it really who I am? I feel that any time you are going through a re-evaluation of yourself, of your goals, of your dreams, your aspirations, you have to come back to some sort of acknowledgement of your core and who you are, but being adopted, I guess there are a lot of things that are more or less unknown and will always be. The things that bother me most is that this has never been an issue for me before now, so it feels ridiculous.

Like, if it was going to be an issue, I think it should have been way before now, not now. I also know I can’t change that, I can’t change when things will choose to be issues or not, but it still is frustrating. It also bothers me because I was only 2.5 months old when I was adopted, and so even though people say, yes, but you still formed an attachment with your birth mother, and you were still abandoned and still experienced this sense of loss, I don’t know. It just doesn’t make sense to me; I guess I don’t buy all of it. I also wonder what it means for all that I’ve done in life up to this point.
IAN

We can’t control when these things resurface. Please don’t beat yourself up about that. Also, none and I mean none of the good things you’ve done have been a waste. I think that even if you’re feeling like you didn’t have a ‘good reason or direction’ to do them, it doesn’t change the fact that you are an amazing and good person. You did those things because being good is who you are.

ANJALI

“Gosh, he’s such a ‘big brother’ sometimes! I hope he realizes how proud of him I am too; it so goes both ways.” (Camera pans back to Ian’s residence and we hear Anjali’s voice continue.)

I sense a common thread in my life of deep commitment issues, things that I never noticed before, or never wanted to admit. Fears of loss, fear of rejection and fear of failure. This has plagued every relationship I have been in. I either set it up for failure or just end it before I get hurt. I don’t let anybody in for fear of being hurt. I feel loved by our parents (at times, but at other times not so much), by you in a brotherly way, by others in certain ways, but it’s like I don’t let myself love things or love others because of these irrational fears.
IAN

It is very frightening to discover these things and be vulnerable. I know I hate being vulnerable, especially since I often try to be all 'with it' like you have said you've tried to be. But being vulnerable at times when it's truly needed is actually a strength. You're there, and admitting these things and working on them is a big, big flippin' deal. I'm impressed for sure.

ANJALI

"It is scary, yes. I'm glad he gets this stuff, and that we can have this conversation." (Camera pans back to Ian's place of residence and we hear Anjali's voice continue.)

I think the commitment issues are not just in terms of relationships, but with anything. I can't stick with one thing, I am always moving around and am restless I guess, but I don't know why. I can, and I do make any situation work and create happiness in the situation. Chameleons have an innate ability to blend in to their surroundings. Not knowing a single thing about my birth history or family lineage,

I've decided that I must be at least a distant relative to the chameleon family because of how I've skimmed through life doing blending in. What I realize now is
this seeming ability to blend in creating happiness in any situation, is actually a
reflection of these insecurities I have, and to be honest, it’s exhausting.

IAN

I do have the same thoughts as you about commitment to things and how genuine
my commitment to things is. Also if I even have the ability, I have been exposed to
a number of women recently that would be perfect for me, but yet I’m having a
major issue with committing. Also, I worry about my ability to not get bored with a
job. I like to do things for a short amount of time, like you talked about too. I
wonder, like you explain, if it’s more than that?

ANJALI

Have you dealt with any of this when you were drinking a lot, or if you hid behind
it with the drinking or if you were hiding from other things? Or not, I know that
these issues impact everybody very differently—guys versus girls, and some
people never really ever have issues and other people do.

IAN

With my own self-discovery three years ago I dealt a lot with the “putting on a
façade” type of thing. I did that for so long that now I’ve really boiled down to the
true me that I finally found after I quit drinking all the time. The true me, I found, wanted to help others and do good, but also still had a lot to work on. I know I love people, I know I like to be active and I know that I love to debate/analyze things.

ANJALI

Since going back to India that first time with you in 2006, I have discussed with others, and with you, the dilemma of not fitting in there, not fitting in here in America either. I am grateful to our parents who adopted us, but more and more I feel that they don’t know who I am either. There are lots of things that they just don’t “get,” which is fine, but it makes it all the more challenging. I still have some lingering questions too about why they chose to adopt. I used to think I knew, but even when we were home before and you were doing your Overseas Citizen of India paperwork, there were mixed messages. Like how Mom told me I didn’t have an Indian passport, that only you did. Or how she told me growing up that I didn’t have a birth certificate, but I have one that was created in Natick.

IAN
I have similar questions. But sometimes, I also think it’s best to not get suffocated by the questions.

ANJALI

“Good point. I’ve always been good at overthinking.” (Camera pans back to Ian’s place of residence and we hear Anjali’s voice continue.)

And yet, during times like this I just feel like an impostor in my own life. Have you ever felt this way?

IAN

I can relate to feeling restless and nomadic. Look at how many places I’ve “lived” and bounced around to. Like you, I have often wondered why.

ANJALI

I feel like I don’t have something but don’t know what that is. I’m mad about the corruption in India and the fact that I was in essence bought. I feel lost on how to figure out my identity when so much of it doesn’t exist—there are no records etc., which is fine. I know that cannot be changed, and to be honest I don’t think it would solve all of my questions, like dealing with these trust issues. With the
identity piece, it’s not just knowing about birth history or whatever, but it’s knowing why I think the way I think. I just want to be able to move forward.

IAN

I'm not saying I'm through the process, but I certainly get a sense of where you are at.

ANJALI

“It’s so relieving to know I’m not alone. Ian is somebody like me. I wonder who else would get this stuff? I should make a list and maybe reach out.” (Camera pans back to Ian’s place of residence and we hear Anjali’s voice continue.)

I know that this is part of the journey. I know that I won’t have answers to any of this tomorrow or next week, or even next year. I get that. But I still am struggling with what to do now that I recognize these things from my past as being issues or ongoing problems, how to make sense of it? How do you to pick up the pieces and move on?

IAN
I know this may sound crazy, and I’m not suggesting it to overwhelm you, I’m suggesting it because it may help you. Come here—to India. Could you? Would that be possible?

ANJALI

I can’t tell you how many times a ticket to India has been in my shopping cart online. But I’m afraid that will make things worse somehow. I’m scared of the idea. The majority of what is going on in my head still seems completely ridiculous, and it all feels very stupid. I kinda just hope it will go away and life will move on. There’s so much that I’d have to work out, with my coach, with school, with work, with my advisor . . . yet, I feel a magnetic pull though to India that my heart needs to come back. I don’t know why or where to go, but I think I just need to get on the plane and come. Give me some time.

✦✦✦

Three months later, I finally bought the ticket and went to India again in 2009. On this trip, I had another experience of being an insider looking out with my brother on a day trip to Kumbhalgar and Ranakpur. For under Rs 9,000 total (~$180), my brother and I rented a bus for 24 people, hired two drivers, traveled to these two areas of India, went up the fortress at Kumbhalgar in the monsoons and into the Jain temple in Ranakpur, had plenty of chai stops along the way and ate a
buffet lunch at a restaurant along the way back. For the local children (bajas) we took with us, it was their first time ever seeing these sights, this culture and history of India.

In our group, only two were foreigners, meaning only two non-Indians. To go see these sights would be amazing in and of itself, but to do it as a group of locals, wow. The bus ride was filled with laughter and hand games and picture taking. The children are so content just entertaining themselves, no iPods, no radio playing, no movies to watch, just the company of each other. We don’t do that often enough elsewhere. It is easy to become so self-absorbed that you miss out on these wonderful opportunities . . . opportunities to be a kid again, to play dress-up and hairstylist, to play hand slappy games, to simply enjoy each others company.

A little rain did not stop this group, that’s for sure. We traveled to Kumbhalgar first; being monsoon season, it was quite rainy. We stopped on the side of the road to get umbrellas and ponchos for the group. But the monsoons don’t stop life from going on, and nor was it going to stop us. We trekked on. The fort was built in the 15th century, so picture a very steep cobblestone fortress, and that is what we were climbing up. Reaching the summit, unfortunately there was no view to admire because of the rainy weather, but the smiles on the kids faces was enough for us to feel like it was a success. The fortress was filled with all kinds of hidden corners and tight spots, like a giant jungle gym designed such so that the elephants couldn’t get through. After Kumbalghar we loaded our soggy selves back onto the bus and headed towards Ranakpur.
Our journey continued on to Ranakpur, through some beautiful areas of India, where tigers and cheetahs and other animals live, though we didn't spot any we were told to look. We did, however, see wild monkeys! I was pretty excited about this one, as I've always loved monkeys from the time I was quite little. I have always wanted a pet monkey. Monkeys just make me happy, I don't know why, but they have this carefree, adventurous way about them, like me.

In Ranakpur, we were there to visit this gorgeous Jain temple that has 1,444 unique hand-carved marble columns. The architecture and the presence of such a sight is breathtaking, not to mention the history. We were met with resistance for my entering the temple with my wheelchair. Because this was a religious temple, we decided it was not worth fighting. For any visitors entering the temple, you are requested to remove your shoes, any leather (belts etc.) and for women, if you are on your menstrual cycle you are asked not to enter. There was a sign outside explaining all of this. We left my wheelchair with the sea of shoes and I climbed onto Ian’s back for the climb into the Jain temple.

Remember what I said about being an insider looking out? This was another moment. This temple is world renowned, so it is a popular tourist spot. We were a spectacle, because we were the locals. Foreigners were stopping to take pictures of us because we were Indian. I was finally on the other side. I don’t really know how to explain this, but, I am truly Indian. It was in this moment when that realization occurred. Part of me wonders, too, whether leaving my wheelchair outside contributed to this, because there I was wearing Indian garb, sitting with the children on the stairs of the temple, there was no line of demarcation between us,
we just were a group of Indians visiting the Jain temple, which the Americans, French, Germans, Swiss were simply in awe of (and they did not realize I understood English!).

The temple itself was so peaceful, so powerful, so serene, regardless of your religious or spiritual beliefs, I firmly believe there is something in there for everybody. Later, when Ian and I were looking at our pictures, we had to both laugh when there were pictures of little White kids taken by some of the members of our group. This is the whole concept of being intrigued by those different from you, natural human curiosity. Though, neither Ian nor I felt like we needed to have pictures of random White children, we kinda felt like we understood this magnetic force of being intrigued by those different from you and attracted to those like you. Collectively, these experiences illustrate what it is like being an insider looking out, as opposed to an outsider looking in as I so often am. Ian summed it up nicely:

“Kinda cool to be on the other side, huh?”

Some of the gaping holes in my identity were starting to be filled in, but there were still questions. Adoption is a journey, not an event. I knew going into the 2009 trip that answers would not come instantly, but it was a much-needed trip for my psyche.

★★★★

Continuation of previous scene:

(Occurs after returning from trip.)

IAN

How are things?
Okay. Not perfect. I’m glad I came, I really am. Thank you for that. But there are still questions. How do you figure out your identity with so much being unknown? I feel like I made some progress but sometimes feel like it’s one step forward eight backwards.

IAN

Believe it or not, you’re doing the right thing simply by writing and having these conversations and asking these important questions. You are correct though; the answers will not come overnight.

ANJALI

I guess I am curious if you have ventured on this path of self-discovery. I just am frustrated that things that were never an issue growing up, at least they didn’t seem to be, all of a sudden are. I don’t expect you to have the answers, but I wanted to share where I am at right now. Thoughts?

IAN

I am excited to write and talk to you anytime about all this as well. I support you, like I said, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 100%.

***
Reflection

After returning from India, and realizing all of this, I did eventually conclude that my lawsuit was a win. One important part not captured in the actual settlement agreement, or the press was that as a direct result of my lawsuit, I successfully changed over the entire administration of my town. The principal left, the superintendent left, the director of special education left, and more than half the school board resigned. Knowing what I know now about organizations and how they work, that was a win, but I was too young and naïve to recognize at the time.

I needed that glimpse into what my life could have been like in India in order to recognize the win that was right under my own nose. Going there gave me that perspective in multiple ways. I witnessed and had my own everyday struggles and battles every moment that I was in India. I describe it to others as being a challenging trip to take, not just emotionally, but also challenging in the sense of having to go from being completely independent here in American culture to completely dependent. For example, I had to plan out my entire day for when I would have access to a somewhat useable, preferably Western style restroom and when somebody would be available to help me up the stairs to use it.

I saw firsthand the lack of educational opportunities and meaningful work experiences for people with disabilities. I would sit in a manually powered rickshaw taking in the scene of the dirty street, extreme heat, the invasion of the senses of the smells of spices, bright colors, honking of horns and lack of traffic rules and a man with polio would catch my eye. Amidst the chaos and sensory overload, I wondered, why was this man with the classic dropped foot gait due to polio would be working
at least 20 times harder than a normal able-bodied person to walk infinitely slower up the street carrying that bucket, when to me, a wheelchair would be so much more enabling? And then I did a scan of my surroundings and realized, that man has a job and he does the best he can to hide his disability to be given the chance to be a contributing member to society. To him, on these streets, a wheelchair would be disabling.

It would be easy to feel guilt in these situations described as becoming an insider looking out. I do acknowledge these experiences were powerful, meaningful and life changing. But, I do not feel guilty about having them. The bottom line is: If I had not been adopted, I firmly believe I still would have gotten sick and acquired my disability, and I either would have died or been one of those kids trapped on the upper level of the orphanage shunned from society with hardly any language, no education and deprived of all opportunities. Going back to the notion of spiritual capital, or the recognition of reliance on a higher power for guidance (Aragon, 2008), I firmly believe that these insights garnered as an insider looking out as well as the irony with the judge assigned to my case happened for a reason. These experiences validate that I was put on this earth for a reason: To make a difference and to be a role model for others, especially those who face any type of adversity or who are left on the sidelines. I believe my mission is not just for people with disabilities, though that is one culture I am naturally well versed in and certainly passionate about.

While culture in its purest sense can take on a variety of forms around the world depending on the unique elements of that region, disability culture is a cross-
cultural phenomenon. Disability impacts individuals of all ages, races, geographic background, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. Human beings interact with the society around them, therefore the potential to identify with more than one culture is extremely high. Mindess (2000) uses a metaphor of an iceberg to describe culture. Only one tenth is visible, such as what one may quickly notice if visiting a foreign country, such as differences in clothing, language, food or music versus the deeper unseen values of culture that may be overlooked. These are the norms, values and beliefs that comprise the very essence of that culture—perhaps particular notions of friendship, family, justice, independence.

Steven E. Brown (2002), the founder of the Institute on Disability Culture, describes disability culture as a forged group identity that people with disabilities have based on the common history of oppression and bond of resilience. I drew parallels between my own experiences of oppression faced in high school with those the people with disabilities in India were struggling with daily. I discovered that roots of resilience were the common tie between our experiences, and my resilience came largely from my Indianness! These journeys to India started to fill in some of the missing holes in my identity. I had always previously only defined myself as a person with a disability, and I now realized I was also a woman, a person of color, and an adoptee.

It was the first time I entertained the idea of allowing these multiple identities to truly develop. It may sound silly to some, but up to this point my identity development had been very sequential; I would spend a period of time in my life developing my identity as a person with a disability and set that aside, then
there were rare times that I would dabble in developing my identity as a person of color, but I usually would just forget about it and resort to my White ways of living that came from my surroundings. This trip allowed me to finally develop these multiple identities simultaneously.

As mentioned earlier in Act II, Marcia (2002) explains that individuals go through identity development cycles including diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. Individuals who are in a state of ongoing crisis and have not made a commitment to an identity may not be ready to address these issues, and for me, these trips to India pulled me out of that state of crisis to allow these seeds to grow.

Thinking about multiple identities, Jones and McEwen (2000) examined how dimensions of identity interact with each other among college women of varying race and ethnicity. Others have looked at the intersection of an individual’s African American identity with their gay identity or lesbian identity and college student identity (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002). The findings consistently show that there are multiple layers of identity and that depending on contextual or situational factors, certain aspects of one’s identities may prove to be more salient than others.

One trend in the literature is about how various social stigmas can influence identity development. This trend draws from Goffman’s (1963) early work that describes how social stigmas—attributes, behaviors or reputations—can cause an individual to be outcast by the greater society, thereby negatively impacting one’s identity development. If, or when, these negative stigmas turn into an act of oppression, racism or any other type of “-ism” against an individual, this also has the
potential to profoundly affect one’s identity development (Edwards & Jones, 2009; Hipolito-Delgado, 2007, 2010; Jones, 2009; Reynolds & Pope, 1991; Root, 1990; Talburt, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). For people with disabilities, one such stigma is ableism, or discrimination against people based on physical ability in favor of those without disabilities, greatly influences identity development.

A healthy, intact identity provides a stronger sense of self and ability to face ableism by reaffirming desired goals and personal worth (Albrecht & Devlieger, 1999; Campbell, 2008; Mpofu & Harley, 2006; Noonan et al., 2004). Just as in the non-disabled population, individuals with disabilities, like myself, often have multiple competing or complementing identities. Research has shown how individuals with disabilities must integrate what it means to be a woman or a man, and develop or re-develop, that identity in congruence with their disabled identity (Asch, 2001; Barron, 1997; Charmaz 1994, 1995; Najarian, 2008; Yoshido, 1993). My account was about achieving, as Marcia put it, congruence across all of my identities and reframing the potential negative impact of the stigmas I had faced into a positive and healthy identity.

As part of a program evaluation report, Ferreyra (2001) explained the heightened risk that adolescent females with physical disabilities have for developing and maintaining their sense of self because of stigmas and oppression. Several empirical studies related to women with disabilities have concluded that stigma and experiences of oppression jeopardize one’s development of identity (Anderson, 2009; Barron, 1997; Najarian, 2008; Noonan et al., 2004; Wendell, 1989). Yet, I believe that these experiences of oppression and facing stigmas can actually
strengthen and enhance one’s development of identity, rather than jeopardize it. To me these experiences are what led to the accrual of my resistance capital and contributed to making me who I am today. I am able now to connect to others on this level and give them hope that by embracing these experiences and allowing it to shape their identity rather than destroy it, they too can develop a strong sense of self and find their purpose in life.
ACT IV:

DEFYING GRAVITY
“Something has changed within me,
Something is not the same,
I’m through with playing by the rules,
Of someone else’s game,
Too late for second-guessing,
Too late to go back to sleep,
It’s time to trust my instincts,
Close my eyes: and leap!

It’s time to try.”
- *Wicked, Defying Gravity* (Schwartz, 2003, track 11)

✧✧✧

**Characters:**
- Anjali
- Mom

**Scene 1:**
A phone call.

**Production notes:**
Two side-by-side images of Anjali on the phone living her current busy and hectic life in Illinois and her Mom calling from her childhood house growing up appear on the screen.

**ANJALI**

(Ring, ring, ring.)

(On the phone with someone else.) Oh, my mom is actually calling, I’m going to have to call you back, ok? (Pause.) Hello?

**MOM**

Hi Anjali, do you have a minute? I have some neat news to share with you I think you’ll appreciate.
ANJALI

Sure, what’s up?

MOM

Do you remember Mr. F? (Pause.) . . . From high school?

ANJALI

(Hesitantly.) Uh, yeah . . . why?

MOM

He called me today.

ANJALI

Ok . . . So?

MOM

The groundbreaking ceremony for the new high school happened earlier this week.

ANJALI

It’s about freaking time. Maybe now it will be made accessible?
MOM

One can hope. But that's part of why I'm calling. Mr. F. called to tell me and to relay to you that your case, your lawsuit was popular topic of discussion at the groundbreaking ceremony!

ANJALI

(With disbelief.) Really?

MOM

Really. He wasn’t sure we still lived at this address/number, but called to tell us that even all these years later, your case made a profound impact on himself personally, the school community, the town and the state. You should feel proud.

♦♦♦

At the end of that phone call, I was left asking myself, why didn't I feel proud? Was all of the pain and suffering I went through really worth it? If it was, why did it take another 10 years for them to actually change? Why had I ignored that part of my past for so long when I knew it shaped who I am today? How does this part of my past influence who I am today? Why are there so many questions? This phone call lit a spark in me to seriously think about opening Pandora’s box.

Steven had planted the seed just a few weeks before; maybe it was time to really do this. I knew I had to stop running. I spent the next couple of weeks gathering the pieces so that when I was ready, I could open that box. I had my
parents ship me some of the legal documents, I gathered old newspaper articles and
I started journaling again. In addition to mentally preparing for the task ahead, I was
left with a very practical question of how does one actually do this? What does it
even look like? The very idea of this non-traditional approach meant that everything
I had learned in “Dissertation Writing 101” was defenestrated. There are no rules
and systematic chapters for this, and because of that, the path was scary.

Though, similarly, there are also no rules and systematic guidelines for how
to sue your school district. Apparently, I have a tendency to quite literally travel
down the path unknown. I did get to thinking, however, that the fact that I came out
of that experience alive and on top, maybe I did have it in me to do this. Maybe that
experience made me stronger. Maybe with the years that had passed, taking a
critical look at these incidents from my past would allow other's to learn from my
experiences and feel empowered in their own lives. Maybe, as Ellis (2009) describes
this project would allow me to:

Revisit my original representation, consider responses, and write an
autoethnographic account . . . [with an opportunity] to alter the frame in
which I wrote the original story, ask questions I didn’t ask then, consider
others’ responses to the original story, and include vignettes of related
experiences that have happened since I experienced and wrote the story and
now affect the way I look back at the story (Ellis, 2009, p. 13).

The reality is, simply writing an autoethnographic account is scary. As Ellis
describes, it is about making oneself vulnerable. It is exposing one’s strengths,
weaknesses, innermost thoughts and opening it up for other's to criticize. It’s
voluntarily standing up naked in front of your peers, colleagues, family and the
academy, which is a very bold decision! When I started down this path, I made a
commitment to myself that I would finish writing knowing that I was true to myself and to not hide behind any façades through this process.

✦✦✦

Characters:
Anjali
David – my previous advisor from my master’s degree program
Friend

Scene 2:
A series of meetings and phone calls.

Production notes:
Anjali is sitting at a coffee shop working on her laptop, a typical scene, and on the phone with her friend. We hear the conversation transpire. It is clear she is in the middle of the Midwest far away from the Boston, Massachusetts area based on the scene of the cornfields and flatlands when she looks out the window.

ANJALI

I just sent an email off to my old advisor, David. He’s in Texas now, but I’m really not sure what to do.

FRIEND

About?? A little context here would be good.

ANJALI

So . . . do you remember those days that we would stay up late and plan my book? Well, I think it’s happening, so we might need to outline again. Haha.
FRIEND

Sigh. You are insane.

ANJALI

More than you know. So, what were some of the chapter titles we had?

FRIEND

I'd have to search my past chats, but I think we were just being sarcastic!

ANJALI

We probably were, but I swear we had this conversation—and it would totally help me out as a starting point!

FRIEND

We most certainly did have the conversation.

Have you ever written your personal timeline? It's where you literally take out a piece of paper and write out every year of your life and write the major events (to you) that happened.

ANJALI

No... I haven't done that before.
Steven and I were talking a little while ago about doing flashbacks to my past with present day stuff. So, it would not necessarily be done chronologically. Is it weird that as I’m listing these major events that the highlights seem to revolve around injuries?

FRIEND

Knowing you? No.

ANJALI

Ok, good.

FRIEND

Why are you suddenly writing your book again? Not that I don’t think you should, but aren’t you supposed to be working on like, graduating???

ANJALI

Funny you should ask that . . . my dissertation is now my life story. Instead of telling the story of how other people become role models, I think I’m supposed to tell my story and integrate my views on disability policy, adoption, educational system etc.
FRIEND

I don’t quite understand, but I am okay with that.

ANJALI

I don’t fully understand either, but it’s happening! Haha.

FRIEND

Ha, alrighty then.

ANJALI

I dunno . . . I’ve heard some pretty convincing arguments as to why I should do it, and so far all of my rebuttals have been squashed.

FRIEND

I mean, truthfully, if anything, it sounds ideal.

ANJALI

I know, right? I’m still not one hundred percent convinced. Hang on, phone ringing—it’s David, he must have read my panicked email!

Hello?
DAVID

Hi Anjali, I’m on the train, but I just read your email and wanted to call. So what’s going on?

✦✦✦

At this point, I proceeded to tell David the idea of my story being my dissertation and I wanted to know if this was truly a viable option or if it was as crazy as it sounded.

✦✦✦

Continuation of previous scene:

DAVID

Hmm . . . I’ll be honest, I’ve never heard of anything like this before. (Pause.)

But . . . well before I say anymore, what do you think?

ANJALI

I think it sounds pretty cool, actually. I know about the methodology, I’m learning about it in a class I’m taking right now with Denzin. But, I guess my question is, what would this mean for my future, like in terms of jobs and stuff? I’m not even sure I want an academic job (Laughs.) but I mean, just in case . . .
DAVID

As I said, I honestly have not heard about this before, it still has to be a rigorous study with a clear methodology and link to theory to meet the requirements of a Ph.D. I’m not saying you can’t do it, but you’d want to make sure you build your committee carefully with people who could really guide you and support you with this.

ANJALI

Yeah, that makes sense to me.

DAVID

Your last question, about jobs and things—I think it depends on what type of academic job you might be considering. But thinking about it, as I’ve told you before, your dissertation doesn’t define you, it’s just a project. And when I think about who is Anjali Forber-Pratt, I think about all the different hats you wear, right? And I also think about all the different research hats you wear too. You’ve built yourself as a strong researcher, like with our ASA [Atypical Sign Language Acquisition] stuff, and I know you do work with your current advisor. What I’m
saying is, this one project doesn’t have to define your career; any search committee is going to look at your entire vita not just your dissertation.

ANJALI

Okay, that makes me feel better.

DAVID

Another thing to consider is how you would do something like this. Where are you going to get your data from and approach it systematically?

ANJALI

I’ve been thinking about that . . .

DAVID

I figured you were!

ANJALI

To me, it is more than just telling my story. I’d also get data from newspaper articles and other media and the legal documents from my case would certainly be a source. It would be looking at key points in my life and how they affected me and my identity and how the incident influenced my perceptions on different systems too.
DAVID

So you’d probably have to come up with a system for what is important and not.

Remember doing that for the ASA project? I think that this could work.

Remember though, this is so out of my realm. You’re doing the right thing by asking questions.

ANJALI

So I’m not totally crazy for entertaining this idea. Thanks, by the way, I really appreciate your advice!

DAVID

No problem, I just hope I was somewhat helpful! Have you talked to your advisor?

I’m assuming you have. And Jenny, what does she say?

ANJALI

Yes, this week is my reaching out to people and just starting to figure out how feasible this would be and to start to sift through the “how-to-actually-do-it.” I haven’t talked to Jenny yet, I sent her an email too. And yes, I talk to Steven almost every day—he is aware of my hesitations!
DAVID

Keep me posted, and if you want to have another conversation as your thoughts are evolving let me know.

Little by little the idea was starting to take form. I was gaining more and more confidence in my non-traditional approach by engaging in conversations such as these. Though one perpetual problem was with every person I talked to, they had an idea on how I should do it. They would draw from their own experiences, such as writing chronologically or developing an elaborate coding system and present a compelling argument as to why I should approach it that way. I quickly realized the more people I talked to about the idea, the more confused I got about what I was actually trying to do. There were many other conversations not captured here, some from fellow Ph.D. students and close friends who I quickly learned were in disbelief of my approach.

“You’re going to what?”

Ironically, the comments from non-academics I struggled with even more. These were the ones who no matter how much I tried to put it into perspective and explain the basics behind the methodology and the credibility of qualitative research, I would leave the conversation feeling like that deflated balloon, albeit for much different reasons.

“That’s such a copout.”
Autoethnography is not for the faint of heart. And neither is dissertation writing, for that matter. But, when you embark on a journey into unchartered waters, it is far from being a copout. I learned to accept that and to keep my cards close. In a conversation with Denzin, he shared that in his experiences too, not everybody will get what I am creating and the ways in which I am contributing. From these conversations, I gained confidence to be the creator and to tell my story, my way. I finally sent Steven an email after a few days after these conversations with subject of: “Sold!” I was finally ready to take this leap of faith. However, as part of an academic institution, there were some formalities and procedures that I was not exempt from. The next task at hand was gaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is comprised of a committee of individuals who approve, monitor and review research involving human subjects to ensure ethics are upheld and regulations are followed—basically to ensure participants in social science research studies are treated fairly and that no physical or psychological harm is brought to them.

As part of Denzin’s interpretive methods class, I had a feeling I might like to at present or publish our final class project. Therefore, with some guidance from Denzin, it was decided I should secure IRB approval through the Institute of Communications Research housed within the College of Media because I was a student in his class. Truthfully, we also discussed the realities of seeking IRB approval for a study like this. We talked about the methodology of autoethnography beings non-traditional, less accepted by others, and that the gatekeeper at the
College of Education (COE) IRB office, Alice\textsuperscript{9} has a reputation for not always being open to alternative methods that she does not fully grasp. We also discussed the iterative circle of revisions, and how if we did not play our cards right here, then I could be stuck in an infinite loop of revisions for the wrong reasons because of confusion over my methodology rather than warranted revisions. These factors weighed heavily into the decision to swiftly and seamlessly apply for approval through the College of Media first, knowing full well, I was likely going to be expected to duplicate my efforts and re-apply either within my own College or at the campus-level. We felt that obtaining this initial level of approval by the College of Media Review Board would strengthen my case if others did choose to question it in the future.

Even preparing the IRB form was a learning experience to describe on paper the justification and rationale behind a study such as this. Again, it was so different from any other IRB form I had ever done or examples from my coursework and past research projects. It was a true lesson in research methods. I wondered: Do I have to provide consent for me to study myself? I laughed because it made one of my previous IRB forms that I had struggled with look like a cakewalk, even though that was a study about children with disabilities, a vulnerable population! I was told, however, this was a formality and an important step along the way. I submitted the completed form and was approved within a short period of time. I was all set to finish revising my proposal and schedule my proposal defense, or so I thought.

\textsuperscript{9} This is a pseudonym.
Characters:
Anjali
Adviser – Steven
Flight Attendant
Director of Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Assistant Director of Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Receptionist

Scene 3:
The scene begins on an airplane, Anjali’s home away from home. In the throws of living her life as a public speaker and role model for kids, she was on a trip to teach a wheelchair track clinic to kids while finalizing the scheduling of her dissertation proposal defense. The scene ends on Monday on campus in the office of the Director of the Institutional Review since they oversee the various independent college IRB offices across campus.

Production notes:
Anjali is sitting in a window seat visibly on an airplane and we see the commotion of people gathering their belongings to prepare to deplane around her. From the moment the flight attendant authorizes the use of cell phones, we hear a chorus of cell phones turning on and message alerts. The text message conversation appears in italics and will appear as pop ups on the screen as the conversation unravels. If the thoughts are coming from within Anjali’s head, not spoken audibly, they appear in within quotation marks and in “italics.”

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

Ladies and gentleman, I’d like to be the first to welcome you to Richmond, VA where the local time is 5:38 PM. We will be arriving at gate B5 and your checked baggage can be found on carousel number 3. At this time, you may now use your cell phones but all other electronic devices must remain off until you are inside
the terminal. Please remain seated with your seatbelts fastened until we have arrived safely at the gate and the captain has turned off the fasten seatbelt sign.

ANJALI

(Powers up phone and reads email.)

Shit.

(Camera zooms in to see the text message Anjali is sending and in real-time we see the following conversation unfold.)

To: Steven Aragon

Message: We have a problem.

Response: What? Where are you? Did you land?

Message: Yes, I just landed. The Department secretary, Betty9, is asking if I got IRB approval.

Response: You did!

Message: Yeah, I wrote back and said I hand-delivered the letter to her. I watched Betty scan it and put it in my file!

Response: Okay, so what’s the problem?

---

9 This is a pseudonym.
Message: Betty said that doesn’t count. She called Alice at the College IRB office and they don’t have record of it, because it wasn’t from our College. Now what??

Response: It’s the same form!

Message: No, there’s some Department form they are specifically looking for. I don’t think I can solve this problem from Virginia.

Response: Do you have a copy of the approval letter?

Message: Yes, but not with me here. I guess since it’s past 5 PM there now, I’ll have to deal with this on Monday, but we may not be able to do my dissertation proposal defense in a week . . .

Response: We’ll figure it out. Prob not till Monday though.

Message: K

(Three days later: Monday morning on the phone.)

ANJALI

I don’t know what to do. I’ve been driving back and forth from my apartment to campus all morning trying to fix this problem. I brought the hardcopy of the letter, and the Department told me it doesn’t count and that I should go talk to the
College IRB Office. But I don’t want to do that, because that’s not where I got approval from in the first place!

STEVEN

So just go in and meet with her and bring the letter! The truth of the matter is, you should consider just going over her head and go straight to campus since they oversee the various independent college IRB offices across campus.

Remember it’s like we’ve talked about before, I don’t think Alice will be open to this method; she wouldn’t fully understand it. I can see you getting railroaded and have to go through multiple revisions, and she’ll likely give you a lot of grief over this. Even if you have to redo the IRB, it may be easier to get approval from campus than the College.

ANJALI

I don’t know about that. Is there such thing as a reciprocal agreement across IRB offices?

STEVEN

I don’t know! Campus would know. You could go talk to Denzin too.
Well, I’m not going to the campus office until I feel more prepared here. I’ll figure something out. Why is this so hard? I hate hurdles.

(Driving home again.)

“I wonder if Denzin is in his office this afternoon. That might be a good place to start. I’ll check the campus IRB website too and grad college handbook. There’s no way I’m the first person to have this problem! New plan: print my old IRB form itself, bring it and letter and email from Department and go see Denzin and figure out what to do.”

(Knocking on office door.)

“Of course, of all days for him to not be here . . . great. I need a new plan again. Panic is not in the game plan! I wonder if campus IRB takes walk-ins? Guess I’m about to find out! Where is the Campus IRB office? Better check my phone.”

(Enters an unfamiliar building.)

RECEPTIONIST

How may I help you?
ANJALI

Hello, I’m not entirely sure. My name is Anjali Forber-Pratt, and I’m a Ph.D. student in the College of Education and I have some questions regarding IRB policies and procedures and how college-level IRB offices operate and if they are connected to each other or to this unit or not.

RECEPTIONIST

Okay, let me see if somebody can meet with you.

DIRECTOR of CAMPUS IRB

So, I understand you just met with my assistant director and he thought it would be better for you to meet with me directly; what exactly is the issue?

ANJALI

Thank you for meeting with me. I am wanting to conduct an autoethnography for my dissertation. I filled out an IRB exemption form with the ICR as part of the College of Media, because I’m in a class there and registered for thesis hours under my instructor there. I got approval and this letter, but when I went to schedule my dissertation proposal defense within my College, they said I had to go through their IRB office. I’m wondering if there is reciprocal agreement across
college-level IRB offices or not? I don’t want to have to go through the approval process again, because I’m trying to schedule my dissertation proposal defense for next week.

DIRECTOR of CAMPUS IRB

Wow, after all my years here, it’s hard for me to believe it, but you are the first student to be in this situation. I’ve never been asked this question.

ANJALI

Well, I always do like to be different!

DIRECTOR of CAMPUS IRB

(Laughs.) Do you have the initial form you filled out?

ANJALI

Yes, it’s just a copy though. It doesn’t have the original signatures. I can get them again if I need to, but my advisor is out of state, so it’s not quite as easy.

DIRECTOR of CAMPUS IRB

Well, I don’t think we’ll need the signatures, because you have the letter too?

ANJALI

Yes, it’s all right here.
DIRECTOR of CAMPUS IRB

Okay, let me take a quick look here. While I’m doing that, can you tell me a little more about your proposed study and how you plan on doing it?

ANJALI

Sure.

(Camera fades back in showing the passing of time.)

DIRECTOR of CAMPUS IRB

Based on what you just described, which by the way sounds very interesting, I would agree that you do not need to get human subjects approval for your study. You have done the right thing by filling out the IRB Exemption form here. But, the predicament you find yourself in is tricky. There is no policy or precedent for the independent IRB offices having reciprocal agreements. One would think they would acknowledge each other and recognize approvals from one as transferring to another since the federal government and our office certainly expects that, but, as I said, to my knowledge you are the first to raise this question.

ANJALI

Okay . . .
DIRECTOR of CAMPUS IRB

That said, why don’t we write a letter on your behalf from our office here stating that you came and met with me, explained the nature of your study and your situation and that we grant you permission to proceed with your study.

ANJALI

Wow, that would be wonderful!

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR of CAMPUS IRB

(He has been listening in from the doorway.)

Okay, so I’ll take these papers here and clock this in as a new IRB submission and read it over so that . . .

DIRECTOR of CAMPUS IRB

No. She needs this letter today. She’s been through enough and we’ve just heard all the justification we need to write the letter of support. Anjali, we’ll get you a letter by the end of the day today. Okay?

ANJALI

Thank you so much, I really do appreciate your time.

***
What a win! Not just for me, but for all of the other aspiring autoethnographers on this campus! Essentially, I walked into Campus IRB and walked out with approval all in the same day. But what is bigger than that was getting their support, from the campus level for this type of study.

Characters:
Anjali
Norman Denzin
Student – Lauren
Voice

Scene 4:
The scene begins in Denzin’s office; a small office space in an old University building that is floor to ceiling with books, papers and “organized chaos.”

Production notes:
Anjali knocks on the wooden door at the start of the scene. As she enters, the camera spans up and down the wall showing the books, papers, and works in progress, and then centers on Denzin. If the thoughts are coming from within Anjali’s head, not spoken audibly, they appear in within quotation marks and in “italics.”

ANJALI

(Knocks on door.)

Hi, I just wanted to update you on my IRB saga, do you have a minute?

DENZIN

Absolutely! What happened?

(Camera fades out and back in to show passing of time.)
ANJALI

And so, I now have IRB approval, and will see you next week for my dissertation proposal defense after all!

DENZIN

Wow . . . (Pause.) This is just wonderful. This is huge. I don’t know if you realize how huge this is! Do you have a copy of the letter?

ANJALI

Yes, here it is. This is the only copy though, but I have it electronically.

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Document 2.1
Excerpt from Letter from Institutional Review Board, April 4, 2011:

“Thank you for submitting the completed IRB-1 Form for your project entitled: [Dream. Drive. Do:] Becoming that ‘someone like me’. Your project was assigned Institutional Review Board (IRB) Protocol Number 11517 and reviewed. This application describes an auto-ethnography where the investigator will write down details of her life as it relates to being a role model within disability culture. The research will examine publicly available photographs, magazine articles, newspaper clippings, etc. that document her actions within the disability community. The research will also involve the investigator writing down her auto-ethnography (which is an autobiographical genre of writing) based on memories of her life, writing down critical incidents and connecting them to the existing political and social climate as it relates to disability and race. There is no systematic interaction or intervention with human subjects involved with this research.”

...“It has been determined that this project as described does not meet the definition of human subjects research as defined in 45CFR46(d)(f) or at 21CFR56.102(c)(e) and does not require IRB approval.”

...“Sincerely,
XXX
Director, [Campus] Institutional Review Board”
DENZIN

Can you send it to me?

ANJALI

Of course!

DENZIN

GREAT letter. And a huge victory for our team, thanks to you and Steven!!!!

Your experience and case sets precedent now for any other student.

So, you know I have to ask . . .

ANJALI

What’s that?

DENZIN

What does the College of Education think?

ANJALI

(Laughs.) Well, there’s a story there too.

DENZIN

I figured as much, just knowing who the key players are . . .
ANJALI

So, after I got this letter from Campus, they said they were going to send it on to the College as well to their IRB office. I was worried though, because what would happen if they just magically got this trump card of a letter from Campus without a heads up? Right?

DENZIN

Mmhmm

ANJALI

I decided to take the high-road on this, so to speak, and to do the diplomatic and (gestures to make air quotes) “politically correct” thing by going to meet with Alice from the College IRB Office to inform her that this letter would be coming and that I did not go through their office, (for reasons they can surmise on their own, but I was just keeping it short and sweet . . .) and that now my paperwork was complete and could they please rush the last paperwork so my dissertation proposal defense can take place on Wednesday.

So, I went in to their office, unannounced of course—I feel like I’m setting a trend here with this—anyway, I went in and very nicely informed them of this letter and
that it was coming from the Director of Campus IRB by close of business today and that I would appreciate their swift assistance with completing the remaining paperwork. Of course, they were on the defensive right off the bat. They wanted to know why if I was a student in the College that I went over their head to Campus. I ignored that question and just said, look, it is complicated, but here’s what happened and I’m simply here to inform you because I didn’t want you to be surprised later on today.

DENZIN

And at this point, it doesn’t matter anyway! You would think they would realize that students doing this type of research are purposely not going through their office and that they need to get with the times! But good for you for not giving up or just changing your topic/approach like so many do.

ANJALI

Thanks! I certainly hope this letter can help other students too—it was quite the ordeal. But, as you always say, gotta love pushing that envelope!

DENZIN

Ah, yes . . .

✦✦✦

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I know many established autoethnographers fight the red tape on their respective campuses; I know the qualitative researchers here on our campus struggle with the confines of these strict policies and procedures and forms that just don't lend themselves to the type(s) of studies they are seeking to pursue. This experience taught me about the origins of the IRB and the epistemological beliefs at play. It takes persuasion and guts to push people to think outside of the box.

Reflection

Reflecting on this experience, the best analogy for what I learned was how to spread my wings and fly, as a researcher. I've learned how to advocate for myself in a different way—sure, I've always been a strong advocate for myself as a person with a disability, or a person of color, but to advocate for myself as a qualitative researcher was a new experience for me. To essentially defend the qualitative research paradigm, the methodology of autoethnography and its legitimacy to the Director could have been quite scary and others may have walked away from the situation entirely, or just picked a new dissertation topic. But, that is just not who I am.

It is one thing to read in a book or to discuss in class about the origins of the Institutional Review Board and how it came about. Though, it is a much different experience when I found myself face-to-face with the head honcho and had to defend my study, purpose and approach in order to obtain the golden ticket, or letter that would allow me to continue on down this uncharted path.
Prior to the 1900s, individual conscience and codes of conduct were used to govern research studies and guide ethical decision-making. The laws and customs of society and the government were used as the standard. As science and technology advanced, there were some grave failures such as studies performed on concentration camp prisoners who could not provide informed consent, or the infamous Tuskegee study. According to the Center on Disease Control, this was a project designed to study the history of syphilis in the hopes of better establishing treatment programs, but participants being treated for “bad blood” actually did not receive proper treatment needed to cure their illness and it was later determined that while participants freely agreed to be examined, there was no evidence of informed consent or acknowledgment of the true purpose of the study (http://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm).

These examples prompted action by governments to institute rules to protect human subjects. From its inception, the Institutional Review Board has been laced with objectivity, facts, science and testing of hypotheses. As the field of social science and qualitative research emerged, it became evident that it was challenging to fit this new research paradigm within the existing structure of the IRB as it was founded on opposite epistemological foundations. This experience reaffirmed my belief and identity that I am a post-modernist. To me, there is not a single, tangible reality; I see the world as being constructed based on multiple realities. Human knowledge is built through cognitive processes coupled with interactions with the world of material objects, others and the self. To this token, it is my belief and assumption that our own experiences shape our perceptions. Using
autoethnography, data about self and context are used to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others including the surrounding culture(s) and historical climate. Creating what my approach was going to be in the writing and telling of my autoethnography is the last piece to discuss.

As I mentioned, the more people I spoke to, the more confused I was getting with the approach. It occurred to me that I was talking to some of the wrong people. I needed to surround myself with methodology experts and to learn from them. At this point, I had read numerous autoethnographic accounts, and was engaged in philosophical discussions with members of my committee, but I still was struggling with the how.

Lucky for me, the International Qualitative Congress attracts key leaders in the field, and I had the opportunity to meet, greet, discuss and learn from some amazing autoethnographers including Carolyn Ellis, Arthur Bochner, Tami Spry and others. The funny thing about autoethnography is you read people’s accounts but rarely gain insight about understanding the process behind it and the trials and tribulations it took to get to that end result. Attending the Congress was an important step for me as I was creating my methods and applying my ingenuity. Attending the Congress allowed me to realize that while it is a dark and lonely path to embark on a journey such as this, there is an underground network of supporters, cheerleaders and experts across many different disciplines who believed in me and what I was setting out to accomplish.

The greatest part about discovering this underground network was that the support did not end at the conclusion of the Congress. Honestly, when I attended the
preconference workshop, *Writing Autoethnography and Narrative in Qualitative Research* with both Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, I naively thought I was going to come out of the 3-hour session knowing how to write my own autoethnography. Initially discouraged, and several emails later, I came to the realization that I was searching for a recipe that does not exist. The beauty of autoethnography is creating your approach yourself and finding your own voice. My quest for the holy grail of answers was over; I came out of the Congress finally knowing that the next step was simply to start writing and to not be overly concerned that I still felt like I did not know what I was doing.

“*Just write.*”

The researchers and individuals I met at the Congress kept reiterating these two words to me. Maybe they were on to something? I took another blind leap of faith and began writing. Initially, I had thought I was going to take each element of cultural capital and tell different stories from my life to illustrate how I had accrued that piece of capital. When I started using this approach, however, it was too limiting. I felt like I was unable to fully develop the stories and everything felt disjointed.

Also at the Congress, there was something else that went beyond my increased confidence level and creation of my methods, but to realize in the sharing of my saga how I was making contributions to the field of academia.
Continuation of Previous Scene:

DENZIN

I’d like you to meet Anjali Forber-Pratt; she and her advisor took on the IRB and won and is now doing an autoethnography for her dissertation. I think you two have a lot to talk about. Anjali, this is Lauren; she is getting railroaded by her college and folks are trying to dissuade her from doing an autoethnography.

ANJALI

(Sheepishly.) Hi. I guess that’s me! I would be happy to talk more with you about my experiences. It’s nice now to be on the other side, and I’d love to help you out in any way that I can.

STUDENT – LAUREN

Thank you! I’m just so discouraged. People are telling me it’s impossible to do this type of research, and that I certainly cannot do it for my dissertation, and . . .

ANJALI

I’m exhibit “A.” I am doing it. Here, on this campus. So, that said, you can too.

You need allies, that’s for sure.

(Camera pans out. Refocuses as Anjali enters a new room.)

VOICE
Hey, aren’t you? Norm was telling me about you, did I hear that you took on the IRB?

ANJALI

“Certainly wasn’t expecting this! Norm is the rock star at this conference, what is he doing telling all these people about me?”

Uh, yeah. That would be me! My name is Anjali, I’m a Ph.D. student doing an autoethnography here at the U of I, and Norm is on my committee . . .

*****

Taking a step back to the personal timeline my friend had me create, the overarching story was that of my lawsuit. Using that story as the main event, I was able to then move forward and backward in time still anchored to this critical incident in my life (Sartre, 1948). It is not that there have not been other critical incidents, but this one incident encompasses so much of my story and serves as the gateway to discuss race, discrimination, disability, sport, family—precisely those things that I was attempting to discuss through the lens of cultural capital. This subtle shift to my approach allowed me to tell a far more coherent account, and weave the theoretical underpinnings from the cultural capital literature into my reflections.

Throughout the process of, “just writing,” I discovered my voice and it happened to take on the format of a movie script. I have always been a visual person and thinker, and as I was writing and trying to capture the emotions and essence of
particular moments, I could see the movie in my head. Using this format, I was able to uniquely intersect the power of dialogue with rich visual imagery and cinematic techniques. The format I have created, through applied ingenuity, is one of specific movie scenes that appear throughout the text. As you’ve now seen, the specific scenes appear in a different font with a scene description, production notes, character description(s) and the ensuing dialogue or visual representation that appears on the screen during this scene. The scenes themselves contain and serve as a catalyst for important moral and ethical conversations. Following the presentation of the scene(s) at the conclusion of the Act, a section of critical reflection is provided connected to the theoretical underpinnings.

While the saga itself of obtaining IRB approval and developing my own “how-to” was trying and challenging, I learned a lot along the way. I had the opportunity to navigate the political system of the University and associated departments and/or divisions in a different way, engaged with leading scholars in the field of qualitative research and reaffirm my own epistemological beliefs, I am proud that I came out on top! This was indeed a victory, another type of gold medal moment, not just for me but also for others who will come along the way.
ACT V:

BECOMING THE LIVING PROOF
“Anything you say to me,
And everything you do,
You can’t deny the truth,
‘Cause I’m the living proof.
So many don’t survive,
They just don’t make it through,
But look at me,
I’m the living proof - oh yes I am.”
- Mary J. Blige, The Living Proof (Blige, 2011, track 1)

Up to this point, I’ve told stories about my dreams and highlighted the drive it took to chase them and overcome obstacles along the way. The following stories are a collection of what I have done on this platform I’ve created for myself. The last act was pivotal because I am now consciously aware of my platform and found my voice to share my stories in a way that balances my multiple identities in my messaging. Instead of just going to give speeches about what it is like to be disabled, or to be an athlete, I discovered there is so much more depth to my story.

Admittedly being a person with a disability as one of my prominent identities, I do wrestle with fears of pigeon holing myself to only influencing this group of people or for being viewed as a Supercrip (Morris, 1991; Shapiro, 1994).

Within disability culture, there is a huge stereotype against the Supercrip, or individuals with disabilities who appear to have overcome their disability and who are successful. Some people with disabilities resent people like me because they fear that they have to live up to unrealistic expectations (whether created on their own or by society) and overcome their disability too. That is not what I’m suggesting. I am suggesting that whatever the difference is you may have, find your own way to embrace it. Why can our society not look past the physicality of disability and to
view disability as a component of one’s identity the same way that being a woman or being of African American descent or growing up with low socioeconomic status is a component of those able-bodied athletes’ identities? For me it is not about being recognized solely for my athletic accomplishments, rather; it is to be recognized for my citizenship and ability to be a role model to others—from all walks of life.

I have not overcome my disability; it is very much a central and core part of my identity along with being a woman, a person of color, and being an adoptee. By embracing and textualizing my multiple identities, it is empowering for others. And as Tami Spry (2011) eloquently explains, this will continue to the point “where it becomes an everyday critical pedagogy of hope and transformation. It becomes a practice of vulnerably engaging the collisions and commnions with others as we seek to find ways of living that allow for a diversity of being, a multiplicity of stories.” (p. 209). This is precisely the type of cultural engagement needed to become that “someone like me” and what will be highlighted in the stories that follow.

Characters:

Anjali
CEO of United States Olympic Committee

Scene 1:
The following scene takes place at a reception at a hotel with a room full of adults and business owners interested in the Olympic and Paralympic movement.

Production notes: Descriptions of the images or movements to appear on the screen are provided in parentheses.
CEO OF UNITED STATES OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

Anjali, are you ready? You’re on in 2 minutes.

ANJALI

Yep, I’m good to go.

CEO OF UNITED STATES OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

And now, we are very fortunate to have one of our Paralympic track and field super star athletes here to share a few short remarks about her story. Anjali Forber-Pratt made her first national team in 2007 and has been climbing the ranks ever since. She earned two bronze medals in Beijing, is currently the world record holder in the 200m. I personally consider her one of our top contenders in this upcoming year. Although she has to perform at trials in June, she is officially a 2012 London Paralympic hopeful. Off the track, she dedicates her time to speaking at events such as these, and well, I want her to tell the rest. Without further ado, Anjali Forber-Pratt!

ANJALI

As you heard, I’m Anjali Forber-Pratt, a Paralympic medalist in track & field and the 200m world record holder. To my fellow athletes in the room, I know we all
have our own story of what it means to us to wear that “Team USA” jersey. For
the others, I encourage you to ask these athletes what it has meant to them. For
me, it is absolutely a tremendous honor, and as cliché as it sounds, it’s been a
dream come true to be on the world stage.

(Camera zooms on an athlete in the room and you see him close his eyes and nod
slightly.)

I also believe that wearing that USA jersey comes with a responsibility to pay it
forward. There is tremendous value that I see in giving back to others, and
wearing these letters across my chest automatically attracts people’s awareness
and they become a captive audience. I have had unique opportunity to capitalize
on my platform of athletic success to truly become a worldly citizen—to use this
hat I wear to truly make a difference in the world. I’ve come to realize throughout
my journey, that representing our nation on Team USA is a great way to give
back and to motivate other’s to live up to their fullest potential.
This wheelchair is what I know; I was sick as an infant with an infection that left me paralyzed. Before I first saw wheelchair racers competing at the Boston Marathon, I believed that I was going to simply outgrow my disability—that it was a phase. I thought to become an adult that I had to first get rid of my disability.

But, by seeing these racers and learning about their accomplishments, I was motivated to dream, and to dream big. Certainly, there were hardships such as injuries and hiring my own lawyer to get a high school education standing up to injustices and discrimination. These experiences though, have shaped me into a
true Paralympian and role model. At age 27, I’m amazed by my own life accomplishments!

Yes, sport has been a part of this. Sport is important to me because it transcends supposed physical boundaries and an outlet to achieve what others may deem impossible. Sport also unifies people from all different races, nationalities, sexual orientations, backgrounds and abilities and can serve as a catalyst for social change. Sport is powerful and has largely shaped me into who I am today: A world class Paralympic athlete and an advocate for those left on the sidelines.

Through sport, I’ve learned who I truly am, what I was truly made of. Sport builds character: You learn to push yourself to new heights, to places that are beyond your wildest dreams.

Going back to this responsibility to pay it forward, I’ve realized the power of this, and love motivating others to live up to their fullest potential. This embodies Olympicism. Each day I live and breathe my own motto: Dream. Drive. Do. I love everything that I do, academically, athletically, with my public speaking engagements and outreach with organizations. It is through the collection of these moments, and the intersection of these worlds that I live in that I have
created my platform to change the world.

By weaving these moments of defeat, trials, and successes into the telling and sharing of my own life story, I have embraced the power of changing the world. I place tremendous value on acting responsibly in my communities and giving back to society by educating others. I go back to one of my gold medal moments when I realized on the top of the podium at World Championships that representing our nation on Team USA is another way to serve our country, to give back and to motivate other’s to live up to their fullest potential. The other thread woven into my identity is the gold medal moment of taking on my school district to get an education, and yet this very education I had to fight to get is what gave me the tools to do what I do as a citizen of the world. The beauty is: People all over the world with varying ages resonate with my story.

Photo 8. © 2010
Caption: Thank you note from 3rd grader to Anjali Forber-Pratt
Dear Anjali,

I grew up in Natick. My little sister, Laura, is close to your age and so through her I knew about you as you grew up.

Now I’m your fan on Facebook. I just wanted to take the time to thank you for putting your story out there. In particular, it’s great to be able to show my 3-year-old son all the amazing things that athletes in wheelchairs can do. My 93-year-old Grandmother is in a wheelchair at this point in life and we’ve met a couple of very ill, young kids in wheelchairs at the hospital. As a counterbalance to these encounters, your home page lets me show him that there [are] many different reasons that people might need a wheelchair and many different ways to use a wheelchair.

Thanks and good luck in all your endeavors!

Lane

Photo 9. © 2011
Caption: Screenshot of Facebook montage of comments and ‘likes’ from Anjali Forber-Pratt’s fan page (http://www.facebook.com/anjalifp)
The amazing Anjali
Natick woman shares her inspiration as top paralympic athlete

By Lenny Maglione
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

She began: “My name is Anjali. Forber-Pratt and I am an athlete. I use a wheelchair to get around because my legs do not work the same as other people. I get sick when I was a baby. I cannot feel my legs or stand up or walk.”

The words are from a children’s book that Forber-Pratt coauthored to inspire young disabled athletes.

Here’s what the 16-year-old from Natick can do: Win a bronze medal in the 400-meter wheelchair event at the 2006 Paralympic Games in Athens; win two gold medals (100 and 200 meters) and a bronze (400 meters) in the 2007 Parapan American Games in Rio de Janeiro; win skiing events; play field hockey; play basketball. Whatever you get, count Anjali in.

Her next goal is to qualify for the 2012 Paralympic Games in London. Wheelchair or not, there hardly anything athletic that Forber-Pratt can’t do.

“You have to look past the chair,” says Jeff Stone, a former physical education teacher in the Natick school system, where he first met Forber-Pratt when she was a ninth-grader. Says Stone, “She’s a world-class athlete.”

Her story begins in Calcutta, where she was abandoned by her mother shortly after birth. At 2 months old, she was adopted by Natick residents Rosalind and Larry Forber-Pratt. Two months after they brought Anjali home, she got sick. “I came down with flu symptoms,” she says.

She was rushed to the hospital. They found out it was transverse myelitis, a neurological disorder that affects the spinal cord. She wasn’t expected to live. “The doctors had written me off,” she says. But they hadn’t taken her heart and mind into account.

Still, she was paralyzed from the waist down. “This wheelchair is my best friend,” she says.

Her motto: Dream. Drive. Do.

January 2011 IPC Athletics World Championships, Christchurch, New Zealand.
2010 Final places: 200m, 400m, 800m - 100% of world's best men.
2009 - US Paralympics Track & Field/USA National Championship, Monroe, Fla.
2008 Bronze medal, 400m - Paralympic Games, Beijing.
2006 Second place, 100m and 200m, third place, 400m - Wheelchair Games, Atlanta.
2007 Gold medal, 100m, 200m, 400m - Parapan American Games, Rio de Janeiro.
2003 Thirty places, 200m, 400m, 800m, 1500m, 5000m - Junior National Wheelchair Games, Hartford.
1996 Two gold medals, two silver medals - Junior National Wheelchair Games, Birming-
ham, Ala.
1993 Two gold medals, two silver medals - Junior National Wheelchair Games, Columbus, Ohio.

Photo 10. © 2010
Caption: Newspaper snapshot from Boston Sunday Globe, December 26, 2010
These images from the newspaper are a far cry from where I started out. Seeing competitive wheelchair racers at the Boston Marathon at age five opened my eyes to a whole new world and allowed me to dream of Paralympic glory.

Specifically, one of my role models was Jean Driscoll. Witnessing Jean Driscoll make history by winning eight Boston Marathons forever changed my life. I was inspired to become a wheelchair racer and to develop my own dreams.

Now in 2012, I have competed and medalled in the Paralympics, finished 4th in the Boston Marathon (illustrated by Photo 9 of the Facebook montage above), am a two-time graduate of the University of Illinois, soon to be third time. Watching people in racing wheelchairs go whizzing by at 25 miles per hour was a life altering event for me. As I mentioned earlier in Act I, I thought that in order to have dreams of my own, that I first had to outgrow my disability. The power of seeing someone like me excelling in sport and in life was meaningful. This was embodied by my favorite recurring Halloween costume as a kid: The winner of the Boston Marathon. Trick-or-treating in a racing wheelchair is quite interesting, to say the least, but I was bound and determined to do so, as it truly completed the ensemble.
If you dream it, do it. Even if it might seem unrealistic, unfathomable, impossible, or whatever else, I am here to tell you that it is possible. If you dream it, it will come.

Document 4.1
*Excerpt from The Boston Globe, March 13, 2011:*

“When she was 5, Anjali Forber-Pratt’s parents took her to watch the Boston Marathon. They settled in on the edge of Route 135 at the Natick-Framingham line. It was then that Anjali started dreaming.

‘One day I will be in the Marathon.’

That day is coming, but the road has been long.”

“For as long as she can remember, she said, “the Boston Marathon has been on my list of things I want to do. I drew pictures of me winning it.” She was inspired watching eight-time wheelchair winner Jean Driscoll race through Natick.

“When I was in third grade I wrote a paper, ‘When I Meet Jean Driscoll.’ I met her in 1993 at the Junior Nationals in Ohio.” They became friends and have stayed in touch.”

At the age of eight, I had a plan of action as to how to make that dream a reality. I know that my story might be an anomaly, but I am here to report that not only did I meet Jean Driscoll, but she and I are now what I consider to be very close friends and life mentors, for each other. We can discuss these difficult life questions with one another, and we get each other. Little did I know, at the time, that I was going to follow in Jean’s footsteps and attend the University of Illinois, become a Paralympic medalist, compete in the Boston Marathon and become an inspiration to others. The following story tells about how this all came to be, and how our paths
eventually crossed beyond the star struck kid that I was when I first met her. It was more than that.

In 2007, I accepted a position at the University as a graduate student assistant and my office was diagonally across the hall from Jean's, and we worked for the same boss; we were colleagues. Almost instantly, this childhood dream come true, was evolving into something into something even more memorable than that. We were excellent colleagues, and became buddies. By the end of my time in that position, we were both sad to see me move on, though it was for the better. During that last day, I made a promise to continue to meet with her monthly just to touch bases and to continue fostering this relationship we had kindled throughout our time together. I kept up with our monthly meetings, despite both of our insanely hectic schedules. We just always found a way to make it work.

One day, during our monthly chat, Jean was struggling with her words, something she rarely struggles with. I couldn't figure out what she possibly was trying to ask me that she couldn't just spit out. She wanted to know, with all of my interest in international disability development and outreach, if I would be remotely interested in accompanying her on a trip back to Ghana to teach wheelchair track clinics the following year.

“Yes!!!!!!”

I didn’t have to think twice about it. If your childhood hero asks you to go with her on a life-changing trip doing things that you both love to do, you just say yes and work out the details later! The lesson here is to take advantage of opportunities that come your way. You may not even realize it at the time; I sure
didn’t, but by being gracious, committed, and open to a sense of adventure, you just never know!

I went, and this trip and all of the subsequent work that has followed from it has brought me even closer to my childhood hero. To go on a trip such as this was an opportunity for me to pay it forward, to see the ripple effect in action and to become that ‘someone like me’ for others.

There was one morning in the middle of Accra, Ghana, where we were 3 days into our trip, still sans equipment because of troubles with customs, when this all came to fruition. Nothing is ever easy in a developing nation; the processes are difficult to understand, to follow, and even when you pay people extra, sometimes you are just stuck. We decided to break into groups, those with racing experience (and equipment, at this point) and those without racing experience and who had everyday chairs. Not all of the participants had wheelchairs to use, so we had to be creative and have some people borrow wheelchairs from those who were in racing chairs, and quite honestly, be flexible.

The stories I heard from he newbie group involved athletes lighting up for the first time when they tasted that freedom and sense of speed. They also reported one athlete who was quite hesitant to try the handcycle and let the boys go ahead of her and really needed that extra push to get going. Once she got her first taste, they couldn’t get her out of it to give others a turn! The newbies were so impressionable, so eager to learn. There is something truly amazing and rewarding about igniting a fire within someone, and witnessing that moment when they realize:
“Hey, I can be somebody.”

“Wow, I can do this.”

These were special moments for me on this trip, because of the alignment with my own mission, but to share in that same mission with my very own hero was remarkable. My group was hungry for a hardcore workout. They knew about my experience with wheelchair racing and Jean’s and were dreaming and yearning for Paralympic gold. To a coach, they were the epitome of a favorite kind of athlete—constantly asking for more. I ask:

“How are you feeling, do you think you can do one more 800m repeat?”

The athlete’s response:

“How about two more?”

I was thanked nearly every lap for the training and for working hard alongside them. One comment has stayed with me even these months later:

“Thank you, thank you so much for one of the happiest days of my life! Thank you to you, your friends, and your country.”

Coaching has always been fun for me, but there is something different about this group, you can sense the drive and determination they each have, and it is simply radiating. People from the community and nearby villages gathered to watch, ask questions, observe, and to just keep on training/doing their own thing while we were there too. Literally, we were there changing perceptions, changing the world, every moment. It is amazing to be a part of something bigger than you. The potential
we saw is just like the potential Jean saw in me, and the potential that I see in others. This potential is explosive, like wildfire. This experience, and story highlights the power of what can happen when this occurs. In the heat of the moment, however, it can be overwhelming.

_characters:_

Anjali
Steven
Athlete

_scene 2:_

The focus of the scene takes place via email between Anjali and Steven and then transitions to an online chat. As this scene unfolds, we are also transported to Ghana to see some of Anjali’s work in action.

_production notes:_

Descriptions of the images or movements to appear on the screen are provided in parentheses. At one point during this conversation, we hear a third voice, of an athlete from Ghana.

Anjali

Sometimes when in Africa and I can’t sleep, I journal while getting bit by mosquitoes, and this one is directed to you. I am changing the world every second I am here, and I know I should be happy and excited about that, but I’m not. (See flashes of images and video of coaching in rural Ghana.) The examples are transformational on so many levels, for them, for me, for the bystanders who gather around to watch and ask questions, for the country of Ghana, for world.
(See people gathering at the track pointing and asking questions.) The woman who was shunned from her village and her family because of her disability—was exposed to sport and now is the breadwinner in the family, and her family talks to her. There’s a university student who thanks me every day for coming here to teach him. He has determination and drive—he just needs the tools that we are providing. He will get a university education; I have no doubt in my mind of that. (While Anjali is describing this student who she has met in Ghana, we see a picture of him on the screen addressing a group of dignitaries and hear his voice.)

ATHLETE

I will bring home a gold medal for Ghana in the Paralympics. (Voice over.)

ANJALI

And, Steven, he still hasn’t been in a racing chair yet! There’s the teenager rolling around on three wheels instead of four because a $.10 nut is missing. There are athletes who crawl around—but are participating in daily life—using homemade scooter boards, flip flops on their hands or just dragging themselves along the dirt roads to get to where they need to be.

All of it is life changing—especially when I can relate to it on so many levels, and
when I am one of the ones who is providing the tools to these individuals to solve these problems, and the counseling to the policy makers and government officials to sustain these changes and to develop from within the country.

It is freaking cool when you are there to witness that fire igniting deep within somebody, that is the humanist in me. And that’s what I get to do so naturally in a disability sport setting, but I’m concerned that it can and will very easily become all that I do, and I don’t want that to happen.

I don’t know if my rationale for why going into disability feels like a cop out makes sense to you or not. But, in a nutshell, it’s that everything I stand for is not letting your disability limit or define you, but to be the best you can be at whatever. I feel like I’m selling myself short.

STEVEN

The cop out comment makes sense to me. Remember, I’ve been viewed in a similar way. The answer is quite simple. Your impact is made by showing the possibilities.

Sure you could focus on the everyday, step-by-step process. But showing possibility and being a role model can’t be done by just anyone. It can, and is being done by you, however. Does that make sense?
ANJALI

No, not entirely. I mean I sort of get what you are saying... I think.

STEVEN

There are different roles that people have in life. It's okay to see yourself in a different role.

ANJALI

I totally get that there are multiple roles and purposes. But...

STEVEN

I think teaching someone how to live day-to-day is very different than serving as a role model which is what I took your struggle to be. I think your purpose is not the day-to-day, it's bigger than that. So much bigger...

I was just rereading your email. Not everyone can light a fire for change. They can help move change along but they can't light the fire. (See video of Anjali and Ghanaian athletes huddled around a fire as Anjali is instructing on how to make racing gloves.)

ANJALI

Okay...
STEVEN

That's how I was thinking of the day-to-day versus being a role model.

ANJALI

But what I’m saying is that doing that, and being involved in that, lighting those fires, if I’m doing that for people with disabilities, that’s a total cop out to do that as a life purpose.

STEVEN

But you don’t do it just for people with disabilities. I think that’s the part you don’t understand and why you’re not understanding my response. You light fires for all people—not just for people with disabilities!!

ANJALI

Hmm, I guess that’s true. I know that I’m doing that for all people but the overwhelming majority ends up being for people with disabilities, so maybe it’s about striking a balance?

STEVEN

It’s so much bigger than that. I understood exactly what you were saying. I don’t want to light fires just for brown people either. I don’t think I’m limited to just
brown people either!! We all probably have a certain emphasis more than others but that's okay.

(Pause.)

Look, not to brag, but sometimes people have to point out my impact because I get locked into thinking I'm only making a difference for a certain group and it's much larger. I actually don't think that fire starters recognize the full brunt of the fires they start. It's like, "Really?? I made that kind of difference??"

ANJALI

Yeah! That's what I'm talking about. You end up putting blinders on yourself, almost. But at the same time, isn't that what is so cool about being a firestarter?

Not even knowing the full impact you're making? I think so!

STEVEN

Yes, and it's cool there are people to show us that impact.

ANJALI

Yeah, that's very true.

STEVEN

So do you see? I do understand why going into disability would feel like a cop out.
ANJALI

Yep, you do.

*****

Document 5.1
Excerpts from International Paralympic Committee IPC Press Release February 14, 2012:

“Four of the nation’s top para-athletes have sought out support in their uphill battle to qualify. They have partnered with a programme called “Right to Dream,” which provides training support and equipment to para-athletes with the aim to combat the misconceptions of the disabled in Ghana and to offer the nation new role models to help inspire and engage the next generation.”

“With London 2012 coming up, there’s really an opportunity there to help current athletes in Ghana to reach their true potential, but also to use the Paralympic Games as a platform from which we can raise awareness about those with a disability in general and also inspire the next generation of children in Ghana to believe that they can do it too,” said Stephanie, head of the [organization’s] Paralympic programme.”

“I want to be a role model. To let people know that people with disabilities have something to offer to society. I want to give people the right to dream.” - Minkah, Ghanaian para-athlete

“Minkah was born into a family of rice farmers and contracted Polio aged 2. He crawled for the next eight years before being provided with a wooden crutch at age 10... [These athletes] have certainly taken advantage of their right to dream in this world, and by the end of this year, they could be stirring up the next generation’s pot of dreams back home.”

*****

Characters:
Anjali
Steven

Scene 3:
The focus of the scene takes place over dinner between Anjali and Steven at an airport.

Production notes:
Descriptions of the images or movements to appear on the screen are provided in parentheses.
ANJALI

(Camera fades out and back in to show passing of time.)

Let’s talk about being a firestarter and making an impact again.

STEVEN

Okay . . . I thought you got it the last time we talked! What’s up?

ANJALI

I have been asked to participate in something incredible called the Responsibility Project where they are featuring Olympians and Paralympians from around the world to make a documentary of the true stories behind the athletes. The critically acclaimed documentary filmmaker Lucy Walker is directing this project. Her latest film, *The Tsunami and the Cherry Blossom* (Carstensen & Walker, 2011) is about the survivor’s tales from Japan. She captures the stories from people as they find the courage to revive and rebuild as the cherry blossom season begins. It is currently under consideration for an Academy Award!

STEVEN

Really?
ANJALI

Yeah! The goal is to create beautifully cinematic and compelling films that involve the sport, but also extend into the culture and environments of the athlete, the “off-the track” story so to speak.

STEVEN

Just another avenue to tell your story!

ANJALI

I know! And, she really gets it. I was on the phone with her for about an hour. Her work as a documentary filmmaker is really about putting autoethnographies on the screen and doing exactly what we’ve been talking about and creating! I can’t believe it, it’s really happening. I’m so excited to meet her.

STEVEN

Things happen for a reason.

☆☆☆
Reflection

This last piece of cultural capital, citizenship capital, ties back to my purpose of even telling my story—to leave a mark on the world by helping those left on the sidelines. Citizenship capital “refers to the knowledge, skills, dispositions and
experiences that help develop citizenship capacity” (Aragon & Kose, 2007, p. 118). It is about acting responsibly in the community and greater society. To me, this is the philanthropic part of who I am, the value that I see in giving back to others and the “do” part of my motto. I have collected so many experiences as I have embodied this notion of a becoming a worldly citizen through volunteerism, public speaking, advocacy work, policy-making across the entire United States and parts of Ghana, India and Bermuda.

However, it’s also important to show why I do what I do—it’s not for the outside recognition. My coach recently told me, if you’re building a house, you can’t live in it while it’s being built. To me, that is what it means to achieve your dreams, it is the action of doing from my motto: Dream. Drive. Do. Every single day, whether we realize it or not, we are building a foundation; we have the opportunity to live in the moment. We have the opportunity to be a role model for others.

It’s never been about the medals for me. Yes, I’m proud of these accomplishments, but the true reward is much bigger than that and captured somewhat by the comments and photos from others. My favorite part so far of returning as a medalist from the 2008 Paralympics has been being able to talk to people and watch them get wide-eyed in amazement and for me to help them to realize that they too can achieve their dreams and that I believe in them. Using my athletic successes as a platform to motivate other’s to change, is brought to life with the work I have done and continue to do. It’s so much bigger than just me though, as Steven and I discussed. It is about inspiring other’s to become that “someone like me” for other’s too and finding their own platform. Going back to the recent press
release from the International Paralympic Committee (2012), one Ghanaian athlete I worked with was quoted:

I want to be a role model. To let people know that people with disabilities have something to offer to society. I want to give people the right to dream.

I give credit where credit is due to all of my amazing coaches, mentors and to my family for supporting my dreams. But equally, at a very young age, I was taught that if you want something badly enough, you have a responsibility to chase it, to make it your own. Growing up with my disability, this is all I’ve ever known, and in many ways it made me have to grow up fast, out of survival. My story is a survivors tale, one to give hope to others, one that I hope motivates other’s to change something within themselves, to recognize their own inner fire or to ultimately become that ‘someone like me’ for other’s as the Ghanaian athlete is doing.

My legacy is to be remembered for helping those left on the sidelines in life to see potential within themselves. My mission is to leave the world a better place. There were a lot of people in my life who challenged me, naysayers who didn’t believe in me, and it has been a lifelong journey for me to even fully grasp and comprehend my own potential and to weave together and embrace my different identities! I am literally the person who has to have other people point it out for me, and mentors and coaches who help me to look back at what I have accomplished, and to this day, I look at the list in disbelief.

A role model is defined as “a person whose behavior in a particular role is imitated by others” (Merriam-Webster, 2011). This person serves as an example of
the values, attitudes, and behaviors associated with a particular role. Role models can also be persons who distinguish themselves in such a way that others admire and want to emulate them or achieve similar success. Research about role models is largely situated within the fields of psychology (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Lockwood & Kunda, 1999; Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002; Lockwood, 2006), education (Bullough, 2005; Carrington, Tymms, & Merrell, 2008; Williams-Nickelson, 2009; Thomas, Hu, Gewin, Bingham, & Yanchus, 2005), business management (Eriksen, 2009; Hall, 2003) and career development (Levinson et al., 1991; Lockwood, 2006; Neumark & Gardecki, 1998; Skeff & Mutha, 1998) literature. The research is conclusive that role models can enhance both career and personal development, but it is rarely examined outside of formal academic or work settings. Why not? Aren’t these stories important to capture and to tell?

Role models also often inspire others in more informal community settings. For example, since disability culture is so distinct and small, a role model often becomes a mentor through community involvement, meeting others, and continually giving back. There are known benefits of role models for specific populations, such as women, medical students, and youth, which include increasing self-esteem and confidence. However, there is considerably less explicit discussion about how one actually becomes a role model. It was through the accrual of these experiences and consciously taking pieces from those experiences and allowing myself to grow and change that I became a role model.

The majority of information on the power and benefit of role models is focused on youth and adolescents (American Association of Women, 1991; Ferreyra,
2001; Hall, 2003; Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002; Southwick, Morgan, Vythilingam, & Charney, 2006; Speizer, 1981). However, even adults often need mentors or role models to guide and support them in their own development or to work through identity crises that may arise throughout the lifespan. Even teenagers, who in the eyes of society are often expected to act and perform as adults, they need positive role models too.

Document 6.1
Letters from Teenagers to Anjali February 10, 2012:

“Dear Anjali,
If you don’t remember me, I’m with 7th grade. I was the kid with the ‘skater doo’, [and] the long hair down to my eyes. Me and my friend were the two main ones asking questions.

Your speech inspired me, because I’m working on becoming a published poet. I use my painful experiences to turn them into something beautiful. Some of which involved suicide attempt, cutting, severe clinical depression, jdc [juvenile detention center], being raped, abused, drug and alcohol treatment, mental hospitals and child protection services.

Meeting people who have gone through traumatic experiences but don’t let that hinder growth is an inspiration for me. That says, “Yeah, I’ve had a crappy life, but it’s a beautiful canvas.”

I just wanted to say thank you, and all the other inspirations I still keep in contact with, they’re helping me jumpstart my career.

Sincerely,
Mary”

Other selected excerpts from letters from teenagers:

“You have inspired me more to get into college and get my doctor’s degree. I really liked when you talked about how you had naysayers in your life but they didn’t stop you from achieving your dreams. I’m glad you came because I don’t think I’m going to second guess myself on going to school. Dream. Drive. Do!”

“You inspired me to go and do my dream. I’m not really sure what it is, but I know it’s going to make me happy. My goal is to go to college and maybe stay long enough and get my college degree.”
Role models are beneficial for minority groups. While numerous assumptions are made that minority group members benefit from somebody like them, the empirical results are inconclusive. For example, in a qualitative study conducted to see whether Black teachers were in fact strong role models for Black students, 60 interviews were collected (Maylor, 2009). One of the aims of the study was to determine whether or not Black pupils would automatically see Black teachers as role models and make a connection between the behavior modeled by Black teachers and their own behavior aspirations or achievement. Research suggests that being a role model may be inherent for some minorities to want to give back to others like them, who they feel a bond or connection to (Bennett, 2007; Cunningham & Hargreaves, 2007; Ross, 2002; Stanton-Salazar & Urso Spina, 2003). Plus, while some minorities may be the role models offered for others to emulate (Bennett, 2007), it is clear that some object to being automatically assumed as the token role model and lack the desire to fulfill this role. This is similar to my own feelings on not wanting to be the token role model for those with disabilities.

There is a great deal of conflicting research on what makes the best role model-protégé match because of the complicated dynamics of motivation, level of comfort and inspiration. While it seems that women respond better to fellow female role models (Lockwood, 2006; Neumark & Gardecki, 1998), research by Carrington and Tymms (2008) disagrees with this claim. From my experience, it depends what the mentee needs and which part of their identity they are struggling to develop. For some, gender is irrelevant but to see a person of color attain an education is what they need. For others, my disability is more pertinent to them or perhaps it’s being a
fellow adoptee. This is why it's important for me to no longer hide behind a façade. By sharing these tidbits with the world, listeners or audience members or individuals I am coaching have the autonomy to connect with whichever pieces they need at the time.

Mentioned above, the role model him or herself must have some desire to be a role model, or to be invested in inspiring others. To combat the degradation of disability identity development due to stigmas or oppressive experiences, some have included stories of women who report the best way to overcome such negative experiences was having a positive role model, another woman with a disability as a mentor (Barron, 1997; Anderson, 2009; Noonan et al., 2004; Powers, Sowers, & Stevens, 1995; Weeber, 2004). I believe this is important to for any identity development that may be complicated due to stigmas or oppressive experiences; it is hard to be different in our world. The bond of similarity serves as an internal motivator for individuals to realize that they can live up to their fullest potential, and this is reciprocated by that role model.

There you have it: My story of becoming that ‘someone like me’ brought to life by my dreams, my drive and my actions of doing. What is your story?
Epilogue

This story was about something that is within us all, the power to: © Dream. Drive. Do. I know now that I need to let go of my own dislike of the word “inspiration” because it’s not about me, and I have accepted and now embrace the fact that my story may cause you to be inspired. By adopting the ethnographic “I” and the true definition of the word inspiration, it is about allowing other individuals to feel that connection—that bond—and to feel empowered and internally motivated to act upon those feelings. It is about becoming a role model.

I would be remiss if I did not address the elephant in the room that any person with a disability or person with knowledge of disability is probably thinking about after reading my story: the idea of the Supercrip. With the evolution to viewing disability through the social lens, disability was viewed as either the Tiny Tim or the Supercrip (Morris, 1991; Shapiro, 1994). The Tiny Tim image is one that elicits pity and presents individuals with disabilities as childlike, dependent, and in need of charity. At the other extreme is the image of the Supercrip, the portrayal of people with disabilities as courageous or heroic super achievers who have overcome their disability to succeed as a meaningful so-called normal member of society (Hardin & Hardin, 2004). The secret is, disability is only one piece of who I am, and my message of © Dream. Drive. Do. transcends those commonly held extreme perspectives and applies to us all regardless of one’s ability status.

It seems our society and the broader world is stuck with no other language or way to view successful people with disabilities, but I challenge you to think about how we view successful people. Regardless of their identities, or perhaps because of
their identities, they are successful and often recognized as role models. I have not overcome my disability; it is just a piece of my identity along with being a woman, a person of color, and being an adoptee.

My motto, © Dream. Drive. Do. came about through a process of critically asking myself, “What do I have to offer the world?” They are truly the words that I live by. © Dream. Drive. Do. is a positive message that resonates with the general population. We all have the ability to dream. As a kid, I had very distinct dreams and hopes for my future, and while there were plenty of people I encountered who doubted my abilities or me, I held on to my dreams with conviction. After reading this, what dreams or hidden fires have you discovered or rediscovered in yourself?

One of the trends in the anthology of Anjali-stories was sheer determination and mentality of “don’t quit.” In middle school, a teacher had us memorize a poem called Don’t Quit (Author unknown, n.d.). I can still recite the poem today because it gave me hope to persevere despite the challenges life may bring. It is more powerful to frame your life through a positive lens, though, and so by turning “don’t quit” into a positive, I settled on the word, “drive.” With any dream you set out to achieve, there will always be obstacles. This is where “drive” comes in. But to me, obstacles are just opportunities in disguise. Have you faced obstacles when trying to achieve your dreams? Did you learn something about yourself along the way? Wouldn’t then, that obstacle be better categorized as an opportunity—something that you had to “drive” through that caused you to learn a little more about who you are as a person in order to come out on top? All of my successes—academic, athletic and otherwise—came with some opportunities in disguise. I feel that by sharing the
hardships of my story in addition to the successes, it gives people something to think back to when the going gets tough; even if my experiences are not the same, how I overcame these struggles might help others, too. I recognize that I have a tremendous amount of inner courage and that I place a high value on social justice. While not everybody may possess the same passion I do for these issues of equality or for athletics, I believe we all have the inner courage and potential to stand up for what we believe in. Though, it is your choice to decide whether or not you act on that. Through each of the hardships I’ve written about, I’ve acted on some and reflected on others and learned to look ahead to what’s next and to see the bigger picture.

We all have the potential to make a difference in the world in the ways that make sense for us – within the constructs of our habits of mind or our spheres of reference. It comes down to what is your own definition of normal, what is your baseline?

As trying as these times were in my life, they have also given me the gumption to want to pay it forward and to “do” what I can to make sure that other people know about the opportunities that do exist for them in the world. © Dream. Drive. Do. is a way to take control over your life and interrogate your own identities and values to unleash your potential. I have shared with you how I did it, and now you are empowered and have the tools to do the same.

I’ve had to grapple with societies stereotypes about me, and I encourage you to do the same. Part of accepting that I am an inspiration to others is also coming to terms with the fact that my sense of norm is actually perceived by many as
abnormal. My definition of normal is skewed. I know that the average person does not have to worry about flipping through the magazine stack before tossing it to make sure I’m not in any of them. I know it’s not normal to have to shuffle my flight schedule around because of a sweet photo shoot opportunity or a big time interview. Sometimes I forget that these things aren’t normal for the average person, because it is the life I have created for myself. I do love it, no question about that, but it is an odd way to go through life -- odd in the sense that some people just don't get it. I can't tell you how many times I’ve been in the newspaper, in various magazines, on television. Sure, I can tell you the highlights such as being on Sesame Street, and meeting the President, and being in Runner’s World and in the Boston Globe multiple times, but I am simply not phased by it anymore. I admit that I’ve accomplished some incredible things and am certainly proud of those accomplishments, but to me, it is just who I am and what I do. My drive is fueled by a strong sense of civic responsibility to leave the world a better place.

Included throughout these pages were pieces of important moral and ethical conversations that I had with my role models, mentors, friends, and with myself to help find my place in the world. While my story may contain different events than yours, the principle of engaging in such conversation is a lesson for us all. What conversations should you be having? I presented personal and emotional experiences framed to act as a catalyst to have discussions about social injustices. I shared my actions based on these discussions in the hopes of giving us a better world. What are your causes—or what social injustices do you want to be a catalyst for change of?
My true hope is that you will recognize your own fire from within, go forth and live your “dream,” “drive” through the hard times and “do” whatever it is that motivates you and makes your heart sing. © Dream. Drive. Do. What will you do?
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