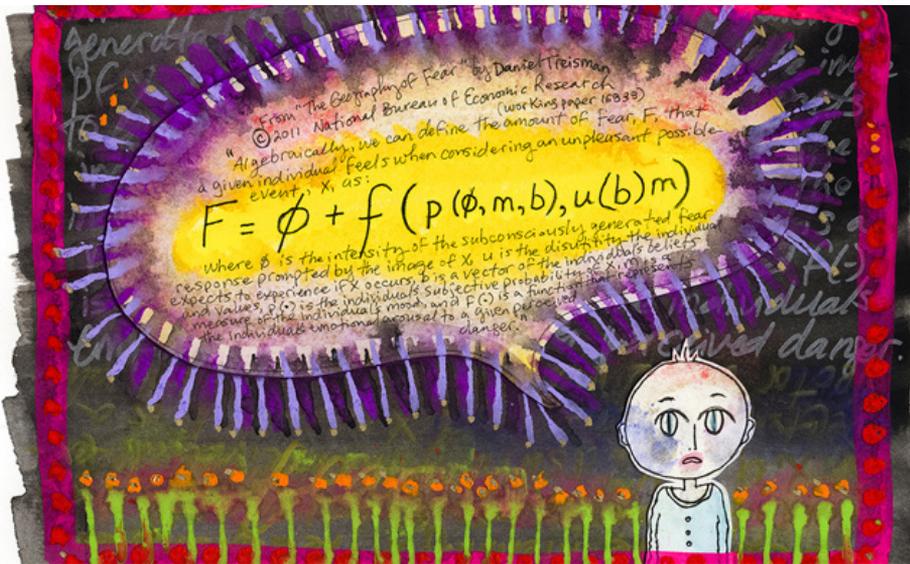


WRITING LESSON

What We Fear



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“This Artist Collects Your Worst Fears and Turns Them Into Something Great”

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This Artist Collects your Worst Fears and Turns Them Into Something Great

The Fear Project uses art to visually interpret the parts of life that scare us the most, normalizing fear as a part of ourselves.



By Alexa Strabuk, Illustrations by Julie M. Elman

JULIE ELMAN, LIKE MANY ARTISTS, STRUGGLES WITH FEAR OF THE BLANK PAGE. THE CREATIVE PROCESS DEMANDS RISK-TAKING, RESILIENCE, AND MESSINESS. AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION AT OHIO UNIVERSITY, ELMAN UNDERSTOOD THE EXPECTATION TO PRACTICE WHAT SHE PREACHED.

To move beyond her fear and to explore what she was teaching her students, she conceived the Fear Project.

People submit their fears to the project's website, and Elman visually interprets them, bringing them to life. Perhaps the most interesting part, aside from the striking visuals, is the resulting effect. The venture brings different fears together on one interface, normalizing and destigmatizing fear as a bad part of everyday life.



The fear of wrongful imprisonment

Though Elman admits that she is no psychologist, she posits that, to a certain degree, sharing and voicing a fear can be validating. And after validation comes solidarity. “I can try to translate the person’s description of a fear into something visual that others can relate to,” she explains.

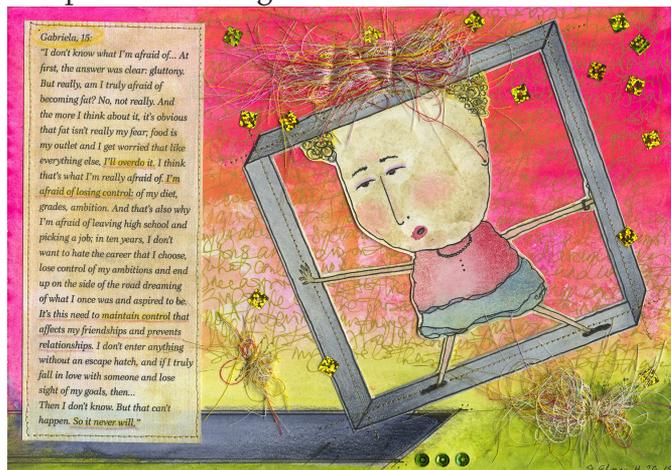
Psychologist, author, and professor Noam Shpancer says that speaking out about difficult experiences or fears provides a sense of strength, security, and relief. Thus, one scared voice becomes a community of empowered voices. “We tend to find solace in the knowledge that we are not alone in our troubles,” he explains. In psychology, it’s well established that confronting fear is essential in learning to manage it. The Fear Project’s root in the visual only emphasizes this. “Great art articulates for us things about ourselves and our experience that cannot be easily and well expressed otherwise,” Shpancer adds. Like what Elman does: She opens a forum to explore fears among us.

She approaches each submission, each fear, the same way: Don’t overanalyze, just do.

Dubbed the “fear collector” by Modern Weekly, Elman describes how what began as an experimental exercise evolved into an ongoing creative undertaking. “It didn’t take me long to get past any fears I had about pumping something out and putting it out there. The good, the bad, and the ugly—I posted them all.” The subsequent

pieces range from the fear of moths to the fear of peeing in front of others. She always follows her gut, creating high-impact images through the use of vibrant, screaming color.

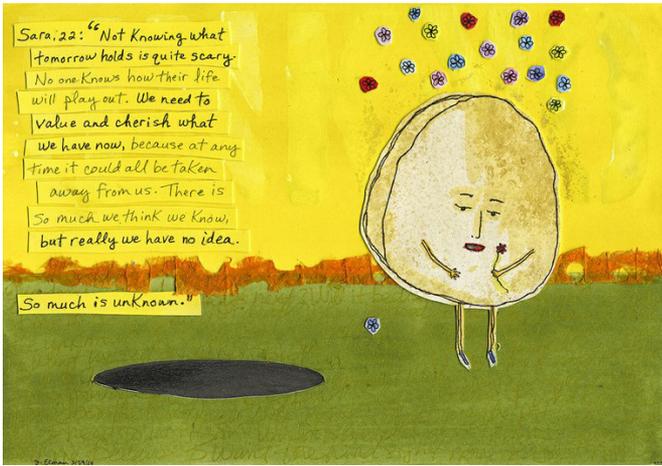
The majority of her pieces include passages from actual submissions while others feature what is called “asemic writing.” This kind of illegible, nonspecific writing adds texture and, in Elman’s opinion, captures the very core of that person’s fear. “I imagine what the person might be saying, or shouting, at that time, and I scribble out those words without making them legible. In some way, I think this infuses the spirit of that person, and his or her fear, into the piece I’m creating.” It is this relationship among fear, individual, and artist that drives the project forward, making fear acceptable and tangible.



The fear of losing control

Elman isn’t sure what makes fear so compelling. On a personal level, she says she wants to avoid dwelling in the negative and believes that fear’s universality, in contrast to the lengths we go to conceal it from others, dictates many of our choices. Ironically, still a worrier by nature, Elman understands that finding ways to push through beats the bleak alternative: “Sitting at home, curled up in a ball, avoiding that very thing that scares us most.”

Fear, she says, either cripples or motivates, and the ones we grant control to almost always have the potential to provide us with the most memorable moments.



The fear of the unknown

To see more of Elman's "Fear Project," visit her website at www.fear-project.com.

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Even though it is normal to have fears, we're often taught to hide them, or feel bad for being scared. To Julie M. Elman, creator of The Fear Project, naming our fear is part of the journey to confronting it—and possibly overcoming it.

Students are asked to respond to these two questions for their essays:

What is one thing you fear about your future? How can you lessen that fear?

Part 3: Writing Guidelines

The writing guidelines below are intended to be just that: a guide. Please adapt to fit your curriculum.

- Provide an original essay title.
- Reference the article.
- Limit the essay to no more than 700 words.
- Pay attention to grammar and organization.
- Be original. Provide personal examples and insights.
- Demonstrate clarity of content and ideas.

Common Core State Standards:

This writing exercise meets several Common Core State Standards for grades 6-12, including W. 9-10.3 and W. 9-10.14 for Writing, and RI. 9-10 and RI. 9-10.2 for Reading: Informational Text. This standard applies to other grade levels. “9-10” is used as an example.

How did this lesson work for you and your students?

Share your feedback with us and other teachers
by leaving a comment on our website:

<http://www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers/writing-competition-essays/writing-lessons/what-we-fear-writing-lesson/>

Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Our rubric should serve as a guide, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You’ve probably encountered similar rubrics before, but here are two quick pointers for using ours:

1. In the left column, find the criteria for evaluating essays.
2. In the top row, find scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).

	4	3	2	1
Focus on topic	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear, but general.	Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more supporting evidence.	Main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
Organization	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader’s interest.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented sometimes make the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
Originality and strength of ideas	Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original position on an issue.	Writer takes a clear position on an issue, though it is not developed fully.	Writer’s position is evident, though it is vague.	Fails to take a clear position, or writer contradicts herself.
Evidence and/or reasoning	Provides specific reasons and/or evidence that demonstrate understanding and insight.	Offers adequate – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting reasons and/or evidence	Provides less than adequate or contradictory reasons or evidence to support position.	Offers only general reasons or evidence or none, or offers evidence contradictory to the writer’s thesis or main idea.
Command of grammar and conventions	Command of conventions exhibited. Creative word choice and varied sentence structure.	Correct use of grammar and conventions (for the most part).	Weak control of grammar and conventions. Errors are distracting.	Use of grammar and conventions interferes with understanding.
Voice	Author’s voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.	Writing attracts reader’s interest. Author’s voice shows engagement with the topic.	Technically well written; however, author’s voice is weak.	Writing fails to engage the reader. Does not demonstrate writer’s interest in topic.

* Adapted from “Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay” from LAEP.org and “6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric” from ReadWriteThink.org.

Part 5: Sample Essays

How Do You Spell: Afriad, Dislexsa, Faer

By Deedee Jansen, grade 7

To me, letters are not soldiers but hip-hop artists. I have trouble reading and spelling. This is because I have dyslexia. When the spelling bee comes around each year my heart beats fast. If there was a meter measuring my nervousness it would explode. When I have to spell boycott, I try: B-O-Y-C-O-T. As I sit back down, out in the first round, I hope that I never have to go up to the podium again.

When I tell people I have dyslexia, they say something like, “I thought you were smart.” This is what I’m afraid of. I am afraid that people will think I am a gentle rain when I am really a typhoon. I want to make a monumental impact, and I am afraid as soon as people hear the word dyslexia they won’t let me be as great as I want to be. I am afraid they will put me in a cage.

In the YES! Magazine article, “This Artist Collects Your Worst Fears and Turns Them Into Something Great,” it states that Julie M. Elman collects fears and makes them beautiful. The cage I find myself in collects my fear about dyslexia and my fear that others misunderstand my learning differences. Trying to get out of the cage is harder than swimming through molasses.

Other students sometimes fear that someone with dyslexia gets preferential treatment—that we’ll receive more attention, earn a higher grade, or be given special privileges. The people who don’t understand dyslexia turn my typhoon into a gentle rain. They put a dim on my brilliance.

I am afraid that when I apply for college and scholarships, admissions counselors and review committees will see that I have dyslexia and count me out. I am just as good as anyone else and I work twice as hard. But people don’t see

this, they just see the misspellings, the red marks on my paper. Sometimes it is all I see, too. My papers look like they’ve been through a war, bloody all over.

When I ask for accommodations, I’m leveling the playing field. But part of me doesn’t want to ask because I don’t want to be looked down on, making what’s already twice the work about 100 times more difficult. A test that takes my friend an hour will take me an hour-and-a-half. Even in math, my best subject, I get time-and-a-half on my tests. This is something my teachers need to know. I need to help them help me. I also need rely on encouragement from my family. They help me get past all my fears, especially this one, by always supporting me and standing up for me.

Dyslexia is a blessing. I think “out of the box” because I don’t even see the box. When my mom first told me I had dyslexia, she asked me if I knew what that meant and I said, “It means I am like Einstein.” One thing that people don’t realize about dyslexia is that it lets you see things differently. This is why Einstein is considered a genius. This is why one day I will be considered a genius.

I want to have a monumental impact that will improve the world and help people. It might be creating something like the light bulb or the Mona Lisa. My dyslexia will not get in the way, it might even help.

These are fears I must leave behind if I am to become a typhoon. And even though the letters will forever be hip-hop artists, I know how to handle these fears. So let the letters dance, no soldiers for me.

Part 5: Sample Essays

A Different Kind of Relapse

By Clair Williamson, grade 11

By acknowledging our fear, we demolish our only defense—denial. Denial is simple: if we ignore the signs, then whatever we’re trying to avoid isn’t there, right? However, by taking a few steps back and looking at our lives just as they are—without the filter that we establish to protect ourselves—we can see that our lives are riddled with insecurities and fears.

It seemed that I had everything I could wish for as a child; I had a house, parents, a sister, and toys. I went to church and loved God. I was a capable student, and I couldn’t wait to grow up and fulfill my dream of becoming a teacher. But growing up requires abandoning the security blanket of ignorance that we unknowingly hold so dear as children. For me, that blanket protected me from my dad’s addiction to prescription medication, from the uncertainty of my own future with prescription medication that I take on a regular basis to manage arthritis, and from the state of my mental health. After abandoning my blanket, I was left vulnerable and quickly fell into the drowning whirlpool of depression. I had lost touch with love and was addicted to self-loathing.

I used to fiddle with my pocket knife and make its reflection dance on the wall. Then, with a sudden change in mood, I would make the blade dance over the skin of my wrist and arms, leaving an ever-so-faint scratch. So much power in an inanimate object; how I wanted the courage to hurt myself with it. This was my lowest point. The mere recollection makes my heart sink.

Now, three years later, my life is radically different. Through patience, the loving support of my family, friends, church, trust in and a relationship with God, and the passage of time, I have been released from my suffering. My dad has been sober for almost three years, and my family is

together. My faith is stronger than ever. I have amazing friends, and my whole life is ahead of me. Best of all, I am happy. But if that’s so, why do I fear “relapsing?” If I have all of my metaphorical ducks in a row and nothing within a million miles hints that things are going to change, why does my mind stray to the possibility that I’ll return to the depression that hurt me and the people around me, or become an addict?

I have pushed this fear to the back of my heart, muted it to the point that it doesn’t show up on long car rides or sleepless nights, when my mind is free to wander. It’s a looming shadow, threatening to pounce, containing the fear that one day I will see my pills and injections as a fix to a problem that isn’t there, or more frightening, that I will return to the void of depression that slowly sucked the joy and love out of my life.

Fears about our future are based on “what ifs.” Once again we need to take a step back and shift the mindset of our fears. It’s only then that we can see that fear either “cripples or motivates” as Alexa Strabuk says in her YES! Magazine article, “This Artist Collects Your Worst Fears and Turns Them Into Something Great.” In a way, it is my fear of “relapsing” that drives me to be who I am today. My fear of returning to the lonely girl who wanted to hurt herself moves me to be a loving, friendly, compassionate person who can and will smile and laugh at the little things.

My experiences have taught me that the universal truth about fears is that they are powerful, and if we don’t fight back against them, we have no hope of going anywhere. We are doomed to live in the shadow of things we think we can’t control. But when we take control, employing the love and kindness of those around us, we can use fear to propel us into greatness. We can defy the limits set by our fears and prove them wrong, prove ourselves wrong, and make something wonderful out of something terrible.

Chronic Pain

By Dion Medina, university student

In May 2007, I joined the United States Army at the age of 19. I played sports my entire life and was always active. I loved to work out, hike, run and swim, so the military was a smooth transition for me. My passion to stay physically fit drove me to receive many awards and recognition throughout my eight years of service. I participated in military-style triathlons where I often won first place, and graduated from rigorous military training programs in the top percentile.

Then one day my entire life changed. In January of 2014, I was diagnosed with a disease called avascular necrosis. This disease slowly disintegrates parts of the bone, like the hip and shoulder. The causes of avascular necrosis range quite a bit, but the end result is the same. Blood flow to these sections of bone are either dramatically decreased or cut off completely. The lack of blood flow causes the bone to slowly die and eventually collapse if left untreated. This disease causes extreme pain for whoever is plagued by it.

I've battled avascular necrosis for every breath of my life since January 2014. Every action of every day has become a debate on if that activity is worth the pain that will inevitably follow. I quickly realized how this disease completely derailed my entire life. Activities I once took for granted, like taking my dog on an afternoon walk or sitting through an entire movie without having waves of pain wash over me, have become something I could only experience in a far-fetched dream.

Then came the pain medication, which I happily embraced. I would do anything to get away from the pain, to feel somewhat normal again, but this relief came with a price. I now have to choose between a day of pain or taking my medication and being so sick and drowsy that I can't get out of bed. This pain relief has become a double-edged sword. One side is an escape from painful

misery, and the other side is a path to addiction and sickness that almost makes life not worth living.

So what exactly am I afraid of? I'm afraid that I will have to face the rest of my life like I have faced every minute of every day for the last two years. Am I doomed to live the rest of my life in chronic pain? I'm afraid that I will never be able to play a backyard game of football with my kids, take them on a hiking adventure, or teach them how to ride a bike. I'm afraid that there is no escape from this horrible cycle of pain. I'm starting to forget what it felt like to be normal. This pain has changed me into a man I do not recognize anymore.

A Serf in the Midst of Feudalism

By Jazmyn Bryant, grade 11

What am I afraid of? I jumped at the thought of writing about my fear for YES! Magazine after reading the article, “This Artist Collects Your Worst Fears and Turns Them Into Something Great.” It got me thinking—what am I really afraid of? A lot of things actually, like what lies in the darkness, flowers that sing the song of funerals, the American flag with its variety of meanings, creepy crawlies that give me paranoia. The invincible is what I fear most, the slimy scoundrel that hides in my dark dreams in white sheets, plotting on my wishes. The man whose colorless skin has been portrayed as historically superior to my own dark hue.

He is the white man who finds my existence inferior. He kills those who question, and he hunts my heroes. He comes in many forms—as the law and judicial system, as presidents, the government, police officers, my future bosses, professors, and even my next door neighbor. He is the villain in every book I read, the antagonist that, even with his unfailing power, feels threatened by the limping protagonist. He looks at me like a bald eagle disgusted by its prey. He fetishizes me and my skin, seeing me as an object, as a collection, an item that is in no discussion or situation equal to his maleness and whiteness.

I am so terrified of this man because his word is law—law that was made by his people, while my word is but a facet of my imagination. He is frightening because he shoots the innocent, with a hundred witnesses to his obvious crime, and gets by free. I am merely an expendable piece in his game of corporate chess. I am only a number and a statistic in his beady eyes of profit and money; he sees the world as a corporation and I am but a worker without a title, and a nuisance to his being.

He is in my nightmares, my history. He curses my ancestors and stares at me in judgment. His eyes burn holes in my aspirations and puts hurdles in front of my goals. Those same eyes steal the nerve from my raised fist. His power is so great that it makes the hairs on my back stand at attention. His icy stare and grin laced with malice. He is watching me close as store clerks, as my teachers, and in cameras he thinks I don’t see. He is waiting for me to stumble, to mess up, to question his power, to give him the slightest reason to imprison me. To show any resemblance, any aftertaste of the all-black, afro, militant mindset of Huey Newton and Assata Shakur.

What do you do when your fear is all around you? When you see evil where others do not? When the hashtags of young dead black men lead to no resolve and people fail to realize there are many more whose deaths don’t make it to the media? The fear that smiles in your face, that rules the world you live in. He looks you in the eye, lies, and knows that you know the truth.

Where do I go from here, when my world seems to resemble more and more of a book called 1984? Where do I go from here? I say this as if it’s just me who feels this way, as if thousands of black descendants don’t shudder at the sound of police sirens. A better question would be, where do we go from here? How do we escape the reality of our society—a government built against us, a system made to ensure our downfall?

We must become the system, embody it, and educate a generation that will fight through knowledge to gain power. We must erase the damage done to our conflicted society and grow as a people to diminish racism and prejudice. We intrude where we are not wanted, we uplift each other and break into a system with the goal of keeping us at their feet. The serfs take control of the feudal society. To the top we go, and at the top we’ll stay.

A Future Me

By Jonah Gold, grade 6

Sometimes I imagine myself as single and 30 years old. I see a go-getter who takes risks and lives in the moment. I also see a frightened person who is always anxious and plans everything before it happens. The go-getter is an average and friendly person who is liked by everyone. He exercises and eats healthy daily. He is fit, hardworking, and has great character. His name is Jonah James Gold and he is proud. He has overcome phobias, Level 7 anxiety, and bullying. He doesn't stop at any challenge that intimidates him, and always fights for what he believes in.

The frightened person is looked at by others as “the outsider.” He knows all the possible ways to calm down, and he sticks to one diet that he can live with forever. When he tries something new, he shakes like a leaf in the wind. He has a perfect routine that he is comfortable with. His name is also Jonah James Gold and he feels unaccomplished. He hasn't overcome phobias, Level 7 anxiety, and bullying. His goals were shut down before they were achieved. He steps away from any challenge that is outside his comfort zone, and tries his best to avoid trouble or drama.

One part of Jonah James Gold thinks of his childhood as proof of what he has overcome, and the other part of Jonah James Gold thinks of his childhood as a reminder of how he hasn't changed at all. The two Jonahs are complete opposites, but at the same time they are perfect for each other. The go-getter and the anxiety-filled one. They strengthen each other's weaknesses and help with each other's fears.

Alexa Strabuk said in the YES! Magazine article, “This Artist Collects Your Worst Fears and Turns Them Into Something Great,” that “Fear ... either cripples or motivates.” I think she means that fear opens the door to an adventure on finding your

values in life.

My fear is that I don't know what will become of me. I don't know how my negative personality traits will play into my future. The two Jonah James Golds represent my highest and lowest points on the anxiety scale: 1 is having no anxiety, and 10 is being that anxiety. I could overcome my problems or I could live with them unchanged my whole life. I could become my own dream man or remain “the outsider.”

My fear shows me what's important to me. I don't need to become that highest point person on my spectrum as long as I'm treating my body, mind, and gender responsibly and thoughtfully. I need to be more proud of me. I need to push myself to try to overcome anxiety, Malusdomesticaphobia (a fear of apples), and sexual bullying. I want to try new foods, make my own choices, and just be me. I need to stop worrying about my future and live in the present. I need to be the Jonah James Gold that I want to be. The judgments of others used to haunt me, but now they pull the trigger of the gun that I call my personality.

To be the best Jonah James Gold I can be, I need to start now. Each day I need to take one step to help treat myself responsibly and thoughtfully. It doesn't matter the size of the step or how I take it—everything stacks up. I need to spend more time around apples so they don't bother me as much. I also want to allow myself to feel anxious at times so I can prove that I can handle it. I don't want to conquer my fears—I want to cope with them. I want to be the happiest, strongest, and most joyful Jonah James Gold I can be. And I know that I can.

The Monster Within

By Nicole Reiber, university student

Fear. That word evokes a rush of physical sensations. My heart beats faster, my breathing becomes more rapid, and my palms get clammy. Just hearing the word “fear” brings me back to every time I have been afraid. In the YES! Magazine article, “This Artist Collects Your Worst Fears and Turns Them Into Something Great,” author Alexa Strabuk describes how artist Julie Elman takes your worst fears and uses them to create beautiful works of art. Elman’s Fear Project has inspired me to look inside myself and recognize that my biggest fear is self-sabotage, a monster of my own design.

The first time the monster took hold of me was in high school. I was struggling in my math class, trying to understand how to calculate linear equations, and became extremely frustrated. I remember asking my mom for help, but unfortunately my calls for help fell on deaf ears. At that time my home life was falling apart. My parents were going through a divorce, which was a horrific event for me. I lost my focus and drive to succeed. The hardest part was my dad choosing to move to California instead of staying in the area to be with my siblings and me.

My inability to focus in school led me to skip class. Instead of focusing on the teacher, I would think about what my life had become. I sat in the back of the class with headphones on while sketching in my binder. I felt like I was worthless, and that learning served no purpose for me anymore. It was then that my monster was born and had total control of my actions. My teachers offered extra help, but I was too far gone. I believe that they eventually lost hope for me and gave up trying because I had given up trying. My self-sabotaging monster had become too strong for me to fight.

I have also missed a lot of opportunities at a

variety of jobs because of my monster. Any time I started to do well at these jobs, my monster would tell me that the company or an individual was doing something to sabotage my success, and I had to fight them. This would cause me to lash out at and accuse my managers of wrongdoing when really they just wanted to offer me a promotion for my exceptional work. I would end up getting fired or being asked to leave rather than move up in the company. I was never aware of what was happening until after my monster had destroyed my career opportunities.

On other occasions my monster would sabotage my personal relationships. Life would be going well with my family and friends. We would laugh and make amazing memories together, but things were too good to be true in my monster’s eyes. My monster would convince me that I needed to leave them before they could leave me—just like my dad had done. I would find trivial attributes about them I didn’t like, ranging from things they were interested in to the way they spoke. This agitation would lead to tension between the other person and me. In more extreme cases, I have lost friends and turned away from family members due to my hidden monster. I’ve become lonely and sad because I have driven so many people away, having hurt them because of my monster.

As an adult I have reached a moment of clarity and insight into my sabotaging behaviors. It has taken years of self-help and counseling to reach an epiphany. I finally found that by standing up for myself against this monster, I weaken its destructive sabotaging abilities. I am still afraid of this monster that looms inside my consciousness. My self-doubt and insecurities are what feed it. As long as I remind myself that I am worth the sun and the moon, I can fight this monster. I have slowly learned who I don’t want to be and who I can be through my journey to overcome my biggest fear. I am now powerful enough to beat this monster.