

2008 Winning Essays

Level I Winning Letter

Dear Dan Millman,

“Life is about the journey, not the final destination.” As you know that was one of the inspirational quotes from the book you wrote, the Peaceful Warrior. This quote means a lot to me and helped me through many rough times. I am 12 years old. I have been doing competitive gymnastics practically my whole life, just like you. I’ve had a couple of minor accidents, bruises, and crashes, but none of those things prepared me for what was going to happen to me next! June 15th was a very tragic day for me. It was about 8:30 at night and I was doing a tsukahara timer on vault. I got distracted and lost my focus BAM! BOOM! CRASH! All of a sudden I’m lying in the pit and yelling for help. “OW MY FOOT, OW MY FOOT, HELP!” I had smacked the top of my foot, in mid air, against the side of the pit wall. My coaches and teammates came running over to me. But it was all a blur. I was scared, nervous, frightened, and in a tremendous amount of pain! I couldn’t even stand up! I went to the emergency room. The doctor came back in and told me that I broke my first metatarsal on my left foot. He thought I might need surgery. When he said those words to me, I froze. I was so disappointed and heart broken. I knew that I was going to miss out on a lot of things. For example, I was suppose to go to overnight gymnastics camp. Also, I knew that I was going to be out of gymnastics for a long time. Things were racing through my head like, “ Why did this have to happen to ME?” And, “Why is G-d punishing me like this?” I had to go into a cam boot for seven weeks. Three of those weeks, I was on crutches. Then I told my doctor that my other foot was hurting too, from a previous injury I had a month earlier. So he x-rayed it, since we were there. It was broken too. I couldn’t believe my bad luck! Now, I was in two cam boots. After I got out of the cam boots, my feet were still hurting me a lot. The doctor x-rayed my feet again and they were still broken. I ended up in two casts and in a wheelchair. I was then diagnosed with a chronic pain syndrome, called RSD, and I was put on many medications. I was so depressed and hopeless. It was then that my mom had me read your book. The part where you got into a motorcycle accident and shattered your leg into hundreds of pieces, really got me I could FEEL your pain! When you were told that you could never do gymnastics again, I could relate because, I was told that too. When you started doing gymnastics again, you gave me hope and inspiration. I knew that if you had the power and courage to train again, so could I. The part I especially found interesting was when your character was taken up the hill by the old man. You walked for hours to get all the way to the top. When you finally got to the top, the old man showed you a rock. You were disappointed because, you were expecting something more unbelievable. He told you that, “Life is about the journey, not the final destination”. As I am now recovering from my injuries, I will try to remember this. Gymnastics should be about having fun and not about the final score. All because of your book, I was able to get through many rough times. Whenever I got sad, mad, or discouraged I thought to myself, if Dan did it, then I can too. I know that your broken leg was way worse than mine, so it makes me feel more confident that you got through it! I hope that one day I will become a

peaceful warrior, just like you! I will always remember, have fun, never give up, and “Life is about the journey, not the final destination.”

Thank you!

Warmest regards,
Nikki Rhum
Buffalo Grove, IL

Level II Winning Letter

Dear Ms. Betsy Byars,

I read many books this past year. I read them for book reports, Battle of the Books, and for enjoyment. Out of all the books I read, The Summer of the Swans was my favorite. It was easy to relate to the characters. Charlie’s odd behaviors, Sarah’s protection and frustrations really hit home. I too have a disabled brother.

My brother is TMH, trainable mentally handicapped, not autistic like Charlie, but has similar odd behaviors. Charlie likes to listen to his watch for comfort and my brother likes to rub his head for relaxation. He also walks on his toes and repeats things over and over. Sometimes his behaviors and his lack of knowledge embarrass me. I am younger than my brother, and a few of my friends will comment on his behavior. This leads to my embarrassment. I know it is not his fault and that makes me feel even worse.

I know just how Sarah felt when she thought that Joe stole Charlie’s watch. People tend to take advantage of my brother and I hate it. For example, he does not count money very well, so people will cheat him out of the correct change. I always have to go into the store with him. Doing this protects him and makes sure no one tries to take advantage of him. I really understood Sarah’s frustration when Charlie would not leave the lake. I get very frustrated when I have to repeat answers to questions my brother may ask. It often takes him twenty times before he gets it straight in his head.

Even though my brother is different, I do not treat him any differently. He’s just my big brother. I fight with him, argue with him, cheer him on at his Special Olympic games, and go many places with him. The neat thing about my brother is that mentally he is younger, so I always have someone to spend time with and play.

This book showed me that people who have disabled siblings have the same feelings as me toward their disabled brother or sister. This story helped me not to feel so bad when I have feelings of embarrassment, protection, and frustration. I now know other people have the same feelings or problems that I do. My brother and I will always have a special bond just like Sarah and Charlie. I know with love and patience these disabled people will be okay. Thank you for helping me realize that I am not the only one.

Sincerely,

Joey Romano
Norridge, IL

Level III Winning Letter

Dear Mitch Albom,

After reading your novel, Tuesdays with Morrie, my perception of life changed. At first, I must admit, it was difficult for me to imagine Morrie; he seemed so close to perfection. The way he viewed life is astonishing and rare. He accepted his disease and fate in an almost positive light. I did not believe that such a person could exist.

I read your book at a difficult time in my life, and I found Morrie's outlook to be especially meaningful. Your book guided me and eased me through my own situation. My grandmother suffered from several different cancers, primarily of the lungs. I witnessed her deterioration from an independent, vibrant woman to one who could not breathe without the aid of an oxygen mask and required round-the-clock care. She no longer could drive and barely could walk. Her independence was gone. However, she reminded me of Morrie. When he had found out about his terminal disease, he planned to stay awake and speak with his loved ones. So, too, did my grandmother refuse certain pain-relieving medication that would make her drowsy. She wanted to be alert and awake so that she could talk with her family and other visitors.

When you spoke of Morrie's "living funeral," you reminded me of yet another instance with my grandmother. Ever since her passing, I have regretted not telling her some of my thoughts or making certain that she knew how I feel about her. I had always pushed it off, fearing that speaking to her in this manner would make her feel as though I was saying it because she was dying. I assumed that the right opportunity to tell her would shortly arise. However, it never did. Or, I never seized the opportunity. For her last birthday, her 83rd, I wrote her a birthday card that conveyed some of my feelings, but I never truly expected that occasion to be my final chance.

Your novel also taught me about another aspect in life: not to get caught up with our culture. As a teenager, it is difficult not to desire the expensive designer clothing or materialistic possessions. However, both you and Morrie taught me that such aspects are not what are significant in life. In retrospect, people will not remember you for your possessions or affluence, but for your devotion and the connections you made with them.

I identify with Morrie in an additional area. There are many people who will do anything, right or wrong, to fit in. Morrie, on the other hand, deviated from the norm in order to do

what he thought was right. I, too, try not to change who I am to fit in with others. I highly respect Morrie for his self-esteem, confidence, and character.

In looking at your own transition from a man caught up with his job in a fast-paced world to the man that you are today, I cannot help but feel grateful to you. I must confess, I, as you had said about yourself, am not the epitome of one who is able to easily express her emotions to others. I am used to keeping them to myself, which makes me appear aloof and indifferent. However, you taught me the valuable lesson that it is important and beneficial to articulate my feelings to others. I saw how that action brought you closer to the person with whom you were speaking. I am learning not to become a stolid person, but to feel and allow others to see my emotions. For this, Mr. Albom, I will forever thank you. In your novel, you asked, "Have you ever really had a teacher?" I have. Without ever having met you, you have taught me valuable lessons that I will carry with me. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Amy Nathan
Skokie, IL