

On a melting Italian afternoon in July, our rental car steamed into town, its inside temperature 108, the wide-open windows offering no relief, the tree-lined road a mirage of cool. Watching the scenery pass by, I was jolted out of my stupor: Was that the Leaning Tower of Pisa? I blinked and straightened up for another look. Oh, what a sight! The leaning tower, which had shared a corner of my childhood with Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory and an old house in Paris that was covered with vines, was real. It was also really leaning. At that moment, my commitment to perfection began to crumble.

The building, a bell tower for Pisa Cathedral, was begun in 1174, but the soft soil beneath it began to sink after the third story was added. Construction was halted for a period of head-scratching, after which the stone cutters picked up their tools and the masons went back to work. Why did they carry on? They couldn't have foreseen that their tower would be leaning, or even still standing, eight centuries later. Perhaps they valued their faulty tower simply because it was their work, and so they kept building, stone by stone.

Well, the ground has been shifting under my feet lately, and I'm leaning a bit, too. I've been thinking about my life—examining its beauty and its imperfections, pausing to evaluate my passions and my resources, and reflecting on the work I've done and the work ahead.

In my family, I've felt the pain of my parents' divorce and my mother's serious illness. I've also experienced the sweetness of unconditional love, the healing of forgiveness and compassion, the joy of a great conversation, the soul-rocking pleasure of music, and the power of humor. At school, I've had great teachers to encourage my curiosity, to inspire me to think, and to haul me up short if I'm tempted to take the safe rather than the risky path. In my community, I've been angered by the growing economic imbalances that can squash the dreams of children, and I've found reason for hope by tutoring some of those children—by seeing how easy it is to hold out my hand and help someone bridge the gap.

In my seventeen years, I've struggled with shyness and control-freak tendencies. What's a perfectionist to do? I jumped into mosh pits, joined speech teams, acted in plays and musicals, helped out other kids with their homework, learned to be a good listener,

My car and I are a lot alike. I drive a 1986 Buick Century. My family won this car in the summer of 1986 at the St. Jude's Church raffle. I must be a privileged teenager because I have a car at my disposal whenever I want it. Nice try. True enough, my car would fall under a loose definition of transportation, but it is also true that no one else in my family is willing to drive it for fear that it won't make it out of the driveway. This 1986 is purple and maroon, with a hint of gold (the rust). Every time I slam the trunk shut, the back end loses a small portion of its structure. The left radio speaker is broken. The roof leaks every time it rains. The power steering rarely works and I cannot unlock the driver's-side door. The Buick accelerates from zero to sixty in—well, to tell the truth, it never gets up to sixty. If it did, my estimation would be about ten minutes. The defrost system is broken. When I turn on the heat it smells like a dead animal. And the fuel gauge is dysfunctional.

You are probably wondering, "How did this pile of junk pass inspection?" Good question. I'm guessing that Divine Intervention had a role.

If you want to know who I am, take one look at the character of this beat-up, worn-down piece of junk. I'm not perfect; no one is. But like the Buick, I'm built to last. I don't worry about the small stuff. I appreciate everything I have and cherish all that I accomplish. Most importantly, I'm honest. Just like the Buick, I come in the package you see. I am proud of who I am and for what I stand. In a sense, the Buick and I reflect each other. My car may not be the best piece of machinery on the road, but it sure does get the job done. So do I.

—Timothy Van Voris '02
Erie, Pennsylvania

covered one of my bedroom walls with words, hung sparkly things from my ceiling, and let laundry and books pile up until I had to tunnel my way out. I'm more relaxed these days, although I still have trouble ordering pizza over the phone.

Ordering spaghetti in Piazza Navona—that one I can do. Two of the best gifts life has given me are my grandparents, who live in Scotland, and who have taken me traveling with my brother and sister. Let me tell you: Auntie Mame has nothing on Granny Jo and Franpa. We've waltzed in Salzburg, vogued with the Three Graces at the Louvre, and listened to the silence at Culloden and Bastogne. These travels, more than any history book, have taught me how wonderfully creative—and how insanely destructive—humans can be. The Earth has been my teacher, too: I've had lessons in gratitude and humility as I breathed the thin air atop the Zugspitze, splashed through a burn in a Scottish glen, or smelled the rain as it washed the sky above Amsterdam.

The next stop on my journey will be college, and this year of transition has its own beauties and imperfections. I'm taking six killer classes, wrestling with huge choices, and wondering how sad it will be to leave home. On the other hand, I'm finding my groove in calculus, enjoying my family and friends more than ever, and feeling the thrill of possibility. There's so much to learn, to feel, and to do; my work has barely begun. So I'll keep building, just as the people of Pisa did. If a few cracks appear, I'll try not to worry, because you never know what might add to the depth and beauty of a life. My tools are ready. Hand me the next stone.

—Erin Sager '02
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