

## *Sample Personal Essays – College Essays*

Justin Winokur '18

Stowe High School, Stowe, Vermont

I don't watch television.

I don't watch television because family legend has it that when I was a baby, there was one of those infamous Vermont snowstorms that knocked the antenna off our roof. My parents, already ambivalent about television, decided not to replace it. That was seventeen years ago. We had our little VCR, and now DVD player, and throughout the time I was growing up, that was enough.

I stopped watching TV altogether when I was 13. The impetus was my best friend deciding to give up chocolate for Lent and me deciding I would try to go without television. I stopped watching videos and DVD's. Just stopped. For two months I didn't watch a minute of TV. At the time it didn't mean much, but it's a decision that's come to matter a lot to me. Someone asked me, "How long are you going to not watch?" "Until I don't want it anymore."

I've grown up in the shadow of Mt. Wantastiquet and Black Mountain, in the corner of Southern Vermont. I live in a small town, in the same house that I've lived in since the day I was born. People gather in church basements and granges, on the ski trails, and in the co-op. I live in a place of community, farms, art and poetry. I love that when I go out, I see people I know and feel known. There is plenty to do besides watch television.

I don't watch television because Garrison Keillor's smooth voice rose and fell from the introduction of a book of poems bound in bright yellow paper, and spoke to me. He murmured, low and cool, "television is a product, not a medium," and I heard him. I can't think when I watch TV. I get swallowed in lethargy, and I forget what it means to really concentrate, to really see, and hear. And when I don't watch television, my mind feels clean, my body right.

It used to be that the numbing movement of colors on the screen was my refuge when I was scared or anxious or tired, a short-lived solution, and a temporary slowing of the gears in my mind. But I realized it wasn't a refuge - it was just a way to immobilize my mind and to avoid what was making me anxious. I sensed how dangerous it was to equate relaxation and safety with turning off my mind. I pictured some horrifying Orwellian scene where I was trained to feel nothing and think nothing. That's an extreme, but there is a passivity in television that I've always thought was dangerous for me.

In my time away from television, I have learned how to love poetry, how to love listening to the radio, and be happy with just the crooning and swelling of voices. I have learned to play the guitar and sing at the end of a tough day. I have learned how to really listen. I have heard, and really heard "This American Life," a radio program of stories, a little like those old-fashioned radio programs that my generation missed out on. (You know, the kind where they clapped coconuts together for beat of horses' hooves, and shook sheet metal for the sound of thunderstorms).

It's easy to sit in the dark, the colors bouncing off your wind-burned cheeks in the theatre, or in the den by the wood stove. It's easy and often comforting to feel as though you're in the company of more beautiful, glamorous people, with seemingly more beautiful and glamorous lives. It's easy to turn your mind off for a little while, to turn your body off.

But it's not for me. I don't want to be dependent on a machine. I want to be reliant on real people, on my own body, and my own mind. I want what's real, even if it's not easy or glamorous or action-packed. There's a different sort of comfort in that. I don't watch television because of the way it disconnects me from what is pure and simple and authentic.

I don't want to be passive, ever. I want to be where I am, when I'm there. I want to be engaged, I want to listen, and I don't want to run away from my own mind. And I'd like to live my life like that: with engagement, gratitude, authenticity, and happiness. My mom jokingly calls me a "little pilgrim," or an ascetic, a puritan. But

it's not about self-righteousness. Because after a while, what I first promised myself became true. "Until I don't want it anymore," I had said. And I just don't want it anymore. I haven't for a while. It's not about self-abnegation; it's about doing what I love.

## Kevin Zevallos '16

### High School of Telecommunication Arts, Brooklyn, NY

I live alone — I always have since elementary school. I wasn't privileged with having my parents there for me. I didn't grow up with my father; he left when I was four. My mom worked from morning to night, so I spent no time with her. While I grew to appreciate her sacrifices, it strained our relationship. My sister Paola, however, was there for me.

Paola picked me up every day from elementary school. Walking home was the best time of my day; the time I got to connect with a person and actually tell them what I drew in school or the new song I learned to play on my recorder. She was the one who fed me, read me bedtime stories and tucked me into bed. I grew to love her like a mother. In time, Paola left me too.

Having to tend to her newborn child, LaMya, my sister could no longer devote her attention to me. Since I was only in second grade when Paola had LaMya, I did not comprehend my sister's actions. I felt abandoned, and I longed to hear someone say I'm proud of you. I used that as a driving force to excel in elementary school.

Before my niece was born I wasn't the brightest kid; I would get C's and B's. Diligent studying, however, paid off. In the fifth grade, Kings County sent me a letter about the "Citation of Honor." I was one out of two kids in my school to receive this award. My mother and sister told me *si tu quieres, puedes*; if you want it, you can achieve it. Like the engraving on a statue, those words stuck with me forever. I felt empowered knowing my mother and sister had faith in me. In high school, when my mother told me *yo quiero que tengas un mejor vida que la mia*; I want you to have a better life than mine, I finally accepted that they had other responsibilities. I don't remember the last time anyone asked me how my day was, but I admire my family's sacrifices for their children to have a better life.

Now I pick up my niece from school and listen to her day as my sister did for me. Everything I learned from my family, I pass on to LaMya. My family's values of sacrifice and self-determination, values embodied in my persona, I echo on to her. One day, if she ever feels lonely, she'll know who to come to.

Work drains so much vitality from the people I care about. I know they must work so that one day I will go to a great college, have a good career, and be successful. I will not let my family's economic situation deter me from my future. I used to be selfish and stubborn; I longed for their attention to hear that they are proud me when in reality they always were. I now understand and don't feel so alone anymore.

## Essays that Worked!

### Olivia Rabbitt '16

#### Bishop Feehan High School, Attleboro, Mass.

The bright blue eyes that alight with unfettered curiosity on the burgeoning bulletin board are not only my own. Nor are the ears that listen raptly to the hum of student life and the gentle sing-song of our tour guide's voice. Almost in tandem, my companion and I tear ourselves from the vivid vignette of college life and return with unmatched strides to the vast expanses of the campus. As the tour continues, I am neither surprised by the eager questions my companion poses - "Where's the baseball field?" - nor by the heightened interest painted so clearly across his face. Wandering amongst the tall stone buildings, I appreciate for the first time how much this visit means to my constant companion, my father.

Growing up in a home overflowing with seven children and two working parents, my father spilled out into the "real world" at age eighteen. He took with him his younger brother, an impossibly solid work ethic, and a Chevy Caprice. Neither of my grandparents were fazed by their son's moving out of the house so abruptly; their expectation had always been clear: go to school, learn the basics, then work. The notion of higher education never crossed my father's strong mind until years after his high school graduation. To hear him describe his adolescence is almost like hearing a fable told from the perspective of the Prodigal Son.

With the outspoken and unyielding influence of my mother, my father decided that none of his children would make the same foolish mistakes that he had made. Learning for learning's sake was always the focus in our home. From our nightly story *The Hobbit*, to endless explorations in the woods, to gardening, to building, my brothers and I were never bored. While it was from my mother that I first learned to question and explore, it was my father who was able to capture my inquisitive spirit and help ground me in the practical.

Perhaps because he was a self-sufficient teen, my father exudes a quiet self-assuredness that can result only from years of independence and a deep understanding of the nature of the world. My father never once isolated me from the "real world." Instead, he found a unique way of protecting that left me both completely aware and largely unscathed. By leaving me free to make mistakes and chase wild dreams, my father was always able to help ground me back in reality. Personal responsibilities, priorities and commitments are all values that are etched into my mind, just as they are within my father's.

In a few short months, I will reach the same benchmark that my father did on his eighteenth birthday. However I will not go forth into a cruel, cold world without a guiding star. I have always known that my path in life will be paradoxically different from, but also much the same as, my father's. Education has always been my focus, but the joy I find in nature and hard work could only be traits taught by the man who now walks beside me. I will, with luck, never buckle under the same burdens he has borne nor will I forget the values he has instilled in me. On this sunny September afternoon, as I envision my own future, I cannot help but wonder what my father sees as we gaze across campus.