

Pinholes, Hometowns, and Finding Your Purpose

By

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When I was in high school, I listened to “Brat Pack” by The Rocket Summer no less than a million times. A somewhat obscure song from the early 2000s, it features the lyrics “For about four years I’ve hated this town / Yeah so much I just wanna get out.” The entire song centers on hatred for a hometown and the eventual realization that hometowns are a part of who you are. The angst-filled part of this song resonated with me so deeply that I constantly doodled the lyrics in my notebooks and on my arms.

For most of us, whether we grew up in a booming suburb or a rural town, the community in which we grew up meant that we viewed the world through a pinhole. Everything seemed big, but we weren’t exposed to that many things. Singular events blocked our view from other worldly problems. Our world was consumed by our hometown and the limited experience we had there.

We all come from different hometowns, so the first time we set foot on this campus, the dynamic of EIU changed. When we joined this community here, we didn’t simply enter into an already existing bubble; we created a new community, but we were also changed by this community through our experiences at EIU inside and outside the classroom. In college, the whole world—including everyone at EIU—was our learning community.

As a member of this new learning community, I began to critically analyze everything I thought I knew. Life was simple in high school because I was viewing my world through a pinhole, and my understanding of the world was clear. In college, however, I began to look

inside myself and discover who I was and what I believed. The girl who always knew the right answers in high school was suddenly confronted with the fact that her beliefs, ideas, and knowledge were not absolute or correct. Even my view of my hometown, which had always been clear-cut and simple, changed as I began to see its charms and quirks as opposed to its downfalls. I began to think about issues that were bigger than myself; everything around me became a learning community.

It was strange to look at my increasingly unfamiliar hometown and self and not recognize what I saw. Suddenly, everything was brand new. I had been viewing my world through a pinhole and, upon entering college, transitioned to a wide-angle lens. The world was brighter, bigger, and more colorful, and I loved it. I saw so much goodness and love in the world around me—in my professors, friends, classmates, and family. The world was bigger and better than ever. My community was flourishing, always welcoming new members who added to the diversity and beauty of the group.

However, when I saw the world in a new light, I was also exposed to the shadows in the corners. Despite the warmth that first radiated from this new world, I began to notice a darkness creeping out from the background—a darkness filled with sexism, racism, and hate. I begged for my naïveté back, wishing only to see the goodness in the world. The shadows that were, at first, resigned to the corners of my mind leaped into view, forcing me to recognize the evil in the world around me.

As a white, middle-class woman, very little, if any, of this darkness personally affected me. However, I saw how the hate in the world affected those in my community. My friends, professors, and peers were facing discrimination that I would never experience because of my

privilege. Confronted with the reality that not everyone is treated equally, I realized that we must look past ourselves to help those in our community.

At that moment, nearly overcome with the amount of hate in the world, I realized that my community had been given the opportunity to make a difference. We couldn't choose to un-see the darkness, but we could do our best to expel it.

I know this might sound like the beginning of a Beatles song or a Harry Potter quote, but in that instant, I understood that our purpose in life is to acknowledge the shadows and simultaneously try to drive them out. We have to stand together as a community, pushing forward to make the world a better place.

One of my mentors and dear friends once gave me this advice: "Live your life in a way that allows you to seek out and love other people." Isn't that our purpose? We should use our education, our minds, and our lives to build up the world around us. From day one at EIU, when we were timid, frightened freshmen at convocation, we were told we could make a difference. I didn't believe the speaker's words then, but as I grew, so did my understanding of what a single person can accomplish.

This is the magic of Eastern—we were told we could make a difference, and professors invested in us. They encouraged us to raise money for a charity, to finish writing that thesis, to volunteer our time. They cheered us on from day one, nudging us to find a place in the world where we could make the most difference. Learning didn't just take place in the classroom; it extended beyond to every facet of our lives.

Just as we all once sat in this very gym during convocation and listened to a speaker tell us we could make a difference, so we are all here, listening to another speaker send the same

message. And that message is this: **invest in yourself so you can invest in others and hopefully expel some of the darkness around you.**

Whether you are headed off to grad school, a 9 to 5 job, or your parent's basement, remember to make the world a brighter place. The world around us will only get wider as we collect new experiences, beliefs, and memories. Soon, the wide-angle lens we acquired in college will be upgraded to a 360-degree, high-definition camera. With this widening of our mind, the world will become an even more beautiful, overwhelming place, and we'll wonder how we were ever satisfied with viewing the world through a pinhole.