

PATHWAYS TO ADULTHOOD

DARE TO DREAM BIG ABOUT
WHAT SENIOR YEAR COULD BE.

BY JEREMY KNOLL ILLUSTRATION BY RICHARD MIA

I REMEMBER BUILDING WINDING

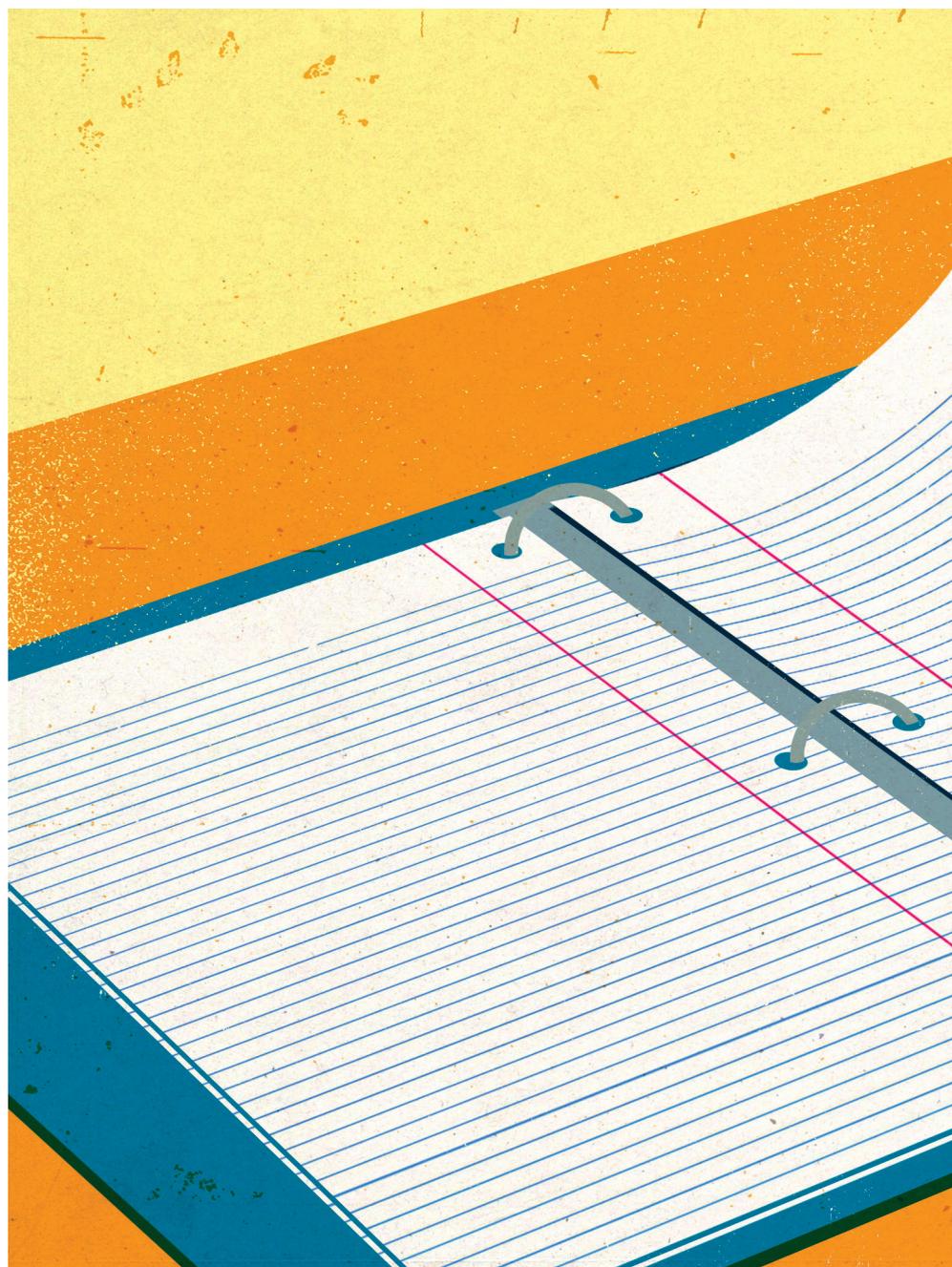
pathways around my house as a kid. I used everything I could get my hands on: from trash cans to tablecloths, hula hoops to hockey pucks. Sometimes alone, sometimes with friends, I would dedicate whole afternoons to building the most random routes I could conceive. The pathways did not lead anywhere. They were simply a means of passing the time.

At many high schools across the country, senior year is the academic equivalent of one of my childhood pathways. Under the guise of curricula, we set up a few hoops for students to jump through, but nothing resembling a cohesive experience that leads in a definitive direction. In the name of education, we allow students to simply pass time. In doing so, we lose the opportunity to prepare these emerging adults to become the best citizens they can be.

Senior Year: Past and Present

Six years ago, Walter Kirn wrote a piece for *The New York Times Magazine* titled “Class Dismissed.” In it, he bemoans a senior year of high school that is “less a climatic academic experience than an occasion for oafish goofing off, chronic truancy, random bullying, [and] sloppy dancing.” He goes on to say that “seniors rule” not because they have done anything significant, but rather because “it’s tradition, and seniors crave tradition. They crave it because they know, deep down, they’re lost, and tradition helps them hide this fear.”

His accusation—that senior year was simply a holding pattern that



encouraged sloth and academic atrophy—made me take a good hard look at my 12th-grade English students. *They are lost*, I thought. I was lost when I was a senior. I did not know what I stood for or believed in. I did not know how I felt about the social issues facing my community or my country or my world. My K–12 education did precious little to teach me about self-reflection or agency.

What Senior Year Could Be

By allowing senior year to remain a blow-off year, we are missing an opportunity to help students navigate the transformation from high school student to full-fledged members of society. We are also missing an opportunity to create a more just world.

For many students, leaving high school offers the unique opportunity to redefine themselves. Even if they aren’t



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Seniors *want* to talk about tough issues. They *want* to have their beliefs challenged and debate with their peers. They just need fuel to ignite the glowing embers burning in their chests.

Ask Students About Themselves

Not enough students from inner-city schools are given internships at prestigious law firms and investment banks. Not enough students driving BMWs to school are aware that some kids attend elementary schools with crumbling ceiling tiles. Regardless of whether we, as educators, can succeed at making the huge systemic changes necessary to level these inequities, we can do a lot with just the written and spoken word.

moving to a new community, they will most likely be surrounded by a different cohort of people who don't have preconceived expectations about who they are. They have the chance to review the details of their first 18 years and decide what to keep and what to toss. If we want to prepare thoughtful citizens, we must support this process.

Do our seniors have an opportunity to practice self-reflection and

self-assessment? Do you ask them to think about how their race, gender or family income opened or closed doors for them? Do they have opportunities to ponder whether fairness and ethics are more important than profit margins? Do they understand the difference between inequality and inequity? As guides, teachers need to keep pointing to and questioning life beyond the classroom walls.

English classes, especially during senior year, have the ability to transcend boundaries dictated by curricula. College admission essays are a good place to start the process of self-discovery that should be the foundation of senior year. One of the questions for the 2016 Common Application asked students to reflect on aspects of their “background, identity, interest or talent” that set them apart. Having students write about themselves, coupled with peer editing, can open their eyes. Suddenly, they see themselves as agents within society, or they see peers in a totally different light. From that moment, a teacher can lead the conversation to how little we know about the people we interact with each day, the judgments we make without facts and how we can work to better understand the people around us.

Another application prompt asks students to write about “a time when [they] challenged a belief or idea.” This offers a great starting point for potentially life-altering conversations. Students can gain strength from hearing others’ stories of standing up for or against an idea they felt was wrong. Those who may never have done such a thing are forced to ask themselves, “Why?” Some may even walk out of class scanning the halls for an opportunity to practice giving voice to their own convictions.

Ask Students Difficult Questions

What is education? What is purpose? What is fairness? What is poverty? These are questions I was asked when I was a senior in high school in a series of “personal definition papers.” I use the same questions now with my students.

While, academically, these writing exercises focus on writing concisely, using vivid examples to illustrate central claims and explaining complex ideas in few words, these are not the skills that matter most. What matters most is students’ abilities to decide where they stand. Asking students about education, fairness and poverty requires them to confront the inequities at the foundation of our public school system. The paper might prompt them, for example, to ask how a student from a school that is poorly funded or inadequately staffed is expected to compete with a student from a school funded by a reliable budget and staffed by professionals with master’s degrees. For students from low-income schools, this question may highlight realities they are all too aware of but don’t necessarily know how to address. For more affluent students, it may be the first time they’ve considered this type of inequity.

Writing about fairness forces students to look back at years of hallway interactions, news headlines and family dinner conversations and to develop their opinions independently. By analyzing the injustices around them, many realize they want to challenge the status quo rather than tolerate it, ignore it or actively support it.

Ask Students to Share Their Voices

For my students, senior year now ends with 10-minute commencement speeches delivered formally in front of the class and any other people the students care to invite. The task is simple: Share what they have learned from their education so far. Students must mine the depths of their experience for moments when they have learned

something about strength, integrity or grace.

These speeches serve multiple purposes. They force students to move past their objections that, at their age, they don’t have anything to teach anyone. They challenge the cozy stereotypes we all use as tools to navigate and simplify the world we live in. Students talk about the struggle of quitting baseball despite a father’s angry objection, about battling eating disorders and drug addictions, about losing parents. They talk about bullying and coming out and devotion to God. They talk about all different aspects of their 18 years, and in the process shock themselves and their classmates.

It all comes from self-reflection and open conversation. It all leads to students better prepared to contribute to a world with less hatred and greater understanding.

Offer Challenges, Not Hoops

I am all for pushing students to excel academically, but let’s make sure that effort is focused on challenges rather than arbitrary obstacles, on character development rather than box-checking. The tasks of senior year need to be more than the disconnected pathways I laid out in my yard all those years ago. This, of all years, needs cohesion; there needs to be a point.

What better thematic thread to weave over the course of their culminating high school year than an exploration of self? ♦

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