

Table of Contents

Dedication and Acknowledgments	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Joseph	5
Chapter 2: Keith	27
Chapter 3: Dante	47
Chapter 4: Sebastian	73
Chapter 5: Patrick	93
Conclusion	121
Afterword	153
References	155
About the Author	163

INTRODUCTION

University colleagues assured me that my life would change. I had been promoted to the rank of full professor. I had reached the professional stage of my career in higher education when I would no longer have to worry about meeting the expectations of another committee on tenure and promotion. I had made it to the top. I could begin to have fun!

I reflected on a recorded song from the late 1960s that my parents often played on the family's stereo. The renowned American jazz singer Peggy Lee sang "Is That All There Is?" In that tune she described the bewilderment she felt as a young girl when she arrived at a circus and saw clowns and elephants and dancing bears, yet felt that something was missing. She continued to sing about anticlimactic events in life and wrapped up the chorus with "If that's all there is, then I'll keep dancing" (Leiber & Stoller, 1969). I felt the same. I had achieved the final promotion but realized I needed to keep dancing. I searched for new challenges that would keep me intellectually engaged and passionate about my scholarly interests.

I discovered that my university offered a competitive faculty research leave. This program enabled professors to enjoy a mini-sabbatical. The thought of taking time off from the routine of teaching classes and participating in endless committee meetings sounded wonderful. With time away from campus, I could focus on a new research project and become reinvigorated. I submitted my research proposal, and shortly after, I celebrated when I learned I had been granted a semester's leave.

Until that time, my research had explored the social and emotional development of gifted young people, with many of my scholarly manuscripts focused on gifted males. I had also studied intelligent adolescents whose lives beyond school were filled with serious challenges.

I chose to continue this line of inquiry. My new study, which led to this book, would examine the experiences of high-achieving talented males who had overcome serious adversity. I wanted to investigate young men thriving in university life or in the early stages of their professional careers. For this study I would explore two overarching questions. I wanted to understand how these high-achieving gifted males overcame adverse circumstances to reach high levels of achievement. Moreover, I wanted to understand and appreciate the relationships that had guided their behaviors, attitudes, and aspirations.

I turned to my friends in the field of gifted and talented education throughout the country. I asked public school teachers and university educators to nominate young men for my study. I was gratified that so many colleagues were happy to help. They recommended young men they had worked with in their settings and introduced them to me. I was delighted with the diverse group of men who became the subjects for my research.

My colleagues initiated a conversation with each of the individual young men to explore whether they would be willing to participate in the study. When they agreed, I communicated with them via e-mail and described my proposed research. I explained that I would travel to their community and spend a week in their contexts to conduct extensive qualitative interviews with each of them individually. I needed uninterrupted time with them in order to capture their complete life stories. I was able to negotiate a calendar with each of them, and they graciously afforded me the time I needed for the interviews. Once dates were determined, I moved forward with travel plans.

The men in the study had all left their hometowns and were living in various places throughout the country. Although I was meeting them in their new professional contexts, the earlier chapters of their life stories had occurred elsewhere. My travels began in January and lasted through May. In some cases, I was able to travel by car; other experiences involved airline flights and car rentals. Each trip involved some personal anxiety. The thought of traveling to a new community and making connections with the young men I had never met seemed intimidating at first. I wondered, “Would they be open to me?”, “Would they like me?”, and “Would I be able to develop a comfortable rapport quickly enough?” I also imagined that the men were probably asking similar questions about me.

My colleagues who had recommended the participants were critical to my success. They served as important gatekeepers and opened the way for me to make connections with the men. These educators had assured the men that they would enjoy working with me and that their contributions to this research would be significant. I quickly discovered that I would enjoy my semester working with them. The men were delightful to work with. Although they had difficult stories to share with me, I realized that the experience was likely therapeutic for them. I believe that their involvement in my research also served as validation for their having created successful, meaningful lives. Through this work, I made significant new friendships, and I remain connected to each of them today. This book features the life stories of five intelligent young men who have important experiences to share with us. I present each of them to you in separate chapters. The concluding chapter presents my thematic analysis of the findings from this study and highlights the scholarly literature to reinforce their significance.

I have selected five representative stories for this book. I will introduce you to Joseph, Keith, Dante, Sebastian, and Patrick. Their stories are compelling and involve adversity that is not at all pleasant. Some of these stories involve similar kinds of adversity. To protect the identities of the young men and their families, pseudonyms are incorporated throughout the book. I am honored that they imparted their life experiences to me, and I humbly pass them on to you. There are important lessons that we learn from these strong, impressive, and inspiring individuals.

CHAPTER 1

JOSEPH

Joseph Ideye was a sophomore at a large research university in New England, enjoying his winter holiday break between semesters. He greeted me with an authentic smile as he walked through the door of his university library. Dressed in cargo style jeans, a university sweatshirt, a heavy parka, and a woolen scarf, Joseph was clearly accustomed to the cold winter weather in New England. This young Black gentleman maintained a rugged athletic physique and appeared self-assured and outgoing. We agreed that a private conference room in the library would be ideal for conducting our interviews, and we succeeded in locating a quiet room for our conversations.

My interviews with Joseph took place during a significant time in our country. We were anticipating the first inauguration of Barack Obama. During the presidential campaign, Americans had come to know the complicated biography of their first African American president and were aware of the significance of President Obama's relationship with his father. I had looked forward to interviewing Joseph because I knew that I would learn so much from him. What I did not realize at that time was that I would later draw comparisons to our president's early years.

Joseph's story is that of a multitalented young man with a complex family history. Having overcome difficult family challenges and homelessness during his adolescence, he was now enjoying a more sedate time in his life as he immersed himself in the college experience.

CHAPTER 2

KEITH

I waited in the lobby of my hotel and watched guests dressed in ski parkas and hats attaching skis and ski poles to the roofs of their cars. With the sun shining after a winter snowfall, they were bound to enjoy a great day on the nearby slopes. A sporty SUV pulled up to the hotel entrance, and the driver smiled at me and waved. I climbed in and was delighted to meet Keith Walton. We shared pleasantries, discussing the newly fallen snow and my travels to the area the day before. I had driven from my home to this university community in the scenic Appalachian Mountains and had enjoyed a relaxing evening in a cozy and rustic inn. He questioned me about my first night at the inn, wanting to be sure I was comfortable and the nearby restaurant was enjoyable. Keith was employed at the university, and we had earlier agreed to conduct the interviews on campus. As we drove to the university, he provided commentary about the local area and seemed delighted to share what he knew of the history of this bucolic mountain setting.

That morning Keith was dressed in causal khakis, a tweed sports jacket, and a buttoned-down shirt—the look of a young academic. With sandy blonde hair and an athletic physique, he was both energetic and outgoing and seemed happy to have me as a guest. Keith was a faculty member in the communications department and director of the debate program on campus. When we arrived at his office, he introduced me to several students and his wife, Margaret, who was also employed at the college. She graciously invited me to join them for a family dinner at

CHAPTER 3

DANTE

My work with Dante Medina began with an unsettling e-mail message. I communicated with all of the participants in my research through e-mail to schedule interviews. Early on in my conversation with Dante, I received the following message:

Thank you for your message, Tom. I'll be at home this weekend, and you can reach me on my mobile. Suggesting a good time to reach me is somewhat of a difficult task because my feeling of wellness comes and goes, as last Friday I had bilateral anterior craniotomies to correct massive subdural hemorrhaging over my cerebral cortex, and I am recovering slowly at home. The onset of my symptoms was rapid, and the etiology of the bleeding is unknown. I will be convalescing for the next few weeks, but I believe I will still be able to participate in interviews. I look forward to your call.

I immediately contacted a close friend who was an experienced nurse. I needed her expertise to help me better understand Dante's situation. She quickly responded with, "The young man you are communicating with is lucky to be alive! I'm surprised he has been released from the hospital." She continued, "It's hard to say how long he'll need to recover. I'm guessing it will depend on whether or not the bleeding caused any brain damage."

CHAPTER 4

SEBASTIAN

On a sunny day in April, I traveled through picturesque southern Appalachian mountains to a scenic university community to meet Sebastian Tucker. I arrived to discover a beautiful campus of 20,000 students. The university was home to many nationally ranked academic programs, including a highly respected academy for mathematics and science, which served as a residential high school for exceptional high school juniors and seniors. Sebastian, an academy alumnus, was the youngest participant in my research study, and he was in his second undergraduate year at the university, pursuing a double major in mathematics/secondary education and biology.

He and I had exchanged cell phone numbers in our earlier e-mail conversations. After extended “telephone tag,” we succeeded in determining a time to meet at the university library for our first interview session. He arrived carrying notebooks and several thick textbooks from his afternoon classes. As we greeted each other, I was struck by his soft-spoken demeanor and warm smile. A tall, thin, young Black man dressed in an oversized sweatshirt and jeans, he was reserved and polite during our conversation. He led me to the front desk, where he chatted with the staff about the quiet conference room he had reserved for us. As I observed the interaction, I realized that Sebastian was well-acquainted with the library personnel. They knew this studious undergraduate student well from his daily visits for long hours of quiet study.

CHAPTER 5

PATRICK

Patrick Brennan was seated at a table by the window in the coffee shop when I entered. He greeted me with a firm handshake and a warm, friendly smile. With his rugged athletic physique and his classic khakis and a freshly starched plaid sport shirt, he reminded me of a model in a sporty men's clothing catalog. After ordering our coffee, Patrick and I proceeded to a quiet conference room in the coffee shop where we were guaranteed to have private conversation. Exchanging pleasantries took little time, and I soon realized that my work with this gentleman would be relaxed. Patrick had an easygoing manner and was a natural conversationalist. As we began the initial interview, he explained that he had brought helpful props with him. He shared a collection of 5" x 7" index cards with key points in his life story that he wanted to share. These cards were not new. Patrick had earlier been invited to share his story with a number of professional groups with a presentation entitled, "From Dummy to Doctor." The cards were reminders of the significant points he wanted to be sure he would address. He joked about his use of cue cards, and I assured him I'd discuss those key points carefully with him. Impressed with his sincerity and his determination to be thorough in sharing his experiences, I knew immediately that this journey with Patrick would be enjoyable. Our laughs began with the cards and continued throughout our work together.

Patrick's story is that of a highly intelligent young man with a history of learning difficulties. In his mid-30s, he had recently earned