

Nick Oeffinger – California: Level III First Place Winner

Dear Malcolm X,

There have been many books that I enjoyed and some of them have taught me life lessons that I still hold close to my heart and use as a personal code of conduct that I apply to my everyday life. Because of the incredible ability that some authors possess, I have always thought that to write a book that truly meant something to another person would be a great accomplishment and a tremendous honor to know that the words you have put down on paper have changed a life, even if that change was miniscule.

Almost all these works of touching pieces of literature are merely fairytales; the products of imagination expressed through an amazing ability to change one's vague ideas into a literary masterpiece. The words in your book may not have been jotted down on paper by your hand, but grammar and sentence structure are not the aspects of a book that touch the very soul of a person. While others authors have written extraordinary book that mean a great deal to many people, you have lived a life that has not only changed my own, but altered the course of a whole Nation. You have lived your life to such a level that masses of people harbored a desire for the production of a novel titled "The Autobiography of Malcolm X". To gaze upon a book of your life and know that you would not change a single word is a beautiful feeling. To never have the desire to withhold embarrassing stories, or use exaggeration in an effort to show yourself in a better light truly lets you know that you have changed the course of history simply by being yourself.

I look back on my childhood and all I see is a horrible anger that had been a part of my personality for as long ago as I could remember. While I was growing up I constantly refused to think that I was like everyone else. I believed that somehow I was better than the people I saw everyday, these people who were happy just going about their daily lives. I used to judge others to such a degree that I would despise them without ever even meeting them. I would notice only the flaws in people's personalities, the way they carried themselves or even the way they look. I never stopped to turn the tables of judgment around on myself. I had grown up refusing to accept that I had any flaws, unhappy with normality; but it was your book that helped me realize that I rejected others as to distance myself, so that this severe judgment I passed on others would never be turned on me.

By high school I had developed a desire for greatness, one that could never be satisfied no matter how hard I tried. I thought that if I could prove to myself that I was better than everyone around me then it would be true and that others would see my superiority, but I see now that this desire was tainted, for I did not care whether I was famous or infamous, as long as I was known. While others held their parents, athletes and actors in such a high regard, I had developed a respect for great power which began my ignorant journey down the path of a Neo-Nazi and eventually gave me my first hero, Adolph Hitler.

When your book was presented to me as a required reading for my sophomore English class I was disgusted. My mind was so closed to new ideas and arguments that it would have been hard to convince me that gravity existed, let alone get me to realize the absurdities of what I had become, and what I strove to be. This desire for infamously

had held me back so much until I broke free of it, but it was not a complete waste, for it led me to your book, and ultimately made me the way I am today.

I vigorously read the first half of the book in search of any little defect or character flaw that I could hold against you in classroom debates. I laughed at your closed mindedness to the flaws of the Nation of Islam, but never saw the massive defects in the Neo-Nazi lifestyle. I resented your double standards for blacks and whites, but could not see that I myself judged blacks infinitely harsher than whites. Lastly, I thought it was appropriate that you get arrested, assaulted, ridiculed, and even exiled from the Nation of Islam. It was this last judgment that became the first life changing realization that I experienced. I realized that I had also been assaulted, ridiculed and in trouble with the police many a time. I had even been exiled from the Neo-Nazis that I had known, for reasons as meaningless as the color of my hair.

Everything started to somehow become clear after this first personal reflection. I know that we have such great differences in our lives, but I soon came to see the similarities and finally I could feel the pain of the trials and tribulations that you endured merely by relating them to my own life. Realizing the pain you felt, the extent of your sorrows, and betrayal and exile you've experienced helped me to see that my racism was a horrible cover up, using others as scapegoats for so many problems I had.

Relating to your feelings gave me the awakening that I needed to break free from my denial and ignorance, but nothing could have ever changed me more than seeing how you changed during your visit to Mecca. I could see that the path to open-mindedness that you took was, in fact, the path I desired so much to follow, it gave me direction, and most of all, it gave me hope that I could actually recover from my years of of ignorance and denial.

Finishing this letter I somehow wish that I could show you how much you have changed my life. I do not know what I would be doing, what I would hold honorable, or even what kind of person I would have become if I had never picked up your autobiography. So, I hope that somehow you know that, if nothing else, you changed the life of one person, who now holds you in the highest regard

My name is Nicholas Oeffinger. I was born and raised in San Mateo, California. Since I was a young boy I have been fascinated with history, especially the history of weapons and Japanese culture. I joined this contest so that others like me might one day be changed by my story. As for now I do not know what the future has in store for me, but I plan on joining the United States Coast Guard.