

Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?

Note: Essays may contain deeply personal, sensitive, and potentially triggering content. All students have given permission for their essays to be shared.

I grew up outdoors. Our modest backyard was my private bioreserve where, under South Louisiana sun, life flourished and so did my curiosity. At three, barely taller than the emerald grass could grow, I befriended frogs and flora and became enamored with nature taking its course.

When my baby sister D’Nai and I were old enough, our parents gave us bikes and a three-street perimeter in which to “conduct research.” Like any self-respecting scientists, we ventured out of bounds, pedaling to a park with a rich ecosystem we perhaps felt too at home in. We tempted snakes; squawked at egrets; made earrings of lizards; played hide and seek with rabbits; and, occasionally, had stare-offs with deer. We wrestled, rolled, leapt, and lurked, like animals ourselves.

More than D’Nai, I became preoccupied with insects whose lives I could observe and help sustain. I was *that* kid, more excited by butterfly-growing and ant-tunneling kits than skateboards and videogames. But nothing beat harvesting them wild. After downpours, I’d zoom to the park, crawl through soggy mud, and return proudly with baggies of earthworms and Roly Polies. I’d set the worms loose in my dad’s garden and be wonderstruck at their life-giving effects. Contrarily, I watched horrified as my Polies perished in their makeshift habitats. I persisted, identifying the dirt, diet, humidity level, and ventilation system needed for my group to thrive. They did. I was ten, never surer what gave *me* life: aiding organisms with theirs.

Imitating Tarzan, I got hurt often. Slashes and scrapes, consequences to most, were perks to me. Treating myself was a treat. After a day in the field, I’d assess the damage and get working. Bite remedies were easy: ice, chamomile tea, and aloe vera. Cuts were more fun. Rubbing alcohol and hydrogen peroxide are the stuff of kids’ nightmares; I found their healing properties fascinating. I was different. That was clear when, hopping a fence in fifth grade, I tore a tablespoon of skin from my leg and, as I’d done with my Polies, I closely monitored the wound’s progress. Pain couldn’t dull my passion for biological processes.

Passion became obsession when, in eighth grade, I discovered the YouTube channel “Nucleus.” I started with blood. I’d figured I had a finite amount and was running low. Turns out peritubular cells in kidneys trigger erythropoietin to have marrow produce stem cells, which replenish blood cells. I moved onto breaks, discovering our bodies release Calcium and Phosphate into fractured sites, forming bridges of Hard Callus that reinforce the original bones, like regeneration in a superhero. Next was burns, infectious disease, and congenital defects. You haven’t seen a geek like me.

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My obsession became a calling in the most appropriate place: a hospital. February 2018 my young father suffered a myocardial infarction, caused when buildups of fat and cholesterol form plaque around the coronary arteries, blocking blood flow to the heart. I sat wondering if a heart attack would take my dad as it had his parents. Being me, I also watched videos on how to treat him if he survived. Thank God he did, but it was in that taupe waiting room I decided I would care for people's hearts before God had to intervene. I had grown up in nature to realize healing others was always in mine.