

I was nine years old when I found out my personal narrative entry had won a young authors contest. At the time, I only remember being excited and proud of my work. And when I attended the workshops and fun activities that served as the contest's reward, I doubt I experienced any greater complex thoughts. However, in hindsight, my view of that event is different.

It was never a question for me. As I sat in the workshops surrounded by other young writers who had the chance to share their stories, it never crossed my mind once. But now, eight years older and significantly more aware, I understand the privilege I had when I was young and had only known it as an inherent right.

In sophomore-year Social and Cultural Geography, I learned about countries with policies that seemed completely unfamiliar. Countries where people are silenced if they dare to speak out about their government. Countries where people can not choose for themselves. Countries where people are not allowed to worship as they wish or write as they please.

To me and my classmates, this was abhorrent. To us young American students, the thought of oppression on this scale was confounding and alarming. But to me, it was more than that. I thought of that little nine-year-old girl who had been ecstatic about her personal narrative. I thought of the children who had sat around me at the workshops, discussing the stories that had brought us to the same place. I remember reading the book full of every winner's stories. But most of all, I remember not thinking about it twice.

To me, the right to say what I want, to write what I want, was intrinsic. I was not taught at every turn that I had to censor myself or that I couldn't criticize or praise my system of government as I wished. But the people in those countries? They were. It made me come to a realization.

If I saw or heard something that I thought was wrong, I was entitled to speak about it in any manner I wished. I could go out and peacefully protest the issue all day if I wanted. I could go to any place of worship, but it wasn't a requirement. In one amendment, I was granted immeasurable freedoms that I never fully understood the significance of. I took these freedoms for granted.

So, I thought of the nine-year-old girl who didn't understand how lucky she truly was to get to write a story about whatever she wanted. I thought about the children, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, or siblings around the world who do not get such a privilege. Those who cannot speak, write, worship, petition, or protest freely. Those who were not granted the privilege of the rights outlined in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.

In the end, it is gratitude. Gratitude for the right to my own voice.

1st Place – Cadence Breitbach - Poynette High School, Poynette - 11th grade