I was considered "the weird one" in elementary school. I expressed myself primarily through dancing, narrated drawings, and music. The majority of my friends thought in more traditional methods, and often questioned my habits. Although I was content in my ways, I felt a strong divide between our attitudes and perspectives. My ideas were commonly disregarded because my thoughts ran in opposite directions compared to everyone else. Group work in class was always difficult when I did not share any viewpoints with my peers, and often resulted in arguments or drawn out discussions. Because these friends and others like them made up the majority of my kindergarten-through-fourth-grade classes, I thought I was fundamentally different, and in some cases, dumb. It didn't help when my sister jokingly teased me about potentially having a low Intelligence Quotient (IQ). Many times, as my friends and I worked on our homework together, I was left astounded and ashamed at the gaping intervals of the levels of completeness between our papers. I faced a constant fear of lacking intelligence.

I was also enrolled in music school. Here, countless Saturdays were filled with "music hours." Any student with a (almost always) performance-ready piece was invited to play in the music hall for an audience. Wearing my favorite velvet dress, I attended my first music hour when I was four and performed the groundbreaking *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.* Because my piece was the least difficult to play, I went first. I was followed by more four-year-olds, then by middle school students playing sonatinas and, later, high school students playing sonatas. Although the others my age struggled with staying in their seats for longer than thirty seconds, I was so enraptured by the music streaming through my ears that I felt it impossible to move. I felt an overall feeling of appreciation and respect for the musician that most other four-year-olds did not understand. My mother recently told me that a woman complimented her on her parenting skills that day, because I had apparently shown maturity that had never before been seen in someone so young.

This caused me to wonder how intelligence is measured. Although my peers in school raced ahead of me to receive stellar grades, I felt like I had achieved a more realistic grasp on my emotions and social reality. I was able to understand and react well to other people's feelings and emotions, but I had difficulty solving simple problems in math class. This duality of knowledge tore open a river of confusion within me, because I was able to exceed expectations in one area but barely reach them in another. The concept of "intelligence" was incomprehensible to me due to my supposed inability to achieve it. I was unaware of my value as an intellect, and often questioned myself. Ultimately, I questioned everything. How does my perception affect the knowledge I possess?

There are countless systems of evaluating knowledge. Intelligence quotient tests were commonly used around the early twentieth century, and were created in order to test a person's level of intelligence. However, they are taken in a very formulaic system that eliminates many other factors that play into a mind's cohesive intelligence. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences claims that there are eight separate intelligences by which people can be defined. These intelligences—spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, linguistic, logical-mathematical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic—highlight a person's strengths and weaknesses. (Gardner, 2012). Based on Gardner's theories, people naturally fall into one of these eight personality types. Because they excel in one area of understanding, they sometimes fail to comprehend others. Because each person's mind functions differently, various factors determine

their intelligence.

These other factors are categorized as "emotional intelligence," or "the ability to monitor one's own and other people's emotions, to discriminate between different emotions and label them appropriately, and to use emotional information to guide thinking and behavior" (Goleman, 2000). With this reasoning, people with high emotional intelligences can comprehend their own or other people's sentiments and feelings. They are able to respond to certain situations based on the reactions of others, as well as understand their logic. Essentially, emotional intelligence is a form of cause and effect. If a beloved pet were to pass away, a family member would be dismayed. An emotionally intelligent friend of the family member might see his or her friend and, in turn, become sad because of this miserable event that has taken place and how it has affected the friend. By ruling out emotional intelligence, intelligence quotient tests ironically prohibit the subject from being fully aware of his or her knowledge.

The majority of one's life is not lived systematically. Intelligence is not merely a product of the factual information we know, but our opinions about that information, and our perception of those opinions. As we learn about our perception, we learn about ourselves. Through metacognition, or awareness of our thought processes and biases, we are able to better understand ourselves and the makeup of the world around us.

Several aspects of modern American culture prohibit us from fully expressing ourselves. In a spoken word TED Talk, nineteen-year-old Malcolm London discusses how traditional high schools are failing because they confine students to social norms. He argues that the schools are "diverse, and segregated on purpose. Social lines are barbed wire. Labels like 'regular' [students] and 'honor' [students] resonate," and "regular students are soldiers in territories that own them" (London, 2013). The student reasons that many schools leave little room for pupils' personal growth because their paths have been predetermined by their surroundings. He argues that his education system is "a weird current cycle built to recycle the trash of the system" (London, 2013). Confined in largely populated schools by the titles like 'regulars' and 'honors,' where "decision-making is centrally based and administratively delivered" (Peters, 2012), it is difficult to discover a sense of identity. In traditional school settings, students are placed in a passive role "rather than an active role, which hinders learning" (University of Illinois-Urbana, 2013). Rather than focusing on their individual strengths and potentials, students are often taught with a lack of student-teacher communication. Thus, the pupil receives a very impersonal, one-sided education that "requires a considerable amount of unguided student time outside of the classroom to enable understanding and long-term retentions of content" (University of Illinois-Urbana, 2013). In a study conducted in Texas charter and traditional districts in 2012, it was shown that only fifty-three percent of the tested students graduated high school, and eighteen percent continued on to further their educations in other education programs. Twenty-one percent of the students dropped out of high school (Heilig, 2013). By maintaining outdated traditions, students are stifled by regulations and standards. Without the ability to think freely and form individual opinions, it becomes increasingly more difficult to be aware of your personal knowledge and values.

Progressive schools aim to reach a more personal level of education to encourage individual growth. Although not all progressive schools teach with exactly the same methods, the majority of them "focus on the unique needs of individual students…progressive educators are concerned with helping children become not only good learners but also good people. Schooling isn't seen

as being about just academics, nor is intellectual growth limited to verbal and mathematical proficiencies" (Kohn, 2008). A school in North Carolina where "the number one contributor to [their] success is [their] personnel…who knock on doors and counsel children to prevent dropouts" had a ninety-four percent graduation rate in 2013 (Wagner, 2013). In my progressive school in New York City, an arguably progressive area, I have seldom felt pressure to fit into the standards of others. At this school, their mission statement is to "establish in its students firmly rooted confidence in themselves and their abilities…early school experience sets the formulation for lifelong intellectual and social growth, [they] strive to develop in each child mental keenness, physical confidence, pleasure in learning, and the skills basic to understanding one's self and the world" (Grace Church School, 2014). My classmates and I are often asked to evaluate ourselves on a global level, considering as many viewpoints as we know of. With such introspection, we are able to be more aware of ourselves and of our presence in the world.

By accepting emotions in others and ourselves, we are able to recognize opinions more truthfully. When we stray from personal biases and focus on the reliable emotions directly before us, we see a clearer picture of reality. This is important in countless situations in life. *The Innocence Project* is "a non-profit organization dedicated to exonerating wrongfully convicted people through DNA testing and reforming the criminal justice system to prevent future injustice" (Cardozo, 2009)**.** There are innumerable cases in which innocent men and women have been convicted for crimes they did not commit because of misled witness statements and the prejudices that follow. Joseph Abbitt was convicted of "two counts of First Degree Rape, one count of First Degree Burglary and two counts of First Degree Kidnapping" in 1995 (Cardozo, 2009)**.** He was sentenced to "Two Life Sentences, plus one hundred and ten years," because the victims identified Abbitt in a photographic lineup "although the opportunity to see the attacker's face was limited" (Cardozo, 2009). After Abbitt served fourteen years in prison, the Innocence Project found DNA evidence that proved him to be not guilty. Thankfully, the misidentified man was exonerated in 2009. This specific case relied solely on the victims' misguided certainty that arose in a photographic lineup. It was stated that Abbitt previously lived in the victims' neighborhood, and had visited their home a few times (Cardozo, 2009). The girls had seen the man before and had perhaps felt a negative connotation towards him, which could have planted a strong bias within them. Because of this predetermined bias in place of reliable information, an innocent man went to prison for over a decade.

On a lesser level, when I was at my first music hour, I was able to sense the emotions that the music caused people to feel. Others shared emotions that were directly caused by a common source. As we sat together, we recognized our own responses as well as each other's, forming a shared experience.

Although emotions can be sensed, they are also vastly physical. Emotions are shown through appearance and can be understood, dissected, and controlled. An example of these methods is called "micro-expressions," a term first described by researchers named Haggard and Isaacs to name the facial emotions we display in correlation to the psychological emotions we feel. (Ekman, 2014) Paul Ekman dissected the types of expressions into four categories: macro emotions, micro emotions, false emotions, and masked emotions. Macro emotions last anywhere from half of a second to four seconds, and correspond to the tone of voice being used. Micro emotions are very brief, and last anywhere from one-fifteenth of a second to one-twenty-fifth of a second as a result of hidden or suppressed emotions. False emotions are deliberately created

simulations of emotions, but they do not reflect our actual psychological reactions. Masked emotions are false expressions crafted to cover macro expressions. Ekman offers courses and training for others who wish to learn his skill and become masters of facial recognition. Through this process, Ekman claims that his expertise will help his students gain a firm grasp on understanding other peoples' truths and realities. His theories require metacognition, as Ekman argues that understanding yourself will help you understand others.

Because there are an abundance of them, Ekman deeply studies the faces of dishonesty. There is an ever-present mask pressed upon us by personal, societal, or cultural influences. We aim to avoid signs of emotional distress, because we "fear that exposing [them] would make us look weak to [those who threaten us]-and, indeed, make us feel weak and powerless *ourselves*…And we certainly don't want to risk turning anyone off by such 'displays' of vulnerability. Nor do we wish to be viewed as childish-or, at worst, *pathetic*-because, seemingly at least, we've lost control over our emotions" (Seltzer, 2011). With this constant fear holding us back from self-expression, we travel further from metacognition and self-awareness. In order to reach full acknowledgement of self-intent and intelligence, we must remove that mask to reveal a face of vulnerability. Perhaps this is why so few people lack truthful knowledge about themselves.

I am deeply affected by social standards in terms of conducting my facial expressions. Because I am a young American woman, others categorize me by my femininity before anything else. I shield my emotions based on the subconsciously prominent idea that appearance matters more than intelligence. Typically, "ideal" women are depicted in one way—with a specifically thin body-type and an unstable personality. This common theme is present in the media, something that the average American teenager spends nearly eleven hours surrounded by daily. We are being set up to reach an unreachable "perfect" standard, as "we get conditioned to think [that] is what women should look like" (Newsom, 2011). Phrases like, "she's smart- for a girl" (Newsom, 2011), are commonly used because women are discouraged from having ambition and taking ambitious positions. Occupations in politics and general leadership are considered to be exclusively for men. Typically, "women leaders are [seen as] 'bitchy,' and brought down by men" (Newsom, 2011). In American films, sixteen percent of all protagonists are female. They are often depicted as body props that exist for the male character, but "become much less valuable after pregnancy…there is this notion that women exist to be decorative, women exist to be stupid" (Newsom, 2011). I am prohibited to make myself "appropriate" by unnecessary constraints. I stress over insignificant aspects of interactions, such as how my skin looked under a specific light, or how wide my smile was. I aim to please others before I consider my own intentions. Because I subliminally work to reach unachievable goals, I forget or change my own goals on the way. Being so conditioned by the cycle of compromise and failure, I became unable to recognize my own strengths, weaknesses, and overall intelligence. How is it possible for one to break the cycle of repression?

In order to recreate our own identities, we must first be aware of ourselves and the effect of others around us. The "self" has been studied as an individual being in control of his/her intentions, although it is realistically impossible to be unaffected by one's surroundings (Beasley, 1987). Humans are receptive beings. We all view the world in specific manners depending on the course of our lives, and react to certain events with separate intentions. We unknowingly build subconscious biases, gaining the influences from others around us while losing our original reasoning (Chiano and Harada, 2008). Because we surround ourselves with more opinions than

factual evidence about the majority of topics, we begin mistaking bias as fact. Our personal opinions are shaped by others around us. It is impossible to understand ourselves without first understanding the views of others.

I am heavily affected by my surroundings, and often find difficulty in understanding my true intentions and goals. Through taking the Enneagram Test, I have found that my personality type is a "peacemaker," and therefore I "have a rather diffuse sense of [my] own [identity]" (Berkers, 2014). A peacemaker is defined as "a person who helps to prevent or stop an argument, a fight, or a war" (Merriam-Webster, 2014). I often feel like more of a vessel rather than a creator. Because of my inconsistent beliefs about the truths of reality, I feel as though I am hyperactively conscious of my actions. However, my self-consciousness does not result in greater understanding, as I am often left in downpours of confusion about my presence in the world and the existence of others.

Months ago, after a grievous event that indirectly affected me, I wrote about my reaction. Unable to cry, I fervently described how I "[couldn't] focus," and believed I was "emotionally detached and [felt] insensitive to everything because everyone else's issues (including mine), [felt] meaningless" (Bell, 2014). Because I knew I was supposed to feel sadness, I began to show the signs of confliction. However, because nobody around me displayed the emotions I felt I needed to see, I did not have enough substance within myself to express those. This led to frustration and confusion, and also corresponded to the Enneagram test, as it classified my personality type as being "not fully involved, as if to insulate [myself] from threats to [my] peace of mind," and also "[tending] to adopt an optimistic approach to life…[with] a deep seated faith that things will somehow work out" (Berker, 2014). This corresponds to my reactions, because with a reliance on positive outcomes, I easily lose my grasp of the reality of the sadness of a grim situation. In earlier recordings, I explain how I felt as though "my mind [had] lost all sense of gravity" (Bell, 2014), expressing the lack of concrete opinions I held. Encompassed by the innumerable views and beliefs of others, I was unable to determine a secure reality.

Many people lack a secure reality, because the majority of the population believes that their moral compasses are superior to everybody else's, which is "neither logically nor statistically possible" (Dunning, 2014). In American society, there is a powerful desire for confidence. In direct correlation with this concept is a series of ceaseless stupidity, as confidence is mistaken for knowledge. A theory named the Dunning-Kruger Effect states that "incompetent people don't know they're incompetent" (Dunning 2014). These inexpert people simply do not possess enough knowledge to disprove themselves. Nonetheless, they are very confident in believing they are intelligent. Through self-deception, "people actively distort, amend, forget, dismiss, or accentuate evidence to avoid threatening conclusions while pursuing the friendly ones" (Dunning, 2014). We hold our opinions to a higher esteem than we do to factual evidence because we fear being incorrect. However, an ignorant mind is not empty, but merely misled by deceiving "experiences, theories, facts, intuitions, strategies, algorithms, heuristics, metaphors, and hunches." (Dunning 2014) The manner in which we conduct our lives is as though we are wearing heavily tinted lenses, unable to see the entirety of the situations before us through lack of various color and definition. Thus, we really have little to no knowledge of self-identity, which, in turn, leaves us confidently mistaken.

Partially causing the mistakes is purpose-driven reasoning. Purpose-driven reasoning is the belief that things exist for a simple reason, and serve that purpose through the life they are currently living (Dunning 2014). An example of purpose driven reasoning is believing that bees exist solely to create honey for the purpose of our consumption. Purpose driven reasoning is dangerous, but it is a common method of judgment in many minds. When we are faced with rushed, unconscious decision making, our purpose driven reasoning suffices. When situations arise where we do not have time to research our views, we accept misbelief as fact. We "import knowledge from appropriate settings into ones where it is inappropriate" because of our misbeliefs (Dunning, 2014). Our self-awareness becomes equally as legitimate, because without proper knowledge of those existing around us, we cannot know anything about ourselves.

Our most apparent personality traits lie within our personal, deep-rooted, biased beliefs. David Dunning argues that "each of us possesses certain foundational beliefs—narratives about the self, ideas about the social order—that essentially cannot be violated: to contradict them would call into question our very self-worth" (Dunning, 2014). Our personal beliefs subconsciously alter any other facts we may acquire, and cause us to be ignorant and misguided. A common principle people regard is that they are "a capable, good, and caring person…any information that contradicts this premise is liable to meet serious mental resistance" (Dunning, 2014). Those who are considered individualists favor autonomy, freedom, and self-reliance. Those who identify as communitarian give more weight to benefits and costs borne by the whole community. Hierarchists "[favor] the distribution of social duties and resources along a fixed ranking of status," and egalitarians "dismiss the very idea of ranking people according to status" (Dunning, 2014).Various opinions layer themselves over these beliefs and cause thick misconception. Eventually, the purpose of acquiring any information becomes solely for the *action* of acquiring such information, which then becomes translated into yet another bias opinion. We are commonly unable to move closer to metacognition and self-awareness because we are so embedded in our biases and misconceptions that we can no longer picture reality.

It seems as though I am covering myself in misconception, and am losing sight of self-awareness. Through my attempt of dissection, I have only further realized the severity of the ever-present confusion about myself and others, and refrain from making any conclusive statements. In order to evaluate myself, I attempted to adopt various modes and look at myself through a metacognitive, colorless lens without bias or predispositions. This process only deepened my confusion, because I found that I partially agreed with any viewpoint with seemingly validated research.

I then wondered how anyone could make a universal conclusion about anything if we all land in separate areas of perception. The concept of reality is fluid without much supportive ground, as "a person's politics can warp other sets of logical or factual beliefs so much that they come into direct contradiction with one another" (Dunning, 2014). We focus on the façades that compose our characters, but cannot see through them. It was said by Thomas Jefferson that "one who knows nothing is closer to the truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehood and errors" (Dunning, 2014). To become aware of yourself, you must remove your beliefs from your actions, and become purely observational. Because this is exceedingly difficult, Dunning recommends to "be your own devil's advocate" (Dunning, 2014), and recognize your own flaws and reactions. When we exist without a front, completely bare and bathed in honesty, we will be able to

successfully understand ourselves and live closer to the truth. Sitting in my favorite velvet dress at my first music hour, I felt the weight of reality upon my shoulders, because I felt the weight of myself sitting in my chair.

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