



THROUGH THE GATE: A REFLECTION ON SUCCESS, FAILURE, AND BEING

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The session began the same as most Writing Center appointments: a nervous and perhaps intimidated writer joined me, a peer tutor, at a Formica table. He plopped down a paper seeking to have it fixed, and therefore worthy to be turned in to his faculty. I began the way I usually do: I attempted to disrupt the writer's fix-it goal by turning the paper face-down and asking him to tell me about it. After his initial shock from being questioned about the paper by someone who could easily *read* it, he proceeded to present a history of something.

Whatever that something was, I'm sure I found it interesting. Or maybe I didn't. But as always, I enjoyed the process of hearing this writer articulate his ideas in his own words before tackling his project in academic language. So when he finished explaining what he was trying to chronicle, there didn't seem to be a point beyond a general timeline of the events. What was this writer trying to tell me?

I asked a common question, and thus began the breakdown of my tutoring process that day: "So, what's your thesis?"

"I don't have a thesis. I'm just presenting a history." And he clearly didn't want to develop one.

When I blurted out, "Well, you're going to have to," asserting myself as the authority over his work, we ceased to be peers.

The session never recovered.

His eyes went straight down and never made contact with mine again. His hands rested on his knees, and his smile disappeared. His answers to my subsequent questions were of the one-word variety. And when he ended the session ahead of schedule, any hopes of rescuing my tutoring process that day were lost.

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I've had years to examine why that session ended so catastrophically, and I often wonder why that one stands out among so many others that have faded from my memory.

I wouldn't have much time to dwell on it, however. Amid the turmoil of a failed love interest and difficulty finding a decent job, I decided I needed a change of scenery in my life. Perhaps my parents had grown tired of hearing me complain about one fruitless job interview after another when they called me one weekend morning in mid-2006, waking me up.

"Paul," my father said, "why don't you try joining the Air Force as an officer?"

Both my parents had been Airmen, so it shouldn't have surprised me when they suggested I consider a military career. After meeting with recruiters from different branches of the military, I chose to serve in the U.S. Army, not the Air Force. I chose an enlisted career, not the officer path my parents had envisioned. I supported the liberation of the Middle East from dictatorships, but wasn't sure how I felt about American involvement there. Despite misgivings about U.S. foreign policy, not to mention whether my personality suited me for military life, I raised my right hand and took my oath of enlistment.

I missed my own college graduation ceremony. Three weeks later, I sat on a plane bound for Basic Training and wondered what I had done.

After nine weeks of rigorous exercise and twenty-two of vocational instruction, I arrived at my permanent unit at Fort Stewart, Georgia. Exhausted, but excited to experience post-training military life, I reported for duty as the low guy on the totem pole. Soon after, eager to please, I accepted a mission to retrieve a few necessary items.

"I'm here for the grid squares and glow-stick batteries!" I proclaimed. I wanted to show some enthusiasm for my work. But the supply technician looked at me as if I were from another planet.

"Can you get grid squares off a map?" she asked. (You can't.)

"Do glow sticks have batteries?" she continued. (They don't.)

This classic new-guy prank shouldn't have bugged me, but it did. Sensing my frustration, Staff Sergeant Jeffries called me into his office and asked, "What's bothering you?"

"I didn't spend four years in college to sweep floors," I blurted out, forgetting military decorum. Once again, I'd spoken too quickly and harshly, and I knew I would always struggle to fit in, no matter what my walk of life.

I was too embarrassed to describe the prank to him, but my answer was honest. The comment could have gotten me in serious trouble.

Instead, the sergeant smiled and reminded me that I had signed up for a reason, and he advised me to focus on what that reason was. I still wasn't sure why I'd enlisted, but I knew I would need to figure it out if I were to attain some measure of happiness in the Army. Again, I wouldn't have much time to dwell on the mounting questions in my life because, thirty days after arriving at my station, I deployed to Iraq.

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I spent most of my time in Baghdad escorting locals around Camp Victory so that they could perform construction and janitorial tasks. One day, I escorted a generator maintenance specialist to various sites. The pleasant mechanic made small talk in broken but earnest English. He checked the fuel level and function of the generators while I sat, bored out of my skull, in the pickup truck.

The daily briefing was always clear: soldiers were not to leave the post with Iraqi civilians, and if we did, we were to consider ourselves kidnapped. The sergeant gave the same speech every morning at six: "If he takes you off post, point your weapon directly at his head, and kindly inform him that if he doesn't return you to Victory, you will pull the trigger."

I'd hardly even noticed the lurch of the pick-up when I briefly saw a warning sign flash by: "Prepare to Leave Camp Victory." My earlier tedium now gave way to anxiety as we quickly approached the outer gate and passed other signs warning us that we would soon leave the post and enter Baghdad.

I tapped the mechanic's shoulder with my left hand, while my right hand first pointed out the window at the signs and then gripped the handle of my rifle.

He kept his eyes on the road and told me, "No worry, Sir, there's a generator soon." I told him that we should not get any closer to the gate. He just took another drag on his cigarette.

"No, really, the gate's coming. We need to stop." My hand tightened on the pistol grip. He hardly paid any attention to me as he flicked the cigarette out the window. "It's okay. You will see," he assured me.

We neared the final warning sign—"LOCK AND LOAD" in gigantic red letters—on the concrete wall next to the metal swing gate, Baghdad just beyond.

I wondered if I would soon get eviscerated in the town square, with the video of my demise on YouTube.

I loaded a round into the chamber of my M-16 rifle and raised it to his head, warning him, "Look, *motherfucker*, we are not leaving this base!"

He slammed on the brakes, and the pickup screamed to a halt—right next to a dusty generator.

"Oh," I muttered. I lowered my weapon.

For the rest of the day, both of us remained silent. We made no eye contact. My duty to escort locals continued for many months. I never saw that mechanic again. Before I knew it, my tour ended, and I found myself back on American soil.

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I made mistakes leading up to my military service, not to mention a few grave errors during my three-year enlistment. I participated in a war I later decided I disagreed with, yet I retain immense pride in my service to the country.

Where does this leave me? Today, still, I consider the history writer and his lack of a thesis. At the time, I thought his strategy quite flawed; in fact, I felt he had made a colossal mistake. But as I consider a few of the mistakes I've made, I must also reflect on my achievements and experiences: I lost thirty pounds in nine weeks of Basic Training. I learned to stand up for myself. I ate dates straight from a tree in Baghdad. I washed my face in an irrigation ditch that the locals told me flowed from the Tigris. I saw camels in the deserts of Kuwait and stared into Iraqi sunrises I'll never be able to describe. My bond with many of the soldiers I worked with, including the sergeant who treated me kindly—as I should have treated that writer—continues to this day. I have stories to tell, of success and catastrophe, of triumph and failure, which I accept into the core of my being. I can't do anything about that session except have faith in that writer to make his own mistakes, and to learn from those mistakes, as I pass through the gates of mine.

Who was I to say that such a silly little thing as a history paper without a thesis wouldn't one day become a part of that student's essence as a human being? I now feel no shame, only acceptance, of the error of my ways, and I can only hope that the writer has arrived at such a place in his existence. Such is life that I didn't understand the importance of the writer expressing himself in his own way, and such is life that I had to go to war to find peace within myself.