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## Theme of Perseverance: Working Towards Equal Opportunity

Martin Luther King Jr once said, 'The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.' In ancient times, the ability to read separated the wealthy and the poor, the educated and the ignorant, the free and the enslaved. The theme of perseverance continues to be prominent themes in many peoples lives as they face adversary. These themes are even more explicit within the lives of those marginalized and facing injustice in both small and large ways each and every day. In Malcolm X's 'A Homemade Education' and Fredrick Douglass's 'Learning How To Read and Write,' Douglass and X share different personal stories in these writings. Neither allowed their lives to be defined by the opportunities they lacked or by the systems which oppressed them, persevering far beyond what was expected of them by the societies they lived in. Both authors go through horrible experiences that feel like life long punishments. With perseverance through the belief that their hardships would someday carry them to greater things they are able to learn and grow through these experiences, ultimately turning these hard times into ways to learn and better themselves. Douglass and X taught themselves perseverance, finding power and self-betterment from their deprecating and incriminating experiences. This can also be seen in the criminal justice system and systematic oppression. I can apply this to my life through my experiences with the mental health care system. Which systemically has been built to hold those subjected to it back, but has instead allowed me to persevere beyond the labels that this system has tried to define me by, and live outside of them.

Douglass comes from the perspective of being a very young man at the age of twelve and telling his story of his first experience being taught to read by a mistress in one of his homes, who was told by her husband that slaves were not allowed to be educated. Douglass knew this to be wrong, in turn paving the way for him to start teaching himself in his spare time and utilizing the children in the neighborhood. He states, "The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers.' (Douglass 2). Even when Douglass had his initial opportunity to learn taken from him, he was able to adapt and persevere through his shortcomings. He discusses his epiphanies of how white men in particular were seemingly aware of their ongoing injustice towards their slaves. They actively wanted to keep them from education in order to keep their opportunities limited due to them 'being uneducated'. He used this as means to learn, and it became one of the hardest things in his life to accept. Although he had freed himself with his unstoppable perseverance, he still did not have the same opportunities as the other men around him solely due to his race. Douglass realization arose that, although he was mentally freed, he still would never have the same opportunities as a white man.

He states I was afraid that these seemingly good men might use me so; but I nevertheless remembered their advice, and from that time I resolved to run away...I wished to learn how to write, as I might have occasion to write my own pass. I consoled myself with the hope that I should one day find a good chance.(Douglass 4)

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Before he was able to read, Douglass was somewhat ignorant to his misfortune. Unfortunately, with perseverance he came to the harsh realization that his oppression was far beyond him, that active systemic oppression can not be completely overcome. Even with perseverance, there are many issues Douglass would have never been able to change in his lifetime. Through his writings he was able to lay the foundations for others to see him as an example of persevering through grim situations.

Not to say that being in prison was a good thing for him, but X turned it into an opportunity for himself. Instead of dwelling over his circumstances he persevered and used his time doing nothing but learning, educating himself on how to read, write and spell. When X first arrived in prison, he had no idea how to read or write efficiently. X realized his lack of reading and writing skills had begun to deeply effect him, he knew something had to change. With perseverance to learn, he pushed himself daily to slowly become literate. X discusses his time in prison, "I believe it took me a day. Then, aloud, I read back, to myself, everything I'd written on the tablet. Over and over, aloud, to myself, I read my writing"(X 2). With his time in prison, X was able to persevere through his struggles to read. Using this knowledge, He found a great deal of power in having access to historical texts written by people of color, about people of color. He learned pieces of history for which he would have never learned had he never been to prison. He also would not have had such access to all of the texts that he did. He describes this as a turning point when he says, "I have often reflected upon the new vistas that reading opened to me. I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life"(X 9). He found nothing but freedom from the knowledge he obtained. Due to the racism during this time surround people of color, he was aware of his initial disadvantage. X also knew he was going to have more opportunities in life then those around him due to his perseverance. Although he would have to work much harder. In order to even have a chance in society, X knew he would need to learn how to properly read and write. Without this, he would not have had the opportunities that were available to him

In similar way to what was demonstrated by Douglass and X, perseverance is being expressed today by many marginalized and oppressed groups. Skin color matters a great deal in the US, and the racial boundary between blacks and whites. There are numbers of hurdles you have to pass through before you achieve your goals in life, many things can effect the opportunities presented to you. Unfortunately, this causes some groups of people to face more hurdles than others. For example, in housing and criminal justice, race often directly impacts outcomes even after controlling income and education. Black people make up more than one- third of people in federal and state prisons, nearly three times their representation in the population. Once they become involved in the prison system, black people are more likely to carry these consequences throughout their lives.(Simms). The main quality in the people able to whom succeed is the quality of perseverance. It is this quality that makes impossible tasks possible. The issue stands in the inequality of police brutality between races. This is shown in 'Becoming African American: African Immigrant Youth in the United States and hybrid assimilation' One father states, 'The majority of the youth interviewed clearly identified experiences or attitudes they had encountered as racially discriminatory.(...)Not so much for my girls, but for my son. The statistics show that he has a very high chance of being stopped by the police.'"(Simms). Even through everything, these groups must adapt and persevere in order to survive in society. Although this form of slavery may no longer be present in the United States.

Even with perseverance, people of color often face more obstacles obtaining their goals. Not only do many worry about discrimination at school, many also have to worry about their safety

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around those meant to protect us. There are groups that work to counter this problem, such as Race Forward in California. Groups like this work by fighting for racial justice through building awareness, working towards realistic solutions and assisting development for leadership and mentor groups within communities of color.

Race Forward also organizes the Facing Race National Conference.... This conference features talks, panels, workshops, films, and performances by rising leaders in the racial justice arena and brings together advocates, students, academics, journalists, community organizers and leaders, and artists(Race,2017).

By bringing these groups together in one place, it allows a variation of perspectives to be represented on one platform. Working together to persevere during these times.

In addition, I have demonstrated perseverance in my own life, this can be seen specifically when it comes to my mental health. Growing up I have always struggled with with my emotional and mental health, more specifically my attention span and my ability to manage stress. This has affected my life in every way possible, straining my relationships, effecting my grades and testing my confidence. School was always easy for me, I never had to study and could easily learn a subject without extensive help from my teachers. Unfortunately, this lead me to never really develop concrete study skills, along with never learning how to fail. The true problem arose once things began to get difficult. In time, it caused immense panic and stress, further clouding my ability to think clearly. Often to the point where I lose motivation to even try. When it comes to stress management, It used to be a crippling problem. Just the thought of receiving a disappointing grade sends my brain into a spiral, losing focus on my work due to the stress of the outcome. Stress management through years of therapy and anti-anxiety medications used to be a major part in my life. However, due to the prices of these resources, it is not financially sustainable for me to continue consistently. Not only is medical help expensive, often times mental health affects your ability to persevere through both difficult and basic daily tasks, in turn hindering the ability to attend class and keep up with grades. For a huge percentage of people facing these dilemmas, perseverance through willpower is one of the only ways to overcome these obstacles. Having the awareness of what is holding you back is an important step in understanding what you can do to overcome a problem. In order to overcome my problem with focus, I tend to limit my distractions as much as possible and reach out to my support systems when I'm feeling overwhelmed. When it comes to my mental health, I try to persevere and take one day at a time. No matter how hard things get, I remember the importance of perseverance. In high school, I did not have the constructive self-criticism that comes with hindsight. As I reached college I knew I could not continue with the habits that I have had in the past because they were not allowing me to succeed in school because than in turn was not allowing me to feel that I was going to succeed in life. Although I still persevered as I worked on developing better daily habits that were beneficial to my mental health. I realized that these habits were going to allow me to be a better student as well. I set up daily goals for myself in order to keep myself on track in work and school. Actually being able to balance my priorities allows me to better manage tasks that I once deemed to difficult because I was not organized mentally. This helps prevent the feeling of drowning in my everyday responsibilities, leaving me able to continue persevering through my daily struggles instead of giving up.

In conclusion, we all learned a lot from X and Douglass. They tell incredibly powerful stories that tell the lives of men that came from nothing to becoming one of the most influential and controversial men in the history of our nation through true perseverance. X was an advocate for

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the equality of African Americans in the United States, and played a major role in where we are today. Eventually becoming a strong advocate for the rights of all people no matter the color of their skin. Douglass is another hero in America because of his perseverance in breaking the walls down that have separated the 'whites' and 'blacks' in America for so long. He is an impactful figure because of his perseverance to put an end to slavery ever since his escape from enslavement. Although he began as a slave, he changed how Americans thought about race, and slavery, becoming a great role model for U.S citizens today. These two men are not only an inspiration to African-Americans, but many Americans who practice the value of equality, justice, and freedom for everyone.

1. Habecker, Shelly. 'Becoming African Americans: African immigrant youth in the United States and hybrid assimilation.' *Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2017, p. 55+. Gale OneFile: Diversity Studies,
2. Simms, Margaret. "Say African American or Black, but First Acknowledge the Persistence of Structural Racism." *Urban Institute, Urban Wire*, 1 Mar. 2018,

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