

Zion Light

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Achieving EnLIGHTenment Through Community, Art, & Action

Lightning fast licks from Jerry's Guitar, Nathan navigating through a sea of faces, two eyes meet in the crowd. Such a moment of spark is the very reason for my existence, as I come from hippie parents meeting on the Grateful Dead tour. I myself am grateful for the band and I'm proud to have grown up attending shows with my single mother while she vended dresses that she sewed from an easy up behind our car in the lots. I'm the second born of two kids; six months after my arrival my parents split up. Mom raised my sister Marin and I in Tempe, Arizona; Nathan, my father, headed back to Minnesota where ironically both of my parents originate from. What followed suit was the purest years of my life, in which various communities small and large served as an outlet in place of the presence of my father who I saw rarely and only on occasion. Rather than focus on who or what was lacking, I instead chose to embrace gratitude for what blessings were abundant; focusing my energy and efforts on trying to give back and benefit others who might be in need.

The external communities I belonged to impacted me greatly; however Film, Television, and Media have also played a vital role in my upbringing serving as a more internal sense of community within my small family. I still remember the great joy I had on Friday nights going out to get dinner and renting a movie from the Hollywood Video store. The feeling of anxiously awaiting the aisles of selections, hoping that my pick would be the first movie we watched that evening. Waiting for my mom to finish her tedious process at the salsa bar while we awaited our

food at the Rubios chain restaurant next door. Finally, watching the television program Ghost Whisperer while eating our delicious meals before beginning the movie night. Such was the case every Friday and so Film and Media became a great source of comfort for me in early years.

Even after school I would watch PBS religiously as I didn't have cable, meaning it was the only kids programming available; that is except for Saturdays in which I would wake up at five o'clock in the morning in order to watch Kids WB on the CW Channel, full of cartoons a bit less educational than what I watched on PBS. All being said, it's fair to say that I was an avid consumer of any content directed my way. Not having a Dad around to show me what sort of masculine oriented media I should direct my focus meant I was able to draw excitement from action heavy adventures I would choose for the family to watch as well as more narrative driven stories chosen by my mom or sister. The road since has been rocky and unclear, yet I've always found myself attempting to focus my eye on the light at the end of the tunnel.

Only when my family later moved to California, did I fully come to appreciate my time in Arizona and the innocence I maintained there. Growing up in a community in which the population was largely Spanish speaking Latinx families, I quite literally grew up without a distinction of color, race/ethnicity, or language. For me, I frequently went over to Spanish speaking houses and was surrounded by a diverse crowd regularly; therefore, the idea stuck deep from an early age that people being different from me or my family was a natural and positive aspect of life. Only after moving to California, in order to go to a "good school," did I have to be surrounded by a largely affluent and caucasian community. There, I first experienced the concept of conformity; Clayton, California: a town in which nearly every house & family looks uniform. Not to say that complexities and exceptions don't exist, but to me such a community demonstrated a shift in experience. Before, differences were celebrated and perfectly normal;

after moving, I noticed that being an outsider, a bit different, or proudly individualistic was seemingly frowned upon at the social or community levels.

While I managed to make a few friends, my social experience was not overall as positive as back in Arizona. I found myself once again drawn to various media as a form of escapism. An epic onslaught of sitcoms on television became one of my after-school rituals. I can still hear the loud uproarious noises from the city bus I would take home from school; I remember the thrill I would have pulling the bright yellow chord, dangling above the window next to me. Another routine upon arriving back to my vacant home after a long day of school was playing video games on my Playstation or computer. Around the 7th grade, I became so much more enamored by the virtual worlds I immersed myself in than by the real world around me. So much so, I no longer regularly went outside to run around and play which also meant a lack of exercise and sunlight. Ultimately these factors lead me to gain weight from one particular summer diet of Doritos and Coca-Cola; as well as become a hideous shade of pasty white.

Seemingly unbothered by a lack of real world connection, each day I found purpose from a sense of community and belonging online. Playing Minecraft and other games with people from around the world allowed me to create bonds and friendships with those I might never have otherwise come across; even if it meant remaining mostly checked out of my life in “the real world.” However, there was a middle-school class that shifted my outlook into one more focused on what was going on outside of my computer screen. Video Production and Advanced Video taken in the 7th and 8th grade represented a moment in which there was a metaphorical clearing of the virtual fog and my path finally became more clear. My sister recommended the class and teacher, and had achieved notoriety for a video she mostly created. I took a primarily backseat

role my first year in video production, but finally had the opportunity to shine in the advanced class.

Not only did I have the ability to plan out and execute a vision for the primary action sequence of our final video, but I did so working alongside peers. I learned during the experience about the importance of collaborating with others from differing viewpoints in order to ensure that not one person or outlook has too much control over a project. Creating something that each of my group members could proudly look back on was one thing, but the greatest achievement was in finally demonstrating that the artistic vision driving me forward could in fact come to physical fruition. Furthermore, I got to see the final film projected on a big screen during our film festival taking place at a local theater. By the time it came to apply for the Clayton Arts Academy at the highschool I was set to attend, I had a feeling that more opportunities for similar experiences were on the horizon.

The Clayton Arts Academy (CAA) accepted me into a community that represented and uplifted those unafraid of being unique or non conforming. Like educational communities I had previously belonged to, it combined grade levels in order to allow for collaboration between upperclassmen and underclassmen. The “specialties” as they were called included Drama, Photography, Video, and traditional Art. While I previously found passion pursuing video production, chose to do Drama and focus on acting. I’ve always thought performance was a passion of mine since I was little and put on shows with my sister, but I never expected the Drama program to have such a profound effect on my confidence, leadership, and writing ability. I was given several opportunities over my four years to perform and even compete scenes and skits that I wrote. Winning an award at a theater competition solidified for the first time that my talent and hard work could stand up to scrutiny even among professional work.

The Clayton Arts Academy was also the catalyst that first introduced me to the medium of Slam Poetry, which I quickly took a liking to. Finally, I could articulate my own thoughts, feelings, and ideas in a creative way; using my powerful stage voice not only to move forward a live narrative, but instead to provoke resonance and feeling within the audience. I could never forget the overwhelming humming and snapping reactions that echoed throughout a large audience as you spit your truth in front of the microphone on stage. There is no better feeling than communal validation in which the words you speak from your heart are accepted and appreciated by complete strangers. Such an aspect of the craft really caught my attention, allowing me to imagine the impact I could potentially make in my community.

The Youth Speaks Teen Poetry Slam is a contest for under 21 artists in the Bay Area to come and compete their poetry, eventually having the potential to make it into a national competition. In 2017, I made it to the second round of the semi-finals before being disqualified which was an achievement for my 17 year old self at the time. The real important aspect of the competition was the fact that it represented my first opportunity to embrace conscious activism. I had been unhappy with my government and finally voiced my frustrations through rhyme, for an audience full of people who snapped, hummed, cheered, and stood up with me. Such an experience was like no other, and thus I knew that no matter what path I followed, it would need to be one in which I speak truth to power whenever the opportunity presents itself.

Achieving success at an early age in acting and activism imbued a sense of purpose and confidence within myself. Learning that I wasn't accepted into any of my top University picks certainly put a damper on my spirits. I instead attended SBCC in Santa Barbara, one of the top city colleges in the nation and also the community college my sister attended. I once again studied acting, but didn't find the same success and passion that had previously followed me.

Furthermore, living hundreds of miles away from the small town I attended high school proved to also be a bit of a culture shock. Gripping with living on my own for the first time as well as searching for a new passion and major left me without much of a drive to be involved at my school. That was until I took Screenwriting, in which I realized my passion for film and writing could ultimately be combined. Suddenly my motivation began to pick up again and I prepared myself to transfer to UCSB via the TAG program.

Becoming a Film and Media Studies major has really brought much of my life full circle, as well as reaffirmed my confidence in following my passions. Working with peers within my community in order to create media entertainment for educational purposes or for others to enjoy has restored a sense of purpose within my own life and work. More importantly, it has helped me to define my own identity as well as what community truly means to me. I see community as the environment in which we will simply survive or have the opportunity to thrive. Identity can often be a reflection of how we react within such communities. Identity can be malleable, and therefore we have the capability of shifting and changing over the course of our lives. For me, the greatest moment in which I made a choice that affected my identity forever after was when I got my name changed just before starting college. In which a true turning point of self actualization began to occur.

Upon turning 18, I had my name legally changed to my mother's last name: Light. My mother changed her name after her divorce and subsequent spiritual awakening, becoming Azurayah Light. My first two names being Zion and River, I felt that Light was a much more fitting representation of who I had become. While my father's last name, Davis, was still important to me in some way, it did not define me as a man. Being from a single mother and facing the challenges laid out before me in this life is what has defined me. Thus I went through

the process of getting my name legally changed. Becoming Zion River Light was a point of no return, in which I finally knew that the path in front of me was one of my own choosing.

Furthermore, I was months out from leaving for college and thus I was ready to start the next chapter of my life with a new but familiar name.

While my new name didn't appear until my second year in academics, having the name change official was an important aspect of defining my character and experiences. Suddenly I did research for topics and worked on projects of my own choosing. I had access to library databases in which I could learn extensively about almost anything instead of just what was assigned or required of me. By the time I made it to UCSB, I decided to go out of my way to pursue a Minor in Professional Writing. Having a name that you resonate and identify with is crucial when taking on goals that may be a stretch or nerve wracking to tackle. I could imagine the name and lettering of Zion River Light as one not only professional, but that inspires action and engagement. Getting into the minor track for Civic Engagement solidified my confidence in myself as a civic engager. Civic Engagement represents not just a choice to be consciously aware and to act, but rather a responsibility to take such brave action and show courage in the face of resistance, conformity, or confrontation.

As a Film and Media Studies major, I feel called to channel my passion for social issues toward the media coverage of these issues. As an activist in favor of civic engagement, I've been called towards injustices that are rarely documented or properly covered by the mainstream media. Learning about the very short list of conglomerates that control most every faucet of our media in my FAMST courses has inspired me to combat the subjective lens that these billion dollar conglomerates project onto many issues; often to their own benefit. However, in order to challenge the structural integrity of modern media communication, I first need to comprehend

how to create and implement the ideal improvements I'm proposing. By pursuing a career within Film and Media and working within a smaller film crew community for the sake of creating meaningful and beneficial content for a larger grand scale community is by far the most integral method for achieving civic engagement within my own life and story.