



*Kristen Shaw*

Second Place

Senior Division

When I think about 'Laws of Life', many cliches and common terms come to mind. Yet, I don't believe I can define my law of life using the ideas of others. Life is all about experience. We learn by experimenting. We learn from mistakes. So, when faced with the challenge of writing this essay, I decided I would use a very personal experience of mine to illustrate one of the most important lessons I have learned in the course of my life.

Having struggled through the teen years, I can personally say that they are some of the most confusing years people must face. You are told what to do, how to act, who to be and where to go. You are neither child nor adult. It feels as if you're in oblivion at times. It is like you're being tugged at from all sides. In the midst of this crazy world, it is easy to understand how one can lose their sense of identity.

Two years ago, this very thing happened to me. I did not recognize my own face. I was petrified of the future because I had absolutely no clue who I was. How could I decide what I would become? Because I had no identity, I lost all faith in myself. I felt as if I had disappeared. I was nothing. How could I be important to others or make a difference in this world if I did not know myself? I was terrified. I now know that I was not alone in my feelings, but at the time I felt so alone. I was a freak. I was completely alienated.

Instead of taking my frustrations and fears out on others, I kept everything inside. I became a shell. No one could get in, and nothing could get out. I never asserted myself because I believed my opinion did not matter. It was only a matter of time before these pent up feelings exploded inside me. I invented a way to make myself special. I would regain my identity. To do this, I must fit in with society, and to fit in I decided I must be beautiful. To be beautiful, I must be thin; then people would like me. I would be listened to and respected. Slowly, I began to restrict my diet. I had a list of 'good' foods and 'bad' foods. The 'bad' list got larger with each day. I obsessively exercised to the point where I'd begin to shake. Although to most people this would be torture, I actually enjoyed it. For a brief time I felt I finally had control over part of my life. I was significant and could effect a change. People complimented me on my appearance. I was a somebody again. I was special. This euphoria was short-lived. Those close to me began realizing something was wrong. I was constantly tired and my life revolved around food and exercise. All my favourite pastimes no longer mattered. Most noticeably though, I became emaciated. At 5 feet 6 inches, I only weighed 100 pounds. My family and friends were terrified. With every attempt they made to help me I worsened. I refused to believe I had a problem. How dare they tell me I was anorexic! I was humiliated. There was no way I had that disease. It could never happen to me.

The ironic thing was, I fought against the only people who could save me. My so-called regained identity was completely false. I had become the disease. Instead of controlling my own life, it now controlled me. I was becoming lost within myself. Inside and out I was wasting away.

The turning point for me was when I realized how much love and support my family and friends had for me. They did not abandon or shun me. They did not consider me strange.

Throughout this entire turmoil, they never left my side, even when I tried my very best to push them away. I realized I was really important to them. I must be special after all.

Through therapy, love and support, I slowly began to see the underlying emotional causes of my physical plight. I realized that this disease was a cry for help. It was how I dealt with my stress and fear. I was confused and felt I had no one to turn to. Most of all though, I recognized the fact that I did not value myself. I spent so much time trying to please others and fit in that I never looked after me. That is why I did not have an identity. I never took the time to learn about myself. I truly believe it is important that I share my story with others. If I can possibly save even one person from suffering the same fate, I feel my struggle was worthwhile.

I still have to work against setbacks and doubts, but every day I feel I'm getting stronger. I've learned to express myself, I speak my mind and make decisions based on what I want. I'm no longer afraid to be judged by others.

I believe the most important law of life that I or anyone else can learn from this experience is that we must believe in ourselves. We must accept and cherish the fact that we are different. This is what makes us special. I've learned that my unique attributes define who I am. I don't have to hide from the world anymore. I have an identity and I am proud of who I am. I encountered many hardships on the way to learning this law, but now that I have, my confused world has become so simple. All I must do is remain true to myself and the rest of my life will fall into place, exactly the way it should.