

# The Interminable Search for Gold Stars

By Ariel Eckblad

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## 'I AM'

My life, to date, could best be characterized as a hoarding of gold stars each 'star' contributing to a constellation of 'I am' statements that came to comprise my identity. Five gold stars on a Tuesday in Kindergarten, I am likable. Repeated soloist in youth choir, I am talented. Twice class president in High School, I am a leader. College valedictorian, I am smart. It was, I admit, quite a validating tapestry of 'I am'-s. My sense of identity shaped by an amalgam of stars and solos. Of course, there were the not so positive indicators 52% on my Algebra final, the social coup in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, the fellowship interview that ended with me in tears. Still, I knew I was a likeable, talented, and smart leader. I had stars to prove it.

If I could hazard a guess, I am not alone in this. I would think that a series of 'I am' statements have come to shape each of our identities, every achievement and every failure adding to the tapestry. Our sense of self has the potential to be a never-ending cycle of parental affirmations, parental disaffirmations, a wealth of friends, a dearth of friends, good grades, bad grades, college acceptances, college rejections, job promotions, job demotions, a happy marriage, an unexpected divorce. And so it continues each occurrence internalized, no

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matter how contradictory. I cannot say for sure that this is a necessarily ‘bad’ phenomenon. On its face, it seems quite rational. We are social beings trying to determine ‘who we are’ and so we look to external indicators for validation (and invalidation).

However, I realized in the course of ‘negotiating my 1L identity’ that this reliance on external indicators may not be as ‘rational’ as many of us believe. Well, no. First, my stars were stolen. Eight months later, I realized.

‘AND THEREFORE’

1L was, by definition, a perfect storm. The summer before it began, I decided I would rise above ‘it.’ I had come to learn the law. I did not come to get the best grades. I had come to make life-long friendships. I did not come to view my 79 section-mates as points on a bell curve. I had come to assess the macro-level structures that shape our society. I did not come to turn inward and drown in insecurity. Absolutely nothing in 1L worked according to plan. The moment I entered the Wasserstein Hall, Caspersen Student Center I shed all that enlightened mumbo jumbo, quickly jettisoning it for a sort of ‘I am going to win in the most traditional sense of the word even if that means eviscerating everyone in my path’ mentality. This shift, occurring in a haze of fear/insecurity/newness, was personally imperceptible. I was not aware of what had occurred until late October, when Legal Research and Writing stripped me of my stars.

Prior to October, I had been doing relatively ‘well.’ There was too much reading, too little time, and just enough anxiety for me to ignore that I was slowly unraveling. However, that October morning virtually no one was listening to the lecture on *Mathews v. Eldridge*. Instead, everyone sat silently staring at their phones, incessantly

refreshing their HLS emails. I was no different. The rare moments I was not staring at my small screen I was desperately watching others observe theirs. I wanted a sign. It came. A girl to my right that I had come to really like, I suddenly liked a whole lot less. Her smile was a little too big; her eyes had an annoyingly knowing twinkle as she beamed at her small screen. My hand was actually shaking. I kept refreshing. And then there it was – no subject, short message (‘Enclosed is your closed memo’), and one attachment. I opened it, scrolling past the ‘constructive commentary’ to the grade at the bottom.

I somehow managed not to cry until 7:45 pm. In a panic I met with my professor. It was pointless, her words were jumbled ‘blah...great start...blah...stronger use of case law...blah... question presented not pithy...’ I really could not hear through the cloud. At some point, I called my mother. She asked one question, ‘what happened?’ I was ready to launch into my rant about how the grading was unfair, how I had not known what pithy meant until 30 minutes ago, how I was exhausted. She stopped me and repeated the question, this time clarifying, ‘No, what happened to you coming to law school to simply learn?’ The question just hung in the air buttressed by a hint of self-righteous accuracy. I had no response. So I scoffed, mumbled some iteration of ‘whatever Mom’ under my breath, and politely hung up.

It took about eight months for me to fully comprehend what had happened. My stars had been stolen. And it shook me to my core. At some point between the Duck Tour at Orientation and that morning in October, it had all become a test, a jockeying for space and place, a hunt for external indicators, a search for stars. I found none. Awkward cold calls, middling grades, no Law Review write-on, no EIP what ‘I am’ statements accompany those indicators? What happened to the learning for the sake of learning? I

forsook it when something in me realized that, in this paradigm, my reassuring tapestry of 'I am'-s was tattering.

On that October morning, I was hoping that my closed memo grade would give me proof. I wanted proof that I was still a likeable, talented, and smart leader. 1L provided me with none. Why did it matter? Why was I so desperate for the external indicators, the validation, the stars? I now realize that my sense of self-worth depended on it. Each indicator, each 'I am,' had become a testament to my individual worth. Adjoining each of those 'I am' statements was an 'and therefore.' I am \_\_\_\_\_ and therefore I am worthy. My sense of self-worth was wholly contingent on the 'proof' provided by external indicators. And so, negotiating my 1L identity became a proxy for negotiating my identity writ large—once the stars were gone, was I still worthy?

#### A FOOL'S ERRAND

If I could hazard one more guess, I am not alone in this either. Many, if not all, of us have at some point equated (or conflated) external validation with worth. Countless times I have done the mental math: X number of text messages a day = worthy of friends, Y GPA = worthy of adoration, Z title = worthy of respect. X, Y, and Z each some form of proof. Maybe much of what drives my desire for 'proof' is a gnawing fear that perhaps I am not 'worthy' of love and human connection. Maybe that is what drives us all? That, however, is another piece for another author.

Instead, I will say this: in a world where titles change, relationships alter, performance varies, and self-perceptions morph, I will never have permanent 'proof' of my worth. 'External indicators,' when available, often paint a confused and contradictory picture. It seems that trying to use them as proof of anything is a fool's

errand. Is there not always someone somewhere more \_\_\_\_\_, a scenario in which you cannot \_\_\_\_\_, a paradigm in which your ability to \_\_\_\_\_ is completely irrelevant? Does this then mean that we are suddenly unworthy? I sure hope not.

I admit I have absolutely no idea what I am talking about. I have no supporting theories, no expert opinions, and no substantiating evidence. These could be the incoherent ramblings of a confused law student, trying to universalize a completely personal experience. It could be that this is not so much a 'realization' as a re-conceptualization. Either way, the only proof 1L provided was no proof at all. I am eternally grateful. 1L forced me to question whether self-worth is something that can ever be verified, quantified, or legitimized. Maybe we are worthy, just because? That sounds right, but I honestly cannot say for sure. At present there is only one question I can answer definitively — once the stars are gone, are we still worthy? Yes, and I have no proof.