

Externship Journal and Reflection

Anonymous<sup>1</sup>

## Playing Beach Volleyball

March 16 (entry written June 16)

I received a somewhat random email from an acquaintance, Beth, with whom I used to volunteer at the local democrats' office. It was an email sent to a lot of people, asking if anyone would be interested in joining a beach volleyball team this summer. My first thought was a subconscious "I don't do stuff like that," as I clicked past it to see what else was in my inbox.

That day, I started to think about joining the team. What would it be like? How uncoordinated am I really? I started picturing the fun times shared by a group of people bonding over a game on the beach, followed by a celebratory burger and drinks afterwards. The more I thought about it, the more I thought, "I *want* to do stuff like that." I have never been very athletic and, ever since my anxiety disorder developed around the time I was 9 or 10 years old, I have normally avoided situations that call on me to be outgoing and social with strangers.

Mary, a coworker of mine who I have become friends with, walked past my desk awhile later. Without thinking about it I blurted out, "Hey do you want to join

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<sup>1</sup> Identifying information has been changed.

a beach volleyball league with me?” She paused for a moment and then said that it sounded like fun. With Mary on board, it was going to be hard to chicken out of this. “Great,” I sarcastically thought. It felt like my subconscious had forced me to try something new. Perhaps more accurately, I had asked Mary in order to provide myself a catalyst to make the decision that, deep down, I wanted to make.

March 19 (entry written June 16)

I’ve waited a few days to send Beth an email committing myself to the team, but finally hit the send button. The past couple of days I’ve sort of dropped casually into conversation that I’m on a beach volleyball team this summer. I liked the way it sounded. It made me feel outgoing, extroverted, and like someone who enjoys a physical challenge. I don’t think I normally feel any of those things, so it was interesting to become that person (albeit in a fictional role I have yet to make real). I’ve always been in with the “artsy” crowd or debating politics, so visualizing myself on a beach playing sports with strangers makes me laugh a little.

My next goal is to get some shorts that aren’t made from old jeans and a volleyball to start practicing asap. I figure spending some time at my less crowded, less athletic local beach will make it easier to adjust to flailing my arms at this ball, hoping just to make contact.

May 30 (entry written June 16)

I haven't seen my mom in awhile so we decided to meet up for lunch in Wheaton, which is halfway between her house and mine. I've sort of forgotten about volleyball for the past several days...the season doesn't start for another two weeks so out of sight, out of mind I guess. Over lunch, my mom asked what I have been up to since the honeymoon, and joining the team came up. We both kind of laughed at the thought of me on a team that didn't involve debate or political candidates.

I suppose my experiences volunteering for President Obama may come in handy as I try learning volleyball with strangers. I learned how to work with strangers to win a campaign that I felt strongly about, perhaps I could draw from that to win a volleyball game. The big difference being I was confident that Obama could win, not so confident in the idea that I can win a volleyball match.

Well after lunch, we happened to stroll past a sporting goods store. Mom mentioned she needed to buy my stepdad some fishing tackle for a birthday present, so in we go. That anxiety byproduct of being hyper-aware of my surroundings came flooding back. As soon as I entered, I could almost feel the athletic eyes of the salespeople nimbly fixating on me, with my thick-rimmed glasses and bad posture. "What's she looking for?" they surely were asking themselves. They probably assumed I was looking for industrial strength sunscreen to preserve my blindingly white skin. I found a cheap beach volleyball

and grabbed a couple pairs of mesh shorts off the sale rack. I quickly paid for my things and completed this little journey into the sporty side.

June 16

Today is the big day, time to put the toes to the sand. I really meant to get out to the beach by my house and practice, but life happens and I just didn't have the time. I'm a little nervous that I was not able to experience the feeling of hitting the ball and learning to balance myself running around in the sand. These abilities seem relatively mundane, but my anxiety builds up the most mundane things. I can feel panic just sitting in a room if I don't feel I have "prepared" myself to be there.

Luckily I tried on my new sporty shorts this morning, because there was a slight problem. Apparently in my mad rush to get out of the sporting goods store, I grabbed girl's shorts, not women's. Oh it's okay, I have those ironic 70's shorts I bought as a joke for our 5k run/walk fundraiser last fall. They'll have to do because I'm late for work.

We got a ride to Pebble Beach. I've never been to this beach before, it's huge. We couldn't find our court, and it reminded me of frantically looking for my classroom on the first day of school, not wanting to stand out. Using our best detective skills we reasoned the nets up at the far end of the beach are probably where we need to go. As we get close to the nets, I can feel my stomach in knots. Girls in two-pieces with zero body fat are leaping, spiking, and basically

not looking like idiots. Thankfully they are in the “advanced twos” and we are in the “recreational sixes.” When I signed up, I made Beth promise that “recreational” equals “just for fun.” I silently remind myself of this as Mary and I search for court 10.

We get to what we reason is our court and meet up with Beth. She suggests we start a bump circle to warm up. The first few times I hit the ball I am surprised at how much it stings! My arms are red, but I think they kind of numb a little so I stop noticing the burn after a little bit.

After receiving some awkward looks for a few minutes, I realize it’s not my skill that these folks on the sideline are thinking about, they’re wondering why we’re on their court. Oops, we weren’t on court 10 after all. First the wrong shorts, now the wrong court. Not the best start to my adventure but, so far, it definitely isn’t as bad as I had built it up to be either.

The rest of our team arrives and introductions start. Everyone seems nice, and to my pleasant surprise, most of them don’t seem too athletic either! We warm up a little more, and I make a couple jokes. I was really surprised at how comfortable I felt as we started to strategize on important tips to remember. I think our comparable athletic abilities and, more importantly, our ability to laugh at ourselves went a long way in making me feel like I could be myself. The primary tip we agree on is that we need to call the ball if we are going to hit it, so we don’t have to people go for it and back off at the last minute because they think the other guy is getting it.

We lose the first game and win the second (it's apparently 2 out of 3). I'm definitely not ready for an overhand serve, but I manage to get an underhand serve over the net, so I consider it a success.

At one of the last plays of the third game, I run for the ball. I hear a teammate, Ben, call it. But it's too late, I can't stop my momentum. We collide. I don't know what happens to the ball, but I do hear my toe crack. Maybe I don't really hear it, but that's how I remember it. Anyway, I think I broke my toe. A cold wave of nauseating pain sweeps through me, and I shake my head. After a few minutes on the sideline, I pull off the ice pack a lifeguard had given me. Swollen and red, but I can move it a little. Perhaps it's just sprained, but probably not the best way to end my first day.



*My poor swollen toes!*

We lost our last game, and headed (or hobbled) to Max's Pub for burgers and beers. Although I didn't feel the greatest, I enjoyed chatting with my new teammates and getting to know them. I felt somewhat uncomfortable sitting at a table full of people I don't know, but having the shared experience of the game helped to break the ice. Additionally, my swollen toe was a great topic to fall back on if I felt unsure of what to talk about.

June 24

Last night's game was rained out, and I was relieved only because it gave my toe time to heal. I'm hoping that having a week off doesn't make me lose my momentum. Yes I know one night of playing so far hardly constitutes momentum, but I had a positive experience and want to make sure I keep that fresh in my mind. It's easy to build up the anxiety provoking moments (being out of shape, not being able to find my court, interacting with new people etc), but if I can remember the good feeling it gave me to complete that game, it will be easier to continue to go. After last week's game, I noticed a boost of confidence. It wasn't anything too specific, but I felt a little more accomplished.

June 30

Thankfully the weather was a little cooler today, so it was a little easier to run after the ball when I inevitably hit it into someone else's court. My toe felt better tonight. I was a little nervous about how it would fair on the sand, but our sand tonight was damp and tightly packed so it wasn't too stressful on my toe. Mary was babysitting her boyfriend's son on the sidelines today, so I felt a little more alone out there. I think I'm under the impression that if I have a friend with me, my faults are more acceptable than they would be to strangers. I can accept my faults better in front of friends than these teammates that I don't know.

After mentally accepting that it was just me out there tonight, I got my head in the game pretty quickly. It's amazing how distractingly fun the games end

up being. The opposing team was nowhere near as good as the team two weeks ago, I had several good serves, and we actually won all three games tonight! I had too much homework to celebrate with the team, but the adrenalin carried over to keep my chugging along on my homework all night. I never realized how a little exercise can help actually *give* you energy.

July 7

Tonight was probably our best performance so far. I've found that a teammate, Jeremy, and I have a shared competitive side that we let out during the games. Without realizing it, I'll start cheering good plays, calling plays for people, and lifting my team's spirits after a bad volley. It's rare for me to find myself acting impulsively "in the moment." I've noticed that when I realize I'm impulsively calling things out, I get a little anxious. I'm worried I have not carefully thought out my words before I say them, and that is not something I'm used to. Hopefully this will help me become a little more spontaneous, as well as little more trusting of myself to communicate well on the spot.

July 14

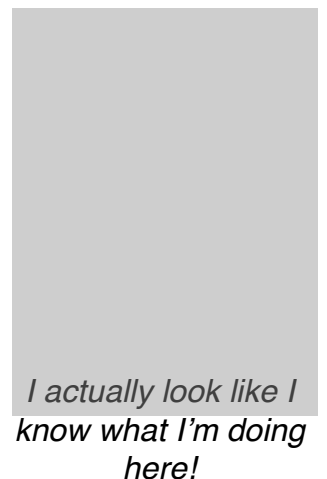
This was the first game that Mary didn't join me. Walking to the beach, I felt apprehension. I feel like this time I'm all on my own. I don't know why having a friend there makes a difference, but I definitely noticed a higher level of anxiety. There's no one to awkwardly laugh with as we try to find our court, and no one to



fall back on if I'm feeling shy. So I took a deep breath and walked onto the sand. Of course it didn't take long before I spotted my team and made my way over. The games went smoothly and we won our first two. On the third game, I decided to try an overhand serve. I had been watching people do it on other courts, and from my experiences hitting the ball this season, it seemed like something I could do. My first try, it went over the net! I made a few more decent serves before I hit one out of bounds. I am simply stunned that I was able to pick up this skill by watching others around me. My team members were also surprised and all complimented my new ability!

This gave me a huge boost of confidence. I picture myself as a physically awkward, clumsy person. I tend to spill things frequently, and I'm taller than average women and I think that makes me feel a little bit more lanky and self-conscious. Seeing that I can accomplish something that weeks ago seemed "advanced" was encouraging. My husband took photos of me at the game and I love these shots that look like I know what I'm doing! It's a rewarding feeling. I think like any cognitive behavioral therapy, the reward of a positive experience will encourage me to try more experiences like this. Perhaps you'll see me on a dance floor sometime soon.

July 15



What does my panic disorder mean to my daily life? It means I am vigilant. I am always monitoring the way I feel physically and emotionally, scanning for anything out of the ordinary. You learn to live with the feeling of anticipation for some unknown bad thing in the future. To say the least it is exhausting, but an even worse side effect is that it dilutes every day experiences. I find it hard to be fully “in” a situation because I am always partially lost in my own head, scanning for threats.

I have been on medication for my disorder for a couple of years. Even though they are never gone, it eases the symptoms. Since starting treatment, I have gradually begun the cognitive behavioral therapy method of putting myself in situations that invoke strong amounts of anxiety. Much of those tests occurred during my work on the Obama campaign in 2008. I had to lead meetings for volunteers, take long road trips with new volunteers, and knock on strangers doors. These were all challenging because new social situations take me from my comfort zone of family, friends, and familiar places.

In this instance I succeeded, but not without a fair share of setbacks. There were days that I couldn't get myself to go for fear of a panic attack, and I would come up with excuses for why I couldn't join everyone because I was embarrassed by my perceived weakness. That feeling of failing and of being left behind is something that I hold on to. You may think it is a negative thing to hold on to, but I find it a source of strength to push myself because I don't want to be left behind again. Once I framed the volleyball experience as something I saw

others doing but felt I couldn't, I was able to make a 'left behind' connection, and gathered the resolve to see this challenge through.

On inauguration day, my boyfriend proposed. My life slowly calmed down into a routine. I wasn't passionately immersed in an exciting campaign, I was just living a normal life of work, school, and home. I was having fewer battles with my anxiety but I was also not putting myself in situations where I had to challenge myself. I think that as intimidating as it sounded, the offer to join a beach volleyball team provided me with a new opportunity to prove my anxiety does not control me.

I don't know that I'll ever be "cured" from this anxiety. Part of it is a biological makeup, and part is a strong aspect of my past experiences. My best hope for the future is to see times that I start feeling anxious as opportunities rather than threats; that I should give up the flight and start to fight.

July 21

Today Mary and I split a cab to Pebble Beach. Something inherently funny about taking a taxi to the beach. It sort of feels like we are lazy before we even get started! When we made it to our court the team on the court next to us asked if they could use one of our people since our team had several extra players on the sidelines. I became nervous that somehow I would be picked to play with them, which luckily did not happen. The reason I was nervous was because I was really looking forward to trying out my overhand serve again to help our team win.

It was not because of my characteristic hesitance to play with strangers, and the lack of that apprehension was noticeable and rewarding. Even with my anxiety, I find it an odd thing to feel success simply from not having a negative feeling or a desire for avoidance. It is achievement by not doing something.

Luckily a different teammate volunteered to play with them. The team we played against was about equal to us in skill. We beat them two out of three and I had quite a few nice overhand serves. Unfortunately one of them hit an opponent right in the face! Awkward for me, but it was probably a lot more embarrassing for her.

I've noticed a couple people on my team are really good at bumping, and a couple others it seems like we never know where the ball will fly after they hit it. I've been observing them for the past couple of weeks and seeing a difference in the way they actually make contact with the ball. Those who seemingly have no control over direction or distance seem to be hitting more defensively. It looks like they brace themselves and then let the ball sort of bounce off of their forearms. Those who seem to have control actually absorb the ball a little. Their arms seem to work as shocks which take the ball's momentum, then redirect the ball as they see fit. I mentioned my observations to a teammate who seemed to know what he was doing. He agreed and also said it is very important to keep your arms parallel to keep good control of the ball. I think I will work on these techniques for the last few games of the season and see if I notice a difference.

July 28

Mary couldn't make it again today, but I was definitely more comfortable this time. I feel like my increasing abilities and the resulting confidence lessen my need to have a friend nearby for support. We had no extra players this time, so there was no need to sub in or out. Everyone there just played for the whole time. I was happy to have the extra time to practice my new bumping strategy.

It was a little distracting to focus on technique and just trying to hit the ball, but I think I got the hang of my new form pretty well. My bumps seemed noticeably more controlled and directed. I could pass it to a setting teammate rather than just pray for it to shoot over and stay in bounds. The game is definitely more fun when you can get solid volleys going that incorporate strategy, bumping, setting, and spiking. It makes each play more exciting and cooperative.

August 2

For the past couple of months, I've been feeling very exhausted from my job for various reasons. Pay cuts, additional responsibilities, and staff turnover had been increasing my level of stress and made me feel like I never had enough energy. Based on my experiences with volleyball, I thought maybe more exercise would help give me a boost. I started riding our exercise bike nightly (well, *most* nights) a few weeks ago, and have noticed an uptick in my metabolism. It makes

me feel more in control of my health and I am starting to notice a little bit more general energy lately.

August 4

Today is the playoffs. Winners move forward. We, however, did not. It was bittersweet. I felt so happy with my successful endeavor, but sad that I couldn't keep playing! I've already decided to sign up again next summer. Mary and I decided that we are ready to try a four person team rather than a six person next summer. It will give us more actual opportunity to make contact on each play, and it will be a little less crowded on the court. I'm boarding a train to Baltimore tomorrow, and I am excited to have the time to really reflect back on the past couple months.

### Final Journal Assignment

The highlights of my experience with the volleyball team involve my ability to reprioritize my learning process in certain circumstances. Normally I lean heavy on conceptualizing and reflective observation. Volleyball forced to take a deep breath and jump in to an unknown experience. I realized that participating in an experience allowed more insight when I turned to reflective observation. That

allowed me to actively experiment with my more informed observations. In the volleyball experience, I think the abstract conceptualization usually followed the rest of these experiences. Sitting at home reflecting in my journal after a game provided the time to look back and think about the broader meanings and lessons learned from my exposure to this new environment.

Earlier in my journal I had hoped this experience would encourage me to become more spontaneous, and to trust myself to improvise in conversation. As far as spontaneity goes, I *did* just take a train to Baltimore with my mom and her intern. I just decided to go and planned this trip about two weeks ago. Normally I would feel the need for more preparation. When I remember the feelings of nervousness stepping onto the sand alone for the first time, I remember how quickly that nervousness can fade when distracted by something I want to experience. It helped me take the step on to the train to sit with a girl who I don't know for the next 20 hours. I also think that playing volleyball has taught me that some things cannot be prepared for, but will still turn out okay. You don't always know where the ball will land, but when it comes to you and you respond, the outcome can be great.

As for being better on my feet with conversations, I've realized that in some instances the opposite is true. A few days ago, I had an interview for a position I was very interested in. I bombed the interview, but pulling from this experience, I realized that the more I send my resume out, the more hands on experience I will get with interviewing and resume revisions to boost my

improvised communication skills. It reminds me that in volleyball, those spontaneous times the ball came to me didn't start out great. My chances of a successful hit were directly tied to my experience and practice, and by learning from my mistakes. This realization that my volleyball lessons are helping me keep a positive and proactive attitude towards my job hunt is inspiring!

I've decided to be more adventurous with my choices. Instead of only applying for jobs that are quite possibly below my skill set, I have sent my resume to jobs that would really challenge me. Just today I set up an interview for Friday with a position that could offer me many challenging new experiences. While I have the standard nervousness for the interview, I believe my newly found confidence in my ability to "dive in" will make me much more successful in the interview. Even if I don't get the position, I now know that taking that step on the sand is worth it.

When I took the Kolb Learning Style Inventory, I was surprised that I fell somewhat in the middle. I did not have a glaring weak area or obvious strong suit. However, the test made me much more mindful of how I learn. More than the test results indicated, I was able to identify my strengths and weaknesses. I know from my anxiety that actively experimenting and experiencing things is harder for me than thinking about them. My anxiety makes it very easy for me to put myself into hypothetical situations to assess risk, and I've learned to rely far too heavily on that hypothetical realm.



This reliance made it difficult to put myself out there on a weekly basis. However, with each approaching week, my hesitance lessened and my positive anticipation grew. It reminded me of the proverb, whose author I do not know, “Once begun, half done.” Getting myself out there was half the battle. Once I made it through the first game, I was on a roll that gradually became easier and easier.

I am at home learning from books. I can sit and digest the information, I can cross-reference, and I can take my time to comprehend the information. Experiential learning is a play-by-play, in the moment method that is a “shoot now, ask questions later” mentality that, to me, seemed impulsive and limiting. I never thought that I would learn better from doing than reading, but volleyball taught me this is not always true. Browsing online for volleyball tips and strategies was pointless without first getting out there and experiencing it for myself. While books will still be my preferred method, this experience has taught me the value of getting my hands dirty in the pursuit of knowledge.