The narrative of society during my educational career is one of contrasting economic and social influences. I was born in 1972 to a 17-year-old mother who never finished high school and a 28-year-old father who worked as a substitute high school teacher by day, and a factory worker at a food cannery by night. The Watergate scandal was taking place the year I was born, and the space race was coming to a close, with the last Apollo mission finishing in December of the same year. The cold war was heating up, and nationally we were turning an eye towards defense against the USSR and China. The free-wheeling days of love and flowers of the 60’s had all but come to a close, but the exploration of drugs continued well into the 70’s, and the paranoia against foreign forces and mutual nuclear destruction of the 70’s and 80’s was just starting to percolate through the American imagination. My particular generation found themselves living between two different diametrically opposed realities; one formed in our early childhood, and one developed in our teen years. By the time the mid-80’s rolled around, it felt as if the phonographic album narrating the tone of our culture was flipped over, and the track of “All You Need is Love” was discarded for the B-Side track of “Money Makes the World Go Round.” My own experience of this transitional period left me with conflicting experiences and values, which created inside of me a cognitive dissonance that I struggled to resolve over the length of my educational career. However, there were several themes that consistently carried through my educational career that helped keep me afloat amongst the chaos.

A disparity in economic and cultural backgrounds made my parents an unlikely couple, and both apparently on the outside track of their own respective family circles. My mother was not more than a child herself when she became responsible for raising a son, and my dad worked as hard as he could as the primary breadwinner to keep food on the table for the three of us (and eventually the four of us, when my younger sister was born in 1978), but that pulled him away from home a lot of the time. While my parents were ostensibly products of the ‘60’s, my mother was a child through most of the most important social and political movements, and while she reports to have lived a fairly wild adolescence, replete with experimentation with drugs, alcohol, and ‘free love’, she was only starting to get a glimmer of the responsibilities of adulthood when motherhood was thrust upon her. In contrast, my father, while sporting long hair, bell bottoms, a bushy mustache and muttonchops, was a college graduate, a born-again Christian, and a registered Republican who voted for Nixon in the previous election. Subsequently, my parents’ values on the subject of politics, religion, and social issues were not always in agreement, but one thing they did agree upon is the high value they placed on education.

My mother bemoaned the education she never had, and my father valued the extent to which he was able to pull himself up by his bootstraps and earn for himself a world-class education at Cal State Long Beach. Economically, our family struggled, but resources for education were valued very highly, and I never wanted for school supplies or for food on the table. My parents strove to maintain a stable and supportive home, even if it meant my mother and I were left alone much of the time. I saw it as my personal job to keep my mother company, and to excel in school as to make all of my father’s sacrifices worth his troubles.

My mother was the eldest of five, and my father was the second eldest of seven, but they were definitely from opposite sides of the tracks, both socially and economically. My mother was the ‘black sheep’ daughter of a beauty queen from England and an army veteran that found himself stationed over across the pond, and through careless indelicacy, became the husband of a 17-year-old bride and a new baby to be. My Grandparents’ relationship lasted long enough to create four other siblings, but my grandfather and grandmother eventually split. My grandmother remarried to a wealthy corporate lawyer who loved her family and made enough money to support her and her children in a high standard of living. My maternal grandfather also remarried, and became a successful master plumber.

Both sets of grandparents on my mother’s side furnished my Christmases as a child, and while I lived an economically restrictive life in general, through my mother’s family, I received an appreciation for wealth and the things that money could buy. I also learned an appreciation for the value of a good education, which might be the key to unlocking the privileged life that I learned about only vicariously through my mother’s side of the family.

Education was a strong value in my nuclear family, though it did not hold across the entirety of my extended family. My father was a son of a struggling itinerant preacher who moved his family of seven children and wife every four to six months as he traveled from town to town, setting up church libraries for congregations across the continental United States. My father speaks of having lived in every state in the union, and never stayed put long enough to develop any real friends or relationships. While the academics of my father’s siblings suffered immensely from the constant state of instability, somehow my father managed to keep his grades up in spite of the disruptions. The moving around, however, finally became too much for my father to bear; in his senior year in high school, he declared himself independent and stayed in Washington state long enough to graduate from high school. From Bellingham, Washington, my father moved to southern California to complete college (the only one of his brothers or sisters to do so). After school, my father moved to Fremont in the East Bay to be near his mother, who now lived there, and to look for work. My father met my mother while he was working as a substitute teacher at my mother’s high school, and while they insist they met outside of the classroom setting, I do know that there was some small scandal involved. Once my parents were married, and my father settled down, he vowed he’d never move his family around like he was forced to do as a child. So, we stayed in the 1100 square foot 3-bedroom starter home in Fremont that my grandparents helped him buy in 1974 until well after my younger sister and I graduated from high school.

My grandmother and grandfather on my fathers’ side had split many years before, and my grandfather was out of the picture since before I was born. In fact, I never met the man, and heard only stories of absenteeism and disappointment from my father regarding him. My father became the eldest male role model to his siblings and my cousins, and has remained a father figure for the entire clan even until today. Many of my aunts and uncles, as well as cousins became casualties of the 60’s, with drug addiction and dropping out being major themes in their lives. My aunt pulled her children out of school when they were in the 3rd and 4th grade, and several of them suffer from adult illiteracy to this day. It often feels like we were luck to escape the implosion of my father’s side of the family.

The economics of the era, and in my particular town, played a large role in my identity, and my attitude about education in general. The oil crisis of 1973 and the ensuing fiscal crisis of the 1970’s left a big hole in the economy, and unemployment became a serious issue. Our neighborhood was run down and impoverished, and our neighbors tended to be on the lower end of the economic strata, with very little culture in educational achievement. We had next-door neighbors who were poor immigrants from Hawaii and who rarely went to school and who constantly fought with one other, as well as with the numerous poor white and Hispanic families that called our street home. It was not uncommon for us to hear loud shouting and violence from next-door, or even gunfire on our street from time to time. Our neighbors burglarized our home on numerous occasions (we found our possessions in their yard. And yet, we had an elderly man who lived across the street and whom often would come to our door with gifts of fruit from his trees or fresh baked cookies. The neighborhood was a mix of values and economic situations, and while no one had very much money, some came to wallow in their poverty, while others held onto an outdated image of the opportunities of America from which they were now inexplicably cut off. Educational achievement was not a shared value on my street, and it seemed as if I were the only kid on my street that held his/herself to a high academic performance standard.

While I lived in a relatively poor area of town, I attended a grade school that had a mix of economic and social backgrounds. We had a large, underemployed Hispanic population and a sizeable number of poor white kids from our neighborhood, plus a smaller but significant population of wealthy kids from ‘uptown’ that were bussed into our school (E.M. Grimmer Elementary), as these kids did not have a grade school of their own in their area yet. This disparity in class and income made itself apparent in the differing access to resources across the school’s population. Classrooms that were furnished by the parents for the ‘smarter’ kids (their children), and those furnished for the ‘average’ students. Fortunately, I was gifted with a family that cared deeply about education (my father had struggled to be the first in his family to graduate from college in his family), and I found myself in the Gifted and Talented classroom (GATE), along with the children of all the uptown kids. When I was ten, the General Motors plant closed in town, launching many of the parents of my neighborhood into a deep unemployment slump that lasted for years, while the parents of my wealthier uptown classmates enjoyed high salaries in professional white collar jobs, and kept our classrooms funded with access to personal computers and high-quality scholastic supplies. It is this access to technology that planted the desire in me to learn programming and exposed me to early influences of computer games and telecommunications through 300-baud modems between computers on BBS’s (Bulletin Board Systems). At the age of ten, my father had saved enough to buy a personal computer for me—an Atari 800 XL, contemporary computer to the Commodore 64 and the Apple IIe, which played a significant role in my formation of identity and focus in education during my grade school years.

Socially, my uptown peers never accepted me, and my own neighborhood kids rejected me as well. I found myself struggling to form friendships, and found my self-esteem fueled by the positive feedback I received from my teachers. I focused on my academic achievement, and due to a weight problem that was acerbated by childhood asthma that was diagnosed at 5 years old, I shied away from athletics, and missed out on forming the subsequent personal bonds that come with team sports. I tended to get bullied on the playground, being an overweight and sensitive kid, and spent many of my recesses in the classroom with my teachers. I also worked in the lunchroom to pay for my school lunches, as our family was severely cash poor in the early days of my education, and that added to my social ostracism. I formed a few friendships in my class between other social outcasts in my grade, and our activities revolved around playing a new game, “Dungeons and Dragons”, sitting out in front of the library during breaks, rolling dice and telling stories to one another. Our small cohort was also deeply into computer programming and running BBS’s to share our thoughts and pirated software with one another. The advent of the personal computer, role-playing games, and the ever-running MTV in our bedroom television sets influenced a childhood that was increasingly oriented towards indoor seclusion, activities that were more cerebral than athletic, and an acculturation that ignored any external influences other than what came out of our televisions, or what we as a small group of pre-adolescent boys could provide for one another.

In the latter part of my elementary school years, our economic status shifted slightly for the better. Ronald Reagan had just taken office in 1981, and the nuclear arms race was in full tilt. My father found a job working for a company that worked in exotic shape-memory metals, some of which were main components on ICBMs and nuclear submarines, and he was able to quit his two jobs in favor of a single job. He still worked odd hours, but he was around more in my junior high years than he had been in my elementary school days, and it made a big difference in my life. My father, a chemistry major in college, found the work at Raychem (his employer) to be much more stimulating, and often he would bring me into his work, as he often had to visit the manufacturing machines on the graveyard shift – he exposed me to large industrial high-tech equipment, and materials such as liquid nitrogen, dry ice, and shape-memory metals, which all served to increase my interest in the sciences.

I performed well in academics, and received consistent A’s in all my subjects. After graduation from elementary school, those classmates that were from the more economically advantaged part of town attended a different junior high school than those in my neighborhood, and after being denied an intra-district transfer, I found myself in a population of kids that I had little in common with other than our general economic status. I struggled to make new friends, but again found myself mostly on the outside. I spent my lunches in the classrooms of my favorite teachers, and met the other academically oriented misfits in the process. I made it my primary focus to achieve the highest marks in my class, and began a friendly competition with the smartest kids in the school for those top spots on the honor roll. Because I looked up to my father, my politics followed those of my father, and I found myself friends with other children of the politically conservative few in our school.

Church on Sunday, voting Republican and striving for high levels of academic achievement was the mantra of our social clique, but it did not last for me. After graduating junior high, I attended the local high school, Irvington High, located just a short bike ride from my house. Irvington was not the best school in the district, academically, but it did allow for me to excel among my population with relative ease. I strived to do all that I could to join as many clubs and activities as I could in the service of padding my high school resume for college, and found myself taking all the highest level academic courses, joining the CSF (California Scholarship Federation), and I even attempted to join the junior varsity football team (though, that did not work out well for me). I continued my interest in computers, and had dreams of becoming a computer game programmer. My Atari 800 XL had aged its way out of usefulness, and I struggled to negotiate an upgrade. My parents couldn’t afford the cost of a new computer, and so I approached my mother’s parents for a loan, which they did not grant me. My grandmother, in passing, made a single comment that dashed my personal dreams, and re-navigated the rest of my educational career. She told me that there was ‘no money or future in computers’, and that I should instead pursue a career in mathematics or science, in which I excelled. Later on, I found the money to upgrade my computer to an Apple IIe, but in the process, I found myself leaving behind my computer programming dreams, and focusing my attention on my higher mathematics and science courses. I continued to run a BBS, however, and was part of a diverse social group consisting of junior high and high school kids from around my city, all of which were connected through the bulletin boards. We all managed to find our voices through the pseudonymic environment that the BBS created for us, and formed lasting friendships that crossed boundaries of economic status, gender or age. I started hanging with a crowd that was primarily not at my school and not in my age range – most of them my senior by several years.

In the beginning of my Junior year, I discovered through an incident with the guidance counselor, that good, smart kids like myself were held to a different standard, and could get away with far more than the average kid might. I took advantage of this double standard, and stopped showing up to school, except to pick up my homework, drop off assignments, and take tests. I know my teachers hated that I was not present for their classes, but they were more embarrassed by the fact that I did not seem to need their instruction. By my senior year, I had missed over 160 days of class (full or partial), and yet due to my maintaining an above 4.3 adjusted GPA, none of my teachers or counselors did anything to stop my truancy. I shifted my coursework in my senior year to art, photography and choir from my former math, science and foreign languages, as I had already been admitted into the school of my choice (UC Berkeley), and I allowed myself to slip away from the academic crowd. I started to mix with other groups and cliques at my school, such as the arts and theater crowds. I also joined the local Rocky Horror Picture Show cast, which put the final nails in the coffin of my religious upbringing. It is in these years that I formed my strongest friendships, some of which last to this day. I also reinforced a bunch of bad study habits that would haunt me in my college years.

In this era of my educational career, I found the greatest level of dissonance; I struggled between the academic achiever part of my identity and that part of me which felt distinctly disenfranchised by the entire educational enterprise. My educational career had served as a platform for social isolation in many regards, and once I started forming friendships that were based on the content of my spirit and not the scores on my report card, I found it very difficult to go back to the good, studious child persona. My exposure to computers had given me a view of personal striving towards excellence in a subject that I loved, and it also taught me how to be valued for the content of my mind and not by my appearance or external physical realities. And yet, a single thoughtless comment from my grandmother derailed my trajectory and put me on a ‘safer’, more socially condoned path. In joining up with the Rocky Horror Picture Show cast, and the arts and theater crowd, I rejected my identity as a math and science student, and yet I entered into my career at UC Berkeley as a Physics Major (I later changed majors to Philosophy in my junior year). I continued to care about my future, what school I would attend, and my overall GPA, but I stopped attending classes that failed to engage my imagination. I can’t help but feel that the nihilism of growing up under the threat of nuclear war adversely affected my generation’s confidence in a future we would be living in, and the consequences of our actions seemed to matter less. And yet, that nihilism faded in the face of new meaning formed through connections with my peers. As my popularity rose among those at my school (I was nominated for homecoming king my senior year), I found my identity fluid and subject to my own desires, but I still held on to the fears of rejection I had learned in my younger years. The traditions of my parents helped solidify the value of education and doing one’s best in my consciousness, but the economy of my environment did not reflect those values in action. I was fortunate enough to find my way into a good university, but I was part of the exceptional few in my cohort of peers from my neighborhood.

In summation, I often reflect that I managed to survive and escape the conditions of my youth, however I need to hold an equal weight for the values that helped motivate me to those ends.