

# COUNTERSTORY PEDAGOGY

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# Counterstory Pedagogy

Student Letters of Resilience,  
Healing, and Resistance

*Adriana Aldana*  
*with student contributors*

Elon University Center for Engaged Learning  
Elon, North Carolina  
[www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org](http://www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org)

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To my students, whose questions, dreams, and  
unwavering spirit inspired this book and make  
the classroom a place of endless possibilities.

## Student Letters on Childhood Resilience

All of us encounter various trials and unforeseen challenges throughout our life. During our formative years, societal expectations and structural barriers can test our capacity for resilience and shape the course of our future endeavors. Childhood resilience is a child's ability to adapt positively and cope with adversity, challenges, and trauma (Masten and Obradović 2008; Greene et al. 2004). In other words, it is the capacity to bounce back from difficult situations and thrive despite adverse circumstances or systemic oppression. This part of the book includes student letters that reflect different aspects of childhood resilience or instances when my students confronted adversities at a young age. Through five heartfelt epistolary essays from Taylor Hosea, Jennifer Bratton, Sara Ruth Robles, John Cruz, and Karis Wortham, we delve into the profound experiences that have molded their resilience and the wisdom they impart to their younger selves.

In her letter, “Dear Younger Self,” Taylor Hosea eloquently employs the metaphor of a butterfly’s transformation to reflect her journey of self-discovery. Her letter emphasizes the importance of trusting the growth process, resisting societal pressures, and embracing authenticity. Taylor’s resilience shines through her vulnerability as she encourages her younger self to find courage and hope during life’s metamorphic stages. “Dear Shy Girl” presents Karis Wortham’s reflection on her shyness as a young Black girl. Her letter beautifully captures the essence of resilience in finding one’s voice and embracing personal growth. Karis encourages her younger self to speak up, seek support, and never let her ideas and feelings go unnoticed, thus discovering the transformative power of one’s agency. Both of their letters encourage embracing authenticity and finding one’s voice.

“Birthday Girl” is a poignant letter in which Jennifer Bratton helps her younger self contextualize her family’s struggles with addiction. Through personal reflection, Jennifer illustrates the influence of supportive relationships and resilient coping mechanisms on her journey as a teenage parent. Despite challenging circumstances, her resilience is evident in her ability to find strength in her family’s support and learn from her past mistakes. Similarly, “Dear Younger Sara” reveals Sara Ruth Robles’s heartfelt expression of pride and gratitude to her younger self for the resilience that guided her through life’s challenges. Her letter celebrates the nurturing relationships, coping skills, and growth mindset that motivated her career in social work.

In “Past Me,” John Cruz pens a candid and introspective letter to his former self, acknowledging the privilege that shaped his early life. Reflecting on the impact of personal choices and familial safety nets, he discusses how his experiences led him to pursue a career in social work to use his racial and class privilege to advocate for underserved communities. Through resilience, John learns the importance of empathy and vows to use his voice to make a positive impact. Collectively, these five letters illuminate the multifaceted nature of childhood resilience. Each student engaged in critical meaning-making through letter writing to articulate their inner strength, defying adversity with unwavering determination. These letters show the

power of supportive relationships, nurturing families, and the wisdom gained from facing life's trials.

Their letters underscore the significance of self-love, authenticity, and embracing uniqueness as potent tools for building resilience. These narratives remind us of the importance of designing coursework that allows learners to name their strengths and highlight the lasting impact of supportive environments and social factors that promote resilience. Students named nurturing relationships with caregivers, family, and peers essential to their resilience, as well as other protective factors such as resource access, stability, and a safe environment (Resnick 2000). Additionally, their epistolary essays speak to the pivotal role of understanding one's privilege and using it to advocate for marginalized communities, bringing positive change to the world.

Engaging in retrospective accounts or letter writings that reflect on the past, informed by current experiences, offers adult learners a powerful means to emotionally process and navigate current oppressive, discriminatory, or exclusionary experiences. This reflective practice allows individuals to draw connections between their past and present, fostering a deeper understanding of the impact of societal structures and empowering them to navigate such challenges with newfound insight and resilience. In what follows, the letters from Taylor, Jennifer, John, Sara, and Karis serve as a testament to the transformative power of childhood resilience and the unyielding potential of students of any age to overcome challenges, flourish, and aspire to change the world.

## DEAR YOUNGER SELF | *Taylor Hosea*

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“We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty.”

—Maya Angelou

Dear younger self,

I am writing this letter many years from when you would even read this. Actually, now that I think about it, it's virtually impossible to write back to your past self, but quiet that overly analytical brain and humor me because these are things worth hearing. Butterflies have different stages in their life cycle. Although we see butterflies in their final stage, typically flying in all their beauty, the butterfly has not always been this way. It has undergone a transformation, just like you will, my dearest, younger self. You must trust this process at every stage, just like the caterpillar trusts that one day it will emerge from its chrysalis and be a butterfly.

At the stage of life when the butterfly is still a caterpillar, it is very vulnerable because of its inability to fly and its larva-like body. Much like a caterpillar when we were younger, we were more vulnerable—in every aspect of the word. But don't let harsh tongues and mean glares from the world stop you from moving past this stage of your transformation and into the next.

You will be told by people you care about, cartoons you watch, and storybooks that you **NEED** to look a certain way, act a certain way, and be a certain way. But don't fall into these traps of socialization with your younger self. I know it's hard, but true happiness is found in being your most authentic self, so try to stay true to who you **KNOW** you are despite the world telling you to be someone different.

The next stage of life is when the caterpillar retreats into its chrysalis to transform into a butterfly. This stage of the butterfly's life is longer than the others because the butterfly has retreated into

its chrysalis, and the outer shell of its chrysalis hardens to protect the butterfly from predators while transforming.

Like the butterfly, your exterior will harden to protect you from others. Junior high and high school will harden your exterior as a source of protection—just like the butterfly’s chrysalis has hardened. Although I understand you are doing everything possible to protect yourself, do not shut the world out during this time because although it can be harsh and scary, it is full of joy, kindness, and love.

The next stage of the butterfly’s life is when the adult emerges fully transformed. This stage of the butterfly’s life is much like the stage of life you are currently in as I, or we, write this letter. Through our experiences in life and our experiences in our MSW program, we are slowly emerging from our chrysalis as the beautiful butterfly.



Figure 1. Original Acrylic Painting on Canvas of Butterflies, reproduced with permission from Taylor Hosea.

Although we may not feel ready to flap our wings and let go of the branch just yet, I know we will someday get there. Courage and hope will get us there.

Younger self, please stop reading this letter for a second, pause, and hug yourself. While embracing yourself, know that you are worthy, and you are enough. Your body, mind, and soul are beautiful because they are unique, just like you, just like the butterfly. Life is a process of transforming our younger self, and just like the butterfly, you will also transform.

In self-love,  
Taylor

### BIRTHDAY GIRL | Jennifer Bratton

Hello Jennifer,

It’s your eighteenth birthday! You’re about to finish your junior year of high school and be a senior next year. What a fantastic time this must be for you! I know you are still living with your grandmother. I hope Dad’s addiction doesn’t spoil your birthday; just have patience with him. He’s doing the best he can. You will understand that one day. Addiction can destroy families, but you can start the healing process once you understand it from a social worker’s perspective. Please find your neighborhood’s nearest Al-Anon meeting when you get a chance. Start looking for a job, and please take school more seriously. I suggest you talk to your guidance counselor and ask for help. You should get more involved in leadership at school; you’re a great leader who loves talking to others. Use your gifts! I know you have always wanted to be a writer. Get a notebook and start journaling; this can help you express the feelings that you keep bottled up.

Hey, I need you to do me a favor. Start loving yourself, look in the mirror daily, and tell yourself something good about yourself.

You must build up your confidence and focus on your strengths. You are amazing, smart, beautiful, and full of life. I need you to know that. One day, you'll need to show your kids how to love themselves, which starts with you. Yes, Jennifer, one day you're going to have kids. Just try your best not to have them right now. You have many goals you want to accomplish, and having kids will slow you down. Make sure you keep reading. You'll read a lot in college, trust me. Another thing is don't be afraid to take chances. Get out of your comfort zone.

Make sure you give your Grandma Ola a big hug, and spend more time with her. Reach out to Grandma Lillian in Louisiana, try to get out there, and see her often. Your grandmothers can give you much of our family history that you'll need later when assessing your life. Stop being mad at your mother. She's doing the best she can, too. Someday, you'll be married, and the phrase "for better or for worse" will have a new meaning for you. Try to remember that your parents are people too. They make mistakes. Love them anyway.

Go to college! One day, you'll realize that you love helping others and chase that passion daily. Feel free to leave South Central. It will always be your home. Travel the world and go places you've always dreamed of. Stop thinking you're an outsider and embrace your friends; they love you. Spend more time with your baby brother. He idolizes you and watches everything you do. Learn to model positive behavior. It will help him out later in life.

This part may be difficult for you to read, but I promise you'll appreciate my advice. When you get older, spend as much time as you can with your mother and father. Take them out, love on them, and learn to appreciate them. They have made sacrifices for you, and they have always taken care of you. They won't be here one day, and you will miss them endlessly. Watch out for your brother Kenny. Make sure he takes care of himself. When you both are older, he'll need you.

When you start looking for a husband, find someone who looks at you like you're the most amazing thing in the world. You deserve the love you've always dreamed of, and if you listen to me, you'll be

healthy, healed, and happy. Never forget how wonderful you are, Jennifer, never.

### DEAR YOUNGER SARA | *Sara Ruth Robles*

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Dear younger Sara,

As I write you this letter, I am honored to share all the milestones you will accomplish in your life, the bravery you hold within your soul, and the resilience that shines bright through your spirit. I hope you feel my love and strength wrapped around this letter as you read this. I am so proud of the woman I have become, and I owe a lot to you and the soul that never stopped believing. You were born with a gift to brighten a room and spread love to individuals who need it most. As a little girl, you went from wanting to be a history teacher, to a doctor, or just helping others in general, but little did you know where that determination will get you in the future. The opportunities you will experience are precious chapters of your life that should not be taken for granted. I write this because I did. You will reflect on these experiences and assess how they made you who you are today. Our parents will work endlessly to provide you with experiences full of growth and will never leave your side. Thank them because they are why I am at this point in my life today.

Our father always told us to "Leave it on the floor" and "Live life with no regrets," but I hope this motto continues to push you to leave your mark in this world. The world can be scary and dark, but I promise you that your voice will empower others to find their resilience, but most importantly, it will empower you. President Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, "We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future." Your power to change this world goes beyond the stars and the moon. As you grow older, you will take your place in history to be the change agent this world needs. Your voice will carry across the globe, your

presence will be welcomed at the table, and your knowledge will benefit communities.

I cannot lie. Things will be hard, and you will doubt yourself along the way, but it is important always to remember where your roots are planted. You are going to fall and fight, you are going to question every decision you make, and you will question those around you, but never forget the beauty of this world. The long line of ancestors who fought hard to get you to where you are today. Make them proud! The village of people who will enter your life at different stages to nurture your soul, make them proud. Your parents, who have demonstrated endless love, make them proud. Your grandparents, who did everything they could to enrich your life, make them proud. Be proud of the young girl you are and the presence you hold. Be proud of the decisions you make and the love you share. Be proud of your roots and the foundation it is seeded upon. Be proud of the feet that march you toward your destination. Be proud of the heart that burns deep in your soul. Be proud of the hands that will create change and the eyes that see the grace in life. Be proud of the voice that carries across rooms. Be proud of yourself.

I want you to know that I am extremely proud of you, little Sara. That bright light never stopped, and the soul determined to make a change continued to do so. We did it, and I write this with every amount of love that runs deep within my veins. You are on the right path, and this world is going to need you. Stay grounded and ask for help. I promise you that my spirit will guide you along the way. You are meant to be here. Go forth with steadfast love and compassion, hold your head high, and move mountains.

With love and gratitude,  
Future Sara Ruth Robles

## PAST ME | *John Cruz*

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Dear past me,

If I were to visit you in a time machine, you would be shocked to see where you are currently. You have just received a master's degree in social work. This would have blown your mind. You would not understand why I chose to pursue a social work degree. However, you may find it surprising that you were the reason I chose this field.

I know you were not a bad kid—although you made stupid choices, were easily influenced by your peers, were immature for your age, and felt insecure. However, you need to understand how lucky you were. Because of your privilege, you avoided many adverse incidents other kids like yourself may have encountered. You don't know what that term means, so let me explain it. Privilege is a unique unearned advantage over other groups of people.

You had one of the most supportive families a youth could ever want. They gave you a voice when deciding important events in your life. Many parents did not provide other adolescents a role in making their own decisions. Let me give you an example. Remember when the dentist always referred you to the orthodontist and strongly recommended that you get braces? Many parents would force their kids to get braces. However, your parents did not force you. They talked to you about the issue and gave you a choice. Although you would regret not getting braces later in life, they respected your decision and gave you a voice. They listened to your voice and let you make your own decisions. Not all youth are lucky enough to have a say in making decisions.

Many adolescents who come from different backgrounds than you do not have the same luxuries you do. Other youths would have been very thankful to be in your position. While other adolescents had to worry about being treated fairly in the community, policies that may negatively affect them, and lack of resources, you were ungrateful for all your privilege. You lived in a selfish bubble and did not think about others' suffering. You had no interest in using your privilege to help advocate for underserved communities of color.

I wish I could explain that lifting weights and being born into privilege does not make you badass. However, I know you will not listen to anyone but yourself, and you will learn the difficult way. On May 16, 2009, your life will change forever. This was the night you decided to drive under the influence and wreck your car. The artificial veil of toughness dropped instantly after you crashed your car that night. You cried all weekend uncontrollably, and the weekend you spent in city jail felt like an eternity.

I know this experience was traumatizing for you, but it could have been worse. What would happen if you did not have as much privilege and had to endure that situation? If your skin color was darker, it was more likely that you could have worried about suffering physical harm from the police. If you did not belong to a family with a higher socioeconomic status, your chances of being arrested again would have increased. This experience taught you that you were not invincible. Although you were still a few years away from deciding to pursue a career in social work, this negative incident pushed you in the right direction to becoming a better human being.

Sincerely,  
Present me

## DEAR SHY GIRL | *Karis Wortham*

Dear shy girl,

I'm so glad you're reading this! I know there are times when you question yourself. You start to feel like something is missing or wrong with you. You are so quiet, but you sit back and notice everything. If you ever think to yourself: Does anybody see me? What is the point of speaking? Why would anyone listen to a little kid like me? I want you to know, shy girl, that I see you and that there is power in your words. Your voice matters and is important in this world. Don't let

anyone tell you otherwise. When girls like you can speak their truth, things in this world will change. This is the truth—I promise you.

I know you probably think what I'm saying is crazy but listen to these words: Your youthful voice today is special. Right now, you get to see the world with fresh eyes. The world's negativity and hate have not jaded you yet. You have yet to be introduced to the stress of being an adult. Enjoy being young—you may not see it yet, but it's a gift. I know you have hope and a vision for the future, not just for yourself but for the people around you.

Just do not stop speaking up for what you believe in!

You have ideas on how you want to feel seen, heard, and equal. Don't let those ideas go by the wayside. Some might say you are just a child and cannot make your own choices. Fight that. Fight with everything you can to make sure your voice is heard.

Shy girl, do not keep these things inside of you!



Figure 2. *Childhood-Self with Elementary School Teacher*, reproduced with permission from *Karis Wortham*.

If you keep those feelings inside, they will eat you up inside. If you worry about needing to know more, do some research. If you are worried that you are the only one feeling this way, start asking your peers. Maybe they're shy like you. If you can't remember it all, start writing these things down. Do not forget how you and your peers feel in these moments. You will look back and be so glad that you did! You'll make an impact, shy girl. Just remember to keep trying. Take a deep breath. You got this.

From,  
A former shy girl

## EPISTOLARY ESSAYS PART II

### Student Letters on Generational Healing

Throughout history, marginalized communities have faced trauma, adversity, and systemic oppression, leaving enduring imprints to this day. Growing research informs us of how trauma can be passed down intergenerationally through epigenetics, where environmental influences can modify gene expression and affect future generations' mental and physical well-being (Yehuda and Lehrner 2018). However, there is also potential for resilience and healing that transcends time and place. In professional training programs, such as in social work and education, writing and storytelling can serve as a pedagogy of care that focuses on wellness, healing, and fostering courageous conversations (Varga-Dobai 2023). Thus, our livelihoods are interwoven with our ancestors', creating an intricate web of interconnected stories. This section showcases epistolary es-