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The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

Watermelon, bacon, blackberries, lobster mushrooms, mint, feta cheese, swiss chard, filet mignon, and apricot jam. This is the MasterChef mystery box challenge (Matousek style). There are no recipes, no guidelines, no blueprint. Yet, the fact I have no set plan of attack is exhilarating. The screams of excitement from the right side of my brain overpower the whispers of vulnerability from the left. Whereas my everyday life is dictated by strict schedules, cooking catapults me into an unlimited world where error is acceptable – or even productive.

Looking down at my ingredients, I begin to formulate a plan. Ironically, I need to think outside of the box. I analyze for suitable combinations. I've seen meat paired with fruit before. A blackberry glaze would be perfect, although I've never made one. It's a risk I'm willing to take.

Eight years ago, I faced a similar challenge when moving to Valencia, Spain. Opening that mystery box, I was confronted by a new language, new people, and new traditions. The magnitude of change I faced made me fear these new ingredients would rob me of my identity as an American. I was intensely proud to be part of a driven community that pushed people to follow their dreams. If I left, who would I be? Choosing to embrace life in Valencia was the most important decision I've ever made, and the recipe I created was different than any I'd used before:

Step 1) Be comfortable being uncomfortable.

When I arrived in Valencia, I didn't speak any Spanish, yet I chose to join a Spanish basketball team because it was part of my identity that I could keep constant, though the language barrier would make the task even more of a challenge. Deciding to pursue my love of basketball was an act of bravery I didn't know I had in me. I started with a smile when walking into the locker room. Stuck my hand out for a high-five when my teammate made a basket. Cheered, laughed, hugged – which were the same in any language. Not letting my fear control me has allowed me to make life-long friendships with girls who, on the first day of practice, I couldn't even have conversations with.

Step 2) To seek out things no longer handed to me.

I see dealing with environmental issues as a responsibility rather than an option. If we continue mistreating the earth, future generations will not have access to clean air and water. It's not fair for us to live selfishly and think about sustainability.

In Spain, however, you must be eighteen to volunteer. Therefore, I had to create my own opportunity to make an impact. I organized the first-ever student-run charity event at my school, raising money for Conservation South Luangwa (CSL), an environmental organization in Zambia. It took months to convince my school's hesitant administration to approve my project. I had to create a formal proposal, a persuasive report about the importance of environmental action, and proof of my dedication to the cause. My event is scheduled for February 12 and has already generated meaningful conversation about environmental issues among my peers, whom I hope will feel empowered to take action themselves.

Step 3) Be open-minded.

Initially, I found the Spanish custom of four-hour family lunches unnecessary and sometimes even tedious. Used to the fast pace of American life, I didn't know how to slow down. Reconnecting with my family each week has provided security and support, which has empowered me to persevere through other challenges and embrace my personal growth.

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Many hours later, I stand back to admire my feast: seared filet mignon with a blackberry glaze, lobster mushrooms and swiss chard with an apricot reduction and, a watermelon, feta and mint salad. Ingredients that at first appeared overwhelming and dissonant have been blended. Just like my life in Valencia, it is the perfect fusion of flavors.