5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others. 650 Max.

I stepped into the Atlanta World Congress Center after a hectic morning of collecting my bags and my thoughts, trying to form a picture of what the next three days of my life would hold.; it's not every day that a sixteen-year-old takes part in a Climate Change Summit led by Al Gore. The journey from California to Georgia was well worth it, though the fuel from the flight certainly gave me pause—one gallon of fuel per second. How is this legal? While the purpose of the event was to inform citizens about specific ways to help save our planet, part of me feared that the former vice president would come before the thousands of eager ears at his feet and simply say, "There's no hope, sorry." This nihilism, I would soon learn at the summit, is actually a common experience formally known as "Climate Grief."

Climate grief is the feeling of hopelessness, loss, and mourning over the inevitable effects of climate change. I experience it more specifically as a pressure in my chest that makes everyday tasks of homework and laundry seem meaningless—why wash the dishes if I'm going to be dead in ten years? (This reasoning didn't quite work on my mother). This sinking feeling had been with me for nearly ten years before I knew its name or ubiquity. The American Psychological Association penned a seventy-paged report entitled "Mental Health and Our Changing Climate." NBC even offered a "10-step program" for climate grief. These two words were the common denominator connecting the 2,500 human beings in attendance at the summit. We were creating our own 10-step program for climate grief, and this conference was step one.

Previous attempts to assuage my then-nameless anxieties included becoming president of my school's environmental club and speaking at city council meetings. Yet it wasn't until I organized a fundraiser for a local estuary restoration project that I finally realized the role I could have in this movement: storytelling. Between actor parents and an extensive theater background myself, I realized that I was intimately familiar with how to engage an audience and remind them of their own humanity. It soon became abundantly clear to me that if I wanted to confront despair, I had to use the skills that I’d been honing and practicing for the past twelve years on stage.

The unexpected realization that I could apply my theater skills to my personal fight against climate change ignited me. I could now stop worrying about my lack of interest in the hard sciences and the pressure I felt to create the next carbon-sequestering technology. On the estuary restoration fundraiser's "opening night," I stepped into the role of the narrator, crafting an engaging plot about the history of the estuary and its importance in our community. The result was a shared empathy, allowing us to surpass our initial monetary goal. It was a moment unlike any other – a standing ovation – in which I could feel the audience connecting with me, and for a brief moment, my grief subsided.

I continue to embody my newfound 10-step plan for climate grief as a member of the worldwide movement to fight the climate crisis. The truth is, there’s more than one way to save the world. In a recent strike I organized for climate action, I was reminded that the best way for me to approach this fight is to draw on my individual strengths and natural ability to reach others through storytelling. Gore’s final message at the conference was, “we came to learn and leave to serve.” It was only through the unlikely interaction of my two very different passions that I finally realized that my form of service had been in me all along.