Reading the book *The Promise of a Pencil* by Adam Braun started out as nothing more than my first “college assignment.” However, as I made my way through the beginning pages of Braun’s story, I began to realize that this piece is so much more than a tedious task to accomplish. I connected with Braun’s words on more than just the level of a reader. It felt as though Braun and I had so much in common; he seemed to be talking directly to me.

On a personal level, the most impactful words of the story are when Braun says, “I wanted to be a part of something that extended far beyond my two hands and the possessions they could hold.” Over the past two years, I have felt a growing desire to accomplish feats greater than the standards my schoolteachers, peers, and parents have set for me. Surprisingly, though, I also have a growing desire to accomplish things that will bring bigger rewards than money, cars, and clothes.

What I have found myself yearning for is the feeling of real empathy. Braun’s similar struggle has inspired me. He tells of how his comfortable lifestyle made him, ironically, uncomfortable. I relate. Growing up in the small town of Bolton Landing, I have known the same 21 students in my class and the same 1,000 year-round residents for almost my entire life. My small town rarely changes and with the large school budget,
Reflection on “The Promise of a Pencil” by Adam Braun

there is little that can’t be bought. As I made my way through high school, I began to feel as though I had to do something that helped me to feel a little bit more for those facing struggles that seemed unimaginable. No matter how many people told me, “You’re just a kid,” I had to do it. Similar to Braun, I accepted the challenges I faced and moved forward. In the midst of my desire to do something that extended beyond the borders of my miniscule town, I turned on my television and heard of the devastation caused by the relentless Hurricane Sandy. I acted on impulse and quickly took action, as Braun said is necessary.

I called my home parish and received permission to hold a relief drive in the church parking lot in three days. I began the drive by calling local parishes, radio stations, newspapers, and high schools in order to collect as many tangible and financial donations as possible. After three days of collecting goods, the drive had spread to four local schools, multiple nearby parishes, and a handful of local newspapers. More than $50,000 in goods was collected. We received everything from baby clothes to toothpaste, trash bags to canned peas. On Monday, after three days of campaigning, collecting, and packing, my family and I finished loading up the 26-foot box truck we had rented to deliver the donations and headed to Staten Island. Once we arrived in Staten Island later that day, I felt true empathy for the first time. To this day, I can’t communicate the pain those affected were feeling or how bad their conditions were. It used to upset me that I couldn’t explain to my friends back home what I had seen that day, and how big of a change those donations had made. Now, I realize that while I can’t always explain the effects my service has had on me, living a life of empathy may encourage others to go out and seek that same feeling.
Braun’s story seemed so similar to how I felt in my moments distributing goods to those in need. As Braun described, I finally felt that my life had a greater use. I began to realize that life is about serving others, because doing so brings positive changes to those we help as well as ourselves. For the past two years, I have experienced so much frustration trying to get my friends, family, and peers involved in service; it has confused me trying to figure out why few people of my generation have interest in serving others. Braun’s story has helped me to realize that many more people share this similar passion than I had thought.

Beyond this realization, Braun’s story reinforces a truth I believe many of us struggle with: Life is far more important than the degrees we receive and the money we make. Braun had it all: money, education, and a secure job. However, his constant feeling of emptiness forced him to look inward and discern what caused this feeling.

Many of us experience times when we feel as though we could be doing more. We often find ourselves yearning for a greater sense of fulfillment with our lives. Perhaps if we took the time to care for those around us, we would begin to understand that true happiness is found in service. Braun’s story has both reassured my belief that I will only find true satisfaction through serving others, as well as inspired me to help others come to this same realization.