When I was in high school, my guidance counselor told me, “Son, you have a choice, you can work with your back or you can work with your brain.” The problem for me then, and for the next twenty-five years, was that I didn’t feel that I had a choice. I worked with my back because that is what my family did. I know only one person with an education, an uncle who was a priest. Jobs that required an education seemed like the staff of movies, and were about as far-fetched as becoming a movie star. So I worked with my back until I couldn’t anymore.

My mother dropped out of college in her first year when she met and married my father, a truck driver. I was born the third child and my father was murdered six months later. My mother returned home to live with her parents who were also raising two of my cousins. My grandfather worked in a factory to keep food on the table and as a building superintendent to keep a roof over our heads. My mother and grandfather worked constantly to support us all and my grandmother struggled to keep up with five unruly children. Our education was not a foremost concern. The adults in my family were much more concerned with keeping us fed and clothed.

My grandparents sent my siblings, cousins, and I to Catholic School because despite the expense, that is what good Catholics do. My grandfather picked up a third job cleaning the church to secure our tuition. Our teachers were nuns and lay teachers who were either more concerned with our souls than our educations or were unable to provide us with a basic education. I had on teacher who taught us that “helicopter” was pronounced “helioptera.” My brother’s teacher taught him to spell “love” “luv.” I spent an entire year learning about nothing but the personal histories of the saints.

I struggled in high school, a lot. My Catholic School primary and middle school education had not prepared me for the school work I encountered in high school. My science class in Catholic School consisted of copying terms off the board and I was completely mystified the first time I encountered a lab science. I went for extra help in math both before and after school until my teacher told me, “You’re never going to get algebra, just sign up for commercial math.” I had never written an essay and had no idea that there was a formula for doing so. Eventually I and my teachers gave up. When I was seventeen
my mother told me to drop out of high school and get a job because, as she said, “You aren’t getting an education anyway.” I got a job and I worked with my back for the next twenty-five years.

Everything changed for me when I met my wife. Her family is completely different from mine. Everyone in my wife’s family has an education, and not just an undergraduate college education, they all have masters degrees or law degrees or doctoral degrees. When I hurt my back at work and it became clear that it was never fully going to heal my wife told me that this was my chance to make a choice. I could continue to go to work and be in pain and misery for the rest of my life or I could make a change, go to college, and choose a career I might actually enjoy. She encouraged me to take the G.E.D. test at the Ciarco Learning Center and I passed on the first try. I decided to enroll at Bergen Community College and begin a college degree so that eventually I can become an occupational therapist. The first few weeks were rough. My wife had to sit me down and teach me how to write an essay, but eventually I got the hang of it. No one thought I could do it. My friends, family, and former teachers all told me I wasn’t cut out for college. My first semester grades came in and they were mostly As, I have never been more proud of myself. I still struggle with math, but now I know I made the right choice.

The meaning of education to me is choice, a choice I never thought I had, and the opportunity to remake my life and choose a fulfilling career. My family still thinks I’m crazy, but I am proud that I was finally able to make the right choice and give myself the opportunity to work with my brain and not my back.