



**13th Annual Ben Strauss
High School Essay Contest 2026**

1st Place

Joseph Chang

One in Infinity

In a cream room with bright, blinding lights, the doctor entered, a harbinger of peril. Suddenly, my mind was whisked far away, the scene around me beginning to crumble as I left my body and entered a haven of lucidity. A place that felt strangely weightless. Here, everything seemed in control, my fears far off in the distance, and hopes coming to life. I felt as if I could relax and sink in, never to return again.

A moment later, I snapped back into my body as the doctor began his next words on the direction for my treatment. I felt my heart still pounding, stomach hollowed out. A million thoughts raced through my head at once, but they all escaped my grasp. A wave of questions and worries filled my throat, yet I couldn't utter a single word. My whole world seemed shattered; my future felt denied to me. At that moment, I almost thought I caught a glimpse of the journey yet to come.

It is thought that endless worlds exist across our universe. Physicists have theorized that each event, every decision you make, branches out to form multitudes of realities that are far different from the one we know. Perhaps in one of these realities, I would have never been

diagnosed with Leukemia; the doctor wouldn't have said the words that would bring my life to a halt. Could such a reality even exist? Faced with an impossible truth, I asked such questions, desperately searching for any way out, any way to detach myself and avoid facing a bitter truth.

Despite my forlorn thoughts, reality remained as steadfast as always. With lymph nodes in my neck the size of tennis balls, swift action was necessary. A port-a-cath was quickly installed, and a bone marrow biopsy was performed. The third day in the hospital, I was given doxorubicin, the first of many rounds of chemo. Disgusted by the shade of red that the chemo had turned my urine, that sight truly marked the point beyond return in my journey. After a week had passed, I began to vomit, which would soon become a regular occurrence. Dinners quickly became taxing and dreary. I constantly braced myself, going into a fetal position, using medicine and ice cubes, anything to ease my nausea.

The end of the summer marked a major speed bump. One morning, I noticed progressively poorer coordination in my right hand, and at the recommendation of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), where I received treatment, my parents called emergency medical services. I felt dazed as I heard the sound of sirens wail in the background, their sound growing ever closer. Paramedics soon arrived, assessing me for a stroke, and I was rushed to the hospital. Fear consumed me as, for the second time, I received a diagnosis from CHOP: intrathecal methotrexate toxicity. A CT scan showed significant swelling in the motor cortex of my brain. Starting from the weakness in my arms, the heavens had snatched strength from my body, and I was soon paralyzed from head to toe. With my body immobilized, my mind drifted from reality once again. Perhaps I could escape this life for another. One that provided comfort instead of anguish, health instead of illness. Yet, the torturous beeps of the monitors continued on, coming and going as they pleased, waiting in ambush to disturb my peace. Nurses tried their best to comfort me, but even words fell from my mouth. Slurred words rendered my speech unintelligible. Exhausted and silenced, I felt my blood boil at the world that had condemned me not once but twice. I screamed with fury, questioning what I had done to deserve such a fate. All

action seemed futile, and my body seemed to surrender to its own helplessness at the hands of the world, manifesting my physical weakness.

Yet, with time, even this trial passed, and I began to make slow but steady progress in regaining my strength and coordination. My hands and confidence shook at first, but after several months of therapy and intense effort, I was able to return to full function.

Although cancer had placed an overwhelming burden on me, I needed to have some semblance of control. The year before, I had joined a competitive math team, which demanded all my focus if I wanted to succeed that year. Thus, my days in the hospital would be frequently spent studying math, taking my mind off the disturbing presence of the IV pumping poison through my chest. Mr. Deckebach, who advised the math club, was one of the greatest pillars in my life during this time. When school resumed that fall, Mr. D wasn't just supportive of having me but pushed me to pursue my passion for math. I had hated how my sickness forced me to stand out and how many couldn't see past it, treating me with fragility like glass ready to shatter at any moment. But Mr. D was one of the few to treat me not as a patient but as a student who loved math just as he did. He took a risk on me that year, the kid who was sick all the time, who had to miss almost sixty days of school, and chose me to represent our team. That school year, even amidst immense struggle, I continued to attend the biweekly practices. Even if I missed school for treatment, I would rush back to school for math club. Through these efforts, I placed eighth among over 200 competitors in the regional competition.

Throughout treatment, I hated the grip that cancer placed on my being. I despised the way my illness seemed to point at me, highlighting my absences and appearance. I thought that people, instead of seeing me for myself, would see only a boy plagued by cancer. As a result, I never willingly revealed my diagnosis to anyone, even my own friends. But by pushing my friends away, I had isolated myself from the greatest support I could have been given. I now realize, in another reality where I had been open about my experiences, perhaps I wouldn't have faced the isolation I thought I would.



In a world of unending outcomes and decisions, each as unexpected as the last, we live in one in which we have survived them all. Our story, the uncontrollable experiences that make up who we are, and everything else around us, is one in infinity. That is beyond a statistical miracle. Now in remission, I truly feel that I have accepted my own story. Sinking into that feeling of ‘what if’ and ‘I wish’ may have felt natural, but to accept the reality we live in is indicative of growth. Ironically, choosing to live in another world was what made cancer define me, keeping me from moving on. People like Mr. D chose to believe in my existence. The nurses and doctors at CHOP chose to believe in my life. My journey with Leukemia has taught me resilience far beyond what I thought was possible. Now, even among countless realities, I choose not to escape but to face it. But I will not let my story determine my fate. I will create my own path, surviving and growing with the experiences of the only world that truly matters.