

Anonymous

**Creativity and Personal Mastery Application
Essay Questions**

November 13, 2006

2. i. Tell me something about yourself, something that will make you come alive as a person. You get to decide what you reveal and at what length.

Something about myself... Why not the whole story? I feel compelled to tell it.

I was born in a small town just outside Manchester in the UK. When I was four, we moved to Tokyo for two years. I don't remember much about the experience except the "bug" and the earthquake. We had a break-in one night and when my parents told us about the burglar, I always thought they were referring to an enormous bug that had tried to steal our things. During the earthquake, my father focused on saving the new lamp we had just bought while the rest of us hid under a table. My mother gave him a hard time for that for years to come. My clearest memories begin when I was six or seven. By now, we lived in a modest town near Liverpool. My childhood was dominated by my passion – no, perhaps obsession is a better word – for horses. My once-every-other-week riding lesson was the highlight of my existence. I set up my mother's ironing board with reins and a makeshift saddle so that I could practice in between lessons. My bookshelves were lined with books about horses and my walls with horse posters. I longed for my own pony. I wrote a poem entitled "If I Had a Pony..." that was published in Horse and Rider magazine. I wrote my parents a note almost every night for what seemed like several years, begging them to buy me a pony. After going to bed, I would mail it over the edge of the banister so it would fall into the hallway below where they would see it while walking from the living room to the kitchen. But owning a pony wasn't within our financial means nor did my parents have the interest or time it would require. So I settled for the twice-monthly riding lessons with a heavy heart, longing to be friends with the girls who owned their own ponies and rode all the time. At some point I remember vowing to myself that I would own a horse one day. This was the start of a theme in my life: setting a goal and overcoming all obstacles to achieve it.

At age 14, we moved to Germany with my father's job. It was a traumatic experience. I was enrolled in a German-speaking school after only having had the chance to study German for a few weeks, with a private tutor paid for by my father's company. I left behind a whole host of close friends and a wonderful school where I was an avid and successful student a year or two into the 'O' Level curriculum which I was thoroughly enjoying. During the first day of class in my new German school, I tried to keep up by looking up words in the English-German pocket dictionary I carried with me, but there were just too many I wasn't familiar with. I took French in German, physics, math, chemistry. The German words for the chemical compounds seemed longer than my arm. Luckily, I was a quick study and somehow made it through the first semester. Socially, it was harder though. At first, my new "friends" wanted to practice their English but they soon lapsed back to permanent German and I got left behind in the nuances and colloquialisms of their teen-speak. Horses became my savior again. I befriended the two teenagers at the post office in our rural town. They owned and actively competed with several show horses that they kept on the few grassy acres beside their house. I hung out with them at every chance I could and frequently got up at four o'clock in the morning on weekends to load up the horses and drive with them to horse shows in the neighboring counties. We couldn't converse much but just watching them ride and helping out with the horses was soul-restoring. One day they announced an upcoming vacation and asked me to look after the horses while they were away. I enlisted my sister to help me out but she was terrified of their enormous size and

Thoroughbred skittishness and marveled at how fearless I was around them. As a normally timid kid, I was in my element around horses.

But all in all, I was terribly unhappy living in Germany so I decided to take matters into my own hands. This didn't seem like my destiny. I made up my mind I would find a way to move back to the UK. My best friend, Susan, and I had kept in close touch. We had been inseparable back home and I had gotten to know her parents well over the course of our friendship. One day, while I was visiting them during a school vacation, I asked them if I could come and live with them so that I could finish my 'O' Levels at my former school. I went back to my parents and told them how I thought it could work, financial arrangements, logistics and all, convinced I could make it happen. My mother was heartbroken but my parents relented and I spent the next year and a half living with my best friend and her family. They all embraced me fully and became my surrogate family. What a treat it was to share every day with my best friend, engaging in all our teenage pursuits. I took on my first job working at the cash register at her grandparents' grocery store, the first in a long series of "career moves". And I studied around the clock to make up the year of school I had missed. In the spring of 1984, I sat for nine 'O' Level exams and received eight grades of A and one B. That same spring, my father announced that he had received a promotion and we would be moving to the US. It was his lifelong dream and because it would mean I would be reunited with my family, my mother was thrilled as well. I was just happy that I wouldn't have to learn a new language and besides, "the States" had always seemed cool on TV.

Following my father's family "promotional" tour of the US, we moved to New Jersey. Never mind that the family trip had been to Southern California (my father was always the consummate salesman after all.) We moved to a nice home on a country club golf course, another of my father's lifelong dreams, and I enrolled at the local high school. What a change from Germany! I understood the language except for a few minor differences. Everyone loved my accent and wanted to be my friend. I was an attractive blond teenager with a cool punk hairstyle and got a lot of welcome attention. I enrolled as a junior but it quickly became clear that my academic experience in the UK far outstripped the US high school curriculum. Soon I was promoted a grade and then had several independent study classes made up especially for me in addition. I thrived socially and academically and was accepted to several top universities, ultimately selecting Princeton.

Princeton was smooth sailing. Great friends, academic success that came with relative ease, a lucrative and socially fulfilling job as a waitress at the most popular student hang-out. I thrived in the intellectually curious learning environment. The psychology and philosophy classes resonated the most with me. An introductory philosophy class called "The Problem of God" was a particular favorite. But I majored in finance because I thought it was more practical career-wise, and settled for minoring in psychology, continuing to be fascinated by the complexities of the human mind and what made people tick. I worked as many hours as I could at the restaurant, thriving on the camaraderie of my fellow waiters and surprised at how easy it was to make money. Working hard for a living seemed to be in my DNA. Alas, by senior year I had been sucked into the campus recruiting mill, believing that investment banking or management consulting were the only two "real jobs" out there. I graduated near the top of my class with several job offers in both of those fields. I narrowed it down to a choice between investment

banking at ABC Investment Bank or consulting at XYZ Consulting. It was 1990 but, in my naiveté, I was oblivious to the recession on Wall Street. ABC Investment Bank and XYZ Consulting battled it out for my attentions. I chose ABC Investment Bank and started work there in July.

Once I began working there, I knew immediately I had made a mistake. What I didn't know yet was how I was going to correct it. It felt like Germany all over again, only 100 times worse, because this time I had made the choice myself, and wasn't this job the whole point of my very expensive education? I slogged it out until a few weeks before Thanksgiving, working around the clock on pitch books that never led to deals, getting called out of bed at three o'clock in the morning to fix a comma that was in the wrong place, working for brainwashed associates who were happy to have another analyst class to do all the grunt work. I distinctly remember thinking "Is this it? Is this my destiny? Is this all there is?" The other analysts in my class, save one or two, seemed oblivious to the fact that there might be another choice, a way out, so to speak. After a long discussion one night with one of my fellow analysts who did seem to "get it", he presented me with his copy of "The Prophet" by Kahlil Gibran, a beacon, it seemed, at an otherwise dark time. It resonated with me deeply and I saw it as a "sign" and a call to action. I began plotting my escape. I called up the partner at XYZ Consulting who had been my point person in the recruiting process and told him of the mistake I now knew I had made in not choosing to join his organization. Within a week, I had secured a spot in the next starting class in September (due to the rigorous training program for incoming graduates, they couldn't accommodate mid-year hires). But it was only November – what to do until then? I thought about sticking it out at ABC Investment Bank but as the days wore on, it became more and more intolerable. After working the entire Thanksgiving weekend without even going home, I'd had enough. One day, I was chatting with Jane, a fellow analyst I had befriended, about planning a vacation over Christmas. Somehow we ended up poring over a Club Med catalog, and as I read the description of the "*gentil organisateurs*" or "G.O.s" who made up the staff of these clubs, I had a sudden "aha". I wanted to be one of them! I instinctively knew it was another "sign", that I had come across the catalog for a reason. Everyone thought I was completely nuts. How could I leave a prestigious investment banking analyst program to become a G.O.? I was told it would be a long shot to get the job because the interviews for spots to work at these clubs are heavily oversubscribed. To me though, I was just going to make it happen. It didn't even occur to me that there could be any other outcome. By March, I was on a chartered plane bound for the Turks & Caicos in the British West Indies. Having committed to the required six-month tour of duty as a G.O., this seemed to me like the perfect way to pass the time until enrolling at XYZ Consulting in the fall.

Club Med was not all I had expected. I had secured a role working as a G.O. in the bank, selling beads (the club currency) and accounting for the club's day-to-day sales. (I thought it would at least lend itself to a theme on my résumé – still finance-related, right?) When I arrived, I was introduced to my "roommate" (we had separate rooms, more like closets really, but shared a rudimentary bathroom), who was the club ventriloquist. There were two immediate problems. First, he was a he. Even more alarming, he carried around a six-foot-tall green feathered duck through whom he always spoke. Then I was introduced to the other G.O.s. It was a motley crew. Let's just say I was the best educated by far, and seemingly the most well-adjusted. Then I was asked by the club choreographer if I thought I had more talent as a singer or dancer. I

thought it was a joke, not realizing that every G.O. also had to participate in the nightly shows that were the primary entertainment for the unsuspecting vacationers. Soon I found myself dressed in a “Cats” costume as we did our rendition of that famed Broadway show one night, the next night doing a lip-sync version of Madonna’s “Vogue” dressed in fishnet stockings, a leotard and three-inch stilettos, and the next night hanging upside down on a trapeze in one of our many “circus” shows. I felt I had gone from the frying pan into the fire. I had nothing in common with any of my supposed “peers”. My hours here were just as bad as, if not worse than, at ABC Investment Bank. I met countless vacationers all of whom were fascinated by my story of leaving behind a career on Wall Street to come to Club Med. They all expressed admiration and envy, wishing that they too had the courage to leave behind the “rat race”. Little did they know! It was all I could do to stick out the six months. I gained ten pounds consoling myself with the all-you-can-eat buffets at every meal. In what little spare time I had, I tried my hand at water-skiing, wind-surfing and scuba-diving. I turned out to be decent at the first, needed daily rescues attempting the second and almost drowned doing the third. I counted the days until XYZ Consulting.

Returning to New York, I signed on at XYZ Consulting. Given my past two missteps, you’d hope by now I would have done a little more due diligence to make sure this next move was a good career decision. Alas, not so. I arrived at the training class and thought I was in the wrong room because it was full of computer terminals. I was under the impression I had signed up for *strategic consulting* not *computer programming*. Somehow, I had skipped the section in the recruiting guide that talked about the focus at XYZ Consulting being “business process reengineering” which involved heavy doses of systems engineering. Learning COBOL seemed like Greek to me. How did I know if I needed to set a flag? And what should I set it to if indeed I did need one? Thank goodness I was a quick study. One day it all seemed to fall into place. I knew I was going to be OK when in one of the later-stage training classes, I was assigned to the “advanced” group that was given the most complex module to code.

Enter Robert. We met at one of the many XYZ Consulting staff meetings we were required to attend and began dating after drinks at a bar watching a football game one Sunday with a group of other XYZ Consulting associates. He was engaged at the time but soon broke off his engagement, much to his parents’ horror. We were immediately compatible, both smarter than most of our peers, driven, outgoing, and intellectually curious. He spoke fluent German, played guitar and was a Black Belt in judo. On a relative scale, I was far more physically attractive but it didn’t bother me. He seemed like something of a Renaissance man, engaging, sarcastic, worldly and razor sharp. We moved in together in a small cottage in Fairfield. By now, Robert had joined the internal strategic consulting group at Acme Investment Bank, having landed a job that we had both competed for and I had lost out on. I had assimilated well at XYZ Consulting after three years, but there was that nagging feeling again – “Is this all there is?” One day, I was reading the local paper and came across an ad for a job at Smith Associates. I had never heard of the firm but something about the ad intrigued me. A couple of weeks later, I met with Alan Smith, one of the founders of the firm, and we hit it off enormously. Within a few weeks, I was working there. It turned out Alan was building a new business unit at the time – strategic consulting to the money management industry. On the heels of building a successful money management firm, Alan had become a well-known figure in the industry whose insights CEOs valued. Alan wanted to turn his casual “advice” business into a serious strategic advisory

practice. I didn't know the first thing about money management but I'd learned a little about strategic consulting and how to put a methodology together. Alan knew all there was to know about the investment industry but little about how to package and sell what he had learned. Together, we built an interesting business. Finally, I had found something I enjoyed doing. I liked the money management industry and the fact that the success of these organizations directly impacted something that mattered – providing retirees with a more secure pension and hence a more secure future. My colleagues were terrific – nice, smart, interesting, and creative. I discovered my inner entrepreneur and the thrill of building a new business. Alan was a demanding and colorful character and although working in a small company was sometimes more like being part of a dysfunctional family, all in all it was exhilarating. We traveled around the country and around the world meeting with the senior management teams at the leading money management firms. I often felt like I had no business telling these people how they could run their company more effectively but at the same time, I was surprised by how common-sense business practices that were a given in other industries were often not being applied at these firms.

Meanwhile, Robert was applying to Yale Business School. Having now been exposed to the world of investment banking and private equity at ABC Investment Bank, he set his sights on a more high-powered career. But he got waitlisted. It was a real blow to him and I knew instinctively I had to change the outcome. I asked Alan if he could introduce us to anyone who could be helpful. The following week a good friend of Alan's who was running a major investment firm at the time, agreed to meet with Robert and then wrote him a letter of recommendation. As a big donor to Yale, this man's endorsement must have made a difference. Robert received his acceptance letter a few weeks later.

Yale was grueling for Robert. His insecurities often got the better of him and my pep talks were frequent. So were my weekend visits. Every Friday I would drive the three-plus hours to Cambridge and return on Sunday. I rarely saw my friends and family. Robert seemed to take it all for granted, so absorbed was he in making the grade at Yale. It should have been a red flag but I chose to ignore it, rationalizing that he would "grow out of it" and would refocus on our relationship once he graduated. He slogged through the classes and we both made some great friends along the way. After his first year there, I got the business school bug and thought I ought to apply as well, but got rejected. My heart wasn't really in it. I signed up for the CFA program instead. I still felt I had a lot more to learn.

We got married just before Robert's graduation and moved to New York. During the campus interviewing process at Yale, Robert had his sights set on private equity but hadn't made the cut. Instead, he joined the investment banking program at a second-tier investment banking firm, having not made the cut either, much to his devastation, at the first-tier banks like Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley. He worked around the clock and I barely saw him but I rationalized away our threadbare relationship with the notion that once he moved to private equity, the hours would improve and everything would be fine. By now, I had been working at Smith Associates for three years and had decided that providing strategic advice to money management companies was interesting, but never having worked at one, I wanted to see if I could practice what I preached. I moved to ABC Asset Management, recruited to be "right hand man" to the new CEO, a friend of Alan's who had been brought in to turn around a sleepy and underperforming

business. The incumbents weren't up for a turnaround though. They did everything in their power to make our lives miserable and to cling to the status quo. Within a few months, I felt like I was back at ABC Investment Bank. I knew there was a better career track out there somewhere but the harder I sought it, the fewer answers I could come up with. Then another "sign" came to me. One day, I got a phone call from an executive recruiter who specialized in the money management industry. We had first met several years prior when she had approached me about a role she was recruiting for at one of her clients. Although my opinion of recruiters at that time had been colored by the low-quality ones I had encountered at the junior levels in the industry, I thought she sounded impressive and agreed to meet with her. We immediately hit it off, unusually so. At the end of the interview, we both concluded the position at hand was not a fit for me but she asked me an interesting question: would I consider a move to the executive search world to work with her? She thought I had all the right skills and would be a terrific asset. I dismissed it at the time, actually rather horrified that she would think I might be interested in what I had perceived to date as somewhat of a "loser" industry. Didn't she realize I was smart, successful and well-educated? But we had kept in touch periodically and this particular day she called me, she was just returning from maternity leave and was serious about hiring someone to work with her. Would I be interested? The concept resonated with me. I had been thinking hard about the elements a next step in my career should have – a strong dose of human interaction, the ability to create a tangible outcome, a project orientation working with different clients, meeting more smart people, ideally some mix of psychology and finance. It all seemed to add up. The only thing I hesitated about was the "cachet" aspect. I still feared a career as a headhunter was somehow more lowbrow than my pedigree warranted. I remember going home that night and talking to Robert about it. He was immediately dismissive, completely pooh-pooing the idea and chiding me for even thinking about it. The following week, I got a call from Jane, the fellow analyst from the ABC Investment Bank days, who by now had become one of my best friends. She had been living in London married to a British doctor but was getting divorced and moving back to the US. Unlike me, she had continued working in investment banking after leaving ABC Investment Bank but was now considering a career change and was interviewing with a number of executive search firms. At first I thought she meant she was using them to help her find a new job in investment banking but then I realized she meant she was interviewing to go into the executive search industry itself. Strange serendipity! It solidified my decision to make the move as well, and after securing interviews with the best firms who specialized in asset management recruiting, I joined The Jones Group, much to Beth's chagrin, since she had assumed I would join her firm. Jane chose to join Jones too. My career finally seemed to be falling into place.

Jones was the best of times and the worst of times. I loved the work, challenging as it was, but the culture was tough. Jones was a privately-owned boutique run by several partners who had spun out of one of the major search firms. Jane and I were viewed as the partners' new "favorites" and our peers at the associate level were jealous and spiteful. Regardless, I enjoyed the work and quickly made an impact. Two months after joining the firm, I came home from work one day and Robert told me he had received an offer to join the leading private equity firm he had been in discussions with. It had been a long interview process and I had been praying he was going to make it, not sure his fragile ego could withstand the rejection. The day had finally come, and now we were going to be moving to Portland, Maine. Robert thought I was going to quit my job – after all, I was "just a recruiter" and how could I continue to work in New York when we were moving three hours away – but I thought otherwise. I finally felt I had found a

career path I would enjoy and I wasn't ready to walk away from it. Besides, I had a strong but uncanny feeling there was a bigger reason I needed to stay at Jones. I just wasn't sure what it was yet. I made arrangements to work from home in Portland two days a week, and to spend three days in New York during which time I would stay with my parents who lived in suburban New Jersey. I spent the next eighteen months commuting back and forth every week, driving up to Portland on Wednesday nights and returning to New Jersey on Sundays. Grueling as it was, it seemed like a perfectly natural solution to me. If you wanted something badly enough, you just had to figure out a way to make it happen.

Living in Portland was lonely. Robert was still working around the clock, more desperate than ever to prove himself. We weren't making any new friends and our social life withered away. The commute took its toll on me but Robert barely seemed to notice. Something was missing and I suddenly realized what. A horse! Now that we were living in Portland, owning my own horse seemed like a possibility. After a long hiatus, I had taken up riding again when I was still living in Connecticut after Robert left for Yale, and had loved every minute of it. The economics of owning a horse didn't add up then though. Now they did. Except that Robert balked at the idea. It was still too expensive in his mind and how would I have the time, especially given my commute. I wouldn't take no for an answer though. I spent the next few weekends driving around meeting with all the local riding instructors, and finally found what appeared to be the right place – Grazing Fields Farm. It was run by two sisters named Gertrude and Gabby. They had an impressive set-up with an indoor arena and a handful of high quality horses. They were around my age and seemed like talented and genuine people who would take an interest in helping me take my riding career to the next level. I signed up for riding lessons, and in early December, after my Jones bonus came in higher than expected, I told Robert I was buying a horse. Sparks flew but I prevailed and on December 28th, 1998, I became the proud owner of Solo, a beautiful bay Thoroughbred show horse who had been owned by one of the other students at Grazing Fields. My heart sang when I was around him. Hours spent at the barn seemed like mere minutes. And what's more, I could now be one of the "in crowd" at the barn, since all the other students but me already owned their own horse or, in most cases, horses. But as the weeks wore on, I still felt I was on the outside looking in, that somehow I just wasn't part of the clique. January rolled around and to my surprise, everyone loaded up the trucks to go to Florida to compete on the winter show circuit. I was left behind with the barn help with cries of "See you in March!" from Gertrude and Gabby. I rode alone in the dark on the cold winter mornings and fantasized about what it must be like in Florida.

In September 1999, something big happened. Jones was sold to a publicly-traded Internet company and out of the blue, I was given an enormous amount of money in stock as part of a retention deal for the key people at the firm. I had made a big impact since joining Jones and the acquiring firm was anxious to keep me in the mix. Robert couldn't quite believe it when I told him what had happened, but there it was, in black and white, in a letter from the partners, a seemingly enormous sum that would vest one year later. All of a sudden, I had a ticket to take my riding career much further. The Florida show season rolled around again and this time I was determined to find out what it was all about. I took a vacation to see it first hand, visiting Grazing Fields' stables at the showgrounds, and immediately decided this was something I had to be a part of. Once my stock vested nine months later, I could start planning the trip to Florida with my horse the following winter and solidify my place in the "in crowd". At the same time, I

was able to give up the horrendous weekly commute to New York since the acquiring firm had a Portland presence.

March 2000. The NASDAQ peaked and began to crater. My stock had soared to more than two and half times its grant value but now began pulling back. It was a tense time as Robert and I watched the ticker tape every day, wondering if our newfound fortune would evaporate. But the stock price largely held up and when my stock vested in September, I sold it all and invested in municipal bonds. That day, I began planning the trip to Florida with the rest of my barn-mates. I thought about quitting my job but, again, I had a clear but hard-to-define feeling that there was an important reason to stay, that it was somehow part of my life plan. Instead, I decided to work out an arrangement with the management team that I would take two days off every week during the first quarter in order to spend the necessary time riding in Florida. It didn't occur to me they could say no, I just knew it had to happen. It didn't occur to me either that Robert wouldn't be supportive. He wasn't but I didn't care. I invited him to come along with me on weekends but he had no interest. Regardless, I made all the necessary preparations and in January, I was on a plane to Palm Beach.

I began my weekend trips to Florida feeling exhilarated. At first, I couldn't imagine being happier than I was then, immersed in the heady world of all horses all the time. I spent every waking moment at the showground, watching the riders practice or compete. I loved being around horses all day and helping out with the grooming and feeding. I thrived on the smells and sights and sounds of stable life, fascinated by the inner workings and the "who's who" buzz of the show circuit, who was winning and losing and whose trainer was being replaced or whose horse was outperforming and why. I was thrilled to be riding for an hour or two every day and competing on the "big league" show circuit, albeit at the lowest levels in my case. But there was still a nagging feeling that even now, even in Florida, I wasn't part of the "in crowd". I was still an outsider. I was staying at a hotel in the next town whereas everyone else in the Grazing Fields crowd was staying in groups at condos near the showground. Every morning, I would hear about their nightly group dinners to which I was never invited. I seemed always to be two steps behind everyone else in knowing where to be or what to do, whereas they all seemed to march to an unheard drum, knowing just when to get their horse ready or which saddle to use or which vet they needed to call. Everyone else seemed to take completely in stride the enormous amounts of money required to be a part of this scene and the unannounced bills for countless expenses – show entrance fees, transportation fees, night watchman fees, braiding fees, new blankets, vet bills, all the specialized clothing and tack required. The list was endless. I gulped silently and quietly wrote the checks.

Then one day, everything changed. Out of the blue, Gabby, one of the trainers, told me she would be going away the following weekend and asked if I could stay at her place to feed the dogs. She casually asked me to go out to dinner at the country club that night and our friendship began to blossom. To give you some background, Gabby was married to Nigel, one of the sons of a prominent New York real estate family. Gertrude, the other sister, was married to Joey, a local building contractor of very different economic station. I didn't know it yet, but there was no love lost between Nigel and Joey, and the disparity in wealth between the two sisters had always been the source of latent tensions. Gabby and Nigel owned a fabulous house on the Palm Beach Country Club estates. Gertrude rented a condo on the other side of the tracks with the rest

of the Grazing Fields gang. Nigel jetted in on weekends on his private plane. Joey stayed home working on his contracting jobs. Although they were both talented riders, Gertrude did most of the heavy lifting in running Grazing Fields and training the students while Gabby contributed but seemed to gad in and out as she pleased. Gabby talked of trips to Mystique and sailing in Martha's Vineyard while Gertrude focused on the myriad details of the barn operation. I didn't pay attention to all this until later but soon it would play an important part in the story.

Robert, in the mean time, couldn't have been more disinterested in all this, until one day when, one week-night when I was back in Portland, Gabby and Nigel happened to invite us to dinner at their house. At this point, I wasn't yet aware of the scope of their wealth, but it soon became clear as the butler greeted us at the door of their fabulously appointed home and an elaborate dinner of lobster and caviar and exquisite vintage wines was served, complete with heirloom china, silver and crystal. After a long evening of conversation and much red wine, Robert and I left wide-eyed and breathless at the fascinating stories of travels around the world, as the size of their family real estate empire became clear. We marveled at how Nigel had rung a sterling silver bell to summon the butler for the next course after we had finished eating. In an uncannily short time, Robert was hooked and Nigel became his new best friend. The next several weekends, Robert flew down to Florida with Nigel on the private jet and the four of us had a grand old time, eating, drinking and conversing into the wee hours. By now, I was staying with Gabby and Nigel on every trip as they had extended a guest room to me full time. During his next several visits, Robert's intoxication with the scene grew by leaps and bounds. He took up smoking, the same brand of cigarettes Nigel smoked, although I had never seen him smoke a cigarette in his life. He bought the same shoes Nigel wore, the same belts. He took a great interest in vintage wines and took up running, just like Nigel. By now, he was regularly having dinner during the week with Nigel on his own back in Portland. Occasionally, I thought I heard him use the same phrases and intonation as Nigel. One weekend during a big snowstorm, Robert got stranded in Florida and couldn't make it back to Portland. We spent the extra day looking at neighboring houses for sale and signed a contract to buy one that same day, a few streets away from Gabby and Nigel's. When the riding season in Florida came to an end and we returned to Portland, our friendship with Gabby and Nigel continued to blossom and we regularly entertained each other for dinner and chatted frequently during the day. By now, the rest of the Grazing Fields crowd had become part of the clique too, a whole cast of characters, including Gertrude who, while frosty to the whole thing at first, was now more inclined to hang out with us since her relationship with Joey had apparently hit a rough patch. I was even happier now that not only Gabby was my friend but also Gertrude who was the "real" trainer whose respect and friendship I had longed for. We spent the next several months in a sort of group "friendship fest", all of us practically inseparable. I spent every evening and weekend at the barn with the whole crew. Robert and I frequently hosted dinner parties at our house for everyone, drinking bottles and bottles of expensive wine most nights. We hosted a big birthday bash for Robert and everyone brought fabulous gifts and wrote heartfelt cards. Gertrude bought me flowers so I wouldn't feel left out. I remember feeling tremendously grateful that Robert and I had something in common again, although the feeling was permanently suffused with a low-grade worry that he seemed to be much happier when he was with all these other people than when he was just with me. Although it all sounds odd now, it didn't seem all that strange at the time. In hindsight, looking back at those few months, I am amazed at how I could have been sucked in by it all and not have seen the warning signs, but the sudden acceptance I felt, of being part of the

“in crowd” at last, was dazzling to me. I felt like the dream I had had since age five was finally coming true.

On Friday, April 13th, the first punch hit. My father was diagnosed with cancer. I was driving on I-95 when my sister called me with the news. I remember everything about the moment. Cold Play was playing on the radio. None of us knew at the time how bad it was. My father was scheduled for immediate radiation and chemotherapy and then surgery in August. I went to New Jersey to accompany him on his next doctor’s visits to get a better picture of what we were facing.

Then came the fatal blow. Robert moved out on our four-year wedding anniversary. He said he was feeling “unhappy” and “confused” and wasn’t sure why and needed some time alone “to think things through”. I felt like I had been hit by a truck. I was bewildered and disoriented, struggling with the suspicion that he must be having an affair but the lack of concrete evidence seemed more valid than my intuition. I stumbled through the days, everything seeming surreal. A week later, I booked a trip to Florida with a close friend, Laura, to see if some distance would help me sort out how I was feeling. In the middle of the night, my cell phone rang. It was Joey, Gertrude’s husband. He had just found Robert and Gertrude in bed together and was ready to kill them, or himself, or both. Somehow, I talked him down, and after we hung up, Laura gave me some Valium to stop me hyperventilating. I will never forget those next few hours. The enormity of the betrayal was only just beginning to set in. Based on further conversations with Joey, it became clear that everyone in the Grazing Fields crowd had known about this for the past few months, and had gone out of their way to cover up the lies. Robert’s supposed “business trips” in the past months were all nights spent with Gertrude. What seemed the most impossibly cruel was that she had slept in my bed with him the weekend I was visiting my father after he was diagnosed with cancer. I reeled under all this new knowledge, feeling like my whole life had been blown to pieces. I cried for hours but then something inside me told me I had to take action. I flew home and filed for divorce the next day, retaining the best lawyer in Portland. While I was sitting in the lawyer’s office, Robert called him to try to retain him but I had beaten him to it. I froze our bank accounts, determined to walk away with everything I could. My lawyer advised me that evidence of an affair might help my case if it went to court, so I hired a private detective. I met him in a Dunkin’ Donuts parking lot in southern Maine and handed him a thick wad of twenties. He drove a red Porsche whose license plate read “ON 2 U”. I remember sitting in my car after he drove away, feeling completely stunned that this is what my life had come to. For reasons I won’t get into, I feared for my life. I never spoke to or saw Gertrude or Gabby or any of the Grazing Fields crowd ever again. For reasons I didn’t understand, a voice told me to fly under the radar, disappear rather than confront. Behind closed doors with Robert in my lawyer’s office, I bargained hard for an out-of-court settlement. My lawyer marveled at my cool-headedness and grit. The divorce was granted quickly. I moved back to New York to rebuild my life.

I was scheduled to move to my new apartment in midtown on September 15th, 2001. Then September 11th struck. It seemed impossible there could be another blow like this just as I was starting to put my life back together. I debated whether to cancel my move, but a voice told me to go ahead with it. In spite of the immense devastation I felt, I began to perceive an amazing sense of resilience that I had come through this and survived it all. I also had a strange intuition

that my life held great things ahead and all this had happened for a reason, that out of all this destruction would emerge a new path.

On December 2nd, I met my now-husband. He is the most wonderful person on earth and my having found him is at the core of my belief that I am blessed with a special good fortune and am somehow destined for unusually great things.

I am probably overstaying my application welcome by now, so I won't tell the rest of my story here, but for a summary of the last few years, years that have shaped me enormously.

2002 was a year of exploration and new beginnings. I drove across the country and traveled around the world alone, hoping to make sense of where I was, how I had gotten here and why. I wrote pages and pages of journals trying to deconstruct and decode the past and determine how to map out the best possible future. I examined the events of my life, my upbringing, the patterns of behavior that were ingrained in me, my persona, how I had allowed myself to remain in such an unfulfilling marriage which I now saw had broken down long before its abrupt end, what I had learned from the experience, what I valued, what I wanted to achieve now and why. I learned tremendous amounts but I felt I had only just begun to scratch the surface. I knew that understanding it all would be a continuous journey. Upon my return, I started a company with five other partners that now has a successful four-year track record, eighteen employees in three offices worldwide and over \$10 million in annual revenues.

2003 was a dark year. My father gradually lost his valiant battle with cancer. Towards the end of the year, I moved back in with my parents temporarily to help care for him and provide emotional support for my mother. I was wholly unequipped for the experience. We were all at his bedside as he took his last breath. There was still so much I had wanted to say to him but had not found the words for. Unwittingly, I inherited the mantle of family patriarch, better equipped as I was to take it on, it seemed, than my mother or my older sister. A new bond would develop between us that had somehow been impossible when my father was still alive, but his death took a heavy toll on each of us.

2004 was about building new foundations. My husband and I celebrated our wedding. I have never felt more confident or more joyful about a decision in my life. I remember thinking "Wow, this is how it can feel when you are on the right path", an overwhelming feeling of "oneness" with yourself and those around you, an indescribable elation. In the same month, we bought an apartment in New York and a house in the Hamptons and gradually made them into our homes.

2005 was a whirlwind year of helping others. I helped my mother sell her house, move to a new community and rebuild her life. I helped my husband find a new job by introducing him to people in my network. I tried in vain to help my sister confront alcoholism and a failing marriage. I continued to help my partners grow the company. All the help I gave others was incredibly rewarding but seemed to take an unduly stressful toll on me. The year culminated in a trip to India to attend a family reunion arranged by my husband's parents. 200 of his relatives traveled to his father's home town to meet me. I couldn't have been greeted more warmly or made to feel so much a part of the family. But visiting the broader country was hard. I was

overcome with compassion for the poverty all around me. The sights and sounds and smells seemed to overwhelm my senses in a way I can't even describe. I was stricken with a stomach virus and spent two days hooked up to an I.V. in my hotel bed, barely able to crawl to the bathroom. It was at the same time one of the richest but most trying experiences of my life. Upon my return, I suddenly realized I felt deeply and wholly exhausted by the events of the last five years, although I somehow felt like a failure in admitting it, even to myself. A quiet voice seemed to be whispering to me, urging me to step back and ask myself where I was and why.

Everyone around me who knows my story praises me for what I have achieved. Out of the ashes of 2001, I have rebuilt my life completely – a new marriage, two new homes, new bonds with my family, a new company, a wonderfully happy and successful existence, all created from scratch. Everything has fallen into place! I've got it all! But instead of feeling I have "arrived", I've "made it", I somehow feel I am just scratching the surface of my potential, a feeling that has echoed throughout my past. I feel that what I have achieved so far is just one of a series of steps along a path. It is a hard concept to explain to people. You don't want to seem like you don't appreciate or take pride in all you have achieved, since you truly do, but how do you put into words that there is so much more you feel you are capable of, if only you could determine what that is? I see life as a series of concentric circles that build on one another. Like the inside of a tree perhaps. I feel I have so many more circles to grow and build, although at this present time, I do not know what each of them will look like. I realize now that I have felt this way all my life, although only in the last year or two has my awareness of this concept deepened and my quest to better understand it intensified. I have been exploring it thirstily on my own, through reading and writing and through endless discussions with my husband and with friends, but recently I have had an overwhelming and persistent sense that I am somehow missing a roadmap, that I am in some way at a dead end in my quest to understand. I have had a strong feeling that I am looking for a next step in the process, something to help guide my way in this quest, but the more I looked, the less I seemed to find. My long hours of reading, writing, discussing and pondering were all helpful but I felt stuck somehow, confused about how to get to the next level in my thinking. If I could have put it into words, I might have been able to distill it to this: what if I could find a spiritual and intellectual guide, a great thinker who is an "expert" in this field, a group of kindred spirits who are passionately interested in and committed to exploring life's journey in a similar fashion, a body of reading that brings together the works of all the great minds who have gone before us in these explorations. And then I came across your course. On Wednesday, I was having lunch with someone I met recently, serendipitously, through a friend. I almost cancelled. It didn't seem that important. It was a horrible rainy day and I knew he was the type of person who would want to get into one of those "deep" conversations about "real stuff". I was in a bit of a funk and wasn't sure I had the energy for it on this particular day. I didn't even have the energy to cancel so there I was, sitting across from him. We got talking. As I explained how I was feeling, about my search for this "next level" of thinking, he mentioned your course. When I got back to my desk after lunch, I printed out the full syllabus. I started reading it on the subway home and almost missed my stop. I read the rest of it at home that night. It was the most exhilarating thing I have ever read. It was immediately, dazzlingly, resoundingly clear to me that I had found the key I had been looking for. The next step on the path. There seemed to be only one problem. The syllabus said the course was only open to Columbia students or alumni. I am neither. The next day I called the university and after being transferred around to a whole host of people in different departments, none of whom seemed to

know anything about the course, I finally found someone who told me not to bother applying, as there were no exceptions. I hung up the phone in disbelief. It just couldn't be. Then I emailed you and received your response that night: "Yes, do get your application in." The stars had aligned. I began to write this. I don't want to sound arrogant but I know I will be seeing you on January 21st. It just would be too cruel to have found this and not be able to participate. Perhaps Goethe put it best: "That the moment one commits oneself, then Providence moves, too."

2. ii. Why do you want to take this course? Give me as much detail as possible. If any part of the syllabus spoke to you strongly, which part and why?

I want to take this course because I believe it has come to me for a reason, that it is the next piece of the puzzle I have been looking for, that it is somehow destined to be part of my life path.

I want to take this course because I have a deep desire to achieve the objectives it lays out. The four objectives of the course resonated with me deeply. Even before reading the syllabus, I had set some similar although far vaguer notions on paper, but once I read them in your words, they seemed to jump off the page at me with crystal clarity. I want to do all the of things you describe: to discover my purpose in life, my unique purpose for existence, to explore a wide variety of techniques and exercises that will spark the creative process, to learn to mobilize resources to reach my goals more efficiently, to establish and achieve a balance in my life, fluid as that balance may be over time. All of these goals were already in my mind in some far less formed way, the notion that it was somehow possible to “custom build your ideal life” and to harness the power of the universe around you to help. To have found a roadmap feels like a blessing.

I want to take this course because I am deeply excited by it. My heart is racing as I write this, filled with excitement at the prospect of embarking on this program. I am visualizing the morning of January 21st – jumping out of bed before the alarm goes off, feeling more than a few butterflies as I wonder who I will meet, what I will encounter, in what ways my mind and heart will expand, what new doors will be opened to me, how my journey will be shaped by this. My mind is abuzz, ablaze even, with the possibilities. This feeling of excitement is like nothing I have experienced before.

I want to take this course because I want to help change our world. I often feel we have lost our way as a society, that all the wrong measures are being used to judge “success,” that we are moving further and further away from a meaningful connection with our environment and each other, that there is so little authenticity left in how we are all living. I am deeply troubled by the world having seemingly “gone crazy” as you say. How can I help get it back on course and do my part in spurring the individual, organizational and societal changes you talk about? I want to discover what callings and tools are inside me to do this, and what form that will take.

I want to take this course because I want to break free from the constraints that society and our upbringing impose on us. While I am sometimes spurred by great boldness and the feeling that I have the power to be different, I am constantly sucked back into the great abyss that is the “accepted” way of living. I want to challenge all the assumptions as to how we “should” be living. I know these constraints only exist in my mind but I need new ways to break through them, to find the permanent courage to be permanently different.

I want to take this course because I want to access all the thinking that has gone before me on these profound topics. Great minds have pondered these things for centuries – how can I find and begin to draw on all that thinking? As you say, these ideas “have been articulated and refined by persons of infinite wisdom, giants who strode the earth in different times and who

belong to different traditions.” Where else could I have found a syllabus like this and a reading list like yours?

I want to take this course because I haven’t been able to find anything else like it. As you say: “Our society, as presently organized, does not accord too many forums for such exploration.” Where else can I go if not to you?

I want to take this course because I believe it will be one of the single most important things I will ever do. So many parts of the syllabus spoke to me, I underlined so much, it would be hard to talk about them all here. I truly wouldn’t be exaggerating to say the whole thing resonated with me profoundly.

2. iii. What specific – list them – learning outcomes would you like to take away from this program?

I would like to come closer to defining my life path, “the grand design” that gives meaning to everything I do and to find that which I can “enthusiastically devote” myself. I feel a powerful calling to do this. I often feel I have so much potential, that it is only limited by my knowledge of how to apply it and to what end. I want to come away with a mind and heart greatly broadened to the possibilities of what I can achieve, what else is out there beyond what I have been exposed to thus far, what impact I could be making on the world that I may not have even thought about. I would like to better understand my unique skills and persona and how I can use them to their fullest potential.

Some days I feel a great boldness, a deep self-confidence, a strong sense that I can conquer the world. Other days I am plagued by a feeling of low self-esteem and the inability to cope with even the simplest of everyday challenges. I seem to constantly vacillate between these two states. I would like to eliminate my “small animal” days, which is how I refer to the latter.

I often feel overwhelmed and exhausted by the personal toll it takes to achieve my level of “production” and “success” across all my various roles in life. I would like to eliminate or find a new way to cope with stress, “to learn how to strive mightily while remaining serene”.

I want to learn how to stop and smell the roses. Reading about the “desperate seeker”, I recognized myself. I am often so goal-oriented, I forget to enjoy getting to the goal. My “to-do list” can dominate my life. My husband has taught me a lot about the merits of enjoying life in a different way, of drinking in friendships and telling stories, of slowing down and being in the moment. I used to devote Sunday mornings to balancing my checkbook. Now I enjoy a leisurely breakfast while reading the paper in my pajamas. But I still need much more help.

I would like to stop feeling like I “should” do things. I want to be bolder. I am tired of being constrained by society to think that one “should” live one’s life a certain way and that mediocrity and living a life of “quiet desperation” are acceptable.

I want to learn new tools, exercises, frameworks, roadmaps, mental models for thinking about life and all its complexities and paradoxes. I want to come away invigorated and inspired to continue this journey, to see it as an infinite path where I can always learn, evolve, grow. I want to learn how to better share this gift of knowledge with others in my life.

2. iv. What are you hesitant about? Are you nervous or concerned about anything you read in the syllabus or heard from others?

There is only one thing I am concerned about, to be honest. What if I outgrow the most important people in my life? What if this course opens me up to such new and expansive thinking that I evolve into a person who no longer feels much in common with them? It can be lonely being this intensely inquisitive about life, to be this bold about seeking your destiny. Other people can find it unsettling and uncomfortable. They might feel “left behind” somehow. It doesn’t change my deep belief that I must take this course. I am willing to accept the consequences.

2. v. What really, really, really and truly matters to you? Why?

My husband really matters to me. Since meeting him, never have I felt so blessed. Never have I experienced such an incredible human connection. Suddenly, I am no longer alone in the world. I have found a life partner who cares deeply about my wellbeing, who supports me in my goals, who strives unfailingly to understand what is important to me and why, who is warm, loving and appreciative every day. Being around him brings out my “best self”. I love him with all my heart. Nurturing and strengthening our relationship every day is incredibly important to me. So many marriages fail because of lack of attention, death by a thousand paper cuts, a grain of sand at a time lost until suddenly there is no foundation. It really, really, really and truly matters to me to make this relationship the best and the most fulfilling it can possibly be for both of us.

Never settling really matters to me. I seem to be oddly compulsive in my quest to fulfill my human potential. I care about it viscerally. I feel a strong calling to do it. I know I have the capacity, the conviction, the determination, the courage. It really matters to me to find out what I am destined for and to pursue that with grace and fervor.

My family really matters to me, my mother, my sister and my two nieces. I feel a deep sense of responsibility to help make their lives as happy and fulfilling as possible. I often feel helpless and wish I could do more but I am learning to accept that you can only help those who want to help themselves.

Being honest really matters to me. I have experienced firsthand the great devastation that dishonesty and deceit can bring about. I never want to inflict that kind of pain on anyone.

Being a great parent really matters to me, if indeed I have the privilege of being one in the future. I don't know the first thing about it but I intend to spend a lot of time and energy figuring it out.

Measuring my life on the important metrics really matters to me. I am trying hard to move away from the traditional measures of “success” – money, material wealth, status in career and society, popularity, physical appearances – toward more meaningful ones – physical and emotional health, alignment with one's true purpose, quality of personal relationships, preservation of and respect for nature, level of inner peace, contribution to improving the world.

Owning a dog one day really matters to me. Dogs bring a huge smile to face and make my heart sing. There hasn't seemed to be a “right time” to own one yet but isn't that my own constraint?

2. vi. How will others who take this program benefit from having you in it?

I recognize that you cannot enroll in this course simply thinking about your own objectives and your own personal growth. The syllabus seemed to convey this throughout. If so, you become like the desperate seeker or the cabinetmaker or the jeweler. You are so focused on your own goals that you miss the broader perspective, the opportunity to be part of a bigger picture. In contributing more to the course, rather than simply taking from it, others learn from you and they in turn can contribute more, allowing you to learn from them. It is the kind of virtuous circle that I believe I can be an important part of.

I have enormous capacity to discuss the topics outlined in the syllabus. Although they like to discuss these topics too, sometimes my incessant pondering drives my husband and my friends a little crazy. I thrive on pondering these broad questions about life. You will never find me short of ideas and thoughts on their application. I will be an active contributor and an intense listener.

I have a natural interest in people. I like most people and most people like me. I am always interested in and feel I can learn something from everyone I meet. I often find I have something to teach as well. I am generous of spirit, passionate, intellectually curious and a natural teacher. At the end of the course, the other participants will point to me as someone who gave it her all, helped them along when they were stuck, challenged them to new heights, and became a new friend. I am someone who forms lasting bonds with those who share this passion for life's exploration. "The very deep bonds with your classmates" that you describe in the syllabus are exciting to me. I will do everything in my power to forge these bonds during the course and to "keep the spirit alive" following it.

2. vii. This program requires an enormous commitment of time as well as emotional and psychic energy. If your participation slacks off, you will be doing a disservice to yourself as well as to other members of the class. Are you fully prepared to take responsibility to make this a resoundingly successful experience for yourself as well as for others?

YES! YES! YES!

Every cell in my body is signing up for this course. I am ready for “outrageous and impossible demands”. I am counting on contributing “endless hours of individual effort”, and on expending “sweat of the brow, buckets and rivers of it.” I am fully prepared for “an inordinate time commitment.” The part about walking ten miles in the tight boots and crawling on bare knees over broken glass? Didn’t bat an eye.

I have always been an extremely committed person. Ask anyone who knows me. Working hard is in my DNA. Setting goals and working toward them is second nature and always has been. These strengths have served me well so far and that has reinforced their importance. You will have my total commitment when I embark on this course.

My calendar is clear starting January 21st. For some reason, every weekend except one during the first quarter of 2007 is completely free, usually unheard of in our itinerant household. Even if it wasn’t, it wouldn’t matter. I would change anything I needed to. My husband’s best friend is getting married in New Orleans the same weekend as the retreat. Although I was disappointed for his sake that I won’t be able to share the experience with him, he is fully supportive of my taking this course and knows I will not be attending the wedding if I am accepted. I won’t miss a minute of this course.

I have already bought the books. Now where do I send the check?