

Creativity and Personal Mastery (CPM) Application

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Suggested length: One page is too short and 20 pages are too long for all questions combined.

ALSO: Please submit a current CV with your application.

1. 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.

In February 2006, my friend Mxxxxx and I found ourselves in Axum, Ethiopia. We flew there on a prop plane that the ticket agent in Addis Ababa told us was sold out but turned out to be almost empty save for us, a dozen traders and possibly a goat or two in the luggage compartment. At the surprisingly tidy Axum airport we were greeted by a portrait of a noble, thin faced black Jesus and a mob of reps from local hotels. Mxxxxx and I eagerly entered the fray and a few minutes later negotiated an attractive rate at one of the higher end establishments.

Of course, anybody with any common sense would have pre-booked a hotel before showing up in a barely known town in the Horn of Africa. But that was not Mxxxxx and me - we arrived in Ethiopia with no plan, no research and no cash. The only reason we had sufficient Birr to get to Axum in the first place was because we maxed out our daily cash limits at one of the two working ATM machines in all of Ethiopia and secured cash advances on our credit cards through an agent in Nairobi as Ethiopia had no credit card services either.

Our hotel in Axum, as expected, was a semi-charming dump with a kindly porter, a gracious garden and a cockroach infested toilet. We did not spend much time there though, having negotiated a guided tour of the town on our ride to the hotel.

The first stop was the famed Axum obelisks - glorious relics of the town's glory three thousand years ago as the capital of ancient Abyssinia. "Great pride of Ethiopia," our eager guide explained as we listlessly looked on, wholly unimpressed by several rows of whitewashed but

cracked and mostly toppled over stones. A dirty little boy followed us around, insistently alternating whispers of “Where from?” and “Money, money, money...”

We then took a ride to what our guide called an “important castle” which, upon our arrival, turned out to be a giant heap of rocks with a few crumbling walls serving as evidence that an advanced civilization once existed there.

However, what is eternally stamped into my memory is not the “castle.” Instead, I can vividly visualize our white van pulling up to the “castle”... biting my lip in terror as it came to a stop... clutching my camera bag as the van door slid open... and following the stoic but clearly unsteady Magnus outside... where a crowd of blind beggar boys was eagerly awaiting our arrival.

The blind boys encircled the van’s door, creating a tiny oval where we could stand but not much more. Their eyes were repulsive – bloody red, dripping white or grotesque and vacuous, puss-filled black orbs. Later we learned that most of them fell victim to trachoma, a disease that is easily cured in the West. But in Ethiopia, it was a cruel sentence for otherwise able-bodied boys, between ten and eighteen years old, to a lifetime of begging and destitution.

Dressed in dreadful Salvation Army rags, mostly barefoot, the blind boys stood like the army from the “Night of the Living Dead”, chanting in dreadful unison, “Money, money, money...”, “Help, help, help...” as their minders, probably younger brothers, guided their desperate, filthy clutching hands towards Magnus and me.

If there is a moment in my life that truly established my personal limits... my personal weakness... that panicked charge through the outstretched hands of the truly wretched and the destitute... of the cursed and crippled... that was the moment that clearly drew a line in my life – I knew that I was brave, or stupid, enough to travel to a small town in Africa with no plan and a wad of cash that is probably more than most people there make in a lifetime. And I also knew that I was weak enough to crumble... to look away... to scatter in fright when the harsh reality of local life stared right in my face, with needlessly disfigured, forever broken teenage eyes.

Before leaving the “castle”, we did end up talking to the blind boys and learning a little bit about them and their lives. Though unfortunately, in my opinion, the solution to these avoidable but common personal tragedies in the third world lies not in throwing pompous change at the problem but through progressive changes to political, economic and education policies that permit these ancient maladies to go on untreated.

Mxxxxxx and I had many other adventures and misadventures on our trip to Ethiopia but I think the one thing that I want to state clearly in my CPM application is that I am open-minded, adventurous and ready to get into all sorts of trouble if it can get me a good story I can proudly share with my grandchildren one day.

2. Why do you want to take this course? Give me as much detail as possible. How did you learn about it? If someone recommended it, who and why did he/she do so? If any part of the syllabus spoke to you strongly, which part and why?

I want to begin answering this question by sharing an experience that, in my opinion, in many ways shaped my approach to work and career.

It started when I was six years old and was living in Kharkov, USSR... At the time, I was obsessed with soccer, harboring the grand ambition of one day becoming a starting forward on the USSR national team. I lobbied my parents and grandparents as hard as I could to let me go to soccer school but it was not meant to be.

“Soccer players get their legs broken and end up as cripples,” my grandfather informed me. Instead I was signed up for tennis, a newly fashionable sport that both my grandfather and uncle were starting to pursue with great passion.

At the time I was OK with tennis – I even had my own little wooden racket with which I smashed balls against my bedroom wall. But when tennis became a forced substitute for soccer it became nothing but a drone, passionless, guilt-ridden responsibility to me. I went to the lessons as if going to a mundane, boring job and my results reflected this – my trainers would regularly complain to my grandfather that while I seemed to have plenty of talent, I lacked “will power” to make even the most rudimentary improvements to my technique.

My tennis career came and went with minimal success. I put down my racket 17 years ago, after I graduated high school, and never picked it up again. My parents always ask me to play with them but I refuse. Maybe I refuse because I lost my form and playing poorly literally makes me feel nauseous but more likely because tennis was nothing more than a forced-upon obligation to me.

However, the reason I want to take CPM is not because my family made me take unwanted tennis lessons but because the tennis story is eerily reminiscent to how I feel about my Wall Street career – it was something that I technically chose if you want to call drunkenly driving into a ditch a choice. Now is the time for me to change this.

“A good, fresh-off the boat immigrant boy needed a good career... wasn’t interested in becoming a doctor since dissecting a frog made me sick... didn’t care to become a lawyer... wasn’t willing to become another Russian immigrant computer programmer... so took the last remaining alternative to a lifetime of poverty and welfare – finance,” is how I would describe my path to finance.

I did have plenty of opportunities to explore other fields, to find something else but for some inexplicable reason, maybe some deeply ingrained commitment to propriety, I did nothing. I could have tried history, which I always loved and excelled at - I took ZERO history classes in college. I was always obsessed with exotic destinations and cultures - I took ZERO sociology courses in college. I always had a writing streak in me but I took ZERO creative writing classes in college.

Instead I decreed to myself that my goal was to get “rich”, whatever that meant, and filled my curriculum with mildly interesting finance courses and mind numbingly boring accounting lectures. I successfully snoozed through these while earning my standard B/B+ with the most de minimus of efforts.

In the back of my head I did have an alternative path to success and greatness that was going to render all this finance non-sense worthless anyway – I was going to become a great writer and live life as a wise and respected sage. But fate had it otherwise and where shortly after graduating college I thought I was about to really take off and start writing some brilliant shit (pardon my French), I had a major personal setback of the romantic kind, which, looking back at it now, paralyzed my writing as well.

Subsequently, I spent my 20's lost and confused, blindly stumbling around trying to resolve my personal life while letting my professional ambitions go on cruise control. I settled into finance and went on cruise-control mode through a series of jobs where I performed well but to which I had no emotional commitment and perceived as temporary stops that would get nothing more than a byline in my obituary.

And so time went and while I did have some modest writing successes, my finance career lived on. I progressed mostly through mindless hustle, driven by a numbing fear of near-term failure, but without any long-term strategy or vision.

But fear not - I have been very fortunate and after being an utter, complete failure in my personal life for many years I now find myself as a stunning success with a perfect wife and daughter, with many friends whom I value and respect - with everything I could have ever asked for.

I believe I achieved this not only through luck but because of my perseverance. I did not accept being miserable. I did not settle on anything I half-liked. I constantly kept my feet moving. I constantly tried new things. I refused to settle for anything but exactly what I wanted though at the time I had no idea what it actually was. But when I found it I knew it and that was it – it really is that simple.

This is what brings me to the doorstep of CPM - I want to find the same success in my career that I found in my personal life. Though today I do not have the luxury of unattached youth and cannot just drop everything and do as I please at a drop of a hat. My desire for a perfect career must be balanced with my everyday duties and responsibilities to my family.

The reason I believe CPM will work for me is because it worked so well for some of my closest friends who took CPM several years ago. They, unlike most of my other friends, have interesting and exciting careers that they love and are passionate about. They have chastised me for a long-time over my directionless career and repeatedly recommended CPM to me, insisting that I commit myself to taking it.

This is why I am here today. I want to work on finding a career path that will make me not so much successful (that will come on its own) but happy and motivated with what I do on an

everyday basis. Based on everything I heard and read CPM is the right venue for me to take this first of perhaps many steps.

3. *What specific — list them — learning outcomes would you like to take away from this course? An example of such an outcome is “I would like to learn how to stop being bothered by what I think others are thinking about me.”*

My entire life I have had the luck of being surrounded by people who are good at what they do... who are very successful at what they do... and who, perhaps not coincidentally, really like... really live what they do... I always thought I'd be one of these people who are passionate, possessed, completely committed to what they do... But I am not...

Instead I find myself as one of those Gogol characters... a faceless functionary in a dreary, neurotic bureaucracy... shifting papers from one side of the desk to the other... giving utmost respect and obeisance to banal decrees... and preoccupying myself with doing everything possible not to rock the boat and keeping a steady paycheck clearing every month...

I do not want this! I do not want to wake up every morning for the rest of my life, feeling dreadful and nauseous about going to a job I feel nothing for... I do not want to spend all my time and efforts trying to accomplish goals that I find petty and unfulfilling... I do not want to waste my time on pleasing people whose opinion I only value to the exact degree they influence my remuneration...

I want to change this... I want to find a job, a career, a long-term path that will be exciting, motivating, stimulating, fulfilling, etc.... I want a career that will be the highlight, not a byline, of my obituary!

And this is what I want to accomplish through participation in CPM – to have the program help me identify a fulfilling career path that will motivate and excite me every day while allowing me to take care of my family.

Having finished this, I realize I did not list the specific outcomes I want, so here they are:

1. Find job that makes me drool with excitement every morning before I go in to work
2. Identify career that I find fulfilling and am happy to have as a headline on my obituary
3. Identify skills where I can be one of the best
4. See if there is anything I am leaving on the table/not utilizing both personally and professionally
5. Find a path to execute on the above while successfully supporting my family

4. What hesitations do you have? Are you nervous or concerned about anything you read in the syllabus or heard from others?

Given the exceptionally positive reviews that I have received from CPM alums, I do not have any significant apprehensions about this program except maybe the most natural – a concern that after I put all the time and effort that I can into this program, nothing will come out of it... and I will still be left in the same place, doing the same things as before, with no land in sight... (This, by the way, still leaves me luckier and better off than most people on this planet)

Though based on my personal experiences and the long road I took to building a happy personal life, this concern might not be fully legitimate... since it seems to me that often the important part is not making the right next step but taking a step, period... acknowledging that you have a problem that you want to fix... and to start working on it... and even if CPM does not entirely fulfill my expectations (my friends claim this is very unlikely), I think it will still be a great step forward for me since trying to do something is always better than what I am doing now - passively doing nothing...

5. *How will other persons who take the course benefit from having you in it?*

I believe I will be able to positively contribute to others' learning from and enjoying their CPM experience.

On one hand, I am a friendly, happy-go-lucky person. I've been lucky in that it is easy for me to make friends and have people relate and open up to me. As strange as it sounds, these personality traits, in combination with being generally a patient, hard-working person, is probably the one thing that has allowed me to succeed on Wall Street to the limited degree that I have. I have an ability to listen and pay attention to people while putting aside any personal distractions, focusing on the message they are trying to communicate rather than the "noise" that follows any one of us (bad manners, personality quirks, etc.).

On the other hand, I think I will bring a breadth of very diverse and interesting personal and professional experiences that I'll try to share with my classmates.

Professionally, I have worked in many areas of finance, with a broad diversity of responsibilities and experiences. Some of these experiences are pretty hysterical, such as what do you do when first thing in the morning your bosses' bosses' boss is calling you because the night before you just happened to forget to release all of Lehman Brothers Asian currency wires (happened when I was 23) – my answer was to tell the truth. Other experiences are perhaps less funny though no less worthwhile, such as what do you do when you find yourself backed into the proverbial corner because of some faulty political steps and bad hiring (happened when I was 30) – my

answer was to shut my mouth, put my head down and work away until a lifeboat in the form of the 2007 subprime mortgage market crash came to my rescue.

On the personal side, I have lived a full and interesting life (or so it seems to me). My family and I immigrated to United States when I was 12. A lot of my formative experiences happened around leaving my home (Kharkov, USSR), my family and friends, as well as coming into an entirely different world and culture... with different people... different values... different outlook on seemingly pretty much everything...

Somewhere between being this fresh off the boat 12 year old immigrant and the 35 year old American who is writing this today, I have had many experiences, both good and bad... making many good friends and maybe some bad... having a love affair go horribly wrong... and have one go incredibly right... travelling the world (going to strange places and meeting some very strange people)... and finally, finding myself here at CPM's door, personally satisfied (and incredibly lucky) but professionally unfulfilled (but also not that unlucky).

In summary, I believe I would be a good contributor to the CPM program... I like to meet new people... I like to share other people's experiences... and I like to help others.... So for this reason, I believe I will be able to make the program better for others... just like others, I hope, will make the CPM experience better for me.

6. *What really, really, really and truly matters to you? Why?*

I believe a very large portion of a person's success or failure in life is driven by the people he surrounds himself with.

As I look back now, most of my actions and decisions, most of the choices I have made in life have been hugely influenced by the people I had in my life. This applies to both family and friends, as well as to personal and professional relationships. I find that in order to succeed, you must have the right support around you, be it someone to give you guidance, a necessary distraction or, even more importantly, smack you over the head and call you an idiot when you are being one (in my case, this is quite often).

When I say this, I look back to probably the two worst times of my life.

One was when I was in my early twenties and had a romance go horribly bad. At the time, though I perceived it otherwise then, I had no one to turn to, no one to discuss the situation with, no one to give me guidance or an alternative solution. And the result I received was directly in-line with this – I was horribly miserable, endlessly failing for an insanely long time.

The second incident took place a few years ago when someone who was very close to me but with whom I had a very complicated relationship suddenly passed away. There is no way to make the process of dealing with something like this easy or pleasant but the fact that I had my wife and a few very, very good friends to share this burden with me made this experience survivable and not utterly ruinous to everything in my life.

This is why I think it is very important to surround yourself with people who are good and whom you can trust. This applies across the full spectrum of life – be it family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, bosses, etc. It is very hard to succeed in anything “despite” others or while relying on incompetent or negatively intentioned people, and much easier to succeed with the support of people you can rely on and who can rely on you.

7. This course 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 other members of class. Are you fully prepared to take responsibility to make this class a resounding success for yourself as well as for others?

I have been meaning to take this course since 2005. In the previous years, for a variety of reasons, the timing did not seem right. And of course I had my excuses... from being too broke to afford the course (~2006 & 2007)... from its timing being wrong... to feeling just not up to it. But end of all ends, I think these excuses were legitimate... and one should take a course like CPM only when he is fully ready and committed... not so much financially... but most certainly mentally and emotionally...

And I know for me the time is now... I must find answers (or at least try to find answers) for my professional dissatisfaction for the good of not only myself but also my family. There is no reason to be miserable and unhappy when one has so many opportunities to be happy and satisfied. So by committing to CPM, I am committing to doing everything possible to find answers within myself... and helping others find their own answers... with the goal of making this program... the time and effort we all commit to this program... as worthwhile and productive as possible.