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COACHING STUDENTS FOR MORE THAN A CAREER:
PREPARING STUDENTS FOR LIFE BEYOND COLLEGE VIA SCHOLARLY
PERSONAL NARRATIVE WRITING

A Thesis Presented

by

Akshar Patel

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Education
Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

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ABSTRACT

What child does not want to do everything possible to please his or her parents? Many times children, regardless of age, find themselves struggling to decide what is right for them and what their parents feel is right for them. Parents are not always to blame for a child's unsatisfied feeling. Children often have a hard time articulating what they are feeling on the inside.

I now find myself in the same conundrum with college students who have difficulty articulating what they want in life. With writing as my medium, this thesis will use the power of both Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) and Epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (eSPN) to explore my personal battle with articulating what I want for myself and the world around me. With creation of a personal definition of success as my end goal, I will explore and exemplify how SPN and eSPN writing can be used in one's life to reflect upon and articulate internal desires for how we want to live our lives.

With my background in engineering and mathematics, I have found writing to be a release from the straightforward answers that I have been trained to search for. All types of people, engineers or not, can use the power of SPN and eSPN to dig deeper and find what exactly they want to do with their time. Finally, using narrative writing to help others write their stories will give both the reader and their respective audiences a medium through which to connect, i.e. SPN and/or eSPN writing.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

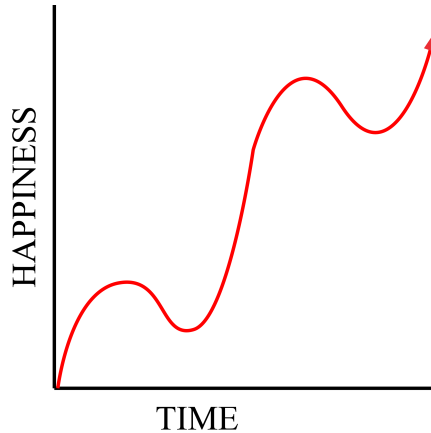
Am I successful?

Before writing this thesis, I believe this question should be addressed-- before writing about the ideas, research, and experience I have with the topic. Short answer: Yes, I am successful. I presently have a job, loving friends and family, and freedom to make my own decisions. The long answer is the few thousand words that follow.

I would like to take the time to write about some of the small things that have led me to where I am now. I am working in Career Services at Illinois Institute of Technology because of my network of amazing people here. Prior to this, I was in Vermont because of the faith I put in advice given by a close mentor; and before that, I was working in Undergraduate Admissions at Illinois Tech because a friend of mine happened to hand me an application to be a Student Ambassador for the office. *That* probably has been the most influential experience to date in my career. I did not know it then, but applying for that work-study position was going to be the beginning of five years of mental, emotional, and physical work that led me to writing this thesis about success.

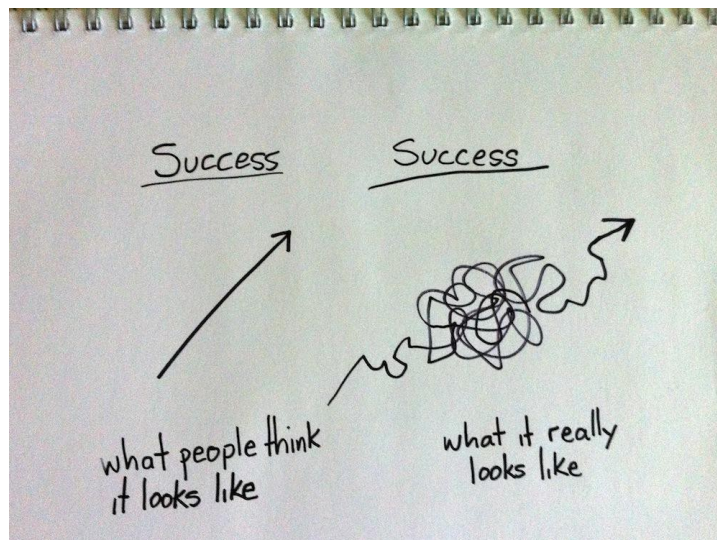
I feel lucky to be able to pinpoint the exact events in my life that have led me to where I am now in terms of my personal success -- however, could this have happened sooner? In the fast-paced, money-focused world that we live in, could I have saved years of college and thousands of dollars of debt if I was able to have my “pivotal moment” much sooner? Would it not be rather better to not have to pivot at all, but be able to take my life in the direction that I wanted from the beginning?

The way that I visualize my progress through life is as a line drawn across a horizontal axis (time) and given different elevations that change along a vertical axis (happiness).



(Figure 1)

The reason I see life in this type of frame has a lot to do with my engineering background and how my mind works, but also a lot to do with the types of people I have surrounded myself with. Toward the end of my college career, after my “pivotal moment,” I was shown an image that has become the premise for much of this thesis.



(Figure 2)

I have invested a great deal of time and thought to unpack the implications of this simple but evocative comic diagram. To be clear, I do believe in the message of this image, and I am writing to help others realize that the decisions they make should not be in order to pursue a life of idealized progress closer to the drawing on the left. One's decisions should rather be made knowing that the ultimate result will be a closer approximation of the drawing on the right.

In basic calculus I learned that an integral is the area under a curve. When one graphs a function on a horizontal and vertical axis, one discovers a curve that changes depending on the function. The integral of that function is calculated between any two intervals of that function, representing the area between the curve and the horizontal axis, i.e., the area under the curve. When I think of success, I think of it as the integral of the drawing on the right in Figure 2. Time is the horizontal axis and happiness is the vertical axis. Since the integral is the area underneath the curve between two intervals, even when happiness drops, because time is always continuing, the sum of the area under the curve remains positive, as long as one's happiness is above zero. The only exception is when happiness drops below zero, or when someone has nothing to be happy for. I dream of a day when not a single person on this planet ever reaches that moment, but even in my own life I have felt like this before. I hope to address this issue through my writing.

It is my hope that more cultures, generations, educators, and other influencers share this image with all ages to ease the anxiety in decision-making and break with the idea that "success" is exemplified by a more-or-less straight line of positive or upward progress toward a predetermined destination. Success, rather, is to be found in the net

integral of fulfillment one may achieve along a path full of twists and turns, ups and downs, toward a goal or goals that shift and change as we learn and grow throughout the experiences of our lives. In short, to feel and to be indeed successful is largely a matter of letting go of any idealized notion of a smooth, uncomplicated path through life.

1.1 Success is a Journey, Not a Destination...

Throughout the planning of this thesis, I have come across many sources that examine similar topics. Strayer University, a private for-profit higher education institution, has started a campaign to change the meaning of success within their campus culture. The project, “Readdress Success” directly challenges the dominant paradigm of success as “the fact of getting or achieving wealth, respect, or fame.” The Strayer project aims to shift the word’s connotation to, “happiness derived from good relationships, and achieving personal goals.” Though I do believe the proposed definition is better than the existing one, I still believe it revolves too much around achievement as an end-stage or outcome, as opposed to the process of experience. My favorite tennis player, Arthur Ashe, spoke of success as a journey, not a destination. From his personal experiences he realized that his success did not stem solely from his achievements -- part of his success spawned from his misfortunes and failures. Ashe saw that as time went by it wasn’t each individual accomplishment that determined the degree of his success, but rather the idea that each part of his journey was a success in itself.

CHAPTER 2: A METHODOLOGY FOR CAREER COACHING

Career coaching can play a vital role in helping students understand success. Often students come to me confused and unsure of what their major means. When I ask students why they chose their major, they too often don’t have a concrete answer, other

than an affinity for peripheral subjects around their major. For example, I once met a student on a campus tour who said she chose mechanical engineering because she liked math and science. To make such a significant decision based on such little information is a huge risk, yet their lack of experience enables a naïve trust that whatever academic-professional path they've set upon, things will somehow work out and be okay for them in some nebulous, speculative future beyond the long horizon of graduation. By the end of a student's college career, however, most have absolutely lost that sense of carefree choice. When students come to me for career coaching in their final academic year, they are looking for concrete and specific answers about what levels of salaries they should expect, or what a typical day at a firm is like, or how quickly they will advance in their careers. Having "paid their dues" by diligently following their academic courses of study, they want and expect the management of their future success to be as cut-and-dried as the calculation of an integral within a simple, monolinear curve.

My approach to helping them is the same when I help myself. I endeavor to convince them to think about their answers not in a methodological way, but according to a personal narrative that makes sense for them. Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) writing has always been helpful to me, to share my ideas by doing "me-search" as well as re-search about my own life. Most of my students are comfortable doing research about their lives in terms of their careers. For example, it is pretty easy to help a student figure out what type of salary they are willing to accept because we can research what others have made, the average cost of living for their particular part of the world, et cetera. However, helping students understand *why* they might choose to go against the grain, either in their professional careers, or in their personal struggles with issues of identity,--

that requires quite a bit of me-search. During those times I find it most helpful to encourage students to write SPN where their main focus is on themselves as individuals, not citing sources to “prove” the truth of what they are saying.

Epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative writing (eSPN) can be used as a methodology to help students think through their lives and see that no matter what risk they take, it is a step in the right direction. While writing this thesis, I have compiled letters that I have written in eSPN format to help me reflect on and review the decisions that I have made towards my career success. eSPN writing works for college students for many reasons, and in my career coaching, epistolary writing works exceptionally well because it is a very “raw” form of writing. I ask students to honestly think about their own lives with minimal regard to external influences.

“An epistolary form of writing is a very personal kind of writing. We will ask that your epistolary writing be in the form of letters. Considering the personal narrative aspect of SPN writing, the insertion of letters (authored by the writer) comes as no surprise. Many of our students include letters they have written to themselves, loved ones, the academy, not-so loved ones, and any other human or non-human (e.g., “Dear Universe,” “Dear Reduced Job Market,” “Dear Lost Church of My Youth,” “Dear Alter-Ego,” “Dear Cherished Mentor,” “Dear Lifelong Tension That Exists Between My Outer Self and My Inner Self,” “Dear Socrates,” “Dear Holocaust Survivor Wherever You Are,”) etc.” (Nash & Bradley, 2011).

Nash and Bradley (2011) explain in their book, *Me-search and Re-search: A Guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscripts*, that these letters are sent to anyone the writer wishes to address. In my coaching I ask students to write to their future

selves and to people they feel are holding them back. I've also shared my own reflection letters with students to show them that taking risks in their life will not "end" when they choose their first job. Like the success diagram in Figure 2, I try to show students that their lives and careers will come with twists and turns that they should embrace. There was a time, after I finishing my first round of writing, when I kept feeling like it wasn't complete, where I was presented with an opportunity that put me on a cliff. It was a chance to jump and see how high I could fly or how far I could fall. This leap of faith through uncertainty and risk, similar to my students deciding on a job, was a moment of vulnerability. I had the opportunity to join an executive board for an organization to which I had dedicated my last 10 years. I had been a student member, an alumni mentor, and a volunteer for almost half my life, and now the next stage of personal investment presented itself.

My initial thoughts were to run, simply because I was comfortable. I didn't *need* to take that next step, and I had done enough up until now to show people that I cared about our cause. These thoughts slowly faded away to the idea that this may be vulnerability, but it was also opportunity. I had the opportunity to take my leadership to the next level; I had the opportunity to join a group of people that were thinking about our organization at greater lengths; but most importantly, I had the opportunity to increase my happiness and find one more "thing" to be happy for. So, I did it and jumped. Initially, there was some falling but then came the flight and my happiness soared. This opportunity gave me a way to network, a way to meet members from across the country, and a chance to give back to an organization that gave me so much.

As I continue to live my life, I continue to add to my eSPN story. Each time I come to a key pivotal moment, which is also a moment of high vulnerability, I am able to write through those moments. A writing piece was to be submitted with the application to join the board, So, I turned to eSPN to share my thoughts, feelings, and the “me-search” I had done to show the committee that I was the best candidate. I wrote a letter to the committee explaining my interest, and why the timing was so crucial for me.

Dear, Alumni Membership, Alumni & Friends Executive Board, National Staff

At what point in your life do a group of people become your family?

When I think about my nuclear family, I don't recall a time when I considered them strangers. Similar instances have happened few and far between in my life. My current colleagues instantly became family on day one, many of my friends never were really friends, rather family; however, one group of people that especially gave me a feeling of family before friends has been the 300,000 members of SkillsUSA. In the last 10 years, I have met hundreds of people that never had a chance to be a stranger. Because they wore the red blazer, they were instantly family – bonded. When an organization builds a network that has a bond as strong as the red blazer, extraordinary things can happen. In an effort to continue doing extraordinary things, I have been presented with an opportunity to join a team of SkillsUSA alumni to develop, impact, and help drive the organization toward Vision 2020 and beyond.

My name is Akshar Patel and I am a Career Development Coach at Illinois Institute of Technology pursuing my passion for education access and student empowerment. Each day my thoughts revolve around the idea of success, and

how I can help students from around the world better understand what it means to be successful. Much of my history with SkillsUSA has contributed to my own success. When I joined the organization in 2005, my heart was set on competing in carpentry and going to engineering school. With STEM education in mind, I continued my education at Illinois Institute of Technology and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering.

The interactions I had with students while serving as a member, state officer, and alumni inspired me to find and pursue my passion for education after college. Three years ago I moved to Burlington, VT for my first job in higher education and to continue my education in graduate school. While in Vermont my connection with SkillsUSA grew and I was able to assist at multiple state conferences: Vermont, Wisconsin, and Illinois. After moving back to Illinois, I am able to serve SkillsUSA Illinois in a much greater capacity. I am charged with the responsibility of marketing and branding for SkillsUSA Illinois. In the last six months we have made great change in Illinois including, a new website, strategic marketing campaign, and continued commitment to reach each CTE student in Illinois, and the country. The opportunity to serve an alumni membership is one that comes with a lot of responsibility and dedication. For the first time in my life I feel that my life – work and personal – give me the freedom to pursue SkillsUSA. I would like to share my SkillsUSA story with alumni who struggle to find balance. I believe that SkillsUSA is not a layer in my life, rather it is part of my life and my routine. I have heard about this struggle from many alumni members, and I believe by sharing my story I can help others use the red blazer

not as a layer but rather a network to do extraordinary things for the organization, but more importantly, for themselves.

With this drive, I request the SkillsUSA Alumni membership, SkillsUSA Alumni and Friends Executive Board, and SkillsUSA National Staff to consider my candidacy for Region 3 Representative on the Alumni and Friends Executive Board.

Thank you,

Akshar Patel

Success is a familiar idea in all walks of life. From birth, babies are conditioned to celebrate their successes. There are rewards given when a baby learns to eat, walk, and talk. Babies learn to associate their parents' smile as a reward to having a small success. Essentially, if mom or dad smiles that means they were successful at something. I learned this from my own experiences training my roommate's new dog. Everything I read talked about focusing on the good and celebrating the successes.

As with dogs, we spend a lot of time celebrating and rewarding children when they do something we want or expect of them. With that mindset developed from a young age, I believe that my meaning of success was oriented around making my father happy. I've been told that when I was a baby, I spent the most time around my father, mother, and grandmother; theirs were the faces that I wanted to see smile -- then I knew I had a success.

However, like most other people, I don't think I really had a list of people I wanted to be around when I failed. Hiding and shame were common themes for when I failed in school, in a religion, or at home. No one wants to show their face when they fail,

and even if they gain the courage to do so, it is still an anxiety-inducing experience. The physiological feelings I experience when I succeed and when I fail are practically the same: knots in my stomach, sweating, and overall anxiety for what's to come. The mental experience also only varies slightly. I still question what people will think of me, how they will react, and whether or not it will cause an emotional reaction.

In the process of developing a meaning of success, how can one know that they are successful if their bodies react the same way to failure? Success and failure are results of circumstances or events. To develop a meaning for success, I must define some parameters. Success can be used in place of an accomplishment and the antonym of that would be failure. This is different from the meaning of success that I seek to articulate here. The meaning of success I intend to set out in these pages accounts for both success/achievements and failures. From my experiences working with high school and college students, many of them do not differentiate in this way. For their meanings of success, they solely look at the achievements.

CHAPTER 3: FINDING A WHY FOR SUCCESS

Simon Sinek wrote a book called, "Start With Why." This book and his TED Talk have a source for many of my values, especially in my career. Understanding one's own "why" is a key factor in having a successful journey. Sinek states that, "Success is a feeling" (Sinek, 2011). In his blog he writes that reaching a measurable goal is an achievement but it is not success. As I think of the idea that success is the integral of happiness over time, I *feel* that success is a feeling. Over the course of time, each individual moment of happiness adds to the overall feeling of success.

Sinek brings to the table an underlying cause for happiness, which is the idea of knowing your “why.” If you know why you are doing what you are doing, and can articulate that to those around you, then ultimately you have the power to be happy with your decision. My model for inspirational leadership (a driver for my happiness) comes from Sinek’s model called “The Golden Circle.” Sinek has discovered that inspirational leaders are those that start with *why* they are doing what they are doing, then proceed with *how* and *what* they are doing. This style of leadership addresses the biological factors that come with inspiration.

In my making meaning of success, I too have sought after inspirational leaders who are not looking at individual moments of happiness as success, but rather looking at success as an integral of happiness over time; every moment, whether a change toward positive or negative in happiness, is a positive addition to the journey of success. Why we do what we do directly impacts happiness. Knowing my “why” helps me acknowledge that though every moment in my life may not increase happiness, over the course of time I am constantly adding to my feeling of success.

3.1 FEELING

Part of Sinek’s studies has been on the biology of the human brain. When looking at the cross section of the brain from the top the outer most layers is the neocortex, our “newest” brain, in evolutionary terms. The middle of the brain is the limbic brain, whence originate the functions of emotion, behavior, and motivation. Through investigating Simon Sinek’s model, I have learned quite a bit about the limbic brain. By connecting with Sinek as my inspirational leader, I have had the realization that when sharing a story or idea, one has to start with *why*.

Starting with why is rooted in our biology. The limbic brain is responsible for decision making and feeling but does not comprehend language. So, when sharing my thoughts on success, if I cannot connect with someone on an emotional level, then they will not feel the feeling that I am trying to describe. This experience was evident during my first connection with Sinek.

I was sitting in a dull conference room in Columbus, NE listening to a presenter talk about how we should market our organization. She was talking about connecting with our target population and sharing our stories. After some discussion, the last part of the presentation was an 18-minute video that would soon change my life. As the video started, the “TED” logo appeared. At that time, I was still not familiar with the idea of “TED Talks” but I had a feeling that what I was about to hear was going to be meaningful.

Simon Sinek appeared on the screen holding a microphone in one hand and a magic marker in the other; there was an easel set up behind him. He began his talk and dove right into marketing strategy. He spoke about why marketing wasn’t working and his discovery. He was a fascinating speaker who was really able to keep my attention the entire time. Throughout his talk I felt light bulbs go off constantly and my limbic brain was kicking in with emotion. Physiological triggers were starting to kick in. I felt my heartrate increase and it took everything in my power to not jump out of my seat and scream, “YES, YES, YES!” This was not only Sinek explaining his idea to an audience, he was also testing it and it was working -- at least on me.

Listening to that talk was one of the first times I began questioning my idea of success. I started thinking about what success or successfulness was in my eyes and did it

align with my “why.” The car ride home from that conference was a long eight hours of thinking about what those around me thought my “why” should be and what I felt my “why” to be.

As I sat in the back seat of the car on my way home from Nebraska, I started to heavily question why I was pursuing a degree in engineering. My father had done everything in his power to surround me with individuals that would have a positive impact on my life. He also made certain that a high percentage of the people in my life were college educated and in fields that society deems “prestigious.” His influence on what I thought to be success revolved around money, intelligence, and ranking in society. The culture that I was raised in would not accept someone who worked without a dignified job title.

My father had the best intentions to keep my mind focused on achieving something great with my education and life. His influence helped me decide on engineering as a field that would bring me success. Biology played a factor in this, too -- some of my natural talents initially justified my father’s support and thus he did everything he could to keep me on track to be an engineer. “According to Piaget, children are born with a very basic mental structure (genetically inherited and evolved) on which all subsequent learning and knowledge is based” (S. McLeod, 1970).

Jean Piaget believed that genetics played a large factor in the mental structure and with that in mind, once my father realized my strengths and mental structure, my surroundings were adjusted to maximize those qualities. Math and science became a priority. History, philosophy, literature, and arts all became supplementary topics that were done “as required” by the school system. Throughout my upbringing, I did not have

mental freedom to explore the world around me and see the kinds of problems I could solve. My nature showed signs of single-minded focus and my father maximized that. My story may sound like a clichéd “Three Idiots” story, a now classic Indian movie about three young men who want to pursue careers that are different than what their parents’ desire, but it is different. My father did not force engineering, math, or science on me; he simply put me in a space where I could maximize my learning around those topics because my genetics seemed to show strength in those areas.

With this background story, during my trip home from Nebraska I started asking myself questions about the problems I wanted to solve. There were moments in my life where my limbic system would trigger, and I would get deep emotional feelings for stories and I needed to identify what those were. If I could identify those triggers then I could find my why. At that point, it was pretty clear that engineering was not triggering those emotional reactions. I was in my fourth year of engineering school and I was just now realizing that I wasn’t emotionally connecting with my schoolwork.

As I started to take inventory of the people, issues, and places I saw every day I realized the common theme was school – and not just schoolwork or classrooms, but the physical *space* of school. The idea of going to an institution of higher learning, and being surrounded by the brightest minds in the world, got my limbic system to spark. That was a huge step in increasing my happiness. I had now discovered what made my limbic system trigger -- but still no “why.”

With a narrowed focus, I went through my daily routine at school. From my commute in, through the day, and my commute home, I thought about what parts of the day triggered the strongest emotional response. This part took some time, not because it

was great, but I was struggling to find what truly captured my attention. Much of my time was focused on schoolwork and on my campus job. It wasn't until I had breakfast with a special mentor that I realized what truly excited me about my day. That breakfast was one of those pivotal moments that I will never forget.

3.2 Key Pivotal Moment

I am pretty committed to being a morning person. Much of this thesis has been written early in the morning before heading to work. Each morning offers a fresh mind capable of thinking beyond the box. For someone who has recently started struggling with anxiety, the morning time offers an opportunity to have a clear mind with out any anxiety inducing thoughts. I have learned from many of my mentors that the morning is a great time to discuss new ideas that are outside the box.

So, on a brisk November morning in 2012 I went off to a morning breakfast meeting to discuss something out of the box. I met with my mentor on Illinois Tech's campus and we drove to nearby Hyde Park for some breakfast. This was my first time interacting one-on-one with him and I couldn't help but sit and stare as he drove. He is a tall, strong, confident human who emulates kindness with every breath. As we walked into the diner he glanced at a woman who was asking for change.

We got our food, sat down and he immediately started asking me details about my life: my family, my culture, where I was born, where in India I have family. He dug deep with each inquiry. We talked about my father's journey and how he got to where he is today. During moments like these, when two people are deep in conversation, there is no sense of time. Our minds that morning were so clear we did not have a concept of time. We were sitting there focused on determining what I would do next. Momentum had

been building up since watching Simon Sinek and now we had reached a pivotal moment. After talking about my history and my work life, I was given the proposal to work in education. We talked about the opportunity to see lives changes on a daily basis. At the time, my on campus job was a mini version of what we spoke of. On a daily basis I was helping students complete their college applications and trying to make their admission process as seamless as possible. Part of the job was working on a special project that my mentor had started with refugees. I was proud to play a small but impactful role in processing applications for those seeking an opportunity at Illinois Tech.

When the idea came to think about pursuing a career in education we were hitting my “why.” Those physiological triggers were going off and my limbic brain was now engaged! As we talked about traveling around the world and working toward a career where I interacted with students and developed programs to aid in their education my eyes started glowing. My mentor was drawing his thoughts on paper and I was following along closely. He discussed a possibly opportunity to work for Illinois Tech but suggested that I explore my options. Though the idea of success wasn’t directly talked about, he indirectly drew to the fact that this would be a journey. There was no single point in time I was working toward; rather an entire journey would sum up my success.

That morning simple words came out of a pretty complex human. It was the patience and poise that captured my attention, and the ideas that got me to feel that a change was necessary. As we exited the diner, he handed a \$5 bill to the woman we saw earlier and continued to the car. For the ride back to campus we took side streets and he pointed out abandoned buildings that had potential to make positive impacts on society. That car ride home, I really didn’t have a lot of pondering going on but I was planning

and preparing. In my eyes, the best pivotal moments are the ones that leave you looking ahead, focused, as one dives into the unknown, ready.

CHAPTER 4: SUCCESS FOR WHO, FROM WHO, WHY WHO?

“In the joy of others lies your own...” (Pramukh Swami Maharaj, n.d.)

The word *tyagi* means “the renouncer” in Sanskrit. Another, more common definition is “sacrificing.”

My grandmother talked about heaven constantly. To her the only thing worth living for was the moment after her death when she would be at the gates of heaven. Who could blame her? She grew up during the tail end of the British invasion. She was young when Gandhi came to her village, and she doesn’t remember really meeting him, but the energy still pulses through her veins. This is one of my favorite stories to talk to her about. There are only two things my grandmother is passionate about: education and religion. Gandhi is the intersection of the two. He is a very familiar topic in my dad’s minivan. Every angle of the Indian revolution has been discussed between Dad and me. We have talked about Gandhi’s resilience, we have talked about his error in giving up western India but not keeping Kashmir, and we’ve discussed his favorite topic, education. Education is a big deal in our family; it’s the reason my parents left India three decades ago. They left so I could grow up in a country where education is free and the opportunity to establish one’s self is great.

When we talk about the British invasion with regards to education, we talk about human capital. My dad tells me the reason India has been left in the dust when it comes to development is because the world’s superpowers took the most educated people out of

India. He and I both believe that our country could have progressed if we would have stopped the export of college graduates in the late '70s and early '80s.

My dad has always fueled my passion for education. He would always say, "They can strip you of everything you own except your mind. It's the only thing that truly belongs to you, and it's your responsibility to nurture it. Feed it with good thoughts and intellectual conversation." These words have stuck with me for the greater part of my life.

I always knew that my parents have sacrificed everything for me. I was the first born; I was their beacon of light upon entering the dark tunnel of assimilation. I was going to teach them everything about the United States. Before my birth, I showed my mom how to buy a car seat and my father how to sign a lease for a new two-bedroom apartment, one with space for a crib and four adults. September 13th, 1991 was their starting line; from that day my brother and I influenced every decision made by my parents.

As the years progressed the relationship between my dad and me had its ups and downs. As a child I didn't realize how much my dad was sacrificing for us. What I didn't notice was the empire my dad was building behind the wall of trust he had built with me. I trusted that my dad, our life, and our family were perfect. But like any construction project, there were delays and changes in schedule that my dad didn't let me see.

Like any family, my family has had its trials and tribulations. There have been disputes with my extended family but my parents have stayed grounded through all of them. The lessons that I learned from these situations were very simple; always think about the big picture. If you can let it go and move on, then be the bigger person and do so. No matter how many times my family would be in a quarrel, when it came to helping

someone my dad was the first in line. If he could not physically help, he would volunteer my time without my permission. Many kids find this disrespectful, but I have always taken it as a sign that my father trusts me to always be there for him. I take this as an honor.

This trust my father instilled in me has been built through a series of fortunate and unfortunate events. The fortunate stories are mostly the same. My dad trusted me to get work done around the house, and never did I fail him. But the times I let my dad down, I really hit rock bottom. The irony is, each time I did let my dad down it was in my education.

The first time I ever struggled in school was in seventh grade. For some reason the concept of homework had escaped me. I was not passionate about my work and my teachers did not believe in me. The feelings of self-doubt and laziness all started in seventh grade math; Algebra 1. My teacher had made it very clear that I was a marginalized student, not because of my abilities, or lack thereof, but because of my upbringing. The first day of class each student talked about their summer. Unlike my “American” classmates, I had not gone on a family vacation, or to the swimming pool every day -- instead I had spent the summer working at my dad’s store. Day after day, I woke at the crack of dawn, jumped in his minivan and opened our Family Pantry. Every morning the same customers would come for their coffee and donuts. First there would be a rush of the local landscapers hauling their mowers and trimmers, on their way to beautify the surrounding neighborhood. After we fueled them up, the neighborhood folks would wake up. On a typical weekend we would see the same 30-50 families come to us for all their basic groceries. For them money was no object, and we were their fastest

option for breakfast and snack items. Again, like in my classroom, these customers were quick to acknowledge that my father and I were marginalized citizens. In our “American” home we woke up every morning and opened our store. It didn’t matter if it was a Tuesday morning or a Sunday morning: breakfast always happened at 6 a.m.

These were my summers -- 6 a.m. to 4 p.m. every day -- and that’s where my stories came from in the classroom. My life at that age was a dichotomy. I lived in an up-and-coming, diverse neighborhood filled with newly immigrated families, but my school and my dad’s work were in predominantly affluent and established neighborhoods. I was learning and working with people from these types of neighborhoods, so in some sense, I was becoming “white-washed.” I dreaded walking into that seventh grade math classroom each and every day. What insult did Ms. Jergens have for me today? It was very hard to approach a teacher when you needed help, knowing that she would laugh at your hardship. I wonder how she would feel to find out that little seventh grade slacker is now working with some of the most amazing people on this planet doing good work that makes a direct impact on humanity?

Despite all the turmoil of seventh grade, there was one event that I had tried to keep my focus on. It was something to look forward to through out my entire seventh grade year. My father had lined me up for the experience of a lifetime. He was sincerely putting my needs before his own, and he was pushing himself to the limit financially to give me this opportunity. This special opportunity wasn’t offered to many students and with the guidance of my father I had earned a spot on the 2004 People to People Student Ambassador Team! At the end of seventh grade I would board a plane with 40 other young middle school students and be ambassadors to Australia, the land of kangaroos and

Vegemite. The vision of People to People International “is that a cross-cultural network of engaged and knowledgeable everyday citizen leaders will be an active force in creating and sustaining a more peaceful world” (PTPI, n.d.).

My academic performance in seventh grade was less than deserving of this great opportunity. Toward the end of seventh grade I was barely passing math. For the first time in nine years of school, my teacher had to call my father in. She had hired an interpreter to mediate our conversation. We walked into the school library and took our seats. The teacher explained to the interpreter what was going on with my academic performance in her course. If I were to succeed in eighth grade I was going to need to learn all of the material over the summer. It became very clear to my father that she was disgusted with my work and she didn't like me too much. Regardless, we ended the meeting and I walked out a nervous wreck, dreading the car ride home.

I sat down in the front seat and buckled in for the ride. The first question shot out like a cannon as soon as the door slammed, “Why did she have an interpreter there? What made her think I don't speak English?!” Like the calm before the storm we chatted about her ignorance but eventually the storm came and it blew fiercely. He was pissed, and he had every right to be. He was sending me to Australia in a couple weeks and I had failed him. That was my first ever big “win” trade. I gave my dad a failing grade and in return I got a trip to Australia. To this day I don't understand entirely why he did, but I thank him for the experience.

The days winding down that year were long and extraordinarily painful. Each day was one less day with those educators who didn't believe in an ounce of my future or me. It was sad to see how any school would allow those types of people in front of young rich

minds with so much potential. That style of destructive teaching is exactly what I strive to oppose when I become an educator.

When my grades came out that last day of school, it was official. I had failed not one but three courses! With my spirits crushed and my fears built up I headed home to show my father what I had done. Instead of getting the courage to show my father, I decided I would take a cowardly approach and I went to the house of my friend who had a scanner and did what kids only saw in the movies. This was my first time working with graphic design and my project was to redesign my report card. I had grabbed some pink paper from school, and I was set to scan, change, and reprint that report card.

After a few technical difficulties, I had my new and improved report card ready to show off. Feeling naturally doubtful about this young attempt at forgery, I had meanwhile decided to not bring up my report card at all. I was going to wait and see how long we could go at home before dad brought up the idea of seeing the report cards. Eventually he realized what had happened when he came home to the news that Akshar had changed his report card! News traveled fast in a small community. He was furious, and it was my first time seeing his true passion, intense emotion, towards something I had done.

As soon as I realized what I had done I headed upstairs to my dungeon for the next few weeks. I knew I would be chained to my room till the day I was released for my trip and then I would be back in my cell. I was strapped in my chair ready to learn a year's worth of algebra. As I slowly came down the stairs that night for my evening meal I followed my mother into the living room to face my father. Head down, I approached him, ready to apologize and hear him tear through the little confidence I had built. The

process of tearing is slow, and it can take time for a tear to completely destroy the fabric. Dad had other plans. With a few simple words he let me go.

“It’s your future, not mine.”

This wasn’t a little slight to my confidence; my father just took a torch and burned that confidence to hell. That short sentence was all it took for me to realize that I had hit rock bottom. I could have failed at anything else and he would have been okay, but education was something he couldn’t compromise and it was something I had just stomped all over. I was officially the first one in my family to take a massive dump on everything my parents had sacrificed to have me raised in this country. This was my terrible, painful first draft of a reconciliation letter:

Dear Dad,

My first instinct is to apologize to you for what I did, but that seems to be a selfish act. If I apologize for what I did then I am asking you to acknowledge and possibly forgive me. Instead of apologizing for my actions, I want to thank you for your response. Your short, verbal, ESPN, “It’s your future, not mine,” was a pivotal moment in my life. That one line letter showed me what I couldn’t see everyday right in front of me. You and mom worked so hard to line me up for success and I took it all for granted. This letter is not to tell you what I should have done or how I could have been a better student but rather a letter to tell you what I realized from the day you told me you loved me in the most honest, passionate, and persuasive way possible: “It’s your future, not mine.”

From the stories you have shared with me, you grew up in a supporting family that valued education, self-respect, and determination. From everything

that you tell me, you were a strong student lined up for a successful future. I have no conception for the kind of home you grew up in. I can listen to the list of misfortunes you have, but I will never be able to feel with you because of how well you have protected me from those same misfortunes. The most pivotal moment in your life is the greatest fear in my life; losing your father. You lost your father at the age of 16 and that moment realigned your entire life. Your journey of success changed. Now happiness over time was on a significantly different course. Happiness was going to be stable and time, like always, was going to continue.

The events of your life after your father died are the stories that I remember most. I learned about how you dealt with problems by building a strong support network. You taught me how important it was to build strong and lasting relationships on the foundation of mutual respect. Each person that interacts with you knows your history and how reliable and helpful you can be. Your pivotal moment of losing your father, I believe, is when you realized that it was your future and only you could determine how it would turn out. In that moment you accepted that success would be defined not by where you ended up but how you continued to move ahead. The major theme for your success and moving ahead was putting others' needs before your own.

That started with your siblings. As the new head of the house, you put the needs of your family first and that in turn has led to your overall happiness over time giving you your positive integral of success. I hope another happy moment comes from you knowing that I have learned selflessness through your example.

Not only are you selfless, you have made me strive for selflessness. I hope that you see as part of your journey of success that you have helped make someone else's journey successful too.

Your forever-grateful son,

Akshar

“We have learned that it is feasible and useful to have teachers visit households for research purposes. These are neither casual visits nor school-business visits, but visits in which the teachers assume the role of the learner, and in doing so, help establish a fundamentally new, more symmetrical relationship with the parents of the students” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

The most important learning experience for me now as I reflect on this incident has less to do with the profound default of my own ethical responsibility and more to do with the lack of support from my educators. As I now interact with vulnerable students each day, I do believe that learning about my students can help me connect with them and in turn build trust with them. I believe that our relationships must be two-way, and though some educators disagree, I have no fear of exposing my students to the interior realities of my life. I would like my students to know that there is very little I have to hide from them and that I am someone to whom they can relate. The anxiety, indecision, and disorientation they experience are all feelings that I have had and continue to have. My parents have always been a guiding light for me, but so much of my time is spent outside my home that the mentors in my life, who have connected with me on a deeper level, have really kept me focused and centered through the twists and turns of life and happiness.

4.1 A Lack Of Guidance

One of the reasons I talk about family is because of my dad's sister. My aunt moved her entire family to the United States because of its education system. My three cousins moved here when they were in middle school, so they could graduate high school and get a degree from a college in the United States. The move that my aunt and her family made is similar to other journeys made by many immigrants to the U.S. In India, my uncle (her husband) left his successful factory and hotel business so that he could work a mid-salary job here in the court system while his children got their valued educations.

When I heard the news about my cousins moving to the U.S. the first question I asked was, "Where will they stay?"

Naturally, my father replied, "With us!"

I have been very accustomed to communal living. For my entire life my household has always consisted of my mom, dad, brother, grandmother, and someone else. After I was born, a series of my dad's friends moved in with us and eventually settled in the surrounding neighborhoods. After that, during grade school, my dad's brother moved in with us for some time, and now finally my dad's sister was bringing along her family of five. It is safe to say that each person who has lived in our home has migrated here because of education. Each parent was ensuring that the next generation in the family would receive a U.S. education.

When my aunt's family moved in with us, I was well aware that I would be attending school with my cousins and it was my responsibility to make sure they were accustomed to the U.S. classroom environment. From buying school supplies to getting

on the bus, I was with my cousins at all times of the day. Because I was younger, I would be in elementary school while they were in middle school, but once we got home our relative high and low statuses would flip. I would help them with reading their homework, and translate as much as I understood. My cousins and I were living every immigrant family's dream. We were slowly preparing ourselves to go off and enter the brightest universities so we could provide better futures for our children and ourselves.

The plan was on course till the day my aunt and her family moved out. They left our three-bedroom duplex unit home for a one-bedroom apartment shared amongst a family of five. This was when a major shift happened in our family. My dad no longer was attending parent-teacher night for my cousins, and he wasn't around to check homework. For some reason my aunt and uncle never took interest in their schoolwork and slowly the distractions starting coming. First it was the movies during school nights, then came the cheating from returned assignments gathered from previous years, until at last none of my three cousins were able to land successful jobs in careers with a stable future.

It has taken me about 10 years to realize the repercussions of my cousins' actions. They live happy lives, but they have no future in mind, though I'm sure they have it in sight. I now understand how different the parenting style of my dad is. He is someone who constantly talks about the future. Where will you be in five years? What can this job do for your future? These ideals of foresight and diligence have been deeply instilled, as if into my very DNA. I now can't make a decision with out thinking about how it will affect my future. My cousins live a different kind of lifestyle. For them, things are about the short term: finding a job that will give them money; going on vacation now instead of

saving for school; and, worst of all, taking a break from school and getting married. I have no right to tell them how, in my opinion, they have been disrespectful to my family and their parents, but it is something that bothers me. The bright side is that by comparison, they make me feel proud of my accomplishments.

When my aunt moved to the U.S. and my cousins were held back a year, the playing field was leveled. They were no longer just children living in India with no future; they had the entire world opened up to them the day they got off that plane. But because of their environment, including other immigrant friends, their parents, and lack of guidance, two of my cousins have bachelors' degrees but none of my cousins are working in a career that will help make them independent.

4.2 How Could eSPN Have Prevented This?

I believe part of the reason my cousins did not fulfill some of their expectations is because they were not informed about what was happening when they moved to the United States. Their parents never told them directly that they were moving to the U.S. so that their children could study and have a better life. eSPN empowers writers to write exactly how they feel without holding back. If the three siblings could have had the power to write about their feelings and acknowledge what they wanted to do during their move to the U.S., then perhaps they would have had a way to process the change in their lives and assume more active agency in preparing for their own futures. eSPN would have allowed them not only to write about how they felt about the situation internally, it also would give them a medium to share their thoughts and feelings about moving with their parents.

My relatives were making the move with success in mind. They were hoping to give their children a better life by getting them into the U.S. so they would have opportunities to study in great schools and be able to pursue their dreams. Like most parents, they made the decision in the best interests of their children, and the children did not have any say. This is something that is very common in the culture that we were raised in. Our parents made decisions and many times we were not told or given any warning about changes that were happening; for children as young as 12, 14, and 16, change can be a very difficult and frightening experience. When my cousins boarded the plane to the U.S., they had no idea what was ahead and they were not given much time to prepare. In the U.S., my brother and I were not included in the decision to take in four new family members in our small three-bedroom home. For us the change was also a frightening experience.

During times like these, when children have no clue what is going on, it can be a very fascinating experience to hear what they have to say. eSPN gives children the power to express how they feel in words without having to worry about ramifications of action. I believe the letters that my cousins would have written could have expressed their concerns and furthered their desires to positively shape this new experience in their own interests as individuals.

By the same token, parents too can use eSPN as an effective way of communicating their beliefs, desires, or dreams for their children. My cousins did not know what their parents wanted from them and did not realize that the decision to move to another country was made out of love. Communication, especially when it impacts others, is a key in supporting one's journey for success. Parents, teachers, and other

influencers who work to help those younger than themselves to be successful, I believe, must share why they are making decisions.

CHAPTER 5: CULTURE – IT MAKES YOU, IT BREAKS YOU

The United States offered many opportunities for Mr. and Mrs. Patel. It gave them the opportunity to earn money, buy property, but most importantly, it provided a virtual guarantee that their children would be raised with the education they needed to succeed. However, something else that most immigrant parents hope for is that their home culture be embodied in the way their children are raised.

People often say that America is a salad bowl, or is a mix of many different cultures, but in speaking with family and friends abroad, very often I hear them say that our culture is missing from this “salad bowl.” I believe that America has created its own culture: one that is a little rebellious and not necessarily rooted in any one religion or belief system.

To shield my brother and me from this rebellious, irreligious culture, my parents did everything they could to make sure we were a part of a Hindu organization. We were raised going to Mandir (Hindu place of worship) every Sunday. When we were young we didn't have much of a choice. I attended language, religion, and culture classes every week. Each Sunday was a cross-cultural adventure consisting of sitting on the ground to learn Gujarati or going outside and trying to play basketball with a slightly deflated ball. My relationships with my peers at Mandir started to grow. I was lucky to be at a place with so many kids my age that all believed in the same set of morals, ethics, and teachings. We didn't eat meat, we did not let dating distract us from education, and we made sure we kept God in mind in everything we did. We prayed before each meal, we

prayed at the start and end of each Sunday, and we were told to pray every day we were home.

During my time being raised in the Mandir, our small community of Hindu families in the Chicago area had grown quite a bit and we as a group, children and adults, decided that it was time to expand our space. So, we purchased land with donations from the congregation and set out to build a massive, traditional Hindu Mandir and cultural complex. I remember seeing the promotional videos, the scale models, and eventually visiting the construction site, and I was so amazed. For the next part of my life, through high school I would watch a cultural complex be built and then a traditional Hindu Mandir next to it. I remember watching from the construction fence as a giant crane swept across the site, picking up massive blocks of marble and granite, all precisely carved in India and imported to the U.S.

At this point in life I had grown up with a core group of friends from the Mandir. My parents were both heavily invested in volunteering their time and we as a family were a part of this bigger endeavor. The more time we committed, the more respect we earned from our peers. As we sacrificed other parts of our lives, we started to give more and more to the Mandir community. My life had gone from attending Mandir on Sundays only to being there every day I was free from school or work. My new license and car gave me the opportunity to drive the 45 minutes any chance I got so I could continue working on a project, or connect with some friends. Unlike most of my friends at Mandir, my family lived farther away and we couldn't always make it every night, so we missed things: events, parties, and random hangouts during the weekday.

Initially I didn't think much of this social culture that was starting to coalesce. Each week, 50-60 first generation Indian kids would get together at this place for worship and to participate in religion together. We all came from similar backgrounds. Our parents immigrated here so our educations and opportunities would be better than those available to our predecessors. Each of us shared our spirituality and faith in the Hindu religion. We were growing together. However, we were also growing apart from the communities that we lived in, our non-Hindu friends, and the American salad bowl.

This bond would slowly start to break due to a key pivotal moment in my life, college. Like most of my Mandir friends I decided to stay close to home and go to school in Chicago, but I was the only one who chose to attend Illinois Institute of Technology. Most of my other friends went to DePaul, Loyola, or UIC. So, I was once again, the farthest away. Now instead of being 45 minutes away from Mandir, I was 45 minutes away from the other campuses and again was missing events, parties, and more random hangouts. These were missed opportunities to connect and eventually I started to find myself more and more distant from this group.

As I started to miss the regular Sunday gatherings I heard less and less from the group. In my mind, education came first. It was what my family had sacrificed so much for. Then my new friends in college were starting to show me that instead of compartmentalizing my life and culture, I could openly share my culture and be a part of theirs too. I didn't eat meat, I didn't drink, and I generally focused on my studies. All my life I was afraid non-Hindus would judge me or not understand why I made those life decisions, but it wasn't until college, when I was removed from my Mandir influences, that I experienced how compassionate people are in this world. My friends always made

sure there was food for me to eat, beverages that I could drink, and supported all of my endeavors.

Eventually college had caught up with me and I did feel a small void in my life. I missed going to the Mandir and seeing some of those familiar faces. Months would go by in between meetings and each time I got the small urge to go, I realized that our time apart created more and more distance between my life experiences and the experiences my Mandir friends were having. They continued to hang out and I continued to move on in my life. I had given up prayer and had decided to dedicate my life to giving back to the earth. I was having my key pivotal moment in deciding that education was becoming an attractive career path in its own right, rather than simply a means to some other end. This was alarming news to many of my Mandir friends. They didn't understand why an engineer would give up money and societal fame to do unrecognized work.

From my perspective, I saw a massive flaw in organized religion and a resultant rift was becoming obvious in my conversations with my friends at Mandir. I felt that giving back in different forms was important and that helping all types of people, regardless of religion, culture, or country of origin, was important. This didn't fly with some of the Mandir folk. When I explained to them the project I was working on at IIT and told them that the school was helping so many students escape the war in Syria, the response was horrendous. They didn't understand why we would help refugees who were Muslim or who lived in the Middle East. "They have multiple wives, they all eat from the same plate, and they sacrifice live animals --why would you ever want to help them?" These were some of the nicer criticisms I heard!

Then when I explained to them that I would travel around the Midwest to attend conferences to help fill the skills gap in the U.S. by working with SkillsUSA, the response was heartbreaking: “Oh, isn’t that the bird house building organization?” Hindus, brown people, all people of color have endured a lot of hatred in this world, but without our own fundamental belief that all people are created equal and deserve respect and dignity, how can we ever show our harshest critics who we truly are? Instead of support I saw barriers. Judgment was stronger inside organized religion than outside with free thinkers. As I continued my final months in college, I cut all ties and communications with these negative influences. These interactions were not adding to my success. For Hindus, success is a destination, and the steps to get there are pretty clear. Unfortunately for me, that’s not what I believe.

5.1 Culture – Can’t Live With It, Cant Live Without It

So maybe it isn’t the “Americans” or “white people” who are not accepting Indian culture, but rather the Indian culture that is refusing to be a part of the great American salad. Under all of the pressures of attaining success to which Indian men are subject, one pressure that is very different than the U.S. is the pressure to get married. For centuries, marriage has been a celebration of wealth, prosperity, and social ritual in the Indian culture. From the moment a child is born, the parents are both burdened and excited about the future marriage of the child. I too have been a victim of this pressure.

Growing up in a “no-dating” culture, I have always found it quite interesting that young children, teens, and young adults date so early in life. If the goal of dating is to find someone to spend the rest of your life with, why do people start doing that in middle school? My Indian roots matched that perspective. It wasn’t until I graduated college that

I started to experience the pressure regarding marriage. This was considered part of success: finding someone to be with the rest of one's life. The difference for me, however, is that I want my choice of spouse to be completely my own. My parents, relatives, and random adults have continually asked me when I was going to get married, as if marriage is like an application for getting a job or buying a home. I believe I have some control over my life, but in no way do I have that much control!

The history of the Indian wedding is rooted in ideas that I am neither comfortable explaining, nor do I believe in:

“The Manusmriti, the book written by the sage Manu describes eight types of marriages in Hinduism namely Brahma Vivaha, Daiva Vivaha, Arsha Vivaha, Prajapatya Vivaha, Gandharva Vivaha, Asura Vivaha, Rakshasha Vivaha and Paishacha Vivaha.

Amongst these last four types are considered illicit or of poor ranking, as they are immoral.

Let me try to describe the nature of all these types of Matrimonial alliances.

Brahma Vivaha is of the highest ranking, as the boy is married only after completion of Brahmacharya Ashram, the stage of learning and student-hood. Daiva Vivaha is of the second rank, where in the bride's parents find her a suitable groom or she is married off to a sage. Similar is the case with Arsha Vivaha, where the bride is married to a sage in return of for gifts. Gandharva Vivaha is similar to Love Marriages for love. Remaining The remaining marriages are of very low rank where the woman is forced to marry the groom because of abduction, in exchange of for gifts, or after illegally seducing the girl” (admin, 2012).

Reading this description makes me very uncomfortable in my own skin. I haven't discussed these categorical descriptions with my parents, but to me this take on marriage

is completely fundamental and not at all aligned with the experience of finding one's own husband or wife in in modern life. It still bothers me that our traditions are rooted in this history. The first description is one part of a greater controversy in Indian culture. Brahma Vivaha, in my words, is a marriage that most families in modern day India still hope for: Son goes to college, graduates, is no longer a student, and gets married. The problem with that description, as seen in the quote above, is the word "boy."

Ancient Indian culture is designed around the idea that girls and women do not go to school. Though it cannot be confirmed, I have felt through my conversations that marriage to a woman was a type of reward after I finished my education. This implication bothers me. The conversations have always been hard ones for me to have with my mom, grandmother, and even my dad, who never likes to talk about these things. Our perspectives are so different. They were not raised in the U.S. and do not understand that the culture here is one built on equality. I believe that equality stretches beyond the freedoms that we all share; equality should be in the way that we look at one another. That's not something that is common in Indian culture. For my family, your looks, last name, the way you speak, all determines how someone will look at you.

"While women maintained the status quo, males through their greater variability would provide evolutionary progress. Hollingworth believed the evidence provided (that there were more men than women in feeble minded institutions and in places of prominence) was weak and set out to provide careful empirical tests" (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2002).

Letta Hollingworth questioned Thorndike's Darwinian acceptance that men were more variable than women. To empower young women and step closer to building a

school for young women, research like Hollingworth's provides support that gender and the physiological effects related to gender can not be a prejudice on the potential success seen in each child. This style of thinking has yet to reach many parts of India and in turn impacts the way success is described to girls versus boys. Hollingworth's research provides proof that there is no inherent difference in the number of talented and proficient men versus women. She has provided a detailed body of research to help establish equilibrium between boys and girls in the classroom. Like prevalent notions of marriage, I believe that education in India unfortunately has a similarly gender-biased style of thinking.

This style of thinking then stretches into how my family views success. Before I continue writing about these claims, I'd like to make a disclaimer, as too often SPN writing can sound subjective and the "scholarship" of writing may not sound conclusive. The thoughts and feelings I have about Indian culture, my family, and history are my own interpretations. These thoughts come from profound moments of loneliness and times of deep introspection; possibly even over-analysis. Curiosity has led me to think and write about success, my generation, and my culture.

The Hindi word for success is "safalata." However safalata can also be translated to prosperity. I believe part of the reason there is disconnect between first generation children and their immigrant parents is because of translation. In English we have many words for a single Hindi word. When I ask my students if there is a difference between prosperity and success they say yes. They associate prosperity with possessions and success with a feeling. Over the last years the conversations between my dad and I have shifted to the topic of success. He firmly believes that for me to have a successful life, I

must make \$50,000 a year and my partner must make \$50,000 a year so together we are able to live our lives within a \$100,000 budget.

This type of thinking – equating success with a certain level of income -- comes from a very genuinely loving place. However, our views on success differ. His mindset is on a destination; he, like many other influences from my culture, projects an image of success that is in the form of a destination. So often I see cousins, family friends, and people in the community that work so hard towards moments. From birth they are in pursuit of education, then they are in pursuit of marriage – Brahma Vivaha. After marriage the pressure to have children silently creeps on them. Then the cycle starts again with those children. Unfortunately, throughout this process much of the pressure is put on women. Though marriage is a union of two people, it is also a financial transaction and process that is not considered organic. Women are married young because of fertility and ancient traditions date back to men being able to choose which woman they wanted to marry; almost like women were some sort of prize for finishing one's education.

Why does this relate to my family, myself, or my ideas of success? I am just one of thousands of young men who grow up in a country that openly promotes women's rights but at home live in a culture where marriage, love, and organic relationships are pressed to conform as just another process in the pursuit of prosperity. In my parents' case, a large part of marriage had to do with migrating. My mom's family was a path for my father to come to this country. Both my mom and dad had something embodied in them that encouraged the decision to come to this free country for the sake of their future children, but also for themselves. They too are part of this pursuit of prosperity. Their parents also put this pressure on them and I often wonder if they realize that throughout

this entire journey they have *already* been successful. Their integral of happiness over time has summed to tremendous success. I haven't shared this with them, but my actions revolve around showing them that they truly are a tremendous success. Every time I make them smile, I know that though they may not understand what an integral is in English, they know that everything they've done has led to not only their own success but also filled my brother's and my own life with safalata.

Unfortunately, there are times when the burden of showing how successful my parents are to them becomes too much on my shoulders. Part of keeping focused and attentive to the idea that everything I'm doing is not only making my parents proud, but also feeding my inner desire to make a difference, is making sure I take opportunities to introspect. During a visit to Chicago about eight months after moving out of my house, I saw an opportunity to reflect and introspect on my life. I was sitting in my grandmother's bedroom listening to a Coldplay song on repeat and for some reason I just needed to write. I wasn't writing for any reason, but I wanted to write to myself because I was having so many thoughts about the last eight months of my life.

CHAPTER 6: MY FIRST ATTEMPT AT FINDING MY OWN SUCCESS

Dear Akshar,

Right now you are pursuing your passion and it's extremely important that you don't fall off track. It took a lot of work to get on this particular track and we can't let all the hard work, determination, and convincing go to waste. In the last three months I have hit a lot of obstacles, but I hope you've forgotten about them by now. I stepped into the abyss the day I set foot in Vermont and now gravity has a hold of me and it's taking me down showing me how much you have to fall to

ever succeed. Vermont welcomed us with open arms. For me it provided a job, place to live, and the opportunity to start our new career. For you, they were lining up everything you needed to achieve the success that you have achieved by now. I am eternally grateful to Vermont, and I hope you are too.

Right now I have hit some pretty hard riffs in our pursuit to change the world. I hit a wall early on in my career and I have just barely conquered it. I saw the importance of keeping a visionary close to me and the effects it has on me when I don't. My first few months in the admissions world have been tough because I have been without a visionary like Jerry. Jerry was someone who kept my eyes on the prize through out all of my work, and right now many times I feel lost. I have to find strength from within and according to Myers Briggs I am an extrovert, so my energy comes to me easiest from others. This was a brick in my wall.

As I work along side some of the brightest minds in admissions I have started to see how my personality has been influenced by where I grew up. Growing up in a diverse, up and coming neighborhood in the Midwest, I developed different interpersonal skills. For me, it is important to make sure a new member of a team feels more than just welcomed, they feel a sense of unity instantly. This was not the case for me. Though my team at work was warm and welcoming, they were quick to silently acknowledge that I was different from them and no matter what I did, I would always be a city kid from Chicago and they would be the northeast home grown children. This was a brick in my wall.

When I submitted my application I was certain that I would impress my boss and colleagues with my experience keeping my personality as the cherry on top. But after working for 8 months I realize that my team was impressed with my swift interview skills but were not ready to acknowledge my experience. I entered the office each day starting from scratch. I have waited for months to be assigned a project that will test my intelligence, but now my patience has worn thin. Week after week I sit and watch my peers work a thorough 8 hours as I surf the web and YouTube the latest Seth Rogen parody. My work experience has not been respected yet, and I have yet to feel a challenge at work. This was a brick in my wall.

It has taken me weeks to conquer this wall, but I haven't conquered it by climbing it. I have conquered it by stepping back and admiring it. I have still kept my interest in structures so it has always been interesting to see how this wall is built. But like Pink Floyd (1990) said, "All in all it's just another brick in the wall. All in all you're just another brick in the wall." Though each brick sounds difficult to overcome, each day I find a new way to find appreciation in my struggle. I hope that you are still admiring this wall and have found solace in this constant struggle. I have set you up with visionaries even though they aren't in Vermont with you; they are with you in spirit and are only a phone call away if you need them. I hope you have continued to be inspired, and I truly hope that you have found a visionary in Vermont that you can connect to.

When I decided to give up engineering I did it on a whim. I didn't have a plan and I wasn't too sure what I wanted to do. As the weeks have gone by I start

thinking of new things that can be done and more opportunities I can have. I hope that you are sitting in a comfortable place and there is some steadiness in your life. In giving up engineering you lost your city, your family, and a relationship. You didn't lose it forever, but you had to give it up so you could start growing roots somewhere new. I want you to know that I have learned the importance of giving back to mom and dad, and making sure they are safe. I hope this is still a big part of your life and your main focus.

I sacrificed religion so I could pursue my interests in education. I am sorry if this has created difficulty in your life. Today I went to the Mandir (Hindu temple) and I was disgusted by how people acted. I went to Mandir since I was born. I grew up with all of the boys that I met today and still they acted so rudely and had no heart when I saw them today. They barely acknowledged that I was there. Growing up I rarely experienced friendship outside of our Mandir circle. It wasn't until I reached high school that I saw how truly genuine people could be. Today, no matter how long I don't talk to one of my high school friends, as soon as I see them we will run and hug each other. This wasn't my experience today at Mandir. All of the guys acted like it was their first time seeing them. Their attitudes were sober, and they really didn't care that I was there. This isn't what you call friendship and I'm glad I learned that quickly. Because of them I had to let go of the organized religion. I still believe in God and the pursuit of heaven, but I cannot share that bond with others. It is something that I must internalize and I have found my special connection with God. She or He has sent me here to make the world a better place; to leave it better than I was given it.

When I started going to Mandir the first concept I learned about was selflessness. We were always asked to be sacrificing. We weren't supposed to be attached to anything, and we would have to give up everything upon death because nothing would come with us when we went to heaven, completely opposite of what the Egyptians believed. Today I have tattooed, "in the joy of others, lies our own" on my arm. It is with this spirit of sacrifice that I choose to pursue a career in which I will use all of my energy to help others achieve greatness. I am in the business of helping others access education. Akshar, this is our form of tyagi.

Sincerely,

Akshar Patel

April 27th, 2014 (8:36pm)

Sitting in grandmother's room watching her fall asleep while listening to Coldplay's "Magic"

CHAPTER 7: SUCCESS = INTEGRAL (HAPPINESS/TIME)

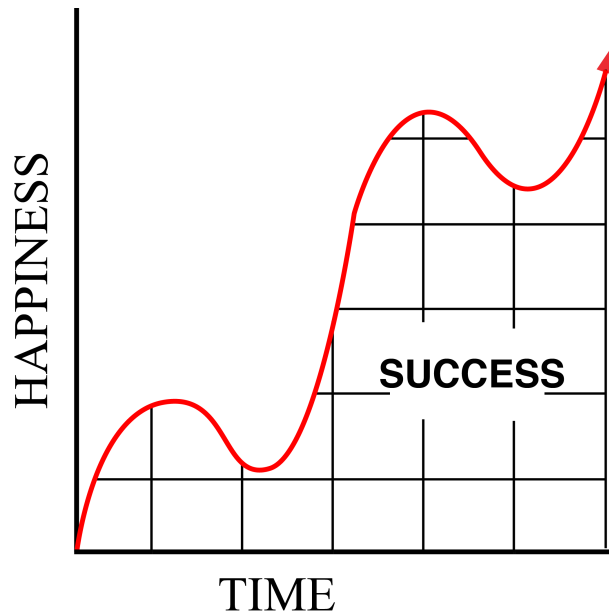
This thesis is a story, and though the order of my writing will change and things will be swapped out, the overall journey of life continues to be joined by my writing. I've spent the last few months thinking very deeply about the several thousand words above. I've gone back and added parts, I've moved parts, and even though I thought I was done writing, my mind wasn't settling and I still don't believe I've articulated my idea well. I have shared this idea: *success = integral (happiness/time)* with many people and have received positive feedback but I do not believe my writing is complete in explaining all

of my thoughts. Up until now I've written about the measure of happiness being positive, but I have yet to address happiness being negative.

The U.S. National Library of Medicine defines major depression as “a mental health condition. It is a mood disorder in which feelings of sadness, loss, anger, or frustration interfere with daily life for weeks or longer” (Rogge, 2016).

I associate that definition with negative happiness. I believe that someone who is depressed, diagnosed or not, is someone whose happiness has dropped into the “negative” space. I myself have been a victim of this feeling often. The idea that there is nothing to live for or that the world would go on without me are some things that cross my mind when I'm in “negative happiness.” This feeling has not happened often for me and I can only recall about two exact points in time when this has happened.

When one maps happiness over time, we see a graph like the one below. Happiness fluctuates depending on the random events of our lives. By accepting that $\text{success} = \text{integral}(\text{happiness}/\text{time})$ one will see that success can be an ever-growing sum. One can take any point in time on the graph and measure one's happiness. I propose that happiness is measured by feeling and that feeling comes from all of the “good” things in your life. So, at any point on the graph of life, one can measure happiness and actually see the things that make one happy. To increase one's happiness, one has to add more “things” that make one happy. Conversely, when one loses “things” one's happiness drops.



s: success
 h: happiness
 t: time

$$s = \int \left(\frac{h}{t}\right)$$

Figure 3

I believe my own experience with depression, the times that I saw absolutely nothing that made me happy were truly the times when I had the feeling of depression. Fortunately, I have people in my life to show me the reasons to be happy when I cannot see them myself. Unfortunately, not everyone in our world has this luxury. When I started sharing the idea of “negative” happiness with my students and colleagues, I found that most agreed with the idea and hadn’t thought about it that way. Through my coaching sessions I talked to students about their current state of happiness. Many times, school was something that wasn’t making them happy, but they had other parts of their life that kept their happiness above zero.

eSPN for me has naturally become the medium for helping myself and students when we struggled to find things that made us happy in our lives. The idea of penning a

letter to someone or yourself opens endless possibilities to truly write about the lack of happiness in your life. Through my own eSPN I have been able to write through many moments of negative happiness and have seen that there still were reasons to be happy. In a way this kind of writing is a type of medicine for those that are experiencing negative happiness.

Negative happiness plays a vital role in the graph of happiness over time. When happiness “drops below zero” the integral becomes negative, so as to take away from one’s success. I believe that this is a mindset. There are those that require medicine to rediscover reasons to be happy and those that require other people to help them rediscover why they should be happy. In my own life, I have fallen into the latter category.

Mathematically, someone would have to have greater negative success than positive success to not be successful and though that is a possibility on paper, I have deep faith in humanity that no person goes long enough in negative happiness to truly be “unsuccessful.” I make it a personal goal to not lose faith in my students who may be in negative happiness. It is my responsibility to recreate their life graph and see happiness over time and show them that they truly are successful because their happiness over time is great.

CHAPTER 8: VULNERABILITY

Over the last few months, I have shared my idea and have thought through it with many people and each time I start to discover another layer to the concept that success = integral (happiness/time). The more I talked about these pivotal moments in my life the more I realized that these times were when I was most vulnerable. The theme of

vulnerability was becoming more and more a part of my explanation. I realized that each pivotal moment was nothing more than a time when someone was most vulnerable. This moment was an opportunity for them to make a decision that directly impacted their happiness. In my mind this was a cliff that one jumped off.

When you are in these vulnerable moments, one has no idea what's to come from one's actions. I felt this quite a bit in my life and with my new definition of success; I found it much easier to make decisions during these vulnerable moments.

By accepting the fact that my success could not be destroyed because of one vulnerable moment, I did not feel like I had as much at stake. Never in my life can everything be on the line, because my past happiness is part of the summation of my success, and that can never be gambled. During those vulnerable moments the only risk I take is my future happiness. There is a risk that my happiness will drop but also the opportunity for my happiness to increase, and at times increase exponentially.

8.1: My Letter, Check-In With Myself

Dear Akshar,

One year ago you would have never fathomed sitting in your newly painted car in the parking lot of Hermann Hall at Illinois Institute of Technology about to walk into work as a Career Development Coach. Back on April 27th, 2014 you could not have guessed all of the rollercoasters that were about to come.

The great thing about it all is that you are still here, kicking strong! In the last year you have learned a lot about yourself, your happiness, and your pursuit of success. The definition of success has changed significantly for you and day-by-day it continues to evolve. The more people you share your story with, the

more support you build. Your environment has made a big difference in your happiness and how you choose to share your story. I hope you look back at this moment years from now and realize that everything that happened this year, though minute, has been an explosive moment in your success. Success is the integral of happiness over time. By increasing happiness you have continued to be successful. Right now, every move that you have been making has been a move in the positive direction of happiness and it has been adding to your overall success.

Part of continuing this positive momentum in the pursuit of success is taking inventory of the changes, people, and places in your life that have put you in this place. The biggest change in the last year has been the move back to Chicago. This change in environment, pace, and culture has really increased your overall happiness over a short amount of time. Chicago has put you in a place where you can dream and share your dreams. The causes you believe in can be verbalized, and you can find a support system to help you act towards those causes.

Even in the last few weeks you have found a deeper connection to the meaning of success. Day by day you realize that everyone's meaning of success is different and as an ambassador for your meaning all you can do is tell your story and help others find their story to share. One great thing you have learned is that no matter where you are, Vermont, Chicago, or else where, people are always willing to hear your story. Story telling has been a huge healing process for you and you have helped others heal through their story telling. Part of the work that you do is empowering young college students to tell their stories.

Those students and others in your community in Chicago also add to your journey of success. Part of the motions of success involves being in an environment that fosters successful thoughts. Family, friends, and colleagues have been an integral part in supporting your success. The validation that comes from your environment continues to give you a positive integral of happiness over time. This support network also has grown to share more of their stories and be more open to concepts such as eSPN. This in itself is a positive indicator of happiness over time.

Once this master's degree is complete, and you have shared it with the network around you, the time will come to decide on what the next pivotal moment will be. Though, pivotal moments are generally not planned, I think it's safe to say that you have developed a skill to feel them coming or you know what to do when you feel that you need one. The next steps I hope will include some experience living abroad, sharing your stories with other people, and expanding the idea that eSPN, SPN, and finding your why can help you increase your happiness over time and help students, young and old realize that they are successful when they accept it. Each move you make will grow the integral of happiness over time. Success today, for you, is accepting that you are part of this journey and our (past, present, and future) journey continues to add happiness over time.

Sincerely,

Akshar Patel

December 9, 2015 (8:17am)

Sitting at my desk in Hermann Hall 113, Illinois Institute of Technology, listening to Cannon's "Evening Star"

CHAPTER 9: HAVING MEANINGFUL COACHING SESSIONS

When I think about the topic of success, I try not to be selfish. I enjoy sharing my ideas and learning from others. I am lucky to be able to learn on a daily basis through my interactions with students in career coaching sessions. In most coaching sessions I strive to create an environment where students feel safe and welcomed to share their feelings on their career and life success. Because I was once an engineering student in their shoes, I try to think about the types of supportive people I felt were missing in my college career, and I try to fill that role for them. Empowering students to discover skills, values, and meaning in their life is a central part of providing them an experience that I did not receive. "*Empowerment* means to enhance individuals' view of themselves by making them more aware of their strengths" (Suddarth & Reile, 2012).

Each coaching session begins with some basic questions about life and family. When I look at the mission of my office, I see one underlying principle: that each interaction with student should not be transactional, but rather *human*. Every student's issue, no matter how common, should be treated as unique. With this premise it is very easy to "get real" with students and see what exactly they are thinking. Career coaches have to think a lot about success. When I talk to students about what they are doing and why they are doing it, I have to be prepared for them to question me back. I ask them, "Do you enjoy what you do every day?" When I get that question back I have no fear responding in with a confident "Yes!"

The primary goal for these coaching sessions is to give students an opportunity to explore their values and see if what they are doing aligns with their values. We use a few different assessments and are currently working on learning more about value assessments. Students come to these coaching sessions with very little preparation and for their first meeting they really don't have a sense of what we will talk about. My personal struggle has been trying to break through the initial barriers with my students. When trying to dig deeper about what they think success or successfulness looks like, I have trouble getting my students to think deeper about what they want out of their college experience. They seem to be stuck on the day-to-day tasks and for many of them, it seems taboo to question getting an engineering degree.

However, I have a few advisees that I have been able to break through to and really spark conversation with about success and what it looks like to them. The interesting part is that in each case it wasn't me who initiated the inquiry, but rather the students who came to me questioning what they were doing in school. What I learned from these interactions was that each of those students had heard me talk in a public setting, usually during a workshop presentation, about my personal struggle with an engineering degree and seeing that it would not help with my meaning of success. This type of opening up led them to seek me out and arrange a meeting with me.

Most of the students in these situations are questioning their motivation to continue in their majors. Part of it stems from their insecurities with their own talent, and having a fixed mindset about what they are able to do. When I bring up the topic of success with them, we discuss the idea of talent and how it relates to success. Our conversations do not revolve around whether we do or do not have talent, but rather the

idea that talent can be developed. I have exposed some of my students to Carol Dweck, the educational psychologist who has written about motivation and how it ties to growth.

“People who believe in the power of talent tend not to fulfill their potential because they’re so concerned with looking smart and not making mistakes. But people who believe that talent can be developed are the ones who really push, stretch, confront their own mistakes and learn from them” (Rae-dupree, 2008).

Whether it is engineering talent, public speaking talent, or an athletic talent, the idea that talent can be developed is extremely important to me in these meetings. When I share my story about changing my career, I focus on my desire to be happy and find my place in the world, not any lack of ability. For some students, topics in the classroom do not make sense, but once they get into their first internship they start piecing things together very quickly. So, when we talk about whether they like their major or want to change plans I always question if they have a lack of motivation because they think they cannot do it. For those students who think they cannot achieve in their fields, I then encourage them to try and find an internship to see how they respond in a real work setting.

It is at these crucial moments where I talk to them about my idea of success. I continue to tell them my story and share with them the image that was shared with me years ago. Together we break down the anxiety that comes with deciding what they will do this coming summer or whether or not they should change majors. They realize that one decision cannot solely determine whether or not they are successful, and as long as they have something to be happy for, their integral of happiness over time is continuously increasing.

Dr. Karl Pillemer has written a book titled, *30 Lessons for Living; Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans*. In this book Dr. Pillemer has gathered advice from a group of wise Americans he deems the “experts.” This group of experts is made up of people who have lived long, successful lives and they have 30 lessons that were discovered in common among the diverse group. One of the chapters is a lesson on having a successful and fulfilling career. The advice about careers is unanimous from these experts.

“Choose a career for the intrinsic rewards, not the financial ones. The biggest career mistake people make is selecting a profession based only on potential earnings. A sense of purpose and passion for one’s work beats a bigger paycheck any day” (Pillemer, 2012).

This is a lesson that I can relate to very deeply and I openly share with my students. Most people know that working in the education field does not guarantee huge financial rewards, and I am very open about that to my students, -- just to argue that one can decide to go into a field that provides intrinsic reward over financial ones and still survive. They know I’m walking proof that one can earn half the average starting salary in education versus an engineering field and still be okay. One big hang-up for my students is not necessarily taking a significantly lower salary, but rather working for companies that do not match their values. Another story that I share with my students is the thought process I had to make when I decided to resign from my first job. I chose letter writing to be my medium for delivering my resignation.

To my team,

Two years ago you gave me an opportunity that very few people were willing to give. You believed in me and brought me onto this amazing team. In the time that I have been here, I have grown both professionally and personally. Beyond establishing a network of colleagues, I have built friendships with people that will last a lifetime. This was my first real shot in the world of admissions and I was able to learn a wealth of knowledge. I really appreciate the freedom that you have given me in pursuing my personal interests, and was thrilled to hear that I would be the new international admission counselor last summer.

During my time here, I have not only learned about the world of higher education, I have also learned a lot about myself. I discovered that I truly am passionate about helping others, and I want to use education as a medium to do just that. I have learned about my true core values, and the values that I seek in others. In the last few months I have come to realize that my values are not in line with the values and principles that the college and the administration are choosing to grow on.

It is with this thought in mind and a heavy heart that I ask that you accept my resignation from our team.

Thank you,

Akshar Patel

Oftentimes, when I have to talk about very meaningful experiences in my life, I think about what it would be like if our campus had an entire department focused on teaching our students about meaning. Robert Nash and Jennifer Jang have written

extensively on the idea of meaning-making centers on campuses and I believe these types of centers would fit in perfectly with the idea of career coaching.

“It is important to understand that a meaning-making center does not minimize, or replace, the existing roles and responsibilities of academic departments and campus offices and staff. Instead, it further validates what many faculty and student affairs professionals already do on some campuses on a regular basis as they connect with students and care for them on a personal level. It is a fact that many faculty and staff go way beyond the work designated by their “job descriptions” in order to build relationships with, and mentor, students” (Nash & Jang, 2013).

Like Nash and Jang suggest, the meaning-making center would be a place to formalize the work that so many faculty and staff members already do for students. As a career coach, each day I look to think beyond a student’s career when I am speaking with them. My questions start with “why” because I believe students don’t think about why they are doing what they are doing. Most students who come to the career center are thinking about *what* they need to do to have a meaningful career. By creating an environment like a meaning-making center, our community is able to foster deeper thinking about purpose; we are able to instill the idea that each student should have a set of values and their life choices should match those values. In my life, I’ve been able to think about purpose when I’ve surrounded myself with people who challenged me to think about my values. Those challenges led me to discover that my values did not align with the values of my first employer. I believe meaning-making environments can challenge students in the same ways; however, until those become mainstream, I choose to challenge my students through my career coaching sessions.

9.1: The Most Meaningful Sessions

Practice makes perfect and being a career coach gives me the opportunity to practice every day. Through the vast majority of my coaching sessions the experience feels very transactional; a student comes in wanting help on their résumé, I critique their résumé, and they are happy. But every now and again I find a person who has a deeper displacement in their life. They are confused, unsure and are looking for something more than a transaction. As I practice the art of coaching more and more, I start to realize that most of my students have this unsettled feeling.

During my first semester of career coaching I saw hundreds of students during appointments, workshops, walk-in sessions, and around campus, but one transfer student who was just starting his journey at Illinois Tech really stuck out. This young man had transferred to a technology-focused school because he wanted a practical application to the science he was studying. He was very excited to be at a larger institution but he also had his reservations. He was afraid he would get lost in the shuffle of a large student population. He was unsure how much his professors cared about him or if he would be able to keep up with the other students. The experience that led him to transfer in the first place was a faculty mentor who wouldn't support his decision to go from science to engineering. This professor broke down his motivation and with a low morale, though excited, he walked onto the Illinois Tech campus.

Our conversations initially were very transactional. He wanted to take every opportunity he could to maximize his potential for having a job when he graduated so he came to meet with me as if to check a box: “meet with your career coach.”

During our first meeting I quickly heard his story and asked him my fundamental question: “Are you successful?”

His answer, no surprise, was “No.”

That’s when I knew I had the opportunity to unpack that “no.” I started to ask him all of the things that would indicate his success. He listed a few surface-level things but I encouraged him to think more deeply. I then asked him to tell me the feeling he would have the moment he was successful and we started to brainstorm.

This was the first time I was going to share my complete hypothesis with someone. He had already told me he had the time to listen. So as we brainstormed feelings together I was secretly thinking of how I was going to present the idea that $\text{success} = \text{integral}(\text{happiness}/\text{time})$. By the time I thought through my first approach we were finished brainstorming and I had no clue how to proceed with the coaching session. So, I just said it! I started talking and drawing and explaining. As he sat there and watched in awe, I kept going. I drew the graph of happiness and time. I drew the line that represented his life and the ups and downs of happiness. Finally, I showed him how integrating the graph from birth to now showed him how successful he was.

This young man came from a loving family and caring environment. In my mind this wasn’t the first time I would be praising his actions or asking him to take inventory of his life. As I started to put the pieces together his eyes lit up. I explained to him how each of the feelings he described as successful were feelings he has already had. I then explained to him that in my theory, happiness was the ultimate feeling of success and that everything he told me that were the things related to success were things he already has.

Each of those things were adding to his happiness; therefore, increasing the integral of happiness over time.

Then, I stopped talking. I realized that I had been talking, writing, and drawing for about three minutes straight and hadn't given him a fair chance at digesting any of my words. We sat there in silence waiting for the other to speak. Finally, he took a breath of air and exhaled loudly. He smiled and said that he agreed with everything that I just presented. I didn't know it then, but I had just acquired my first fan. He believed in my why and agreed that success as a lifestyle choice was the best advice he could receive. This was my first of many encounters with this special student. That evening, I turned to my preferred form of introspection, eSPN, and wrote him a letter:

To A Careful Young Man,

Our meeting today was a pivotal moment in my coaching. I'm very grateful that we crossed paths at the beginning of my journey into coaching minds. Thank you for your willingness to listen about risks, which in itself was a risk. After our discussion today, I realized that regardless of your upbringing, parents, teachers, and other mentors rarely talk to young minds about their success. You and I know how great of an environment you are coming from, and after our quick life inventory today I hope you realize how great you truly are.

Our discussion today has inspired and motivated me to continue sharing this and my story with other students. Your enthusiasm for listening to what I have to write has given me a new passion for sharing my writing, and talking to as many people as possible. Thank you for believing in something that so few

believe. I am excited to continue the conversation with you, and I hope you too spread the message about our mindset.

Thank you,

Akshar – Your Career Coach

With this quick note I took more time to think about my experience during this coaching session. I truly was intrigued that I received so much buy-in from someone I would have expected to already realize this. Was this idea that uncommon? Was I thinking that originally? Or do people “know” it but not think about it consciously?

“According to Piaget, children are born with a very basic mental structure (genetically inherited and evolved) on which all subsequent learning and knowledge is based” (McLeod, 2009).

Jean Piaget has been a substantial influencer on the way I think about my development and the role I play in the development of my readers. Piaget’s theoretical framework, which he called “genetic epistemology,” focuses on how knowledge develops in humans. Piaget defines four primary cognitive structures that a human develops through from age 0 through 15. I believe that I have had the most success talking to students about success when I have considered their relative level of cognitive development. Piaget lays out his four stages as: sensorimotor, preoperations, concrete operations, and formal operations.

I have been extremely mindful of the idea that Piaget’s theories have applicability to children and also to education in a university environment., What I have noticed is that not all students have reached the formal operations stage by age 15, or else they haven’t stayed there when they come to the university environment. What I have noticed in

relation to Piaget's theory is that when I present my idea to students, they perceive it differently depending on the stage they are in. As a coach this is integral to how the idea of success is presented to our students.

One of the lessons I have learned in my short time being a career coach is that every interaction with a student is an opportunity to coach. In this year of growth I have learned to never break character. Our structured lessons may seem a bit contrived, but the chance that a student will break out of their shell and open up is worth the silent judgment we may endure. This characteristic optimism toward our coaching practice led me to have one of the most meaningful coaching sessions I've had recently.

In late spring of 2016, after traveling for several weeks to attend SkillsUSA conferences in the Midwest, I finally got back to work and was ready to settle in to my routine. Then came an email that would become a key pivotal moment. A colleague forwarded a message about a student group looking for a staff mentor to travel with them to Nicaragua the following week. They had just become aware that they would need someone and I was quick to respond to the inquiry. This was a chance to increase my happiness and add to my success. Or, alternately, a decision that would crash and I would be devastated by the rejection. Luckily the former was the result of my inquiry and the trip.

The travel to Nicaragua was the best opportunity I had to bond with students and build trust with them. Thankfully I was able to relate to their stories, share laughs, and ultimately become a friend to some of them. My goal from the trip was simple; I wanted them to know that at least one person on campus cares about them. After the trip I continued talking to a couple of students and eventually I began meeting regularly with a

few of them. Then one day after a meeting, one of the young men that I had become friends with reached out to me and asked if I had time to grab some dinner with him. He didn't know at the time, but I always have time to have dinner with people.

9.2: From Transactional To Transformational

We met at a restaurant on the north side of Chicago. Naturally, I was 30 minutes late. The only context for the meeting he had given me was that he was thinking about changing his major. On my drive to our meeting I tried to think about the scenario. Almost like a doctor I think about the course of action I will take. First, I observe the “patient” and their case history. Then I come up with a diagnosis – “you’re not happy with your major, you’re letting your family put pressure on you, you don’t know enough about the path you have chosen.” Then comes the hard part – prognosis.

On this particular drive, I was thinking through all the possible diagnoses I could give him. I thought about our interactions from the trip and how that impacted my perspective. I thought about the way he spoke during our meetings and the way he tried to follow discussion and take copious notes. But, instead of walking in with a predetermined diagnosis, I approached our meal with as open and clear a mind as possible. I really wanted to listen to what he wanted to share before making any claims.

Once we were settled at the restaurant, he started asking me questions about my day, my life, and how things were going at work. I shared with him my excitement for working with his Engineers Without Borders EWB team and the other projects I had going on. Eventually the conversation turned to his life. This was my opportunity to practice a Career Style Interview. I had read about their effectiveness, and this was my first chance to practice the technique. I asked him questions to seek specific information

from him. I was interested in what he thought his strengths, interests, and ambitions were. Initially, his mind bounced from one idea to the next. He talked about inventions that he wanted to create, the life he was hoping to live, and the service he wanted to give to youth in his community.

After letting him question his own thoughts and listening closely to the words he was saying I asked him the one question I ask of all my students: “Are you successful?”

He repeated the question to himself, thought about it for a few seconds, and then responded, “No, I don’t consider myself successful yet.”

I asked him to explain and he started telling me all of the things he needed to accomplish before he would consider saying he was successful. He wanted to finish school, get married, start a company, and many more things. I asked if his family thinks he was successful and he thought they probably considered him successful. I was genuinely curious as to why he didn’t believe he was successful, so I continued to ask him questions.

We made a list of things he would have when he was successful. He wrote down things like a degree, possibly a home, and a loving wife. I then asked him the feelings he would have when he was successful and he wrote things down like proud, satisfied, and happy. As soon as he wrote the word “happy” on that sheet of paper my eyes lit up! I knew that I would be able to talk to him about my mindset and I would be able to show him that he already is successful and he would continue to be successful.

I continued to question his responses and pushed him to dig deeper. I asked him if he thought there were any outside influences that were impacting the way he viewed himself, like his parents or friends. He said his friends supported him and his parents

couldn't be more proud of all his success. That is what startled me. If his parents told him he was successful, then why did he doubt himself? Until now, my students who had questioned their own success usually had an external factor that was affecting their thinking, but this was the first time I met someone who was still questioning their success in spite of parental support. My facial expression had changed from concerned to startled, so I had to explain to him why. Now it was now my turn to talk. He had been talking a lot, and other than a few questions I asked him, I was virtually silent. I let the silence stretch out for almost too long before I took a deep breath and mentally prepared my response; I was practicing this new thing, thinking before speaking.

I began by telling him my story of changing majors. He had heard it before but not in the detail that I was sharing with him now. I explained to him the exact moment I realized I needed to make a change. I told him about my key pivotal moment. I then quickly got to the part where I came about my definition of success. I told him how I define happiness and how that is what I believe success is about. He still seemed wary of the idea but he followed along. Finally, we took inventory of his life to help him see that he was happy. This entire process took over an hour, and though the content of the discussion was valuable, what I found most moving was the way his body language and voice changed from the moment we met to the end of our discussion. His ears were listening to what I was saying and his brain was digesting it, but what I saw was that his mind was getting excited. He was experiencing the physiological changes that I feel when I talk about this new idea of thinking.

We then decided on some next steps. He was thinking about changing his major, and we had not made a decision during that meeting, but I reminded him of some advice I

had read in “The Last Lecture,” by Randy Pausch. “You can always change your plan, but only if you have one” (Pausch & Zaslou, 2008). So instead of making him decide, the essence of our coaching session was focused on his strengths. My goal of empowering him had been achieved, and now it was up to him to see what wanted to plan.

We ended our time together by talking about our trip. Both of us were sincerely moved by our time in Nicaragua and we were excited to go back. We shared laughs about how our parents were worried and probably would never travel to Nicaragua with us. I knew that I had made an impression on him and as much as this meeting was about him, on my drive home I knew how much it meant to me. So, when I got back, I wrote him a letter.

I am going to be brutally honest; my first impression of you was not the best. The first thing I noticed of you was your relaxed, careless attitude. I quickly realized it wasn't careless, it was careful. Over our time together, I've noticed how careful you are to do anything, not because you don't want to but you live a very precise life. Our meeting last night solidified that feeling for me. Before we met for dinner I was trying to prepare for our meeting and I was thinking about all the things there were going through your head. I'm very grateful that you reached out to me. I'm not sure what led you to choosing me to be the person that you discuss your success with, and I don't think you had any clue that I was genuinely passionate about this, but I assume fate decided for you.

Our conversation was very meaningful for the both of us. You've expressed your gratitude towards me but I want to reciprocate. You have given

me confidence in my mind, writing, and then things I tell people. You were skeptical at first, and took time to listen to what I had to say before analyzing and finally agreeing with what I had presented. Your critical thinking and carefulness helped me earn respect from you that is extremely meaningful.

As we continue to build a bond over our commitment to service I hope you see yourself as a large part of my journey. You and your peers encompass the meaning of my life. Without dedicated, selfless students like you and the entire Engineers Without Borders student body, I would not have the motivation to think about success nor the support needed to write scholarly personal narrative writing.

Our interactions have empowered me to think deeper about the purpose of higher education. I hope to continue my education and take my writing further and it is my wish to find more students like you to help me think critically about education and what purpose the classroom serves in a student's success. From our trip I saw that the amount of learning you all did during our trip could never have happened in a classroom. You have made a global impact by utilizing your engineering, mathematics, science, art, language, creativity, and service skills; no classroom can foster that kind of learning.

Finally, thank you for trusting me. You and your peers have trusted me with a task I do not take lightly. Though my knowledge of engineering continues to fade, I do realize the profound impact your work makes on people, and my role is to be in the background. As all of you continue to lead into uncharted territory I will be behind you making sure no one falls behind and in moments when you start to question why you've joined this journey, I will be waiting to catch you.

Thank you for questioning me about my writing. Thank you for listening to me, but most importantly, thank you for trusting me; it's not something I take for granted.

Gratitude Always,

Akshar – Your ~~Career Coach~~ Friend

9.3 Reading to be Inspired

This style of thinking that I have turned to has not just come from one conversation or a book. In this whole process of searching for what to do in vulnerable moments and how one should develop, I have met many mentors, read many books, and watched many short clips on peoples' ideas about vulnerability, success, and happiness. But at the root of my idea I related to a set of authors in educational psychology.

“...Vygotsky had already expressed concerns about intelligence testing of children, arguing that formal testing was unlikely to capture the ways in which children respond in real-world situations...” (Zimmerman, 2002).

Vygotsky provides support to my story of testing and being unsuccessful in school growing up. He provides a strong resource for explaining why I was lucky to be surrounded by individuals who directly and indirectly impacted my success. Their influences in many ways are consistently redirecting my idea of success. This will directly relate to the letter I will compose to my father thanking him for providing me with support beyond finances in my pursuit of success. Success can also be seen as a scaffold and the idea of layering success can be one approach to the answer for what success looks like.

“...Dewey suggested that one needs to consider a person as constantly growing or ‘becoming.’ One can see this as similar to Vygotsky’s notion that the only good learning is that which is in advance of the present state of development” (Zimmerman, 2002).

Dewey and Vygotsky provide an idea of thinking that can help me understand why my father pushed me to always think about what happens after I finish my present level of education. The idea of success that was being projected down from my primary influence, my father, was one that is similar to Dewey’s focus on the relationship between cognitive, affective, and moral development. Dewey provides a set of ideas that support the idea that success is an ever-changing concept and depending on what combination of development one is in, your view of success will be very different. Vygotsky’s notion of good learning is what has pushed me to think deeper about this concept and in turn has pushed me to be “advance of the present state of development” or in my words, to be vulnerable.

CHAPTER 10: ME, MY SPN, AND I

Dear Reader,

If you’ve made it to this point, congratulations, though my story will continue to progress, for now the writing will be coming to a close. This writing piece truly began in January 2014. This was the first time I wrote down my thoughts about everything that was going on in my life. I started a Masters of Education degree with a very solid plan, but you’ve probably realized by now, my life never goes as planned. It has taken me significantly longer than anticipated to finish this writing. The last three years of writing has come with many changes but this writing piece is truly the only constant I’ve had. I’ve changed addresses

several times, jobs titles, age, relationship status, and through all of this I've been able to share my writing journey with every soul I've met.

This letter to you is intended to help fill in the gaps to my story. I realize that there may not be a clear “big picture” to my story and that is the exact intent of this writing. When I started this piece I was focused on culture and its importance on education. Much of my early writing is on my father, grandmother, and their feelings on education. From that time to know a lot has changed in our relationship. Though our core beliefs are the same, time has played quite the toll on some of the words that I've written. Today, my grandmother is weaker than ever before and her health has put a huge strain on my family's daily life. I didn't know that I'd be back living with her and my family when I started this writing but many things have come full circle including my inner desire to make her and my father proud. No matter how hard I try to distance myself from them I always find a path that leads me to them. In the last two years it has become harder for me to show my love for my grandma. I am less patient with her once “cute” quirks. Many times there is great tension between us because I am frustrated at how she treats herself. As she continues to live her final days, I continue to reflect on how I can think about the positive memories we've had and how she has been a significant part of my writing. One thing that I noticed a few days ago – everyone in my life knows about my grandma. It took meeting the parents of one of my students to realize how far my grandma's story has reached. She has become a part of my identity, and for the rest of my life she will be a large part of my happiness inventory.

Would you be surprised if I told you my father knows nothing about this writing? He definitely has been the single largest part of all my success but I have yet to share with him any of my writing. In the last three years we've had nothing but collaboration, understanding, and sacrifice in our relationship. Even though I have done things he does not approve of he has supported me in all of my decisions. I've given up religion, I've given up emotional attachment to some extended family, and I am now committed to a life of service, and he is still here by my side ready to help in anyway possible. He doesn't understand everything I do, and probably like you, he doesn't see the bigger picture but he knows that he's a part of it.

I hope by now you see that though this writing is intimate, and primarily a narrative piece about me and my interactions, the purpose of writing my SPN is not only to share my story but to encourage you to share yours. Though I didn't think of this three years ago, in the final days of writing, the bigger picture has drawn itself out in my mind; the next step for my happiness is to collect the stories of everyone in my life. Through this process of writing I have discovered the things that are truly keeping me happy are not things at all, it is people. I am fortunate to have thousands of people in my life from all over the world, and no matter how long we've known each other, or if we've never met in person, the fact that we are connected creates a desire for me to know about your success story. Taking inventory of my happiness has helped me realize how important risk is in my life. Most of the people that play a significant role in my life came from taking risks. I have met people through many different mediums and each of those

people has taken time to listen to my story. Now I feel the next risk to take is to start listening to others' stories.

I know there still is so much happiness to add to my life. For me, the more people I add in my life the higher my happiness reaches, and you guessed it, the happier I am the more success I have. Taking inventory has brought me to the point in my life where I truly believe that no matter what risk I take I have a history of success that cannot be taken away. The only thing that stops future success is the risk I don't take, and there is no cultural, religious, spiritual, educational, or human barrier other than myself stopping me. By continuing to live a life where risks are taken knowing I have happiness to catch me will take me to new places, new people, and new methods of service.

“To summarise: postmodern psychology is postcognitive. It begins by recognising that the motor of mental life is an effort after meaning. Selfhood is the condition of making this effort and is also the product of it. Selfhood is not a structure but a processes, distributed through and supported by a system of biological, psychological and cultural levels of order” (Pickering & Barton, 1995).

Success is a process! Post-modern inquiry has been the largest influence in my own life because that is the era that I have been raised in. Attaining success involves understanding and accepting that it is a process. In concluding this thesis you hopefully come to the realization that no matter how much learning happens, like most other senses in humankind, there will always be a hunger to attain more.

Success is accepting that you are in an ongoing process of doing “good” and embracing the “biological, psychological, and cultural levels of order.”

Serving others is not always easy, but serving myself is the ultimate pain for me. This writing process has not been easy. This has been the single most difficult experience for my heart because I’ve had to face my anxieties, my fears, my judgments, and I’ve had to share them with others. I know many who have read this are hurt or disgusted with what I’ve said. I also know that most may not have known about the deep thoughts and desires I have and this has been a scary experience sharing that. I haven’t told my father about this writing, and to this point, I’ve shared pieces of this writing with one close friend and other acquaintances I do not see everyday. Most of my closest friend knew what I was writing about but never were exposed to the words. Through the last three years many people have come and gone in my life, but the through line has been me, my SPN, and I.

Never alone,

Akshar Patel

This writing piece has been the only constant in my life for the last few years. All of these concepts, ideas, and conversations have emerged because of this endeavor. When this project originally began I did not know the concept of career coaching, though I had experienced it and the advice from those sessions was a big part of the decision I made. As a career coach, I know how vulnerable the students I meet with are. The words, stories, and advice I choose to share with them are vital to their career. Thinking about a student’s life beyond their vocation can be very intimidating. This idea of success and

using eSPN as a medium of exploring success can be very intimidating for career coaches.

President Barack Obama gave a great metaphor during a podcast that can be applied to the work we do in career services. “Sometimes the task of the government is to make incremental improvements or try to steer the ocean liner two degrees north or south so that 10 years from now, we’re in a very different place than we were. But, at the moment people may feel like we need a 50-degree turn. We don’t need a two degree turn. You say ‘Well, if I turn 50 degrees, the whole ship turns. And you *can’t* turn 50 degrees” (McDonald, 2015). Most professionals in education understand what President Obama is talking about here. Educational institutions are ships that couldn’t turn 50 degrees even if one tried to adjust course so drastically. Career coaches must realize that it takes small changes in the school’s culture to see the environment be in a different place years from now. In the words of Robert Nash and Jennifer Jang, the purpose of education is “prepar[ing] our students to grow as whole human beings throughout their lives” (Nash & Jang, n.d.).

From my experience sharing my writing and encouraging students to write, I have found that if trust is built between the career coach and the student, then the student is more open to advice about the decisions they want to make regarding their career and life beyond career. John D. Krumboltz and Al S. Levin write in their book *Luck Is No Accident* about how Levin benefited from bad advice from a career counselor.

“It wasn’t until I was in my late twenties that I realized that I needed some help sorting out my career plans. I remember meeting with a career counselor at my university career center. She took one quick glance at my resume, handed me a list of prospective

employers and sent me on my way. So much for dedicated services to alumni! Anyways, this meeting with a career counselor unexpectedly changed my life forever. I realized that you could actually earn a decent living (on a college campus no less), listening to a few questions, handing someone a piece of paper, and then sending the person on his or her way!” (Krumboltz & Levin, 2010).

Levin’s “bad” experience in the career center completely changed his life and I hope when he looks back at it today he doesn’t think of it as bad, but rather a risk he took. Through all of my experiences with career coaching and encouraging students to write eSPN I have noticed that students tend to put a lot of weight on the words that I share with them. Levin used his experience as a way to find a career in something he thought he could improve. That turned into a very successful career that gave him opportunity to make the change he desired. Each moment career coaches have with their students is very precious and it is embedded into the ethical codes set up by the National Career Development Association.

For the career coaches who are new to this world, and to the ones who have been practicing for several generations my advice is simple: the less you compartmentalize your life the easier it is to relate with students. In sharing Scholarly Personal Narrative, I found that it was easy for my students to hear or read the scholarly parts, but it was the personal narrative that really caught their attention. This thesis has not only gone through the stories of my interactions with career coaching, it is the living proof of taking the advice I give to all my students, --that is, to write! The most important lesson and the final message for educators is that the process of writing this thesis over the course of three years served as a document to foster learning, growth, healing, and living.

Everything written in this document not only provides information, it is the story of me living the advice that I was writing and adjusting it as necessary. What I learned from focusing on one writing piece for the last three years is that every person should be working on writing an SPN throughout his or her life. Though this writing may be coming to a close, I will continue to write out loud and write it out and the next step will be to encourage everyone to write it out with me.

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