

2018

Seeking Balance: Lessons to Myself

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SEEKING BALANCE: LESSONS TO MYSELF

A Thesis Presented

by

Matthew R. Manz

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

May, 2018

Defense Date: March 21, 2018
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ABSTRACT

The search for balance in my life reflects my attitude towards life itself. In seeking balance, in juggling my strengths and weaknesses, my joys and my sorrows, I seek affirmation that I am living the life I want to live. This thesis offers my own definition of balance, and outlines why it is important and how it manifests itself in my life. In examining my own story, I offer lessons to those who seek balance in their own lives. Without being prescriptive, these lessons illuminate my own views while reminding me to live life my way.

What is work/ life balance? What role does exercise play in finding balance? What can we learn from losing a loved one? Can we re-examine how to explore life's big decisions? Why is important to always have something to look forward to? And why would someone want to study this topic?

By approaching these questions using Scholarly Personal Narrative, I invite the wisdom of other scholars to influence my own views. Yet while these scholars – and the equally important wisdom from friends and loved ones – help shape my perspective, the stories I offer are, ultimately, my own. Through these stories, through my “lessons to myself,” I seek equanimity and clarity in my approach to life.

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CHAPTER 1: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Dear me, age 21,

Let's cut to the chase – you are me, and I am you, and so this letter is not really for you, or for me. But let's play along. Later this year, I'll turn 32, which seems like a good time to look back and take stock of the last ten or so years of my life, a time that encompasses the start of my career and my transition into “the real world,” as we so often refer to any time after college. Let me offer you some advice, and see if I might even be able to use that advice as I move further and further from my life as a recent college student and closer to my life as a mid-career professional.

Let me be clear: I do not worry about middle age, nor old age, nor am I particularly concerned about dying. I do fear a life lived without meaning; I fear a life lived behind a computer in a job that pays the bills and little else.

So with this letter, let us embrace the benefits that each age brings, acknowledge the limitations, and strive ever towards our best life. Selfishly, I write this to remind myself what is truly important to me. In a world that seems – seems is perhaps an important word, in this case – to be shifting ever more to one where people derive meaning primarily from jobs and careers, where everyone is busy all the time, where the news cycle spews hate and seems utterly politicized, I find myself coming back to this question: what allows me to find balance?

I write this for myself, but I write also for friends and family, and for all those who enter this “real world” seeking to find themselves and to learn what is truly important in their own lives, and what gives them meaning. This letter is for early professionals and late professionals, current students and lifelong learners. Mine is a story

shaped by conversations and experiences with these friends, family, and coworkers, and it is a story worth telling. I seek this balance because life is a balancing act, and that balance is not found in a vacuum, nor does balance always mean happiness. I'd be pleased if people find my perspectives useful, and if what I write in this letter serves others.

So what I write about for you – for me, for us – in this letter is a series of stories and lessons about things that are important to maintaining balance in life. I recognize that these lessons are fallible, and that what's important to me now will change, undoubtedly, as life progresses. But now, in this moment, let us seek balance.

CHAPTER 2: WHY SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE?

“We write to discover what we think” – Joan Didion

What makes me an expert? What sort of advice can I offer that hasn't been said before, a million times in a million different ways? If we accept that writing a letter to myself seems to inherently make this document a sort of self-help manual, what gives me the right to offer advice to anyone else, let alone myself? Who am I to think I'm an expert?

Before we dive into the lessons and stories, let's ask the question another way: in a world that places increasing importance on numbers, data, and quantitative research, why in the world would I choose to write my formal Master's Thesis using a style that puts people, stories, and my own view of the world ahead of citations from peer-reviewed articles and scatter plots?

I could offer a number of different responses, all of which I believe to be true: my stories matter, and my voice deserves to be heard; the type of advice I intend to offer in this letter isn't suited for empirical studies or big data, and, in fact, I'm often skeptical about the value of quantitative data (unless we're talking about baseball, in which case I can talk about data all day long). I believe traditional quantitative data has a tendency to devalue people and the human experience. Data can be useful, of course, and it is difficult to operate without it in the professional world, but it rarely paints the whole picture.

As is often the case in life, however, the simplest answer is usually the best: Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) writing represents the type of writing I want to read. If it's the type of writing that I want to read, it's probably going to be the type of writing that I want to write. I want to tell stories, and through those stories, I want to remind

myself – and help others discover in their own lives – how to stay balanced. As Nash and Bradley write, “the research questions select the methodology, not the other way around.”¹

SPN writing intrigues me, challenges me, and frustrates me. It frightens me, and reassures me. It simultaneously unnerves me and calms me. In many ways, it encourages me to reflect upon the very topic that my thesis is about: balance. Balance to me is like riding a bike: if you lean too far one way, you fall. If you lean too far the other way, you fall. Balance is being able to avoid falling while still moving forward (and if you do lose your balance and fall every once in a while, you dust off your knees, put a Band-Aid on the scrape, and get back on the bike).

Good SPN writing requires this very same balance. I thoroughly enjoy research, and I especially enjoy the type of research that complements SPN writing so very well. The Scholarly, or “S” section of SPN writing, is a critical component of making my story credible, tangible, and accessible to readers. It need not incorporate hard quantitative data, though it could; the research need not be from a peer reviewed journal article, though in some cases that might work perfectly. The external scholarship that I use in my writing can come from fiction or non-fiction, insight from published authors or wisdom from the mouths of babes. I can use scholarship best when it helps me tell my story; when used poorly, it confuses or serves only to mask weak writing. Too much S makes for a

¹ Robert J. Nash and DeMethra LaSha Bradley, *Me-Search and Re-Search: A Guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscripts* (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, Inc., 2011), 39.

noisy document that drowns out one's own writing; too little and you can put yourself on an island where your writing might become less impactful.

The Personal, or "P" in SPN writing is perhaps the most valuable aspect in SPN writing, and thus, naturally, the most difficult. When I write about personal stories in the pages to follow, too much information (the dreaded TMI) overloads a story with unnecessary detail. It can also detract from the flow of writing and serve as exhibitionism. I've read SPN writing that has too heavy a "P," where the author becomes too engrossed in their own story to be able to make it relevant to others. This type of writing comes across as self-serving despite the author's best intentions. Yet a document with too little "P" makes the writing suffer even more drastically. The P represents what I think of as the "stickiness" of the story. How long will a story stay with a reader? If the story has just the right amount of heart, just the right amount of "P," it might stay with the reader long after they have put it down, and he or she will continue to learn from it long after their first reading. Works by authors like Brené Brown, Mary Pipher, and Paul Kalanithi have stayed with me long after reading them, due in large part to just the right amount of "P."

I find personal writing to be the most difficult part of SPN writing. I aim to write with enough detail to serve my writing, and I want to share the details of what happened to get to the heart of my story: what it meant to me, and, thus, what it means to you, the reader. This balance between too much and not enough is an ongoing struggle for me in SPN writing. Below is what I wrote in my first class where I encountered SPN writing in fall of 2015:

I am uneasy about being willing to share personal experiences. I find myself in the “earned trust” camp, where I’m comfortable sharing experiences only once those with whom I am sharing have shown that they deserve my trust. I fear a sort of voyeur experience from being encouraged to share information that I’d rather not share and in receiving information from others that I’d be more comfortable not knowing (the “over-share” effect that I’ve witnessed in previous courses or trainings).

Much of what I wrote above still rings true; I still consider myself an “earned trust” person, wherein I’m comfortable sharing personal details with others only after they have earned my trust. If I’m going to be vulnerable with someone, I want to know who they are and what they’re going to do with the information I give them. Since this thesis will be a public document that belongs to the University of Vermont, I won’t have any control over who reads it. How am I supposed to be personal if I don’t even know who’s going to read this? This isn’t a Facebook post where I can control my audience.

Reading other people’s SPN writing has helped instruct me in finding the right balance of “P.” In *How Stories Heal*, Jarrett Chizick shared a very personal experience in a letter he wrote to Robert Nash. While he divulged highly personal details, he provided only the information that was essential for the writing to be meaningful. He wrote: “I recently had an event that changed my life path. My relationship with my son’s mother had become estranged. How do you respond when someone you love asks how they should proceed with their life?”² Beyond these few details, Jarrett didn’t share much about what this event was or how the event unfolded. Beyond a brief paragraph, Jarrett moved

² Robert J. Nash and Sydnee Viray, *How Stories Heal: Writing our Way to Meaning & Wholeness in the Academy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 99.

the story right along; it wasn't the act itself that was important, it was how he responded to it.

Without his knowing it, Jarrett helped me view SPN writing in a new light. His lesson was simple: share what is essential to the story. How do I know if I'm oversharing? Hopefully, I'll know if the details don't serve the writing. Unless the details are not strengthening the S, the P, and the N, I can leave them out. I can still be vulnerable, and I can still include the P (at least as much as I'm comfortable with), and although I can't control who reads this, I can control what I share.

If the "P" can make a story stay with someone for a long time, the Narrative, or "N," is what gets them to read your story in the first place. It is what makes them want to turn the page. Good stories need strong narratives with thrilling characters and interesting action. A beginning, middle, and end provide narrative structure, and help to capture the audience. Stories need a hook that grabs the reader and draws her in, encourages her to read more, makes her ask, "what's next?" My favorite hooks in novels are cliffhangers, those moments where I need to find out what's about to happen, and where it's almost painful to stop reading. In SPN writing, cliffhangers can be hooks, but so too can an anthology of stories that provide detail about people, that make the reader care about what happened or what will happen. SPN writing is about people, and details help these people come alive. Without these details, we're writing about boring characters, not interesting people.

In the coming pages, I'll seek to combine the S, the P, and the N. Will I always be successful? I doubt it. But as my topic is balance, I commit not to perfection but rather to diligence and perseverance, and to a sense of responsibility to this document. My hope is

that this thesis will be of use not just to others, but that it will also be of use to me. If it's true that we "write to discover what we think," as Joan Didion said, then the very act of writing this thesis will be just as valuable for me as the end product itself.

CHAPTER 3: BALANCING EXERCISE

“Father Time is undefeated”

Soccer has been a huge part of my life for as long as I can remember. My first exposure to soccer came on the fields at recess in kindergarten. Soon thereafter came slightly more organized youth soccer, then middle school soccer, high school soccer (go Cougars!), and eventually club soccer in college and a men’s league since then.

I still play soccer year round, which in Vermont means that I play indoor soccer for half of the year and outdoor soccer for the other half.

I rate myself as about an average player in the leagues that I’ve played in; never the best, and never the worst. I’ve split my time between playing goalie and playing on the field, and while I never truly excel on the field, I rarely do things that make our team lose. I can remember individual moments of greatness (a goal I scored on an overhead kick one summer remains one of the three greatest sports moments of my life), and some individual moments that I wish I could forget (I can remember the exact spin of the soccer ball on the goal I let in during the high school playoffs in 2002). Though I don’t have a particularly good memory in general, my sports memory is nearly eidetic. I can recall which bat I was using when I hit a walk-off double in Little League baseball; at the end of a round of golf, I can remember each individual shot I took; I can remember the very first goal I scored in soccer as clearly as I can remember the one I scored a few weeks ago; I recall with ease the feel of dewy grass on my stomach as I slid across the field while making a diving catch in ultimate Frisbee on a random Tuesday night in college.

The importance of these memories demonstrate the need I have for sports, for games, for competition, and for exercise in my life. One of my great fears in life is experiencing an injury that prevents me from taking full advantage of this passion of mine.

During the summer of 2012, I was playing in my usual men's soccer league when I felt a twinge in my right hamstring. I was 26 years old and had never had a major injury in my life. I'd never broken a bone in my body, never twisted an ankle, and never pulled a muscle. I'd had plenty of minor bumps, bruises, and scrapes, but the closest I'd ever come to a real injury was having to take a couple days off from track and field in high school due to a sore hip flexor.

So when my hamstring cramped, I chalked it up to being nothing more serious than the soreness of an overtaxed muscle. I was in the middle of a game, and saw no reason to stop playing. The game finished, and while the hamstring was sore for the next few days, I paid little heed to it.

In the game the next week, I was sprinting up the field, when without warning, my hamstring seemed to explode under me. I crumpled to the ground and could hardly move. My teammates helped me to the sideline, and I watched the rest of the game from the bench, my hamstring contracting like an angry fist.

The next day was even worse; after a fitful night's sleep, I woke up and could hardly walk. I called in sick to work, and my wife helped me move around from chair to chair. Stretching the muscle was impossible, and resting it was agony. Ice, Advil, repeat; that was my reality for the next few days.

I missed the rest of that soccer season, as well as our fall season, and it felt like I was in purgatory. I became irritable more easily, I didn't sleep as well as I used to, and I found myself restless and unfocused when trying to complete a task at work or at home.

I came to realize that not only did I miss the competition, but I missed the feeling of being in shape. As my body fell out of shape due to not being able to exercise, I felt like my happiness and clarity of thought also began to diminish. Worse, as I got out of the habit of exercising, I found myself less and less motivated to try a different form of exercise, one that was lower impact on my hamstring. The thing that my body and mind was so clearly craving was also the thing that seemed so hard to will myself to do.

"I just don't have any motivation to get started," I told a friend of mine one afternoon, when he asked me to go for a light jog with him. My hamstring was almost back to full strength by this time, and while I was easing myself back into exercising, I had yet to fully push it. As a result of not playing soccer regularly, I'd fallen out of the routine of exercising regularly.

"I know exactly what you mean," he said. "When I tore my ACL a few years ago, I was super motivated in the first few weeks of rehab and physical therapy. Yet during that time when my knee was starting to get better, but before it was fully healed, I couldn't get myself off the couch. I binge-watched three seasons of *Game of Thrones* in a week."

I was surprised, because this friend had just completed a half ironman race, which was comprised of a 1.2 mile swim, a 56 mile bike ride, and a 13.1 mile run.

"So how'd you get back into a routine?" I asked him.

“Two ways: I set a goal of training for this half iron man, and then I told all of my friends and family that I was doing the race. Everyone I told was amazed, and after telling so many people, I couldn’t back out without being humiliated every time I ran into someone who knew I was racing. They became my accountability partners.”

It seemed like decent advice, so I signed myself up for a half marathon the following spring. I wasn’t going to have trouble running the distance – I’d done a half marathon before, and knew what to expect – but I told a number of people that I was going to run it in under two hours.

The motivation worked perfectly. Over the next several months, my runs got longer and easier; I kept playing soccer, but I had this additional event to train for, which kept me active in between soccer games. I ran the race and finished with a time of 2:02:37; not under two hours, but fairly close. I vowed to do the race again the next year, immediately after I finished.

I finished in 1:56:30 the next year, dropping over six minutes from my previous time. It didn’t feel as good as scoring a goal in soccer or hitting a home run in baseball, but I was still proud.

In addition to my running, I continued playing soccer, but I was more cautious, more hesitant. What if the injury happened again? What if I hurt myself and couldn’t get off the couch again?

In the five years since that injury, I’ve found that my body recovers slower than it used to. Perhaps it’s due to age, or perhaps it’s due to the fact that I’m not as fit as I used to be. Perhaps it’s because I try to play just as hard as I did in high school, but because I don’t play every day anymore, my body isn’t used to the same type of impact. Whether

it's aging or simply not being in as good of shape as I used to be, it's a struggle for me to adapt.

In *30 Lessons for Living*, author Karl Pillemer compiled life lessons collected from interviews with over a thousand Americans over the age of 65 (who he called the “experts”). The experts “know one fact firsthand: what you can expect from not making the right health decisions isn't an early death – in fact, that's the least of your worries – instead you should be concerned about years, possibly decades, of suffering from chronic disease.”³

The advice that these experts offered Pillemer was clear – act now, while you can, to age gracefully: cut out the smoking (not a concern for me), eat healthy meals (I have some success in this arena), and keep your body active.

As much as I keep the long-term benefits of staying active in the back of my mind, I'm also aware of the immediate benefits that regular exercise brings. I know that motivation begets motivation, and that lesson help drive me.

As I age, I've found that I need to be more aware of my body's abilities and its limitations. I'm not old, and as I've mentioned, I'm not particularly afraid of getting old. But I do fear a life where I'm not able to do the things that I want to do. My desire to remain at the peak of my athletic prowess, to be as physically fit as I was 10 years ago reflect how I'd like the world to be. I'm not as fit as I once was, and in some ways, I

³ Karl Pillemer, *30 Lessons for Living* (New York: The Penguin Group, 2011), 135.

might never be. I work now to balance where I think I should be with the reality of where I find myself.

But that's not a reason for me to give up; if anything, it should be a reminder to continue to stay as active as possible. I was watching a soccer match on TV recently, and the announcers were discussing one of the older players on the team I was supporting. I'd followed this player for most of his career, as he was a standout both for his club teams as well as his national team, but his performance had dropped in the past few years; his speed, once one of his most impressive aspects of his game, was waning. "Father Time remains undefeated," the announcer said.

It was a fairly offhand comment, but it has stayed with me since that game. The insight was nothing new – almost every single professional athlete who retires does so after his or her peak performance has long since passed – but the phrasing struck me as clever. It might work well on a motivational poster somewhere.

Lesson: keep yourself physically fit. Your emotional health is not independent from your physical health; in fact, staying physically fit is an important part of staying emotionally fit. Moreover, while recognizing your limitations physically, don't use that as an excuse to get out of shape. Fitness will mean different things at different times of your life; don't hold yourself to the same standards you held yourself to when you were younger, but hold yourself to realistic standards that continue to push you physically.

CHAPTER 4: THE NEED FOR ANTICIPATION

“He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how” – Nietzsche

“As I see it, our very survival depends on some idea of future happiness” – Dalai Lama

I was a Spanish major in college, and spent my junior year abroad in Spain. As part of the program, my classmates and I took two four-day excursions during each semester to different parts of the country. The goal was to expose us to the various cultures, dialects, accents, landscapes, and people that make Spain a uniquely diverse and beautiful place. We travelled to historic cathedrals, drank local wine, visited jamonerías (establishments where they sold cured Spanish ham), and saw art from Picasso, Goya, Dalí, and El Greco; we took boats down rivers that led under historic bridges; we bartered with local merchants for olives; we hiked mountains and swam in the Mediterranean Sea.

If I sound almost obsequiously reminiscent, it’s because the memories I have of my time abroad fill me with such fondness that I can almost forget that there were times while abroad when I cursed my overconfidence in believing I was fluent in a language that I could hardly speak. Though my language skills increased tremendously during my time in Spain to the point that I could call myself fluent (though never natively fluent), I spent the first month and a half understanding almost nothing that people said to me. If I focus on the fondness of my time in Spain, I can almost get my memory bank so full that I can barely squeeze in the memories of startling frustration, isolation, and loneliness.

One of these excursions took us to Galicia, a province in northern Spain that looks more like Ireland than what people think of when they picture the landscapes of Spain. Through beautiful winding roads, our bus led us to rocky cliffs overlooking the Atlantic

Ocean, through dense green forests, and, ultimately, into the historic city of Santiago de Compostela.

The professor leading the excursion had been talking for much of the bus ride to the city about the cultural importance of Santiago de Compostela. I listened drowsily (which meant that I listened without comprehending, as I needed to be actively listening in order to understand what he was saying), paying little attention to the topic. He was likely explaining that Santiago de Compostela serves as the destination and culmination of the Camino de Santiago, an ancient Christian pilgrimage, and is also a possible location of the remains of St. James.

I was more focused on the landscape and wondering where we were going to eat dinner that evening. An ancient religious site in yet another cathedral? I was cathedraled out at that point in the excursion. We arrived in the city, had a delicious dinner, likely went to a bar or two, and headed back to the hotel. The city was beautiful, but it didn't seem any more or less special than any of the other beautiful cities I'd seen in Spain up to that point.

The next morning, my group gathered in the plaza outside of the cathedral to prepare for our tour. Men and women wearing hiking backpacks filled the cobbled streets, their hair long and dirty, their faces coated with sweat but filled with beatific gazes toward the ancient cathedral. Some rode donkeys through the plaza, some sat on the steps in the shade, drinking from the cheap plastic one liter water bottles that I saw all throughout the country.

“Peregrinos,” an old man said from nearby, seeing me staring at these people; and then, in thickly accented English, “Pilgrims.” I nodded. It was helpful, because I had never heard the word “peregrinos” before.

We entered the cathedral, and the first thing that the tour guide showed us was a handprint in one of the marble columns. Upon completing the Camino de Santiago, she told us, it is customary for a peregrino to place one’s hand on the marble column inside the cathedral to signify that your camino had ended, that your pilgrimage was complete. I was astounded; the marble had been worn away over the centuries by the hundreds of thousands of people who had rested their hands on the column, and had left a ghostly imprint. The tour guide invited us to touch it, to feel how smooth the marble was.

I declined the invitation; I decided on the spot that I would come back and complete the Camino de Santiago, and that I’d touch the column, that I would place my hand over the hands of all the peregrinos who had come before me, only when I’d earned it.

I’m rarely impulsive. I make decisions only after long and thoughtful weighing of pros and cons, of benefits and risks. Maybe it was something about the city of Santiago de Compostela that drew me in. Maybe I’d just had a particularly good breakfast that morning, and I woke up feeling refreshed and in the mood for an adventure. Perhaps the stories my brother had told me about his own adventures along the Appalachian Trail the previous year had me craving a similar experience. I’m still not quite sure why, but that morning, I made the decision that I would complete the Camino de Santiago.

In the years since I visited Santiago de Compostela, I’ve had a number of false starts. My initial plan was to return immediately after graduation, to complete this

experience before diving into the working world. I'd shared my plan with my girlfriend, Rachel (who would later become my wife), and she too became interested in the journey. I gladly shifted my plan from a hermetic pilgrimage to an adventure we could share together. We would talk about the Camino at length, and we would share both our excitement and fear about such an adventure.

Then, as so often happens, our plans to walk were derailed. Rachel was accepted into graduate school that started soon after graduation, her mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, and despite our best efforts in saving money, we were forced to confront the reality that we were two kids fresh out of college with no jobs. Saving is difficult, but when there's no income coming in, it's impossible.

As our careers progressed, and we were able to start to save money, the realities of our working worlds – or of my working world, at least – crashed down upon us. In a job that provided me with a maximum of three weeks of vacation time, there was no way for me to complete the Camino, which generally takes people 5-6 weeks to complete.

And so I put the Camino on the back burner. Our lives got busy with work and school, with weddings (our own and those of our friends), with buying a house, with a new puppy, and with the at times unbearable emotional challenges that come from caring for a terminally ill family member. These were excuses not to do the Camino, but they were legitimate and they filled our lives with meaning. As hard as it was, we were tethered to Vermont. Though our plans were on hold, the dream of completing the Camino was never far from our minds.

When I was in college, my roommate (and my best friend in college) and I spent a great deal of time talking about the future. As our time moved closer to graduation, the

futures that seemed so bright during our first year at college grew cloudier and murkier. As first year students, the “real world” that lay beyond college was far enough away that we didn’t need to worry about it. We had essays and exams to complete, anyways, so we shouldn’t be wasting our time worrying about the future. Yet as we hurtled recklessly toward graduation, we couldn’t avoid the feeling that time was running out, that we needed to figure out just what to do once we graduated. The blueprint for my life until graduation day was easy to follow; the blueprint for life after college was one we had to design ourselves, and it was incredibly frightening. I think one of the reasons that I liked high school and college was because I had a goal in mind: graduate. The two epigraphs that begin this chapter help clarify my own thoughts on anticipation:

“He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how” – Nietzsche

“As I see it, our very survival depends on some idea of future happiness” – Dalai Lama

These two ideas are intertwined in my mind. I believe Nietzsche’s “why to live” is the same thing as the Dalai Lama’s “idea of future happiness.” During the late hours of an all-nighter in college, I could power through assignments because I knew there was an end goal in sight. There was a tangible thing I was working towards.

The working world offers us less concrete “whys.” In my professional setting, promotions and raises are the closest thing I can relate to graduations, and those are so often unrelated to my actual job performance that I rarely even think about them as tangible things that I can be working towards. I generally enjoy the work I do, and I’m proud of the work that I do, but I don’t necessarily feel like I’m working towards something. I have trouble finding a professional “why” or a tangible work-related “idea of future happiness.”

But I still need to be working towards something, or looking forward to something. On the days when work is bad, or when life is causing me stress, the idea of future happiness offers a sort of protective cocoon. A few weeks after Rachel's mom passed away following her long and brave fight against breast cancer, we started talking about the Camino again. While Rachel's mom was sick, we had been nervous to leave Vermont for more than a few days in a row, anxious that she would fall, or wind up in the hospital, or worse. Accordingly, we'd been unable to plan for anything. Future happiness was a concept that we couldn't wrap our heads around, because we were so entrenched in the intensity of the present moment. We'd spent so long dreading what was going to happen to Rachel's mom that we'd forgotten how truly wonderful it could be to look forward to something. Sure, we were still limited in vacation time, still aware of the cost of a trip of this nature, still nervous about the challenges that we would face on the Camino. But for the first time in a while, we felt like we could allow ourselves to get excited for something; we'd longed for that healthy anticipation, without even realizing it.

Knowing that I could only take a few weeks off from work in a row, I decided to adjust my plans. I didn't want to give up on doing the Camino, nor wait until I retired to take this journey, so instead I compromised. We had read that some people do the Camino in chunks throughout their life, walking for a week in their 20s, a week in their 30s, etc. Reading that changed my viewpoint around. And so recently, Rachel and I booked a three week trip for July to leave computers and TVs behind, to lace up our shoes, strap on our packs, and just start walking. We'll go as far as we can, but we won't

rush. We'll walk at our pace, on our terms, on our own Camino. I have no agenda, no city I want to be sure we make it to in order to consider our trip a success.

The Camino represents a great adventure on the horizon, and my excitement for it grows as our departure date draws closer. Having something to look forward to that I can fall back on when life gets hectic calms me.

Reflecting on the excitement that a larger journey like the Camino offers, I've found myself also appreciating some of the small things that I will miss while I'm away from home. In feeling the anticipation for a large journey, I've become more aware of the things that I can look forward to every day, such as:

- My drive home from work
- A delicious dinner
- My wife greeting me when I get home from work
- My dog resting her head on my lap when I watch TV
- That feeling when I lay down in bed after a long day
- A book that I can't wait to keep reading

These are simple pleasures, of course, but they are also reliable and give me meaning.

The joy of anticipation – the idea of “future happiness”, as the Dalai Lama might say – doesn't have to be limited to an epic trip or a new experience; the opportunity to take part in something of that nature too often hinges on things outside of our control. Of course, those can be great things to look forward to, but the simple pleasures can be just as strongly motivating.

Lesson: Fill your life with things that excite you and keep you motivated. Having something tangible to look forward to is one of the best gifts you can give yourself. It's okay to acknowledge when reality does not match your expectations, but remember that anticipation is a gift unto itself. Even if the book you've been waiting to read isn't as good as you were hoping it would be, don't forget the joy you felt in looking forward to reading it for the first time. While walking the Camino de Santiago, you might be bitten by bed bugs, become dehydrated, deal with blisters and overcrowding, and wilt in the intense summer heat. But you might also experience exactly the type of spiritual and rejuvenating pilgrimage you hope it will be. Regardless of the experience itself, remember that the anticipation of walking the Camino was a joy in its own right.

CHAPTER 5: ON BIG DECISIONS

“All you can give us is what life is about from your point of view. You are not going to be able to give us the plans to the submarine. Life is not a submarine. There are no plans” –

Ann Lamott

I applied to five colleges during my senior year of high school. I had no real interest in going to three of the five colleges – these were my safety schools that I could have attended if all else failed, but they were never going to be the perfect fit. The two schools that I was really interested in were St. Lawrence University (SLU) and Holy Cross.

Coming from a small town and a high school that I felt intimately connected with, I was seeking the same type of experience in college. Worried about becoming lost in a big-school environment, I didn't want to go to a large state school. I wanted the intimacy and personal connection that a small school offered.

Both SLU and Holy Cross offered these environments, and while Holy Cross offered the thrill of living in a city, something I'd never experienced, it was perhaps larger and decidedly more religious than I was really looking for. Regardless, I felt that I would be happy at either school, so while I was anxious to hear from the colleges with an admissions decision, I wasn't truly all that nervous.

In the spring, my college decision letters arrived: four acceptances and one denial. Holy Cross had opted to not admit me, and I was thrilled: I'd avoided my big decision. I was going to SLU.

My high school experience, especially in my junior and senior years, was wonderful. Looking back, I realize that my happiness in high school (something that is so

rare when talking with others about their own experiences in high school) was matched only by my ignorance to that happiness. I played sports all three seasons, was named captain for two teams my senior year, was surrounded by fiercely close friends who also happened to be extremely kind and caring people, and was supported by a family that loved me. Yet I was ready to be done with high school by the time graduation arrived, ready to experience the type of independence that only college could bring to a youngest child whose siblings had already gone off to college.

I spent the summer before my first year at SLU working, swimming, hiking mountains, and driving my 1993 Volvo 240 Classic, with its busted speakers and wood trim, to my friend's basement where we would play video games and talk about girls. I also experienced the same rites of passage that so many first year college students encounter: going to Bed, Bath & Beyond with my mom to buy twin extra-long sheets for my dorm room; emailing my college roommate, who I'd been introduced to via email from SLU, to figure out who was bringing a fridge and who was bringing a TV. The night before driving up to SLU, my dad proudly handed me a small tool kit, full of screwdrivers, sandpaper, washers, hammers, nails, and, oddly, a handsaw, for all of the "projects" that I would inevitably be called upon by all of my toolbox-less classmates to help out with. He blissfully ignored the fact that my greatest construction project to date was fairly feeble stool I had once constructed from a kit in Cub Scouts when I was eight years old.

In short, I felt like I was fully prepared for life at college. I was confident. As the youngest child with two older siblings, I'd spent the last few years touring college campuses, sitting in on admissions information sessions, and – horribly – helping my

siblings move in and out of their dorm rooms. My bags were packed, I'd hugged my friends who were off to their own respective schools, and my parents and I made the three and a half hour trip north and west to St. Lawrence. In high school, I'd had great friends and was captain of the soccer team – I was going to fit in like a champ in college!

The reality didn't match my expectations. Instead of dominating the social scene in my first few weeks on campus, I felt awkward and uncomfortable. My roommate was fantastic, and the people on my floor formed a great community of friends. I played intramural soccer, began to get involved in clubs, enjoyed my classes, and partied enough to experience the yin of drinking with friends and the yang of miserable, terrible hangovers.

Yet I wasn't happy. Somehow, I had replaced my social confidence that seemed unshakeable in high school with social awkwardness, and the college friendships that I had hoped would immediately mimic the feel of friendships I'd had growing up were still developing. The same benefits of going to a relatively small school – it seemed like you knew *everybody* – were also its drawbacks. The relationships that made up the first year of college were fraught with drama, and I remember going for a long run one weeknight at 1:30 in the morning, just to get some breathing room from the interpersonal conflict that was playing out among people in my dorm. The peace and quiet of the cool October air was revitalizing, and as I ran up and down the stairs of Richardson Hall, the lamplights casting long shadows, I realized that I missed home. I missed my dogs, I missed my friends, and I missed the quiet and solitude of my bedroom. I missed my comfort zone. Being an introvert in a college dorm, where you rarely have quiet time to yourself, was weighing on me.

I started to play with the idea of transferring schools. I thought that if I got a fresh start at a different school, I'd be able to do things differently. I had joined the Ultimate Frisbee Club at St. Lawrence, and I remember walking to practice one day, talking to a friend of mine. Our talk turned to our feelings about life at St. Lawrence.

“Are you happy here?” I asked him.

“Yeah,” he said, nonchalantly, “This is the happiest I've ever been. I absolutely love St. Lawrence, it's been the perfect school for me. Why?”

“I'm not super happy here,” I told him. “It's been sort of a rough adjustment from high school to college.”

“Yeah, I get that,” he said, which surprised me, because he seemed to have taken to college with aplomb. “The truth is, I just love college. If I had to guess, I would guess that any school would have been the perfect school for me.”

I remember thinking about that conversation later that night. My friend was so happy at St. Lawrence because he was so happy to be at college. He would have been just as happy to be anywhere else. I wasn't miserable, but I wasn't fully happy, either. I finally realized that my dissatisfaction had nothing to do with St. Lawrence. I hadn't made the wrong choice of schools, and I didn't need to transfer to somewhere else, because what would be different anywhere else? Nothing – I needed to change my *perspective* on college, not change my choice of college.

I read Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* for the first time while I was writing this thesis. The byline of the title is “Some Instructions on Writing and Life,” and what I found most interesting about the book is that there were times where one could just as

easily apply the advice she offers about writing to living. At other times, the advice she offers about life could be useful to writers.

In Lamott's chapter on plot, she shares this bit of whimsy: "All you (authors) can give us is what life is about from your point of view. You are not going to be able to give us the plans to the submarine. Life is not a submarine. There are no plans."⁴ It is so easy to skip over these profundities in *Bird by Bird* because Lamott's book is so readable and accessible, that you almost don't realize the wisdom. Amidst the humor and self-deprecation, she offers reminders that writing, like life, is not easy, but showing up is half the battle.

I entered St. Lawrence as prepared as I could possibly have been. Academically, I was going to a rigorous school that would push me, but where I would not be buried under unrealistic expectations. Socially, I'd learned how to make and keep great friends (and I'd learned that primarily from the people who would become these friends). Emotionally, I was grounded but eager for a new experience. So what happened? Why was that first semester at SLU so difficult? How had my new friends so easily and quickly adapted to this new environment, when I felt like I was still trying to learn all the rules?

Listening to my friend's wisdom that afternoon, I realized that I didn't want to leave St. Lawrence, I didn't want to go back to high school, and I didn't want to go back home. I was right where I was supposed to be, I just wanted things to be easier. SLU was

⁴ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 55.

a beautiful place, and there was nothing broken about how it operated, at least from my perspective. SLU didn't have to adapt to me, I had to adapt to life at SLU. As prepared as I thought I had been to come to college, the truth was that I didn't realize how hard the transition was going to be. Accepting that truth was difficult, but it was also the start to my path to finding peace and enjoyment. As the days, weeks, and months went on, I fell in love with the school. Nothing was ever perfect, of course, and there were still many times where I felt overwhelmed or lost, but I never lost my newfound perspective that it was up to me to make things better.

Lamott's assertion that "life is not a submarine," and that "there are no plans" serve as a stark reminder that, at least to some extent, none of us truly know what we're doing. Some people fake it better than others, but all people will struggle at some point in their life with finding direction, meaning, and purpose. There is no user's manual to life. Life is not always linear, and more than anything, the expectations that you have do not always align with reality.

The value of what my friend shared that day has served me well since that time. His statement that SLU was the perfect school for him because he simply loved college, and that any college would have been the perfect school for him was profound, because, of course, the inverse was also true. SLU was not the perfect school for me during the first semester of my freshmen year because I wasn't happy at college, and so no school would have been perfect for me, at least not until I could adjust to college life.

I can recall two other distinct times in life when this simple wisdom helped me accept the reality of my situation. The first is when I studied abroad in Spain, and the second was when I started my first "official" professional job after college. In both

instances, I had doubts that I had made the right decision, and that I had chosen the wrong study abroad program, or the wrong job. Whenever I felt these doubts, I called back on my friend's advice. What did I not like about my experiences? Had I truly chosen wrong, or were my expectations simply out of line with my realities?

I remember arriving in Spain, full of confidence in my language abilities. I was convinced that I was already fluent in Spanish, as I'd been studying the language for over eight years, and surely if I'd put that much time in, I simply had to be fluent, right?

Wrong – I remember standing in Barajas airport in Madrid, listening as someone announced which carousel my checked bags would arrive on. The slow and measured voice of the person making the announcement sounded nothing like the far slower and more measured voices my teachers had used in class. I wandered around aimlessly until I finally located my bags. In about five minutes, I had transformed from Mateo Manz, fluent linguist who spoke flawless Spanish and could probably even speak French, too, if the need arose, to little Matty Manz whose catchphrase was about to become “¿repite, por favor?” (“Can you repeat that, please?”).

Yet this time, I had some ammunition in my fight against this isolation and the humbling environment that Spain initially provided me with: I was ready to deal with the hardships because I knew that I wanted to learn the language; I'd done my research, and I knew that I wanted to be in Madrid, that I wanted to be in *this* program in *this* city. It did not necessarily make the rough times easier, because there is very little that is more overwhelming than not being able to communicate with others, but it made the little triumphs more noticeable. Just like in my first few weeks at SLU, there were some wonderful moments scattered in between the longer periods of frustration: I remember

running with the bulls during a local festival in my second week in the country, the elation I felt in avoiding certain death by goring matched only by my happiness that when you're running for your life, you don't actually need to try to carry on a conversation with anyone nearby. You can scream and yell in whatever language you want, and be comforted by the fact that not only is that behavior normal, it's encouraged!

When I was just getting started at SLU, though, I didn't acknowledge those great times, as they were often overshadowed by the difficult moments. Looking back, I can remember them now: the joy of winning the first-year intramural soccer tournament and the nerdy thrill of opening my college textbooks for the first time. When I was in those moments, however, I couldn't seem to see the forest for the trees; the environment I was in quickly overshadowed those joys that I was experiencing.

During my first weeks in Spain, I felt these same feelings creeping in, threatening to drown out the joys and excitement that this new experience was offering me. Yet this time around, I used those joyful moments like building blocks, trying to construct enough stairs so that even if I couldn't get out of the hole I found myself in, if I stood on my tiptoes and jumped, I could just see over the top of the hole. I knew that there was a way out of the hole, and I just had to keep building these stairs. Eventually, of course, I made it, and I experienced one of the most incredible and rewarding years of my life.

Years later, I once again found myself feeling overwhelmed, this time in a professional setting. I had worked at Champlain College for several years, and recently things had begun to change. My boss, whom I had worked for since I began with the college, had been replaced by a different supervisor. He was an internal hire, and I'd worked with him cordially in the past, and he was competent, if perhaps a little brusque.

On his first day, he sat us down and shared that the way our department had operated in the past few years was no longer acceptable, and that he had been brought in to change the direction we were headed, along a “positive trajectory.”

I continued to listen, but he’d already lost me. Change is difficult for me, and always has been, but I came into the meeting with my new supervisor with an open mind. I was eager to hear his strategy for success, and even if I didn’t agree with him, I planned on being willing to try whatever he outlined. Yet instead of offering concrete examples of strategy and a vision for the future, my new supervisor belittled the work that we had done for the last few years. In his efforts to turn the page and start fresh, he essentially alienated those of us that were left, devaluing our efforts. I felt ashamed, as though the positive work I had done prior to his arrival was all for nothing, and I felt angry, because I was proud of that work.

I had enjoyed a lot about my job prior to my new supervisor’s arrival. I had not enjoyed everything, of course, and I cannot imagine that I will ever work in a job where I feel universal happiness. Yet the night that my new supervisor started, I began searching for a new job. I wanted to work somewhere else, and for someone who supported and valued me. I didn’t need to work for someone with whom I agreed on everything, but I wanted to find someone who shared my own values.

That afternoon at SLU, I heard my friend say, “I love it here, but I’d honestly love it anywhere.” That was all it took for me to realize that I needed to change my own perspective and reframe my own college experience. I used that strategy again when I was first starting in my program abroad in Spain; both times, I made tremendously positive changes in my life that I’m incredibly grateful for.

By the end of my time at Champlain College, I didn't need to reframe my view on my job. I had found myself in a situation where I needed to make a change, not in a situation where I needed to approach the problem in a new way. The door had started closing by the time my new supervisor began, and I needed to leave in order to find professional contentment. I made this change by finding a new job, and have not regretted it for even a moment.

Lesson: You will find times in your life when things are bad, when you feel overwhelmed, and where you feel like nothing is ever going to get better. During those times, take a step back, and try to figure out just why you are feeling that way. Are you truly in a situation that is untenable? Are you truly unhappy? Look at the problem from all angles. It might just be that there is a solution, whether that solution be to seek patience or to seek help. If you can figure out the real reason behind why you're feeling overwhelmed, you might be able to find a solution.

And in those times when you are truly unhappy, be bold. Be brave, and make the change. Find a new job. Move. Quit a hobby that doesn't bring you meaning, and that you're only doing because you've always done it. Move on.

CHAPTER 6: THE JOYS OF BEING AN INTROVERT

“The secret to life is to put yourself in the right lighting. For some it’s a Broadway spotlight; for others, a lamplit desk.” – Susan Cain

I remember taking a personality test in college, trying to figure out who I was, what I was good at, and what my strengths were. The results came back indicating that I was most certainly an introvert, and I remember feeling...what, shame? Embarrassment? There was simply no way that I could be an introvert. I was a freaking admissions tour guide, the job on campus that called for only the most outgoing personalities!

“Introvert” seems almost like a dirty word. The word conjures the image of a hulking, un-showered, computer-playing loner who hangs out in his mom’s basement (and sure, I’ve played computer games in my parents’ basement, but my hygiene is generally above average!). Extroverts are the people in the Corona commercials – tanned, fit, and having fun with other people on a beach somewhere, congratulating each other for their dominance of the social spheres they inhabit. Introverts are hermits like Jack Nicholson in “The Shining,” squirreling away somewhere writing a book that gets crazier and crazier; extroverts would rather watch a sports game in a bar with other people than at home, where they can actually hear the commentary.

Because of my impression of introverts, I didn’t like that the assessment had labeled me as one. It didn’t match with how I viewed myself, how I thought I interacted with the world. I loved my friends and family, and loved spending time with them. I am never more alive than when I’m on a soccer field, working with my teammates towards a shared goal. I liked people! I mentally filed the test away, stopping only to remind myself

how little credence I gave to tests of that kind anyway. I chalked it up to being another wasted visit to my Career Services Office at St. Lawrence.

A few years later, I was participating in a professional development event at work, and the issue of introverts and extroverts came up again. The person presenting was talking about changing the narrative around these words. I perked up – was there a path to finding peace and acceptance as an introvert? It was important to remember, the presenter shared, that being an introvert or an extrovert had nothing at all to do with one's ability or even interest in being social. There are plenty of incredibly charming introverts, just as there are plenty of relentlessly awkward extroverts. Being introverted or extroverted only relates to where people find their energy. An introvert gets energy from time spent alone, whereas an extrovert gets energy from being with other people. An extrovert says, "wow, this was a long week. I can't wait to go out on the town to blow off some steam." An introvert says, "wow, this was a long week. I can't wait to go home and unwind with a quiet night in."

The shift was immediate for me. Shamed no longer, I was able to accept myself as a proud introvert. "Look," I wanted to shout (or, rather, quietly share with someone next to me), "I'm not (automatically) awkward just because I'm an introvert! I just like to recharge in a quiet place, maybe with a book or a movie!"

Accepting that I was an introvert also helped me understand why my transition to college seemed so difficult. Growing up, I was always able to unwind and relax in the comfort of my own room. I had solitude there, and if I wanted even more solitude, I could go for a walk in the woods behind my house. I enjoyed the quiet and peacefulness that being alone provided me with. At St. Lawrence, there were always people around;

sharing a room, even with the person who was my best friend at college, could be draining.

I think I would have loved to read Nancy Aronie's *Writing from the Heart* while I was in college. In her chapter entitled "The Winter of my Content: Giving up the Comfort Junkie," Aronie writes about her experience of living alone in a cabin on Martha's Vineyard for a month. She would sit in solitude and write, read, jog by the ocean, and watch the birds feed by her windows. In that solitude, she found comfort.

Aronie strikes me as someone for whom this month might have been especially challenging, as she seems to lean towards the extroverted side of the scale. Her solitude is also extreme, as she separated from her family and friends to experience this time alone. It was also an experience that her privilege, or what she calls her "ivory island tower"⁵, provided for her, which she acknowledges. Yet she offers some insights that are useful to all, not just those who identify as introverted or extroverted: "Maybe there's a compromise in there for you. How about from a month *away* to a few minutes *unavailable*? Sue Benchley, who wrote the beautiful book, *Every Day Sacred*, calls them 'little sabbaths.' Take a little sabbath every day."⁶

I love this thought. The idea of a "little sabbath" seems almost required for me to maintain my own sense of balance. Every day, in this world that seems to reward

⁵ Nancy Aronie, *Writing from the Heart: Tapping the Power of Your Inner Voice* (New York: Hyperion, 1998), 46.

⁶ Aronie, *Writing from the Heart*, 46.

extroverts, a brief pause to take a breath, to be “unavailable,” even if just for a few minutes, allows me time to gather my strength quietly. My parents begin each morning with quiet conversation and coffee on our front porch, watching the sun rise, or, more often, the stars begin to fade as the dark night shifts to pale pink. As reluctant as I am to give my parents credit for a practice that I often derided growing up, I recognize this as their little sabbath. It is their way of welcoming the day calmly, of spending time together before the day gets too busy. The more the world speeds up, the greater importance these moments seem to hold.

In my current job, I have my own office. While my door is almost always open, I take time each day to close the door, to have a few moments to myself. I pause, I breathe, and I sometimes close my eyes and savor the solitude and privacy of those few minutes. This brief time recharges me. I think of it sometimes like an hourglass: I start my day with a full hourglass, and the sand falls to the bottom throughout the day. My little sabbaths allow me, briefly, to turn the hourglass over again, moving some sand back to the top so that I can ensure that I don’t run out before the end of the day.

In Susan Cain’s *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking*, the author explores the benefits of introversion and extroversion. Among other subjects, she explores the Civil Rights movement, and how the decision by Rosa Parks to not give up her seat on the bus in 1955 was more powerful in large part due to her quiet strength. She didn’t need to amplify her personality to make a powerful statement, and in fact, Cain said, with the help of powerful orators like Martin Luther King Jr. at her side,

her quiet strength made a more powerful statement than it would have if she were extroverted.⁷

Reading this book also encouraged me to remember that being introverted or extroverted is not a binary; I'm not one or the other. I lean towards introversion, but I love people and want to spend time with them. As I seek balance in this life, I can encourage myself to embrace my natural proclivity toward introversion. Too much introversion, however, can be unhealthy, so there may be times when I need to embrace the parts of me that are extroverted as well. Cain writes that "The secret to life is to put yourself in the right lighting. For some it's a Broadway spotlight; for others, a lamplit desk."⁸ For me, perhaps, it can be both.

Lesson: Being an introvert is not a weakness, though it may seem that way at times. As you learn about yourself, embrace that which makes you the person that you are. Work on the aspects of yourself that you want to improve, but don't change yourself to try to become someone that you don't truly want to be. Recognize what gives you energy, and give yourself time to take care of yourself. If you're extroverted, embrace it: find the social gatherings that you need to feel energized and motivated. If you're introverted, remember that you don't have to be antisocial; be active, spend time with friends and loved ones, but remember that it's okay to carve out time to be alone.

⁷ Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* (New York: Broadway Books, 2013), 3.

⁸ Cain, *Quiet*, 264.

CHAPTER 7: WORK. LIFE. BALANCE

“There is time and space in your life. Allow it to find you.” – Marietta McCarty

When I first envisioned writing this thesis, my primary objective was to explore balance within the sole context of my personal and professional life. As I wrote, my thoughts expanded to encompass what balance means to me, in general. Yet my job and career remain major parts of my life, and I would be remiss to avoid discussing the idea of work/ life balance, for much of my thinking on balance relates to how I approach my professional and personal life.

In order to understand my own thoughts on work/ life balance, it makes sense to revisit my work history, and explore my journey towards my present day working environment. My own life and work experience, of course, shapes my views on work/ life balance.

I graduated from college in 2008, majoring in Spanish and minoring in Film Studies. While I loved my courses and was happy with my choices of major and minor, neither subject appealed much to me as a career, and I often found myself explaining to well-intentioned family members that no, I didn't want to be a Spanish teacher; no, I didn't want to be a translator (is that even an actual job, I asked myself?); after those two suggested career paths, few people had any legitimate suggestions about what I could actually do for a career.

I knew that I both enjoyed and was good at my work as an admissions tour guide. I began to seek out work in a college or university, but it wasn't until a full year after graduation that I finally found work as an entry level employee at a college. During that year, I found several temporary jobs. For about 3 months, I put “Made in China” stickers

on boxes containing hot water heaters. I expected that the job would last only about a month and a half, but it turned out – after that month and a half of putting stickers on these boxes – that my fresh-out-of-prison coworker and I had been instructed to put stickers on the wrong part of the boxes. Thankfully, we were able to print off more stickers, and our work continued for another month and a half.

I next worked for a few months at a mortgage lender, clocking in promptly at 8 AM and leaving everyday promptly at 4:30 (with 30 minutes exactly for lunch). I would have happily worked a few hours of overtime each week, as the extra money would have been great, but the company I worked for wouldn't allow it.

Finally I landed a job at Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont, and like many other entry-level positions, I learned that the “other duties as assigned” part of my job description should have been listed first, as I spent most of my time on those “other duties.”

I was eager to make my mark, to impress my boss, and to show to myself and to others that I was a hard worker. After four years of college and one of inconsistent temporary jobs, I was delighted to be a productive member of society.

As the weeks turned into months, and the months into years, I found that my increased responsibilities never replaced my old tasks. I did whatever my boss asked me to do, but I never stopped doing all of the other duties that were also my responsibility. At a time when I wanted to be spending more time at home (I'd just gotten married, and my wife and I had recently gotten a puppy), I found myself spending more and more time at work.

And yet I was still proud of my advancement. I'd earned a promotion, which included a nominal raise and an extra week of vacation (I was far more excited about the vacation than I was about the salary increase). Yet I still felt unsettled. The more time I spent at work, the greater my recognition was at my workplace, but the less time I spent doing the simple things that made me most happy: walking in the woods; reading a book on my back porch, listening to birds as the sun set; taking my dog to a secret swimming hole that few other people knew about; going to the movies. Meanwhile, the employees at the college who were moving up the ladder or earning leadership positions were putting in 50-60 hour weeks and yet seemed energetic and enthusiastic whenever I saw them. It exhausted me just watching them work.

I received an email from my boss one night, thanking me for the hard work that I'd been putting in recently. I saw the email first thing in the morning when I arrived at work, and noticed that my boss had sent it at 11:47 the previous evening. My boss had arrived at work before I had that day, and was still firing off emails as it approached midnight. The kind words and recognition moved me, of course, but as I read the email, I couldn't help but wonder: is this what it means to be a leader at a college or university? Do I have to put in 12 or 13 hour days every day?

Jang and Nash capture the fundamental moral and ethical dilemma that I was facing – and that I still face – in *Teaching College Students How to Solve Real-Life Moral Dilemmas*: “Ethical dilemmas tend to occur whenever students’ personal moral beliefs come into conflict with their organization’s implicit or explicit ethical expectations and

practices”⁹. I would argue that in the cases of the full-time jobs that I’ve had, it’s not just the implicit or explicit ethical expectations and practices of organizations that I conflict with, but with society’s expectations as well.

I talk about work with my family and friends regularly. I ask them about their job satisfaction, and many people whom I speak with express that they don’t love their job, but that they are driven to work hard so that they’ll stay employed (at least) and get a promotion or raise (at most).

The expectations in a variety of different fields – education, engineering, business – are often that employees should be working longer hours, and that the only way to get ahead is to outwork your competition – that is to say, to work more than your coworkers.

In my current role as an Academic Advisor for International Students at the University of Vermont, I generally enjoy and am proud of the work that I do. What I struggle with is the amount of time I spend at work. The reality for me, and for most working people, is that I spend most of my daytime hours at work, and I am only able to spend a relatively small amount of time at home, doing things that I love, that truly bring me meaning.

My college roommate is self-employed. He worked for a few years in advertisement doing pay-for-click ads on larger websites, and after a few years of working for a company, he realized that he could do the same work on his own, make a similar amount of money, and set his own hours. He uses those hours now to travel (he

⁹ Robert J. Nash and Jennifer J.J. Jang, *Teaching College Students How to Solve Real-Life Moral Dilemmas* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 116.

went to the soccer World Cup in Brazil in 2014, and invited me, but due to my work schedule, I couldn't go). He lives a lifestyle now that allows him to set his own hours, spend time doing what he wants to be doing, and work when he wants to.

Yet his life is not the one that I want. He is nomadic, spending a few months in one city before moving to another. While there are things that I respect greatly about his lifestyle, there are also things that I believe he's missing out on: stability, for one. I prefer to set down roots; I have a house in Vermont, and envision living here for a long time. I respect the freedom that his lifestyle allows him to have, yet I often wonder what this lifestyle prevents him from achieving: does he miss stability? Does he sometimes long for routine, for the comforts of knowing that the workday starts at 8 AM (almost) every day? Or do I wonder about this only because I know that it is those very things that I would miss if I chose his lifestyle?

Occasionally, I treat myself to a "mental health day." Every so often, during a time when work is relatively slow, and when my absence would not force undue strain upon my colleagues, I call in sick. Although I feel guilty almost every time I do this, I try to stay present: I acknowledge my guilty feelings, and I sit with them, allowing myself an opportunity to be aware of them. And while the guilty feelings stick with me all day, I also give myself permission to practice self-care. I golf, or I hike, or I sit inside and read, or I take my dog swimming. And I return to work, recharged, and almost always glad that I took the day to take care of myself. I was heartened to read the following suggestion by Stacey Miller, a senior university administrator, who in her article "Easier Said Than Done: Practicing Self-Care and Health and Wellness in Higher Education and Student Affairs," suggested that the profession of student affairs should consider adopting a

policy already regularly enforced in the counseling profession: encouraging, and in some cases, requiring staff to take mental health days. By encouraging leadership to recommend these days, Miller says, professionals can avoid the guilt and use the time to exercise, read, or sleep, all of which improve mental health and revitalize employees¹⁰.

Why is time so valuable in my life? Does it mean that I'm lazy or don't want to work? Viray and Nash offer this suggestion:

Constructivists tend to ask: what meaning lies *inside* of you, and how can you best narrate it? Objectivists ask: What meaning lies *outside* of you, and how can you best prove it? In reaction to this overly facile dichotomy, though, we believe that at some level we are all both constructivists and objectivists. So in a sense, we are all postmodern constructivists and objectivists, often at the same time.¹¹

In part, I'm writing this to try to figure out how I truly feel about my work life. I'm constructing this narrative to determine what meaning my work has for me. Do I want to stop working entirely? Of course not; I enjoy my job, I like the challenge of working with international students, and I feel like I make a difference in their lives. Do I want to become self-employed and find a way to work on my own, to set my own hours, to be my own boss? The answer, again, is probably not; at least at this point in my life, my coworkers energize me. I enjoy bantering with colleagues, collaborating on tasks, and asking for help when I need it. I like a team atmosphere. And yet, objectively, I also understand how the game works. Who gets promoted? Who gets the best raises?

¹⁰ Stacey A. Miller, "Easier Said Than Done: Practicing Self-Care and Health and Wellness in Higher Education and Student Affairs," *The Vermont Connection* 37 (2016): 142.

¹¹ Robert J. Nash and Sydnee Viray. *Our Stories Matter* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 5.

Generally, it is the folks who work hardest, who put in the longer hours, and, ultimately, who put work first and everything else second.

I often share my thoughts on work/ life balance with friends and coworkers. Many share my views, but, like me, don't always know a solution. In clarifying my own thoughts throughout this thesis, I hope to make some points that can be universalizable.

Mary Pipher encourages writers to realize that their words matter; that through writing, they can make change, and even if it's only a small change, it has meaning. She refers multiple times through her book, *Writing to Make Meaning*, to a wonderful quote from James Baldwin: "The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way...people look at reality, you can change it"¹². Stacey Miller's article about self-care in higher education made me feel like I didn't need to feel guilty about my own views on work/ life balance; here was an upper level university administrator who was echoing my own feelings. Employees wanting time away from work to practice self-care, in whatever way makes sense for them, is not the same thing as not wanting to work. I want to work, but I don't want it to be the thing in my life that I derive the most meaning from. My approach to work is a part of my identity, it is not the only thing that identifies me. This is the idea that Nash and Viray are driving at in their constructivist/ objectivist comment in *Our Stories Matter*: by finding the meaning that lies within yourself, you have the ability to share that meaning with others in an objective way, allowing them to construct their own meaning in the way that they view the world.

¹² Mary Pipher. *Writing to Change the World* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006), 24.

By finding meaning and sharing it with others, writers can invite readers can find their own meaning.

This concept is not new, of course, and is certainly not limited to personal narratives; I've found meaning in my own life by reading novels and watching films that are entirely fictional and that don't necessarily echo the authors' or directors' own life experiences (lately, authors like Lev Grossman and Patrick Rothfuss have shifted how I view the world; films I've watched recently like *Manchester by the Sea* and *Ex Machina* have also allowed me to view the world differently). Mary Pipher might suggest that through viewing the world in a different way, we will also view ourselves in a different way.

Compare the following passages, the first from *Writing to Change the World* and the second from *Our Stories Matter*:

In our great postmodern supermarket of ideas, good writers point readers toward meaning¹³.

We tell our students that their little squeaks, like ours, have the power to carry equal weight with the cosmos's music.... Their individual and group stories will teach, but only if they have the courage to put them into words and to narrate them with pride and enthusiasm¹⁴.

Both passages point to a common truth – the tales that authors tell give meaning to others. Pipher encourages these tales, but asks that writers go beyond: point your

¹³ Pipher, *Writing to Change the World*, 96

¹⁴ Nash and Viray, *Our Stories Matter*, 48

readers towards your meaning. This is the universalizability that Nash and Viray encourage students to seek: through the meaning you uncover in your own stories, you provide meaning to others.

So as I write about my own relationship to work, I invite myself to explore my own feelings about that relationship, and to articulate to myself how I truly feel. If I can do that successfully – and I’m not assuming that I necessarily can, for my like all relationships, it is complex and layered – then through the meaning that I provide for myself, perhaps others can also find meaning in their own lives.

I attended a conference for academic advisors recently, and I found myself drawn to a session that focused on ways to prevent professional burnout. The session talked about maintaining a healthy work/life balance and offered suggestions towards practicing healthy time management skills. Unsurprisingly, this was one of the better attended sessions of the conference – apparently we were all seeking advice on how to maintain a positive relationship with our work. Perhaps even less surprisingly, attendees of the session were eager to share their own personal work war stories.

One of the ideas that the presenters touched upon was the common practices of “lazy shaming” and “busy affirming.” Lazy shaming, they explained, occurs when one coworker calls out another coworker for leaving from work on time (“You’re leaving already?”), or uses a lunch hour to exercise (“Good for you. I wish I had time to do that.”), etc.

Busy affirming is a closely related concept, and I see more of this in my own workplace than lazy shaming. Busy affirming happens when someone completes a

project that required a great deal of effort and, usually, time. “Wow, you’re a superman!” is often heard when someone stays late in order to finish a project.

My problem with busy affirming is that it can so closely resemble gratitude and recognition. It’s a microaggression of workplace discontent. It is incredibly validating to be recognized for a job well done, and when that validation comes after work that was particularly time-consuming or demanding, it feels all the better. Yet there’s quite a difference between “Great work! This kind of project will be few and far between,” and “Great work! Now we need you to get started on all those other projects that you weren’t able to be working on while you did all this good work.” Or, even worse, “Great work! Now that you’ve been able to do superhuman work on this project, I will come to expect the same level of work on all of your subsequent projects.”

The presentation left me satisfied, surrounded by other professionals, who, like me, wanted to explore this idea of balance in their working and professional lives. Yet the phrase “work/life balance” means different things to different people. A friend of mine who works in a leadership role at a university regularly works between 50-60 hours per week. He tells me that he is often late for work, and regularly takes a long lunch to run errands, go to appointments, or exercise. Sometimes he leaves for the day at noon. For him, work/ life balance means that he can justify taking a long lunch because he is putting in a lot of hours on the back end. If he works until 7 PM most days, who really cares if he took an extra half hour at lunch?

He also regularly checks and responds to email on the weekends. I believe that when you respond to emails at all times of day and night, every day, you set an unrealistic expectation, not just for yourself, but, if you’re a boss, potentially for your

supervisees. If your colleagues see your boss as always accessible, it's not a far leap to expect that the rest of the department should be constantly accessible as well.

Another friend of mine is an engineer, and has a similar attitude towards work/life balance. This friend has a camp in one of the more beautiful and remote parts of Vermont. It's relatively close by for me and for him, and he and I and many other friends spend time there during the summer swimming, waterskiing, playing bocce, and enjoying root beer floats on the dock; it's a wonderfully peaceful and relaxing place, and I know that it's one of his favorite places in the world. Mine too, come to think of it.

Last summer my wife and I were at the camp with my friend and his fiancée. It was a Saturday afternoon, and his phone rang. Cell phone service is a bit sketchy at the camp, so he ran outside. Almost two hours later, he returned, looking stressed. Something at work had gone wrong, he explained, and he would have to go into work early the next morning to help fix the problem. For the rest of the evening, he was distracted, his mind clearly focused on the problem at work.

For these friends, work/life balance basically means that work never stops. Part of this is company culture, of course, where employees need to follow the company's expectations. Yet for my friends, work can come and go at any time, but they're essentially always on the clock. They justify this philosophy by explaining that they can take longer lunches, or show up to work late, or leave early (something that neither of them do). Their idea of balance is my idea of work addiction.

My general approach to work/life balance is that when I'm at work, I should be doing work, and when I'm not at work, I should not be doing work. It's a simple enough concept, but I've found and seen that it's not always a simple practice.

I need time away from work to recharge, and if I'm constantly working (even if it's just checking email), I'm not giving myself the opportunity to do that. As an Academic Advisor, I work with students who are often in varying stages of panic. Students come to my office to talk about academic crises, of course, but I often meet with students dealing with mental health issues, sexual assaults, abuse, addiction, and financial stresses. The conversations that I have with students can be intense, and I use my time away from work to unwind, so that when I come back to work, I can be fully present in those conversations.

The reverse of this is also true, and perhaps even more important to me – when I'm at home, I want to be fully present with my family and friends. I want to be able to spend my time with the people I love most without them feeling like they're being shortchanged. I don't want them to feel sidelined because something at work is distracting me.

Finally, I try to adhere to this philosophy not just for the students I work with, and not just the family and friends whom I love, but for myself. I'm happier when I give myself fully to activities, whatever those activities are. I'm a terrible multi-tasker, and if I'm constantly on the computer or on a phone checking email, then I'm not being present and appreciating the moment. I make my work email difficult to access on my phone, thus preventing me from using convenience as an excuse to check it.

This focus on putting my wants and needs first ties in well with Nash and Jang's discussion of egoism:

Ethical egoism...teaches that each of us ought/should do what advances our best interests, and this ought/should is morally obligatory. Why? Because almost everything that we choose to do is motivated by a desire to fulfill the needs of the

self. . . . We have met many quarterlifers who are egoistic dualists, and they readily acknowledge this: They choose to satisfy their needs first, but sometimes their choice is to put the needs of significant others (or even strangers' needs) before theirs for whatever reason.¹⁵

I'm happy to say that I'm at least partly a proud egoist. My life is better when I give more fully to one task than when I spread myself thin trying to accomplish many tasks at once. If I ought to be doing one task, and doing it well, then that is where my focus should be, whether that task is preparing a presentation at work or taking my dog for a walk. If I'm on my phone checking email, then I don't get the full experience of the walk, or the necessary recharging time that it brings me. Likewise, if my boss gives me a task that is a priority at work, I'm satisfying my needs by putting the needs of my boss (or the college I work for) first.

Norman Rosenthal touches on this idea of balance in his accessible and straightforward book, *The Gift of Adversity*. He relates a story about an interaction that he had with his father on a Sunday evening, when he was dreading returning to school the next day. His father explains that Norman was feeling the "Sunday-evening blues," but that by the next morning, once the day had begun, everything would be back to normal.

His lesson – and my year in the military – have stood in good stead with regard to not "borrowing trouble" and worrying unnecessarily – a piece of wisdom beautifully expressed in the book of Matthew (6:34): *Be therefore not anxious for the morrow: for the morrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.*¹⁶

¹⁵ Nash and Jang, *Teaching College Students*, 67

¹⁶ Norman Rosenthal, *The Gift of Adversity* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/ Penguin, 2013), 138-139

This is, of course, most excellent advice. As wonderful as anticipation of something that I look forward to can be, dread of something that I'm not looking forward to can be equally powerful. There is peace and acceptance in living in the moment, in cultivating the here and now, and giving oneself fully to an experience. It is simply impossible to do this if you're constantly checking your email.

Another story from *The Gift of Adversity* also warrants mention. Early in Rosenthal's career, when he was serving in the South African military, he, his wife, and his young son found themselves with a relatively large amount of free time. After finishing work for the day, he and his family would visit with friends, go out to eat, and generally spend time together as a family. He says "It was the first time in years that I'd had so little work to do.... The Italians have the expression *il dolce farniente* – the sweetness of doing nothing"¹⁷.

I loved that passage from Rosenthal, because he captured in that short paragraph the way in which I would describe work/life balance. *Il dolce farniente* is not a celebration of laziness or sloth; rather, it's a celebration of time, time that can be spent in the manner of one's own choosing. It's an opportunity to do and appreciate the things that a restriction of free time does not allow. It's something that I could not fully enjoy if half of my attention was somewhere else.

Someone asked me recently about my professional future, and I responded that the best form of currency I have available to me is time. I enjoy my work – and I work

¹⁷ Rosenthal, *The Gift of Adversity*, 130

hard – but I’m not eager to do it for 50 or 60 hours per week. As much as I feel fulfilled by my job, I also feel fulfilled by my life outside of my job. I was meeting with an upper-level administrator at UVM, a person with whom I have an excellent relationship. She shared that she spends about 6-7 hours most weekend days working (in addition to the long days that she puts in Monday through Friday). As I contemplate “moving up” in higher education, I struggle with the concept that in order to do so, I have to accordingly sacrifice a great deal of personal freedom and time. When I hit five years of work at UVM, I’ll earn an additional five days of vacation, which is worth more to me than the small raises I earn year to year. Yet if I move to a leadership role, will I even be able to use those days? Or will I be too busy to take time off work? What do I want to do with my career?

As I raise these questions and explore my own views on work/ life balance, I often find myself wondering how I came to these views. Is it possible that I’m just lazy? That my views on work/life balance reflect nothing more than a desire to sit at home and not ever do work? In *Writing to Change the World*, Mary Pipher suggests that people create “I Am From” poems to explore their own identity. These poems encourage writers to think about who and what shaped who they are today. By knowing where one comes from, perhaps it’s easier to figure out where one goes.

Below, I offer my own “I Am From” poem. Instead of focusing on my life as a whole, I’ve narrowed the focus to my work life:

*I am from Grandmother and Granddaddy, Grandma and Grandpa, Mom, and Dad.
I am from David and Sarah.
I am from Cub Scouts, Soccer, and Baseball.
I am a Chitty’s Bottle Boy, from less than minimum wage and from the boss I never met.*

I am from job applications denied at the movie theater to applications accepted as a dishwasher.

I am from Waterworks and Chef's Corner.

I am from Adventure Camp at Smuggler's Notch.

I am from Admissions. "What sort of major are you interested in? Not sure? Great, you'll be just like me!"

I am from Fundación Atlético de Madrid, from learning the difference between cojones and cajones.

I am from the Study Abroad office. Let's get you to Spain!

I am from the box factory. "Do you smoke?" "Nope." "You will!"

I am from one day at UBS, from three at DEW, and from 6 months at Universal Mortgage.

I am from Champlain College, I say proudly.

I am from Champlain College, I say with a few reservations.

I am from UVM, gratified to welcome international students proudly, especially now.

I will be from ...?

Writing this poem was an interesting exercise, as it brought up memories that I hadn't thought about it years. My grandparents were an obvious place to start, as I had always respected them – especially my dad's dad – for their hard work. My parents and siblings, who are some of the hardest working people I've ever met, also influenced who I am in my work life. My family set the bar very high in terms of integrity of work, and I can only say that I've modeled much of my personal work ethic around their values.

Cub Scouts, soccer, and baseball taught me from a young age the value of teamwork and responsibility. I credit these groups not just for helping me form life-long friendships, but also for instilling a sense of pride from a job well done. Yet it's hard to think of these activities without also thinking of the people who volunteered their time to coach and lead these activities. These were people who directed their full attentions to the task at hand, providing the opportunity for my friends and me to share in these experiences.

My first job was as a bottle boy, counting bottles for redemption. It was a terrible, almost criminally low-paying job, and I never once met my boss. A friend of mine hired me, and his training consisted of playing cards in the back of the store (to be fair, it was not a job that required a good deal of training). I reminisce with a smile about the job now, but it was truly as unpleasant a job as I could imagine. The turning point in this brief employment was when a couple of high school classmates of mine, sporting thick hangovers, handed me a bag of Bud Light cans that were covered in what appeared to be vomit and other bodily fluids. They took their \$1.85 in bottle redemption, and with that, I decided that I was ready to explore new job opportunities. I learned from this experience that I didn't need to stay at a job that made me truly unhappy.

I moved to washing dishes, and with all sincerity, I've rarely been so pleased with a job. I washed dishes at two different restaurants, and had great experiences at both. I enjoyed the lively atmosphere that comes from working in a kitchen, and I had a good time getting to know my coworkers. I also felt valued – if you've ever worked in a restaurant kitchen, you'll know that if your dishwasher is slow, then everyone is slow. I knew that I didn't want to work in a restaurant for a career, but as a high school and then college job, it was perfect. My professional pride was developing.

My other summer job was working as a camp counselor at Smuggler's Notch. I loved being outside, but I felt too much responsibility (what if I lost one of my campers!) and not enough control in planning my days. Instead of being able to plan or lead a camp group the way that I wanted to, my bosses gave me rigid instructions that I had to adhere to. Still, the experience was a positive one overall, but it also helped me realize that I didn't want to be a classroom teacher.

In college, I began to think about what it would mean to find a career, not just a job. I was hired in my freshman year as a Tour Guide, and it was only later, as a senior, when I was on the committee to hire new guides, that I realized how fortunate I was to have landed the position. Only about a quarter of the people who applied to be tour guides were hired, and I had been one of those lucky enough to be selected. I grew into the position, and became a valuable part of the admissions staff, but I was naïve to how strongly the job would help prepare me for my future career in higher education.

I also was fortunate to land an internship while studying abroad in Spain. I worked for Fundación Atlético de Madrid, the community service foundation of the professional soccer team. I went to work every day in the Estadio Vicente Calderón, sitting behind the front desk. I filed and organized, ran errands, greeted clients, and stuffed envelopes. Frankly, I could have been happy cleaning the bathrooms. I love soccer, and having the opportunity to go to work in a soccer stadium everyday was amazing. I met some of the best soccer players in the world, was able to attend games for free, and made my friends back home quite jealous. I also developed some excellent relationships, and got comfortable enough that they were able to joke with me about my Spanish skills. I had been using the word “cojones” (slang for male genitalia) instead of the word “cajones” (“drawers”) when asking where to file some documents, and they informed me, using a variety of questionably appropriate hand gestures, the difference between the two. It was, needless to say, a memorable day at the office.

When I returned to campus, I was able to share my love of studying abroad by working in the study abroad office. For the first time, I began to think of pursuing something like this as a career. I led pre-orientation meetings, served on selection

committees, and offered information sessions on my own experience abroad. The opportunity to share an experience with others that I was so enthusiastic about was a wonderful gift, and I likely would have done it as a volunteer experience if they'd asked. What I didn't realize, at the time, was that I would be leading meetings and information sessions in a very similar fashion only a few years down the road in my work at Champlain College and again at UVM.

Graduation came, and with it, an unrealistic expectation about finding a job. St. Lawrence was a great school, I'd done well academically, had been very involved in a diverse array of extracurricular activities, and was articulate. Surely people would be lining up to hire me! This view was compounded by our Career Services staff, which offered wonderful statistics about the percentages of graduates who find work within a year of graduation, but little practical help in actually finding that work (for example, one of the most memorable events the Career Services office put on in my senior year was the "etiquette dinner," where they covered all the ins and outs of dining in a professional setting. Though I enjoyed a particularly tasty meal, I have not yet had a professional dinner wherein I used any of the lessons that I learned at that event).

As I've mentioned, it took me 15 months following graduation to land a permanent full-time position. For a new college graduate, the wait was interminable. I spent time at the library, as my girlfriend and I lived in an apartment with no internet, so I'd walk to the public library to use their free wi-fi to apply for jobs, most of which I wasn't truly interested in. I was thrilled to land a temp position putting "Made in China" stickers on boxes, which I've written about above. My "I Am From" poem touches on the question that I was asked several times: "Do you smoke?" My answer was always the

same: “Nope.” “You will,” they always replied. I’m proud to say that their predictions never came true. Several other temp jobs came and went, which paid the bills but did little else.

Finally, I landed at Champlain College, and for most of my time employed there, I had a wonderful experience. I had a supportive boss eager to help my professional development, but more importantly, eager to support me as a person. I was proud to work for the school, and I felt like my work mattered and made a difference. It was an ideal first job.

The culture shifted, though, throughout my time at Champlain, and by the end, I was actively looking for a new position. Eventually I found one that aligned with my own interests, and I was delighted to move to UVM and begin advising international students. In a way, I’d been preparing for this position since I had my own international experience in Spain. Though I can’t truly grasp the bravery that most of my students show every day in their decision to move their entire life from one country – and culture – to our own, my own small international experience at least lets me see the edges of it. I can empathize with, if not fully comprehend, their experience. Rosenthal notes that “It’s important to realize...that we don’t have to experience exactly the same type of suffering as another person to feel empathy and reach out to help”¹⁸. Indeed, while my own study abroad experience was guided by a Program Director who held a number of students’ hands (mine included, at times), I still found it incredibly valuable. When I see students come to

¹⁸ Rosenthal, *The Gift of Adversity*, 81

UVM who don't have the type of handholding that I had, I value their courage even more.

Writing this poem made me think about the idea of job versus career versus vocation. The jobs that I held growing up, and the jobs that I held as a temp were just that: jobs. They provided me with money that I could use for things that brought me meaning, but the jobs themselves held little meaning for me. Whether I enjoyed the job (such as when I was washing dishes) or hated the job (hello, bottle boy!), they were superficial.

Career-related jobs were those that set me on the path to finding my vocation, or my calling. I consider these type of jobs to be stepping stones, jobs that allowed me to work towards finding a job that I could love. Working as a tour guide and in the Study Abroad office led me to a job at Champlain, which led me to my job at UVM. They allowed me to progress toward the work that I truly wanted to be doing.

Even now, I don't believe I've found my vocation – my calling – and I'm not entirely convinced that a vocation is truly an attainable goal in my life, but *searching* for a vocation is a reasonable and quite realistic goal. A few years ago, I read the book *The Once and Future King*. The book tells the story of a young King Arthur, and his knights of the round table. One of the characters, Sir Pellinore, is on a lifelong hunt for the Questing Beast, a mythical creature that would earn someone great renown if they were to catch it. At one point in the story, after many years of searching and hunting, Pellinore finds and catches the Questing Beast. With his life's work now complete, he loses his purpose in living. He releases the beast, but finds it impossible to move on with his life. The beast, too, suffers, having no one left to try to find it. In Quixotian style, Pellinore

decides that the only way to reclaim his sense of self is by starting the hunt again. At last, man and beast are content, their purposes – their meanings – are reestablished and the natural order continues.

For me, a vocation is my Questing Beast. At this point in my life, I find satisfaction in seeking a vocation, not in finding one. I love working with international students, and I would not be surprised to reflect, in 30 or 40 years, that I wound up working with international students in one way or another for my entire career. Nor would I be surprised to discover that I changed paths completely, moving my career in a new and entirely unexpected direction. My quest for meaning in my professional life is an ongoing one. My thoughts return often to the epigraph with which I began this chapter. Channeling the wisdom of a variety of philosophers, Marietta McCarty sums up my own views on work/ life balance: “There is time and space in your life. Allow it to find you.”¹⁹

Lesson: you get to decide what “work/life balance” means to you. For some, the balance represents seeking financial independence, at whatever cost that may require. For others, time is valued above money. The key is to discover what is important to you, and to work hard to get it.

¹⁹ Marietta McCarty, *How Philosophy Can Save Your Life* (New York: The Penguin Group, 2009), 243

CHAPTER EIGHT: FAMILY

"Those burdens are what make medicine holy and wholly impossible: in taking up another's cross, one must sometimes get crushed by the weight" – Paul Kalanithi

My wife Rachel's mother, Dayle, was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer in fall of 2007 when Rachel and I were seniors in college. We had been together since the end of our first year at St. Lawrence, and we headed back to Vermont during Thanksgiving break to be with her while she underwent a mastectomy. That Thanksgiving was the first of several holidays that we spent in the hospital while Dayle fought breast cancer.

The doctors let us know that they expected the surgery to take about an hour and a half. The three of us (Rachel, her dad Ken, and myself) spent the time in the waiting room, fidgeting, aimlessly flipping through old magazines, and pacing. Three hours after the surgery began, the surgeon finally arrived to let us know that he had completed the operation. He let us see Dayle briefly, who was still unconscious from the anesthesia, and then we followed him into his office to debrief.

They had done their best to remove as much of the cancer as possible, but he suspected that he had not been able to get everything. Because of the advanced nature of the cancer, he and Dayle's oncologist explained, there would be no cure, no remission. She would never again be cancer free, but with treatment, she could still expect to live for a few years.

An aggressive treatment plan of radiation and hormone therapy was scheduled. The doctors said that they would only explore chemotherapy, which I had always thought was the go-to approach for people with cancer, if all of the other treatments had failed.

For a few years, for far longer than Rachel or I had expected, Dayle lived in relative comfort. She had regular meetings with her oncologist, and while there were a few scares that seemed terrifying at the time, looking back now, they seem rather mild. Our naiveté is apparent only in retrospect. Whenever we heard her mention that her tumor marker numbers had gone up, we became convinced that the end was near, that she was surely dying. In those days, the bad days seemed terrible, but as we look back, we hadn't yet learned what bad days really were. Dayle was dying, of course, and had been ever since she was diagnosed, but she was living, too. Her zest for life dwarfed her fear of dying, and she made sure that we knew it. One summer, a few years after Dayle was diagnosed, she invited Rachel and I on weekend trip to a resort in New Hampshire organized by her work. We took an excursion to a network of caves, and a few of these caves required people to climb on their hands and knees in order to make it through. Most people walked around this cave, but Rachel and I took the adventurous route, finally making it through, soaked and covered in mud and grime. Upon exiting, we looked around, expecting to see Dayle, but there was no sign of her. We turned around and looked back inside the cave, and sure enough, there she was, giggling and swearing, crawling on her hands and knees. We shook our heads, but it was clear that a little thing like cancer wasn't about to stop her from doing anything she wanted to do.

We were certain that she would not be alive when we got engaged, but there she was, taking us out to dinner to celebrate. Surely, then, she would have passed away before our wedding, but no, of course she was there to give Rachel and I a hug after we said our vows. I danced with her while Rachel danced with my dad during our reception.

I truly believe that she willed herself to stay alive longer than was expected, so that she could witness these milestones.

Whenever she became sick, she always bounced back and rallied. Her oncologist was nimble and quick to adapt, using her symptoms as well as her blood tests to prescribe alternate treatment methods. Dayle participated in a number of cutting-edge studies that prolonged her life, and the information that doctors gathered from how she responded to these treatments undoubtedly served to prolong the lives of others as well. By summer of 2015, she had surpassed our own private individual estimates of how long she had to live. Her cancer had spread to her bones, her blood, her liver, and her brain, but she was the same person that I had known since I met her in 2005. She moved slower, her feet were numb from neuropathy, and she often grimaced from the pain, but aside from that, you wouldn't know she was suffering from cancer.

Finally, things started to get bad. In fall of 2015, she started to get weaker, and her tumor marker numbers and blood work all indicated that the cancer had begun to spread more rapidly. The hormone and radiation therapy had failed, and she and her oncologist decided it was time to begin chemotherapy.

From my perspective, the only positive thing about chemotherapy was that it extended her life. It gave her the chance to celebrate another Christmas, to enjoy Rachel's birthday, to travel to visit family and friends. But it constantly reminded me of unicorn blood from Harry Potter. In the books, by JK Rowling, someone could drink unicorn blood if they were on the verge of death, but doing so comes at a price: "The blood of the unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible

price... you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips.”²⁰

From the moment she started chemo, she was a shadow of her previous self. She was sick from virtually fall of 2015 until the end of her life in March 2017; she slept more than ever, her energy was completely sapped, and eating, which had been a lifelong joy, became a chore that she completed only to make her husband and daughter happy.

In late 2015, Dayle went into the hospital with massive liver failure. Rachel and I were sure that she had finally succumbed to her disease. We prepared ourselves for the inevitable.

Remarkably, she recovered, slowly, and made her way out of the hospital and back home. Between the first of the year, 2016, and when she died in 2017, Dayle would go back to the hospital 9 times, staying anywhere from a day to a couple of weeks.

When you hear about cancer, you know that treatment is hell. You know that cancer treatments often turn healthy-looking people into corpse-like beings who serve as a living reminder that death is right around the corner. You learn that the disease is treatable but has no cure, that remission can be temporary, and that almost everyone knows someone personally affected by it.

You also come to learn that when someone you love is dying from cancer, every time your cell phone rings, you assume that you're getting a call telling you that your loved one is back in the hospital. People don't tell you that activities like going out to

²⁰ JK Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York: Scholastic Press, 1998), 258

dinner, so often a source of comfort, turn into an update of someone's medical situation. They don't tell you that avoidance and denial can be powerful, useful tools for self-care, that it is sometimes best to stay home and watch a movie instead of looking your loved one in the eyes and seeing how much pain she's in. They don't tell you that at the end, you pray for that person to die, to relieve the pain and suffering that everyone is going through.

In *When Breath Becomes Air*, author Paul Kalanithi hauntingly recounts his own self-diagnosis of cancer. As a doctor himself, he recognized firsthand the sort of challenges one undergoes in caring for a loved one. "Those burdens are what make medicine holy and wholly impossible: in taking up another's cross, one must sometimes get crushed by the weight"²¹. I read this most of this book while Dayle in her last few days of life, and some of the passages, like the one above, struck unsettlingly close to home. Because of the love that we felt for Dayle, and the love that she had for us, her burden was also ours, and it was, at many times, unbearable.

This thesis is about finding balance, and I think that the intimate experience of seeing a loved one go through a terminal illness shaped many of my current feelings about balance. As an only child, Rachel bore the brunt of the care that family members so often provide for dying loved ones. The emotional challenges, medicinal information and dosages, and the trips to the hospital prevented us from having any sort of balance. I'm amazed at how well we were able to live our lives as Dayle's health was deteriorating,

²¹ Paul Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air* (New York: Random House, 2016), 98.

emotionally, we were ragged. Even as we realized these challenges, we couldn't find a way to escape the "crushing weight," as Kalanithi calls it.

We had been saving for a vacation for a few years, and in the fall of 2016, we finally decided to book a trip to Jamaica. We were seeking a mindless beach vacation where we could take a break from real life – a "little sabbath." We'd started and stopped our planning for the trip several times, but finally decided that this was a trip that we wanted – perhaps even needed – regardless of timing. We booked a six-day trip for the beginning of March, and made sure to purchase the travel insurance in case we needed to cancel last-minute.

We were scheduled to leave on a Monday and return on the following Saturday. On the Friday before we left, Dayle went into the hospital with severe liver pain. She knew how excited we were for the trip, however, and willed herself to leave the hospital and return home, doing her best to convince us that she was fine, that there was no need to worry. She and Rachel got pedicures on Sunday, despite the very clear discomfort that Dayle was in. They each excitedly wiggled their blue toenails at me when they got back from the pedicure.

On Monday, we awoke at 3 AM to catch our plane. Rachel checked her Facebook before we got into our car to get to the airplane, and saw that her mom had gone back into the hospital only a few hours after she and Rachel had done their pedicures. It was an interesting situation: we knew that Dayle didn't call us because she knew that we would consider cancelling our trip but she still wanted us to know, because she had put it on Facebook. It was one of the many games that get played when family members are trying to protect each other and try to reach out for help.

We made the decision at 3 AM that morning to continue with our trip to Jamaica, perhaps feeling even more intensely the need to avoid the real world for a little while. We also knew that Dayle was not in urgent condition, and that if anything truly bad happened, they could email us and we could come home before Saturday.

Despite the great food, the peaceful atmosphere, and the frozen drinks we sipped while listening to the waves crash on a white sand beach, we generally spent our time worrying about what was happening back home. Our goal of escaping the realities of home didn't come to fruition, and we returned to Vermont as quickly as we could.

We came home from Jamaica and went almost straight to the hospital. In the days we had been gone, Dayle had weakened greatly. She couldn't walk on her own, ate almost no food, and had trouble following conversations. Painkillers made her nearly incoherent.

She gained strength over the next week, enough to stay awake through a conversation. The four of us met with her oncologist, and Dayle indicated that she was ready to try the next round of chemotherapy. She hadn't given up yet. Eventually, she became strong enough to move from the hospital to the rehabilitation facility next door.

The following week was terrible - she threw up everything she ate, couldn't get out of bed by herself, and physically declined to a level I hadn't yet seen. She gathered the family together, and let us know that she had changed her mind and decided not to pursue chemotherapy any longer, and that she was ready to stop the fight. Rachel and I were incredibly saddened, but we also felt a profound sense of relief.

She went home to her house in Barre the next day -- a Monday -- and hospice helped her get comfortable. Her birthday was the following day, and we gathered with

extended family and friends for a birthday celebration. Rachel and I arrived to the house around 5 PM, and most folks arrived soon thereafter. At 6, without eating, Dayle said she was going to bed. We shared tears over her birthday cake.

We took the day off work on Friday of that week, and Rachel made Dayle and I grilled cheese sandwiches. Dayle, perhaps in a final move of comfort to Rachel, ate the whole sandwich while smiling. It was the last meal she ever had.

We arrived Saturday morning, and found Dayle alive but non-responsive. We spent the day holding her hand and talking with her, sharing memories and sharing tears. Dayle's siblings had arrived, and we took turns giving her morphine and other painkillers, knowing that at this point, we were doing what we could to make her comfortable. Nurses stopped by to let us know what to expect in the coming days: soon, her limbs would start to go cold, as the blood in her body focused on supporting her internal organs. Her fingers and toes would turn blue, and her legs would become mottled. Her breath would get raspy and thick, and then would slow, until finally it would stop.

Later that day, our dog, Millie, who we had been bringing down all week because Dayle had requested her, climbed onto Dayle's hospital bed and laid down. We made sure that she didn't pull out the catheter that the nurses had installed earlier in the day. Unresponsive to most other stimuli, Dayle weakly raised a hand and gave Millie a brief pat. Seeing this, Rachel, Ken and I gathered around her, and Dayle opened her eyes and gave Ken two brief, weak kisses.

We spent the next several days in their house. We returned to our own home only to sleep, as Dayle's siblings had offered to take the night shifts to keep an eye on her. We

would return early in the mornings, bleary eyed from exhaustion, and Millie would jump up gently on her hospital bed each day and lick her face before lying down at her feet.

On Wednesday, we arrived to see Dayle's breathing had become thick and raspy, just as the nurses had mentioned. What they had failed to mention was how violent the act of breathing would become - Dayle was using her whole body to breathe, with shudders that ran from head to toe. Finally, later in the day, Dayle's breathing became gentler and shallower. Surrounded by her family, she passed away around 6 PM on Wednesday, March 29th. The hell of the last few days was over, and my initial thought was one of relief.

The funeral parlor was efficient and graceful. It's fair to say that they had death down to a science, but it was a social science – one grounded in compassion and grace. While selecting urns, we had a delightful moment of levity: one of the men knew Ken, and they were reminiscing about people they knew growing up. They began to talk about family, and the man mentioned that, “my Grandmother was a Hoar.” Rachel and I made the mistake of looking at each other, and we failed miserably at stifling our laughter.

Rachel and I spoke at Dayle's funeral, and I was filled with such pride and love as I watched Rachel read a poem that she had written to honor her mom. Rachel clearly inherited the courage and grace that Dayle had embodied throughout her life.

A couple of weeks after Dayle died, Rachel and I met with Kevin, the minister of the church that I had attended growing up, and where my parents are still members. Kevin performed our wedding ceremony, and while neither Rachel nor I are particularly religious, we have a great deal of respect for him as a person. I was pleased to talk with him, to help process everything that had happened. He was, as always, a wonderful

listener and an excellent asker of questions. He probed without pushing, listened without judging, and, importantly for us, did not use our time together to push religion onto us. In many ways, talking with him confirmed that we were grieving in the right way. He went so far as to say that “there’s no wrong way to grieve.” He also reminded us that it was okay to remember Dayle as a person, and thus, imperfect. As with any person, there are flaws and faults; Kevin encouraged us to not feel guilty about acknowledging those flaws. In short, Kevin offered us a real conversation, and allowed us to show vulnerability. It was a tremendous gift.

People always say that death is a part of life, but I think it’s impossible to understand that until someone you love dies. Some people learn that lesson early, but I didn’t truly learn it until Dayle passed away. The first death that truly impacted me was my dog, who died when I was a freshman in high school; he died after a fairly brief but painful few months, and my family grieved as we would have for any human member of the family.

My granddaddy passed away when I was in college, and I, alongside the rest of my family, was lucky to be able to visit him very shortly before he died. I remember shaking his bony hand – he had the best handshake of anyone I’ve ever met – and feeling his strength, even as the rest of him was fading.

While both of these deaths affected me greatly, they came after long lives that were well-lived. They died in the natural course of life, and their deaths were relatively peaceful.

When Dayle died, I learned the intimacies and grief of the dying process, but also the relief that death can bring. But it was through Dayle’s approach to life that I learned

the most valuable lessons. Upon receiving her diagnosis, it would have been easy for her to despair, or rage, or weaken – it's how I think I would have acted. Instead, in some ways, it seemed as though this diagnosis invigorated her and gave her something to fight against. Not once did I see her despair or ask why something like this had happened to her. She was worried about her family, worried how they might take it. As the end of her life approached, she did an interview with a local newspaper, and she explained that when her time was up, she'd be okay, she'd be ready, and that she hoped her family would be okay as well. Even in the worst times, she would find comfort in her family and friends, and give comfort to those who were there to support her.

When I write about balance, I write about Dayle, because to me, she represented the type of balance that I would like to have in my own life. She refused to become an angry or sad person because of her cancer diagnosis, but she allowed herself brief windows of time where she could express those emotions. To me, balance is not about negating those emotions, but about giving them expression without letting them overpower you. Most of my relationship with Dayle occurred after she was diagnosed with breast cancer, and when I remember her now, it's impossible not to remember the hard times and the many hours spent visiting her in the hospital. But it's also impossible to forget the image of a loving mother sitting on a swing in the backyard of Rachel's house, watching a fire burn down while surrounded by her dog and her family. Both of these images shape my memories of a woman whose energy and compassion, and whose love for her family, continue to serve as a lesson for how to live my own life.

Lesson: all emotions are part of the human experience, and we are shaped by grief and sadness as well as by joy and happiness. Through grief, through sadness, we can

appreciate all the more the times in our lives that are full of happiness and joy. Yet these emotions need not exist in a vacuum; when things are hard, lean on your support networks, whether they be family, friends, animals, or coworkers. When things are wonderful, recognize and appreciate those times, and share them with loved ones.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

Why write about finding balance? Why would I explore this topic in a Master's thesis, when I could have written about societal issues, done research on advising international students, or explored social justice within higher education? What am I hoping to get out of this topic? Why is balance important to me?

Perhaps the answer is that, simply, I seek balance in all aspects of my life. Rarely do I find myself singularly focused on one thing. I enjoy relaxing, but I take pride in working hard; I like to exercise, to stay physically fit, but I also enjoy "the sweetness of doing nothing." I crave the anticipation of looking forward to events big and small, but I enjoy the richness of being fully present in those moments. I stress over big decisions, but once I've made up my mind, I look forward, not back, and I put energy towards making sure that it was the right decision. I seek the comfort of friends and family, but I also find my energy in the quiet times when I'm alone, when I can recharge and reorient myself. Finally, I seek and find balance with my family, who give me strength and who support me. I have learned that the pain of loss is balanced by the joys of life, and that although the death of a loved one can be impossibly difficult, it can also be a relief.

As I finish up my Master's degree, I recognize that these views are but a snapshot in my life. If I had started this program five years earlier or ten years later, my lessons would undoubtedly be different, my views shaped by my changing life experiences.

I address this now to you, my younger self, ten years my junior with an exciting future in front of you: live and love your life, and enjoy the next ten years. Seek balance: work hard, travel, spend time with friends, read, relax, and, above all, enjoy it.

Sincerely,

Matt Manz

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