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THE FEAR OF FAILURE AS AN ATHLETE AND AN INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENT:  
THE SEARCH FOR MEANING MAKING OUTSIDE MY COMFORT ZONE

A Thesis Presented

by

Loftur Eiriksson

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

University of Vermont

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

May, 2020

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**May, 2020**

## **Abstract**

When I was young, I always looked at the world with frightened eyes. Growing up I was so afraid of dying I placed myself inside a bubble. The comfort zone I created around my parents and our family home was a place my mom never imagined I could leave. I never imagined I would leave. Here, shielded from my perceived dangers, I felt happy and safe.

Using the method of Scholarly Person Narrative, I will tell the story of my development and growth into a stronger individual—mentally and physically. I will examine my personal history and explain how I found the courage to leave my comfort zone to face my fears and why that mattered. I will illustrate how difficult this was, how I handled challenges, and how my approaches to failure as an athlete and educator changed my perspective toward life.

The key to the success in my journey was the use of vulnerability. The vulnerability of leaving my comfort zone helped me uncover my true nature and live in the moment. It helped me embrace the fear, that not knowing what the future holds is all part of the bigger picture. It allowed me to take a step back and explore who I was outside of my comfort zone. Instead of living in fear each day, this examination helped me open up and start living life with joy.

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## Methodology

In this thesis I will be discussing my fear of failure as an athlete and a student. I will use a methodology called Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN). The book *Me-Search and Re-Search, A guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscript* helps to clarify key components regarding this methodology. It consists of four components: Pre-Search, Me-Search, Re-Search, and We-Search. (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p 6-7).

Pre-Search is the start of the journey. It is where you allow your mind to wonder and seek what really matters to you. What is it that I have so much passion about that I will put my butt to the chair and write a master's thesis? (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p 35-43). In Pre-Search, I prepare myself mentally and commit my time to my work. I have personally decided to focus my piece on my fear of failure as an athlete and an international student. I will discuss and explain in detail why I have always been afraid of leaving my comfort zone then I will show how I faced that fear to come out as a stronger individual.

Throughout the document, the relatability of my personally significant themes will be the glue that holds my thesis together for my audience, those people I hope to connect with throughout my thesis. Connection is the key here. My dedication to my themes and audience will keep me connected and on track. (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p 45-53).

Me-Search allows you to examine your own mind and heart. It helps you find the "me" in your writing and gives you freedom to explore your own ideas and find your inner voice. Me-search uses your own life experiences to explain your vision of the world.

“It is all about the personal stories.” The personal nature of the stories allows a richness and deeper meaning to the SPN themes and ideas. It brings connection to the whole project. (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p 67-78). Though Me-search might be the toughest, it is also the most rewarding of the four SPN components. This is where I will let my writing come to life.

Good SPN writing requires deeply personal stories. Sharing my personal experiences and discussing their meaning takes courage. It requires me to open up my soul to myself and to my readers; it requires me to look into my life experiences to find a sense of understanding. Putting myself into the “Re-Search” phase will reveal what truly matters to me and what makes me the person I am to today.

Re-Search consists of guidance and references. It enlists texts and quotes from other academic scholars to give your personal stories a more legitimate standpoint. It supports your stories and makes all of your writing more trustworthy. (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p 79-86). This part is crucial: the knowledge gained from other scholars will inspire a better understanding of my subject matter.

Through my interpretations of the Re-Search, and how it connects to my own experiences, perspectives, and life questions, I will be able to better understand my fear of failure as an athlete and international student. I will be able to examine and possibly answer the questions: Why am I so afraid of leaving my comfort zone? Does it take the same mindset to be an athlete and a student? If not, how are they different? What role does my comfort zone play in my identity as an athlete and as a student?

We-search is the last piece of the puzzle. It brings the reader closer to the writer wherein the reader finds similarities between the writer’s experience and their own. In

SPN, the writer generalizes his experience and research such that he can co-exist with the audience that reads his piece. (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p 103-112). It is in We-Search that my personal narrative will help you (the reader) understand my perspective in such a way that you connect with and hopefully gain insight from my experience.

I will share with you all the troubles and mistakes, the good times and bad times that I feel illustrate why this topic is so important to me. I know for a fact that I would not be the person I am today if I had stayed inside my comfort zone. But that challenge gave me a brighter sense what living really is. In successful We-Search, the reader will also enjoy a similar result.

It all begins with identifying the key themes I want to discuss, examine, and explore in my document. From that point I will connect my themes to my personal stories and experiences and back them up with Re-Search to deepen my themes and give richer meaning to the point I am trying to make.

The final step is bringing all of this together and generalizing my ideas and experiences so that the reader can hopefully find a connection with their own. (Nash and Jang, 2015, p 19).



## **Who am I: Where do I come from?**

I cannot say that I come from a very athletic family. However, both of my parents played some sports growing up. My dad preferred basketball over soccer. But he was enthusiastic about all sports. He played and coached a lot of volleyball in our hometown. I don't have any memories of my mom playing sports, but she tells me stories every once in a while, about her soccer days when she was younger. I have hard time believing her. But why would she lie about that? And, I must get my athletic abilities from someone. Maybe they are from her?

I come from a family with a history of agriculture. I moved with my mom, dad, and older brother to our farm when I was four years old. It was always a struggle for my dad to try to get me to help out at the farm. My interests were always toward sports. For me, spending time doing agricultural chores was like a torture.

Though I often wished we lived in a city—where all my friends and I went to school—growing up on a farm turned out to be more beneficial for me. It helped me build myself up mentally and physically. From an early age I had to work feeding the animals and doing farm chores. My parents showed me that you need to earn the right to be able to do what you want to.

Sometimes, my farm obligations caused me to miss soccer practice. It did not happen often, but when something more important needed to be taken care of on the farm there simply wasn't time for my parents to drive me to practice. Though they tried their best to make sure I got to all of my practices, sometimes it just wasn't the priority.

In this environment I learned that you need to organize and prioritize. I had to finish my chores before I'd be taken to practice. All of this made me realize one important fact about my life: I had no interest being in the agriculture business when I got older.

My parents did everything in their power to get me and my other siblings to all of our trainings. Their work ethic was extraordinary. Both worked full time jobs, took care of the farm, and drove me and my sibling to practices.

I am so grateful for what my parents have done for me. They made me feel so good that I never wanted to leave. My home with my parents was my place of fortitude and my comfort zone, a place that I could always go to if everything felt lost.

## **Virtues**

“Like love, like talent, like any other virtue, like anything else in this life, happiness needs to be nurtured - this is the truth of the whole matter.” — Ogwo David Emenike, *Happiness Recipe: Eat and Stay Happy* (2012)

“Always find opportunities to make someone smile, and to offer random acts of kindness in everyday life.” — Roy T. Bennett, *The Light in the Heart* (2016)

As I get older, my perspective towards the world changes. I am happy with who I am, and I am happy where I am. But that does not mean that I will become complacent and stop moving forward. I try to develop and nurture my virtues with each new environment I am in. My virtues help me to remember who I am and what I represent not matter the environment. They help me behave in a manner that is respectful and makes me happy about myself and how I want other people to see me as a person. I hold on tight to my core virtues, the virtues that have helped me throughout my first twenty-seven years of my life.

Your virtues inform how you want to be seen and how you want to tackle the world. Before I start discussing my virtues, I need to briefly explain what virtues really are. Aristotle defines “moral virtue as a disposition to behave in the right manner and as a mean between extremes of deficiency and excess, which are vices” (SparkNotes Editors, 2005). So, the question is, how do we learn to behave in the right manner?

I have learned most of my virtues from my family. My parents play a vital role there! I have learned my virtues through their actions and their approach to daily life. I have always looked up to my parents. Watching them and learning from them has been a privilege that I hope will inspire others. It is important to know that all of us are going to

be a role model to someone at some point in our journey. The virtues I learned from my family are my foundation as a role model.

My strongest virtue is kindness. There can never be enough of kindness in this world. My mom and dad are full of kindness. Like I said they were incredibly dedicated to drive me to practice. I can't overlook the fact that both my parents had full-time jobs in addition to the farm. My mother was and still works as an accountant. My father is a consultant for dairy farmers. That made their schedules pretty stacked. But that did not stop them from helping other people out and volunteering to help out at tournaments.

My mom helped out during track and field tournaments. My dad was more involved in the basketball area. He was the chairman of the youth academy. So he helped out with organizing basketball tournaments and hiring coaches for the youth teams. All that work was done as a volunteer.

My parent always found time to help out. In fairness I think they did a little too much. They could have used the time to spend it with each other. But my parents rather wanted to help out because it brought them joy. Aristotle wrote, "*Virtues are formed in a man by his doing the actions.*" I am what my mom and dad have represented all those years. I am always quick with a yes when someone needs help. I like helping out people. It makes me feel good about myself. I certainly don't do it to make people owe me anything.

Another important virtue of mine is grit! Grit has been a big factor in terms of how I tackle big obstacles. My grit comes from all the hard work I have been doing most of my life. I am a worker, and always have been. I can go on forever and work myself down to the ground physically and mentally (which has consequences that I'll talk about

later). In a way I needed to earn the right to go to practice; I had to complete all my chores before I could get a ride to practice. I did not take my sport for granted. It was something that was earned. That is what being in a competitive sport is all about in the end. No one is going to give you a starting spot on a team. What extra effort are you prepared to extend as an athlete for that spot on the team? What is it that makes you better than everyone else?

My third virtue is loyalty. Loyalty is really important to me. My parents have always tried to keep the family close. When I was younger and through my teenaged years, my family spent almost every weekend together which resulted in a powerful personal connection. My bond was particularly strong with my mom. She is everything to me. I transformed this sense of connection into loyalty. Once I feel a personal connection and trust, I become extremely loyal which has ironically caused me the biggest headache of them all. I simply cannot be selfish. I always need take into account what surrounds me. This is a part of my comfort zone: I have to stay loyal to the people around me (which I will talk about more in the next chapter). I simply cannot walk away leaving everything behind without knowing things will be fine without me. It sounds arrogant, but I don't want anyone to have a rough time just because I found something better to do. Also, part of this loyalty is fear-based. I am scared to leave a place where I feel at home, comfortable, respected, and happy.

## **Loyal to My Home and My People**

*“If you want to move to a new level in your life, you must break through your comfort zone and practice doing things that are not comfortable.”* —T. Harv Eker, **Quotes You Need for Unlimited Success**, [www.fearlessmotivation.com/2018/03/08/5-powerful-t-harv-eker-quotes-you-need-for-unlimited-success](http://www.fearlessmotivation.com/2018/03/08/5-powerful-t-harv-eker-quotes-you-need-for-unlimited-success). Accessed February 2020.

I never saw myself moving away from my parents’ house. The comfort of being close to them is where I wanted to be. Without distractions or troubles, I felt safe and sound. As I got little older though, I started to think more about my future and what I wanted to do for a living. The opportunities I wanted were not in the town where I grew up. What I wanted to study was taught in a college located in the capital of Iceland, Reykjavik.

At Nineteen, I moved away from home. That time was a very bumpy patch for me. I went home as many weekends as I could and never really found myself in Reykjavik. The only thing that really kept me there was my brother. We lived together. If he had not been there, I would not have survived.

Why was it so incredibly hard for me to change environments? I believe it was my loyalty holding me back from truly letting myself enjoy my own personal journey. Piero Ferrucci describes loyalty as: “Loyalty is linked to our relationship with our parents, especially our mothers. She has nursed, protected and raised us. She was the first person to love us. Endless support no matter if we had a talent or a gift.” (Ferrucci, P., 2006). As kid I had a lot of difficulties going away from home. School trips were off the table, even soccer tournaments were difficult. Always the day before leaving, I caught a cold, or had a high fever. There was always something that was bothering me. My mother

was certain that fear of going away from home made me sick. The thought of going away from my mother's arms, was too hard for me to bear. My personality wasn't strong enough to handle new situations on my own. I was a scared little kid.

Looking back, my time at school in the capital was sort of a mini test. I would have never finished it alone. But I had my brother with me, encouraging me when I felt most challenged. With each passing week, my mind started to become more and more comfortable being away from home. Slowly, in Reykjavik, I was able to create bonds and friendships that helped make the environment more comfortable. What was missing, though, and what I never found was the personal connection I needed to truly feel at home and thrive in Reykjavik.

## **Beliefs – Morals - Values**

*“The world is full of people who have stopped listening to themselves or have listened only to their neighbors to learn what they ought to do, how they ought to behave, and what values are they should be living for.”* – Joseph Campbell, *The Power of the Myth* with Bill Moyers (1991)

I do believe that there is something great at work in the universe that I am not meant to understand. I also believe that my actions and my behavior will reflect on the outcome of how my life will turn out to be, and that being true to my beliefs, morals and values will help me find what I search for.

When I talk about beliefs, I am not talking about religion. I am not a religious person. Though I do consider myself Christian, that is not what defines my actions or how I approach life.

In one of the chapters in Robert Nash and Jennifer Jang’s book, *Preparing Students for Life Beyond College*, the authors give insights to questions that ‘quarterlifers’ can ask themselves to seek and find a better understanding how they feel. “What is the right religion for me? Why am I so critical of my childhood religion? Do I need a religious faith to be a moral person? Why does god seem so far away from me on some days, and so close on others?” (Nash and Jang, 2015, p 12). This got me thinking. I don’t believe that there is one almighty god. Yes, I was taught that I should not steal, that I should treat people they way I want to be treated. I learned to respect my mother and father, etc. But to me, these rules are values that make me spiritual. Not religious.



I want to make that clear that I am no angel. I have treated people with disrespect. I stole when I was younger; I stole from my brother and I stole money from my mom. These small crimes may seem innocent, but I know that they are unacceptable.

What I have seen and learned is that when you have a positive aura around you, good things will come your way. Life is going to throw at you all kinds of challenges but having a code to live by is always going to help you out in the long run. I witnessed my mother and father trying to embrace each challenge they faced with open arms. They treat everyone as an equal and are true to their beliefs, values, and moral codes. They always came out of each situation with a smile on their face and happy with the outcome.

The best way to demonstrate all of this is to share with you an incident that happened to me not so long ago. This incident, I believe, never would have happened if I had stayed true to my beliefs and values. I think the universe was punishing me and trying to bring me back to the ground. I was playing a football match with my team. We were playing against a team that we should have easily beaten. On paper, our team was much stronger, but the game ended in a devastating loss. Normally after a game, some of the players want to go out. In this case the coach had forbidden us to go out. He said we were allowed to have a drink, but we needed to stay at home. He did not want us to be seen downtown. Understandable, I mean at the end of the day you don't go out celebrating a loss, right? But I had planned a gathering with a couple of my friends that night. We were going to cook some fancy food and drink some wine. I explained to the guys when I arrived that I could not go downtown with them, that I could have drink with them at home. Also, I showed up dressed up in my club training gear so I would normally never go out dressed like that. But the night went on and we started to play a drinking

game that ended up with all of us getting really drunk. We were all pumped up. When you are drunk you don't make the best decisions, but one of us thought it would be a great plan to go downtown. We all got ourselves ready and went out. I ended up at a bar, dressed up in my club training trousers, wearing a button-down shirt that my friend gave me. Though I stayed there for only twenty minutes, I woke up the next day with the biggest guilt. How could I have done that and still call myself professional and disciplined?

My first thought was to call my coach and confess my actions. I much preferred that he heard it from me than from someone else. I needed to be honest. It was eating me alive. I sought out help from one of my teammates asking him what I should do. He told me I should not confess, because I could lose my spot on the team. He suggested that I just take a chance that no one saw me and that no one would tell the coach I'd gone downtown.

Deep down I knew it was the wrong decision to make. Each day went by, and every time I ran into my coach, I had this pounding heartbeat in my stomach. I was so afraid that he would confront me, but he never did.

I thought I was off the hook but in the next game, I was in the starting line-up. Everything was going great. Then boom! I got into a horrible tackle. I broke two bones, with five fractures total. My season was over. Just like that. I believe that the universe was punishing me for not being true to my beliefs. Had this happened if I would have simply followed my coach's rule in the beginning? Had this happened if I had come clean and been honest? Had this happened if I had admitted my mistake and taken responsibility for my actions? I don't know. But I believe you get what you deserve. I had

behaved in a terrible manner, with disrespect and disloyalty. I could only blame myself.

These signs made me believe that there are some greater forces at work than I am meant to understand. All I can do is stay true to my beliefs and make sure I follow them as best as I can. I know that if I do, good things will follow. If I don't, I will have bad things coming my way. There is no one else in this world that can determine my destiny other than me.

## **Who am I as an Athlete?**

Every day I try to maximize my athletic performance. Every step and every turn I take I do with my sport in mind. I am very disciplined to myself. I eat healthy food, I maintain my hydration levels, I watch out for getting enough sleep. I almost never miss a practice. If I am injured, I am in the gym or at the physio putting time and effort into getting back on track. I basically try to take care of all the important factors that I can control and do them as best as I can. (Sadly, I have never spent this amount of energy and dedication to make my academics work.)

As an athlete I look at the world differently. I have a different perspective than a non-athlete in this world. I think the biggest difference is that I am not as scared of failing. I do not procrastinate as an athlete. I don't make up excuses for myself as an athlete. Every single day I put my mind, body and soul into my sport, no matter the outcome. I do all of the less-fun stuff, like lifting weights, doing extra exercises that my physio gives me. I do not postpone that and wait till the last minute to do it, so that I can hide behind that if I fail. I dive right in because I know it is important for my progress as an athlete. I have accepted the fact as an athlete that I am not perfect, and I am okay with that.

As a non-athlete, on the other hand, I have so much fear of failure it leads me to procrastination, especially in school. It is part of feeling inadequate. For some reason, I think I am supposed to be good at everything, so I put this pressure on myself for perfection. I know that this behavior is nonsense, but I can't help myself. I am still trying to figure out a way to combine my athlete and non-athlete perspectives.

Throughout my adolescent years, I only saw the world through the microscope of an athlete. All aspects of my life were modeled around my sport and how I improve as an athlete. I was enrolled in school, but that was only because it fitted really well into my schedule as an athlete. My passion was for my sport. I have enjoyed every single moment of my athletic career: the good and the bad, all my mistakes and failures. In the following chapter I will explain what helped me along the way to develop into the athlete I am today. I will explain why I think every single moment was worth it and why I had and still do have so much passion for my sport.

## **Starting My Journey**

*“Live the Life of your Dreams: Be brave enough to live the life of your dreams according to your vision and purpose instead of the expectations and opinions of others.”*

— Roy T. Bennett, *The Light in the Heart* (2016)

My beginning as an athlete is simple. It started out as a dream; a dream in which I saw myself becoming a professional athlete. How did *that* all start? I guess it all started with my brother. Both of us were incredibly ambitious to achieve and perform well in our sport. My brother is two years older than me. He has always been a big part of my life and was my role model growing up. We played soccer all the time together when we were growing up. In our backyard, we made up our own goals. It was simple: we used two jackets, or two shoes for each goal post. The problem in this was that we had to imagine and evaluate whether or not the ball went over the bar or wide of the post. This guessing started a lot of arguments and fighting between us growing up. We were both very competitive and both wanted to win. So understandably it sometimes got out of hand and we ended up fighting. It didn't make my mom's life easier. But growing up with a brother normally ends up with a fight every now and then. We always made up and became friends again. Sometimes it took longer to forgive each other. But we always did in the end.

Hopes and dreams are what kept us going through those years. In fact, that is what keeps most people moving forward. The root of the word dream is to reach full potential you need hope or aspiration to serve as a motivational device. Hopes and dreams are full of passion and excitement. They can be anything you want them to be (Nash and Jang,

2015, p 26). In the book *Preparing Students for a Life Beyond College*, Robert and Jennifer explain their take on dreams with the support of Norman E. Rosenthal, MD (2013). “Who, in his decades of dream research, has found that our dreams give birth to our goals. The first step is to recognize, and establish, our goals based on our dreams, and then cultivate the determination to act on them. Rosenthal has three simple rules for activating dreams and transforming them into achievable goals: 1. Recognize and respect all of our unique and authentic dreams (those greater and lesser ideals that motivate us); 2. Take our dreams seriously, especially when others might be ridiculing or minimizing them; 3. Hold on to our dreams firmly, with determination, and let them grow into fruition”. (Nash and Jang, 2015, p 26).

I have been chasing my dream since I was little. Every decision, every turn, every single moment has been to fulfill the dream of becoming a professional soccer player. Until recently. I am twenty-seven years old today. I realize that I am not going to be turning professional at this point. I play in a semi-professional league today. It gives me money, but not enough to build a life or a living around. I achieved a lot of things as a soccer player but not all the big goals or my ultimate dream. From a young age there has been little to stop my process.

Of course, there were distractions along the way—I will talk about them in more detail in my distraction chapter— but my downfall has been that I did not make my goals clear enough from the beginning. I made many changes, withstood injuries, failures and distractions, but I came up short.

I am happy with the outcome; I am happy with the process as well. The process taught me so much more about life itself. I was really close to becoming a professional

soccer player. I know I was. My journey has been unbelievable. I have become more comfortable being out of my comfort zone. I have been a part of a team that won the America East Championship title. I have competed in the NCAA tournament twice. I have gained connection and friendship with people that I can't put a price on. I have a much more open-minded perspective towards the world today. I do not hide behind my comfort zone or the people closest to me for protection. I am more confident in my own ability to take care of my present.

Would I change anything? Yes, there are situations that I would have dealt with differently. But what is done is done; there is no point in thinking about that anymore. I did my best in each moment and each second; I have nothing to regret. Like I said, soccer has been the foundation of my life. All the excited and fun moments I have experienced were made possible because of soccer. I am deeply grateful for what it has offered me.



## **Failures – Mistakes**

*“Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new.”* - Albert Einstein

*“If you're not making mistakes, then you're not doing anything. I'm positive that a doer makes mistakes.”* - John Wooden, American basketball coach and winner of 10 NCAA championships.

We are all different in a beautiful way. This is what makes each of us unique. It all comes down to how we face our mistakes and failures. I truly believe that I would not be where I am today and I would not be the person that I am today, without all the mistakes and failures that I have experienced in my life. Would I want to go back in time and prevent some of them from happening? No, I would not. I believe that I am exactly where I am and who I am supposed to be because of my mistakes and failures. In some cases, I could debate that I should have handled my situation differently, but that does not necessarily mean I would be better off or in a better place.

As an athlete I can't begin to start counting how many times I have experienced failure. Big or small: I have come to the conclusion that the size of the mistake doesn't matter. If I start writing them down or spending too much time worrying about them, I truly believe that I will lose against the process of my life. My process of always striving to be a better athlete, of working hard and not becoming complacent has had little room for reflection on failure.

I know that life is tough. I know that life is not going to hand you what you want on a silver platter, that if you want something, you need to work hard for it. But

sometimes the only move forward is to take a step backwards. This is how we learn. Through life experiences that end with a failure or by taking the right path as the result of a mistake, we learn from the dance of stepping forward and backwards.

“We all make mistakes. The question is, what and how do we learn from them? Most people view mistakes as events that should never have happened. An initial reaction to an error or mistake may be to cover one's tracks in order to hide the fact that a mistake was made. Denial is another frequent reaction...To benefit from our mistakes, we must realize that we made one. That is, some basic ability to monitor the progress or results of actions is required. Moreover, it is necessary to be able to determine why a mistake was made and how the mistake can be avoided in the future. Finally, one must recognize the situation that led to the mistake when it arises again and must remember how the mistake can be avoided.” (Johnson, 2004).

Learning to recognize and admit my own mistakes has been a long and difficult lesson. Because I was afraid of admitting that I messed up, there was a time when I used to blame other people for my downfall. I got caught up in the famous blame game. For example, I'd never admit when it might have been my fault that my team conceded a goal. I'd make excuses and pin it on somebody else saying, “He told me to do that.” I failed to recognize that the beauty of mistakes or failures in sports and in life is that in most cases you get another shot to redeem yourself. I have made bad mistakes in my life. Some I have learned from and some I haven't.

Some of my mistakes can be linked to the fact I am a people pleaser. I let people's perspectives and opinions affect me too much. Many decisions that I have made out-side of my sport have had something to do with what my friends were doing. I want people to

like me. I care what people think and say about me. This weakness has sometime led me off the track of what I want to do, or what I think is best for my own interest. When I finished elementary school, I applied to attend high school in my hometown. I decided to study to become a carpenter. Did I want to become carpenter? Not that badly. But my mindset was simple: Find a program that is easy and is not challenging academically. At that point it looked easy enough. It looked as though I could just cruise through it without opening up a single book. Also, I had a good friend that applied for it. So, I decided to follow his steps.

After a year in the program I started to see that I had little interest becoming a carpenter. Some areas of the field were enjoyable, but it was clearly a mistake that I had made. I did not see myself as a professional carpenter. Though I was following someone else's path, I did not think much of it at the time. But follow-through is part of my nature, so I stuck with it and finished the carpentry degree, with the addition of a high-school diploma. I did the addition of a high-school diploma so that my options for additional academic learning would be possible.

Reflecting back, would I want to have studied something else? Yes. I would have, but do I regret studying carpentry? Absolutely not! During that time, I learned a lot that I think I wouldn't have learned in any other classroom. I had fun and I enjoyed most of my time there. But if I had not been so narrow-minded trying to go the easiest way possible through high school, I might have chosen something more challenging and more enjoyable. I would have most likely chosen something related to sports. Why didn't I? Because I was too busy thinking about what my friends were doing. I was too worried that if I would go some other way, I would lose my connection with them. I love being

around people and helping people out. I hate nothing more in the world than to disappoint people. In some cases, I consider this connectedness to be my greatest strength as a person.

It can also be a terrible weakness that at one point came close to ruining my career as an athlete. Not wanting to disappoint my soccer coach, my basketball coach, my teammates, my mom and dad and my friends, I was able to keep my athletic career going for quite some time—until it all caught up with me. I'll give you a brief insight into what my schedule looked like the last year before my body collapsed.

As I mentioned before I have played soccer since I was five or six years old. Soccer was always the more popular sport among my elementary school classmates. Like them, I was passionate and in love with that sport. Since I was young, I gained a great deal of attention for my ability to play soccer and basketball. My class had several talented players; many of us had the same dream growing up. All of us aimed toward being professional athletes. Most of us wanted to end up playing professional soccer, but some wanted to pursue professional basketball.

My dream was to become a soccer player. I and my friends that wanted to become soccer players had a close group. We spent much time playing soccer outside of practice and school. Our competitive nature kept all of us focused. Each of us wanted to become better than the next one. So, without even realizing it we helped each other become better soccer players and athletes.

Even though soccer was much bigger on a national scale, basketball was always the sport my hometown was known for. This started because where I grew up, there were no facilities to practice football during the wintertime. An indoor horse track facility was

the only practice space we were offered; we were scheduled there two times a week to play soccer. The ground was covered in small rocks and dry mud. Because this was such a bad surface for soccer, many of us switched to playing basketball during the wintertime. When the winter was over, and all the snow started to disappear, I'd turn my focus back to soccer and start to train in earnest for the summer. When I turned 16, I was the only one left playing both basketball and soccer. My friends that had gone over to basketball during the wintertime, decided at that point to devote their time towards soccer full time. I however played both sports until I was nineteen years old.

All year long I was training for the upcoming season, for either basketball or football. The basketball season was from beginning of October till the end of March. After the end of March, I took out my soccer cleats and trained till end of September.

Initially, basketball was just my pastime during the winter months. However, I started to make some great progress as a player. I started to enjoy the action of the fast-paced game of basketball and payed more attention to basketball, especially the National Basketball Association league. That is where all the best basketball players in the world play and make their living. I began to entertain the idea of becoming a basketball player instead of a soccer player. When I was fifteen years old, my basketball coach let me know that I had the potential to go somewhere with my talent. If I kept doing what I was doing, it could lead somewhere. My soccer coach really loved me and had some big plans for me. He knew I wanted to become a professional athlete.

That same year I also started training with the senior soccer team. I was loved by both my soccer and basketball coaches because of my character. I was a hard-working kid who didn't ask any questions. I just ran my lungs out every single practice and every

single game for the team. I was always the first person to arrive at practices, doing some extra work and staying late after practice to work on passing, shooting, first touch, etc.

In my heart I knew I was in it for the joy and challenge. My dedication and hard work were all about self-improvement. It is my nature to work hard and do my best for my own sake, but I started letting the opinions of the people around me affect my decision making. Because I didn't want to let anyone of them down, it seems I had studied for the wrong reasons. I started playing basketball because of my friends; I kept playing basketball because of pressure from my coach. I decided to quit soccer and take up basketball full-time because I wanted to follow my teammates. But I start playing soccer again because of love for the game. My indecision ended in overexertion, burnout, and injury. Instead of listening to my own body, I followed my environment doing whatever was required of me. Back from an injury I finally ended up quitting basketball and committing all of my time to soccer.

There is a common chain of mistakes one makes as an athlete; it is part of the sport and part of being human. But as a people pleaser, I felt I was never completely in charge. It took me a lot of time to figure that out that all my decisions were made with some pressure from my peers. Perhaps I needed to make these mistakes in order to realize who I am?

I recall my mom asking me countless times, "Are you sure you don't need to sit this one out?" And, "Won't you take a moment and see what you truly want and need?" I didn't listen. I was too occupied trying to gain the acceptance of everyone around me. Without all these mistakes I made as a young athlete and a young student, I don't know where I would be.

Maybe it was a mistake to study to be a carpenter. But today I am a carpenter and I can work as a carpenter. Maybe it was a mistake for me to go and play basketball. It took precious time that I could have used to become better at soccer. I was talented enough in basketball though, that I could have easily picked it over soccer. Hell, some say that I was a much better basketball player than a soccer player. But that 'mistake' helped me to become aware of how much love I have for soccer. It was natural for me to pick soccer.

My path academically and as an athlete has been bumpy due to my mistake of letting people affect my decision making. I was going in all different directions and perhaps could have made smarter decisions more aligned with my desires. But I am proud of how I handled each of my mistakes. I did not back away or give up. I did not take any short cuts or try to cheat my way forward, I learned and gained something new with each mistake and each failure.

## **Distractions**

*“Life throws up around us these temptations, these distractions, and the problem is to find the immovable center within. Than you can survive anything. Myth will help you do that. This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t go out on picket lines about atomic research. Go ahead but do it playfully. The universe is God’s play.”* – Joseph Campbell, *Myths of Light* (1968)

Distractions present themselves in many forms. Distractions are all around us in our adolescence years. Distractions have ruined many talented individuals. Having said this, I think distractions can also be for the good. As human beings in this world we have to deal with distractions. It doesn’t matter who you are, where you are from, or who you want to become. There will always be distractions, whether you want them or not. How you deal with the distractions determines the path you take in life.

I have come to realize that the best way to deal with distractions is using a moral compass. What is your code of ethics in this world? What drives you forward? First, we will have to define a moral compass.

I will again rely upon two insightful persons to help me explain where I am going. Robert J. Nash and Jennifer J. J. Jang who wrote the book *Teaching College Students How to Solve Real-Life Moral Dilemmas*. They define moral compass as: “Having a moral compass means knowing how to act “in character.” Character is neither mechanical nor unchanging. Character is fluid. It is situational. It changes, sometimes dramatically, sometimes subtle. It means understanding what gives our moral meaning and then acting accordingly. It means being consistent but flexible: knowing who we are, where we come from, and who we would like to become. It means acutely aware of the ethical story



about our lives that we would like to write in the best of all possible worlds. It means being conscious of how our background moral stories influence our foreground moral actions, both for good and bad. It also means being aware of the impact of our past and present communities that have been so central in defining each of us as a moral being.” (Nash & Jang, 2016, p 12-13).

I personally had never paid much attention to this before I took the class with Robert and Jennifer. I just did whatever I thought was right. In keeping with my upbringing, I behaved in a respectful manner. My decisions were backed up by little else.

Robert and Jennifer teach us that “each of us lives our lives in at least four overlapping ‘moral spaces,’ and each world features its own special moral language. The most comprehensive, and most defensible, ethical decision-making occurs whenever we use all four of the moral languages to resolve moral dilemmas. They call these spaces a private moral space, a small-community moral space, an organizational moral space, and cosmopolitan moral space.”

“First moral language or the ‘private moral space’ is simply our background beliefs as human beings. Our background beliefs drive our entire ethical decision-making. It is entirely based on personal values, what is it that I believe in and why? Second moral language or the “small community moral space” is the space where we actually develop our background beliefs, both in the past and the present, and, most likely, in the future as well. What we believe in morally and spiritually has its roots in, and is always mediated by, those smaller concrete communities, such as family and friends that have shaped us, and will continue to shape us as ethical beings. The third moral language or the “organizational moral space” is the world of the workplace, the professions, the public

arena. It is a setting that individuals with different sets of background beliefs, and memberships in different communities, often meet as “moral strangers”. The forth and the last moral language is the “cosmopolitan moral space” is the setting for what Dalai Lama calls an “ethics for a whole world”. It is the moral space where, according to Dalai Lama, we attempt to discern what is common to all of humanity, no matter our unique cultural, nationalistic, or religious differences. It is the ethics we must learn to practice in a shared world where hard-and-fast, age-old identity boundaries are fast disappearing.” (Nash & Jang, 2016, p 29-43).

I am going to talk a little bit about some of my distractions before and after I paid attention to my moral compass. What type of distractions did I face? How did I handle them? Where do I stand in relation to those distractions today?

Social life is an important factor of every human being. I am personally driven by my social life. I love being around people. In fact, the social aspect of soccer is part of the reason I enjoy it so much.

Social life can be described in different ways. When I hear the phrase social life, I think about being accepted and appreciated; I also think of alcohol and partying. For young people social life today is first and foremost partying—which usually includes alcohol. This dependence upon alcohol raises several questions: Can you start a social life without alcohol? Is the alcohol necessary to meet new people? Why do people drink? Is it solely because of peer pressure?

Where I grew up and from what I have experienced in life. I think that people start drinking because they want to escape from their comfort zone and show people a different side of themselves. They have something that they desperately need to show

other people. They want to change their self-perception or show how funny or laid back they are; they want to find a place of acceptance among their peers. We are all trying to create our own identity. Sadly, many of us—myself included—use alcohol to do this.

For a long time, I stayed away from alcohol. I did not go to parties unless I was the designated driver for my friends which eventually became so boring that I tried to avoid it as much as I could. Today is a different story, though. Alcohol has become a bigger factor of my life that I care to admit. It has become part of my identity a person. Somewhere along the way I changed. I want to briefly examine this with you here.

First things first, I want to tell you a little bit about my background. The town where I went to school and practiced my sport was crowded with young people drinking and doing drugs. It was cool to drink and do activities that I considered to be “wrong side of the laws.” I was taught from an early age that alcohol could be one of the factors that could stand in my way of becoming a professional athlete. I was very fortunate in my home environment that alcohol use inside my household was very limited. My parents had a beer only every now and then, this was always just one or two drinks during weekends after my siblings and I had gone to bed. My parents never drank alcoholic beverages in front of us when we were younger. That is approach my parents lived by and the environment that they wanted us to grow up in. They definitely stayed true to their beliefs and values in not drinking alcohol in front of us. This set a great example that I wanted to follow.

It definitely worked out well: my brother didn't start drinking until he was eighteen years old, I didn't start drinking until I was twenty years old, and my sister hasn't tried an alcohol drink and she is twenty-two years old.

It wasn't just my parents that tried their best to educate me about alcohol, my coaches and the school that I attended growing up tried to educate us about where alcohol use could lead. They tried to teach me how it could affect my body and brain, how it could ruin my progress over the week, how long it would take to get rid of the alcohol out of my system, and most importantly, how it would impact my performance as an athlete. It would take only one night out during the weekend to slow down my improvement progress each week. Initially I made a decision that I would not drink alcohol as long as I was trying to become a professional athlete. I told people around me when they offered me alcohol that I didn't drink. In most cases people respected that, but there were times when I was hassled. At that point, it didn't really bother me. I didn't need people to understand my approach. All that mattered was that I believed in it.

I am twenty-seven years old today and from my experience, my mom, dad and my coaches were not wrong about alcohol's effect on athletic performance. In 2017, the NCAA-administered a survey of approximately 23,000 student-athletes. The findings showed that overall, 77% of student athletes reported drinking alcohol in 2017, which is a slight decrease compared to previous years... 42% of all student-athletes said they engaged in binge drinking (defined as 4 or more drinks for women, 5 or more drinks for men in one sitting) (NCAA, 2018).

“Misuse of alcohol can interfere with athletic goals in a variety of ways related to the negative effects of acute intake of alcohol on the performance of, or recovery from, exercise, or the chronic effects of binge drinking on health and management of body composition. Besides the calorie load of alcohol (7 kcal/g), alcohol suppresses lipid oxidation, increases unplanned food consumption and may compromise the achievement

of body composition goals. In the post-exercise phase, where cultural patterns in sport often promote alcohol use, alcohol may interfere with recovery by impairing glycogen storage, slowing rates of rehydration via its suppressive effect on anti-diuretic hormone, and impairing the muscle protein synthesis (MPS) desired for adaptation and repair”. (Thomas, Burke & Erdman, 2016).

Alcohol is a huge distraction if your goal as an athlete is to show up every single session as prepared and focused as you can be. From my perspective, I personally need a good night of sleep, I need to be well hydrated, and I need to have the right nutrition to maximize my performance every day and every week.

My hometown was very small and drowning in drugs. If you knew the right people, it was very easy to get a hold of drugs. Because the town population was only around 2,000 people, I had friends whose older brothers or older sisters were heavily involved with drugs. This was the kind of environment many of my friends experienced growing up.

Thinking back, maybe growing up on a farm had some privileges. Most of my friends from elementary school started drinking around sixteen years of age. Some started sooner. When I turned twenty, I was the only one left of my group of friends group who hadn't started drinking.

From all of the lectures that I'd had from my mom, my dad, and my coaches I knew alcohol would affect me as an athlete in many different ways. Because of the major effect it would have on my body, I would not be able to perform at my highest possible level. Being hungover is not something that goes well with athletic performance. You feel tired all day and you can't eat anything which increases your risk of getting injured.

There are no positive factors for an athlete to consume alcohol in high quantity. If I was aware of how alcohol would affect me. Why on earth would I then start drinking alcohol? I had not touched alcohol for my first twenty years of my life. What changes so drastically that I needed to drink alcohol?

The reason was simply that I felt I was slowly losing my friends. I was not getting invited to parties anymore. I was slowly becoming an outsider. But I could not tolerate losing my social life. I wanted to be a part of all the fun. Drinking was the simplest way to fix that. So, I started to drink with my childhood friends.

At first, I only drank on special occasions. It wasn't until I went to a new soccer club in 2015, that my trouble with alcohol started to become a reality. I was going into a new setting with a new group of guys that I did not know. That summer I spent too much time at the bar with my teammates instead of focusing on body, nutrition, and health. But I am a social person who excels when I feel accepted inside a social group. That gives me confidence. Such confidence can take you far in the world of sport, if you have the skillset to back it up. My way back into the group was through social gatherings that normally included alcohol. It removed my inhibitions and helped me socially, but completely backfired when it came down to performing on the field as a soccer player. After drinking, I was not sharp; I was not fit enough to perform at my best. The worst part of the whole thing was that I was always picking up some little injuries that kept me from training and really getting into my best physical shape. The effects alcohol and not taking care of my body were starting to bite me in the back.

That same summer I got the news that I had been admitted into a college in America. I was going to start there in the fall of 2015. At the age of twenty-two I was heading into a new adventure. It was the beginning of a new chapter for me.

As good as 2015 was for me—graduating from Reykjavik University with a sport science degree and getting admitted to a school in America to play soccer and do my master's degree—you'd think I had it made, but my year as an athlete was a disaster. I can honestly say that I have never performed as badly as I did in 2015. There were many different contributing factors, but my biggest was the amount of time I spent with an alcoholic drink in my hand.

Most people know how college life can be, but I am going to share a little insight into how my schedule looked in America and how I dealt with the situation I was in.

Moving to America was a really big step for a small-town farmer's boy from Iceland. The only thing I knew about the social life in American college was from what I'd seen in the movies. I can only say that what I saw and experienced is scarily similar. The social life is based on and controlled by alcohol and parties. I am not saying you need to drink alcohol in order to have a social life. I think many students have achieved this without any trouble. I can only share my perspective as a varsity soccer player.

During the fall semester you are in season as a soccer player. From August until the end of November, you are usually playing two games a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays. On top of that you are practicing almost every day to prepare for the next upcoming game. Given this tight schedule, there should not be any room in your schedule for anything other than homework or more sleep. However, college is a strange place. It is a place where the social life runs the show.

My social life was controlled by my teammates. I did not meet anyone my own age in my master's program. Most of the people there were older than me and had a lifetime of experience. So, the only people that I met outside of the classroom were my teammate's friends. Every single time we went out, it was to drink. I know I should have just stayed at home for most of the times, but the people pleaser that I am did not want to appear to be that 'boring.' I know I didn't have to drink. But it was easier for me to meet and talk with new people when I was a little bit drunk. With alcohol, I felt I could step out of my comfort zone, socializing and making friends became more natural.

College is a strange place that is so much fun, I was turning into a new man—one that I did not always recognize. I was no longer taking care of myself as an athlete and was having troubles on the soccer field. I was still stuck in an injury circle that I had been dealing with since the start of 2015. The main reason I could not get out of it was alcohol. Whenever I thought my body was one hundred percent ready, it crumbled down once again. The amount of work that I was trying to dedicate to my sport, was not compatible with my social life and all the other factors that came with it. I spent too many nights at the bars, when I should have stayed home resting. I went to too many house parties, which I could have skipped to stay home to rest and recover. I was eating fast food on too many occasions. I was sacrificing crucial moments when I should have been resting and eating well for my recovery, but instead I was using them to keep my social life alive.

It is easy for me to sit here today and write about what I should have done. But the truth is that I felt I personally needed the acceptance of my teammates. I needed to feel a part of the group in order to thrive as an athlete. But the ways in which I was trying to fit into my social circle did not work for me. If I drink alcohol, I get so incredibly



hungover, I can't get out of bed, and I can't eat anything for almost twenty-four hours. Imagine how idiotic it was for me—an individual who says he wants to become a professional athlete—to want to put myself through that misery. There is a time and place for everything. Why not just party and celebrate after the season when hopefully you as an individual have achieved what you want to have achieved. Social life can be tricky to deal with. Like everything else in life, a healthy social life requires balance.

I don't regret anything. I know today where I stand. I know my moral compass. I learned through a very dark path that I certainly do not need alcohol to be able to thrive as an individual, but I learned that the hard way. Could I have played my cards a little differently at the time? Yes, I definitely think I could have. But is that a guarantee that my life would have turned out for the better? I am not sure.

What I do know is that for many young athletes, there will come a time when you think the social life is more important than your life's dream. I can promise you, if your friends can't understand your dream and are making you choose between them and your dream, you need different friends. Please do yourself a favor and let them go their way, because you will not need that type of people in your life.

## Grit

Will you be able to get somewhere in life, chase after your dreams, or even succeed in life without grit? I don't think so. Grit is one of the virtues that helped me through some of the biggest challenges in my career as an athlete. When I was younger, I never really paid much attention to why I did anything. My actions were simply driven by my passion. I did whatever I enjoyed. I loved playing soccer, so I just trained hard and tried to get better than the other players around me. I never asked any questions. I just went out there and tried to work as hard as I could, so my team would end up with the win.

How did I learn to be gritty? Did it just magically happen? I listened to a Ted Talk by Angela Duckworth Ph.D. that focused on grit. She described grit as the *“Passion and perseverance for a very long-term goal. Grit is having stamina. Grit is staying with your future, day in and day out. Not just for the week, not just for the month, but for years, and working really hard to make that future a reality. Grit is living life like a marathon, not a sprint.”* (Duckworth, 2013). My grit has been tested dealing with injuries. I have faced tough injuries that kept me off the field but have not stopped me in my process toward my long-term goals. I worked through my injuries day in and day out, to see myself back on the soccer field, doing what I love and do best. Dealing with injuries is as Duckworth describes living life as a marathon, not as a sprint.

How do you become a gritty person? No one wakes up and decides to be gritty. How do you keep motivation alive? Duckworth elaborates in her Ted Talk episode on how to build grit in kids. *“Is something called growth mindset, an idea that was created in Stanford University by Carol Dweck. It is the belief that the ability to learn is not fixed.*

*That it can change with your effort. Dr. Dweck has shown that when kids read and learn about the brain, and how it changes and grows in responds to challenge, they are much more likely to perseverance when they fail because they don't believe that failure is a permanent condition.” (Duckworth, 2013).*

The ability to learn can change with effort! This has been the experience of my journey through sports, academic life, and life in general. Seeing my parents work hard each day towards their dream made me aware of what I needed to reach success. It was up to me alone to finish my marathon and make something out of my dream.

To me, it seemed normal to work hard. I had not experience of anything else. Though I took that with me into my daily life and my approach as an athlete, growing up I wanted nothing more than to be like everybody else: Go to school, do my homework, hang out with my friends, go to practice and then maybe go and hang out more with my friends again. Instead, my childhood was a little bit different. Living on a farm requires a little bit more responsibility and work than living in the city. My mom and dad were farmers who both had full-time jobs; my siblings and I were required to help out as much as we could on the farm. I could not hang out with my friends after practice. Sometimes we weren't even able to go to practice because our parents couldn't drive us.

I am so grateful for today for the work I needed to do and the responsibilities I had to take growing up. It was hard as a young kid not always getting what I wanted but being on the other side of not being able to do what I want is a valuable lesson that life is not going to hand you things. That is a simple fact. I know that I can't take life for granted. You need to work and earn your right to do what you desire. That is the work ethic growing up on a farm gives you.

As I got older, I nurtured and developed my grit. I learned and gained grit from watching my mother and father do what they could to make sure my siblings and I got the best possible environment. My dedication towards my sport grew from this foundation of grit. I started to find and develop grit from within myself. Spending so much time becoming a better athlete, coming back from injuries and setbacks is possible only from personal grit. Because of grit, I can come back stronger and more prepared than before. I think that is important as an athlete in general to never be satisfied becoming complacent and to always work on adding something new into your skillset.

Grit will help make that possible, if you are willing to put the time in. It is not going to be easy and definitely not always fun, but to reach the highest standard possible you need to be willing to put in that extra work. In most cases it can be very boring work, but it is essential to maintaining a fit, sharp, strong and most importantly healthy body.

I'm going to share with you a little story. I got badly injured last summer. I was tackled in a game and was driven immediately to the hospital. The x-ray clearly showed some broken bones. The doctor wanted me to get an MRI on my foot, to see how badly injured the ligaments in my foot were. After some examination, a specialist told me that I had a Lisfranc injury in which one or more of the metatarsal bones were displaced from the tarsus, or the ankle and upper part of the foot. I was told that it would take one to two years to heal, and that it may never heal completely. The specialist was basically telling me I would never play competitive soccer ever again.

I am not going to lie, when the doctor walked out of my hospital room, I completely broke down. Just like that, everything I had worked so hard for was taken away from me. When I went to get the MRI and saw the specialist again, it turned out

that my ligaments may not have been as badly damaged as in a typical Lisfranc injury. It was good news! I tried to stay positive. My career might not be over.

I tried to keep up with what the doctors were saying. They could not tell if I needed a surgery or not because of the swelling. Once that reduced after six or seven days, I came back for another examination. The specialist needed to move my foot into various positions in order to determine if I needed a surgery or not—I have never experienced as much pain in my entire life—but everything seemed pretty stable. I needed to wear a cast on my foot for two months and was not allowed to put any pressure onto my foot for the whole process. This meant bedrest for almost sixty days.

Skipping through the next sixty days, I returned to the hospital to get my cast off and see the specialist for another examination. The pictures showed that all my bones had healed back into their original place and that it was time to begin the rehabilitation process. My doctor wanted me to have the crouches for as long as I needed to be able to walk normally again. My doctor told me that it could take three weeks but could also take up to six weeks. He was right, around the sixth week, I was finally able to start walking without any assistance from the crouches. With help from a physical trainer, I was back into building myself up. I did a lot of biking and exercises to strengthen my foot. Weeks passed as I worked hard to get myself back. The injury occurred in the beginning of June. It was not until late into January that I have just started to run again. I still feel pain and my foot is chronically swollen, but that is not going to stop me from trying to get back even stronger than before.

You see, from the moment I got the news about the extent of my injury, I have tried to accept the fact it happened and stay positive. All I can do is believe and hope that

I can one day return to the field. In fact, I will do everything in my power to do so. I know it is going to take even more work than I have ever faced in my life, but I am willing to do it. This is my personal grit.

If it does not happen, at least I know that I tried. Only after doing my very best to make a comeback can I close this chapter as a soccer player happy and satisfied. If it ends up that I have played my last game competitively, I am also okay with that. There are a lot of things in this beautiful life that are waiting for me. But until that happens, I am going to give my career the opportunity that it deserves. Overcoming mistakes and distractions and exercising grit are only part of the journey. I will tackle this redemption with my passion to my sport and perseverance that I will come back stronger than ever!

## **Discipline**

To be disciplined requires commitment. As Nancy Slonim Aronie writes in her book *Writing from the Heart*, no one is born with discipline. It is earned through work and commitment (Aronie, 1998, p 103-112). My discipline as an athlete grew much when I was young. I had to work and earn my free time to be able to train and practice. I needed to persevere through chores at my farm so that my parents could have time to drive me to practice. It was a valuable lesson. Showing me that sometimes you need to spend some time doing the ‘boring’ stuff to earn the right to do what you consider ‘fun.’

This is similar to the story Slonim Aronie talks about in her book about a therapist who is trying to treat a thirty-year old financial analyst with a lifelong problem with procrastination. The therapist paints a picture for her. He finds out that she likes cake and loves frosting and that the frosting is always the first part of the cake she eats. He helps her understand that her work habits are exactly the same as her cake-eating habits. She starts with the good/fun stuff at her work, and then drags herself through the boring stuff for the rest of her working day. He explained to her that if she was willing to turn this around and force herself to do the unpleasant things for the first hour, she would then be free to enjoy the other six. She saw his logic and was able to turn this around and fix her procrastination problem (Aronie, 1998, p 103-112).

Change is not always this easy. No one would choose to spend more time miserable than happy. But why do we do sometimes fall into that trap? I think it is because we haven’t recognized it within ourselves. It takes the experience to see what discipline truly does for you. I have had to sacrifice and prioritize since I was young. I was taught from a very young age that to do what I enjoy, I needed to take care of other

aspects of life first. It has helped me to develop the discipline that I have today. As an athlete, I have a lot of discipline. If you want to stay on top of your game in a professional or a semi-professional environment, you absolutely will need to be disciplined.

No one likes to be injured. Being on the sideline, doing some individual work, some rehabilitation exercise, drains all your will power out of you. I have faced many injuries that have kept me off the field for a long time. The amount of time and energy I needed to build myself up would not be possible without discipline.

But like in the story about the therapist and the financial analyst with the procrastination problem, I was willing to do all the boring stuff to be able to enjoy myself on the field again. If I didn't have the passion I have for soccer and feel that it makes me happy, I would have quit long ago. If you truly have passion for what you are doing, being disciplined can be easy; after a while you even start to appreciate all that extra work.

What I need to work on however is becoming disciplined in the other aspects of my life. I have put all of my effort and commitment into my sport which has made other aspects of my life such as school, my job, and my social life suffer.

I don't relate much to being disciplined in school; books and I have never been a good combination. I try my best to take care of it, but the passion and the commitment are never truly there. I know how important it is to seek knowledge and find a future job. Being able to do that I will need to take care of my education with as much passion and commitment I give to my sport. But even though I know how important it is I always allow myself to take a day off. I tell myself 'I will take care of it tomorrow,' until I have



postponed my school work so many times that I get hit with the brutal reality that I need to take care of all my work with almost no time left. As a student I don't have the discipline that I need to maintain myself at the highest possible standard. Though I find the power and discipline to sit down and finish what I start, and I have always delivered, it is not always my best work.

I need to start putting more accountability and discipline into my academics. I know it will quell my sleepless nights and reduce my anxiety. I could easily be more disciplined; I could do each boring assignment at a time, so they do not stack up on my agenda. But instead I let them pile up, and then go into some kind of savior mode and try to rescue myself from failing. This is not a message or a behavior that I would recommend.

When I do finally start my projects, I find discipline driving me forward. As Nancy Slonim Aronie talks about so well in her book, work will always require discipline. Beginning is the hardest part. We always look for the rewards first. But if you start and stick to the not-so-pleasant part, you will find the reward you are looking for and you can enjoy yourself after that (Aronie, 1998, p 103-112).

## Where Do My Talents Lie?

My talent has always been around sports. This is where my passion lies. As long as I am playing, my priority in life will always be sport. Through my love and commitment, I developed my passion in sport. It makes me happy and gives me purpose. I *mean* something to people as an athlete.

How did I realize my talent? Why did I become passionate about sports? Can you be talented but, not passionate at the same time? Dr. Robert and Jennifer describe it this way: “*Passion can be an excitement, enthusiasm, inspiration, love, and affection to an activity. Meanwhile talent is a native ability, a natural aptitude, for excelling in a specific pursuit. Passion is the great motivator. Talent is the ability to translate our passion into practice.*” (Nash and Jang, 2015, p 31).

In other words, passion and talent work together towards finding success. If you don't have the talent, your passion alone will probably not help you succeed. On the other hand, if you are not passionate, your talents will never fully be shown to the world. These two factors work hand in hand for success. I have played with a lot of talented individuals. Sadly, I have seen so many great talents go the wrong way because they simply did not have the passion for what they were doing, there was always something else that they found more interesting at the time. For me, I was in it for the long run. I was passionate about becoming a professional athlete. I would do anything to make my dream come true.

To this end, when I turned nineteen years old, I knew I needed a new challenge. I wanted to move to the capital area to train and play soccer. The training facility in the

capital area was on an entirely different level than the one that I grew up with. The capital area facility had full-sized indoor turf, and full-sized outdoor turf fields. Teams could train all year long. My hometown facility had a very small outdoor turf field that could barely hold six people at once. Before that little turf field was developed, we were practicing on an indoor horse facility. Playing soccer on a surface that was built mainly with mud and gravel was difficult, even treacherous. The playing field had little rocks in it which meant that falling down usually resulted in deep, bloody cuts. At every single practice inside that horse ring, someone twisted an ankle or got some gravel stuck in a knee, elbow or hand because they fell down. It didn't stop us though. Our passion for the game was so incredibly strong, injuries and inconveniences like rocks and mud didn't drive us away from the sport. We knew we only had to stick to it during the winter, because during the summer we had a great facility to play soccer outside. Driven by the prospect of practicing and competing on the superior summer fields, hardcore soccer players kept committed. Also, some of us used the wintertime to play different sports like basketball.

Because my decision to move away from home was based on my sport, I did not think it would be that hard for me. I thought I was ready. I wanted to chase my dreams. Though the capital of Iceland (Reykjavik), was only three-and-a-half-hour drive from my hometown, it scared me, and I had a really tough time adjusting. Thankfully I was living with my brother so I had someone with me I knew closely, who I could turn to if I ran into a challenge or a problem. Leaving home was definitely the right step for me. As hard it was, it was definitely the right step on my path to developing my athletic career. The

move allowed me—even forced me—to explore the world on my own without my mom or my dad breathing down my neck and helping me in every step of the way.

After I finished college in Iceland, my journey took me to America, the land of opportunity! As I have clearly stated, I am not a fan of big changes. If I feel comfortable, it is really hard for me to leave that safe place. I think that every single person must confront such changes; they help us grow. My move to America exposed my weaknesses and forced me to face them.

## **Why Did I Want to Go to America?**

The answer is simple really. I moved to America to play soccer. Though being able to get a degree while I played soccer sweetened the deal, it was never my main motivator. Pursuing a degree was just my way of trying out a new challenge as a soccer player and seeing where that would take me. It did take me exactly where I needed to help me grow and develop as a person—not as an athlete, but as an individual in this world. I left Iceland a scared, narrow-minded, little kid; I came back with a whole different way of looking at life. Like so many young people in life's journey, I needed to properly move away from home in order to make my brain start working. Out of the protective environment that I had received from my mom my whole life, I was on my own for real. It was the scariest part of my life, without a doubt.

I was never an adventurous person growing up. From a young age I was always really loyal to my home and had a tough time traveling to games or spending weekends away from home. In spite of that I had a dream of becoming a professional soccer player.

You never realize how hard it is to leave home until you do. All the things that you take for granted when you are still living at home are no longer at hand, and you are all alone. I remember the first day I caught a cold in America. The first person I called for help was my mom. Why? I just truly thought she would know where I should go to seek help. Instead of asking my teammates where I could get medicine or help, I turned to my mom. That is how fast I was holding to my comfort zone. I did not look anywhere outside it. I did not know how to.

Even though your parents will always be right by your side every step of the way, you need to take this journey alone for most of the part. They will be there for support

and guidance, but as for living and finding your place in this world, that is all on you alone. I see that now. As hard as it has been the reward is worth it. Living and experiencing college in America has been one of my biggest achievements.

I have achieved and earned many trophies as an athlete, but they do not compare to the fact of my stepping outside of my comfort zone and coming out a winner. I moved to America with a specific way of life. I was afraid of living it, afraid of mistakes, afraid of failures. Today I make them with open arms because no matter what you do or how you live your life, those mistakes, failures, and all the other setbacks that may happen always come knocking eventually. All I can do is take one day at a time and really make the best of each moment.

I have never looked at my background as anything special; I never thought it stood out. Mine was a very normal and healthy childhood. It wasn't until I moved to a different country that I learned that I had something unique to offer and a different perspective of life to share. Before coming to American, I did not dwell on the past or think much about my childhood. I just moved forward with my dream and goal in mind. I did not attend any classes that asked the question, "Why?" I was in what seemed like a factory-driven environment of get your education, no matter the cost, and get a job. Dr. Robert and Jennifer use this 'why' to help their students make meaning. In *Preparing Students for Life Beyond College*, they remind readers frequently of a famous saying by Friedrich Nietzsche: "He who has a 'why' to live can bear almost any how." They help students find a deep, sustaining meaning "why" to live as much as finding "how" to make a living in your life. (Nash and Jang, 2015, p 3). I was very lucky to be among those students.

I was exposed to the power of personal reflection through storytelling in my first semester in college in America. I was struggling to really commit to the program I had found my way into, but that simple approach opened up my mind and turned my entire thought process around! It took time and effort, but my tunnel vision approach to life eventually expanded and got brighter. My upbringing in a hard-working environment was one where you did not show any sign of vulnerability. I was stuck in that ‘strong’ approach for some time when I initially arrived in America. I had a very difficult time sharing personal stories with my classmates. This was not because I did not want to, but because I had never done it before. My habitual ways of being—my comfort zone—had such a tight grip on me I could not break free. In time and with great effort I managed to take one baby step at a time to find the courage to step out of my comfort zone.

In my program I was going over all of my life. It was taking me places I had never thought of before. Through reflection and sharing with other classmates, I talked about the people that have been closest to me and how their role helped me on my journey to becoming the person that I want to be.

## **What Makes My Story Unique?**

Before my time in America, I was certain that I wanted to become a professional athlete. It was my passion; it was my calling and it was the only thing that I was good at. I did not have anything else in this life. It is what got me up in the morning and it gave me strength to push forward. Little did I know that maybe there was something more to life. I was about to find out what living really is and will be for the rest of my living days.

Moving to America is probably the pinnacle factor in my story and how I see myself today as an individual. The beginning of the journey to answer the question “who am I?” in her book *How Philosophy Can Save Your Life: 10 Ideas That Matter Most*, Marietta McCarthy describes individuality as self-possession. *“It is our task alone to piece all of our puzzles (parts) together to make a stable, sturdy whole being. No one description can be captured of individuality; each of us is much more than just an athlete, a pilot, a teacher, a coach. We are mixes of many components, both internal and external. Our individuality is much rather defined by the actions in which we carry out our tasks, big or small, and by whom we love.”* (McCarty, 2009, p 165-197).

Looking back to my journey I never saw anything special stand out. My life was normal; I thought I was no different from anyone else. (In a weird way this is such a disrespectful way to look at yourself). But now I know that I am as flawed as an individual as I am perfect. I am my own person. I stand on my own feet like the next guy. I have my own life experiences and thought processes that identify who I am. I am always growing and developing. It just took time and self-awareness to realize that.

I moved to America with one goal in mind: play soccer. I wanted to experience life’s new challenges as an athlete. I did not intend to make my academics part of my



priority. Life is however mysterious. The only reason I survived and why my time in America was so important to me is because of the academic program I enrolled in. My program threw me into all kinds of directions I had never let myself go before.

I remember the first time I read the question 'Who am I' in class. The only thing that popped into my head was my name. After that I was stuck. To save my life, I could not think of anything else to say. Why? Probably because I had never really allowed myself the time or freedom to explore and find the true meaning of that question.

## **The Search for ME**

It is funny to think back on how I truly ended up in my college programs in America. I was not there by choice. I was there because no other program wanted me. I never would have been able to play or study in America if it wasn't for my professor. All the other programs denied my admission due to my insufficient use of the English language. That turned out perfectly in the end, because I don't know if I had learned this much about life in all the other programs. I ended up exactly where I needed to be in a class and a program that required me to be very personal. Its sole purpose was to give me the freedom to explore ideas and thoughts to find meaning in my life.

In Dr. Robert J. Nash and Jennifer Jang's book, *Preparing Students for Life Beyond College*, they offer students the permission they need in order to pause in the middle of going through the motions. This 'pause' enables students to talk about their deeper existential questions and universal life issues in an open and honest way face to face. They offer students serious meaning-making quests that help them better understand and clarify who they are. "*Hopes and dreams (What is it that I want to do with my life)? Values, morals and ethics (Just who is it that I am striving to become as a moral being)? Religion or spirituality (What is the right religion for me)? Core relationship (Why is it so hard to live alone but also so hard to sustain a relationship)? Intersecting identities (who am I relation to my skin color, social class, religious background and gender)? Career, vocation and job (am I studying what is right for me)? Civic engagement (how can I fulfill what I have been told is my civic responsibility to improve the world locally, nationally, and internationally)? Self-care, wellness, and balance (How will I ever learn*

*to take care of myself so that I don't become just another mentally exhausted, workplace fatality going through the motions)?” (Nash and Jang, 2015, p 10-12).*

These are all questions that Robert and Jennifer encourage their students to answer honestly to themselves. This is the part where I truly started to see the world with different eyes. This is also the part where everything became chaotic for me. I had a million different questions that no one could answer for me. It took me time to face the reality that no one except me had the answers I was looking for. I was the key to all of my troubles. Not anyone else. It was not my mom's job description or my dad's job description to ask the right questions. Even though they had been too involved in too many of my life decisions to that point, I needed to take control of my own life, my own destiny, and take the first step to facing the world and creating my own reality. I am going to share with you a little story that hopefully shows how alone and in the dark, I felt and shed more light on where I am going with all of this.

Two or three months into my first semester, I was having a rough time settling in. I was struggling academically and as a soccer player. If I am totally honest, I was playing terribly. I was not playing anywhere near my standard or near the standards my coaches expected. A conversation I had with my coach at this point stands out for me as a turning point. It was on a bus on our way to New Hampshire to play our final game of the regular season. I was sitting in the fourth row in the bus, reading a book that was on my agenda for one of my classes when my coach called me to come and have a talk with him. I figured it was about the upcoming game, since it was a very important game for us. He had been talking to most of the guys in the starting lineup, so it made sense that he'd talk to me about the upcoming game against New Hampshire. I sat next to him and he looked

at me and asked, "How are you doing? Is the school going well?" With everything that had been going on such as all the chaotic questions I had about life that had been going in circles in my head, I was all over the place. I had so many questions that I needed answers to, but I did not know where to start or where I was going. I decided that I would just go for it. I looked at him and answered plain and simple. "Truthfully, I am not doing so well, sir. I am lost and confused, and I don't know if I really belong in this environment. I am not enjoying playing soccer right now, and I am struggling to get my academics in line. I just feel like I am letting myself and the people that fought for me to get into the program down. I don't know what to do. I am seriously thinking about going home, so I won't fail you and everyone else. This was too hard." It was a long and deep conversation that truly came from the heart. We shared stories that meant a great deal to both of us. From that moment our understanding and respect for one another rose to a new level.

I have always been a closed personality when it comes to my emotions. I have always found it difficult opening up and sharing, even with my family members. I don't want to be vulnerable, look weak, or admit that I am afraid. But in that case, it felt like it was meant to be. I just had to get this off my chest. If I hadn't, I don't think I would have settled in the way I wanted to. In fact, I think I would have given up. I would have let the worries and the fear consume me and gone home, where I felt most safe and comfortable. But now I am working each day and each moment to better myself and allowing myself to be vulnerable and tell people how I really feel. I am no longer worrying what people think about me, what they like and dislike. I have spent too much time already in my life with that worry on my mind.

Are my thoughts and actions always the right ones? Of course, not but executing and making decisions—good or bad—I deal with them as they happen and learn from them as I can. I am allowing myself to go outside of my comfort zone and start to find who I really am. I want to make it perfectly clear though that even though I have taken the first steps in the search of myself, I am far from done. I may never truly find the complete version of who I am, but that will not stop me from trying. I will with each day and each moment, try to make myself and people around me better. Through my grit, my beliefs, my journey, I hope to be a role model. I hope my quest for the true meaning of ME will inspire and be of benefit to others.

## Regrets

I have gone through a lot of challenges and life experience to get to where I am today. How? It all starts with accepting the fact we don't have all the answers. What I have thought helpful to use in a daily life practice is flexibility. Mariette McCarty writes about flexibility in one of her chapters in *How Philosophy Can Save Your Life: 10 Ideas That Matter Most*. *"Flexibility is the ongoing practice of moving with life. By accepting change as an inevitable aspect of being alive allows us to flow more easily with life's movement. If I know deep down that the world will renew itself in every moment, I learn to expect change as a natural part of life. Inflexibility drains energy and power away from us. That results in exhaustion in the long run. This can be aspects like refusing change of opinion, altering practice, adjusting a priority, or simply listening to those with whom we disagree. With this we might miss openings and opportunities to grow and regrets begin to stack up as a result."* (McCarty, M., 2009 p 99-131).

It sounds simple, but it really isn't. Our circumstances give us specific requirements driven by the fact that we need to figure out our future as quickly as possible. Questions such as 'what job will I do in the future, what will sustain me financially, so that I can buy a house and a car?' seem to conflict with the bigger questions of our true self. After all, what is so wrong with letting yourself stay in the present and figure out what you really want in this world?

In the same flexibility chapter McCarty talks about "letting life live you...Settle yourself on whatever is immediately present. When you feel like your attention is wandering away, hustle back to the moment. This is the real secret to life, to be completely engaged with what you are doing in the here and now." (McCarty, M., 2009.)

This practice has taken time and great effort to begin. I am still to this day trying to live my life in the present moment. Obviously, this is not always possible. You need to look into your future and try to figure out where you are headed. But since I started using this approach I have been more at ease with my life. I don't worry as much about my past or future; I know they will be taken care of if I truly put my effort and heart into the present. With this approach, opportunities are not scary thoughts, but exciting challenges that I am willing to face with open arms.

For the longest time I questioned every single decision of my life. "Did I make the right choice?" "Man, I should have done it the other way," and "If I would have chosen this, I would be in a better situation." There are million things that you can dwell on and ask the 'what if' question about. These questions itched my brain throughout my first semester in college. Constantly second guessing myself, I was sure that I made the wrong choice going to college. I had seriously considered packing my bags and going home. I felt that there were no beneficial factors going my way, that I was not in a program that would benefit my future. And I was certainly not getting any better as a soccer player. What was the point then really? Then I started wondering. What if I go home, what then? Is that going to magically make everything better? I didn't know. I still don't. But was I willing to waste this opportunity? Was I willing to leave my master's program, leave my teammates, and give in to the fear of being out my comfort zone?

My fear of failing was so severe, that I could not take it anymore. And I was not playing well on the soccer field which made the whole process even more difficult. Soccer was the reason why I was even in the discussion to go to college and yet I was not playing well on the field. I was letting myself down as a performer. I was not making the

impact on the team that I wanted. It all seemed too much and it scared me, I had been considered one of the important players on the team. The problem was not the program, it was not the team. It was entirely my fault. From day one, I was the problem. I was never completely committed. I was always looking for reasons, and actions that could give me an excuse to pack my bags and go home. I really didn't feel confident athletically or academically. So, what could I do?

I started to take one step at a time to seek help through my teacher, my coaches, and through my class. I slowly and steadily began to become more flexible. I was in a new environment, of course it would not be the same I was used to. I had to adapt and allow myself to be in the moment.

After that moment on the bus when I opened up to my coach, things changed for me. Instead of complaining and wondering what might have been if I had gone home, I started to *live* the dream and face my challenges. I did not have all the answers; no one really does. But I started to pay attention to other people. Understanding their perspective, their story, and their life experience helped me to be brave and take a step out of my comfort zone. I am glad that I spoke to my coach about my struggles. It was helpful for both of us, I think. For me to open up and admit to myself that I could not do this alone helped me face the fact that I needed help along the way. As for my coach, it was helpful for him to understand where I was coming from and why I was playing like I was. I was facing life problems that were beyond his ability to fix. All he could do was listen and share with me his own experiences.

Once I started to take care of my present, I really began to find *myself* in this new environment. Being in the moment and using every single day to do what I enjoy doing, I



started enjoying playing soccer again. I stopped worrying where it would necessarily take me. I recognized the joy of just being a regular guy enjoying the privilege of playing soccer and living in another country. Who knows, maybe this is the only chance I will get to live in another country to play the sport that I love. I realized that I was not ready to waste that precious time with worries about the past or the future. I was here and now and would make the best out of it.

## **Vulnerability**

I thought that I needed to take on the world on my own. I actually thought I could. But I was in over my head. I was too afraid of showing weakness. Thinking it would make me weak and make people think I wasn't good enough to be where I was, I only saw shame in asking people around me for help. That was when vulnerability came into the equation and helped me understand its power to find a sense of belonging and joy in what you are doing. In *Daring Greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent and lead*, Brené Brown explains some of the many interesting facts about vulnerability that I had been struggling with.

I had always considered vulnerability to be a weakness. To me, there is no time or for vulnerability in the world of sport. Brown disagrees, "Vulnerability isn't good or bad: It's not what we call a dark emotion, nor is it always a light, positive experience. Vulnerability is the core of all emotions and feelings. To feel is to be vulnerable. To believe vulnerability is weakness is to believe that feeling is weakness." She says that what most of us fail to understand and learn is that vulnerability is also the birthplace of the emotions and experience that we crave. "If clarity is what we search for or a deeper meaningful spiritual life, vulnerability is the path for us." (Brené Brown, 2012).

Reading this made me realize that I never knew what vulnerability really meant. The only people I had ever really allowed myself to be vulnerable with were my parents. I received all of my support and guidance from them and never allowed anyone to see my true self outside of that relationship. I did not have the courage to show the rest of the world who I really was deep down. This was a huge part of the reason that I never really felt I belonged in America. Because I thought I could face my struggles all on my own,

and I did not trust anyone to share my burden, I did not let anyone inside my comfort zone. Locked in this vault, I was too afraid of letting people in. I felt I didn't have anyone close to me who I could trust. And if I opened up, I did not want to seem weak or worthless. I did spend a lot of time using Skype to talk to my family. Even though I was able to open up to them, and they tried their best to encourage and talk to me about my struggles, I never found the connection I needed to adapt to my environment. Instead I needed someone who was familiar who understood what my environment was asking of me. That is when trust comes in.

I was headed for loneliness, misery, and failure. I needed help. I could not do this all by myself. In *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown goes on to discuss the support we all need and how to get the best out of that support. Brown confirms what I suspected: putting all our vulnerability out there for random people is not going to come off in our favor. Vulnerability is based on a mutual respect between people and requires boundaries. It is about sharing our vulnerability with people who have earned the right to know about our feelings and our experiences. It is part of the trust building-process we all need in our lives. Without boundaries and trust, vulnerability will lead to disconnection, distrust and disengagement. (Brené Brown, 2012).

Slowly with each day, I and my varsity soccer coach began to create mutual respect for one another. I often went into his office to discuss soccer and our season but our conversations often changed pace and we just ended up discussing how I was doing in school and in life. I initially played it tough and always told him that I was doing well, that my teammates were great, my program was great, and I had nothing to complain

about. I was not ready to be vulnerable with him just yet. In my mind I did not want to complain or appear to be soft.

But the truth was, I was not doing well. I was facing some real problems that I could not wrap my hands around. I could not entirely explain what exactly it was that was making me struggle so badly in my new environment. I truly think that, considering my story and my personality, I needed a personal connection that would show me that I truly belonged in my new environment and that I was good enough to be where I was.

How could I find it? Where would I start? I didn't see any solution other than just giving up, leaving and never thinking about it again. I was so wrapped around the fact I needed to take this journey alone, that I was strong enough mentally and physically to handle it. I had gone through some parts of my journey alone. This was just another addition to be part of that journey.

I had grown up highly valuing the ability to fix problems and face challenges alone; I looked at it as a sign of strength. But like Brené Brown puts it, in reality it can be miserable and feel rather depressing trying to be strong and face everything we do all alone though we admire the strength and the commitment it requires. However, the vulnerability journey is not that kind of journey you take alone, it requires support. We need non-judgmental people that will push us to try out new ways of being. When we fall, we are going to need that helping hand pulling us back up from the ground and back to our feet. There is no shame or a sign of weakness in asking for support. (Brené Brown, 2012). At the point when I recognized the true strength of vulnerability, a weight was lifted off my shoulders and my soul. I had to ask for support.

I first turned to my professor in my program. We'd had some intimate conversations in the past. I opened up to him about my problems. I told him that I was thinking about giving up, that the journey was too much for me, that I could not see myself being strong enough to finish it. I was playing terribly as a soccer player, but I was cocky enough to talk about how bad the quality was. That did not make any sense. If it was that bad, why wasn't I playing better and being the best player on the field?

My connection off the field was close to nothing. All the people that I had interactions with were either my teammates or my coaches. I had no life off the field where I could just go and be me. In our first conversation, my professor just sat there actively listening and asking questions every now and then. He gave me the utmost respect and allowed me to pour my heart out. After I was done talking, he told me that I was asking all the right questions. Leaving and going home? Maybe that was what I needed. Maybe it wasn't. No one could truly know for sure. We all make decisions in life that will determine who we are and who we want to become. That's part of living. Was I ready to go home, knowing that I could have tried better to adjust and find the connection I needed to feel like I was at home? He certainly did not want to lose me from his program. He was also certain that my varsity soccer coach was not ready to lose me from his program either. But at the end of the day, what I wanted was all up to me. He encouraged me to talk to my coach and tell him what I was going through. I would eventually get up the courage to do just that.

Walking out of that conversation, I felt so much lighter. My soul was ten times lighter. I did not have any specific answers. Hell, I even had more questions! But taking the step forward and being vulnerable with my professor brought me some ease with all

my questions for a moment. It was no longer my own burden to carry. I had allowed another person into my struggles and asked for support. The reality seemed a little less scary.

I still had my doubts, however. I was not sure if I was ready to go and open up to my coach. In my world, sport had never been a place where I could show weakness or vulnerability. I still didn't think my struggle on the field had anything to do with my personal life. My turning point was when I finally admitted to myself that I could not do this all on my own. I needed someone that I could trust to share my concerns and struggles.

I truly thought my problem was easily fixed on the field. I would fix it like I always had done in the past. I'd go into a manic mode of physical exertion and just get back to my basics. I'd go to my roots and out work every single problem building up confidence and to reminding myself that I am what I am because of my hard work, not my talent. I powered through training sessions. I showed up thirty to forty minutes before practice and used that time to physically and mentally prepare for each session. I stayed late after training to work on my passing, my shooting, my technique or I do extra gym stuff to keep myself sharp.

In this case my work ethic and how I was approaching my sport were not the problem. It was so much bigger than that. My problem was everything that was happening around me in my personal life that I wasn't coping with. It was distracting for me to be who I am and who I wanted to show people. I could not get used to the food, I could not get used to the language, I could not find a connection with my teammates and I could not find a place where I could just be myself. I always had some mask on, trying

to fit in, trying to be good enough. If things kept going like this, I would not just fail every single person who risked their reputation to bring me into this school, I would also turn into some new individual that certainly wasn't me. I wasn't living up to my fullest potential. I could not let that happen. I had to do something. As my professor encouraged me to do, I used my next opportunity to have a conversation with my varsity coach.

I started our conversation by letting him know I was not here to complain. I just needed him to understand why I felt like I was playing so badly. So I opened myself up. He listened with respect. When I was done talking, he told me that he knew exactly what I was going through. He had gone to England to try out his luck as a young soccer player. Much like me, he never felt like he belonged there. Being an extrovert, he was able to cope a little bit better in a new setting. I however am an extreme introvert. I do not like new settings, but they present my best chance to learn and do a little better.

He agreed with me that I had not been playing to my fullest potential. That he had perhaps put too much pressure on me to begin with. He wanted to make sure though that I knew I was good enough to be in his program and he could see that clearly. He shared with me more stories about his struggle as a soccer player and that I wasn't alone in this. It was perfectly normal to feel little lost in a new environment. He said he was there for me if I ever needed to talk.

As when I had had a similar conversation with my professor, when I spoke to my coach, I felt ten times lighter. Now I had another person who was willing to share this burden with me—a person who had made it clear I was good enough. That is what my personality needed to be accepted by the people around me.

Being vulnerable with my coach gave me the courage to slowly reach out to teammates that I lived with. The reward was indescribable. But as Brené Brown points out, there needs to be a mutual respect between both parties in order for vulnerability to do its magic. When I felt I had built my teammates trust and I sensed their respect, I slowly began to allow them into my life as well. Though I never went as deeply into my struggle as I did with my coach and my professor, I allowed myself to be who I am around them. That truly helped me adjust to my environment. It took effort, patience, and a lot of courage to be vulnerable. But in the end it all was worth it. If I hadn't forced myself to be vulnerable with my professor and my coach, I truly would have given up. I would not be sitting here writing this thesis. I would not have all the friendships that I have with some of my teammates from college.

Being vulnerable is not an easy task, and I am still learning to be completely vulnerable. Even though it has played a huge role in many of my achievements, there is always room for improvement. I try my best to be vulnerable with the people that I love and respect. It makes me feel exposed and at risk of getting hurt, but that is inevitable. Getting the good emotions, such as happiness, joy and empathy you will need vulnerability. It truly was the turning point for me. It made me appreciate that the problems and the struggles I was having were just the start of a better days to come.

I remember when I first went to my professor to talk to him about my struggles. My heart was pounding so fast. I had thought about every single outcome this conversation could lead to. I was truly thinking about leaving my program. Giving up and going home, to where I belonged. I was so afraid that he would be disappointed in me and disappointed in the fact that he had given me a chance to attend a college program in



America. Though my mind was going million different directions, I built up the courage to be vulnerable and told him how I was really feeling. After I had finished talking, he was not angry, disappointed, or let down in any way. He was more interested in why I was feeling the way I was. He understood it must be difficult for international students to be far away from home. Not knowing where your “home” might be in this new environment. But he encouraged me to have a chat with my coach as well and tell him how I was feeling.

Though all the people around me could give me support and guidance, no one could really answer all the questions I had burning in my mind and chest. Those answers had to come from me alone. If my place was really meant to be in America or back home in Iceland, that was a journey that I needed to find on my own.

Being vulnerable did not make me weak, instead it made me stronger in a way that lifted my burden. It showed me that with vulnerability you can find strong emotions like belonging and warmth. Such power encourages me to try to the best of my ability to be vulnerable and allow myself to be seen for who I am and what I represent. I still have a lot to learn and I am working on it each day.

## Success

I can't say that I have really made my dream come true as an athlete. Though I dreamt of becoming a professional soccer player, I have come to terms with the fact that I will not become a professional soccer player. I play as a semi-professional soccer player today in Iceland and have for the last three years. Today I am still facing the fact of being injured after my last season. I don't know if I will ever completely come back from that injury, but I will do everything in my power to try. If it goes down the path, I will not be able to play at my highest standard I am okay with that. I am proud of what I have accomplished, and I am proud of the things soccer has given me in life. The opportunities soccer has brought me are incredible. I don't think I will ever again define my life simply by who I am and was as an athlete. It is a big part of who I am and what I have become, but my journey and the process have been the biggest part of who I am.

What I have learned is that even though the product is what you seek and want, the process towards it is the beauty of life. Robert Nash and Jennifer Jang go over this in one of their chapters in the book *Preparing Students for Life Beyond College*. They describe the meaning-making journey as a process more than a product. They give a great analogy of this with the help of philosopher Alan Watts who believed that in music, one doesn't make the end of composition the point of the composition. If that was so, then the best conductors would be those who played the fastest! People would go to concerts just to hear one, final crashing chord, because that would be the end! Their understanding is that the ending of a symphony is not the main focus, the focus is on the music that is played all the way through the symphony. Like the musical composition, life and the

meaning-making journey ought to be the opportunity for us as people to sing or dance, while the music is still playing. To them the meaning is the process and the purpose is the product. (Nash and Jang, 2015, p 13).

I think that is such a beautiful way of looking at it. Why spend all my days worrying about the final product in my journey when life is right in front of me and I am here to make the most out of it? My time on this earth might come to an end tomorrow. Why not use my time enjoying my process towards my product? I wasted too much valuable time thinking about my product when I was staying in America. Instead of using my precious opportunity to really enjoy the process. I finally came out of my comfort zone and saw how I was wasting my time worrying about stuff that was not necessarily in my control. What I could control was my approach to take on each day. I could spend my time enjoying and really getting caught up in the moment I was in, or I could have stayed in my comfort zone worrying about my end product and maybe never accomplish anything.

My biggest success to this day is not anything sports related. It is the courage to leave my comfort zone and find out how much fun it really is to be in the moment. The time and the energy spent worrying about life is a time wasted.

## **Specific Take-Aways**

Following your dreams is what matters. Finding a way to deal with problems and dilemmas along the way is part of the journey. The real beauty of a dream is the process of trying to achieve it. Regardless of the outcome, the process is part of our own life symphony. We need to play it; life is not going to happen on its own.

Going to America helped me personally become more open minded to what living really is. It certainly was not a smooth ride, but a very important one for me. Raised in an “overprotective” environment, I never really had to stand on my own feet and face the challenges that came my way on my own. I was always able to fall back into my comfort zone and to my parents whenever I felt life pushing me into new challenges. But maybe this was exactly what I needed in order to become who I am today and to prepare me for the meaning-making questions I faced in America? All we can do is to be brave and trust in ourselves.

Joseph Campbell described the meaning-making process very well when he wrote, “Nietzsche was the one who did the job for me. At a certain moment in his life, the idea came to him of what he called ‘the love of your fate.’ Whatever your fate is, whatever the hell happens, you say, ‘This is what I need.’ It may look like a wreck, but go at it as though it were an opportunity, a challenge. If you bring love to that moment—not discouragement—you will find the strength is there. Any disaster you can survive is an improvement in your character, your stature, and your life. What a privilege! This is when the spontaneity of your own nature will have a chance to flow.

Then, when looking back at your life, you will see that the moments which

seemed to be great failures followed by wreckage were the incidents that shaped the life you have now. You'll see that this is really true. Nothing can happen to you that is not positive. Even though it looks and feels at the moment like a negative crisis, it is not. The crisis throws you back, and when you are required to exhibit strength, it comes.” (Joseph Campbell, *A Joseph Campbell Companion: Reflection on the Art of Living*, 1995).

No matter what happens, no matter what type of situation you find yourself in, there is always room in your character for improvement. It is in our own hands to act and spend time on ourselves. No one is responsible for our actions except us. People may try to talk you into all sorts of different directions, but you must be led by the light of your own true character.

What path are you willing to follow? Your own path or your friends' path? Having good personal morals and values will make these types of question easier to answer. They will guide you towards the path you desire.

Part of this journey is making mistakes along the way as well. Making mistakes is essential to growth. It is the learning process of making something good—your life—even better.

Being an international athlete and an international student was difficult. Feeling I needed someone who had earned the right to know how I was feeling, I sought personal connection. I learned that trust is not built in a day, that it is an ongoing effort. Time and a lot of vulnerability helped me gain the sense of connection I needed to keep going.

At one point on my journey, I was ready to give up and go back home to Iceland where I felt most safe. I was willing to let my fear of my failure, take away my potential

and my opportunity to experience the life of a collegiate athlete and to get a master's degree. I am no longer willing to let fear lead me.

My journey and my decisions in life have been far from perfect, but I faced them, learned from them, and continue to grow into the character I am becoming. The process has no end.

## **Summaries and Conclusion**

My journey has been difficult with many bumpy roads along the way. My fear of leaving my comfort zone developed early in my life. I was very happy and comfortable with my 'ordinary' life, but to achieve my dreams as an athlete I needed to find a way out of my comfort zone. Little by little, with courage and vulnerability, I started taking small steps outside of my comfort zone, but whenever I felt times were getting tough, I allowed myself to get dragged back into my comfort zone.

By moving to America, I forced myself into an environment I was unfamiliar and uncomfortable with. It was a whole new world for me. I took that jump into the abyss because of my love for soccer. As I chase my dream of becoming a professional soccer player, I gained new experience in all aspects of my life.

It definitely did not go down as I pictured it. My first few months in a foreign country really hit me hard. I felt I was not able to cope with the style of play of my team, my school program, or my social life. I was so far outside of my comfort zone, I felt completely alone. I had two choices, adapt or die. I had to learn how to act inside a new culture and inside a completely new system. I had to find my identity and my place.

Because I was too closed up, it took time and was a real struggle to try to fit in. I did not let people into my life, and I was not making an effort to allow people to be a part of my life. However with the help of my program and the people around it, I was able to slowly build trust and connections. Learning how to embrace vulnerability was a key factor there.

I definitely would have not survived this journey if it wasn't for the taste of the philosophy that was in my program. The meaning-making questions about life, the explorations of my purpose and identity became my foundation. With each new life experience, I found new keys to my identity. My program instilled in me the ongoing quest to use each moment and each encounter with new experience as opportunities to grow as an individual.

This new way of thinking opened up my personality. I stopped worrying about the past and the future and started focusing on my present. Life is a process that is meant to be nurtured in the here and now. One day at a time, I was able to cope better and better with my environment. I was able to build trust and connections with my teacher and my coach which helped me slowly build better connections with some of my teammates. With time and effort I was starting to feel more at home in America. But that only happened because I did not give up. I forced myself to see this path all the way through.

The issues I faced do not seem like such a big deal today, but at that point in my life, they were very big. I had never experienced anything like that before. Part of the beauty of what I experienced is that you never know what you are capable of doing until you try it.

The fear of making mistakes or failing did haunt me. I'd always looked at mistakes and failures with shame. I saw them as signs of weakness, but have finally accepted the fact that making mistakes and failing are inevitable parts of the process of learning and even succeeding.

I am so incredibly grateful and proud of my journey, it opened up so many endless possibilities. I was scared of everything when I was younger and was so



comfortable inside of my bubble, where everything was safe, that I did not think I had it in me to live and face my problems alone.

I left my comfort zone, and it was messy. However today I am much more independent and much more aware of who I am and how I want to be seen in this world. I still have my procrastination spirals when it comes to projects, I still face distractions around my social life, but I now know I have the tools, insights, life experience, and courage to face whatever problems and struggles life brings.

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