

Mr. Gunnar
English 12

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Holding College Chiefs to Their Words

College Presidents Pen Admissions Essays

By ELLEN GAMERMAN

Reed College President Colin Diver suffered writer's block. Debora Spar, president of Barnard College, wrote quickly but then toiled for hours to cut an essay that was twice as long as it was supposed to be. The assignment loomed over Wesleyan University President Michael Roth's family vacation to Disney World.

The university presidents were struggling with a task that tortures high-school seniors around the country every year: writing the college admissions essay. In a particularly competitive year for college admissions, *The Wall Street Journal* turned the tables on the presidents of 10 top colleges and universities with an unusual assignment: answer an essay question from their own school's application.

The "applicants" were told not to exceed 500 words (though most did), and to accept no help from public-relations people or speechwriters. Friends and family could advise but not rewrite. The *Journal* selected the question from each application so presidents wouldn't pick the easy ones. They had about three weeks to write their essays.

The exercise showed just how challenging it is to write a college essay that stands out from the pack, yet doesn't sound overly self-promotional or phony. Even some presidents say they grappled with the challenge and had second thoughts about the topics they chose. Several shared tips about writing a good essay: Stop trying to come up with the perfect topic, write about personally meaningful themes rather than flashy ones, and don't force a subject to be dramatic when it isn't.

As Mr. Roth of Wesleyan, in Middletown, Conn., waited in line with his daughter for rides at Disney World, he thought about his question -- describe a person who's had a significant influence on you -- and wondered whether the topic he'd chosen for his response was too personal.

"It occurred to me, that must be the question our applicants ask themselves," Mr. Roth says. "I can write this about my history teacher or a public figure, what you'd expect, or should I write something more meaningful to me, but riskier?"

In the end, Mr. Roth decided to take a risk, telling a story of his brother who died at age five, before Mr. Roth was born. His older brother's portrait hung in their childhood home.

"I was to heal the wounds caused by the death of that beautiful little boy in the picture," he wrote. "Yet I was also to remain the trace of those wounds."

Mr. Diver of Reed, in Portland, Ore., was asked to write about an experience that demonstrated the importance of diversity to him. He described a violent episode as a young man that eroded his liberal self-image. Overhearing the mugging of a young black woman outside his home in Boston's South End, Mr. Diver, who is white, grabbed a baseball bat and hit the woman's attacker, who was Latino.

"Doubts welled up in my mind," Mr. Diver wrote. "Did I really understand what it means to live in a diverse neighborhood? Or did I just want cosmetic diversity as a backdrop for imposing my white, professional-class ways?"

The incident, which occurred in 1975, is mentioned in "Common Ground," a book by J. Anthony Lukas that told the story of three families, including Mr. Diver's, in a rapidly gentrifying and racially divided neighborhood.

Robert Oden, president of Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., was asked to evaluate the impact of a significant experience, achievement, risk or ethical dilemma that he had faced. He wrote about how life should be approached as an adventure, and described running, panicked, in the streets of Cairo when a trip to the pyramids, on the western edge of the city, went awry. "Within a few short minutes, I was lost. Utterly, hopelessly, lost and confused."

Eventually, he realized that he was safe, and concluded that around the world, "people are people," and most are kind and quick to help others.

"Did I really understand what it means to live in a diverse neighborhood? Or did I just want cosmetic diversity as a backdrop for imposing my white, professional-class ways?"

Mr. Oden says he found it tough to write an essay that didn't sound a little crazy in its attempt to be interesting. "I can think of writing an essay that would be batty and daft and wild, and I can think of writing a very conventional essay that would be neither," he says. He went with Cairo because it was a specific story, set in a particular place, with details he remembered vividly.

With the assignment of picking a person who inspired him -- from fiction, history or a creative work -- Grinnell College's Russell Osgood chose history, writing about 18th-century Anglo-Irish political figure Edmund Burke. Mr. Osgood, who announced this week that he will step down in 2010, drew parallels between his experience as president of Grinnell, in Grinnell, Iowa, and Mr. Burke's philosophy.

"...Burke, like David Hume, believed that change is best accomplished by a gradual movement in structures and institutions rather than by violent upheaval. When I arrived at Grinnell as a new president in 1998, there was concern, even apprehension, about me and the possibility of change," he wrote. In response to those concerns, Mr. Osgood says he told people that any change he brought to the college would occur "thoughtfully and after learning and listening." He says he wanted to act in a way that was consistent with Burke's philosophy.

Given the same question, Marvin Krislov, president of Oberlin College, in Oberlin, Ohio, says he briefly wondered if he should write as if he were a high-school senior, but then concluded he'd write a better essay if he looked back on his experiences from an adult perspective. He described a trip he took a few years ago to South Africa's Robben Island, where anti-apartheid activist Nelson Mandela was imprisoned:

"Contemplating Nelson Mandela's life can make one weep at the inhumanity and cruelty he experienced. But it is also inspiring," Mr. Krislov wrote, adding that he was especially impressed by a school Mr. Mandela and his colleagues created while they were in prison. "I was deeply moved by their faith even under horrific circumstances in education as the path to social change and uplift."

One of the most challenging questions came from the University of Pennsylvania application: Write page 217 of your 300-page autobiography. President Amy Gutmann focused on her professional accomplishments, including creating a vision for the school, dubbed "the Penn Compact," when she became the university's president in 2004. "No sooner had I begun writing my presidential inaugural address than the political philosopher in me took over," she wrote. "Instead of delivering the standard omnibus address that no one will remember, why not propose a new social contract to put the ideals of higher education into ever more effective practice?"

Some presidents, like many high-school students, wrote about their extra-curricular activities. "What I love about bicycling is how close I am to the countryside, moving slowly enough to see everything, and able to stop when a spot beckons," wrote David Oxtoby, president of Pomona College in Claremont, Calif. Others took the opportunity to focus on academic policy: "We need to adjust to the new economic realities while maintaining our commitment to access and affordability," wrote Catharine Hill, president of Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

The question for University of Chicago President Robert Zimmer was simply a quote by poet Rainer Maria Rilke translated from the German: "At present you need to live the question." His interpretation: "Living the question is not simple. It entails the intensity of argument and engagement. It demands intellectual risk-taking and a preference for analysis, inquiry and complexity over easy solutions or comfort."

Ms. Spar, president of Barnard College in New York, says the application exercise reminded her how difficult it is for students to write an original essay, especially when so many are answering the same questions from the common application.

"In an ideal world, I'd rather go back to the system where colleges ask more idiosyncratic questions, because really what you want to find out is, why is this particular kid a good fit for this particular school?" she says.

When she sat down to write, she rejected one of her first ideas, which was to describe her running and swimming routine. "That struck me that'd be a very, very boring and self-aggrandizing essay to write," she says.

So Ms. Spar, who once wrote a graduate-school application essay about talking backwards, used a trick familiar to many survivors of the college essay ordeal: She turned her question on its head. Asked to describe an ordinary-seeming daily routine or tradition that held special meaning for her, the working mother wrote instead about her lack of routine. She described a typical chaotic day: she was juggling preparations for a black-tie event with the needs of her three kids. Meanwhile, her husband was stuck in a snowstorm in Buffalo, N.Y. and the family cat was found with a "writhing" chipmunk inside the house.

"I pack my daughter's clothes for soccer practice and put her Hebrew homework where she has at least a remote chance of encountering it. In between, I check on the chipmunk, which is now expiring sadly on the downstairs rug," Ms. Spar wrote, later adding: "The chipmunk has died. And another day begins. Thankfully, I've never been much for routine."

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Reed College's Colin Diver on an experience in diversity

By COLIN DIVER

A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.

The two police officers finished taking our statements. The white cop, smiling, gestured toward me. "We should recommend this guy for the citizen crime fighter award. He's a hero."

His partner, black and unsmiling, wasn't so sure. "He coulda got himself killed. What if the guy had a gun?" he said, fixing his gaze on me.

The mugging victim, a young black woman, sat quietly in the corner, clutching her handbag -- the handbag I could have been killed retrieving. I looked down at the shank end of the baseball bat, still in my hands. I'd kept that bat ever since Little League, even after it was cracked and taped. A genuine Louisville Slugger. During a recent crime wave, I'd kept the bat by the front door, somehow imagining that I could use it to defend my family. Then, earlier this same evening, I had heard a scream outside. I grabbed the bat and ran into the cold dark streets. A young woman cried out "I've been robbed!" She pointed at a shadowy figure running across Tremont Street, the boundary between my turf and alien turf. I chased him. Just as I caught up, he glanced over his shoulder. Does he have a knife? A gun? In a flash of panic, I swung the bat, and he fell.

Later, sitting in my dining room, all I could think was: I'm no hero. I hit a man with a baseball bat. A brown-skinned man. A poor man. Was this the "diversity" I had bargained for? This was the bat I had used growing up in relentlessly suburban, middle-class Lexington, Massachusetts, where diversity meant playing with a few Catholics and an occasional Jew. Six years ago, I had moved my family to Boston's South End, reveling in its economic and racial variety. Did I feel virtuous living there? Our son's school was a model of statistical integration: one-third black, one-third white, one-third "other." We met with neighbors on the multiracial council. Our boys played with black kids who lived down the block. The Latino guy across the street repaired our car. We sat on the front stoop on summer evenings and sipped Chardonnay while the world cruised by.

And now, I had raced out into those same streets and knocked a man down with a baseball bat. I had demonized the muggers and the burglars who were preying on our neighborhood, and now I had descended to their level. Or worse. Doubts welled up in my mind. Did I really understand what it means to live in a diverse neighborhood? Or did I just want cosmetic diversity as a backdrop for imposing my white, professional-class ways? Was our experimental elementary school serving the kids from the housing projects as well as it served the kids from the townhouses? When we celebrated the opening of a new trattoria around the corner, did we mourn for the bodega it displaced? Did we really appreciate the smell from the all-day backyard pig roast next door and the salsa music blaring from open car windows?

I looked at the splintered shank end of my Little League bat. This is what it means, I thought, to try to impose your will, your ways. If you really care about diversity, embrace it. And change.

Barnard College's Debora Spar on daily routines

By DEBORA SPAR

Please describe a daily routine or tradition of yours that may seem ordinary to others but holds special meaning for you. Why is this practice significant to you?

Routines are good. Routines are comforting. Routines bring order and efficiency to the messiness of life.

I do so wish I had some.

But my life, like that of most women trying to juggle a job, some kids, a husband and her hair, never seems to settle into anything that approximates ritual. Unless, of course, you include chaos as a meaningful pattern of events.

Take a typical recent day. My eldest son stayed home from school to finish his college applications. The high-speed internet connection isn't working (again), so he uses my computer instead. Two hours later, envelopes in hand, he emerges, reminding me that a) he needs the car tonight; and b) he can't be around to watch his younger siblings. I drop him off at school and dash to the grocery store for dinner fixings. I come home to the cat and a writhing, half-dead chipmunk. I leave the chipmunk on the rug, lure the cat away, and try to determine the best combination of open doors and closed windows to give the poor rodent some chance of escape.

Meanwhile, my younger son calls with an enigmatic message. Something critical. Tonight. At 7:00. I can't call him back because he dropped his phone under a moving car and it doesn't get incoming calls anymore. I can't possibly get him where he needs to go though, because son A already has dibs on the car, and I'm due at a black tie dinner at 6:00, delivering a speech on women and leadership.

I head back to the computer to write, trying desperately to finish tonight's remarks and deal with the dozens of messages that have accumulated in just the past hour. Because it is, after all, a work day. I pack my daughter's clothes for soccer practice and put her Hebrew homework where she has at least a remote chance of encountering it. In between, I check back on the chipmunk, which is now expiring sadly on the downstairs rug. Should I whisper quietly to it? Administer tiny little Heimlich maneuvers? Pick it up with the dust pan?

Sometime around 5:00, my husband calls. My daughter is off to soccer by now, and my sons (after several rounds of intermediation) have coordinated their evening plans. Dinner is nearly done, and I've thrown on something that will hopefully pass for black tie garb. I haven't yet figured out how to handle tomorrow morning, when the three kids need to be at three different schools and I am convening a campus conference at 7:30.

"Hello, love," my husband says sweetly, "is there anything I can do to help?"

My husband is in Buffalo. He is in Buffalo a lot lately. It's cold there, and it snows. But I'm moving at lightning speed, racing between the kids, the speech, the conference, the roasting chicken, and the dying chipmunk. "No," I say. "We're all set." Chaos and I are doing just fine.

The next morning, I learn from the radio that a freak blizzard has hit Buffalo, taking with it my ambitious plan to have my husband retrieve the children from track, piano, and chemistry tutoring that afternoon while I discuss advances in feminism. I'm toast.

I creep into my daughter's room and silently lift the lid of a shoebox that has been poked with airholes. The nuts and water are undisturbed, and he's there, eyes closed, curled into what I can only take to be a position of resignation and accusation.

The chipmunk has died. And another day begins. Thankfully, I've never been much for routine.

Carleton College's Robert A. Oden Jr. on getting lost -- and found -- in Cairo

By ROBERT A. ODEN JR.

Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

It was not, I know, the first time I'd been lost, really lost. It was not, I also know, the first time I'd been in Cairo, but the City Invincible I did not know as well as I would come to in later years.

I awoke one morning, staying in the center of Cairo, not far from the quite enchanting downtown campus of the American University in Cairo, and hence near the Egyptian Museum and the Nile. A day largely free I had from working to learn Arabic and other tasks. "Aha," thought I, "I'll visit the pyramids." Sure, I'd been there before, but always in a group and I wanted to walk around and around the Great Pyramid and those of Khafre and Menkaure alone, alone and silently, as the pyramids were meant to be experienced. But how to get there, to Giza on the western edge of Cairo where habitations ceased and the desert, stretching across all of Africa, began? Not, I knew, via bus or taxi, because though there is much to love in Cairo, traffic is not among the city's lovable traits. So, I decided, I'll walk.

Walking through Cairo is not without hazards; the sidewalks often give way to deep potholes and one has inevitably to cross streets – that unlovable traffic again. But Cairo is among the world's safest cities, perhaps the single safest city anywhere, and one learns, I knew even then, a lot more by walking. Indeed, later in life, much my favored way to come to know any city new to me was to run through the city, initially wearing sneakers (Converse basketball shoes, I recall), then the spiffy new running shoes made by so many companies when running became fashionable.

And the getting to the pyramids, I knew, would be easy: every few blocks, sufficient horizon would appear between buildings to display the pyramids, beacons towering above, there in the west, unmistakable, navigation landmarks par excellence.

Getting to the pyramids happily followed my confident prediction. It was easy. It was the getting home that was not. No pyramids towered above central Cairo and my room. No landmarks this time. Within short minutes, I was lost. Utterly, hopelessly, lost and confused. We are taught not to panic, never to run, when lost, but the experience itself is so shattering, so robbing of rationality and all teaching, that every time before I'd been lost, panic and running ensued. I did just this in Giza, en route somewhere, but en route nowhere familiar. Rationality and instruction gave way to panic and running. But only briefly. Much sooner than when I'd been lost before, most often in the far northern woods of the U.S., I ceased to run and to panic.

I realized, and this came as a revelation, that I was safe. Here, in Cairo, I was safe. Slight half-sentences of Arabic I could utter, sufficient to gain, with hand signals and more, some sense of where I was, some sense of where I needed to go. The trip home required hours more than the trip out, but far more did I learn en route home.

Here's what I learned. That people are people, that the world around most people are friendly and helpful and come swiftly to the aid of those lost. Something more, something equally important, something which with me has stuck, I learned. I learned that life is an adventure and that that best course through life is to approach all of life as an adventure. Thus placed into context, getting lost is an adventure from which we can learn uncommon and uncommonly important life lessons. In college, in college courses, far from home and family and familiar, comforting faces, I'm sure to get lost again. But if I see college as an adventure and if I see getting lost as part of the adventure, then the learning which I long for college to be will come the more swiftly, the more certainly.

Grinnell College's Russell K. Osgood on a historical figure that has influenced him

By RUSSELL K. OSGOOD

Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.

Edmund Burke is by almost any accounting the leading organic conservative thinker in Anglo-American political theory. He was Irish by birth but became prominent as an English political figure in the eighteenth century. Most people remember Burke as the man who in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* expressed abhorrence of the violence and mayhem of the Jacobin crescendo of the French Revolution. But for me, Burke's greatness lies in the totality of his political and parliamentary positions in a long and active life in which he was never a major insider but always on the periphery of power and influence. Besides abhorring Jacobinism, Burke supported a species of Irish emancipation, the cause of the American Revolutionaries, and finally fought the injustice and venality of British colonial rule in India. This amazingly modern set of positions might seem hard to square with his status as a conservative icon.

Burke was a great orator, a seminal thinker, and a man whose conservatism combined with distaste for oppression and injustice. Others have seen a contradiction here, but I do not. As an organic conservative, Burke believed that society should evolve gradually and that those in leading positions should be liberally minded and guide social development. He also believed in a state with multiple power holders and social checks and balances, including a ruling religious hierarchy (the Anglican Church in England) whose moral values would contribute to the enlightened direction of the state.

More salient for this essay is how has Burke affected me? There are aspects of Burke, for instance his toadying to the very powerful around him, which are unattractive. However, what attracts me to him is my belief that Burke, like David Hume, believed that change is best accomplished by a gradual movement in structures and institutions rather than by a violent upheaval. When I arrived at Grinnell as a new president in 1998, there was concern, even apprehension, about me and the possibility of change. I told people that if change came, it would occur thoughtfully and after learning and listening. Dramatic change has indeed taken place at Grinnell over the past decade, but I believe it has occurred in a manner consistent with Burke's -- and my -- philosophy.

We live in a different age from Burke, one with more delineated ideologies. I can turn on the TV and get a narrow and unbalanced right wing, a Catholic, an evangelical, a populist, or a leftist perspective. Like Burke, I believe that much or even most ideology should be tossed aside and that whether as a lawyer, faculty member or a college president, one's response to the current issues benefits from regular involvement in the tumults of the day, followed by reflection on what can or should be changed or criticized.

The corruption of Warren Hastings, the British East India company governor of Bengal, and others in India and their simultaneous oppression of the people was a familiar if distant fact to many. But Burke made it a crusade. No doubt he had motives beyond the moral revulsion he felt, but even so his single minded dedication to trying to correct this situation is something we all should emulate. A hopeless good cause is still a good cause. And it is incumbent on those who land in positions of power and influence, whether in 18th century Britain or today, to act on their moral intuitions in what they do.

So, in a less grand compass of time and place than Edmund Burke's, I have sought to see right direction of justice in the daily struggles of my professional life.

Oberlin College's Marvin Krislov on a historical figure that has influenced him

By MARVIN KRISLOV

Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.

The historical figure who has most influenced me is Nelson Mandela. My admiration for him is rooted in my high school days in Lexington, Kentucky, in the mid-1970s. Studying U.S. History, I was fascinated by the Reconstruction period, and the question of how one can or should create social change. That was vitally important to me since Lexington, and America, were grappling with issues of racial integration and equality.

In college, I learned about Mandela, the African National Congress, and South Africa's political struggles. I began comparing Mandela's efforts to change South Africa, with our politics and civil rights movement. Court decisions, for example, had furthered civil rights in the United States. For Mandela, the courts were not a viable option. Yet despite legal victories much remained to be done in America to achieve social justice.

That lesson was reinforced by my mother, a social worker, and my father, a labor economics professor. Their lives' work focused on education and issues of fairness and equality. So has mine. I became a lawyer, a public servant, and an educator. Working in higher education, I was honored to serve as the University of Michigan's general counsel during its successful defense before the U.S. Supreme Court in 2003, of admissions policies embracing student body diversity.

A few years ago, I traveled to South Africa, and visited Robben Island, where Mandela was incarcerated. I was astonished to learn that in prison Mandela and his colleagues created a school, a makeshift Robben Island University. In wretched conditions, they educated themselves, their fellow prisoners, and even some jailors. I was deeply moved by their faith even under horrific circumstances in education as the path to social change and uplift.

Contemplating Nelson Mandela's life can make one weep at the inhumanity and cruelty he experienced. But it is also inspiring. I now serve as president of Oberlin College, the first college in America to admit students of color and women to coeducation. One of Mandela's heroes, John L. Dube, the great educator and father of the African National Congress, studied at Oberlin, as did Dr. Vernon Johns, a 1918 graduate, and many other pioneers in the American and international civil rights movement. Like Mandela, they believed in education's transformative power.

What I find most compelling is Mandela's moral stature. He suffered for 27 years as a political prisoner, but made peace with apartheid's leader to build a stronger nation. His vote in South Africa's first all-race election was cast beside John Dube's grave. By establishing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Mandela and his colleagues aimed to draw lessons from South Africa's past that will enable its diverse communities to build a better future.

Fascination with South Africa prompted me and two colleagues, one South African, the other American, to edit a new book about affirmative action in higher education in our countries. Working on it, I often thought of Mandela. His life demonstrates that in the most difficult times, we can endure, educate ourselves, and progress toward equality and justice.

Pomona College's David Oxtoby on an experience that was 'just plain fun'

By DAVID OXTOBY

Although it may appear to the contrary, we do know that people have a life beyond what they do to get into college. Tell us about an experience you've had outside your formal classroom and extracurricular activities that was just plain fun and why.

As a man in my fifties, I find it hard to pretend to be 17. But even college presidents have to escape from responsibilities sometimes, and for me that's ideally on a bike path or little-used road.

Bicycles have taken me places I might never have seen otherwise. One summer, I took part in a two-day 150-mile ride to raise money for the battle against multiple sclerosis. I still remember the hot wind in my face as I rode with a group of several hundred through Illinois cornfields and paused for refreshments in small towns, where the whole population turned out to welcome us. Camping out with a group of new friends after a long day's ride, we shared stories of families and travel. A weeklong ride through Brittany with my brother and sister taught me the joys of small-town France, with picnic lunches of bread and cheese and nights in youth hostels. We met local students bound on similar adventures. I still remember my first taste of tripe there -- I had no idea what I was eating.

I am no Lance Armstrong. I ride for distance, not for speed. In the hundred-mile rides I have done ("centuries"), I have been among the first to start and the last to finish, passed by many speedier riders along the way. One January century ride in the Anza Borrego desert on the southern edge of California, I started at dawn and finished as the sun went down. But there are always friends -- new and old -- to encourage me as I slowly make my way up that last hill at the end of a long ride.

What I love about bicycling is how close I am to the countryside, moving slowly enough to see everything, and able to stop when a spot beckons. One dream I have is someday to ride with a friend across the whole country, meeting people in all the places I miss on an interstate highway or a cross-country flight. Who knows when I might find the time for that?

On weekends, I sometimes join a group of faculty and staff from the Claremont Colleges for an early morning bicycle ride. We always find time to stop for a snack at a doughnut shop and discuss sports, world news, or a book we've recently read. One of my most special memories from the last several years was the day of my inauguration, when a group of Pomona College students, faculty, and staff joined me for an invigorating morning ride through the neighborhood. That group of riders was a fun introduction to the entire college community, and students reminded me of our joint adventure for months afterwards.

The University of Chicago's Robert J. Zimmer on "Living the Question"

By [ROBERT J. ZIMMER](#)

"At present you need to live the question." --Rainer Maria Rilke, translated from the German by Joan M. Burnham

Questioning, not deference, is the route to clarity. "Live the question" is beyond a poetic exhortation. It is a way of thinking and an approach to the world -- one that demands rigorous argument but discovers in that challenge enthusiasm for ideas and a power to transform lives and society.

Living the question is not simple. It entails the intensity of argument and engagement. It demands intellectual risk-taking and a preference for analysis, inquiry and complexity over easy solutions or comfort. It requires a habit of challenging one's own assumptions, even while analyzing and questioning others. Importantly, questioning also requires listening.

The simplicity of stating a question can belie its complexity. How will the world generate enough energy to enable its population to rise from poverty while minimizing the effect on climate? In founding the University of Chicago more than a century ago, William Rainey Harper asked how to create a university whose basic research would contribute to questions of fundamental societal importance. Today's successors to the faculty and students he brought together raise similar queries. But their questions, though basic, harbor a depth of remarkable complexity: How do science and economics combine to inform the options for energy production? How do the world's differing societies and economies affect the alternatives? Before answers, one must find the frameworks for analysis and discourse, laying the foundation for discovery, understanding, or considered action.

Some questions have answers. Others do not and so illumination, rather than a simple response, is required. How does one best teach all our children to help them thrive now and in the future? How do the historical traditions of the world's cultures affect lives today? Properly answering difficult questions and illuminating others demands a deep commitment to intellectual rigor in developing and evaluating arguments. Arguments must be supported by data, yet data do not always make answers obvious. Often, different arguments relating to a question point in opposing directions. And inevitably, the initial question leads to new queries. But this process of engagement with the question holds far more hope of illumination than seeking solutions that are facile and rigid.

When Rilke wrote these words, he was counseling a young poet. A century later, they capture the aspiration of students coming to our campus, joining other scholars who find living the question to be a way of life, even when questioning seeks only to reflect wonder at the world. In that same letter, Rilke encouraged the poet "...to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves...." Such an orientation empowers our students, alumni, and faculty to challenge conventional wisdom, define new disciplines, make imaginative and creative contributions across the spectrum of human endeavor, and change the world. It holds a key to a rich and engaged life.

University of Pennsylvania's Amy Gutmann writes a page from her autobiography

By AMY GUTMANN

You have just completed your 300-page autobiography. Please submit page 217.

As a college undergraduate, I had dreamed of joining the faculty of a distinguished university and making a lasting scholarly mark in political philosophy.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, both dreams had come true. I had served on Princeton's faculty for nearly three decades, and mentored two generations of great young scholars who now hold teaching appointments at illustrious universities around the world.

And I had made three enduring contributions to moral and political philosophy.

I had formulated a systematic analysis of the importance of democratic education for democratic politics. This analysis became the touchstone for the values of liberty, opportunity, and mutual respect among diverse individuals that I aspired to advance throughout my professional career.

I had developed a theory of deliberative democracy with Dennis Thompson, which we offered as an antidote to the coarseness, intransigence, and extremism that too often has degraded democratic politics and public discourse. By demonstrating how deliberation and mutual respect

could elevate the quality of democratic debate, we presented a model for placing moral reasoning at the center of everyday politics, and for making the most out of the many moral disagreements that come with the territory of democratic politics.

And I had originated a new political theory in which identity groups are neither friends nor enemies of democratic justice. I argued that identity groups pose distinctive challenges to democratic societies that have been neglected both by political theorists who overlook the advantages of organizing on the basis of mutual identity in democratic politics and by political scientists who lump all politically relevant organizations together under the rubric of interest group politics.

The more I accomplished as a scholar and teacher, the stronger my desire grew to test my theories of education and deliberative democracy in practice. My first opportunity came at Princeton, where I founded the University Center for Human Values to encourage innovative teaching, scholarship, and public deliberation on important ethical issues in private and public life.

Becoming Penn's President in 2004 consummated the match between my scholarly yearnings and my aspirations for higher education. No sooner had I begun writing my presidential inaugural address than the political philosopher in me took over. Instead of delivering the standard omnibus address that no one will remember, why not propose a new social contract to put the ideals of higher education into ever more effective practice?

Because the vision of a social contract is larger than the person who proposes it, I gave the contract a banner name that would unite the whole University community: the Penn Compact. I gave the contract an overarching goal: Penn would rise from excellence to eminence. Then I laid out the Compact's three governing principles: We would increase access for talented, hardworking students of all backgrounds by strengthening financial aid based on need; we would empower our faculty and students to integrate knowledge by breaking down the silos that separate the liberal arts from the professions and the academic disciplines from one another; and we would put our integrated knowledge to work by engaging in a spirit of partnership with our neighbors in Philadelphia and with communities throughout America and around the world.

Penn's extended family of students, faculty, alumni, and staff rallied immediately around the Penn Compact, and the revolutionary academy founded by Benjamin Franklin was on its way toward becoming a more eminent and well integrated university.

Vassar College's Catharine Hill on a person who has had significant influence on her

By CATHARINE HILL

Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.

When I was a young faculty member at Williams College, my teaching and research interests turned to the questions of poverty reduction and macroeconomic policies in the developing world. As is so often the case in academic settings, I was influenced by older and wiser minds, notably in this instance Professor Henry Bruton. The influence of Henry's interest in how to improve the well being of the world's poorest people, particularly in Africa, eventually led me to a three-year residence in Zambia, where I applied my interests and talents directly to the problem. There, as one might expect, I was also influenced by people with more experience, and I learned as much about development economics as I contributed.

Again, because colleagues encouraged me to become involved in the running of the college, including admissions and financial aid, I began at the mid-point of my academic career to consider the implications for our society of the question of accessibility to higher education by students and families in the lower half of the income distribution in America. Here I was fortunate to collaborate with another mentor, Professor Gordon Winston, whose research focused on important economic issues affecting higher education in the United States, especially at highly selective colleges. I took the influence of that work on access and affordability with me to Vassar. Two years ago, after several years of strong financial returns on our endowment, we decided to return the college to a "need-blind" admissions policy that considers applicants without regard to their ability to pay. This decision, encouraging greater socioeconomic diversity of the student body, is philosophically sound but certainly economically challenging.

(When it comes to big decisions, I'll note that Vassar's timing has been worse. Matthew Vassar founded the college in February of 1861, about a month before the bombing of Fort Sumter and the start of the Civil War. What looked like a great idea in February seemed more daunting by April, but the college successfully opened in 1865.)

We, and other institutions of higher education, are at a perilous juncture. We need to adjust to the new economic realities while maintaining our commitment to access and affordability. Not to do so would risk the public's trust and future support.

Development economics and higher education accessibility share one fundamental: they both ask us how we can take the resources of a world where wealth is limited and unevenly distributed, and adjust that to the benefit of everyone. The world would be safer and stronger if every nation enjoyed more prosperity and if every talented student, regardless of income, could attend college or university.

Gordon and Henry, fellow economists, friends, and colleagues, have influenced my career path from economist and professor, to Provost at Williams, to President at Vassar. Retired now from teaching but still going into the office, both are quintessential college professors – active researchers, superb teachers, and committed to the ideals of a liberal arts education. Both have an amazing ability to ask the important questions and then make progress on discovering the answers. I think of them often as we work through extremely complex issues in these uncertain times.

Wesleyan University's Michael S. Roth on an influential person in his life

By MICHAEL S. ROTH

Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.

The person who influenced my life the most is someone I never met. I can still see his portrait hanging there in our living room: a large oil painting of a little boy based on a close-up photograph. When friends arrived I waited with trepidation for the question that inevitably came. Who the heck is that hanging there? That's my brother Neil. He died.

Neil died from meningitis when he was about five years old. I couldn't have told you even that much until I was in my twenties. Afraid to ask, or unable to remember the answers we were given, my older brother and I just never raised this topic in conversation with our parents or with each other. We were, my parents determined, going to have normal childhoods. We were not going to grow up in a house of tragedy. Still, at the moments when the old home movies were brought out, or at the memorial services on Yom Kippur, our parents' pain briefly became visible.

I was born about 16 months after Neil's death. Only after I was a father myself did I learn that having another child was the balm prescribed to help heal my parents' pain. I was to fill the void left by this loss. Or perhaps I was supposed to create a new life for my family by reclaiming their right to happiness. In any case, I felt a special, but certainly unspoken, role. I was to be the hero who would set the family right again. I was to heal the wounds caused by the death of that beautiful little boy in the picture. Yet I was also to remain the trace of those wounds.

At least that's how I felt the influence of my missing, ideal brother. I was to excel in school, but even great grades never felt good enough. One of the most fulfilling moments of my life was winning a valedictorian award named for my brother at our religious school. As a college student at Wesleyan, I turned to the study of philosophy and psychology, always within some kind of historical context. I told my teachers I was interested in how people make sense of the past, especially in how they deal with loss. My first research papers and then my books focus on how we create a past with which we can live. I wrote about Freud and Hegel, about trauma and about revolution, always with attention to how individuals or groups find ways to overcome significant loss without merely forgetting it. The personal and the professional melded together.

In recent years I have turned to photography and film to understand how artists in these media have dealt with (sometimes triumphed over) painful memories. Even the film class I am currently teaching continues to deal with these same issues. The central questions of my work and life go back to that portrait.

I can still hear the question. Who the heck is that hanging there? That's my brother Neil. He died. The most influential person in my life.

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