

So you wanna get into grad school? (Part I)

Here is some advice from someone who has to read many applications.

1. Don't ask for recommendation letters from people who are self-absorbed, pompous narcissists. If their letter is about them and not you, it reflects badly upon you as a judge of character.
2. It is perfectly ok to give people "talking points" in a letter. Not everyone is a good letter writer. Help them promote who you really are.
3. If there is a gap in your academic record, or your grades are spotty, explain it unapologetically, but don't let us wonder. Honesty is good policy. This is a place where you don't want the committee's imagination to go wild.
4. Read directions and call and ask if you don't understand something. If you submit the wrong stuff in the wrong place, you lose points, always.
5. You can be laconic in your essay responses if you are a brilliant essayist. If you are laconic without any true substance, you will come off as lazy or arrogant. Everyone else made an effort. Why should you be excepted from the task?
6. Your personal statement tells us something about your personality and your passions, and any capacity for originality. Be authentic, and try not to be procedural and boring. We don't want to read your resume or life history in chronological order. We also don't want to read the word "passionate" one more time. That should come through reading about your deeds and how you describe the things you love. The proof is in the pudding.

7. If you have to describe an “emotional moment”, don’t choose one from which you haven’t learned anything and don’t emotionally barf all over the letter. Also, “emotional moment” doesn’t mean “sad”. Explore the many emotions humans can feel. Choose an event from which you have some objective distance. This is not your moment to confess you have untreated PTSD. Bonus points for truly learning from something, but none for learning nothing and just telling us about it.
 8. Grad school requires some capacity for analytic and critical thinking. One of your writing samples needs to convey that. If you don’t know what I am talking about, maybe you are not ready for grad school.
 9. If you are submitting a creative sample, try to include something that frames your sample with some information about your intention and inspiration. We need context to properly process what we are looking at.
 10. Men tend to ‘brag’ and women tend to ‘ramble’: this is the perception of you when you list your skills and accomplishments. Re-read your personal statements trying to iron out the implicit biases we all have. Do some research on implicit biases about gender, race and ethnicity and even out your writing.
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[Aquarium of Worries](#)



Cabo Pulmo, Mexico

It is August of 2013 and she is in Mexico. It is only one week into the vacation, yet every possible scenario, likely or unlikely, is already circling her mind like a bunch of vultures over a dying animal. This poor animal, a banal metaphor for her happiness, tried so hard to live a happy life, but upon brief separation from the pack, it wore itself out trying to catch up, and soon collapsed out of exhaustion and laid there waiting to die. She wished that the stretches of anxiety-free happiness could just keep up with the pack and graze from pasture to pasture. If there was ever a predator waiting to pounce on the weakest animal, she always obliged. Not without a battle of course, but she wondered if giving up might instead be less exhausting. She wondered whether not keeping up with the pack was an option. Whether on land or sea, there was always danger looming in paradise. It was so tiring to stay happy.

Outside the hotel room, a beautiful full moon lit the sky and the entire bay of Costa Azul. Other than the scorching daytime heat, there was no better time to be on vacation. There were no thunderstorms. It was less humid than she expected. The water was potable everywhere. She hadn't gotten sick from 'la

turista'. She hadn't seen or heard a snake anywhere and only two people had tried to pitch a timeshare to her thus far. To any other person, a cheap vacation by the water with someone you love should be heaven on earth. It was heaven on earth. But it was also hell, because none of the big things back home were resolved and thus every little setback in heaven was a constant reminder of hell.

At night, she closed her eyes and craved to be underwater, where everything was quiet and she could explore. Yet in the shadows, even in her sleep, she saw predators and screamed quietly. Haunted by fear, she would get up and urinate, sometimes half a dozen times, wasting salt and overheating, waking up exhausted and hopeless. All of her worries from home, a trifecta of debt, work and family, disguised themselves as sharks and snuck up on her in her real and imagined snorkeling activities. At daytime, she was snorkeling in the magnificent Sea of Cortez, which Jacques Cousteau himself dubbed the "aquarium of the world". Her boyfriend held her hand when they went into the deep waters, but at the sight of deep ridges, she pulled him back. Her body shivered underwater while she wondered what might confront her on the other side. She swam back to shore swiftly after getting tired of being afraid.

Tomorrow they would drive to Cabo Pulmo, a most spectacular place for snorkeling and diving. In her sleep, she imagined what it might be like to encounter a whale shark. She imagined that moment when her boyfriend would pull her toward the deep waters in pursuit of the gentle giant. She visualized the dark shadow of facing an unknown creature the size of a small bus, hoping that it would be spotted so that she would know immediately that it is not a foe. She felt the panic that would overcome her body. She wondered if the creature would sense her overwhelming anxiety and try to save her by swallowing her whole. The odds of being swallowed by a whale shark are pretty slim. It almost happened to someone last

year. Their throat is too small however to fit a full person. If a giant fish could not save her from her lifetime anxiety, maybe she could never be saved. The Sea of Cortez was no match for her imagination, an aquarium of worries, where hundreds of species coexist and thrive with little hope for extinction.

Huacas of the Past

While searching for inspiration to move forward, sometimes it helps to look back...way back. Over dinner tonight, James and I talked about old civilizations. I remembered that I had an old tribute to a certain place of the past, a sacred place: my own [huaca](#).

Before game engines were available to mere mortals, there were things like CAVElib and Performer. I made my first CAVElib application to look like a mythical place in Peru. I would just sit in the CAVE and stare at it. It sounds dorky, but I really liked escaping in it. It was scaled to size and I felt like maybe I was lost in the fog in the Andes. Somewhere in my archives, I may have some old screen captures from IRIX. A few months ago, I even found a printout of the entire code for that application written in C and OpenGL. I was a primitive programmer, but somehow I made it happen. But it was not enough.

I was sad that I couldn't go to that place, neither physically nor virtually. VRML offered a glimpse of what the future may be. It was a way to bring real-time graphics to the web. It was a dream. It sucked. Because programming for VRML sucked. In 2001, I made a virtual *Chavin De Huantar*. Today, you would call it level design for a game. There is even a dangerous *easter egg* hidden somewhere in the levels. I wrote my first

published student paper about it. I was terrified to present it. I met some nice people. But it went nowhere. Too far ahead of its time, for better or worse. Cosmoplayer, the VRML player died, but thankfully it can be downloaded and installed even on Firefox. I downloaded and installed it today. And much to my surprise, most of the world works. Maybe one day, I can get to Chavin, shoot high rez pictures and make a real video game out of it in Unity.

For now, all that remains can be viewed below—a virtual ruin of my past ☐



<http://www.evl.uic.edu/gotsis/huacas/>
(requires VRML Player download from [here](#))

Resilience Through Numbers

It has been a slow and steady year full of changes for me. After a series of major emotional losses, I have emerged in a slow and steady pace trying to maintain my cool during times of crisis. Work has been especially fulfilling this year, although the financial climate is not for the weak of heart. I seemed to have transitioned to becoming research faculty during the worst period for fund-raising in a long time. I see leaner budgets, cuts across programs, more projects for less

salary replacement. It will probably get worse. But for once in my life, I am getting over things much faster than before. I have learned how being legitimately angry, even for short periods is extremely constructive.

Besides having a very supportive social network, I have the privilege of working with an amazing group of people from all walks of life and I have never felt more inspired to solve problems. Failure has struck me many times, but I have never been afraid of it. Boredom is what I am always most afraid of, followed closely by the fear of squandering talent, not just mine but that of others. In recent years, I have learned that a healthy amount of narcissism can lead to resilience. Even thinking that I can actually help with something is rather narcissistic. Yet, the thought of wasting a mind that can contribute to this world in small or big ways is a terrifying one. Until I had students, I didn't know why narcissism was valuable. Removing insecurity and replacing it with confidence for others was transformational for me.

My students taught me that I had the ability to help them somehow discover what they like and want and they let me push their boundaries and experiment. In this process, I became comfortable with my own skills. For years I hated the "jack of all trades master of none" line because of my own insecurities. Now, I strive to be a master of none because I prefer working with other people. In reality, we all have mastery over several areas. Learning to raise your hand and say "I can do this" with beaming confidence is incredible. Even more incredible is the ability to find the people who can do what you can't do and at times, convince them that they can do this, whatever it is that is necessary. There is also the "I can't do this" moment and it is best to be working with people who also know their limits. The more people you let into your world, the more likely you can find those who can and can't at the right time.

Resilience is a word bouncing in my head for over a year now.

It has become a meditation. For me, resilience has been about numbers. The number of people who have contributed to my well changes all the time. Some transference has persistence, while other exchanges are fleeting—perhaps a spark—but not a lasting imprint. Shifting into positive opportunities for transference is hard yet possible. Recognizing positive and constructive models is not a widely taught skill. If the mirror you hold up to yourself and others is broken, it is hard to see. Coming from a mixed bag of positive and negative role models, the path is not always clear because we tend to follow what our early emotional experiences find familiar, no matter how terrible these are. Therefore, resilience lies in numbers: how many people can you meet in a lifetime who can transform your emotional and intellectual world?

[The jet lag post.](#)

It used to be fun. You could carry all your creature comforts with you on the plane. The seats were bigger. The lines were faster. The food was better. Taking a plane feels just one step more luxurious than taking a rural bus these days. There is no dignity left in traveling. Put your stuff in plastic bags. Take off your shoes. Pull out your laptop. Don't wear an underwire bra. Take your decongestant. Throw out your water. Decide whether your bladder is big enough to choose window seating with two people sitting next to you. Squint to watch a movie you can barely hear.

Thankfully, face-to-face interaction upon reaching one's destination is so rewarding that it makes up for this hassle and humiliation. Now if we could find a cure for jetlag, I wouldn't be writing this post at 3am EST when my biological clock is set to PST. And where does all the lost time go? How

old are we really when we travel so much? Have I traveled enough to actually be 2 years older? It sure feels like it.

7 more plane rides until mid- June. At least a week's worth of aging suspended midair.

[For Edwin and beyond.](#)

In 2006, I wrote this [post](#) about Edwin, a homeless man I talked to for some time – a habit I don't indulge in very often. His sister contacted me out of the blue and shared his life story, that of a smart and talented man who suffered from neglect, abuse and mental illness and drowned his pain in substances. A life wasted. A common, heartbreaking story. Back when I wrote the aforementioned blog post, I used to read [the Steve Lopez column about Nathaniel](#), the schizophrenic musician he followed around for some time. A [movie](#) was made inspired by their encounter. No movie will ever be made about Edwin, but his life is no less worth remembering. If nothing else, as a lesson about how little we do about helping people with mental illness in this world.

How can one help people in need through meaningful ways, beyond just giving them a few guilty bucks? It is often hard to tell what they really need and I can't feel responsible for every single person on the street. Life is always so uneven. I had never seen homeless people until I moved to the United States. While I was growing up in Athens, even during the recession one only saw the occasional drunk sleeping on a bench. Now Athens is full of homeless people, much like it was in post-WWII Greece when Hitler left the country in starvation by shipping away all the food.

The numbers can't be verified but somewhere in the range of

100-300 thousand people died without food. Athens was a dire place back then. My mother near died of typhoid in the city. My father fared better in the country as they could at least grow some vegetables. It is hard to imagine a time when the wheelbarrows carried dead bodies out of the cities. Yet in our towns today, homeless people are found dead on the street everyday and many aren't mourned for by anyone. We often think that "those people" had a choice and somehow should had pulled themselves up by their bootstraps.

Mental illness is uncomfortable to think about and it is often hard to imagine what someone is or was without it. We romanticize and/or demonize mental illness in movies, media and in our imagination. We're all guilty but setting boundaries against someone who is behaving less than "normal" and beyond "eccentric" is a hard thing to do. A lack of knowledge about accurate science regarding mental illness has a lot to do with this. "Normal" is not just a socially constructed group of characteristics and behaviors. Just ask someone who isn't functioning to the fullest of their potential. And we do need science to help, because loving people is just not enough...

We know that some of the risks that increase the incidence of mental illness are inherited. Others are a result of a crappy upbringing or simply too many traumatic events in one's life. Resilience can be inherited but is not endless and artifacts of stress and anxiety can be passed on to our offspring at a genetic level. How can we prevent all this? I am learning a lot through a partnership with [Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child](#). My partners in developing an interactive project that could help [re-frame](#) how we think about child development are Nahil Sharkasi, Diane Tucker and Amy Akmal.

Edwin is a face to a socially constructed predicament we all encounter too often for comfort. Maybe this project can go further than the 20 bucks I gave to Edwin at a corner gas station: sadly, it was too late to do anything else for him.