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MALS Final Reflective Essay
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As I reach the end of my MALS journey I have the opportunity to look back upon my body of work and course experiences to ask myself many critical questions. In comparison to the purpose of the admissions essay I must ask myself if goals have been achieved and if I have stayed true to my own original intentions. Did I meander from my own goals? Was my time and money well spent? Did I take advantage of this opportunity to grow both personally and professionally? Those are some of the first questions that came to mind as I began this final reflection. However, those initial questions spawned many more questions about my own intellectual progress, my own beliefs, and my future aspirations. Those deeper questions are the framework for this final reflection. I have whittled many thoughts into six primary questions that will guide this reflection. Because this degree program is meant to be both a scholarly *and* a deeply personal experience for those on the MALS journey it is important for me that my reflection considers both realms. The six questions that I chose to expound upon are areas that impact both my professional and personal life. The MALS program bills itself as a “sanctuary for thinkers” and that is an apt description of what this program has meant for me.

As I contemplated how I wanted to structure this final essay I decided that it would be best to use course artifacts to address questions about my own professional and personal evolution. I initially chose six artifacts that were most

representative of my own evolution in thinking. I think these artifacts demonstrate real growth beyond just accumulation of factual information. As I compiled these artifacts around my initial framework of questions I realized that I had come to a grand conclusion: the true value of a liberal arts education, from my current vantage point, rests in the realm of metacognition and critical thinking. This is probably not breaking news to those who work in higher education but this epiphany was a distinct change in thinking from my original goals when entering this program. The refinement of this metacognitive skill of thinking about one's own thinking requires one to be both introspective yet thoughtful of stepping outside his own experience. I believe that a self-actualized individual can simultaneously delve deep into one's own mind while still hovering above that intimate task of self-reflection. If you will, it is for me akin to an out of body experience, where one can be simultaneously engaged in their own thoughts while also trying to step outside those thoughts to look at our own minds from a place that utilizes logic and employs broad perspective. This act of mindfulness can be profoundly liberating for the thinker who needs to take stock of their own thoughts and see them without judgment. This mindfulness is indeed a messy and nebulous task (and one that takes great practice) but well worth both the effort and the practice. I believe that practicing intellectual mindfulness results in the ability to engage in reflection that is neither egocentric nor disassociated from the self. It is a merging of what one knows of themselves and what one knows of the world so that our own mental landscape has a truer history, broader points of reference, and a more accurate sense of origin.

Some of the six primary questions for this reflection came to me prior to reviewing artifacts and some of them came to me as a result of reviewing an artifact. However, it was an edifying experience to see the questions answered through artifacts while also seeing some artifacts develop the question. This made the reflection feel more holistic and authentic.

1. How do I know what I believe?

While it may sound like a simple act of self-reflection to ask oneself how they have come to know what they believe to be true I feel that this task is much more profound than it may appear. Many people are made aware of their beliefs due to affiliations with religious organizations, formalized education, or familial customs. When asked, “What do you believe to be true?” many people can readily cite religious dogma or scientific laws of nature such as the divinity of the Christ or Newton’s Law of Gravity. But when pressed to answer the question of “*How do you really know that to be true?*” most people provide answers are overly simplistic: “the bible tells me so”, “that is how I was raised”, or “the scientific literature tells me so.” While these are all solid and defensible answers they don’t get to the heart of really knowing *how* one has come to believe what they believe. The MALS course “Problems of Modern Belief” had a great impact on my own conceptualization of knowledge and belief. The artifact entitled Minding the Gap: A Summary of Problems of Modern Belief provides some critical insight into my own growth in this area of inquiry. In this journal I spent a great deal of time

considering how one's own internal dialogue (that plays consistently in their own mental background) requires us to recognize the structural relevance of language. I found myself asking the question of whether metacognition can occur outside of the symbolic art of language? How does the language we've been given (and its structural limitations) impact our ability to reflect? Can we think about our own thinking without language? In short I think the answer to that question is "No." Language assigns meaning to both objects and concepts and we work within the language that we are given. While cognition can be demonstrated outside of the realm of language (for example there are plenty of tests of non-verbal intelligence) metacognition requires language. This has many implications: the structural differences in foreign languages, the emotional value assigned to some language at a young age, the fluency and memorization of text and how that automaticity shapes beliefs, and even our ability to form a sense of self based on the self-talk we see modeled for us as children. From this course I walked away with a much deeper appreciation for our modern beliefs and my own beliefs. I think that I am now much more cognizant of my own internal dialogue and how that language shapes how I approach the world. I walked away with a much clearer understanding of the connection between language and belief systems.

2. What do I care about most deeply and why?

Much of my professional life revolves around supporting individuals who are remarkably unique. As an Autism Consultant I work with individuals who experience the world in ways that are incredibly different from typical humans.

This neurological disorder impacts both their perceptions of the world and how they express their feelings and ideas. This has work been a cornerstone of my professional life for over a decade yet I had never given much thought to how my vocation represents my values. In the course "Global Arts" I had an opportunity to explore art from many different cultures to see how people all over the world use art to signify what is considered special, sacred, or beautiful. My final project for this course involved looking at the art created by people with disabilities. Below is a paragraph from this paper that seems particularly germane to answering my own question related to what I care about most deeply:

"When we see that some primitive cultures make art without even having a formal word for the concept of art we begin to understand that the task of making art is indeed an impulse that is automatically engaged even when people do not have the language for discussing the purpose, process, or product of making art. This was an important concept for me to consider as I tried to connect the coursework to something tangible in my life through my work with people with disabilities. If art is purposeful and inherently present in the lives of primitive and indigenous people then I could make the connection to valuing and validating art produced by people with impairments in language, variations in cognitive ability, and differences in other thought processes. I believe that by extending art appreciation to the art produced in the disability community then we add a very important dimension to our understanding of the inherent human impulse to make art. Contemplating the art produced by people with disabilities is akin to considering the fundamental question of what it means to be human. When we affirm the creative impulse of those with limited abilities then I believe we implicitly affirm the value of creating art for all human beings."

In that paragraph I am reminded of my own appreciation for those without a way to communicate their own needs and desires. Just as I considered language in my previous question I find myself again answering my own question by referencing language. I recognize now that I care most deeply about giving a voice to those who do not have one. In some cases this is literal: some of my students have no language at all and reply on pictures and devices. In other cases my students may have language but do not understand the social nuances involved in using language. I am fascinated by language and how our own internal language impacts our emotions and what we think. But the

thing that I care about most deeply comes down to the act of using language to be known and understood by others. Beyond the communicative task of getting one's needs met I believe that we have an inherent need to be more intimately known by others. Even if language is absent we have a need for others to know us and know what think and what is important to us. I often find that people with disabilities use their art to represent themselves when language is absent. In the chaotic and frenzied abstract art we get a glimpse into the mind of someone who is mentally ill. Or the detailed and intricate drawings of an individual with autism give us insight into their need for precision and order. Ultimately we have a need to share ourselves with others and I want to use my life to help those who cannot express themselves. For now that need is meet with my current work but ultimately I hope to be a writer who can help others tell their stories and share their experiences.

3. How does clarifying my worldview on the connection between the spiritual and the natural world impact how I approach my life?

Until taking the MALS course "Religion and Ecology" I had not considered how different faith groups treat the natural world. Growing up in a Christian church I became very familiar with the Christian perspective on life after death. However, I had never considered how the Christian preoccupation with the afterlife impacts how we care for our own planet. Many of the text for "Religion and Ecology" were eye opening but the text Ishmael by Daniel Quinn profoundly impacted my own perspective on man's connection to the natural world. Ishmael has become a cult classic among environmentalists but for me I walked away

with more than just a sense of responsibility to the environment. The course and the text helped me to make connections between our interpretation of scripture and the destruction of our planet. I had never considered how the biblical account of creation puts mankind in a theoretical position of supremacy atop the natural world. The creation story sets the stage for our desire to rise above nature as opposed to living in harmony with it. In that creation myth mankind is given dominion over the creatures and the land. Unfortunately we have taken that edict very seriously and plundered the earth of all that is useful to our needs and wants. My reflection on Ishmael, although not one of my finest writing samples, shows a great progression in my understanding of the connection between our own creation stories and how we interact with the world. My greatest epiphany in this domain came when I realized that a symbolic reading of biblical scripture (as opposed to a literalist reading) gives us much more room for understanding and respecting the natural world. If one believes in a literal and inevitable destruction of the earth by God (that always seems to be imminent) then caring for the planet is a trivial task in the grand scheme of spiritual affairs. However, if one takes scripture seriously but not literally then there is a lot of room for an environmental care ethic that is part of the faith tradition. My coursework in the MALS BioRhythms course also helped me to make a deeper connection between the rhythms of nature and our own internal states. That course provided a very scientific grounding between nature and our cycles of emotions, sleep, and even fertility. Thinking of nature in scientific and

spiritual dimensions has given me a greater respect for being aligned with the natural world.

4. How has this program impacted my professional life?

One of my favorite readings from a MALS courses is the Bookseller of Kabul by Asne Seierstad. There was a great deal of controversy about Seierstad's book because she imbedded herself in the lives of her subjects without fully disclosing her purpose or offering her subjects an opportunity to proof read her work. She presented the book as a non-fiction account of her observations of the man who was known as the Bookseller of Kabul. Ultimately the facts of the book were contested by those who were depicted in Seierstad's novel. Not only did the family of the bookseller feel misrepresented but they also felt betrayed. The book itself was an excellent read but I also became very engaged with this relationship between the writer and the subject. The relationship between a writer and their subject is similar to the role of a consultant and their clients. As a consultant I often find myself unsure of boundaries in my role to consult with schools and families to change behaviors. If I am simply an observer it becomes difficult to know the student, their family, and the staff who are paid to support them. Without spending a great deal of time with them it is difficult to understand the patterns of behavior I'm seeking to change. I've often found myself teetering somewhere between being engaged and being enmeshed in the lives of those I support. The behaviors of the students and the lifestyles of families are often extremely peculiar and unorthodox. Families build their lives around these

oddities and peculiarities and I often feel like I am peeking in on some private ritual. Siererstad's novel brought down a great deal of judgment on the lives of those she depicted. In response to the controversy Siererstad say, "It's not possible to write a neutral story." I remember thinking about those words a great deal as I wrote my reflection of the book. Although she was seriously maligned for her book I think she chose a defense that was very appropriate for an author. Just as it is difficult to present a neutral story I find myself grappling with how to present the facts of an individual's life when writing reports that will remain with an individual for many years. I find a lot of comfort in Siererstad's words about neutrality. Sometimes things are bad, wrong, uncomfortable, or maladaptive. We don't always want to talk about those things that are uncomfortable to witness. I think Siererstad wrote a very brave and honest book and her work encourages professionals in all fields to choose honesty in the presentation of the facts. I think this experience helped me to process the role of the professional and how their role intersects with those that are under their professional purview. I think it helped me to be mindful of ethical considerations while also maintaining a focus on being honest about what we see in our professional lives without doing harm to the individuals we help or write about.

5. How has this program impacted my relationship with family, friends, and co-workers?

Although I enjoy writing a great deal I have never written or enjoyed reading poetry. I've never enjoyed poetry or seen its literary value. When I registered for

the MALS course “Creative Expression” I was not expecting the opportunity to write poetry. I was greatly hesitant but decided to go ahead with the course and see if I could tolerate the work. I am wordy and I am used to elaborating on my ideas in depth. When confronted with the task of writing a poem that conveys a specific sensation I found myself dumbfounded by the lack of room to express myself within the parameters of poetry. Choosing words that fit the syllabic parameters of specific poetry proved to be challenging. Yet when the writing began I found myself dealing with a great deal of emotions. I rarely write about my own family but allowed myself the opportunity to write about a family member in one poem when asked to write about the sense of smell.

Self-reflection that is purely personal is difficult for me and this poem was very hard to write. I’m not sure that I stayed within the parameters set by the professor but ultimately it meant a lot to me to write something so personal. And from that experience I was able to write many more things that were personal and therapeutic. I think that because it was an academic exercise I gave myself permission to write a few more poems and letters that were very personally cathartic. Some of them remain personal and some were shared with family. Ultimately it gave me a chance to connect writing with family.

6. What’s next in my life and how has this experience helped to clarify that question?

In the Age of Revolutions MALS course I was exposed to many ideas that changed the world. These were ideas that created revolutions and inspired entirely new

ways of thinking about the world. This was also one of my favorite courses and one that provided a great deal of growth. The artifact that I've chosen to address this question with a journal article is entitled "Fundamentalism on the Offensive".

To quote a line from that journal article:

"The debate between fundamentalism and liberalism is raging. People who once tacitly accepted a fundamental faith are checking their facts and questioning their roots. Others who once left the church because fundamentalism didn't meet their needs are coming back to a more liberal church that is making a place in the pews for a greater diversity of people and thought. We are truly living in an age of religious revolution. However, this debate goes deeper than denomination. We are questioning the authority of the scripture *and* the organization. Like small children, we are increasingly asking the question, "But why?"

With this course and this journal response I began to see the difference between conservatism and fundamentalism. I think those two ideologies are often unfortunately lumped together in ways that do a disservice to the intentions of both camps. With this activity I was able to recognize the narrowness and haughtiness of fundamentalism. This was important for me because it helped me to define my own sense of purpose. Being a liberally-minded person I had always seen the "enemy" as the conservative camp. Ultimately I have come to realize I share a lot in common with those in who identify themselves as conservative. However, I don't share a great deal in common with the fundamentalist. The conservative sees himself as being pragmatic where the fundamentalist sees himself as being *the* answer. As I end my MALS journey I come away with many questions but my questions are more thoughtful and more considerate of the perspective of others. Distinguishing between the conservative and the fundamentalist gives me

much more focus in understanding the minds of others. And ultimately I think that is my next step---to continue exploring the minds of others to see where we share common ground and where we go in opposing directions. I enjoy writing and I enjoy considering the nuances of other people's process of thought. Ultimately I hope to make a career as both a writer and a thinker. I've greatly enjoyed my work as an educational consultant but my desire is to widen my vocational scope and spend more time writing for a larger audience. The MALS program has expanded my perspective and ultimately I believe that it will expand my career options and my audience. I believe that we are currently on the cusp of a new educational frontier as teachers and administrators begin to better understand the unique learning needs of all students. I would like to be a part of that exciting new frontier as a writer, a consultant, and an advocate for revolutionizing an antiquated and biased educational system.