UNCG MALS Spring 2014
Reflective Essay
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Acknowledgments

MALS has been a wonderful experience and I want to thank everyone who has helped me along the way, including my colleagues and professors, who have given me a lot to think about, and my family, for encouraging me and for understanding when I needed to 'disappear' for a few hours to read or write something, especially my beloved Mom, Marilyn, who passed away a little over a year ago. Mom was proud I'd decided to go back to school for my Master's and she'll very much “be there” with me at graduation. Props also to my dogs, Max and Luci, for putting up with a million or so keyboard strikes and the inevitable cursing that has accompanied my digital and intellectual frustrations. If they were ever bothered by my clatter, I wouldn't know. They never said a word.

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Now, then, my essay:

“What If”, a reflective essay from a grateful MALSiian

Introduction

In my admission essay from the summer of 2009, I wrote,

I’m an idea guy. I love having ideas, sharing them, getting feedback on them, learning others’ ideas and celebrating them. To me, every idea that’s shared is a good idea and the only bad ideas are those no one has ever dared share.

And I think that's still true. But, MALS has awakened me to another awareness: that I'm not just an “idea guy”, but a guy who, at least occasionally, not only has an idea, but actually does something with it. Someone who asks, “What if... I actually do this crazy thing?”
You see, having an idea is like holding a seed. Unless you do something with it, it will never realize its potential. One must plant the seed and nurture it but, more than that, take joy in its growth and anticipate its harvest, if one is to ever realize the full satisfaction of even having the idea in the first place. One must ask oneself, “what if” I plant this seed?” What if, indeed.

And that's what I did back in August of 2009. I had “the idea” to get my Master's degree. But, then I took it a step further and asked myself, “What if I actually did it?”. Now, having done it, I can congratulate myself on my evolution. MALS has helped me realize something I should have known all along. It is something that has always been there, always been part of my character. It has inspired me, driven me and delivered me throughout my career and my life, but I never really put “it” in perspective until I went through this program. I now realize that I'm not just an “Idea Guy”, as I wrote in my essay, but a ”'What-if” Guy”, as in “what if I don't just think, but actually do?”. Within the difference lies evolution, itself. After all, if life were content with the primordial stew and never asked, “what if I crawl out there and eat the grass and lie in the sun?”, we'd still have gills. And dishpan hands.

Back in August of 2009, if I had contented myself with just the idea of getting my Master's, my life would not have changed, if just for the simple reason that the timing of everything that has happened since I started MALS would be totally off. MALS has prepared me for a chapter in my life I didn't even know was coming.

You see, I'd had it pretty good back then. I was the Creative Director for one of the country's largest radio broadcasters, had my own office and my own recording studio, was making as much as I could hope to make within my role in the company and, yet... I wasn't happy. The “spark” that had propelled me was dying, and I knew it. And it scared me. That spark was my edge. It constituted the joy I took in what I did, a joy that fueled my performance. It was my advantage and if it died, so would the engine of my career. I just didn't care, anymore. My shelves were full of the awards I'd once aspired to win, my nose was pressed up against the ceiling of my profession and I was, for the first time in my career, marking time, putting in a day's work for a day's pay, a lifer in a job I'd had enough of.

And then I asked, “What if...?”
Had I not done that, I would not have enjoyed some really great adventures. I would not have visited London to toast a ghost, which I did after being inspired in Dr. Cannon's *Global Perspectives in Biology* class. I would not have “visited” with my childhood self at summer camp and felt again that first blush of love, which I did in my MALS Poetry Class. I would not have delved into Poe or Shakespeare nor understood globalization nor known what Keynesian economics is all about nor fathomed the psychology of a terrorist. I would not have, literally, exchanged messages with a marooned white farmer in Zimbabwe nor, figuratively, been thrown from a train with Ghandi nor walked a muddy path with Desmond Tutu. Had I not taken MALS' *Modern China: The Dragon Awakes*, my ignorance of the challenges faced by that still-emerging economic and geopolitical powerhouse would perpetuate the same sort of suspicions that, on a grander scale, lead to cold wars, and even hot ones. I would yet be blind to any number of racisms (and other -isms); oblivious to the plight of the poor (and the ways in which their suffering affects us all, as elucidated timelessly by John Donne); and be as despotic in my thinking as any colonialist. I would not have all the keen perspectives, all these fresh appreciations that I so relish from my MALS classes.

...and I certainly would not have read, at the bottom of a recent email from Dr. Wilfred Tremblay, Dean of the Nido R. Qubein School of Communication at High Point University, these words:

“*We’re delighted to have you on our faculty.*”

When I started MALS, I had no definitive plan for my Master's. It was just a “bucket list” thing. Five years from the month I started MALS, armed with my master's degree from UNCG, I'll be going back to my alma mater to teach. “*What if*” MALS were responsible for that? What if, indeed.

**My MALS Experience**

My MALS journey began with a conversation with a colleague at work. She, too, was considering getting her Master's degree and was intrigued by the MALS program at UNCG. She sent me the online link and asked what I thought. I told her, *'Looks good!*' and that was all it took for the seed to settle in my brain. Ultimately, my colleague decided it wasn't for her, given her family and career responsibilities, but I decided, what the heck, another check
off the ol' bucket list: “What if I did this? Let's give it go!” I applied and was accepted.

Since I didn't have a clue about grad school, it seemed appropriate to start off with a class with that name. “Clue: Detective Fiction”, taught by Dr. Joseph Rosenblum, was a good choice for a first class. I found myself with a happy stack of novels and stories by some of the most captivating authors in history: Poe, Christie, Sayers and more. We not only read great detective stories, we wrote and shared some darned good ones, too. “Hey”, I thought, “this is fun!” That, for me, is essential. If it isn't fun, it's hard to get it done. And Clue was fun! As many of my MALS classes would, later on, Clue engaged my imagination. I found myself opening windows onto discoveries and experiences that transcended the parameters of the class, itself.

For example, my assigned reading of Poe lead me on a quest. We were asked to read Poe's Murders in the Rue Morgue, nominally the world's first 'detective' story, and share our thoughts, which we all did. But, things about the story still niggled at me, beyond any of the questions raised in the class: why, I wondered, was the story set in Paris, a city to which Poe had never been? Why France, at all? Why was the culprit so bizarre, so implausible - an orangutan, of all things?

I did a little digging on Google, and one discovery led to another. Poe's original title was not “Murders in the Rue Morgue”, but “Murders in the Rue Trianon”. A magazine editor had changed the title to make it seem even more mysterious and compelling to would-be readers. So, then, why Rue Trianon? Where did that come from? Well, I discovered a similarity between the word “Trianon” and a street in Paris called the Rue Transnonain. In 1837, just a few years before Poe wrote Rue, a workers' riot erupted along the Rue Transnonain and several people, including women, were killed when police opened fire on the crowd. Contemporary newspaper reports deemed the police response, 'savage', 'brutish' and 'beastly'. That reminded me of the orangutan, a savage, brutish, beast who had killed the two female victims in Murders in the Rue Morgue. I Googled further and found some other interesting coincidences.

The name of Poe's detective in Rue is C. August Dupin. Well, guess what was the name of the president of France's Chamber of Deputies and a long-time workers' advocate, who supported the Transnonain riots? Andre Marie

It turns out Andre Marie Jean Jacques Dupin had a particular friend, the sculptor and caricaturist, Honore Daumier. Daumier created a cartoonish sculpture of Dupin that today is on display in the Musee’ d'Orsay. At about the same time, Daumier drew a cartoon of France's ruling regent, Louis-Phillippe I, in which the king appears as a self-indulgent, petulant, corpulent autocrat. Phillippe loathed it. So much, in fact, that he banned it from publication. Daumier titled that work, “Gargantua”. And guess what a “Gargantua” is? You guessed it: “a savage beast of enormous size and strength”.

I have decided that *Murders in the Rue Morgue* was not just a random tale of intrigue, but a political satire: an homage to Daumier, the “other” Dupin and the working classes of Paris.

I have later discovered that the “Poe-Paris-Dupin” coincidence has been noted, elsewhere. But, what if I went to the Poe museum in Baltimore to see if it has been studied formally, and, perhaps, offer my own calculated hypothesis? What if, indeed...

From Poe, I next decided to try MALS' Poetry class. Get it? “Poe”-”Try”? But an even more compelling course caught my eye and interceded: *Terrorism!* OOOoh-ahhhh. From mystery to misery, right? As both a history undergrad and devotee of the History Channel, the promise of plumbing the pathology of the world's most pestilential people intrigued me. **Dangerous Minds**, with Dr. William Hamilton, took me from the back seat of a Bader-Meinhof BMW to a farm under siege in modern-day Zimbabwe.

That last bit became the core of my final project for that class, one in which I researched the institutional “terrorism” of Zimbabwe's de facto President-for-Life, Robert Mugabe. I gathered a lot of material on Mugabe, but wanted to get a real-life perspective on how it felt to actually be under his yoke. So, I reached out via email to a Zimbabwean farmer I had read about. Dawie Joubert, a white farmer, was at risk of his land and life, squarely in the crosshairs of the Zimbabwean government's nefarious land-redistribution program. Robert Mugabe had instituted that campaign in order to systematically dispossess white farmers of their land and award it to “war
In the process, Dawie and other white farmers came under attack by mobs, typically composed of the youthful mercenaries who comprise Zim's dreaded paramilitary-cum-thug organization, the ZANU-PF. The ZANU-PF are genuine “terrorists” and much-feared instruments of Mugabe's pogroms.

Although Dawie and many other of Zimbabwe's multi-generational landholders had already paid large government-demanded sums to forgive the colonial roots of their proprietorships, and had also successfully appealed their cases to international courts, Mugabe's perfidy was unabated. Still today, he persists in his efforts to rid Zimbabwe of its colonial legacies. While that might be understandable in the context of colonial oppression, it is difficult to accept when it creates such modern-day depression for Zimbabwe's people.

Dawie's farm, and those of other white farmers in Zimbabwe, had once produced so much food that Zim was known as “the breadbasket of Africa”. These legacy farmers had paid enormous sums to legally purchase their lands. Mugabe's treachery has done nothing to right the tide of justice. It has only produced starvation, as untrained hands turn formerly productive farmlands into sallow wastelands. As government officials continue to seize these assets, outrageous inflation has turned the Zimbabwean dollar into a laughingstock. Today, you can buy a $100,000,000,000,000 (yes, that is “one hundred trillion dollars”) Zimbabwean bank note on Ebay for about ten U.S. bucks. That tenner is due solely to the novelty of the bill, not its true exchange value. Despite all those zeroes, one hundred trillion Zimbabwe dollars aren't worth a dime.

I still hadn't left my desk, but MALS was certainly taking me places. Little did I know just how far I would end up going.

Including back in time to a precious place in my childhood. The 3rd class in my MALS journey, “Creative Expressions: Poetry”, took me back to when I was a skinny, floppy-haired goofball enjoying one of his last thoroughly care-free summers.

It also introduced me to other things, from verses to “versus”. “Verses”, as in poems, and “versus”, as in... classroom conflict.

Somehow, I managed to tick off one of my Poetry class colleagues by using the “F-word” in one of my poems. Claiming to be a student senator, she threatened to drag me before student court if I didn't watch my language. I was
more astonished than angry. In fact, I apologized for offending her, because I sincerely had no intention of doing that, but I also told her I took a very dim view of *censorship* and that I had every intention of continuing to use whatever words I wished, whenever I wished to use them. Oh, the umbrage that ensued. Professor Mark Smith-Soto slyly- and wryly- adjudicated the issue by posting a famous poem rife with 'fuck this' and 'fuck that'. To this day, I smile at his style. If and when I face a similar situation in one of my own classes, I can only hope to display such grace.

Oh- and that “visit to my childhood” I mentioned above? It had nothing to do with that “childish” altercation. Actually, it refers to a poem I wrote for that class that reminded me of those golden days long ago, when I was a newly-christened teenager, lazing about in summer camp and all I had on my schedule was lying by the pool, holding hands with my first crush, feeling the charge of that first awkward kiss and gazing at the sky:

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**Summer Camp**

It always seems summer
when boyhood dies,
when little girls’ cooties are little boys’ lies,
and Nature blends her
her headiest dose
from honeysuckle droplets
and Bazooka Joes

and gelatin stains smear
glossy lipped smiles
and first furtive looks spark
wondrous wiles

of strawberry kisses and pool water hair
and learning love tastes like a gummy bear.
From Poetry, I bopped on through **Contemporary World** and then on to **Shakespeare: A Muse of Fire**. That class was on fire! Taught by renowned “Bard-o-phil”, Joe Rosenblum, I felt like I was traveling around the English countryside with Shakespeare's crew, dodging plagues and pernicious regents along the way. I was Christopher Marlowe! I was Francis Bacon! I longed to jump in a time machine and take my spot among the Groundlings at the Globe Theatre! And that got me “what-iffing” again: “What if I went over there? What if I visited the New Globe? What if I did join the Groundlings, right there in that hallowed 'O’?” What if, indeed.

Speaking of that “O”... I took a little liberty with my final paper in that course, and, to my relief, Dr. Rosenblum didn't object. We were asked to prepare 5 or so pages on “*What does Shakespeare's Henry V say about theater*”? I considered it such an obtuse challenge that I felt comfortable veering off the track into one of my own obtuse quests: I wrote my paper on a wholly different subject, one that I had found repeating itself throughout *Henry V*: the symbolism of the “O”. From Chorus' opening line to royal crowns to island kingdoms to breaches made in walls, *Henry V* is loaded with “O”s. I hoped Dr. Rosenblum would understand why I pursued that topic and wouldn't think my paper- and me- full of caca and, to my relief, he was “good with it”. In fact, he told me, in all his years studying Shakespeare, he could not recall anyone discussing that subject. I'm sure Dr. R was just being gracious in saying that, but I also got the sense he was happy I chose to seek the self-edifying pearls that he, himself, treasures so much in Shakespeare's work. I was happy to oblige.

At this point, I was just about halfway through my MALS experience. I'd had a lot of fun and had certainly gotten my academic feet squarely back under me, after 25 years outside of a classroom. I'd been accepted to Golden Key. I had gone well beyond just dipping my toes in the academic pool, so I decided to take the full plunge, challenge Fate head on and sign up for **Global Perspectives in Biology**.

That word, “biology”, was a formidable thing. I am not a science person, which is ironic because my Mom was a genuine rocket scientist. She wrote the operating system code for the Mercury space program. Meanwhile, I struggle to solve the Junior Jumble. But, knowing I needed to take the class to get my 630 credit, and also to contribute to my Global Studies Certificate, I finally persuaded my index finger to stop hovering over the mouse, plunge the cursor home and commit me to “biology”.

After posting my first response in that class, I understood my index finger's reluctance. I didn't get get my usual A. Instead, I only got a 17 out of 20. As it turns out,
that was actually better than most of my classmates. And, the truth is, 17 out of 20 was more than I think I deserved on that effort. I had delivered a perfunctory response to the class' initial query, “What is Science?” and the professor, Dr. Janne Cannon, gave me a perfunctory grade. That B startled me. It got my attention. I sat up straight in my desk chair and gazed at that B like it was some sort of gauntlet that Dr. Cannon had tossed right through my monitor. I decided, there and then, to rise to the challenge.

And I'm glad I did, because Dr. Cannon's class was my hands-down favorite in MALS. It was the proverbial “incredible voyage” through a science for which I had very little previous understanding or appreciation. Dr. Cannon weaved biology into world affairs. She offered us heroes, including Dr. Paul Farmer and his associates at Partners In Health. She showed us how to navigate upper-echelon medical journal sites for our research. She encouraged us to truly comprehend the unseen world of microscopic beasties that cause so much misery in the world and also the unseen beauties that wage war against them within the human body. And, she introduced me to a man I went all the way to London to meet for a drink. His name was Dr. John Snow and he died over 150 years before I got there.

In 1854, Dr. John Snow became famous for removing the handle of a water pump he had concluded was the source of London's cholera epidemic. Snubbing the Caducean curmudgeons of the city's medical boards, who clung to the bunk that cholera was caused by “miasmas”, Snow saved untold lives in London and around the world by proving *Vibrio cholerae* was waterborne, not airborne. He did so by creating a “Ghost Map”, a Voronoi diagram, using dots to designate each of the cholera deaths in and around the Golden Square area of London. Those dots formed a veritable noose around that pump, so he removed its handle and the epidemic abated.

While I was writing my paper on Snow and his Ghost Map, I Googled an image of how the area looked today and that's where I got my first glimpse of the pump with its missing handle. A replica of it stands near where the original once stood. I also got a glimpse of the “John Snow Pub” in the pump's background. Yep- ol' Doc Snow has a pub named after him, right there in Golden Square. I thought to myself, “What if I really did go to London? Not just to be a Groundling at The Globe, but to order a pint and a glass of clean water in that pub...” What if... indeed...

The evening of the first day of October, 2012, was chilly and damp in London. A light rain had cleared the sidewalks in front of the pubs that line Westminster's posh
Broadwick Street. As I marched along in the drizzle, the silhouettes of tipplers in the bars' windows grooved along with me, dancing in the amber glow of street lamps. I smiled when the smooth macadam beneath my Nikes yielded to cobblestones. I looked up and spied what I'd traveled a thousand miles to see: an old-fashioned black metal water pump with a missing handle. And the John Snow Pub, rising up behind it, gleaming in soft, golden light. It was as if I had walked right into the image from my Google search.

I went in and ordered a pint and, also, a glass of water. The goofy smile on my face prompted a query from the publican behind the bar, so I told him my story. He called over his mates and they shook my hand and then one of them conducted me upstairs to see the pub's Dr. Snow memorabilia. It was all there: the Ghost Map, the statistics of the cholera victims neatly detailed in Dr. Snow's opened diary, all mounted in displays on the walls. Then, we went back downstairs and out to the sidewalk, where a single block of pink granite marks the spot where the genuine pump once stood, high above its erstwhile cholera cocktail. I stared at that spot and imagined Dr. Snow and his particular friend, Rev. Whitehead, wrenches in hand, detaching the handle from the font of London's infection that once stood on that very spot.

I thanked my “tour guides” and offered them a 20 pound note, which they insistently refused. They told me not to leave quite yet and invited me back into the pub, where one of them presented a tattered old leather register. It was their “Pub Book”, containing the names of note-worthy visitors, those who had more than just the usual stories to tell. They laid the book upon the bar, opened it to a fresh page and handed me a pen. I signed it and headed back into the night. I hoped they wouldn't mind accepting the 5-pound note I'd lain beside my empty water glass.
I had wanted an adventure and I had gotten one. My visit to the John Snow Pub marked the moment that MALS delivered on my original expectations. Anything else would be a bonus. So... what if I end this essay at the moment I shrugged back into my jacket and headed out into that drizzly London night, warmed by the satisfaction of a journey well-taken and the promise of adventures still to come... and with a Groundling ticket for the following evening's performance of *Richard III* at the New Globe safely tucked away in my wallet?

What if, indeed.