Portfolio Questions

YOUR PAST – THE PATH THAT LED YOU HERE

1. What is your experience with giving back to others in your community? Have you ever been involved in any projects or campaigns to make a difference in the world? It’s fine if the answer is no. Just explain why you haven’t felt a need to get involved. If the answer is yes, talk about your own experiences. Go into depth; this is like your autobiography of civic engagement.

2. What is your family history? Trace the geographic journey that you and your ancestors took to get you here today. What are some of the most interesting and notable parts of your family’s history? What part of your family tradition, culture, ethnicity, or heritage most resonates with you?

3. Were there people who were particularly strong influences on your life and your way of thinking? Who are the greatest heroes, mentors, and inspirations in your life? These could be people who are living or dead, famous or obscure, people you have known, or people you have only read about in history books. How and why have they touched you so deeply?

4. What adversities have you or members of your family overcome in your lives? Tell stories of how you/they managed to triumph over such troubles.

5. Answer one of the following:

   a. What have been your favorite creative inspirations throughout your life? What are the books, movies, art works, songs, or other hobbies and creative activities that you have most enjoyed? Why and how have these things uplifted you?

   For example, some people write about the soundtrack of their lives – the songs that remind them of their favorite times from growing up. Other people write about their top ten favorite films of all time, or the ten books that they would take to a desert island. In each case, just make sure that you explain why you love these particular creative works so much.

   b. Are there any creative works that have actually changed your life? Tell the story of how they made such a deep influence on you.

   c. What are the most creative things that you have done in your life? Please feel free to include creative examples. If you love creating art, writing poetry, or taking photographs, then include an original work. If you love singing, record a CD. If you have a story of an amazing time of joy that came out of hard work when you struggled to achieve something great, then tell that story. Have fun with this!

6. What are the greatest experiences of your life? What are your finest moments and the accomplishments of which you are most proud? What have been your peak experiences?

7. Best memories – Spend 30 minutes and write down all of your most cherished memories from your life. Imagine that this is like one of those exercises where somebody tells you that your house will burn down, and you can only take 3 things. However, in this case, you can only take the memories that
you write down in the next 30 minutes. All else will be lost to posterity. Try to make these memories as evocative as possible – full of details, sights, smells, and sounds: everything in your life for which you are most grateful and blessed.

Your best memories could be much more simple pleasures than the peak experiences and accomplishments you wrote about earlier. They could include remembering weekends that you spent with your grandparents, or summer afternoons with your best friends, or a humorous moment from your childhood that always puts a smile on your face.

EXPLORING YOUR PRESENT

8. Write about the things that make you happiest. What gives you the greatest sense of fulfillment, personal satisfaction, and self-esteem? When are you so engaged and absorbed in an activity that time seems to stop? What are the times in your life when everything seems to flow, and you are in the peak state of joy? What are the things that you do that give you the greatest returns on happiness, productivity, and contribution?

9. What are your greatest talents and your signature strengths?

In order to get the most accurate assessment, please take the VIA Survey of Character Strengths test online, established by the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania which will offer an academically valid survey that will identify the areas where you can most make a difference. http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx

This is your chance to take an inventory of your best qualities. Some people may have trouble with this question because they have been taught to be modest and humble; they don’t want to brag or to focus on what makes them special. Nonetheless, it is valuable to recognize the ways that you can contribute to the welfare of others; this will help determine the best direction for your life. How do you stand out from other people? What unique gifts do you have to offer the world?

Once you have determined your strengths, figure out specific ways that you can incorporate them more into your life. Researchers have discovered that people are much happier when they use their strengths on a daily basis in new and creative ways. People can even transform boring jobs into ones that they enjoy by using their strengths more. How can you use your strengths more often in your day-to-day life?

10. Engage in the “reflected best-self exercise” – This is getting 360-degree feedback about you at your best. In the traditional 360-degree feedback exercise, friends, family members, co-workers and other people tell you about your strengths and weaknesses. But here we are focusing on your optimal state:

Ask 5 to 20 people – friends, family members, significant others, co-workers, teachers, supervisors, and other people who know you well -- for stories of when they have seen you at your best. You can create a survey through Google docs in order to collect the data. See the separate document on setting up Portfolio Question 10.

After collecting all of this feedback, write down the recurring themes. What have people repeatedly found to be your gifts and talents and strengths? How does this exercise make you reflect on what you wish to do with your life, and what you have to offer the world?
11. What matters most in your life? What are the things that you value more than anything else in the world? Are you living consistently with these values? Are you spending most of your time on the things that really matter deeply to you? If not, how can you change your life to reflect what matters most?

12. What are the most common stories that you tell about your life? What are the negative beliefs and stories and patterns of thought that stand as obstacles to reaching your full potential? Can you rebut them and show them to be false?

13. Choose one of the following:

a. What are you grateful for? Scientific research shows that people who count their blessings are much happier and healthier than those who do not. Think about everything for which you are grateful or appreciative. For 30 minutes, do a gratitude free write.

You can continue to keep a gratitude journal – every night, or perhaps just once a week. Just before you go to bed, record 3 to 5 things for which you give thanks: good things that happened to you today, things that you normally take for granted (your ability to see colors, your hearing, your ability to savor tastes of food, etc.)

b. You may also choose to do a powerful exercise, developed by Professor Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania: Write a letter of gratitude to a person who has had a profound influence on your life, but whom you have never fully acknowledged. Thank them for the powerful, positive impact that they made in your life. To make this exercise as effective as possible, schedule a visit with them to read your gratitude letter out loud. Dr. Seligman’s research has shown that this is one of the most uplifting life experiences for both the writer of the gratitude letter and the recipient. The positive effects of this gratitude visit often last for many weeks or months.

YOUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE

14. Answer two of the following:

a. If we gave you $100 million, tax-free, what would you do with your life? (In other words, how would you spend the rest of your life if you were independently wealthy and did not have to worry about money?)

b. If you discovered that you had only two years to live, what would you do in that time? (Imagine that you would be completely healthy over the next two years. What would you want to accomplish before you die?)

c. What have you always wanted to do, but have been afraid to attempt?

d. What one great thing would you dare to dream if you knew that you could not fail? (In other words, what one great goal would you choose to pursue if you knew that success was guaranteed?)

15. List everything that you wish to achieve and experience in your life (“bucket list”). Write down as many goals as you can – at least 100 goals for your life. Dream big! Go wild! Don’t compromise at all: write down all of your dreams and aspirations here, no matter how ambitious or idealistic.
16. Answer at least one of the following questions about your future:

a. MAGAZINE ARTICLE – 5 TO 10 YEARS IN THE FUTURE - Create a magazine story about you having succeeded. You have made a real difference in the world and in other people’s lives. Your life has been rich and full of meaning and significance. What have you done? How did you get there? Again this is a creative exercise in imagining the future. You could envision yourself as TIME Magazine’s person of the year. Why has this prestigious honor been bestowed upon you? Explain it in detail, as if you were a reporter writing this story for a prestigious magazine.

b. AUTOBIOGRAPHY FROM 30 YEARS IN THE FUTURE - Write your autobiography from the perspective of 30 years in the future. Imagine that this is the best of all possible worlds, where you have been able to live your ideal life. What have you accomplished? What transpired over your lifetime? This should be a fun, playful exercise where you talk about how you will combine your passions and dreams with your strengths and talents. Be as detailed as possible.

c. FUNERAL – END OF LIFE – Imagine that you have passed away. There are many people who have come to your funeral to celebrate your life. If you have lived your ideal life, what will these people be saying about you? How will they describe your contribution and your character? What would you like them to say?

17. In question 12, you explored the negative stories that you tell about your life – stories that prevent you from reaching your full potential. What are the new stories that you could tell? How could you see yourself as being on “the hero’s journey,” with a life rich in meaning and purpose?

18. What is your mission statement? In a single sentence or paragraph, try to summarize what you are meant to do with your life. If this seems difficult, you can start by answering the following questions:

a. Imagine that you are a character in a novel. Why did the author place you here? Every character, every scene, and every detail in a novel happens for a purpose. What is your purpose here on the Earth?

b. Author Frederick Buechner once wrote that, “To find your mission in life is to find the intersection between your heart’s deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger.” What is the great hunger in the world that you wish to address? In other words, what is the issue that you care about most deeply? And how can you use the talents and strengths and passions that you have identified in this portfolio to address that need?

19. What are the things that give you a sense of hope? What makes you optimistic about the future? What do you find exciting and promising about this moment in history?

20. In question 1, we asked you about giving back to your community. Researchers have shown that people who are most happy and satisfied with their lives are those who spend a great deal of their time giving to others and the world. Now that you have completed this portfolio and have hopefully come to some greater clarity on your goals and dreams for your life, what is your vision of how you would like to make a difference in the world? What can you do to get started on it today?