Humble Resort

My stick jabs the ball creating a distinct smack. The sound reverberates off of the walls and back onto the green pool table, it then travels down the staircase and into the kitchen where it dissipates. Sometimes the smacking multiplies, creating a chain reaction, causing balls to fly across the green table and fall into any of the six holes located at the edges. Light is cast into the room from a single window, no wider than a twin bed. This natural light is accompanied by the warm, yellow bulbs above. Allowing me to see all the gold and silver trophies placed on dark wooden shelves centered on the wall. At the opposite end of the window are the bedrooms and bathrooms. Next to the window is the staircase, leading to the rest of this humble resort. This so called “resort” was known as my grandparent’s house.

When I was young I came here nearly every summer to relax, enjoy the sun, eat food, and just be. My life was similar to that of a dog. I was fed, had many “toys” at my disposal, and the word stress was hard to find in my mental dictionary. It was a time of speechlessness for me. I didn’t talk much, being that I was rather shy. And because of my shyness I never really had much to say, and therefore I didn’t get to know people as much as I could have. It was also a time of relaxation and timelessness. A time priceless enough to want to slip back into. To me this place was a means to exit the life I was living. Not by means of death, of course. But by means of relaxation, and perhaps meditation. I did not know what meditation was when I came time and time again to visit this peaceful house. But I could feel something about the place, even now. Perhaps I experience that feeling more right now than I ever did in the past.

“If you hit the bottom of the ball, you can put a reverse spin on it.” My uncle Corey explained this to me one day as he caught me playing pool. He was in his 20’s, and I was somewhat distant from him. I never saw him much, and had minimal interactions, probably due to my shyness. There was a conversation here or there, but nothing of extreme significance. His workout equipment occupied some of the garage, as well as his room. He enjoyed dirt bikes, motorcycles, and anything that could go fast. I believe he even got into trouble with the cops at times, but that is in the past. Eventually a motorcycle accident took his life right outside the neighborhood, and his room became a place of memories.

As I step down the soft wide stairs of my grandparents’ house, to my left is the front room. Filled with furniture some are leather, others soft, this is the first place I see when I come here. Most of the furniture is focused toward the neglected television. My family and I once spent a Christmas morning in this room, it was filled with many memories of which I do not remember. Although one thing I do remember is that I like spending Christmas back at home, where it snows. It never snows here in Arizona. When it’s snowing back at home, it’s a cool summer day here. It’s honestly quite odd to be thrown into 70° weather during Christmas time. To the right of the stairs leads to the outdoors. But before that there is the kitchen on the left, and another mini living room at the right. The flat-screen television here definitely wasn’t neglected, as my grandpa Stan crushes the poor couch, it flinches as he gets comfortable. The leather is probably stretched and discolored in his favorite spot. He always seemed to be watching some kind of documentary show, or shows similar to “how it’s made”. If you sat next to Stan he would always tell you all about the show he’s watching. The kitchen was to his back, normally where my grandma was cooking or cleaning. In the center of this spacious kitchen was a complementary table, many meals were served here. I also stuffed my face with bowls upon bowls of cereal at this table countless times. I walk past the kitchen and the mini living room where my grandpa Stan sat and bring myself up close to the backyard door. Right as I slide open the back door I can see the glimmer of the warm, clear pool water peeking out past the braches of cactus plants. I walk clockwise around the plants to get a better, closer view of the water. The water is calm, yet volatile as the gentle waves are pulled in every direction. It just so happens that I’m in my bathing suit, my shirts off, and it’s a warm summer day. I’m ready…

I step down into the cool, refreshing water of my grandparent’s clean pool. The palm trees make a distinct sway as the warm Arizona wind flows with them. The wind chimes sing, and birds converse. As I walk the water line passes my knees, goes past my thighs, and eventually reaches my chest. I take a deep breath and fully submerge in the clear liquid. All sounds are gone, except for my slow beating heart. As I sink deep down I feel my ears press against my skull. I can hear myself think again, I can feel the soothing water against my tan skin. The smell is gone, the sounds are gone, and the scenery has changed. I look up at the other world, the world outside the pool. The trees disfigured by the warping of light through the waves. Then suddenly my heart picks up, lungs grow tense, I can only hold it for so long. I kickoff the bottom of the pool and accelerate upward bursting through the surface like a shark, and gulp the summer air. As oxygen returns to my vitals, so do the birds, wind, bells, and smell of dinner on the grill… But as I open my eyes I realize I’m not surrounded by water anymore. I’m not in the upstairs pool room, living room, or the kitchen. I’m not in the swimming pool, or even the backyard. I’m nowhere to be found in the long lost humble resort. I’m off in the present, wherever that may be. That house is gone now, taken by a crashed economy. Today my grandparents are happily retired and live in an RV that they travel across the states with.

My grandparents’ house is a thing of the past yet somehow it still renders itself in the present. But why? Why does a collage of memories from my childhood still occupy my thoughts? Our past has a great impact on each and every one of us. The people we grow up with, the events/tasks we take on, and how we view the world all do their parts in shaping who we are as individuals. Everybody has their own personal version of a “Humble Resort”. It may be on top of a mountain, deep within a city, or someplace exotic. Some visions/memories are abstract, while others are more defined and concrete. But I believe each of us has at least one if not multiple memories that we keep with us. The common denominator between all of these visions and/or memories is that they either tell something about ourselves or show us an underlying want or need. Now I am not making a statement that if one dreams about cats, then he/she should buy a cat. What I mean to say is that reoccurring memories or visions that hold some kind of meaning or value may give insight to oneself.

My accumulation of memories about my grandparent’s house holds some kind of interesting value. It helped me realize that life changes. Simple as that. This idea is something that I’m not sure if people think deeply enough about, or even think about at all. My uncle Corey has passed away, my grandparents sold their house and moved into an RV, soon after that they each retired, and I’m off to college working on a degree. That scenario is slightly different from a child swimming in a pool with little to worry about each summer. I believe that each and every one of us should think of and understand our past. Understanding our past will help us develop our future self. Living and experiencing life itself changes a person. But the act of thinking about past experiences that have impacted them changes them as well. Throughout the years each and every one of us slowly ramps up our lives. We take on more roles, make new friends, remember things, forget things, etc. And the next thing we know society as a whole is different. Then we think about memories in the past and we admire them, we want something from them. In some shape or form there is some kind of satisfaction we get from thinking about past events. But sometimes we think too much about the past and our heads get stuck there. This is a mistake. Each of us needs to live in the now, and plan for the future. After all the only day that you can change is today. But that satisfaction each of us gets from those daydreams of the past is important. Knowing what it is that you like about a certain vision and what it personally means to you can guide your life decisions. Our own thoughts can enlighten us.

But I think there is another message to this story as well. Throughout my childhood I remember thoughts and visions of my life being a journey. As if I were going someplace at all times, and each day was just one step closer. But that “someplace” wasn’t a physical destination, it seemed more of a status, a feeling, or even an understanding. And the only way to get to that so called “place” was through deeper understanding of myself. I still feel this way. As if each day is a step closer toward something I can’t describe. But this does not have to do with any religious beliefs of deities in the “after-life”. This is in the now, the current and the present. My dreams and memories show me how I have thought, and how I think now. Memories show me the similarities and differences, and how I have grown. This revisiting of the past serves as a moral and disciplinary self-check. I can use the past to analyze myself and check for patterns, and so can you.

Memories are one of the most intriguing things the human mind can hold. And I hope that each and every one of us uses those memories to their full potential. Use them not just to remember, but to be inspired and enlightened. Use them to check against your current beliefs and moral standings. And above all, use memories to guide you on your journey of finding who you are and what you aim to become. Whether it be a shocking experience, a lovely afternoon, or a humble resort, every experience has insight. I can only wish you luck on using that insight for your future endeavors.

Personal Essay (A computational passion?)

I was sitting up on a ledge with a view just barely over the crowd so I could see our robot’s final seconds. There was a 3 tier pyramid located in the center of the arena, with the audience wrapped around it. Every single one of us had our eyes fixed on my team’s robot, it was lifting itself up to the final tier of the pyramid for maximum points. It reached the top of the pyramid just as the time for the round only had a few seconds left. Suddenly one of the hooks that were used to hold the robot up snapped, and the robot fell over 10 feet and slammed to the ground just as the timeout buzzer rang. My team was short just enough points to lose the final round of a regional tournament. It all ended with a big cheer from the crowd for Hawaii’s alliance, the opposing team.

About a year earlier I was walking through the crowded halls of my high school, filtering out all the clumps of people wanting me to join their club because it’s “Great to get involved” or “Lots of fun!” Each year during registration Meridian High School always put stands up for each club/team at the school, it was a good way to recruit new people. I didn’t want to join the lacrosse team, had already played football for six years, and quite frankly thought all these people were annoying. Especially since this was my junior year and I had already dealt with these people two other times. They were bombarding me with signup requests and all I wanted to do was get to the end of the hallway. On the second floor I looked down one of the hallways and noticed a girl standing next to what appeared to be a robot. This caught my attention, I had never seen anything like this before. A robot standing next to a multitude of sports teams seemed out of the ordinary. After some thought about it I walked up to the girl, and had a small chat with her. “We’re in great need of computer programmers at the moment, since all of current ones are seniors” she noted. “Oh well perfect, I’m pretty interested in programming. I’ve had some experience with it as well” I replied. The friendly girl then encouraged me to sign up for their team. I was a little nervous about committing to a team. At this point in my life I had never been in a club that I had any deep, personal experiences with. But I gave it a shot, and wrote my email down on the neglected signup sheet. In just a few minutes I was out in the parking lot. I had just finished junior year registration and had something to look forward to.

After several months I received my first email from the team. They call themselves the Bullbots, which derives from the mascot at Mountain View High School in Meridian, Idaho. During the first meeting, held at Renaissance High School, I met most of the people that I would spend the next two years with. Also I witnessed a handful of robots the team built, along with the one I saw at registration. The robots were all specialized for different tasks. Some could shoot basketballs or kick soccer balls, while others were built for speed. One robot could even deploy another smaller robot. After the meeting I was suddenly struck with anxiety about my competence and abilities as a programmer. But I soon learned to grow comfortable with my team, and realized that any level of experience is welcome. It’s a place for growth and personal exploration.

This place is the home of what is called a FIRST Robotics Competition (FRC) team. These teams can be found all over the world, a few are located here in Idaho. Every FRC team competes in a global competition each year. This competition changes from year to year. Sometimes it may involve throwing or catching objects for scoring, climbing simple structures, autonomously speeding around a track, etc. Once the FRC teams are given their assignment, this marks the start of “build season”. Every team has exactly six weeks to design, create, and test their robot before competition. Each team is normally broken into sub-teams. The Bullbots were broken up into four groups, each with their own lead. Electrical, mechanical, and programming were the three main sub-teams, with the fourth meant for everything non-robot related (i.e. Marketing, scheduling events, fundraising, etc.) Each sub-team collaborates with each other in order to build a successful robot on time.

My first year was all about getting used to the team, and getting to know one another. I was very shy at this time. I was antisocial, which was probably why it took me so long to find a club that I liked. I also had trouble communicating ideas and/or thoughts. This was a very self-conscious time for me. Thoughts like “What will they think of me and my abilities” and “What if I can’t do it” came into my head. Worrisome and anxious I was. Eventually build season came. The team met after school for about 4 hours on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. In addition we met from 8am to 8pm every Saturday. You practically live with your team throughout the 6 weeks of build season. The lead programmer, Derik, was an intelligent, blonde haired geek. Interestingly enough he wasn’t just good at code, but also with poems and literature. Throughout his years he had done much of the robots code himself. Derik’s best friend Taylor was scrawny and humble. He never exactly typed code but he always helped with computer science theories and aided the team along. Derik’s prime objective was to get the robot coded for competition. He struggled in teaching newcomers how to code, what components do what, and how the team works. Many new members were interested in programming. But one by one those members moved to a different sub-team like electrical or mechanical. A lot of the members simply became disinterested since Derik spent little time with them. Eventually I was the only member of the programming team that stuck to it and played the waiting game.

Build season days were intense with discussion, brainstorming, and confusion. What do we do? How do we build it? What parts do we need? Will we have time to prototype this? Why the heck hasn’t X Y and Z been done yet? Those are the types of questions that everybody was asking all the time. The atmosphere can seem exotic for one who isn’t used to it. Drills and saws are screaming away from the mechanical team, electrical is wiring up power and discussing schematics for the robot components, while programming is mashing their keyboards and excessively testing the robot to kill any remaining bugs in the code. On top of that people are tired, hungry, possibly overworked and sometimes just want to go home. Team members start getting impatient, people aren’t doing their jobs, we argue. This is the time where an individual’s personality is tested. At the end of the day, one may be mentally and physically exhausted, and stressed. But if you love what you do, then you still have that itch to come back, to finish the project, to see what you’re really made of.

Eventually we were able to create a robot that shot Frisbees through the air and was able to climb a 3 tier pyramid (The mechanics of the climbing system were honestly quite sketchy). The team felt we all had a fairly good robot this year. According the other team members, the Bullbots had only gone to nationals once before (But not because of robot performance, there are other ways to make it to nationals). Eventually we tested our robot’s climbing mechanism during competition and found out that we were among a small group of teams throughout the nation that could actually climb to the top of the pyramid. I’m unsure of the exact numbers but only some 10-20 teams in the U.S could get to the top, and we turned out to be one of them. This fact fueled us until the very end of the competition, when Hawaii’s alliance scored just enough points to win the final match, sending them to nationals.

We may have lost the final round, but to me this was just the beginning. The only two programmers left besides me were Derik and Taylor, who were graduating seniors. Therefore my second year I was elected as the lead programmer. This not only meant that I would have some training to do later on, but it meant that I had to figure out everything Derik didn’t teach me, plus program the robot solo. Well almost solo, that is. This was the year I met Steve. Steve was a mentor for the team who I hadn’t really talked to until now, since I now had incentives. This year proved most difficult. I didn’t know where to start, felt lost, isolated, and confused. My mentor Steve guided me each step of the way. Showed me workarounds to problems I hadn’t experienced in the past. We faced many of the same problems the first year, except all the weight was on me now. I came to really respect Steve after working with him for hours and hours on end. I never realized how knowledgeable and intelligent he was. I not only had the help of Steve, but the gentle help of Katy as well. Katy is the Bullbot’s head advisor. She knew nothing about programming, but she was able to help with the stress, coordinating schedules, and simply just be there when we needed a little extra push. “Is there anything you need Clay?” Katy would always ask, especially when we had a lunch break and everybody could see that I was still working. Sometimes I barely ate I was so busy. Which I don’t recommend. Steve and I were constantly working on robot bugs, but we were also working on something the team had never done before. “The robot camera can detect the game ball using color” I said aloud as I was presenting our progress on the code. Using an artificial intelligence library developed by Intel, Steve and I were able to get the robot’s camera to detect the game ball. Although we never finished every feature of this product due to time constraints, it worked in more than just theory. It’s achievements like these that make me miss my late night coding session at with the Bullbots. Eventually we “finished” the robot - more like had to stop working on it - and we drove out of state to competition…

There was a 10 by 10 foot area marked for my team and me. This small concrete section was outlined by white tape. Along the tape was a series of tables and toolboxes wrapped around the inside of the marked section. This allowed just enough room to fit a few of my team members in the designated space at one time. Among all of these toolboxes, tables, and team members stood the most valuable piece. Sitting in center, about three feet wide and 4-5 feet tall, stood our teams robot. We were located inside of a stadium in Utah. There were around 40 to 50 other robots inside the stadium, each one of them either located in their designated areas or in the testing area. Because our team had a 10 by 10 foot square for all of our belongings, so did every other robotics team in the stadium. Every team had anywhere from 10-25 members. Now take that number of members per team multiplied by the number of teams, and shove them all into half the size of an ice skating rink and you have what is called the pits.

In the pits every team had one main job; that was to get the robot ready for the next round. Each robotics team was battling in a tournament against one another. About every 20-40 minutes our team would have to take our robot out to the arena to play in a 3v3 round along other teams. Honestly we did not make far in the tournament. Our robot had fundamental mechanical issues that hindered its performance in important aspects of the game. Throughout the competition the mechanical team and I were constantly battling our robot’s issues. Changing gear ratios, editing the loading system’s code, etc. To no avail, the Bullbots robot’s “problems” were never quite solved. But I cannot stress how much I appreciated my team during our time in the pits. Each and every member gave me the upmost respect. Not only was Katy and Steve there to guide me in my decisions, but in the pit the entire team was very trustworthy and helpful. I needed anything, and it was done. Mechanical and Electrical leads were asking what it was that I wanted them to do. Although we didn’t get close to nationals that year, I was more than happy to work with the team I had. Their joy to work with me brought about a bittersweet feeling.

Once back from competition I felt different. I was no longer the shy kid walking among the hallways of my high school. I was better at working and communicating with others. I learned a vast amount of skills from that team. My time with the Bullbots has taught and given me more hands on experience than any classroom could ever give me. I also realized that you can’t make everything perfect and you just need to give it your best shot. If you try to juggle everything at once, you’ll wreck the whole show. Not only did I feel different, but I wanted the programming team to be different as well. I soon began training individuals and helping them as much as I could throughout the summer. I eventually came across the son of a Bullbots alumni who was very interested in programming. Once he joined the team, I gave him every last bit of knowledge I had for as long as I could. I wasn’t going to let all my time there go to waste, otherwise the programming team would have to reinvent the wheel all over again.

Signing up for my high school robotics club was one of the most pivotal moments of my life. If the team would have never decided to recruit people at Meridian High School, or if I would have never signed up, then I would have never met any of the wonderful people on my robotics club. Which in turn would have changed my life dramatically. Simple moments can change our lives. It still astounds me how the people around you in your everyday life can change how you think, feel, and behave as an individual. It wasn’t just me, but the people I worked with that helped me achieve my goals. That is why I still visit them to this day, dropping by whenever I have time to check up on them. Sometime later I was able to reflect on my experiences, and realize how much I cared about the Bullbot’s and its future. Having a passion like that changes who you are, and what you aim to become.

The Passionate Journey

There are people in this world that are different from others. These people are different in ways that are, philosophically, difficult to explain. You may be wondering who these people are, and in fact you may be one of them. To explain this group of people, I will first give you an idea of the opposite of this group.

In this cliché example a person wakes up to their buzzing alarm, and groggily gets out of bed. They prepare for another 9-5 workday. It’s Monday, they are already exhausted, and all he/she can think about is what they want to do after 5 o’clock. Monday goes by, then Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, until eventually its 5pm on Friday and that person is excited for the weekend. This is a very banal but realistic example of what 80% of individuals are doing with their lives (Dinsmore). So what are the other 20% of people doing? This 20% is that special group of people that have found their passion. They wake up every day energized and excited about their work. I have met few people who fit this category, but I believe they are easily distinguishable in a crowd. So what is the difference between someone who enjoys their everyday life and someone that endures it? The key difference is passion. A majority of people in the world haven’t found what it is that they love to do, they are not in sync with their natural aptitudes. As more and more individuals begin to notice the difference between people who love their job and others that endure it, a question bubbles to the surface.

How do you get from working because you have to pay bills, feed yourself, and stay alive, to working because you love your job and you feel that you never work a day In your life? In other words, how do you find your passion?

Sir Ken Robinson is an internationally recognized leader in the development of creativity, innovation, and human potential. He taught for 12 years at the University of Warwick in the UK and is now professor emeritus (Robinson and Aronica). And in Robinson’s book, Finding Your Element, he aims to answer that exact question. How does one find their passion? The book refers to finding what you love to do as your “Element”. Robinson states that an individual’s Element is “…doing something that feels so completely natural to you, that resonates so strongly with you, that you feel that this is who you really are.” (xi). It’s about being “in the zone”. Being in your Element is where you’re staying up late at night trying to get something down. It may be a new music piece, or an equation that you’ve spent hours working out. Nonetheless everybody has an Element, and finding that Element is based off of three principles.

Robinson states in his book that everyone is unique (20). No two beings on earth are exactly the same, we all have our own interests, aptitudes, hobbies, likes, and dislikes. We are unique biologically, as in our genes and traits, as well as environmentally. Nobody grows up in the same place, time, and culture with the same family, wealth, and experience. Because of this, each and every one of us have a different passion or Element.

His second principle states that “You create your own life” (23). Human beings are naturally creative, they shape culture. Imagination is said to be the act of creating something that is not present to our senses. So what is creativity? Imagination is integral to creativity, creativity can be seen as “applied imagination” (Robinson and Aronica 24). Your world is created by what you choose (and choose not) to do. In Finding Your Element the author notes a quote from Carl Jung, “I am not what has happened to me, I am what I choose to become” (24).

Robinson’s final principle for finding your Element is that “Life is organic” (25). A study mentioned in a TED talk, “The Psychology of Your Future Self” by Dan Gilbert, asked thousands of people how much they think they would change in the next several years. What they found was that nobody, no matter what age, can make an accurate guess as to what their life will be like in 20, 10, or even 5 years (Gilbert). Every single person dramatically underestimated the amount of change that would occur in their lives. Life is not a step by step process, there is no list of what you must or must not do. Each step you make can be in any direction, and each direction you choose is not necessarily good nor bad. These directional decisions are based off one’s personal interests and ambitions (Robinson and Aronica 26).

These three basic elemental principles can help guide an individual into finding their Element. But many roadblocks can and will occur along the journey of finding one’s passion. A prime example of this is our education system. Education systems around the world are not built with these three principles in mind. Education is based off the assumption that life is linear (Robinson). In Sir Ken Robinson’s famous 2006 TED talk, “How Education Kills Creativity”, he highlights the fact that education systems need to be completely rebuilt. Everywhere you go there is the same education hierarchy. Mathematics and language are at the top, while humanities and arts are at the bottom. Because of this, many highly creative and skilled people think that they are not intelligent or useful, because what they are good at isn’t valued (Robinson). Education is the way it is because it was meant to meet the needs of industrialism in the 19th century, but today’s needs are different. We’re running education systems where being wrong is the worst thing you can do. Ken Robinson states that “Creativity should be as important as literacy.” In 2005 Steve Jobs gave a commencement speech to the University of Stanford about his life decisions (“’You’ve got to find what you love.’ Jobs says”). Steve dropped out of college and it turned out to be “… one of the best decisions I ever made.” Free of the limitations of graduation requirements, Steve took the classes which he found interest in. This led to Steve creating - as well as being fired from - his own company, Apple. This was an open door for him. Being let go allowed him to focus creatively, and once again be free. He proceeded to start up two companies, one of which is the most successful animation studio in the world, Pixar.

A great number of people grow up thinking that we must do certain things to succeed. We “must” excel in academics. We “must” go to college. We “must” get a well-paid job. But this is all a psychological trick. Society has set these rules down, these rules may work for some, but they most certainly will not work for all of humanity. Therefore each of us must find our own path, set down our own rules, and live our own individual, and unique lives.

Despite Robinson’s three elemental principles, some individuals still have a hunch that it is simply not possible for everyone on earth to find their element. They simply ask, who’s going to do the dirty work? Who will clean the toilets and work at assembly lines? First off, there are a vast amount of people in existence all with very personal and specific aptitudes. There will always be someone out there that loves to do the cleaning, or taking out the trash (Robinson 103). Although Ken Robinson does note that not everybody can make a living out of what they love to do, but it is important that one finds time to do what he/she loves. Not everybody can become rich from their passions, but they are “…entitled to be enriched by it” (Robinson 104).

To find your element you must first focus on what you’re good at, these are aptitudes or natural talents. This is exactly what Steve Jobs did; he sacrificed a degree for a refined focus on himself. These aptitudes are different from abilities. Aptitudes are the raw talents that people possess i.e. easily understand math concepts, or having a good visual sense. An ability is something that requires education, work, and experience, and must be practiced in order to be obtained. Examples of abilities are a mathematician, artist, and a cryptographer. Aptitudes is more the nature side – what we are naturally good at or enjoy. While abilities is more the nurture side – what we have become good at and have mastered. By combining aptitudes with abilities, and resisting the urge to conform to other beliefs about the “must-haves” in life, you can find a passion that will drive you for the rest of your life (Robinson 36).

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