What matters most to you, and why?

Grandpa stories are a memorabilia – funny, somber or pensive, we reckon our lives’ learnings with these stories. 8 years back, I had a similar discussion– my grandfather looked back at his life to tell me his stories. Most of them were lined with “Oh I wish, I could….” During his hay days, circumstantial constraints bound him from doing what he wished to and his unfulfilled desires echoed their way into his last days – literally. He died of chronic cancer a week later. Leaving me with clear thoughts that underlined my value system, he gave words to what I consider the most valuable doctrine of my life - Freedom.

Freedom matters the most to me. To me, freedom is not being limited on my desires. Freedom gives me choices, freedom is a sweet fruit - an outcome of a struggle and above all freedom lets me make my dreams a reality.

Everyone dreams, but most limit it to air castles and desires. Freedom allows me to dream, to desire and attain what I desire. Right from my childhood, I wanted to be a pilot, but could not join Air Force due to family pressure. Even commercial flying was prohibitively expensive. I let my flying dream take a backseat, albeit temporarily. I persevered, and a decade and a half later, I earned my private pilot license. A long and arduous journey for 15 years, I freed myself of all constraints to emerge victorious – with “flying” colors. Freedom let me convert my childhood dream to reality. I worked through all cinchers to get what I wanted. Freedom and liberty do not mean defying rules, but recognizing the compulsions inherent in being and inwardly assimilating each day’s experience. I learnt each day, imbibed the lessons and worked my way to my dream.

Liberty has to be earned, and whatever is earned is respected. Edmund Burke said – “Believe in it that the lovers of freedom will be free”. Freedom is not for the weak and it is preceded by labor and struggle that, howsoever small, gives life a mission. To me purposelessness, even for a moment is a bane. Desires give me direction and freedom is the path to the directions. Moving to goal every
minute and overcoming the impediments are parts of my struggle – like anyone else’s. The fruit that it bears is only delicious. In Fidelity, I had an innate desire to be an active member of a large scale product transformation. With little knowledge of financial services industry and not much idea of the product, I started by leading a nondescript team. Graduating my way up, overcoming the barriers of knowledge, project management and technical know-how, I not only led the team successfully to the closure of the exercise, but I also became one of the 6 core members of the team, each of the other 5 had over 2 decades of experience running the product. I pride myself in the achievement and even more in the impact it had on Fidelity India. Bit by bit, I freed myself from the clutches of fear of little knowledge and a daily tactical supervision to establish my turf. Even today, when I look back, I value every moment of my struggle. I relish all the sleepless nights I spent to pull myself up to reach the higher echelons of the global team. I could have chosen to move on a safe path under supervision and guidance, but the freedom out of the struggle is worth every drop of midnight oil I burnt.

Only a free man can embrace a choice from many. I learnt the hard lesson in college, when I lost on my grades. Bound by irresponsibility and recklessness -progenitors of negative freedom, I did everything, but study in my first year at IT BHU. I was bound by mindlessness and a nit-wit state that made me spell DOOM. It took me much hard work subsequently to drag myself out of the mess. Freedom is not only about choices of what to do, but also a choice of not doing what one does not want to do. I did not want to muck my grades, but smeared with negative freedom, I did exactly what I did not want to.

Talking about choices– over time, I have overcome many societal, economic and limitations to indulge myself in a myriad of things. My being a pilot, an adventure sports enthusiast, avid reader of art, history and philosophy, a volunteer on HIV victims’ rehabilitation, aficionado of Single Malts, connoisseur of food, addict to puzzles and movie buff to name some, take my intellect to a completely new level. They free me from the clutches of gripping ennui. On the professional front,
my varied interests help me engage almost anyone in a conversation. People relate to me in unique ways, and I form deep personal relations that are radically different from professional echelons. Freedom lets me choose and that accentuates a wholesome feeling.

There may be many tenets to freedom, but freedom as a facet of life has helped me evolve progressively. From being a kid with not much control on my destiny, I moved to becoming independent. From being an unsure teenager, I became a pillar of strength for many. I have come a long way from evolving as an unsure and gawky kid to a resilient and strong man today. I strive to become independent and as I progress, I aspire to take people along the way.

In the famous fable story of a race between tortoise and hare, the tortoise moved slowly and steadily to beat the hare to the finishing line and freed himself from the never-ending ridicule of the hare. The tortoise, although slow, moved constantly. Likewise, I have been moving to my destination. Slowly and sure footed, I have unshackled myself, built my profile to reach where I am today and prepare myself for the next freedom battle. I believe harbingers of freedom create value - tangible or intangible, real or notional. Creation is the essence of my next journey.
What are your aspirations? How will your education at Stanford help you achieve them?

By 40 I aim to start my entrepreneurship venture to restructure and turnaround sick units to bring them back on the track, by 50 establish my company’s foothold in the market, at 60 become a seasoned turnaround specialist and at 70; go back to educate the world of my experiences as an entrepreneur and a transformation leader! A crisp vision of future but it would take careful planning and strongest muscles in my profile to accomplish a seemingly lofty aspiration. Till now, I have built on the breadth of my profile by way of multitude of engagements in my professional, academic and personal lives. It had its own bane and I was sometimes considered as one with lack of focus. But, with my eyes on the end goal, I got what I set out to achieve – the experiences added to my adaptability, creativity, innovativeness and as my supervisor says – ‘ability to work in amorphous situations’. Now, I would like to deepen my skill base to learn how to evaluate a business from a holistic perspective and invest my capital to help create more value. Till recently, whenever I presented a fervent pitch of my entrepreneurial plans, I was told rather unceremoniously that I needed either 2 decades of business experience or a backing of a credible MBA from a world class institution. Needless to say, I chose the latter.

I want to have a pedigree that is recognized anywhere in the world. I also want to develop myself for near and distant future. Stanford promises me both. For instance, a Stanford alumnus – Candace Matthews commented – ‘I would never have thought that more than 20 years later I would feel even more strongly about Stanford than I did when I graduated.’ No other alumnus of a school I researched has said such an intense statement as this. I long to be part of the community and echo such intense emotions 2 decades later. Just as much, I want lifelong ammunition to sustain my venture – the final peak that I want to scale. Stanford forms the base. Like in army it is believed that more you sweat in peace, less you bleed in war; I look at my peaceful and sweaty stint at Stanford to
prepare me for a war to set up my kingdom. With an “I can” attitude, I look forward to master the cutting edge concepts taught at Stanford and give my dream sharp contours.

From what I know, Stanford is all about entrepreneurship. So is my dream. With a vision similar to mine, a brand name recognized in any corner of the globe, and Silicon Valley as the playground, the stint would be completely galvanizing.

The entrepreneurial spirit fostered by the Stanford pedagogy will help me prepare my business plan. My entrepreneurial vision is to work towards rapidly turning around and turning up small to medium sized companies and unlock potential value. The model I will deploy will have 2 separate arms - an investing arm would focus on opportunity identification and financial structuring through mix of equity, debt and mezzanine instruments and an operating arm that will build the organization systems and structures for sustainable value creation. At Stanford, everyday, I will build this single paragraph; word by word; into the most attractive propositions whetted by the strongest pillars of entrepreneurial learning. It will be my kingdom’s blueprint. In India, such a concept of end to end turnaround by an external agency is still fledgling and so learning to play the game from an expert will go a long way in establishing the concept. Over the next decade, the business scenario is expected to undergo a massive change. I want to be at the core of the change.

Learning is best when I acquire complete skills and pedagogy at Stanford will help me learn best. Business education is continuously reforming and concepts become dated soon. Stanford circumvents this challenge through management perspectives - that builds strong foundation to lifelong learning. Strong fundamentals help imbibe continuously changing concepts in a better manner. It fosters adaptability. I can even customize my learning to suit my aspirations. With such a “sui generis” pedagogy, I know, I am poised to become the best. Even so, mentorship program will help me tie the loose ends together and this is the most valuable means to attaining the end.
My 2 years will be replete with focus on entrepreneurship, and the learning will be further strengthened by reinforcements like accessibility to Bay Area - the hotbed of entrepreneurship where I can learn from the value creators of the new economy. Opportunity to take classes across the street at Stanford University that will add to the perspective and depth of my learning and intensive seminars, synthesis seminars and Global experiences that outline the curriculum and that will reinforce theory with application. These would add much to my learning and will help me speed up much to my dream that I resolve to build one day.
Tell us about a time when you had a significant impact on a person, group or organization.

Fungal growth in mouth, body parts swollen with Kaposi sarcoma and a viral load of 500,000 per ml. A desolate family in rude shock and utter misery, when the patient was first brought to the hospital in a comatose state. The 36 year old cab driver had full blown AIDS and was completely clueless about it. He and his family definitely did not deserve such a predicament.

The philanthropist in me took over and I volunteered to sponsor the economic destitute’s treatment. Thus began a turning point in my life.

I got him under dexterous hands and in just 2 weeks his infections were history. Accompanying that were words of wisdom from a counselor to help him bring his life on track. In the following 4 weeks, the viral load dropped to undetectable levels. He was back to normal. The virus resided somewhere, but would not dare harm him, at least as long as he took medicines on time. Today, the cab driver is leading a normal life, accustomed to fight the “enemy within”.

As long as treatment is publicly available in the world, I have promised him access to it. In turn, he is committed to follow his treatment religiously. The episode stirred us to a different plane. Today, my financial plans constitute his treatment expenses and spare times constitute counseling and rehabilitation of other HIV victims. Affected by goodwill, he initiated his philanthropy by training his locales on how to conduct their life despite imminent death.

Today, not only have I become more aware of HIV, but also its affect; not only have I felt the profusion of such dreaded problems, but also seen the world from eyes of those affected by it and not only do am I happy to earn money, but also use it to make someone’s life little more worthy.

Tell us about a time when you tried to reach a goal or complete a task that was challenging, difficult, or frustrating.

Successful changes in an organization are driven from the top, but when the changes happen at the top, organizations reinvent themselves; but doing this is easier said than done. In the last couple of
years of ECS’s consulting engagement with a leading luxury hotel chain, we had driven structural changes in unit operations with support from the top (executives at the head office), and in the last lap of the engagement we proposed structural changes for the head office that would help to reinvent the organization. It was an easy sell, but implementing it through a set of reticent and belligerent executives would be onerous. The boom time in hospitality added to my troubles in changing the mindset. I was sure to have a rollercoaster ride and the winds only got gustier.

Each of the 14 executives had his own antithetic ideas that added to the cacophony. I first had to make them one. Slowly, I overcame the divergent and obdurate mindsets and developed a shared vision. However, some corners never got filled. These were relatively senior members at the headquarters, so escalations could have its own unpleasant repercussions; perhaps without resolution. I had to be utterly urbane. In 3 months I built adequate responsiveness and just when I almost got on track; the executives got shuffled in an organizational change. I had to redo everything, with a different set. Half way through the assignment and we had only got the team together. “Do they really want a change?” - I asked myself.

As luck had it, we were in murky waters again - the engagement dynamics changed and we had to provide “pair of hands” support. Most of the client members went on to take other responsibilities. “It is an organizational need” was the answer to the new dark clouds. The gears shifted again and the exposed corners became gaps setting up ingredients to an inferno.

Amidst much firefighting and patchy work, we somehow met the deliverables. The 3 year long journey ended, but left some long lasting marks. The clients, though not vociferous, seemed discontent. We suppressed frustrations and parted amicably, but somewhere I was dissatisfied. When I look back, I learnt lessons like how catastrophic lack of planning can be, but perhaps the most important one was how a coherent vision, commitment and sense of need is imperative to success of a large transformation.
Hi, Mr. V,

As I interacted with Stanford's adcom last year in national MBA career fair, they positioned GSB as a general management school like a compact Harvard, not particularly entrepreneurial or high-tech. Of course they have major presence of super successful entrepreneurs and high-tech professionals, but it's because of the location and the regional environment, not by intention, according to the adcom.

You have some extraordinary achievements in several giant companies, lots of impressive extracurricular activities, especially flying, and you leveraged it as your major value in terms of "freedom." You also positioned yourself as an entrepreneur to match the aspirational entrepreneurship spirit in Stanford GSB. And obviously you'd read lots of novels that your essays were really splendid and attractive for adcoms to keep reading your stories. All of these were great advantages to your essay package.

However, your essays and stories were, not critically, but somewhat incomplete. While not only your stories, but also your career logic was a little bit vague. Your GPA, even not in the U.S. 4.0 system, could make adcom frown, either. Your 700+ GMAT can make up a bit for your academic capacity, but the break down matters that your V was only 35.

The essay materials you picked were majorly "freedom" and "entrepreneurship," also altruism to poverty. All of them were great, but the freedom part was not assertive enough. It worked well with your flying hobby but it was quite empty beyond this freedom value. You may need 1 to 2 steps deeper to fulfill this value with more progressive extension like "innovation" or "exploration" to achieve some goals ahead. You also need to correlate all these values with your career goals, and these goals should be lined up with a core theme that inevitably needs the Stanford GSB. So far these values are separated from each other.

The 3rd and 4th essays could go 1 step further, too. And the financial plan for poverty and be connected with the entrepreneurship one, while you need a clear and specific business plan for your entrepreneurial dream, or at least have a clear direction that you're already on your way. The 4th one was a bit pity that you could leverage the constraint to explain what and how will you leverage GSB.

But don't get discouraged by any of these. Overall, since you have pretty decent and solid experience, also quite well-rounded personality and interesting life, so if you can correlate all the dots, you’ll be perfect.

Sincerely,

David