



# I AM EXCEPTIONAL: L'ESPERIENZA DEI MILLENNIAL

Alla ricerca della propria identità

I AM EXCEPTIONAL: THE MILLENNIAL EXPERIENCE

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# I AM EXCEPTIONAL: THE MILLENNIAL EXPERIENCE

The Search for Identity in the Next Greatest Generation



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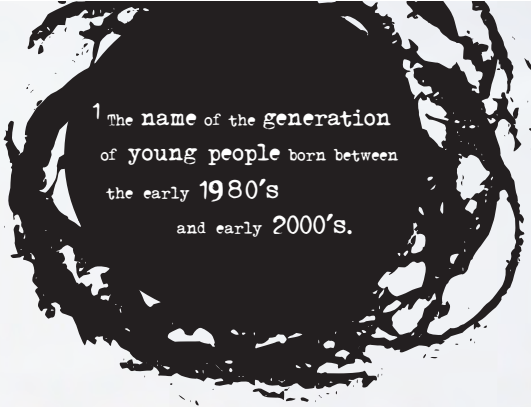
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Most of the **pictures**  
included in this project  
**were not crafted by**  
**professional photographers.**  
**These are personal, amateur**  
**photographs taken by the**  
**Millennials**  
**who collaborated on this exhibit.**

Therefore they remain untouched.

The gift to see the beauty surrounding  
us is not something given only to professionals,  
but to anyone with a heart that is open  
and gazing outward onto the horizon.



<sup>1</sup>The name of the generation  
of young people born between  
the early 1980's  
and early 2000's.




A MILLENNIAL<sup>1</sup>  
MANIFESTO



**W**e, the undersigned, the generation of startups and quarter-life crises, of constant status updates, and identity invention are committed to the promise we received when we were young: that our lives would be extraordinary. Born at the optimistic turn of the century, we desire to embody fully achieved potential, creativity, and social enterprise. Yet for most of us, that greatness has been elusive. We belong to a nation that categorizes identity through generations, each with a distinct culture and with a trademark historical contribution. In our time, Time Magazine has deemed us the self-absorbed "Me, Me, Me" generation. As Chris Weller said, "we post to social media on a regular basis, through profiles and accounts that pose the question: Who are you?" While many commentators have commended the high mobility rates, increased college graduations, and propensity towards idealism in our generation - we are keenly aware of the drama inherent in constantly inventing an answer to that question. The glitzy image posted on our Facebook wall seems ephemeral, and once alone we are disappointed.

It has been the Millennial experience (thus far), that our *voyager* years in our twenties and thirties have been marked by longing. We hunger for a great and impossible version of ourselves, and yet are constantly disappointed by the fact that the target keeps moving—that our promised happiness is perpetually postponed.



As a result, many live as novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard describes: "The only thing I have learned from life is to endure it, never to question it, and to burn up the longing generated by this in writing... Surely, I love my children [job, friends, and lifestyle]. Yet, even the meaning that they produce is not sufficient to fulfill a whole life" (*My Struggle*, 14). We face an uncomfortable truth: a generation whose self-esteem has been carefully protected, and whose lifestyles choices have been broadened, has not become happier as a result. We desire to reclaim the promise that our lives would be meaningful and great - and yet have found that we need answers outside ourselves, and with people who are daring enough not to exhaust their longing.

For this reason, we have chosen to create an exhibit on the Millennials, not out of the narcissism that our public discourse suggests, but rather out of the acute awareness that the Millennial problem is a timely, poignant expression of the human problem. This chasm between our desire for greatness and the frustration of reality is the starting point for finding our true identity; here we are forced to confront the question of what gives meaning to life. In order to narrate this timeless identity struggle to the people of this epoch, we feel compelled to use our Millennial language and *media* - Facebook, selfies, blogs, live feeds.

The exhibit is the result of six months of work - the Millennial Project - between 75 young adults from North America who have tried juxtaposing their experiences with a few fundamental texts by Luigi Giussani, in order to understand if his proposal could still be relevant today. While working in small groups of 10-15 people over several months, the interstate Skype calls and the Facebook and Twitter posts have become the place of an overflowing of stories, surprises and discoveries. The path of the exhibit reflects this, as it evocatively retraces the journey to our visitors, inviting them to undertake it with us.



# MARTINA

is passionate about **CATHEDRALS**, merchants and **CRUSADES**, and teaches **MEDIEVAL** history to college students amidst the cornfields of the Midwest.

# JOSE

is a jack of all trades. While he happens to be a **civil engineer** with some credentials in **theology**, his greatest passion is **education**.



# JONATHAN

is a **real estate entrepreneur** in the **Rockies**. He loves hiking, sharing life with his friends, having fun with kids, and beauty.



# CHRISTINA

has been passionate about education since she was very young. As she got older, her love for **Chemistry** and the physical sciences grew. Now she is a middle school **science teacher** in a small Catholic school.



# CAROLINA

is a frenetically joyful **World History teacher** in an inner-city high school on the **East Coast**. In another life, she would have probably studied graphic design and museum architecture to be more helpful to Martina in this endeavor.

# STEPHANIE

is a wife and **mother** of two (soon-to-be three) **kids**. She lives in Wisconsin.



# RAYMOND

is a **PHYSICIST** who works at a university, where he is fortunate enough to get paid to be a **PERPETUAL STUDENT**, with nature as the professor and the **UNIVERSE** as his classroom.



# JAMES

is crazy for **HOCKEY** and works for a sales and marketing company in **CANADA's** leading city.



# MONICA

loves teaching **Science** and **Italian** to her students in middle and high school. She also loves spending time with her **children** Lucia and Joseph. She is married to a wonderful engineer who makes her life a **beautiful adventure**.



# EMILY

lives in **Ohio** with her husband and 3 children, and is about to give birth to her **fourth child**. She is looking forward to snuggling the new baby and doing all the things she can't do while she's pregnant like **climbing trees**, riding bikes, and sleeping on her back.





WHY DO  
I TAKE PICTURES OF  
MYSELF?



“ I have to say that’s because I want to count, I want to be seen. I don’t just want to take a picture of the mountains, even though they are beautiful, I want to be a part of that picture. So this is another way of not just seeing that I am the center of everything, but wanting to be a part of something.

IN THE END THERE IS THIS DESIRE  
TO BE A PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER THAN MYSELF,  
EVEN SOMETHING INFINITE.



This photo was taken in the **ARCHES PARK IN MOAB, UTAH**, by a photographer we know who lives in Colorado. So the story is basically that he was up all night after all the tourists had left, taking pictures with a technique called **'LIGHT-PAINTING'** photography - using a flashlight to light up the arch during a long exposure, with the **MILKY WAY GALAXY** in the background. It was very beautiful, but at the end of the night he decided he wanted a **SELF-PORTRAIT**. So he put on the timer, ran all the way up to the arch, then came back to realize he had taken his favorite shot of the night. ”







**ABOUT**

The search for identity in the next greatest generation.

**mil-len-nial** (mi len-uhl)  
A member of the generation born from the early 1980s to the early 2000s, especially in the United States and Canada; a member of Generation Y.

**PEOPLE**

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**The Millennial Experience**  
January 14, 2013

**ME ME ME GENERATION**  
Millennials are lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents. Why they love us all.

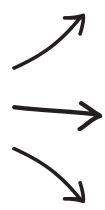
**The Me Me Me Generation | TIME.com**  
Millennials Will Save Us All. Andrew Myers for TIME. They are narcissistic, overconfident, entitled and lazy, but they just might be the new Greatest Generation.

**The Millennial Experience**  
January 21, 2013

**The Identity Crisis Under the Ink**  
Americans, particularly Millennials - are getting more tattoos than ever! Is a shifting, increasingly uncertain culture to blame?

**The Millennial Experience**  
December 12, 2012

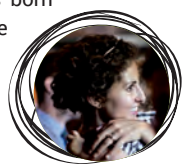
**Amid The Stereotypes, Some Facts About Millennials**  
"Millennial" is the demographic buzzword of the moment. But are young adults today really so different from previous generations?



“ The word **Millennial** conjures the image of the young hipster - born in the middle of a digital revolution, educated to be an exceptional non-conformist and yet **burdened by the expectation of living up to that specialness**. When we started the work together, looked at each others' Facebook walls, and reflected on why we posted certain things about ourselves, we became keenly aware of these posts as an expression of a deep longing for the promises that have been made for our lives. Getting into our 20s and 30s, what many journalists call the voyager years, has meant **we hunger for a fuller version of ourselves that did not come with college or the dream jobs**. In fact, the sense of fulfillment is perpetually delayed and disappointed. However, **in listening to that internal dissatisfaction, there has been a possibility of rediscovering a different kind of purpose, a different kind of greatness that our generation (or generations before us) has not been able to provide.** ”



I would add that **the question of trying to understand oneself is common to everybody**, not just those of us born in the millennial generation. But since we are Millennials, and this question of meaning and identity is surfacing for us in particular ways and through unique experiences, those are what we're using in this exhibit. ”



“ The exhibit attempts to capture our questions and reflections through our generational language - blogs, social media, conversations with friends, snapshots - all of which are condensed in a Facebook timeline. We have chosen this format because this is the way in which we Millennials express our thoughts and experiences, and make ourselves known. The snippets of questions and comments that compose these timelines are transcribed from the Skype conversations among 75 young adults who have been working on this together, in dialogue with other Millennials and authors who speak to this experience. ”

**We have quotes, not definitive statements**, because we don't want this dialogue to be over, we want to foster thought and conversation. By design, this installation is incomplete, inviting its viewers to jump into the fray. As you go through the pages, feel free to leave your comments and questions in the blank space at the bottom of each panel. ”



# In Search of Identity



**Chris Weller**  
September 12 at 11:37 AM

We all post to social media on a regular basis, through profiles and accounts that pose the question: "Who are you?" For some, that choice is liberating; it's a chance to start from scratch. For others, the pressure to present a certain version of ourselves can be paralyzing. In either case, modernity compels us to declare our identity with conviction, whether we've found it yet or not.

Like Comment Share

Jonathan Ghaly, Martina Saltamacchia, Sofia Anastasia Wiener, and 175 others like this.

View 2 more comments.



**Jordan Dansky** The quarter-life crisis is universal. It happens to people from all over the world, in all different phases of life, for all different reasons. We struggle with finding our identity, pursuing our dreams, discovering what we actually want out of life, and evaluating where we are right now.

September 12 at 5:34pm Like Reply



**Alicia Keys** The day I wrote "We Are Here", I was sitting in a circle of people of all ages and we were asked, "Why are you here?" Why am I here? This really hit me on a deep level. I realized no one had ever asked me that question before.

September 14 at 6:14pm Like Reply 12



**Vince Petrucci** I can't help but think that I am here on earth to be outrageously happy - but the kind of happiness that carries more weight than a passing feeling. Without that happiness, I cannot discover myself. And to do all of that work of discovering myself, I need people who embolden me enough to question: "who am I?"

September 16 at 12:42pm Like Reply 3



**Patrick Duffy** Why am I at work? Why am I here? Everybody else hates being here, which makes the whole thing seem like a waste of everyone's life. What does it mean for me to connect my work to a meaningful purpose? Or is it just something I'll have to suffer through until I retire?

September 23 at 4:14pm Like Reply 9



**Beth Nelson** Being a mother, people assume that you're "here" on earth to put on a brave face and raise decent kids—and your value is wrapped up in that product. That seems like a pathetic reason to have children. Motherhood promises something better than that. Why am I here?

September 30 at 9:29am Like Reply



**Luigi Giussani** By the very fact that I'm alive, I pose questions about my purpose, because these questions are at the root of my consciousness: what is life worth living for? What's the meaning of reality? What's the meaning of existence? [...] By the very fact that you live five minutes, you affirm the existence of a "something" which deep down makes living those five minutes worthwhile.

September 16 at 9:11pm Like Reply



**Clive Thompson** People are wrestling with how they appear to the rest of the world. Taking a selfie is a way of trying to understand how people see you, who you are and what you look like, and there's nothing wrong with that. There is a primal human urge to stand outside of ourselves and look at ourselves.

Rather than dismissing the trend as a side effect of digital culture or a sad form of exhibitionism, maybe we're better off seeing selfies for what they are at their best—a kind of visual diary, a way to mark our short existence and hold it up to others as proof that we were here.

September 16 at 10:34pm Like Reply 36



**Steph Stokman** There seems to be something validating about telling others about your day and posting pictures to go along with that narrative, then waiting to see what people are moved to say about it. "You're such a good mom!" "Your kids are so cute—where did you get Olive's hair clip?" "Hang in there, I have tough days too." "Your family is so sweet!"...on and on and on. This affirmation is addictive, I'm sure. What I see happening is that "everyone out there," the audience, let's call it, becomes a really significant source (if not the primary source) of that unconditional embrace that we all need in order to live, not just survive.

The audience placates that desire for meaningful relationship. I don't want to live this way. I don't want to live pretending I need to be interesting or impressive enough for an audience. I want to be certain that every instant of my life has meaning—with or without my captive followers.

September 18 at 6:34am Like Reply 21

Write a comment...



**Alicia Keys** The day I wrote "We Are Here", I was sitting in a circle of people of all ages and we were asked, "Why are you here?" Why am I here? This really hit me on a deep level. I realized no one had ever asked me that question before.

September 14 at 6:14pm Like Reply 12

“

I was really struck by this thing that Alicia Keys is saying where she notes that one day she was just asked “*Why are you here?*” To which she replies, “*This really hit me on a deep level. No one has ever asked me that question before.*”

I think that modernity kind of pushes us to set aside those questions: “*get back to work, stop asking why you are here, just get back to work, you have a job to do.*” Giussani, instead, reminds us that **these questions are really at the heart of everything that we are given.**”



**Luigi Giussani** By the very fact that I'm alive, I pose questions about my purpose, because these questions are at the root of my consciousness: what is life worth living for? What's the meaning of reality? What's the meaning of existence? [...] By the very fact that you live five minutes, you affirm the existence of a "something" which deep down makes living those five minutes worthwhile.

September 16 at 9:11pm Like Reply

“

Giussani's quote forces me to consider that most of us don't actually have the capacity to name what it is that we really live for. And often when we do, it's an enormously rude surprise (as it was for me). If you can look at the ugly truth in the face - that you have actually woken up this morning for something banal - **then the crisis is good for you. This level of honesty allows us to deem**

**whether our purposes are worthy or not.**”



**Jordan Dansky** The quarter-life crisis is universal. It happens to people from all over the world, in all different phases of life, for all different reasons. We struggle with finding our identity, pursuing our dreams, discovering what we actually want out of life, and evaluating where we are right now.

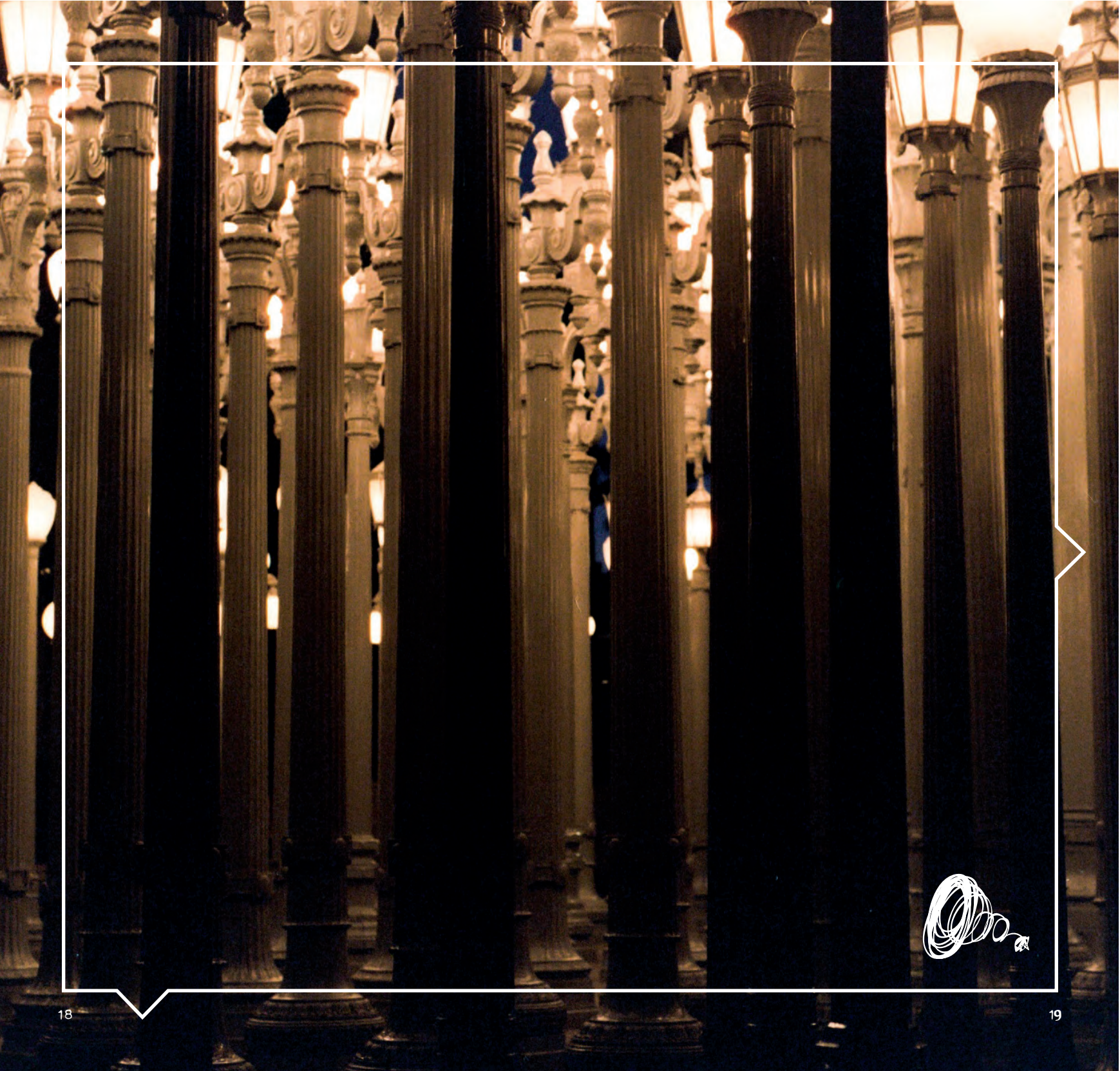
September 12 at 5:34pm Like Reply

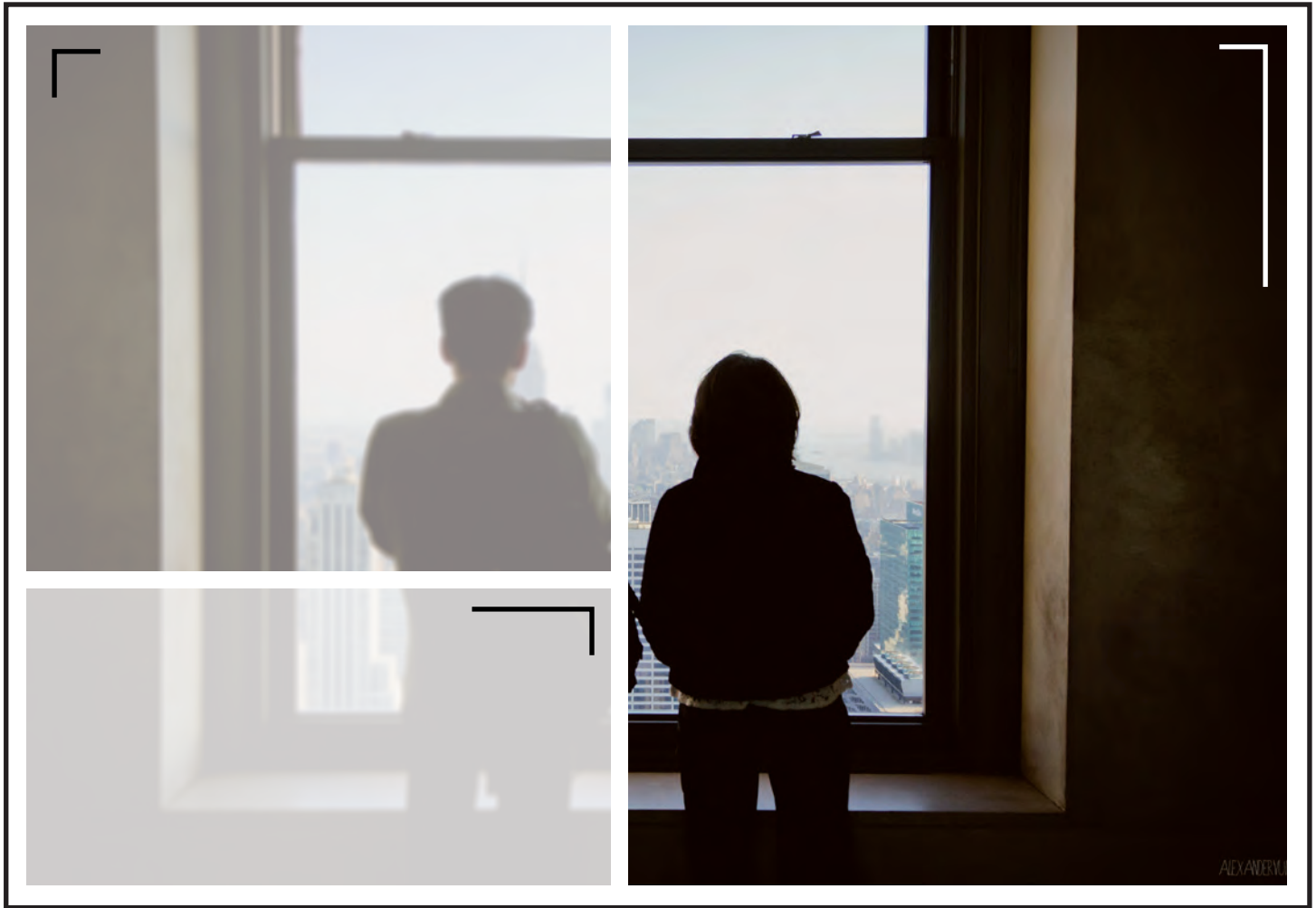
“

One thing that really hit me about this panel was the quarter-life crisis phrase, because I always felt that **I was in a perpetual identity crisis in my twenties and thirties**, and I thought I was the only one. Hearing this being discussed, I was like, wow, there is this whole generation that's going through it. **This is liberating for me - that I didn't have to hide from this search. It's a shame that I didn't know who I was, but I can really start the search.** Because we always hear about the mid-life crisis where parents or people in their fifties look back and say, “*Shit, what have I lived?*” Whereas we are asking these questions much earlier, and we are much more dissatisfied it seems.

”







# I Want Something More



**Emily Williams**

October 3 at 4:17 AM

It's four o'clock in the morning, and I can't sleep. I switch on my lights and rearrange my body in my bed. In the next hour, I think about another wave of career choices, look for a part-time nanny job (it seems that's all you can get with a Psychology degree), and weigh my options regarding new apartments. But wait, there's actually nothing I can afford. As the frustration starts mounting and my alarm is set to ring in two hours, I start wondering, "What do I want for my life?" Certainly not this.

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Amanda Pekowski, Marissa Moran, Carolina Brito and 131 others like this.

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**Emily Marsolek**

In a recent conversation with a friend, I decided to take a risk and express the tremendous questions that have started surfacing in my life. My friend said, "Emily, the more you dwell on these questions the less happy you'll be." Unconsciously, I often do follow her advice. I bury myself in Netflix or Facebook - exhausted by the effort it takes to "dwell" in the question. But it feels fake. It feels like I'm cheating myself of something riskier, yet more satisfying than whatever I've got going.

October 4 at 9:56pm · Like · Reply · 22



**Jack Kerouac**

And already in my life I've had two wives and sent one away and ran away from the other, and hundreds of lover-girls everyone of them betrayed or screwed in some way by me [...] now I look at my mirror face scowl and it's disgusting [...] Everything'll be all right, desolation is desolation everywhere and desolation is all we got and desolation ain't so bad.

October 5 at 2:32pm · Like · Reply



**Steph Stokman**

My husband and I have been married for five years. We have two young kids. There's not as much romance, not as much time, and not as many surprises now as there were at the beginning. To this, of course, everyone says, "Well you shouldn't expect it to be the same... that was the honeymoon, this is reality."

I used to be ok with that explanation and I would use it to reason with myself whenever I felt dissatisfied with marriage, but this explanation is no longer enough. There was an undeniable promise in our falling in love and getting married - I refuse to give up on that.

October 6 at 11:34pm · Like · Reply · 16



**Laurence Rivest**

An irrepresible thirst for meaning, which we think of as our flaw, is precisely what makes us infinitely valuable. Precisely because we desire what cannot be bound by time and space, we are not defined by any momentary reaction. Therefore, our self-worth cannot be confused with the reactions we adopt. We can make our desires as "manageable" as we want, but this is not what we are! We are that irreducible reality that seeks satisfaction in something greater than itself.

October 8 at 9:48am · Like · Reply · 29



**Emily Green**

I went back to Spain a few days this summer to visit some dear friends. The last night, we went for a walk in the perfect weather, in the narrow streets of the beautiful old Jewish quarters. Suddenly, my friend stopped and asked, "Emily, you seem quiet. Are you tired?" I said, "No, but I'm thinking about how everything passes." I didn't want to say goodbye, and I had a huge tension and desire for meaning, a connection between those passing days and everything else.

October 11 at 9:36pm · Like · Reply · 8

Write a comment...



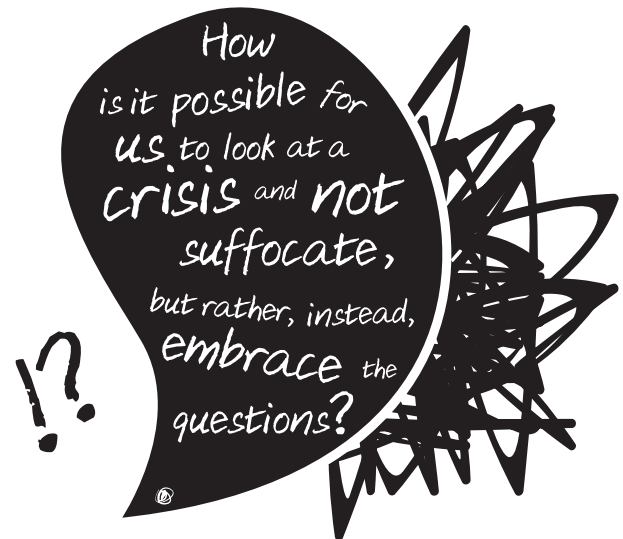
**Steph Stokman** My husband and I have been married for five years. We have two young kids. There's not as much romance, not as much time, and not as many surprises now as there were at the beginning. To this, of course, everyone says, "Well you shouldn't expect it to be the same... that was the honeymoon, this is reality."

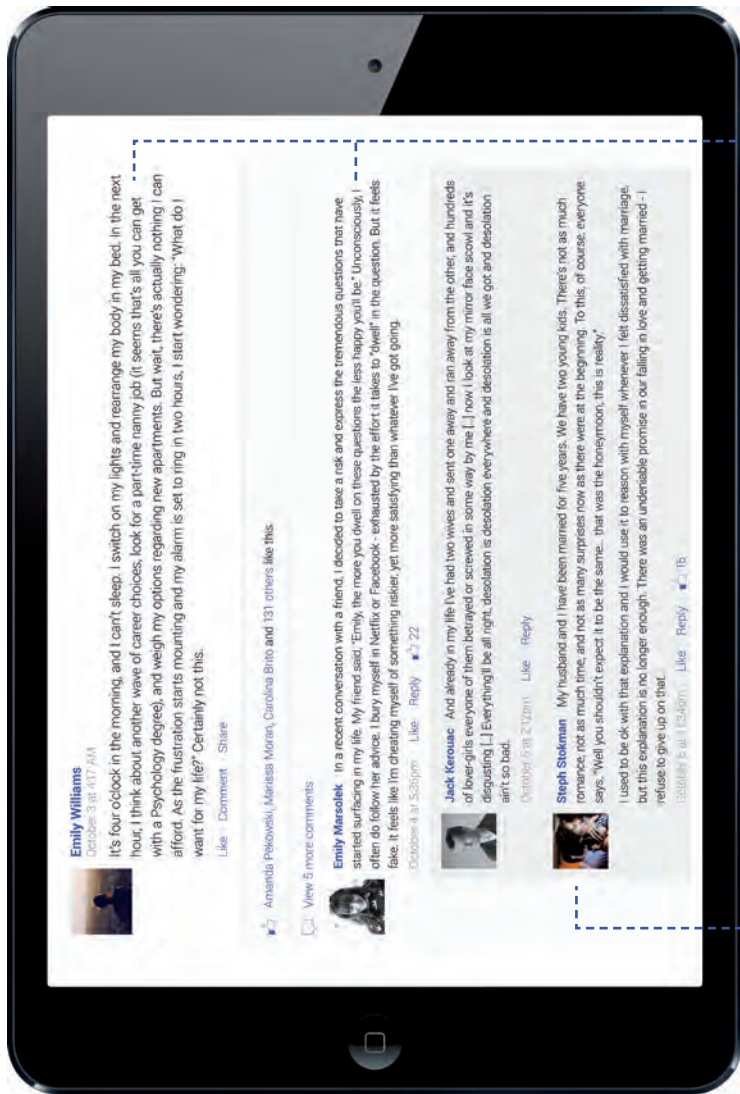
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October 5 at 11:34pm · Like · Reply · 16



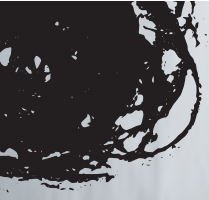
I found the **quarter-life crisis problem** is actually the **most important and most generative tool** in our personal **development** - meaning that the more you look at those questions, the more you look at the dissatisfaction of the restlessness, the joblessness, and Steph's contribution to this panel - that those things ultimately are very good for us. I think the loneliness that Jonathan was describing is definitely something that all of us know very well, but it's the positivity in front of that loneliness that allows you to actually grow. How is it possible for us to look at a crisis and not suffocate, but rather, instead, embrace the questions?





“What I’ve seen in myself is this need to just have an answer, and that’s what has led mostly to this dissatisfaction that is spoken about in the second panel with Emily Williams or Emily Marsolek. If you take the risk with a friend to bring up these questions, often the response just seems to be: *“Don’t dwell on all these questions, just forget about them.”* And I subconsciously just shove them down, distracting myself with Netflix or Facebook when I can’t handle anything. What I have found in being part of the Millennial Project is that there is really only one thing that helps me to stay with that question, a companionship. **I need someone who encourages me to keep asking - not just someone who gives me an answer, because I feel I haven’t been taken seriously when I am quickly given one.**”

“I didn’t really have anything to add but I think what Carolina said: when we actually can name the thing that we’re living for, or that thing within us that’s really plaguing us, we can have a **real freedom** in front of it. This is exactly my experience the night that I shared this thing about my marriage within the context of one of our group meetings. I just was really surprised because in sharing this experience, it can really seem depressing and awful - it probably makes people not want to get married or something. But at the same time, after I mentioned it I went and sat down with my husband when we were both getting ready for bed and I felt a tremendous freedom and joy in front of him. I could say: *“here’s what’s been happening, there was this promise and instead we live like this during our day-to-day life, and I know there’s something more.”* But amazingly, **saying this out loud** to myself, to my husband, and to these friends **wasn’t the end of something**, it wasn’t like, *“well, that probably means I married the wrong person.”* Instead, I wanted to look more deeply at it.”





**Charlie Hoehn**  
October 16 at 10:59 AM

My entire life I've done what everyone told me I should do. From kindergarten to my senior year of college I had a high GPA, I volunteered, I played sports, I was in groups, extracurricular activities, student council. I did all that stuff. And so by the time I graduated in 2008, even though we were in the heart of a recession, I fully anticipated that I would be able to land a gig without very much effort. And after 12 weeks of applying for jobs to dozens of companies, I had been turned down by every single one of them. And my friends were all going through the same thing. It wasn't just me. Everyone had been saying, "you gotta take what you can get in this market." I was like, "What? Did we really just spend the last 4 years -- no, the last 17 years -- pursuing this stuff that other people told us to do, following the rules? And this is where it's gonna take us?"

That advice that I took for my whole life, it was a lie! This scam is taking me to a place that is going to be singularly and outstandingly, unremarkable.

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---

Amy Sapenoff, Federico Gallo, Elynnore Florendo and 159 others like this.

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**Fedi Fromm** I went through hell but succeeded in med school. I have an awesome husband and two kids; I have a beautiful house. I "have it all" but it's not enough. The most vital thing in life is not figuring out my career or finding the right guy or having children because none of those things are it, and I'm still here to find out what is it. My generation likes living in limbo, going from one potentially satisfying thing to the next. But no matter what the circumstances are, what most say should be enough is not satisfying. I want more than enough.

October 16 at 2:03pm · Like · Reply · 7

**Taylor Swift** I should have known that I'm not a princess, this ain't a fairy tale. We're happy, free, confused, and lonely at the same time.

October 16 at 3:51pm · Like · Reply



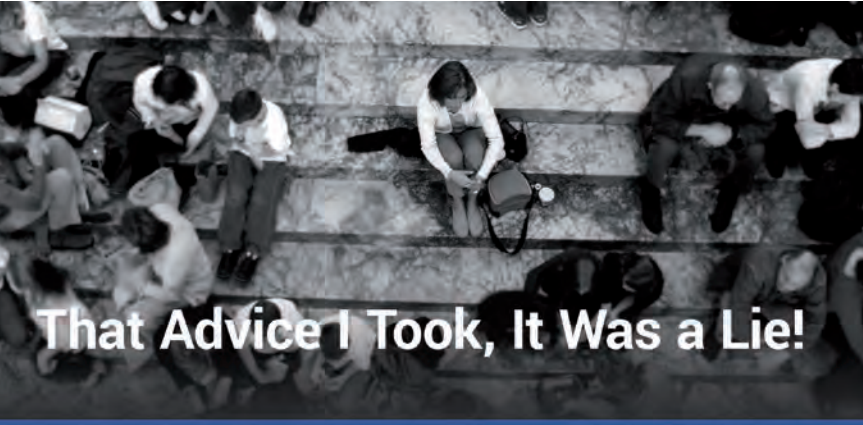
I really love Fedi's quote: she went to Med school, has an amazing husband, two kids, a beautiful house, and yet she's saying that she's not satisfied, **"I want more."** For me, this was incredible because it seems like Millennials are very audacious in saying that **we have a lot of things that previous generations would have died for, but it's not enough**, it's not true freedom, it's not the American dream that's going to make me happy. So, it seems as though the advice we were given was a lie, and this lie begs the question: *"Well, what do I do from this point? If all those things that in previous generations everyone said are going to make me happy, aren't, then, what do I do?"* It's kind of a dizzying place to be in. *"We're happy, free, confused, yet lonely at the same time."*



This desire for greatness and even the promise of it has always been so spoken of in my life. I didn't have the experience that Charlie had in being useful without a job, nor Fedi's having everything and it not being enough, but somewhere in between - just knowing that this isn't it. If I ever asked why I have to study this, everything was always: so you can go on to the next grade, so you can get into a good college, so you can get a good job, **so just let this suck up your entire life that you'll be happy some day** - but never answering this question of meaning. What I wanted to do was get my degree and then get married and choose to stay home with my kids. Feeling so deeply disappointed when I achieved all this, I really felt lied to. This promise of the American Dream was crap. It has not satisfied me. I think it has been easy at times to think like Taylor Swift: *"I should have known that this wasn't a fairytale. I should have known."*

**But something in me also can't just resort to apathy. My desire for greatness is still there**, it's just that all of this advice that I have taken my whole life was a lie that didn't lead there.





# That Advice I Took, It Was a Lie!



**Charlie Hoehn**

October 16 at 10:53 AM

My entire life I've done what everyone told me I should do. From kindergarten to my senior year of college I had a high GPA, I volunteered, I played sports, I was in groups, extracurricular activities, student council. I did all that stuff.

And so by the time I graduated in 2008, even though we were in the heart of a recession, I fully anticipated that I would be able to land a gig without very much effort. And after 12 weeks of applying for jobs to dozens of companies, I had been turned down by every single one of them. And my friends were all going through the same thing. It wasn't just me. Everyone had been saying, 'you gotta take what you can get in this market.' I was like, 'What? Did we really just spend the last 4 years -- no, the last 17 years -- pursuing this stuff that other people told us to do, following the rules? And this is where it's gonna take us?'

That advice that I took for my whole life, it was a lie! This scam is taking me to a place that is going to be singularly and outstandingly, unremarkable.

Like · Comment · Share

Amy Sapenoff, Federico Gallo, Elynore Florendo and 159 others like this.

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**Fedi Fromm** I went through hell but succeeded in med school. I have an awesome husband and two kids. I have a beautiful house. I 'have it all' but it's not enough. The most vital thing in life is not figuring out my career or finding the right guy or having children, because none of those things are it, and I'm still here to find out what is it. My generation likes living in limbo, going from one potentially satisfying thing to the next. But no matter what the circumstances are, what most say should be enough is not satisfying. I want more than enough.

October 16 at 2:10pm · Like · Reply · 7



**Taylor Swift** I should have known that I'm not a princess, this ain't a fairy tale. We're happy, free, confused, and lonely at the same time.

October 16 at 3:53pm · Like · Reply



**Enzo Jannacci** And we must always be happy because our tears hurt the king - he becomes sad if we cry...

October 17 at 5:28am · Like · Reply



**Luigi Giussani** The King represents the powers that be who hate this sadness of ours that is, in its profundity, the living flesh of those questions which constitute man's heart. The powers that be become sad if they see you crying! This song of Jannacci truly pierces us to the core, because each one can assent to the way that the power controls society, a way which depends upon limitations and reductions that progressively enslave our humanity.

October 17 at 7:34am · Like · Reply



**Lindsey Kirchoff** We hold ourselves, our careers and others to high expectations because the power exists to meet our expectations. Our generation's greatest challenge will be consolidating reality with this crisis of unmet expectations.

October 20 at 11:16pm · Like · Reply · 10



**Rachel Mokerman** About a month ago, I started a new job in a very fast-paced, demanding environment. I'm stressed and anxious for most of the day, worrying about failing and debating the possibility of a different job.

Last week, I sat down with a colleague charged with training me. She's very good at her job and a little intimidating to me because of it. I was nervous, afraid I would not measure up. In the middle of our meeting, it dawned on me that I had a choice: I could look at this moment either as just a measurement of myself—my intelligence, my competency—or I could open up to the possibility that the moment with my colleague was given to me, mysteriously, for the overall good of my life.

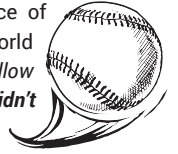
Everyone around me says that what's needed in life is success, a house, a good husband, good health, the right balance of work and pleasure—the list goes on. My heart says otherwise. I search for something infinite, a good that all those things listed cannot give me. The culture around me points me back towards those finite things. But I have found that I cannot help but expect great things from life: it is just how I am made.

October 21 at 10:59pm · Like · Reply

Write a comment...



From childhood we've all been told that if you follow your dreams you'll do whatever you want, you'll accomplish everything. And all of these celebrities who made it to the top, they're always telling us: follow your dreams. In my case, when I was four years old my dream was to get a grand slam for the NY Mets in game seven of the World Series. That was my dream. So, I am confronted with the fact that I am not there and I probably never will (and that the Mets suck). I probably have a better chance of making it to the MLB than the Mets winning the World Series. "What was wrong with that? Did I just not follow my dreams far enough? Was it my fault because I didn't pursue this dream for long enough?"



While we are constantly switching jobs and switching careers, our parents were stuck with their job and they were happy to stay with that job for decades. I have a friend who studied engineering, but then got an MBA from Harvard and naturally she is very successful. One day, she tells me that she's quitting her job and I asked her, "Why? You seem like you're doing really well for yourself." And she says, "You know, I just wanted a job where I felt I was making a difference in the world." So now she quit that very successful position to do something completely different. I don't know if she feels like she's making a difference now, but I think she wanted more from her job because she wanted to know that her work was somehow connected to the rest of her life. **It wasn't enough to be successful** and make tons of money. She was looking for meaning even in her work.

I think that's really at the heart of this millennial trait of being dissatisfied. We do feel like there's a desire for it to actually mean something, and not just be content to separate those eight hours a day from the rest of our lives.



I think your story about the MLB really clarifies the theme of this panel because we have been told that we have all the power in the world to shape our destiny. Therefore, if we fail, it is because we are somehow incompetent. So, people start distrusting this desire that they have for greatness, fearful that such a thing is impossible. This makes it easier to adopt someone else's criteria to what it means to be great. **Very few of us take the brave option of questioning the dominant narrative about a fulfilled life.** And I think in order for any of us to break the feeling of either self-hatred or resentment of society's expectations, we have to adopt a different set of criteria. **We need something that both challenges what we assumed to be a "great" life, but also respects the magnitude of our hopes and desires as human beings.**



# How Will I Know?



**Jordan Dansky**

November 1 at 10:41 AM

How in the world are we supposed to make all of these big life decisions? Yes, we may have graduated college and have a nice little piece of paper that says we're ready to take on the real world. But are we really ready? Will you ever know with 100 percent confidence what you want out of life?

Like · Comment · Share

Emmanuel Orino, Emily Wurzler, Jonah Lynch, and 124 others like this.

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**Enzo Piccinini** We have an internal capacity to recognize what "we want out of life," what makes us who we are and makes us recognize the things that always remain the truth. This detector - the heart - expresses itself as need for truth, beauty, justice, the need to love and be loved, and an inexhaustible demand for happiness. Your heart is present in what you are doing at all times - regardless of whether or not you listen to it.

November 2 at 7:12pm · Like · Reply · 18



**Luigi Giussani** When I observe myself in action, engaging with reality in a full and open manner, the needs of my heart begin to surface. These needs arise when engaging with love, study, politics, money, even food and rest—and excludes nothing, whether friendship, hope, pardon, anger, or patience. Every daily gesture has a connection to those inexhaustible needs that make me who I am.

November 3 at 9:53am · Like · Reply



**Monica Ciantia** What is the heart? I was 5 years old. One afternoon coming home from school I looked at the blue Ugandan sky wondering: Is there something behind this life of mine? What is really out there? Is there more? Today I am a mother, married with two kids and pregnant with the third. And I wonder when my kids will start asking the same questions.

I wake up in the morning and I cannot help but want the day to be meaningful, beautiful, and filled with surprises. Although raising children requires daily structure, I do not live the day dictated by a task list. As I grow and get older, this heart demands more and, joyfully, I feel it more.

November 3 at 9:59am · Like · Reply



**Francis Petruccielli** My heart is infallible. Not my feelings, but the desire for love, fulfillment, and a meaning that I can bet my life on—that's infallible. It knows when something satisfies it or not. I have to use it and not bury it; follow it in everything I do. Life becomes a great adventure when you accept only to be bound by the size and courage of your desire.

November 3 at 12:54pm · Like · Reply · 15



**Steph Stokman** I was really sick this week and I realized that I lived these days of being sick as a time out of living my life. I just wanted to be left alone. But my kids, who were also sick, didn't stop living. They depended on me even more. They sought my presence more. I was really struck by my children. They stuck to what was essential to them—the relationship with their mother.

My kids' outlook is much more reasonable than mine—precisely because in depending on unconditional love, they live by the simplicity of their hearts. Instead, I often conceive of myself primarily as a "doer," and perceive that the value of my life and myself diminishes when I can't "do."

November 6 at 4:10pm · Like · Reply · 16



**Emily Green** I, too, always think my worth comes from what I achieve or what I do. And the only way I've ever broken out of that mindset was when someone looked at me with unexpected tenderness, and with impossible love.

November 7 at 12:13am · Like · Reply



**Andrei Rublev** You know it well: you can't manage anything; you're tired, you can't go on. And all at once you meet the gaze of someone in the crowd—a human gaze—and it's as if you had drawn near to a hidden god. And suddenly everything becomes simpler.

November 7 at 5:24pm · Like · Reply



**Lorenzo Albacete** Can't the incarnation appear as both ordinary and absolutely disturbing? Can't it be totally close and infinitely beyond at the same time? This is what our hearts really want: a God who is intimate while remaining really God.

January 7 at 10:05pm · Like · Reply · 24

Write a comment.



**Luigi Giussani** When I observe myself in action, engaging with reality in a full and open manner, the needs of my heart begin to surface. These needs arise when engaging with love, study, politics, money, even food and rest—and excludes nothing, whether friendship, hope, pardon, anger, or patience. Every daily gesture has a connection to those inexhaustible needs that make me who I am.

November 3 at 9:53am · Like · Reply

“

In this panel, Giussani says that if you observe yourself in action, in an earnest and open manner, the needs of the heart begin to surface. This conversation on the heart helps us to actually recover a different criterion. And it allows us to actually develop a much greater tenderness for one's self, whereas the world usually forces us to hate ourselves for never having done what we thought we could do.



**Monica Ciantia** What is the heart? I was 5 years old. One afternoon coming home from school I looked at the blue Ugandan sky wondering: Is there something behind this life of mine? What is really out there? Is there more? Today I am a mother, married with two kids and pregnant with the third. And I wonder when my kids will start asking the same questions.

I wake up in the morning and I cannot help but want the day to be meaningful, beautiful, and filled with surprises. Although raising children requires daily structure, I do not live the day dictated by a task list. As I grow and get older, this heart demands more and, joyfully, I feel it more.

November 3 at 9:59am · Like · Reply

What I love about Monica's contribution is that in working together we've actually rediscovered an affection for the self which this identity-obsessed generation (ironically) does not allow people to do. **Reinventing yourself doesn't necessarily translate into affection for the way you were made.** Ultimately reinvention of the self, I've found, leads to places of much more self-disgust. ”



**Francis Petruccielli** My heart is infallible. Not my feelings, but the desire for love, fulfillment, and a meaning that I can bet my life on—that's infallible. It knows when something satisfies it or not. I have to use it and not bury it; follow it in everything I do. Life becomes a great adventure when you accept only to be bound by the size and courage of your desire.

November 3 at 12:54pm · Like · Reply · 15

“

During the work together in these months, Francis had really been hounding us on the point that the heart is infallible. And I just kept arguing with him because I couldn't accept it, and he was so certain and he just kept saying it. **But that was something that terrified me to hear, that there could be something infallible in me, some infallible criteria.** ”



“

**A**s Fedi was saying in this panel, I think what's been valuable about being a Millennial is that suddenly you discover that this is what makes me great: yes, it's not enough for me to go through Med



School just to get a job and make a lot of money. Yes it's not enough for me to get married and have a lot of kids because even with that you're like, is this it? So, for me, it's been that discovery: **that this heart, this wanting more, becomes your ally. It becomes the most beautiful thing and what allows you to actually live.** As a consequence, being at home with my kids in my routine, like what I was trying to say in the panel, is that what moves me.

**The motor in my waking up in the morning is this: the need that my day has meaning.** Sure, within the routine of the day there are things that are banal, changing diapers and whatnot. But you don't live your day dictated by tasks. You live your day dictated by the fact that you want more and you are looking for meaning. I think what's great is that affection for yourself, that level in you which is what makes you great.

I think Giussani's right, if you are engaged in life (in politics, your studies, the people you love), this affection for life comes out and that's a beautiful thing. **In being a mom, I wonder when my kids will start thinking about that when looking at stars, or at a person they love. Does my life have a meaning?** When is that going to happen to them? That's the motor. If I think about my past experience, carrying a baby that was born and only lived a couple of hours, it's so true that being in front of that, being in front of all of you, says that there is more.

**THERE IS SOMETHING MORE  
OR ELSE THIS LIFE  
DOESN'T MAKE SENSE.**

”





“**T**he picture on this panel is really dear to me. When Emily and I were choosing the pictures for the panels, when we arrived to this one our question was: “*How can we represent the heart, the fact that we have an internal detector that makes us leap in front of what you, Monica, are describing, that **other people actually have my same desire?**” And then we realized that searching, searching, searching for pictures, **we actually had captured on film the very moment in which this detector jumps in and works.** The story behind this picture is that three years ago we went to a Irish pub in Omaha, and there was this bartender who was absolutely stunned by us, by the way we were spending a normal evening together, drinking a beer and chatting.*

And so, when we organized a dinner because one of us was moving to another city, we decided to invite him. He arrived knowing nothing about us other than seeing us at the pub few nights before. **He was so amazed at seeing our friendship,** that he commented: “*I have never seen people that stay together or are friends in the same way that you are. How long have you known each other for?*” And he asked this to Monica who had only been in Omaha for 3 months, and so she responded, “*Two-three months.*” He was absolutely shocked - and the picture really captures this moment. For the whole evening he had this amazement all over his face.”

“ Can't the incarnation appear  
as both **ordinary**  
and absolutely disturbing?  
Can't it be totally close  
and infinitely **beyond**  
at the same time? This is what  
our hearts really want:  
a **God** who is intimate  
while remaining really **God**. ”

Lorenzo Albacete



“ **T**his is really the heart of the exhibit, because  
in the first part there are all of these questions,  
all of these identity searches, but  
*then something absolutely unthinkable  
bursts out into the scene* - which, as Albacete  
proposes, *is the possibility of the divine  
as something ordinary.* ”



# What if?

If God became a man, if he came amongst us, if he came right now, if he slipped into this crowd and was **here among us**, to recognize him as divine should be easy because of his incomparable exceptionality. To recognize that he was something exceptional, out of the ordinary, **irreducible** to any analysis, should be easy.

It is exceptional because it **corresponds** to the expectations of your heart — no matter how confused and nebulous they might be. What is exceptional corresponds unexpectedly to the irresistible, undeniable demands of your heart and mind in a way you could have never predicted.

It is a strange contradiction. What is **exceptional**, paradoxically, has the appearance of what is **most natural**, that what I most desire happen. To come across something totally, profoundly natural because it corresponds to the demands of the heart is something absolutely exceptional.

It is easy to recognize a divine presence because it is exceptional: the divine presence corresponds to the heart; and one stays with Him and **would never leave**, one would never go away and would **follow Him** all his life.



Wait, isn't there a big jump here?  
It sounds to me like,  
"Here are all the questions  
and, now the answer is 'Jesus' ..."



”

T

here is a complete disconnect because that's exactly what happens in reality.

What if this exceptionality that my heart longs for has the face of a person, and I can stay in front of it? **To say that another human being is the salvation is something absolutely dramatic. The exhibit represents that drama.** There is a chasm between the first and second part, but it's there because it's real. The American poet Edgar Lee Masters would call this first part of the exhibit:

*"Longing for the Sea and Yet Afraid."*

Instead, the second is the grace of an encounter - which we can either accept, or reject. Nothing, not even our set certainties, take away that freedom. So, the jump between the first and second part of the exhibit is highly dramatic because this tension is always there. **The core of our conversation is between the two sections. It is precisely in that chasm.** ”



”

I actually had an experience of this CHASM just recently. I had decided I would be lazy about things and sort of push away my heart and not desire everything. Then, one day what happened was that Beth, my sister-in-law, was having a baby and I couldn't be there, and this thing was really troubling to me. The whole day I was moping around, feeling like I was really forgetting something.



All I could understand from this situation is that I had this tremendous love and desire to be with Beth and this baby and I couldn't be there, but I was being given something else entirely to do here. So, my train of thought became, "I really want to be there. I can't be there. I'll go wash my kid's hair and then cook the dinner," which is the next thing I had to do. I wanted to be there so badly that day, but I couldn't. What does the love that I felt for them and the desire to be there have to do with being present in my house, at that moment?

It was really the first day in a lot of days where I was stunned by the question, "Does Christ have something to do with this situation?" And I was moved to tears. **It was a starting over again.** I couldn't say the answer; it was somewhere in the gap between the reality of the situation and this claim that the circumstances have to do with Christ, that this has to do with the ultimate meaning of my life, like we've expressed on the panels. **So it is a painful place to be, and uncomfortable - but ultimately necessary for something else to enter into the picture.** ”



”



I think part of the reason we perceive a jump between these two sections is because Millennials tend to remain at the level of questions, wanting to know the meaning of life, but sometimes fail to move beyond the question. Maybe it's because they are cynical or scared, but sometimes it's because they think: "Oh yeah, it's fine if I never know what the meaning of life is", like there is some kind of justification to it, or some kind of identity in it. **But I've really seen that just the question is not enough for me to live. I really need something that will answer the question and save me.** This is why the encounter with Albacete was incredible and changed my entire life.

I met him because when I was teaching high school the chaplain of my school invited me to go to a presentation Albacete was giving, basically trapping me and begging me to go with him. It was a three-hour drive to Chicago on a school night, and three hours back. And I thought to myself, "I don't need another Theology presentation," because I was a Theology teacher and I knew everything.

But he literally dragged me into his car and said he was going to fire me if I didn't go. So I went and the next day I walked in the classroom and I changed my entire lesson to Albacete's lesson. In the middle the kids were like, "Mister, did you meet a girl last night or something?" and I said, "Yeah, a fat Puerto Rican girl." There was an evident change in me that they saw, and I even changed my entire curriculum for that. However, now I see that even Albacete isn't enough. **And so it's this constant seeking the answer and not just staying in the question. The questions are still there, even after the answer - but now they're present as a promise, not as a nagging preoccupation to be squashed.** ”

”

For me this jump is fantastic and I don't think that to make it gentle is valuable, **the answer to the question comes as a jolt.**

**How could the absolute answer to life be anything less?**



”



## a gaze

Andrew stayed there listening to Him for hours and then afterwards had to go home. He said goodbye to them and they returned home in utter silence. Andrew entered his house, put down his cloak and embraced his wife. Imagine Andrew embracing his wife and bursting into tears while she, overwhelmed, kept on asking, **What is wrong? You're**

**different, what's happened?** And he held his wife, who had never felt embraced in that way before in her whole life, he was another person. He was another person! It was him but he was another. If she had asked him, **Who are you?** he would have said, I understand I have become another... **after hearing that man speak, I have become someone else.**

Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus. From a distance, Simon fixed his eyes with curiosity on that man who was waiting for him. When he found himself three or four meters off, Jesus looked at Simon. Simon would remember that day for the rest of his life. **"No one has ever looked at me this way!"** Simon felt immediately, irreversibly connected to Him. The day after, he ran to the nearest town because he had heard Jesus was there. He stuck himself right there in the middle of thirty people to hear Him speak - to watch Him speak! The day before He said to him, "Simon son of John, you shall be called Peter," and Peter discovered the entire depth of his character.

As he resumed his work fishing the following day, he was a different man. He couldn't leave Him! And every day he was coming home different. So, day after day, the evidence of a bond, of a fondness and of trust, of **certainty was growing deeper.**

This prostitute was on the road, on a day that He was passing by the city. He set his gaze upon her; she gazed upon him while walking, without stopping. That gaze marked her whole life.

Jesus looked at her for an instant. And from that day forward, **she would never look at herself as before**, she would not see the relationships with men, with people, with her house, with Jerusalem in the same way. She, this woman used by many, would now look at her whole life through His eyes. The gaze of that man was enough to change everything. The next day, when Jesus was at the house of a Pharisee and was eating, she entered, threw herself at his feet, started to cry, and wiped His feet with her hair - with a tenderness, with an affection, that made it evident to everyone that that woman loved Jesus. **She had been loved, affirmed gratuitously, without needing to give anything in return.** What that woman desired the most had happened. And so a joy grew in her that made her use everything, which made her love everything, in a new way.

# in the crowd

"Mary!" How all of Jesus' humanity must have radiated in being able to say her name with such a tone, intensity, and familiarity that Mary recognized Him immediately — when just an instant before she had mistaken Him for the gardener. "Mary!" It is as if **all the tenderness of the Mystery reached that woman** through the humanity of the Risen Jesus, now unveiled. Unveiled, but no less intense.

"Mary!" So then, you understand how in that moment she realized who He was. His humanity resonated with hers, and generated a gladness that she could never have imagined before, and that she could experience only in the relationship with Him. Without Him, she could not know who she was or what life could be, nor what fullness life could deliver.

All my attempts to generate joy failed. All my life, I desired the absurd — something that would never die or disappoint even in the most transient moment. I thought there was something wrong with me. His friendship succeeded in magnifying and overwhelming that flaw in me. **Being with him, staying with him, I couldn't help desiring everything from everything.** With him and these friends, I could be myself. Not in terms of some esoteric self-expression, but in allowing myself to be more fully.

Without that friend, that passion for life and that freedom felt frail. His company didn't solve an intellectual debate, or effectively convince me that I wasn't wrong to find my desires unreasonable. **However, in remaining with him, I began to realize that I had wanted far too little.** He was even more wildly desirous, and paradoxically, happier than I was.

Meeting Lorenzo woke me up. **I didn't know people like him existed.** People whose hearts stubbornly refuse to sleep, who dare to embrace everything — fully aware of their own misery and incapacity. He lived something impossible that people search for and philosophize about, but never find. Lorenzo and his friends had no illusions about life's tragedies and disappointments. Even so, his eyes were luminous with a sense of promise, deep satisfaction, and mischievous hunger all at once. My friends and colleagues don't have those eyes.

**With him, I was overwhelmingly joyful.** He was the freest and most unlost person I had ever met. While laughing, smoking, and embracing me, for the first time I felt unalone. After years of self-inflicted lethargy, telling myself that I wanted unreasonable things from life — I was free. **I could finally stop trying to placate myself.** In the midst of my efforts to build something on my own, and then give up the effort altogether because it was too hard and fake — a miracle happened.

Everything was different and I didn't take on a massive project to make it happen. I didn't operate under the same criteria. The girl, the dazzling career path, and **striving towards being totally "unique"** seemed paltry in comparison. I was communing with Lorenzo's deep, unshakable gladness in living.

I wanted to know the source of his joy — and even be embraced by it. With him the desire to be loved exploded. This is the bedrock of my life, the source of all authentic joy and freedom. **This is what I want for every person in the world.**





“When I was seven, I remember looking at the stars and **wondering what is life all about.**

In high school discovered I was not alone in this, and I met people who have that same question. These friends helped me realize that these questions are what make you what you are. They were able to say:

“This is what we care about and this is what I spend my life for. **We want to know the meaning of our life and this is what we love.**

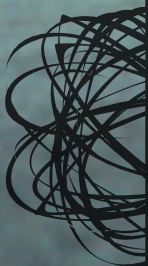
We love the questions in you, and those are the questions we care about.”

They wanted to live my questions with me.

”



For me this pregnancy has been so difficult that after months of being sick with severe anxiety and depression, it has drawn out these questions in me on a level I didn't want. But one day I was talking to a friend in a total panic attack and he said to me, "What if at a certain point you could imagine that you can embrace this, that you can say 'this is good for me?'" And I thought, there is nothing good about this. But I have to say that through this insanely jarring experience I've discovered that I can't even survive on my own.



I was driving in my car today after spending time with friends, just thinking, "Oh my God, the worst thing that has ever happened to me has really been a burst of something beautiful, because I would never even attempt to seek Christ as an answer to this if I was alone, or if the answer would have been to take a pill and make the depression go away, it would just be a way of avoiding myself, or avoiding all of the questions." This is really freaking hard, but I can't believe that I am thankful for the depression because it forces me to remain in the questions - although it's not as simple as just saying that.

Even in the most uncomfortable experiences of my life, even here Christ is with me. I am not abandoned".

"Oh my God, the worst thing that has ever happened to me has really been a burst of something beautiful..."

# Postscript

In the last few months, this Project **has invaded my marriage, my friendships, my family, and, most noticeably, my work.** That heart and longing we're constantly talking about is regenerating my teaching, even though I'm often fearful and slow in responding to it. The moments where I'm learning to use my "heart" have initiated new dialogue with Him, and I feel as if I'm on the cusp of something tremendous.

I realize that were it not for this impossible question – **"what do you mean the purpose of life is relationship with Him?"** – then I would have been exactly where I was five years ago, holding onto a search for where my work will have lasting value.

Without understanding that life is relationship with Him, I would have made social justice my unattainable god. The situations my students grow up in and the decisions they make often elude my best efforts, and I often realize that I fail at creating a more just world. Then, I am back to bitter disillusionment about my own place in it.

Instead, in the last months, the purpose of my daily 12 hour work day has radically shifted. **I've been thrust into this beautiful and compelling possibility that the Mystery wants to meet us in the midst of our work — on his own terms, through circumstances we would never have expected.**

Since beginning the work of the Millennials, **I've dared with great trepidation and vulnerability** to thrust narratives about beauty and mercy into my classroom. I've proposed that we ask questions that get us into territory that I don't know how to navigate. **I dare to pose those questions and discard my cynicism because my friends walk with me.** In their company, I am beginning to understand that being defined by relationship has allowed me to recover myself and ask for impossibly beautiful things in my life.



“IT TOOK A CERTAIN **EXCITEMENT**  
AND ABILITY TO EMBRACE THESE  
QUESTIONS, FOR US TO **KEEP**  
**WALKING.**”



“ I love this image because you so clearly want to see what’s under there, and there’s no way of knowing, but it’s compelling. I want it framed somewhere in my house just to **remember that these questions aren’t suffocating, and that I don’t want to rest.** Even the pretty image on the curtain, because there is something peaceful about it, but I really want more, and **I want to know what’s behind it and who’s behind it.** ”



“ A fter what happened to us, it’s **impossible to continue like before.** For me the beauty of this is that it keeps reoccurring. During these past months, many big things have happened and my sense is really like the man in the picture: I absolutely don’t know what is awaiting me, but the one thing I am absolutely certain of is that **I don’t want to waste one second of this life that I’m starting to glimpse.** And so, that gesture of **lifting the curtain is the expression of the desire of my heart** with all these questions, with all this drama in front of absolute grace - this gaze in the crowd that we met. Afterwards, nothing is really like it was before. ”





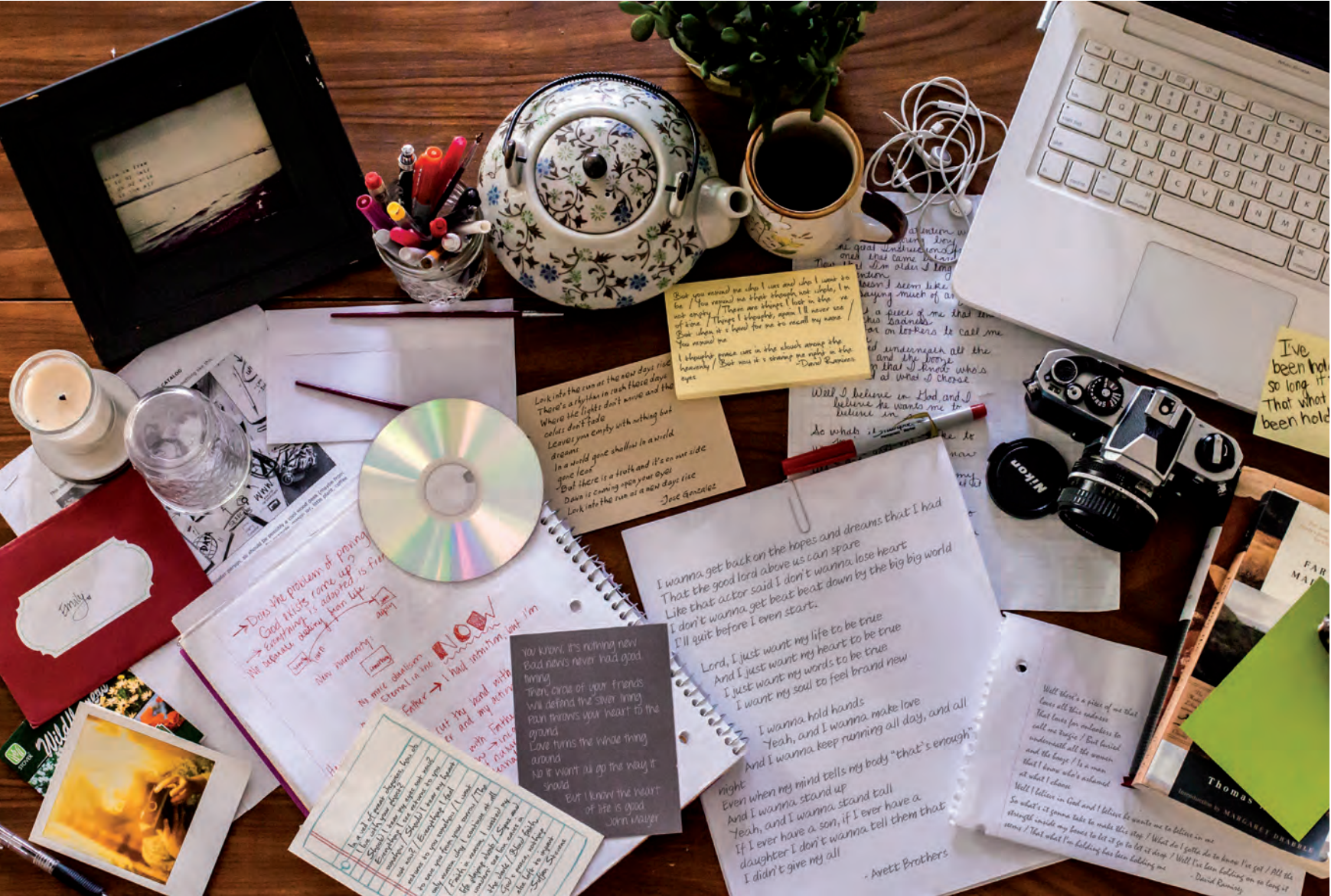
“

At the conclusion  
of this path, through  
an encounter with  
a gaze in the crowd,  
the individual  
is no longer alone  
before the magnificent  
cosmos.

The bonfire in its ordinariness  
encapsulates a companionship  
- the warm light of the fire  
breaking the darkness  
of the night. ”







*"All the while I hungered for meaning in my life.  
 And now I know that we must lift the sail  
 and catch the winds of destiny.  
 Wherever they drive the boat  
 to put meaning in one's life may end in madness,  
 but life without meaning is the torture  
 of restlessness and vague desire."*

Edgar Lee Masters "George Gray"

This sadness, this longing  
 for something great,  
 this desire to be truly oneself requires  
 a reasonable man to take a step,  
 requires his freedom to act: he has to cry out.  
 Indeed, in front of man's own incapacity  
 either everything is tragic,  
 or everything is dramatic.



**THE MILLENNIAL PROJECT**

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