

1. Tell me something about yourself, something that will make you come alive as a person. You get to decide what you reveal and at what length.

My life began in Moscow, Russia. I don't recall any extraordinary happenings in my earlier days. I was generally a happy kid; although my parents might argue that I was a bit of a hand-full, and at times quite stubborn. I remember being told that I was an angel, but only when I was asleep...

Now that I think of it, the most memorable early life moments included my uncle, he was the most adventurous of the family and always came up with ways to entertain and excite me (from parachuting a pair of goggles when I came to visit him to flipping his kayak twice, once with me in it). He used to take me travelling every summer, kayaking through less explored parts of Russia and camping. It was a blast!

Unfortunately, the end of stability happened early for me, coinciding with some major changes in the country at the time. The wave of major transformation swept across the country ripping it apart and causing some major overnight changes. I was only 9 when it happened and to me those things were more entertaining than anything else. Tanks on a street one day, change of government the next week and snipers on the roofs the day after. The more direct impact happened when the 1000%+ inflation hit, all of a sudden I remember that certain staple foods simply disappeared from our table. At the time I didn't quite understand why we couldn't have my favorite- cheese. I remember having to go to stores to line up for cooking oil and getting a number written on my hand to mark the place in line (1168).

Then it hit even closer to home, our family rapidly fell apart. It turned out that my dad's salary went from being quite decent to provide for a family of four to peanuts as he was working for a government research institution. My mom, on the other hand, was giving private lessons in high-school and was doing well. The fact that she became the main bread winner put a lot of pressure on the family. It was unfortunate when it happened, as I was only 11 and my sister 3. I don't think our family was unique in that respect though, the whole country was going through an incredibly stressful time.

I made a choice to stay with my dad and the next thing I remember were the hardships of the next few years. I remember the winter of '93 was particularly a tough one, I recall having to eat spoiled spaghetti with milk every morning before school and complaining about bugs swimming and being told that those were just sugar bits. I don't think I perceived it as being a hardship at a time, just thought of it as a peculiarity. Funny how the perspective differs when you are younger and don't know any better.

Not sure if parent's divorce affected me much, just remember being sad and not sure why things happened the way they did. Before the split up my mom used to take me and my sister on "dates" and I remember being quite irritated after the split-up when I understood that the guy was not "just" a friend. I actually originally stayed with my mom and the guy was really trying to be mean to me and get rid of me. I got the message...

Looking back, I think I really grew up mentally during the period. It was an accelerated school of life. I also recall feeling rather strange at school. I never “fit in” I tried smoking and let that go after a year as I realized that I was doing it for social purpose rather than actually enjoying it.

I’ve never felt like something was missing, my dad tried really hard to provide for me doing some odd jobs here and there. One day he’d be selling carpets, the next day he’d be a courier and the next month would be working as a laborer in construction. It must’ve been really tough for him just to provide enough for us to have food on the table every day. A different set of challenges, to say the least, really puts things into perspective... My granny on the other hand went through WWII in Russia and always recalls being starved and as the result always tries to eat as much as possible as a matter of habit. My dad had his own very tough period in life where everything he was used to went away and he was left with no income and a kid.

I went to a very good school in Moscow and the only strange feeling I had was that my classmates had infinitely more things than me. The moments I recall from my schooling in Moscow were winning marathon and another schooling competition. Other than that I struggled with school, mostly because I couldn’t see the purpose of doing exercises and spending time learning. I was getting all average marks and some teachers actually told my father that I was not capable of learning and he should not hope that I become anything in life. Having said that, other teachers saw through my aloofness and said that I was one of the most capable students but I’ve never bothered to study so never got to realize the potential.

I was average student in all areas except math, in which I all of a sudden got near the top of the class towards the end of high school, to everyone’s surprise. To me it was quite apparent thought. One semester I was sick for a long time and accidentally spend more time than usual studying. I passed with a flying colors and realized that it was not only quite easy to do math but also enjoyable to be featured as a top students. That was the very first example when recognition pushed me forward.

The years went by and my dad gradually recovered and found something that could pay for our bills on a more of a permanent basis. He got a stall in downtown Moscow selling books and magazines. It was a small business but a decently profitable and my uncle got involved as well. Together they were able to gradually grow and make it more successful.

At the same time they saw an opportunity for another small business nearby. They didn’t want to be distracted from their own one so they gave me an opportunity to try it. It was selling joke ids (i.e. ID of an *alcoholic* or an ID for a *lazy bum*, Russian humor is slightly different from Western one). The business was doing well and I spend summers and time after school running this venture. I found it was one of the most fun things that I’ve done. Considering I was only 13, I had an early start in business world: sales, managing merchandize, figuring out profits. To say that I really enjoyed it would be a big understatement.

At the same time I had couple of interesting side lessons like dealing with mafia one day and drunk special forces marines another day. Police would occasionally pick me up and put me into police station for running the business underage. The normal rules of doing business clearly

didn't work! When I was 14 I learned that gambling is not good after losing a day's salary in a slots machine. Since that day I stayed away from gambling.

The next huge change came when we were planning to move to Canada in 1998. The tough part was that my own mom was using me as leverage, telling my dad to exchange my share in her apartment for her permission for me to leave the country. After going through messy divorce my dad didn't trust her though and I volunteered to be a mediator between them. I asked my dad if he is OK for me to transfer property rights to mom and he was, but he said that he didn't trust that she would give me the permission. They were at a gridlock telling the each other to make the first concession. I thought it's easy: I would get my mom to write permission first and then I would ensure that she gets the property share. I talk to her and she agreed that it was a good way to proceed. The biggest shock came when after agreeing she went back and said that she's not going to do it. My trust foundation was rocked.. it affected me fundamentally, afterwards I kept asking myself a question: if I can't trust my parent how can I trust anyone. It was a fundamentally difficult question which had significant trust repercussions for the coming years.

As the result of this we also had to hide the fact that we'll try to sneak out of the country so I was prohibited from telling anyone that I might be leaving the country for the fear that my own mother is going to discover that we are leaving and try to stop it.

It was a difficult thing to comprehend for a 15 year old. The only two people whom I told a day before leaving Russia were one neighbor who acted as an adopted mother to me and my girlfriend at the time. And precisely what I told them was that I'm going tomorrow and I might or might not come back. I think it was the biggest shock for my girlfriend who I've been seeing for 9 months. Essentially she thought I was joking...

The next day we packed and went to airport. We deposited our luggage and then it came turn to the airport immigration. The official asked where my mom's permission for me to leave the country is. My dad's face sank.., I thought to myself, this is a deciding moment of my life, which it really was. On one side I get turned back and return to my previous life and the prospect of being drafted into Russian army in the coming years. On the other hand there was an exciting prospective of going to Canada and starting anew. We wouldn't get second chance to try. All of these things passed through my mind in an instant and I said "mother is just outside terminal, she brought us here and will be joining us in Canada later". It was a lie that saved us and off we were to Canada.

Canada didn't seem real for the first while I was there. The fact that my dad up to the last minute didn't believe that we had a chance to get out without my mom's permission resulted in me not having a chance to prepare myself, which complicated matters. I would dream that I'm still in Moscow and that move to Canada was indeed the dream. I would dream of army drafters knocking on my door and wake up in cold sweat. The language and cultural barriers were quite significant too. I would have a feeling that everyone around me can speak Russian and just pretending that they can only speak English to make my life difficult. Guess perception is a funny thing when you are younger.

I think we invent shortcuts in mind to make life more logical and easier to comprehend. Those ideas came under a lot of pressure when we moved to Canada. It was really a big challenge to adapt and again I stood up to it and faced it. Or did I?

I realized that a lot of times what I was actually doing is absorbing the challenge and moving on, thinking that a passive response is the easiest. I saw the very same approach from my dad when he struggled to find application for his experience and who university masters degrees from Russia. He took it in stride and went for the available choice of a laborer. I saw disappointment in his eyes as he moved to Canada thinking that it's a land of opportunities and instead discovered that it was precisely the opposite for him, more like a step back.

I went back to last grade of high school in Canada as I was too young for university and to improve my English. Then as my grades were all A's my dad told me to follow in his footsteps and become an Engineer. The following four years are an absolute blur, I don't remember much from university. I found it completely uninteresting and not engaging, repeating my Russian high school experience. I kept on thinking to myself, why am I doing this? I cruised along taking as many courses at a time to finish it faster, having an idea that there's going to be a good job waiting for me at the end...

The wake up came when I graduated from university and discovered that no one actually was interested in hiring an average engineering student without any work experience. I reacted in my normal way, retreating and waiting for the job to come. I started sleeping late and waking up late. I lasted for three months just sending around resumes and waiting for people to reply. At which point I realized that I'm pretty screwed.

I also realized that I'm at a crossroads. I thought of my dad. I respected a lot the fact that he sacrificed his business in Moscow to move me to Canada. At the same time reflecting on his and my experience I saw similarities. All of a sudden I come to realization that if I was to continue cruising along I was going to end up average and struggle through life. I started reading biographies of successful people trying to understand what was going through the minds and learn from them. I didn't have any role models or mentors and therefore I was seeking the advice indirectly from those books. I found that what differentiated majority of those people is that they tried and were not afraid to fail. The definition of success of course can be argued, but I believe having comfortable conditions in which you don't worry about food is essential.

With that idea I decided to try get out of the conundrum I got myself into by getting experience and since no one was willing to pay me to get that experience I had to get it for free = volunteer my time in return for experience. I went around looking for volunteering jobs, and to my surprise couldn't find any neither. Nobody was keen to take a recent grad.

At that point I started to get quite irritated; I came to the local Chamber of commerce and asked for a volunteering job. They said they had nothing... I said I could sort paper clips for all that matters as my only other alternative would be to pay somebody to give me work. Fortunately they were encouraged by my enthusiasm and called me the next day and said that they actually had lots of things I can help them with. That's how my full time three months stint with them started. I ended up doing quite a bit of interesting work with them, including public policy design

and negotiation and membership drives. On top of that I've got loads of local business contacts from the Chamber and was able to land a couple of decent jobs as the result. I was on fire and continued getting involved in more and more stuff. Doing projects with government and local non for profits, participating in community leadership programs and speaking about immigration issues to college and high school students. I felt alive again. I was the youngest among all these groups and people looked at me with amazement and that I thrived on that energy and recognition in addition to feeling good about the things I was involved in.

The city we moved to is in mid-Canada, relatively quiet and remote place and I quickly felt like I was outgrowing it. And despite people telling me it's better to be a big fish in a small pond than a small fish in a big pond I made a decision that there's something more than the city and I need to make the move sooner than later.

The MBA was my ticket out. I studied really hard for GMAT and surprised myself and people who knew me from university with the result. I then spend time diligently researching schools and choosing the one that appealed to me carefully. In the mean time I started writing a blog about the whole experience. To my surprise I started getting a lot of readers. I was excited again, even though I have never thought that writing has been my strength I found myself really drawn to writing and spending countless hours reading other blogs for ideas and style. My writing gradually improved and I started getting even more readers. At the end I was getting more than thousand people from all over world reading my blog monthly. I was on a cloud 9.

The MBA experience was more interesting than my prior educational experience and I came out more confident. Thinking that I want to do consulting or finance in Toronto. Apparently life had added a slight twist to that plan and I ended moving to Hong Kong instead. I felt energized again, trying something completely different, moving away from small Canadian city to an exciting place in Asia. I didn't even think twice about moving. I just packed and said bye to my dad, who I think was slightly surprised that I didn't hesitate to move so far.

Since moving to Hong Kong though I feel like I lost the thread. The job is going all well and I'm paid a multiple of what I was paid in Canada. I should be happy as I can now afford majority of things that I dreamed off before.

I've been in Hong Kong for a year plus and after that moved to Singapore, where I've been for a year and a half. Looking back I feel like life almost stood still since I left Canada. Like a hamster in a wheel I move my legs, sometimes even run, but looking back I am largely where I was before.

2. Why do you want to take this course? Give me as much detail as possible. How did you learn about it? If someone recommended it, who and why did he/she do so? If any part of the syllabus spoke to you strongly, which part and why?

I want to take the course to understand what is stopping me from moving forward. Since coming to Asia three years ago I feel that have been sealed in a time capsule of a sort. I know I should feel happier as my career progresses and I'm getting paid well but somehow I don't feel it. I want to take the course to help me reflect on whether I'm focusing on the wrong things or my focus is perhaps too narrow.

In particular, I realized that the concept of value of money is changing for me in inexplicable ways. I remember coming to Canada in April of 1999 and thinking how expensive Slurpy (frozen slurpy mix of sugar and color, very popular in North America and sold through 7-Eleven) was. For the first while I was translating prices back into Russian roubles in my mind and everything seemed very expensive. I explicitly remember debating the first time I saw Slurpy for \$1.75 whether to get it despite the high price... Somehow over the years things changed gradually, through university years I didn't earn much and even after university my salary grew gradually. Once I got my second job things were looking up because I was making a bit more. I was on top of the world! I could get a car and have some extra spending money on a side: amazing! I didn't really think I needed much more but yet something was pushing me forward: I went to MBA. When I make a decision to do an MBA I had done a lot of research, but still consciously couldn't understand how a year in school can produce such high salaries. I took a leap of faith and went for it though. Coming out, my salary almost tripled: I was shocked. I had no idea what to do with all the money. Was my worth really changed so much over the year? Did I become 3x smarter? or maybe 2x smarter and 1.5x better looking (yah right!) Anyways it was a big learning, where essentially overnight my concept of value changed.

I could finally afford all these things I've seen in magazines I thought! Bingo!!! I was so happy. And off I went on a shopping spree collecting everything which I came across. I had this thought in my mind: I'm thirsty for life luxuries and need to satisfy myself. Very soon I satisfied that thrust and then came a moment when I asked myself: and now what? You can only have so many pairs of shoes (perhaps ladies might argue otherwise) and Lacoste polos. Some people fight that realization by starting a collection of ... watches, pens, etc. This to me seemed like a very un fulfilling way to spend money. Giving it to charity didn't seems like the brightest idea too, a bit of an easy way out (give money to somebody else to feel like you are doing good). Anyways, that's part of the overarching question that I'm still pondering. I guess there's always a bigger house and a faster car, but there's gotta be more to life, isn't there? Really hope that I can explore this further as part of the course.

I thrive on building creative ideas and lately that has been suffering. I use to draw and play guitar, but somehow over the years it all faded into the background. I feel like there's something inside of the me trying to burst out, but the mental cage that I've placed myself into is holding me back. I look back and see this creative happy person, and then start to wonder, where did he go? There's multitude of reasons why that might be the case: stress of not knowing where I'm going with my career and whether it's really something that is going to make me happy long term, having brought that creative person to corporate world I've been told that there's no place for that

in a serious world of working people... or maybe simply that's how I read the world "it should not be creative". When I first started working I always wondered why people in corporate world were so dry and disillusioned, they seemed to operate like desensitized robots.. I thought to myself back then, darn, how can people get to that state, and wouldn't they feel absolutely terrible when they would come to retirement, look back at their career and see that there's a void looking back at them. I really don't want to end up with a void looking back at me, I want to have a fulfilling career and enjoy every single day of it. If I leave a mark at the end its great, if not, its still OK, as long as I've enjoyed it and made people around me share that enjoyment. Maybe I'm just a dreamer, or maybe I'm not.. and that's what I want to find out.

I found out about the course from somebody who took it at London School of Business. It was quite amazing to hear the person describe the experience and how it changed them. It didn't seem quite possible, and I was a bit skeptical in the beginning. I'm a big believer in modesty and this seemed to bluntly promise to change your life. Oh oh, I thought to myself, it sounds like a "H*rbal Life" which took Russia by storm in early 90s, building a strong sales pyramid and promising a world, while delivering none. So here I had a bit of a dilemma, do I go on a limb and trust this person who I respected a lot or just give it a miss as another gimmick. I've decided to read the syllabus and google it so see what others experienced. It actually turned out to be quite profound. It built on some of the reading that I've been doing on the happiness and took it a lot further to actually practically implement the concepts in ones life. I decided to go on limb and give it all I've got. Did I mention that I'm a big believer in you get what you put in.

The parts of the syllabus which spoke most strongly to me were the pieces of wisdom ingrained throughout it. I found myself stopping and thinking deeply about each. I found the story of the king and the sage on p26 particularly enlightening. How happiness in my mind seems to be tied to the things that I've accumulated/accomplished and how it actually might stop me from going further. I recall how it always surprised me how older people were always much more risk averse and were afraid to lose "things". As the result they were losing not only options but opportunities and were getting stuck. Now that I reflect on my recent experience I'm realizing that I could be falling into the same trap. So I really need someone to challenge me so that I can regain the speed.

3. What specific — list them — learning outcomes would you like to take away from this course? An example of such an outcome is "I would like to learn how to stop being bothered by what I think others are thinking about me."

I would like to understand how to be a happier person. I feel like I've lost the thread and I need help to find it again. I'd really like to figure out whether contentment is a friend or an enemy. So far I've always viewed it as the later. I'm not sure if my upbringing and experiences have shaped me to be afraid of it. I'm scared that the second I'm contented with something I'm going to sink. Although lately I've had some passing ideas on whether it's contributing to my extra stress.

I want to become more disciplined with my time. I set myself ambitious goals only to get disrupted by other small things that pop into my life. As the result I get irritated at myself and people who disrupted my "flow". At the same time I keep on feeling that there's gotta be a better

way of handling these things. I'm hoping that the course can help me find the focus and concentration.

I want to learn how to bring forth my creativity into the day to day activities. As I mentioned I generally consider myself a creative person, but lately feel like my creative pores have been stifled. I want open them back up and see the color around me rather than simply shades of grey.

Material things have to this point been the measure of success, but somehow I'm feeling that its not quite right. I see people I respect chasing a better car or a more expensive watch, and I do get caught in it sometimes too, and then I pinch myself and ask myself weather its really something that I want simply because magazines and my peers say that its definition of success. I want to understand if there's other ways that might work for me.

4. What hesitations do you have? Are you nervous or concerned about anything you read in the syllabus or heard from others?

I don't have any hesitations about the course. I'm coming in with an open ears and mind. I want to be challenged and stretched. I want to get outside of my current box. As I mentioned when I first heard about the course I was slightly hesitant because it seemed to promise to change ones life. Having seen so many other things give the same promise I was initially uncertain, before doing more research and talking to the alumni.

I'm interested how my girlfriend will take the changes in prospective and revelations that I might experience. I hope she won't feel like I'm going on this journey alone without her. Once I'm on the course I'll take her along on this journey by talking though the changes and ideas with her. I'll share the reading materials with her and discuss it with her.

5. How will other persons who take the course benefit from having you in it?

I believe that I'm generally an open and insightful person. By bringing my positive energy and commitment to the group I believe we can all get more value out of this shared experience.

Moreover, coming from a very diverse background, I'm hoping it will allow me to understand and relate to other people on the course. I'm hoping to sometimes introduce a friendly challenge and help grow their ideas while at the same time creating a safe atmosphere for learning. I don't think my current situation is unique or particularly interesting, but perhaps by sharing it with the group we can all gain some insights of the problems that others might also be experiencing.

6. What really, really, really and truly matters to you? Why?

My family really matters to me. I want to help them to feel well taken care off.

My girlfriend matters a great deal to me. We've spend rocky year together but she's the person that I feel most connected with and can understand me the best. It matters to me that she's happy, achieves her full potential and at the same time feel safe with me.

My friends matter a lot to me too and I get worked up trying to help them with their issues. Although at times I feel that I'm imposing my idea of happiness onto them, I'm really trying to be open minded though and let them achieve their own version of happiness.

It also matters to me that I'm achieving my potential and don't have any regrets when I look back. I remember that one of the most life changing things for me was reading a diary of a lady in her mid 30s who got diagnosed with a fast progressing cancer. It was amazing to get a sense how her priorities changed essentially over night as the result of that singular event. How all of a sudden things that used to matter don't anymore. One of my ex colleagues got diagnosed with brain tumor and after that realized that all the extreme hours he was spending at work were useless and what he actually should be doing is spending those hours with the ones he loved... quite profound.

7. This course requires an enormous commitment of time as well as emotional and psychic energy. If your participation slacks off, you will be doing a disservice to yourself as well as other members of class. Are you fully prepared to take responsibility to make this class a resounding success for yourself as well as for others?

Yes, I'm definitely committed to put in the required effort and then some to understand myself better and shield this time against conflicting commitments. I take full responsibility in clearing my schedule to make sure that I have my complete focus on the learning and the exercises requirements between the sessions.