

Every great leap forward in your life comes after you have made a clear decision of some kind.

Tell somebody they have to carry a jar of jelly across a marble floor, and they'll do it dancing. Tell them they have to do the same thing with a \$20 million Ming vase, and watch them sweat from their fingertips.

There's something inside like a conscience that says, / "You're painting floors while your pals are renaming the stars. / Get up, get up, go do what you started – / If you want to be a martyr, try harder!" / So you sell and you sell with your heart / So you can make a few bucks and lose a few friends. / This is the stuff that makes you, / It will be the same that breaks you... / Move on, get on with your life; / It's pointless to play if you don't get paid...

There are two things to aim at in life: first, to get what you want; and after that, to enjoy it. Only the wisest of mankind achieve the second.

Early in the sixteenth century, Wàn Hù decided to take advantage of China's advanced rocket and fireworks technology to launch himself into outer space. He supposedly had a chair built with forty-seven rockets attached. On the day of lift-off, Wàn, splendidly attired, climbed into his rocket chair and forty seven servants lit the fuses and then hastily ran for cover. There was a huge explosion. When the smoke cleared, Wàn and the chair were gone, and were said never to have been seen again.

Know That I Fought Until the Lights Were Gone

I get out of bed the same way every day, / Blurry-eyed and waiting for the alarm to sing. / Sing me into FM radiopathy – / Numb / and tired / and perfect for the working day...

The real loser of our times is the one who is expected to win.

*I never loved nobody fully; / Always one foot on the ground. / And by protecting my heart truly,
I got lost / in the sounds I hear in my mind.*

Whatever course you decide upon, there is always someone to tell you that you are wrong.

Someday I'm gonna find it, / Wish I knew what I was looking for / Inside the disarray... / I woke up this morning, / Don't know where I'm going, / But it's all right – I wouldn't have it any other way.

A man is a success if he gets up in the morning and goes to bed at night and in between does what he wants to do.

There is no enough.

Introduction: Let's Not Settle for Satisfaction

I wrote the first version of this post in 2010, back before the NFL Draft in question, which is why I reference 2010 as the “present.” Although it’s been years since this happened, I’ve tried to keep the vast majority of my initial perspective unchanged. Hopefully, you have the chance to approach the topics at hand from that same unknowing perspective.

Obviously, life has answered many of the questions the post raises, and that I ask near the end. The structure of this post, therefore, goes something like: Main Body, Questions, Epilogue, Second Questions. The Epilogue advances the narrative all the way up to the present day, but if you don’t already know what happens, I strongly encourage you to avoid it – or anyone else’s responses – until you’ve written your first draft. That said, I do want you to read the update before you submit your post; the “truth,” as it were, may change your original response (just as Senior Project research may crush a couple of your preconceptions about your career).

If you end up changing your mind after reading the update, don’t delete what you wrote. I love looking behind the scenes at how creative works are made – I’m one of those people who actually watches the Extras on his DVDs – and I’d like to see what you originally composed. Past students who needed to write additional post-update material divided their entries into boldly-titled sections: Original Work and Now That I Know.

Finally, please make sure you’ve read – and really considered – all of the prompts before composing your response. I knew that the responses to *Making Islands Where Islands Would Go*, for example, would be pretty home-obsessed, even though plenty of questions never touched on that topic. I come up with a bunch of different prompts because I (somewhat selfishly) prefer as much variety within these threads as possible, so don’t feel pressured to pick the first question unless it calls to you! Remember, you can craft your own prompt and run it by me if you like. Above all else, try to craft material that’s distinctly your own!

Without any further ado...

1. Things I Can't Change

I first came up with the idea for this blog after reading Wright Thompson's ESPN.com piece about a young football player named Myron Rolle. (The material that follows in italics is taken from that piece.) For those of you who don't follow football and/or have no idea who I'm talking about, you have to understand something about Rolle: calling him a football player is like calling you a student. That's one of the hats you wear, sure...but it's probably not the one you use to define yourself. A more accurate label for Rolle, especially for our purposes, is "Renaissance Man."

Whatever he does, he does it well and, to the immense frustration of others, with ease and grace. He's an All-American safety. He can play saxophone and sing. He was the lead in his high school's production of Fiddler on the Roof. He graduated from Florida State as an exercise science major in less than three years with a 3.75 GPA. He shadows doctors, dreaming of medical school. He says "please" and "thank you." He researches stem cells. He starts anti-obesity programs that the U.S. Department of the Interior adopts, aimed at helping Native American children make smart choices about fitness and health. He raises money for hospitals. Myron Rolle, it can safely be assumed, not only eats vegetables, he likes them. Life hangs comfortably from his shoulders like a fine suit.

Understand this: Myron Rolle graduated from FSU in less than three years so he could try to become a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. This is not someone who messes around. This is certainly not a man accustomed to failure.

In so many ways, Myron Rolle is the opposite of Winston Smith. One is accomplished; the other accomplishes nothing, literally (since his specialty lies in the crafting of...lies). One is young, healthy, vigorous, driven, and intelligent; the other is feeble, timid, aging, unhealthy, and lacks ambition. For one, the possibilities are seemingly endless; for the other, the possibilities seem hopelessly empty.

Yet one can argue that Myron Rolle is just as beholden to others as Winston...perhaps, in his own way, even more so.

Two unfamiliar envelopes poke out of [Rolle's mailbox] slot. The first one is from Ohio. He tears into the envelope and finds a note: I read about you in The New York Times and I thought you might be interested in this article from The New Yorker. It's a recent piece by Malcolm Gladwell, and it offers and backs up the theory that professional football is a lot like dogfighting and is, ultimately, a sport that cannot be played without doing serious damage to the brain. This is, obviously, a conundrum for Rolle: He wants to be a pro football player and a neurosurgeon. Don't successful careers in each of these preclude the other?

Of all the obstacles facing Rolle, including the luck and work and genetic blessings required to be one of the 32 chosen to be a Rhodes scholar and one of the 32 chosen to be a first-round pick [in the NFL Draft], perhaps none is greater than this: People in each world don't believe anyone could possibly be passionate about the other. He's always asked: Which do you like more? Draft gurus question his commitment. His defensive coordinator at Florida State, Mickey Andrews, told Rolle that he was spending too much time on school and not enough time on football. Even Oxford University assigned him to St. Edmund Hall, known here as the jock college.

The other letter is from a London teacher: I heard you this morning on Radio 4. Never have I heard a young man so articulate, forward thinking and inspirational. All I could think about listening to you was: I have to get him to speak at my school. I'm a teacher in London at an inner-city school where I do lots of work around raising Black achievement. To hear you speak about the importance of education and hearing about your life decisions – putting off the NFL for Oxford, wanting to be a neurosurgeon, money not being your main goal in life – it would all mean so much to the kids at my school.

Rolle considers his mail. Two letters, two totally different problems; if other people's myopia is an obstacle, then the exact opposite is, too. He is trying to stay on course in a vast sea of possibilities, and everywhere he goes, he is confronted by people lining up to tell him what he means and what he could be and, most confining of all, what he should be.

He is a vessel for other people's dreams.

Here are the three things to know about Rolle as he reads that second letter:

1. The Monday after he won the Rhodes scholarship, his cell phone rang. Jesse Jackson. At first, Rolle thought it was a joke. But no, it was actually Jesse Jackson, and he wanted to tell Rolle this: "If Dr. King were alive today, he'd be proud of you."

2. While Rolle was in D.C. for the inauguration, Princeton professor and African-American leader Cornel West spotted him on the street and bowed. Literally bowed down and said this: "You are the future of black America."

Everywhere he's been, for as long as he can remember, he's been singled out for future greatness, by strangers and family alike. When he was in high school, riding on the New Jersey Turnpike with his dad, he asked one day, "What would it be like to be normal?" He's thought about that a lot.

And this, too: What is enough for those who see so much in him? He opens his e-mail and there's a recruiting pitch from the Harvard Business School. His dad wants him to make a perfect score on the Wonderlic exam given at the NFL combine. Jesse Jackson wants him to be a leader for an entire generation. Florida State told him on his recruiting visit that he could be a Rhodes scholar...and now he is. Mickey Andrews wants him to react, and his professors want him to think. He deals, on a daily basis, with the crushing weight of having this much potential. He worries about losing himself. He never stops thinking about what other people want for him, and how it's easy to become a mosaic of their expectations instead of staying true to his own.

"The danger is that you lose a sense of identity," he says, "you lose a sense of who you are. If you continue to try to navigate through constructs that are set up by other people, by other people's thoughts of who you are and who you should be, you will never be personally at peace."

So he understands he shouldn't spend his life pleasing other people. But what does he want?

This brings us to...3. A year ago, Rolle spoke at the College of the Bahamas. His family comes from the nation, and he alone among his five brothers was born in the United States (his mom traveled to Houston so he could be an American citizen). He was chosen before birth.

One of his many dreams is to open a medical clinic in his hometown of Exuma, and so, after the speech, the Bahamian politicians crowded around him. Be the prodigal son, they told him. Come back and be president one day. Be prime minister. When he returned to Tallahassee, he was online one night in his room and saw a photo tagged on Facebook of himself and the current president of the Bahamas. A lot of things ran through his head: People want me to come back and save their country? I don't know if that's in my plan. I never thought of politics. This isn't me.

*Sitting there in the dark, he finally began to understand: **There is no enough.***

All he can do is stay focused on his dreams: NFL, medical school, then a life as a groundbreaking neurosurgeon and head of a foundation that brings medical care to those without.

You know, simple stuff.

2. Don't Crack Your Head on That Pavement, Man

I brought up *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock* when introducing *Our Heads Are Spinning Around* last week. It's critical to our understanding of *1984*; in some ways, it's critical to our understanding of Myron Rolle. But when I first read about him, a different figure from the junior-year poetry unit popped into my head:

Richard Cory.

I envy Myron Rolle's abilities. I envy the possibilities those abilities can reveal. But I don't envy him. He isn't allowed to fail. And he almost certainly will.

Will we remember Myron Rolle? I can tell you this: Rolle wants to be a first-round pick in the 2010 NFL Draft this April. He wants it desperately. But I don't think he'll make it.

For one thing, he skipped his senior season to go to Oxford. Plenty of players don't pan out even after four continuous seasons of collegiate work. The team drafting him is gambling a) that his physical skills haven't degenerated away from the playing field; b) that he can shake off the rust at the same time that he's making the jump to the professional level (which, as I've indicated to some of you, is far more difficult than one might anticipate); and c) that he can still make that jump to the pros after spending so much time away from live competition. Not only is that a big gamble, but the men making those gambles also have to take their own employment situation into consideration. (If you miss on too many draft picks, you're wasting millions of the owner's dollars, and you're out the door.)

Moreover, Rolle may be well-regarded – he was once the top-ranked high school recruit in the nation – but he doesn't have a lot of statistical flash. He's a clinical player; he diagnoses instead of reacts. This means he doesn't get burned by big plays, but it also means he puts himself in position to make plays more rarely. He intercepted one pass in three combined seasons at Florida State. Dozens of young men vying for those limited draft spots intercepted more passes last season alone – at the same time, as it so happens, that Rolle was studying abroad.

Yet regardless of his physical skills or statistical background, there's a simpler truth at work here. The National Football League tends to shy away from individuals it feels cannot devote themselves utterly to its sport. In this sense, it's no different from deciding whether to let a singer who may have a questionable attitude about touring for months on end join your band. Sure, the guy's talented. But do you really want to put your trust in someone who might change his mind, who might not dedicate himself to your craft the way you dedicate yourself to it?

And might Myron Rolle, if asked to lay down a hit in a situation that places his head (and therefore brain) at risk, shy away from contact rather than sacrifice himself?

These are the questions we ask of the excellent. But the questions are real. They don't mean he won't get drafted; they probably mean he won't get drafted very early. Since you pay your picks largely according to a slotting system dictated by their draft position, you're taking less of a financial risk by picking Rolle late, particularly if he suddenly proves contact-averse or simply retires early in order to pursue neurosurgery. In short, the general manager who drafts him must calculate whether an investment in Rolle will pay off, and at what point in the draft that investment becomes a wise one.

Thus Rolle must place his fate in the hands of other men, none of whom can probably match up with him on an intellectual or athletic basis. These men get to make the decisions for him because that's the way the system works. Collegiate athletes don't get to choose the company they join when they enter the professional ranks, so other men determine where they will play (and, therefore, when they will play), and they (along with an agent) will negotiate how well they are paid. Myron Rolle will probably be underpaid

relative to his skill due to the aforementioned slotting system; teams only budget a certain number of dollars to spend on all of their draft picks combined, and you spend less money on lower picks.

And if Myron Rolle gets hurt during his first contract, NFL contracts aren't guaranteed. Lower-round picks don't usually enjoy long careers even when they're healthy because they're so interchangeable; the team invests little in you, so you're replaceable, particularly if you're injured.

Imagine, if you will, Myron Rolle suffering an injury to his head, or to his hands. His NFL career ends. His career in neuroscience and neurosurgery never begins. What does he do then? Are there still mountains left to conquer? And will they matter as much as the ones he tried to climb with everyone clamoring for him to succeed their way?

Myron Rolle is caught in a social machine. It's not a sinister machine like the one Winston works to sabotage, or the intentionally hidebound one the Savage comes to resist once he reaches the World State, but it's a machine all the same.

Isn't there something screwed up about the idea that a man can have too many passions for his own good?

Isn't there something screwed up when we punish a man we expect to be everything to everyone for meeting our expectations?

It is...difficult to be everything to everyone. As a younger man, I tried to be. But life has simply taught me that I'm not up to the task. I found out the hard way that I can't meet every individual's expectations. Yet in some ways, I still try. By that, I mean I try to make sure I can meet the expectations of the people who matter to me (including my own). I have to hope I can consistently figure out which people to value, and which expectations I actually want to meet.

And I hope Myron Rolle figures out what he wants before he loses everything.

+ In the words of Rolle's lecturer, "What if you're successful in ways you didn't intend to be successful?" Would your new successes matter as much as the dreams you never realized or the goals you never met? How important do you think it is to meet your goals?

+ One of the most challenging aspects of Rolle's reality is listed at the beginning of this post: *There is no enough*. He's lived a life of constant challenge. He's never known peace. He's never known real satisfaction because he's never had time to enjoy it, to get complacent with success. Is this a blessing, or a curse?

+ If you're a general manager of a football team – with your continued employment largely contingent on the performance of the team you assembled – do you draft Myron Rolle?

+ Winston, of course, lives on the other end of the spectrum. Whereas Rolle seems to disturb the universe simply by passing through it, Winston merely hopes to make some sort of a tiny life for himself, and spends all of Part Two pursuing that quest. Do you think Rolle will ever be as happy as Winston is in those sublimely quiet moments of joy?

+ What should we do with a person like Myron Rolle? Do they have the right to try whatever they want? Should we encourage them to pick a fate and ignore the rest? + If you're Winston, is the universe worth disturbing? If you're Rolle, is the NFL worth the risk?

+ What do you think will become of Rolle? If you're in his position, facing this particular branching point in your life...would you want to see the future first?

Epilogue: The Twenties Yet Unseen

Myron Rolle was not, in fact, drafted in the first round. He was chosen in the sixth round, on the last day of the draft, by the Tennessee Titans. They used the 207th pick to select him.

Tom Brady aside, almost no one from the sixth round of a draft ends up with a long and successful NFL career. For now, Rolle seems to be no exception. He was released at the end of his first preseason, and signed thereafter with something called the Titans' practice squad. That group sounds like it would provide great opportunities for someone to improve, but in actuality, the eight-player group's main function is to simulate the behavior of each week's opposing team. You don't really get to practice your own game; for example, a quarterback on the 49ers' practice squad spent the season pretending to be a tight end on offense and a cornerback on defense. You don't get a real uniform. You don't get to play. You don't attend the games. If you stay on it for all seventeen weeks, you can make up to \$85,000 for that year. You do not receive health insurance. Can you imagine what a football player's insurance premiums must cost if he's paying out of pocket, especially if previous playing damage lingers?

Rolle was never listed anywhere on the Tennessee Titans' official depth chart. After a year spent on the practice squad and a second preseason with the team, the Titans released him again in September of 2011, barely into the second year of a four-year contract. They didn't think enough of his future to re-sign him to the practice squad. No one else came calling.

But he spent his time well. He joined a college's Board of Trustees. He started a program with a fellow Rhodes Scholar that aimed to make fellowship opportunities more widely available to college students who'd normally pass on the chance to pursue them. And he had not yet suffered an injury to his hands or head.

The Pittsburgh Steelers signed Rolle to a reserve/future contract after the 2011 season ended. It wasn't a guaranteed contract; he was one of eighty-plus players trying to make a fifty-three man roster – something he couldn't do on a less-talented team as a draft pick two years earlier. As a draft pick, you almost automatically make the roster during your first year; the general manager looks kind of foolish if one of his picks flops that badly. You usually make it as a second-year player, although that's less common for fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-rounders.

As a free agent? Not even a free agent that teams would fight over, but a reserve/futures guy? Rolle was disposable. He needed to outwork, outhustle, and outperform at least thirty other men who are just as hungry, talented, and driven. He wasn't going to be able to protect his body if he was going to win a spot. He'd have to fight in practices and exhibition games that mean nothing in the record books, although the toll they can take on one's body are all too real.

Rolle faced a future where he could still end up breaking himself in a moment that ultimately counted for nothing. He tried anyway. And the Steelers released him days before the 2012 season began. The Google snippet beneath his official website still referred to him as a "future NFL star."

One year later, Myron Rolle enrolled in medical school at Florida State University. He'll graduate in 2017.

+ What do you think of Rolle's decisions now that you've seen how they've unfolded, and how does the actual outcome affect your "pre-evaluation" (if at all) of that choice?

+ The World State would have undoubtedly looked at Rolle's case and thought: *What a waste*. He never became the football player he could have, and he'll forever be behind as a med student and eventual doctor. This isn't to say he's bound to be terrible – just that his pursuit was messy, chaotic, inefficient...and so, so emotionally taxing. Why should this Alpha have been allowed to wander around, pursuing his own choices, when he'd have been better off just focusing and excelling – and when society at large would've benefitted more as a result? In short, does Rolle's quest highlight the wisdom of the World State's approach to its citizens and castes, or does it provide you with ammunition to challenge their model?

+ If you're raising Myron, do you allow him to bounce around until he finds his passion (at the risk of losing everything), or make him focus on one area (at the risk of missing out on a more fulfilling life)? Should we, in essence, save him from himself? Would you treat Rolle the way you'd prefer to be raised?

Blog Title: "I Just Want to Sell Out My Funeral," *The Wonder Years*, *The Greatest Generation*

Introduction and Epilogue Titles: "Killing a Camera," Braid, *Frame and Canvas*

Section Title #1: "Things I Can't Change," *The Story So Far*, *What You Don't See*

Section Title #2: "Black and White Town," *Doves*, *Some Cities*

Quotes on the First Page: Brian Tracy, Charles P. Pierce, Braid, Logan Pearsall Smith, Herbert S. Zim, The Velvet Teen, Claude Lelouch, Regina Spektor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lifehouse, Bob Dylan, Wright Thompson
