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Creative Spark
Essay I
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Ithaca

‘When you set out on your journey to Ithaca

pray that the road is long,

full of adventure, full of knowledge.’

Constantinos Kavafis, Ithaca (1911)

Ithaca, a Greek island in the Ionian Sea, was the island that gave birth to Ulysses, one of the smartest Greek commanders, who through his invention of the ‘Trojan Horse’ led the Greeks to a victory over the Trojans. Immediately after this victory, Ulysses set out on his journey to return to Ithaca. To return home, to kiss his wife, to see his now grown-up son, to meet his friends and his parents, all these were Ulysses’ goals. ‘To arrive there is your ultimate goal’ as Kavafis states later in the poem. Like Ulysses, every person has his or her own goals and therefore is immersed in a journey towards the accomplishment of this goal. However, it is possible for someone to be in a journey without an ‘ultimate goal’ in mind. More often than not, this goal will appear in the way.

It was during Christmas 1992, that I received a very special present from my grandmother, Orthodoxia. She had knitted a sweater especially for me. She had started knitting this sweater, as I later found out, because she wanted me to have something from her. And what’s better than a hand-knitted sweater? It could keep me warm during chilly winter nights while reminding me of my

relationship with my grandmother. Having as her goal to offer me a present to remember her, she created an original sweater, which for me will always be unique. On the blue background of the sweater, two familiar figures are shaped, the figures of a grandmother holding her grandson in her warm embrace. I have it in my wardrobe at home, even though it is way too small for me to wear, and whenever I see it, it reminds me of my beloved grandmother. I remember her smile whenever she saw me, the way her face lit up when she recognized I was happy and the worry and eagerness to help when I was feeling dispirited. Although my grandmother passed away six years ago, her memory is still alive through this sweater.

Having a goal is not, however, a necessary condition for creation. In the documentary 'Dancemaker', for example, the featured dancer does not always start dancing with a goal in his mind, as Ulysses and my grandmother both did. Dancing is a pleasure more than it is a job that provides him food and accommodation. This reminds me of Philia, my sister's best friend who often comes to our house to study and play with my sister. That girl has an inimitable talent. Whenever she listens to a popular music tune, she quits what she does and starts dancing. She combines different twirls and pirouettes from shows she has watched, but most of the time she invents her own moves, and the result is impressive. The way she raises her hand, turns around, jumps to land strikingly on her knees and then repeats it altering a specific move makes me wonder where her talent springs from as I can only watch her in admiration. She creates without having a goal in mind. Sometimes, the absence of the goal, of schedule, makes the creation more spontaneous and hence more original and exciting. It is with nostalgia that I remember her excitement whenever she was dancing and the satisfaction that our applause gave to her.

'Always keep Ithaca in your mind
To arrive there is your ultimate goal.
But do not hurry the voyage at all.'

Since I first heard about MIT and the scholarship that the idea of MIT encompasses, I was struck by its excellence. The unparalleled opportunities in research and the Institute's gigantic reputation attracted me to search to find out more about this school. And as I learned more, I became more immersed in my dedication to MIT. I then set my goal: Get into MIT. I struggled to achieve it, but I learned much along the way. As a Greek-Cypriot, I attended a public school in my area where I was taught subjects of my choice in a rigorous level. However, to enhance my educational experience, I attended afternoon classes in GCE A'levels in mathematics, physics and chemistry. Every extra course I took during the afternoons taught me the same subjects as school from a different perspective. These two sets of courses complemented each other as they taught me how different languages are used to explain the same topics. While my understanding of science developed, my interest in it grew exponentially. The more interested in science I was getting, the more eager I became to become a member of the MIT community.

Applying to MIT was a journey of self-exploration and creation. I found out that things I was taking for granted, such as playing the piano, being involved in student government and trained as an officer in the army actually influenced the admission decision towards my favor. In addition, I was involved in a youth group called 'Youth Encounters for Peace'. Our goal was to promote peace in Cyprus. Among other bi-communal activities, we organized festivals for Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots to meet and 'destroy the masks of evil we have painted on each other's faces', helping me destroy the misconceptions I had for Turkish-

Cypriots, strive to make others believe that we can live in peace and impress my interviewer at the same time. I wasn't, though, involved in these activities with the goal of getting in MIT in mind. This was a part of a goal many young Cypriots share: to bring peace and cooperation between the island's two main communities. This is now partly achieved, since many of the Cyprus youth share this goal and work together to achieve it. Eventually I achieved my ultimate personal goal. I can still remember my application essay's epilogue: 'I can now set my own goals, strive to reach them and reach them I will.' For 'when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it' as Paulo Coelho beautifully affirmed in his masterpiece 'The Alchemist'. I wanted to get in MIT more than I ever wanted anything else in my life. Indeed, the universe conspired in helping me achieve my goal.

At the present I am settled in Cambridge, living my life-long dream. My journey, though, has not finished yet. I am now in search of another goal. A goal in achieving which, I will put all my forces and the whole universe will again help me. I need to find this goal. In the meantime, I enjoy my journey to the unknown.

'Pray the road is long
That the summer mornings are many, when,
with such pleasure, with such joy
you will enter ports seen for the first time;
stop at Phoenician markets
and purchase fine merchantise [...]
visit many Egyptian cities,
to learn and learn from scholars.'

I hope my journey is long. The joy of meeting people, going to places I've

never been before, experiencing new feelings and learning from scholars, has not lost its meaning, no matter how many centuries have passed since Ulysses' journey. The absence of a goal does not exclude that I am going to experience all these diverse things. However, having a goal, as I found in the example of getting in MIT, makes me motivated, hard working and far more creative. During the period I had this goal I wrote the best essay I had ever written in my life, I was more energetic than ever, I became involved in many activities while enjoying myself the most. This way I felt more satisfied with myself and my actions and so did the people closest to me, my parents, friends and relatives who have spent much time (and money) in supporting me and enabling me to pursue my dream.

Nevertheless, it may not be that I don't have a goal; I may now have a different kind of purpose. It is not a single and specific ambition as getting into MIT was. For the first time ever, I live in a foreign country miles away from home. To overcome any hurdles posed to me and benefit from the challenge has become my aspiration. To create new friendships, to allow myself feel emotions of love, respect and appreciation, to enjoy every moment of my immersion in the American culture, while being able to keep in touch with home and maintain my existing friendships; all these I can now say are my objectives.

After all, the best way to be motivated and creative in life is to have a goal. Having a goal forces you to perform at your best while on your journey to the goal. During this journey you learn many things, things you wouldn't learn, even think about, if you did not 'set out on your journey to Ithaca'.

'And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not deceived you.

Wise as you have become, with so much experience
you must already have understood what Ithacas mean.'