

Twenty-Seven IFs in Life on My Path to Becoming a Teacher Freshman Year – Away at School and Two IFs

Monday Phone Calls

I had always envisioned going away to college. When I had set Stanford as my goal as a nine-year-old fourth-grader, Stanford met my going away goal. However, when my family moved to Atherton just before my Freshman year in high school, Stanford was now just four short miles from my home. How could I count that as “going away to college”?

My older brother Paul spent his Freshman year at Oregon State College. While there, he called home every Monday evening to keep us updated on his college life. I informed my parents that Paul’s plan would be my plan, as well. I would call home every Monday evening to give them an update on my college life. Other than that weekly call, no one in my family was allowed to have any contact with me while I was away at college.

I had been saving my earnings from my Christmas and Summer jobs to buy myself a car to take with me to college. However, my father said that if I waited until my Sophomore year, he would give me a car. My parents had already given my brother Paul a car at the start of his Sophomore year. My father was now promising me, and by logical extension, my younger brothers, cars for our second years in college. Would I wait a year? Who wouldn’t? We would get our mother’s current car, and she would get a new one. Our mother’s preference was for convertibles. A for-free, nearly new convertible was definitely worth the wait.

After I moved into my dorm, I visited Stanford’s on-campus bike shop and purchased a bicycle. I used my bike for campus travel and trips to and from home for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. I was now definitely away at college, even if the distance was only a bike ride away.

Two New Goals

I have always set goals for myself. My going to Stanford was one example. Goals can be achieved, or they can be abandoned, like my giving up on playing football. Whether goals will be met or eventually be abandoned, I still set them. As a Freshman at Stanford, I set two goals for myself. Both goals were set as my way of paying my father back for his paying for my Stanford education.

I had earned no scholarship funding and had not applied for any student loans. My father was paying for my room, board, books, and tuition. The things not paid for were incidentals like my bicycle, between-meal snacks, trips to the movies with friends, and any other little things that might pop up. The savings that I had planned to use to buy a car were more than enough to cover snacks and movies.

What I felt owed my father for paying my way to college was getting him his money's worth for my education. Goal one: Never missing any class. I met this goal with just one unavoidable exception. I broke my thumb in a water polo game my Senior year and the snapped bone had to be pinned back together. I missed one class during my thumb surgery.

Goal Two: Maintaining a 3.000 straight B average for my four years of college. My father had earned Cum Laude status during his time at Stanford. I did not set Cum Laude as my goal. I felt striving for mostly A's would require a level of studying that might take the fun out of college life. A solid B average would be good enough. Goal achieved. My four-year cumulative grade average was 3.068. A straight B average.

Bonehead English

The Freshmen class arrived at school for a week of orientation before the start of classes. Part of the orientation process was taking placement exams for English, math, and foreign language classes. Because of my unpleasant experience in taking Spanish in high school, I was not planning to take any foreign language classes ever. As a result, the only two placement tests I needed were for English and math.

My math score placed me at the Analytical Geometry and Calculus level. My score on my English test placed me at the Bonehead English level. My counselor told me that my low score was because I had flunked the spelling section. She said that if I had simply marked the answers randomly, my score would have been higher. However, since Stanford's Bonehead English classes did not teach spelling, I would be placed in a standard Freshman English class instead.

Freshman English and Mr. Vasta

Mr. Vasta was my professor for my third quarter of Freshman English class. At one point, he had instructed all of us in class to never fall in love with a sentence. If a sentence did not fit in our story, get rid of it. I found that instruction to be quite odd. I could not imagine ever falling in love with a sentence. However, there was one paper that I wrote that really did contain a single sentence that I had fallen in love with. I could see the sentence didn't quite fit in the story I was writing, but I liked that sentence so much I could not bring myself to delete it.

When Mr. Vasta returned my paper to me, he had circled that very sentence and wrote in the margin next to the paragraph in which the sentence was included, "Did you intend this to be poetry? It was good, except you wrote it as prose. This whole paragraph is tortured prose. You could easily make poetry out of it, but it is bad prose."

What follows is that tortured paragraph.

Was death final? She could not know. Only a guest would pave the way. Could death be a chill that crept upon the living as frost upon a glass? If death were, as she chose to guess, and as she hoped it was, then death was not a final thing, that nothing else undoes. Pure glass reflects an image, true, that, though unclear, when frosted still comes through. If glass were memory, and frost were time, then if one upon this earth could remember a deceased, though the image be no longer clear, a picture will linger in his mind. The lingering is life continued, for what is life but continued images in one's mind.

Below is the exact same paragraph broken into lines of almost poetry, as Mr. Vasta suggested. My tortured paragraph of prose really was more like poetry than I could ever have imagined.

Was death final? She could not know.
Only a guest would pave the way.
Could death be a chill that crept upon the living,
As frost upon a glass?
If death were, as she chose to guess,
And as she hoped it was,
Then death was not a final thing,
That nothing else undoes.
Pure glass reflects an image, true, that,
Though unclear, when frosted still comes through.
If glass were memory, and frost were time, then,
If one upon this earth could remember a deceased,
Though the image be no longer clear,
A picture will linger in his mind.
The lingering is life continued,
For what is life but continued images in one's mind.

A Very Big IF

IF Mr. Vasta had simply given me a poor grade for my "tortured prose" and let it go at that, it would never have occurred to me years later to turn the tortured paragraphs in the story I was writing then into poetry. The story, which I call either "Soft Salt Tear" or "None But I" depending on my mood can be seen in the [Dekodiphukan](#) sub-section of the 1972-1973 section of [Chapter 9 - The Yearly History of a Change in Plans](#).

If it were not for Mr. Vasta, I would not have learned how easy it was for me to write poetry, and *Dekodiphukan*, the book that teaches children the 44 sounds of English that are the core of the Center's Reading Program, would never have been written. (See [The Concept – 44 Sounds](#) section of [Chapter 13 - The Reading Program - What It Is & Why It Works for Everyone](#))

Swimming



Stanford did not have a water polo team, but that was of no concern to me. I only played water polo in high school because my two best friends were swimmers who were also on the water polo team. At Stanford, being a swimmer was enough for me.

At that point in time, Freshmen were not allowed to be on varsity teams in any sport. While all of Stanford's swimmers worked out together, our swimming meets were conducted separately. The varsity team's budget allowed for traveling to other colleges in the conference and a yearly journey to the NCAA championships.

The Freshman team's budget allowed for a bus ride across the Bay Bridge to compete with the Cal Freshmen swimmers. Other than that, our competition consisted of defeating any high school team around that wanted to experience losing to a collection of elite college swimmers.

The one exception I made to my "no one in my family was allowed to have any contact with me while I was away at college" rule was when my Stanford Freshman swim team hosted my brother Jack's M-A varsity swimmers. Everyone in my family was invited to that meet.

A Second IF and A New Career Path

At Christmas time, I once again worked for the Boy's Department of Roos Atkins at the Stanford Shopping Center. I drove to work each day when I returned home for Christmas vacation. While at Stanford, though, I simply peddled my bike from my dorm to the shopping center.

I had now worked at Roos Atkins for three Christmas seasons and two summers. I expected the Summer between my Freshman and Sophomore years to be spent again at Roos Atkins. However, Tom Haynie, Stanford's swimming coach, pictured above with the Freshman swimmers, had a different plan for me.

Tom told me there was a course he would be teaching in the Spring Quarter that he wanted me to take. The course was not offered through the P.E. Department. It was offered through the Education Department instead. It would be taught at our team's swimming pool.

The purpose of the class was to qualify enrollees for both Red Cross Lifeguarding and Water Safety Instructor (WSI) certification. The Red Cross says its WSI course trains instructor candidates to teach all the courses presented in its Swimming and Water Safety program to all age groups. WSI certification is the gold standard in providing the most comprehensive training for swim instructors.

I completed both my Lifeguarding and WSI training in May. I was then, without applying for the position, hired as both a lifeguard and swim instructor for that Summer's Chuck Taylor Coaching Camp at Stanford. In addition, I was also, without applying for the position, hired as a Summer lifeguard for the recently constructed Foothill Swimming and Tennis Club.

While my next-door neighbor Chuck Taylor (see the [New Neighbor](#) subsection of the [A New Town - Same Two Goals](#) section of this chapter) had gone from being Stanford's football coach to being its athletic director, he had not hired me for his camp. The camp engaged children in a variety of sports activities headed by Stanford coaches and their assistants. Tom was in charge of the swimming activities at the camp. Tom was the person who hired me for both the Stanford and the Foothill positions.

Tom needed someone to work with him at the Chuck Taylor Summer Camp. Since I was the only local swimmer on his team, Tom had me attend his Aquatics Methods class to get me certified as both a lifeguard and a swimming instructor. Tom had known me even before I was accepted to Stanford, and he also knew I would be available.

My being on the Stanford swim team and, as a local, also available in the Summer set my career path for all but one of my college Summers that followed. I was now both a lifeguard and a swimming instructor. I had enjoyed working at Roos Atkins, but the pay was terrible. Now, the pay was much better, and a coat and tie were no longer required. I had no way of knowing that this new career path would eventually lead to my becoming a teacher. IFs do not reveal themselves in advance. IF I had

not been a Stanford swimmer who also happened to be local, then, as you will see later in this chapter, I would never have become a teacher.

Fraternity Rush

Stanford had a special rule regarding student housing. Freshmen had to reside on campus in student dorms their first year. The purpose of this was to delay by a year the joining of fraternities so we could all get to know our Freshman classmates. Stanford had no sororities.

I appreciated the purpose of this. Many of my high school friends went to colleges where Freshmen who wished to join fraternities or sororities had to make their choices before classes even began. Their main circle of friends then became their fraternity or sorority brothers or sisters. At Stanford, we got to know a wider assortment of our Freshmen classmates before picking or not picking a fraternity to join.

Fraternity rush was a Spring Quarter event. All the fraternities had open houses for several nights in a row. We Freshmen males made the rounds, introducing ourselves and then waiting to see which fraternities might ask us to join. I did not view myself as a fraternity candidate at all. I didn't drink, didn't smoke, didn't even swear. I only dated briefly as a Senior in high school and never had a girlfriend. At Stanford, I had exactly one blind date my Freshman year because my dorm had a party, and we were all to attend in the company of any female we could find.

My absence of traditional vices was not based on any religious beliefs. I had two puffs on a cigarette my mother was smoking when I was ten and swore off smoking right then. Never took another puff. My father, who loved beer and wine and having a nightly cocktail with my mother after coming home from work, tried to introduce me to drinking alcoholic beverages in my teenage years. I hated how they tasted, but my father assured me I would acquire a taste for them as I grew older. My response was, "Why would I want to acquire a taste for something I didn't like?"

This refusing to acquire a taste for things I didn't like but was supposed to like as an adult also extended to coffee and tea, both of which I still won't drink. I don't even like coffee ice cream. As a teenager in high school, it seemed to me that the teenagers around me who drank and smoked and downed coffee, were just doing it because that's what adults do. That was not a good enough reason for me. I was not going to do anything I didn't like doing just to be an "adult."

As for not swearing, when I was growing up, it was not at all acceptable for a boy or man to swear in the presence of a girl or woman. Men and boys who were used to swearing among themselves were constantly

having to apologize for slipping up and swearing in mixed company. I decided way back in elementary school that it was simpler not to swear at all, so I eliminated all swear words from my spoken vocabulary. Not swearing meant no need to apologize.

It never occurred to me that people would even notice that I was not swearing. However, when I was talking with a dorm friend during my Freshman year at Stanford, I quoted him something another person had said. That quote included the word “shit.” My friend looked at me in surprise and said, “You swore!” That was the first time I came to know that my not swearing was obvious to anyone but me.

In addition to fraternities, Stanford had Eating Clubs. The all-male eating clubs were an alternative to the fraternity system. They were originally organized by students to provide meal service alternatives to the dormitory cafeterias for the non-fraternity population. They were now also hubs for social activities. My father had been in an eating club while he was at Stanford. I considered myself a much better candidate for an eating club than for a fraternity.

I mentioned in the [Andy, Howie, and Keith](#) sub-section of the [Junior Year – One Big IF](#) section of this chapter that my friends Andy and Howie were at Stanford and that friend Keith and I would be joining them. Actually, Keith took a gap year off to work as a sailor on a Standard Oil Tanker, so his joining us was delayed by that year.

Both Andy and Howie were in the Alpha Delta Phi fraternity. They wanted me to join them, as I knew Keith would definitely be doing the following year. Andy and Howie knew exactly who I was and was not. So, if they wanted me to join them, I would now just have to get used to seeing myself as a fraternity man.

Susceptibility

One of the courses I took as a Freshman was a Psychology Department’s class on Statistical Methods. The class was more about math than psychology. Even so, the professor was definitely from the Psychology Department. After the class was over, the professor invited me and three other students from the class to his office. He picked the four of us because we were his class’s top four students.

Once in his office, he said he wanted to run a quick study on us. He had us stand silently with our eyes closed. He then said over and over, “You are leaning forward... You are leaning forward...” Before he started his little chant about leaning forward, when I was just standing there with my eyes closed, I was wobbling a bit. However, once he began saying: “You are leaning forward,” I stopped wobbling and became rigidly

upright. There was no way I was going to lean forward in even the tiniest bit. I did not like the notion of someone thinking he could control me.

One by one, I could hear the other three students losing their balance and stepping forward to regain it. That was it. The test was over. The professor didn't bother telling us the purpose of his little test, and I assumed that was the end of it. However, a few weeks later, the Psychology Department contacted me and asked me if my three brothers and I would like to participate in a hypnosis experiment. They wanted to see if susceptibility or lack thereof to suggestion was genetic. Over the Summer, my brothers and I all took our turns at being hypnotized by the Stanford Psychology Department.

For my session, I was seated in a nice, comfortable chair, told to close my eyes, and then asked to follow the instructions I would be given. The session went on for between thirty and forty minutes. It started with my being told I was falling asleep, a message repeated throughout to cause me to fall asleep more deeply. In addition to telling me how deeply asleep I was, I was given a series of activities to carry out. I did everything they told me to do except one.

At the end of the period's instructions, I was told I would not be able to remember any of the activities I had been asked to perform until I was instructed to remember by the hypnotist. I was then told to wake up. The test of my level of hypnotism would be measured by how many of the things I had been told to do I could now remember doing. I recited for them every single thing I had done in the same order I had done it.

The person who had been doing the hypnotizing told me there was one thing I had left out of my remembering. He then said, "Now you can remember everything." I still could not remember what I had left out. He said it was the fly swatting. I had been asked to swat away a fly that was on me, but there was no fly, so I hadn't done any swatting. I had just sat there motionless. I told the test giver that he asked me to tell him everything I had done. Since there wasn't a fly, I had not swatted it. I had not recited to him any actions not taken.

My susceptibility to suggestions was zero. What the test of the four of us showed the testers was that susceptibility, or lack thereof, to suggestion was not genetic. My three brothers were all hypnotized to some degree, with my brother Jack found to be the most susceptible.

You Can't Make Me

My lack of susceptibility is actually a personality trait I have had for as long as I can remember. The reason I grew steadier when the professor said I was leaning forward is because I automatically resist being made

to do something I don't want to do. The same reason applied to the Stanford hypnotist telling me I was asleep and then thinking he could take control of my behavior. It wasn't a lack of susceptibility. It was my being obstinate.

I really have a "You Can't Make Me" attitude. It does not show itself often because what I want to do generally matches up with what people around me expect me to do. An example of my attitude can be seen in the [What I Learned About Myself](#) sub-section in the [High School -Junior Year – One Big IF and One Goal Gone](#) section of this chapter.

As another example, at one point, soon after I had my driver's license, I did something that my mother didn't like (a rare occurrence). She decided my punishment would be grounding me – no driving for a week. As soon as she told me that, I handed her my key to her car and said, "Take your key. I will not be driving anymore." I meant it, too. If my mother was going to hold driving or not driving over my head, then I refused to drive at all. Since my mother knew me well enough to know I meant it, she gave the key back and picked a different punishment.

My "you can't make me" attitude shows up again in the [Promise Made - Promise Broken](#) sub-section of the [1973-1974](#) section of [Chapter 9 - The Yearly History of a Change in Plans](#). In that case, neither my school's principal nor the district's deputy superintendent had anticipated at all the "you can't make me" choice I would make and its effect on my entire teaching career.

But What Happens If...

But what happens if a "you can't make me" person like me is forced for years to do things he does not want to do, cannot accept, and has no way of escaping? The [Sophomore Year](#) section that follows tells the story of what happened to me in that situation.