

Be Brilliant:

Reflections and exercises for helping ourselves, and others, give and get more

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Table of Contents

Be Brilliant.....	4
So You Want to Change the World.....	6
Lenses, Brilliance and the Pursuit of Happiness	8
Who are you and what do you do?.....	10
I Believe.... I Promise...I Expect.....	12
Ten Conversations to have with yourself as Soon as Possible.....	15
Quenching our Thirst for Appreciation	17
Creating Space.....	19
Telling Compelling Stories about our Experiences and Achievements	21
My Second Epiphany.....	24

Be Brilliant

It begins with a spark, a current of energy that radiates outward, illuminating the darkness and igniting our collective possibilities.

It exists in people of all ages and backgrounds, and although some have achieved prominence, it is not about money or power in the traditional sense.

Brilliance is an inner light that shines with clarity and purpose, emanating from within while radiating outward, catching and amplifying the light of others.

People who shine brilliantly possess an inherent respect for the world, an ability to experience joy and gratitude that nourishes their soul, and provides strength and courage to get closer and travel farther.

The world does not cultivate brilliance, nor does it recognize it as such. Instead, brilliance is often viewed as a one-dimensional strength, impressive and rare, yet somehow different and even isolating.

Yet it has the power to elevate and connect us. By merely recognizing brilliance, we can begin to resonate, and receive its gifts with a sense of warmth and promise, a clarity that can guide us forward.

How can we nurture brilliance in ourselves and in others? First, we must develop a sensitivity, noting shifts in our own radiance and the energy of those around us. As we begin to notice

changes, we can glimpse the sources of light, feeling out the edges and boundaries and discerning impacts and possibilities.

Yet it is critical that we start with ourselves. For it is only when we are shining brightly and able to nurture our own brilliance that we can cultivate it in those around us. Since brilliance is highly combustible, it spreads from person to person, eventually- unavoidably- lighting up the world.

And although it must begin with each of us, we cannot achieve brilliance alone.

So You Want to Change the World

I know you are out there, even though I cannot see you.

Maybe we have already met, or perhaps our paths are yet to cross in some interesting or circuitous way. That is how it usually happens, through some chance encounter, or a connection through a colleague or friend, or sometimes, just a radiant energy that leads to further conversation. Although your stories are all unique, a distinct pattern has begun to emerge. Perhaps the following profile resonates.

Although people may be drawn to you, you often feel alone, fundamentally different from those around you, like an outsider peering in.

Although you experience joy, you would not describe yourself as fun in the usual sense. Your happiness has a serious and reflective quality, a kind of gratitude rather than a youthful abandon.

Although you are an achiever, you seldom take pride or satisfaction in your accomplishments. Instead, you quickly refocus on the work ahead, yearning to use your gifts and talents toward the greatest good.

You are at your best when serving others, and although you feel blessed with a strong sense of purpose and mission, sometimes these gifts feel like a heavy burden that is yours alone to bear.

Perhaps I know you because I am of your kind, and I seem to have developed a heightened sensitivity to your energy that floats like an airy layer of possibility, hovering above any negativity or fear.

The great news is that our numbers are growing, and those who radiate the strongest are young and brilliant, determined to use their talents to make significant and lasting change. They seem to know intuitively that our systems are broken, and they are ready to serve and lead, understanding that the two are inexorably linked.

But they desperately need our help. Their power can only be activated through opportunities to mobilize and leverage their gifts. When the spaces (or jobs) are too tight or restrictive, or the goals too narrowly defined, their potential remains untapped.

In order to increase our numbers, we must actively cultivate the talents, passions, and sense of purpose that lie latent within all children and adults. But for these young professionals, the Super Stars who are most ready and eager to make their mark on the world, we must put their talents to use, recognizing that they are special and finding ways to connect them with the communities they long to serve.

For those of us lucky enough to connect with these individuals (in person or increasingly through social media), we must act boldly as mentors and sponsors, helping them connect with organizations that will utilize their talents either through existing or emergent opportunities. And when necessary, we must help them create new models and paradigms, connecting them with resources and support, nurturing their efforts and helping their brilliance take root.

Lenses, Brilliance and the Pursuit of Happiness

Success, Fulfillment and Humanitarianism. These are three of my favorite lenses. I would like to introduce you, in case you are searching for a set of your own.

Success is a lens that drives many of us. It helps us set goals and strive for growth and achievement, while seeking evidence of our competence. Although the need for success can catalyze our movement and fuel our determination, it is inherently neither positive nor prosocial. And if left unchecked, our desire for success can turn into an addiction, threatening relationships and quality of life.

Fulfillment is a highly personal lens that is tied to our core needs and gifts. The more we know about what fulfills us, the better able we are to focus our time and energy. In this way, our fulfillment lens- if well defined- can manage and steer our success, navigating us through the inevitable pitfalls and landmines that await. And although fulfillment is in some ways self-directed, we all share a fundamental need for human connection which gives this lens a somewhat broader and more universal orientation.

Humanitarianism is my favorite lens. It is also the broadest in terms of its focus and reach. Humanitarianism helps us gaze beyond ourselves, and our immediate circumstances, and leads us to think about the broader community and world as well as ideals and principles that can unify and elevate. Our humanitarianism lens helps us to be better and stronger, and lifts us up

toward more noble goals and impacts. It gives us courage to be leaders, and keeps our other lenses in check by pulling them upward and outward toward the greatest level of brightness.

While each of these lenses is inherently limited and individually incomplete, when working together they expand our possibilities and potential. When we are shining most brightly, we are able to help others calibrate their lenses toward greater success and fulfillment. However, when we are radiant and join with others who are also shining brightly, the possibilities become limitless as ideas and solutions materialize with little effort or obstacle. This is when virtually anything becomes possible.

This notion of collective brilliance has benefits well beyond the individual success that we crave. When we are shining together brightly, we gain a sense of shared intimacy and connection that is resonant with fulfillment, purpose, and mission. Interestingly, these are the very ingredients that can be missing when we strive for success or fulfillment alone.

Who are you and what do you do?

I offer two simple questions that can illuminate how we see ourselves, and our place in the world: “Who are you?” and, “What do you do?”

I am a mother of four and an Associate Dean at the University at Buffalo.

I am a University leader who works to develop and leverage potential toward the greatest good.

I am a connector, facilitator, and creator of new community models and paradigms.

We all have access to an infinite number of descriptors and frames for characterizing who we are and what we do. The ways we define or describe ourselves, and our life’s work, can vary with mood, audience, or area of focus. However, by putting ourselves out there in ways that are thoughtful and authentic, we can define our space in and for the world and invite others to engage, share, and co-create.

When my daughters were young I would often ask them, “Who are you, and what do you do?” Claire would quickly announce that she was a gymnast and Natalie would exclaim that she was a lover of nature and animals. Obviously, their depictions were incomplete, yet they served as bold announcements of their core interests and passions, which are still so beautifully clear and resonant today.

As we grow older, we often lose the brilliance of our passions, strengths and gifts. We learn to become more understated in our introductions, qualifying expectations for ourselves, and others. We wear our titles and job descriptions like a yoke, yearning to unburden ourselves yet complicit in our own subjugation.

What is our fear of brilliance? Is it the association with bragging, boastfulness or conceit?

How interesting that narcissism is on the rise with an insatiable thirst for material possessions and status. People yearn to be beautiful, successful, and powerful yet we cannot exclaim the importance of our mission or the passion with which we work and live.

Several years ago, my oldest daughter told me that I am not like other mothers, in that I love myself so much. I could tell that her words were not intended to sting or embarrass, but that she was testing out an observation and trying to put her finger on some intangible quality. I explained that I do love myself but even more importantly that I love my life. Every day I have opportunities to make a difference, to connect with people, and to learn. She assured me that this was not a bad thing, just different.

Sometimes I have the urge to introduce others to the world and to point out the amazing things that make them so unique and special. In doing so, it is my hope that they will begin to see themselves as I do, and to appreciate the gifts that they have and the power they uniquely possess.

So try this... pretend that you are me, describing you, and ask yourself...

Who am I, and what do I do?

I Believe.... I Promise...I Expect

Here is an exercise that yields huge returns and can be used with virtually any age group, demographic, or area of focus. I developed it when my children were very young and I was looking to clarify my approach to parenting in an effort to stay focused and maintain my sanity.

The instructions are deceptively simple. Choose an area of focus, a role, or aspect of your life. Once you select your lens, write a few concise sentences or bullet points that sum up the essence of your platform for each of three categories: I believe, I promise, and I expect. Your statements should be general enough to capture your overall mission or approach, while specific enough to serve as a guide for future actions and decisions.

I have used this exercise in a number of settings and contexts including coaching, strategic planning, group facilitation, and mediation. Based on my experiences I would offer the following suggestions for each category of reflection.

I Believe

It is helpful to frame your “I believe” statement around ideals that are associated with whatever role you are focusing on. In other words, if you are completing this exercise as a parent, you might craft a statement about what you believe to be the core responsibilities of parents or conversely what you believe society needs in terms of its citizens or communities (the ideal outputs of parenting). If you are completing this through the lens of leadership, you might consider the final “product” of leaders’ efforts in terms of the bigger world or systems they promote.

I Promise

The “I promise” statement speaks to core commitments, which should not move or shift, regardless of changes in context or the unforeseen twists and turns of life. I strongly feel that we need more commitments from individuals, organizations, and institutions- commitments that we can count on no matter what. Your own promises should come directly from your beliefs and should be broad enough to serve as anchors while allowing for changing solutions and goals. In this way, your promises should not limit you, but instead should guide you in your decision making while ensuring ongoing alignment with your core beliefs.

I Expect

The “I expect” statement is my favorite, but I find that it is often the most difficult to work through. Here is the idea: while it is great to commit to others through your promises, you also need to define the parameters and boundaries of your engagement. Specifically, what are your core expectations for the individuals with whom you interact in your respective roles? Like promises, expectations should also be tied to your core beliefs and should never waver, ensuring the stability of who you are while also enabling you to fulfill your promise to others – and yourself.

Although this exercise takes time and necessitates deep reflection and soul searching, I find that it is well worth the investment and can yield important returns. When I developed it for myself, it was based on a very clear notion that I wanted to convey through my parenting, and still holds true for the mentoring relationships that I hold most dear.

I do not want you to waste any of your life trying to figure me out. I want you to know exactly who I am and what I stand for, so that you can use your time and energy to figure yourself out, to recognize and

cultivate your gifts, and begin to impact the world. The sooner you are able to do this, the sooner you will experience the magic that comes with actualizing your unique promise.

Ten Conversations to have with yourself as Soon as Possible

I first discovered the benefits of talking with myself back in college. To be clear, I am referring to an actual dialog, not the muttering or rambling that is often associated with talking to oneself. In my version, I actually pose questions, either verbally or in my head, and then formulate a response, which in turn leads to follow-up questions, forcing me to further refine or elaborate my thinking. To be truthful, as an interviewer I can be pretty tough on myself, and like Barbara Walters I've even been known to elicit occasional tears.

Although when I first started talking with myself it was limited primarily to gathering my ideas for papers or presentations, the scope of my internal dialog has become quite expansive. Over time, I have found this exercise to be helpful in virtually every aspect of my life, allowing me to reflect on my experiences and observations and clarify my views and philosophies across domains. It has also helped me to cope with crises and low points in my life, forcing me to articulate core beliefs, concerns, and disappointments while finding moments of gratitude and truths on which to build.

Here is how it works. Get comfortable with assuming two distinct roles: the interviewer who finds you fascinating and is genuinely interested in probing your thoughts and observations, and you as the expert who holds a wealth of experiences, gifts, and observations to reflect upon and share. Find somewhere comfortable to talk with yourself. My absolute favorite interview location is my car, while on the way to my office, meetings, or wherever. I admit that I used to feel a little embarrassed when people in passing vehicles would stare at me while I talked with myself, but ever since Bluetooth technology came out, it is no longer an issue.

You can of course customize your topics and conversations based on your circumstances and areas of focus, but I offer the following questions to get you started. Do not forget to follow up with additional probing questions, as the more you force yourself to clarify and elaborate your responses, the more you will get from the process. And I should mention an added benefit, when the day comes that you finally do get interviewed by a real professional, not only will you be ready, but you will be able to counter with additional- and even better- questions of your own.

Here are some of my favorites:

1. What do you know to be true?
2. If you were born to make one contribution to the world, what would it be and why is it needed?
3. Name the most important people in your life. What do you most appreciate about each of them and why?
4. What does being educated mean to you?
5. What should all people be entitled to and expect?
6. What do you owe and to whom?
7. What do you find most disappointing?
8. What is the best gift that you have ever given? What is the best gift you have ever received?
9. In what ways have you been shaped by your family/ ancestors/ mentors/ teachers?
10. What do you stand for?

I wish I could listen in on your conversations. I am sure they will be fascinating.

Quenching our Thirst for Appreciation

We all need to feel valued. It is a fundamental ingredient for growth, fulfillment, and virtually all things healthy and good. And yet, despite its universal importance, the state of feeling valued remains elusive and slippery, especially for those who struggle most for its attainment.

We are all familiar with the maddening paradox. The harder we work to prove our devotion and worthiness, the more frugal the appreciation and accolades become. And the less we receive, the more we seem to crave, leaving us in a perpetual state of neediness and vulnerability, pulling us into the weeds and further away from the growth we desire.

Unfortunately, when we live and work from a place of vulnerability, we become consumed with our own fragile state, unable to focus on the needs of others, thus depriving them of our support and attention.

Although this pattern is self-perpetuating, its cessation is within our control. By addressing our fundamental need for feeling valued, and in essence filling ourselves up with meaningful appreciation, we can replace the cycle of vulnerability with one of strength and support.

How can we accomplish such a seismic shift? I share a fun exercise that I adapted from a course on mediation. I have found it to be wonderfully powerful and I encourage you all to give it a try.

Assemble a small group of people. It does not matter who they are as long as you care about them and they are all connected with you in some meaningful way. I have done this exercise with my own children as well as groups of friends. Please note that there is no need for everyone to be on their best behavior. In fact, I found it to be most powerful when my children were at their worst.

The instructions for facilitation are simple. Your participants will all take turns being the focus of the group. Whoever is the focus will sit in a designated chair and listen, accept, and acknowledge the observations or feedback offered to them. The members of the group will take turns addressing the person of focus by sharing something about them that they particularly admire or appreciate. All are encouraged to be thoughtful in their offerings and not directly repeat something that has already been shared. At the end of their respective turn, the person of focus will return to their seat and continue sharing their own offerings with the other members of the group as the focus rotates. As facilitator, you make the first offering for each of the persons of focus, setting the tone, and ensuring that the exercise is treated with respect and thoughtfulness.

As the exercise unfolds, allow yourself to observe the energy in the room and how others react to the positive feedback they receive. Also, pay attention to your own experiences as facilitator, noting how easy it becomes to offer meaningful observations, and the warmth and intimacy that results.

Perhaps you will be invited to be the person of focus at the end of the exercise, but ultimately, it shouldn't really matter. In fact, you may even find yourself declining the invitation in the interest of time or some other priority, since you will already have received the benefits that you need. I have found that the only thing that can effectively quench our thirst for appreciation is to shift our focus away from our own direct needs, and experience the fulfillment that comes with helping others be their best.

Creating Space

We could all use some distance, some room to breathe, to gain perspective and collect our thoughts.

When our emotions drive us, we are reactive, vulnerable, and often find ourselves up against the wall.

Space is critical for good decision-making, a buffer of calm, a sense of control, the knowledge that it will somehow be all right.

When we are too close to life's details, our emotions kick in. Like being trapped inside a pinball machine, our anxiety becomes triggered, activating those around us, shifting energy and ultimately depleting our resources.

While many of us yearn for more space, solitude, and calm, we mostly wait for it to appear, somehow failing to realize is that space is created, constructed, and controlled by us alone.

Every second we receive stimulation from the environment- sounds, images, experiences that our minds interpret as we perceive threats and priorities, making attributions and planning and executing our actions.

Although we often feel like we do not have control or choices, our constructions are largely our own doing. While they can default to an automatic mode, the framing of our experiences can always be brought under deliberate control.

Let us consider space in a different way. Imagine a telescoping lens that can move your field of vision both outward and upward. As it pulls away from a specific experience or situation that is highly emotional, it creates a larger field around it with more room to move, breathe, and think.

Imagine your lens spreading outward from a place of “I can’t believe she said that,” to the larger frame of “negativity in the office” and finally to the positive belief that “everyone deserves a safe and supportive work environment.” As we expand our focus outward, we stretch the space towards more abstract frames or categories. As we do so, we become more and more emotionally detached. When we finally settle into the optimally expansive lens, new solutions and approaches begin to emerge. Put simply, space generates innovation.

This telescoping also moves upward from reactions that are ego and fear driven to those that are tied to core values and beliefs. As your lens moves from “he doesn’t respect me” to “everyone deserves to feel respected and valued,” and finally toward broader notions of universal love and support, we can feel our energy lift. And as we move our gaze upward we begin to see threats differently, compassion kicks in, moving us out of the victim role towards a state of higher self and humanitarianism.

To be clear, this transformation is not automatic. It takes control and time, especially when we are feeling particularly threatened or under duress. Contemplative practices can help, giving us tools and frameworks, and signs to recognize in advance of anxiety taking over. Rituals and practices can establish time and space, making it easier to reach and maintain a place of balance and higher thinking.

The alternative to creating space is to be reactive and emotional, a highly dangerous and exhausting way to live. Since the notion of waiting for life to calm down or for others to gain perspective is not a particularly viable solution, we must simply learn to make and maintain the space we need to be our best.

Telling Compelling Stories about our Experiences and Achievements

One of the hardest topics for people to talk or write about is themselves, and why they are uniquely well-suited for a particular opportunity or honor. I have been noting this challenge at the University, as I work with some of our most outstanding students. Despite the fact that they have so much to offer- travel, research, academics, the whole package- they often blank when asked to write a personal statement or sit for an interview about their experiences. Invariably, they insist that they are not good at talking about themselves or bragging about their achievements. Yet ironically, they have spent so much of their time and effort collecting these very accomplishments.

Perhaps part of the issue is that we are all in such a hurry. Students rush through high school trying to get into college, and then once in college we hurry them through as quickly as possible in an effort to save them money and get them into the work force. In our haste, perhaps we are failing to support their critical reflection- namely, helping them understand and articulate what it is that they have experienced and accomplished, what they can offer that is uniquely theirs. And yet, these are the very skills that will move them to the next level, allowing them to create and secure opportunities for growth, advancement and expansion. And perhaps most importantly, these are the skills that will help them self-correct when they find themselves in positions and situations that no longer connect with their cores values, interests or beliefs.

How can we help students get better at talking about themselves and their experiences? Although intended for students, these techniques can be used by anyone, for virtually any opportunity or goal.

1. Begin by listing the categories of skills and competencies that are of critical importance to your intended audience. You can usually find these in the specific posting or opportunity but I

encourage you to dig deeper. Look at reports, press pieces, or profiles of individuals who have held the position or opportunity (or similar position or opportunity) in the past. Allow yourself to imagine the perfect recipient, employee or candidate. What types of categories of skills and competencies would they possess and why are these important given the demands or honors of the opportunity of interest?

2. Once you have a good list, allow yourself to reflect on your own positions, experiences and achievements and begin to note these under the specific categories with which they correspond. While you can start with specific responsibilities or activities, also note actual experiences that connect with these- both good and bad. Allow yourself to reflect around these experiences and note any big lessons, developments or growth. Ask yourself why it was important, what you learned, and how this experience impacted you or those around you. Keep going with this exercise until you have an extensive outline of key skills, experiences and competencies that you can reference and expand upon. Hopefully, at this point you can take some satisfaction in noting the abundance of experiences available to you.

3. Now it is time to look for patterns. Everyone has unique patterns that help describe the ways they approach choices in life and work. Patterns often reveal themselves over time and diversity of experiences. Once you can recognize and articulate your patterns, they can be extremely helpful in weaving compelling stories about you and what you will bring to any particular opportunity, along with how you will respond to challenging situations or contexts. Consider using critical questions to help reveal your defining patterns. What drives you? How do you define growth or success? How do you add value to challenging contexts? Consider how these

patterns have propelled you on your path and have led to your current interest in this particular opportunity.

4. The fourth step is perhaps the most important. It involves flipping your lens and focusing not on yourself and your accomplishments, but instead on what you can uniquely contribute to the potential employer, organization, opportunity, or broader community. Through succinctly articulating how your unique skill set and experiences can complement and benefit the recipient, you can assure the decision makers that you have strong potential and are worthy of their investment.

Once you have worked through these exercises, allow yourself to practice talking about your experiences in relation to your defining patterns and sense of broader impacts and contributions. You can move between these levels of reflection, making connections, bringing up specific examples and evidence, but always tying it back to the specific opportunity and what you have to offer.

The most exciting aspect of helping students master these skills is seeing them discover and internalize their signature patterns for the first time. There is something quite powerful in recognizing the unique ways in which we approach our lives and work. When these patterns resonate strongly with employers and the needs of the world around us, we feel empowered and more confident, and begin to seek out opportunities and choices that further strengthen our potential contributions. It is when these internal and external narratives strongly align that we can be our most impactful.

My Second Epiphany

My first epiphany came several years ago when I realized that I could maximize my impact by helping others fulfill their potential. For much of my life I carried a sense of heaviness, searching for ways to satisfy my mission and civic responsibility. Although I found pleasure in developing community programs and collaborations, I knew that my efforts were inherently limited and that knowledge left me feeling frustrated and sad. So when I finally discovered that I could amplify and leverage my own talents by helping others navigate their journeys toward success, I was both relieved and eager to offer my support on a greater scale.

My eagerness resulted in an open door policy. I tried to help anyone who came my way, offering my connections, strategies, and even a temporary home for students in need of support or guidance. As I came to recognize the importance of professional development, I worked to synthesize my experiences into processes and frameworks, offering workshops, articles, and even a TEDx talk, all in an effort to help others become unstuck and actualize their talents toward the greater good.

Although well intentioned, my logic behind this approach was fundamentally flawed. I was working from a false assumption that because all individuals possess talents, which I know to be true, they represent equally good investments in terms of my time and resources. I now know that this is not the case, which is my second epiphany. In reality, individuals vary considerably with regard to their respective return on investment potential.

To be clear, I still believe that everyone has something to contribute and that we cannot see or appreciate the long-term impacts of our individual actions and relationships. But when it comes to making meaningful and timely change within our most challenged communities and neighborhoods,

certain individuals are clearly more poised to be agents of change. Those with the most potential are individuals who are intimately close to the problems and possible solutions, those who have a sense of mission and urgency, and are already adding value, but yearning to do more and better through their own success and leadership.

I now understand that these are the people I am most interested in supporting. And I believe, at least I think, that they definitely need support. In being from challenged and impoverished communities, their own success is not guaranteed. Instead, navigating the education system and the various obstacles that block and limit opportunities can consume their energies and resources. But layering the additional intricacies of understanding and penetrating the systems and structures affecting their communities calls for knowledge, competencies, and connections that can take a lifetime of luck and determination to develop.

Yet, imagine the rewards if we can fast track the rising stars within our most challenged communities, nurturing and supporting them with all the riches we possess. In what exciting and unexpected ways will our communities grow, and what will we look and feel like as a healthy, vibrant culture that not only embraces diversity but seeds and nurtures it from within? I don't know about you, but I cannot wait to find out.