

**Optional Second Essay**

**Question 2: Describe the environment in which you grew up and how it has shaped your personal goals.**

Photography has always been my grandfather Don's life, and in turn, a large part of mine. Every year, he would travel to some far-off destination and return with stunning pictures of penguins atop icebergs in Antarctica, or whole families, ankle-deep in rice patties in China. In the late 1980's, he made several trips to Africa to photograph both wildlife and people. I was only five years old, but the moment when I saw those pictures still lingers in my mind vividly. It was a cold, snowy day and I was sitting in his 1960's-style kitchen eating chicken noodle soup. While large snowflakes fell slowly past the window and settled on the walkway, I felt the soup travel down my throat, warming my body from head to toe. My parents were running errands, and I had been deposited in the care of my grandfather for the afternoon. As I finished slurping the remains of the broth, and eyed the chocolate chip cookies in the glass jar on the counter, my grandpa Don walked into the room. He leaned down and whispered, "Follow me, I have a surprise for you."

Quickly forgetting about the baked goodies, I hopped out of my seat and followed him down the hallway and into his study. He closed the heavy doors behind him and pointed to the corduroy sofa, which was an indication for me to sit. As I took my seat, he handed me a small, black box with two round buttons on top. With a quick movement, he hit the lights and the room went dark. A few seconds later, I heard a buzzing noise and a stream of white light poured out of the lens on the slide projector. As I stared at the

fuzzy, blank screen he said, "This is lady Godiva on her white horse in a snowstorm." I didn't get it. But, this seemed the appropriate moment to laugh, so I let out a chuckle, which grandpa seemed to appreciate. "Go on, press the button," he finally exclaimed. So I did. I was amazed by what I saw. There were six zebras standing next to each other, drinking from a small watering hole. I pushed the button again. *Click*. The photograph that I beheld was of a leopard and her two cubs, lying under a small tree, its branches providing a bit of shade from the sweltering mid-day sun. *Click. Click. Click*. I kept moving through image after image, drinking it all in. There were lions and giraffes, dry plains and large waterfalls.

All of a sudden, I came across something unexpected. My breathing stopped short and I gasped slightly. A little girl, not much older than myself, stared out at me from the large screen. Water dripped off of her face and onto the rough cloth covering her thin body. In her hands, she held a small bouquet of limp yellow flowers, which bent under the weight of the moist air. Her deep-set eyes focused in on mine. Who was this girl? I wanted to know her name, what her family was like, the kind of house she lived in. What kind of food did she eat? Did she go to school? All of these questions were running circles through my brain. But when I asked my grandpa, he couldn't tell me the answers. The only thing he knew about this child was that she waited in the rain with other villagers to welcome him to their village. She ran away after giving him this cherished gift.

I was unsatisfied by this answer. I yearned to learn more about this child and her culture. I vowed to one day travel the world and visit the places I've only seen in

photographs, to meet the people whose lives are vastly different from my own. I wanted to understand not only how they lived, but also their beliefs and values. I guess that desire never died. While I haven't met this Ethiopian girl, or even been to Africa, I was able to experience another culture when I had the opportunity to be part of an exchange program with a school in Rome. As a host and then an exchange student, I spent six weeks immersed in Italian culture. As a young-adult, I haven't been able to visit the rice paddies in China, but I've learned as much as I can about the language and culture from Ms. Shao, my Chinese teacher. I haven't witnessed the crowded mosques of the Middle East, like my grandfather has on many occasions, but I'm still curious about the beliefs of these people, and learned about them and others through a course I completed on world religions this past summer. My thirst to see the world has yet to be quenched. Every time I look into the imploring eyes of the young Ethiopian girl, I am reminded of how much is still unknown to me and the many mysteries yet to be solved.